

The following text was originally published in Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education (Paris, UNESCO: International Bureau of Education), vol. XXIII, no. 1/2, 1993, p. 211-19.

©UNESCO: International Bureau of Education, 1999

This document may be reproduced free of charge as long as acknowledgement is made of the source.

CONFUCIUS (K'UNG TZU)

(551-479 BC)

Yang Huanyin¹

Eminent teacher, philosopher and political theorist, and founder of its feudal system of education, Confucius is one of Ancient China's most famous figures, a man whose practical experience and deep thinking on the subject have left their mark on educational development in his own country and elsewhere. Revered in antiquity as the 'Supreme Sage' and the 'Model for Ten Thousand Generations', Confucius now enjoys universal acclaim; his remarkable and lasting contribution to teaching and education has ensured him a place in history, as well as in culture, in China and beyond. The influence of his pedagogy remains perceptible today. Recent years have seen a renewal of interest in Confucius, as scholars ask themselves whether his ideas have withstood the test of time.

Biographical note

Confucius (551-479 BC), whose patronymic was Qiu and given name Zhongni, was born at Quyi in the principality of Lu (today's Qufu in Shandong Province), to which his forebears, aristocrats from the principality of Song, had fled for political reasons and where their fortunes had gradually declined. His own father, a minor official, died when Confucius was still a child, leaving the family in poverty. Initially employed in a low-grade post with responsibility for livestock and granaries, he rose through the administrative hierarchy to become, at about the age of 40, the prefect (*Zai*) and director of public works (*Sicong*) in the city of Zhongdu, and then minister of security and justice (*Sikon*) for the principality of Lu. Later, he traveled with his disciples in Wei, Cao, Song, Zheng, Chen, Cai and other parts of the country, unsuccessfully expounding his political opinions and moral precepts. He returned to Lu at the end of his life, and spent his final years writing and teaching.

Confucius took lifelong delight in learning as well as teaching, and lived to see his reputation as an accomplished polymath spread far and wide. Before his time, under the Zhou Dynasty, schooling took place within government offices and was dispensed by public officials. General education, the prerogative of the nobility, was denied to the common people, and there was no such thing as a full-time teaching profession. Young aristocrats received a civil and military education based on the 'six arts': rites, music, archery, chariot-driving, calligraphy and mathematics. The end of the so-called Spring and Autumn Period, with which Confucius' life coincided, was marked by violent upheavals as Chinese society based on slave-ownership was transformed into a feudal society; the political and economic underpinning of 'education for and by the administration' was collapsing and culture was acquiring a more popular base. In breaking the aristocratic monopoly of learning and setting up a private academy that was accessible to rich and poor alike, Confucius was moving with

his times. 'My teaching', he declared, 'is open to everyone, without distinction.' He was in his 30s when he first accepted disciples; he took in 3,000 in all, seventy-two of whom progressed to complete mastery of the 'six arts'. In scope, enrolment and quality of teaching, the school of Confucius was unique for its age; both during and after its founder's lifetime and posthumously, it exerted a considerable influence in the political, economic, cultural, ethical and moral spheres. Confucius devoted his energies to this undertaking for almost half a century, and his efforts were interrupted only by illness and death at the age of 72.

His views on education

In the course of this half century, Confucius, not content to give excellent training to a large number of students, constantly distilled his own teaching experience, thus developing his own educational doctrine.

The teacher's first task is to identify his audience. In this connection, Confucius stated that his lessons were destined for all men, without exception (*Analects*, Wei Ling gong). His pupils came from the lowest as well as the highest levels of society, and access to education was thereby broadened considerably. Opening the doors of learning more widely, he hastened the development of general education in Ancient China, thus contributing both to political reform and to the dissemination of culture. At the same time he helped to reveal the humanist character of Confucian teaching, which was to have an unquestionable influence on the private schools and academies of feudal society. This approach also helped to create the conditions whereby the emergent land-owner class could accede to the authority conferred by learning and produce talented men from its midst.

Role and objectives of education

Starting from the political principle that virtue was a prerequisite of government, and the psychological observation that 'by nature, men are much alike; their practices set them apart' (*Analects*, Yang Huo), Confucius demonstrated that education plays a fundamental role in the development of society and of individuals alike. Not only does it offer a means of ensuring the supremacy of virtue; it can also alter human nature and improve it in qualitative terms. By raising individual moral standards, it renders society in its entirety more virtuous: the kingdom is well administered, orderly and law-abiding, to the extent that all within it follow the path of righteousness. Although it may be an exaggeration to state that the supremacy of virtue can be guaranteed by education alone, special concern for the latter, and the notion that action at the level of individual morality is called for if the moral level of society is to be raised, remain topical today. The teachers and political leaders of the feudal era were all imbued with these principles; most of them emphasized that education had an improving effect on individuals, and promoted order and security throughout the land; hence it should be developed. Confucius was at the origin of that concern for education, which gradually became one of the great traditions of China's feudal society.

Another of a teacher's tasks is to determine what type of person he is to form. Denouncing the favouritism and the passing of office from one generation of nobles to the next that prevailed during his time, Confucius recommended appointment according to merit and 'promotion of the ablest' (*Analects*, Zi Lu). He considered that the goal of education was to produce capable individuals (*xiancai*)—whom he also called *shi* (gentlemen) or *junzi* (men of quality)—who 'combined competence with virtue' and whose subsequent careers in administration and government would bring about the ideal of a kingdom managed with integrity. 'You believe you have studied enough? Then take up a post in the civil service', he advised his disciples (*Analects*, Zi Zhang). This radical stand against the principle of the

hereditary transmission of posts was reflected in the system of training and appointing officials that was later adopted in feudal society, and served as the theoretical basis for the selection process introduced under the Han Dynasty, and later for the imperial examination procedure that would be followed throughout the Sui and Tang Dynasties and up to the fall of the Manchus; it was also central to the feudal education system as a whole. The Chinese people have, to this day, kept faith with these two traditions; character development aimed at competence together with moral integrity; and appointment according to merit.

Content

In conformity with these objectives, Confucius determined that the twin pillars of education should be moral instruction, which would have priority, and the imparting of knowledge.

Moral instruction, which had to take pride of place, since what was needed were individuals of outstanding virtue who would assist the prince in governing with integrity, thus became the basis of Confucian teaching. In deference to the interests of the feudal land-owning class, Confucius reshaped the moral concepts of the past, and proclaimed a series of new rules designed to put an end to the political chaos and moral decadence of the times. His ethics, philosophy and politics are indissociable, the first of these being characterized by a rare vitality which was the driving force of feudal morality and civilization for more than two millennia and which was centred on ‘humanity’ or ‘benevolence’ (*ren*), which also signifies love for one’s neighbour. This virtue manifests itself in all types of relations between human beings and contains the germ of other qualities: filial piety (*xiao*), respect for the elderly (*ti*), loyalty (*zhong*), respectfulness (*gong*), magnanimity (*kuan*), fidelity (*xin*), diligence (*min*), altruism (*hui*), affability (*wen*), kindness (*liang*), frugality (*jian*), tolerance (*rang*), indulgence (*shu*), wisdom (*zhi*) and courage (*yong*). It also helps in avoiding all forms of excess, promotes fearlessness in the face of difficulties, assists in distinguishing what is to be cultivated from what is to be eschewed, and encourages honest and righteous conduct. All these qualities stem from *ren*, which enjoins human beings to show mutual sympathy, solicitude and respect, and to watch over one another. In order that all these precepts might serve to enhance the responsibility of individuals and society alike, Confucius stressed that each man should cultivate virtue and should receive a moral education. Thanks to individual efforts in that respect, there would be order in family affairs, the country would be well governed, the people would live in security, and peace would everywhere prevail. Moral education was thus for Confucius the means whereby his ideas concerning virtue might be materialized. As the founder of feudal China’s education system he defined its basic content by working out his concept of moral instruction, and established guidelines for its further development. His ethics can, moreover, be said to have codified the whole network of social relationships in feudal China.

However, Confucius was equally concerned with the intellectual development of his disciples, that is to say with the inculcation of culture, abilities and skills. In order to instill the moral values of feudal society in them, the basics of an all-round culture and the capacities required to exercise official responsibilities, he drafted six manuals which were considered to be the foundation of teaching and learning: the *Book of odes* (*Shi*); the *Book of history* (or Documents) (*Shu*); the *Book of rites* (*Li*); the *Book of music* (*Yue*); the *Book of changes* (*Yi*); and the *Spring and autumn annals* (*Chunqiu*). These didactic works, which deal essentially with social relations and with ethics but also address a large number of other subjects, including philosophy, history, politics, economics, culture and musicianship, constituted the first relatively comprehensive teaching manuals in Chinese history. Since Xunzi’s ‘Exhortation to Study’, they have been respectfully referred to as *jing* (canonical works or classics). *The Book of music* has been lost, but the five other Confucian classics

served for more than 2,000 years as the basis for education in feudal China. Nowhere in the world has any other didactic work ever been referred to with such consistency over such a long period. Beginning at the time when the Han Emperor Wudi founded the Imperial College in 124 BC and decreed that 'all schools of thought except the Confucian doctrine shall be proscribed', feudal China built the cult of Confucius and the reading of his canonical works into the foundations of an education that had been designed to serve the interests of the ruling class, according them a pre-eminence that would not be challenged until 1919, by the violent 'Fourth of May Movement'.

Besides the six classics, which were designed to provide a general culture, Confucius' teaching also covered the six arts (rites, musicianship, archery, chariot-driving, calligraphy and mathematics), the purpose of which was to impart skills and know-how through practice; according to Confucius, study of the six classics, coupled with mastery of the six arts, would inculcate sound moral sense and a solid cultural grounding that were necessary for the competent exercise of public office.

Rooted in political and moral principles, Confucian education is concerned solely with what constitutes the makings of the 'man of quality' and with the tools that the official must master. Natural sciences are hardly touched upon; trade and agriculture are completely ignored. Another outstanding feature of the educational theory and practice of Confucius and the feudal teachers who succeeded him is disdain for manual labour and those engaged in it. Except for a few minor alterations, the content of education continued to reflect the options and priorities established by Confucius throughout the feudal period.

Some principles

In the course of his lengthy career as a teacher, Confucius steadily put together a system of principles which had a distinctly materialistic slant. Many of them correspond to the general laws of pedagogics. His essential concerns were: to provide students with an education that matched their aptitudes; to inspire and guide them; to lead them by stages; to instruct oneself while teaching others; to explain the present in the light of the past; to devote oneself conscientiously to study and to take delight in it; to combine theory with practice and applied study with abstract meditation; to ensure that personal behaviour was in conformity with the principles examined; to encourage independent thought; to take account of the age of the learners; to practise self-control and self-analysis; to set a good example; to correct one's errors and improve oneself; to curb evil and exalt the good; to welcome criticism; to accept correction; to forget past affronts, etc. For Confucius, all these principles were the product of a profound intuition frequently confirmed by practice.

Teachers

Confucius had a great deal to say on this subject. Considered to be a remarkable teacher himself, he was revered throughout feudal society and served as a model for countless generations of his successors.

He believed that a good teacher should first and foremost be passionately and conscientiously committed to his work. His own knowledge must be broad in scope and fully mastered if his pupil was to benefit from exposure to it. Confucius further believed that in order to elicit good results, the teacher must love his pupils, know them well, understand their psychological particularities, give thought to ways and means of facilitating their access to knowledge and, to that end, develop an effective methodology. The hallmark of a teacher's virtue, in Confucius' eyes, was tireless commitment through his lessons to his pupils' development. He must also possess firm political convictions; show modesty and discretion

in his relations with others; convey his knowledge in a disinterested fashion, keeping nothing to himself; express himself elegantly and in lively fashion; cultivate his own personal morality; and match his deeds with his words.

The ethical code of education which Confucius elaborated, his own performance as a teacher and his attachment to the 'mean' are still considered today as Confucius' finest and greatest contributions to the cause of learning.

Education and economics

Confucius was not unduly concerned with the links between education and economics, but he nevertheless maintained that prosperity should take precedence over education. An educated, vigorous and prosperous population was, to his mind, the sign of sound administration; in other words, not only was education important, but its development must be materially based on development of the economy. A State can be well administered only if its population is in good heart and if its prosperity permits steadily increasing access to education. This concept of educational economics reflects an embryonic materialism.

Educational philosophy

In this domain, Confucius, wittingly or unwittingly, applied some of the basic tenets of psychology to the solution of concrete problems with which he was confronted, and he formulated a number of observations in the domains of what we now refer to as differential psychology, learning psychology, moral psychology and teaching psychology. As regards the educational process itself, his remarks concerning the differences between his disciples—differences of intelligence, aptitude, character, aspiration, interest and taste—reflected an attentive attitude that led him to put forward a number of pedagogical principles concerning, for example, adapting teaching to the aptitudes of the pupil and the effectiveness of clarifying and encouraging pupils' questions.

But Confucius' thought on educational matters was not confined to these domains, and scholars who have recently examined other aspects of his thinking, notably in the fields of philosophy and sociology, consider that they deserve attention, especially for their rational qualities.

It will be seen from the foregoing that Confucius had elaborated a conceptual framework that was in keeping with the interests of the land-owning class in the China of his day, and he began to put his ideas into practice. His pioneering work, occurring as it did at a time when the old slave-owning system was being replaced by a feudal one, obviously had a revolutionary impact, and assured for Confucius a key place in the history of education in China, without which its development could not be properly understood.

The influence of Confucius

If Confucius' thought had a profound influence on the development of Chinese society, and particularly that of its education and moral science, at different times and under a variety of circumstances, it also left its mark on a great number of Eastern and Western countries, which it reached through a wide variety of channels. Confucius and his doctrine do not belong only to China; he is acknowledged throughout the world as a major figure of universal civilization and culture.

Confucian thought moved eastwards at an earlier date than westwards, and its imprint in the East was more profound. His ideas reached Korea and Viet Nam more than 2,000 years ago, during the Qin and Han Dynasties. In 285 AD, his ideas were communicated from Korea

to Japan. From Viet Nam, they were transmitted to a number of South and South-East Asian countries where, as the centuries passed, they entered the very fabric of national customs and traditions, becoming—as in China—part of their fundamental culture. Many scholars postulate the existence since ancient times of an 'area of Confucian culture' centred on China, with Korea, Viet Nam and Japan as its principal components. Confucianism joined Buddhism, Christianity and Islam to become one of the four major cultural systems of the planet.

From the time it began to spread, Confucian thought deeply influenced the political, economic and cultural, and to an even greater extent the educational and ethical, development of the countries which it reached. This was especially the case in Korea, Japan and Viet Nam which—when Confucianism arrived—were either in a state of transition from a primitive to a slave-owning society, or moving from the latter into feudalism. None of them had written languages, still less school education. With the introduction of the Confucian classics, they adopted Chinese characters, started to publish books and followed the Chinese example in establishing schools where the Master's doctrine was taught. The propagation of Confucianism may thus be seen as being directly responsible for the emergence of their systems of schooling. Confucianism left its mark on the training of scholars as it did on the recruitment of officials. Schooling in each of these countries, at central as well as local levels, in public or in private establishments, at higher and at lower grades, and whether in matters of goals, content, selection and promotion of teachers, or assessment and placement of students, is characterized by a remarkable fidelity to Confucian principles. Indeed, Confucius became a cult figure in all schools and at all levels. In Japan, he was revered as the 'Supreme Sage and Foremost Teacher'; in Viet Nam, as the 'Teacher of Ten Thousand Sovereigns'. He was taken as a model by successive generations, and the supreme incarnation of virtue, an object of veneration for teachers, pupils and society as a whole. Confucianism also permeated family and social education, the education of women and small children, the education dispensed at the Imperial Court and the education of expatriate students. In all these countries, as in China, the Confucian classics served as didactic models during the feudal period, education being based on respect for Confucius and the reading of his canonical works. They may thus justly be claimed to have significantly extended the scope of the pattern of education which Confucius had initiated in China.

As for the recruitment of officials, examinations based on Confucianism, as applied in China, were organized over a period of eleven centuries (from 788 to 1893 AD) in Korea and for more than eight centuries (from 1075 to 1919 AD in Viet Nam). Such was not the case in Japan, but its people, from their supreme authorities down through the administrative hierarchy at all levels, including the Shogun and their followers, were the first to venerate Confucius and to practise the classics. Familiarity with Confucius' ideas and canonical works was also an important criterion for the appointment of officials. Today, Confucius still has an important place in the education system of countries of the region. Japan, Singapore, Korea and South Viet Nam (before the reunification of the country) remained particularly faithful to his thought, especially in the domain of moral education. In 1982, the Government of Singapore exhorted its citizens to study and to disseminate Confucius' teachings, which were described as embodying 'the essentials of the art of government' as well as the moral rules of life in society; classes in Confucian ethics were subsequently included in secondary education, with large-scale promotional campaigns. In the other Asian countries, the past and present influence of Confucianism on education, although less far-reaching, is nevertheless to a greater or lesser extent perceptible, pointing inevitably to the conclusion that no other teacher has been as influential as Confucius in this part of Asia.

In the early 1600s, Jesuits returning from missionary work in China spread the ideas of Confucius in the West, where they had a special impact on the philosophers of the

Enlightenment. Europe at the time was in the throes of bourgeois revolution, and these thinkers turned to Confucius for support in their opposition to despotism and the principle of divine right. His atheistic philosophy, his moralistic vision of politics, his notion of the inseparability of politics and ethics, and the stress which he laid on the economic significance of agriculture filled philosophers such as Holbach, Voltaire or Quesnay, with the most fulsome admiration; they referred to his works in denouncing the abuses of their age, often attributing their own criteria to him. It was thanks to their enthusiasm that the West became truly enamoured of Confucianism, a state of affairs which is still very much apparent today. More and more international symposia on Confucian thought are being held; not content with new studies of Confucianism, Western scholars are investigating the modernity of his doctrine.

Although, during his lifetime, Confucius was unable to attain his goals as a teacher, his posthumous contribution to the history of culture and of teaching in China and in other countries throughout the world has won for him not only the reputation of ‘Supreme Sage’ and ‘Teacher of Ten Thousand Generations’ in Chinese feudal society, but also what amounts to universal esteem. Since ancient times, many countries have compared their leading scholars, educators and thinkers to Confucius: the distinguished teacher Ch’oe Ch’ung, who opened the first private school in the Kingdom of Koryo, was styled ‘the Confucius East of the Sea’; the Enlightenment philosopher Quesnay, ‘the European Confucius’; the great German poet Goethe, ‘the Confucius of Weimar’; as a token of the respect and admiration which he inspired, the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci, who established parallels between the Western and Chinese civilizations, was known as the ‘Christian Confucius’.

As a result of his outstanding qualities as a teacher, Confucius is regarded in many countries as a model for members of the profession. In pre-liberation China, his birthday was celebrated as a holiday; this is still the case today in Taiwan, in Viet Nam and in the Asiatic communities of the United States—an occasion marked by commemorative events and ceremonies to honour especially meritorious teachers, and to encourage others to draw inspiration from the virtues of the great educator.

Note

1. Yang Huanyin (China). Researcher at the Central Institute of Educational Sciences (Beijing). Member of the Scientific Committee of the Council of the Chinese Foundation of Confucian Studies. Her works include particularly two books (in Chinese) on the influence of Confucius’ thought outside China and a series of essays on Confucius’ educational thinking.

Bibliography*

- Chen Jinpan. *Educational ideas of Confucianism*. Wuhan, Hubei Educational Press, 1985.
- Chian Zhonglien. *The cream of thirteen classics*. Changsha, Hunan Educational Press, 1992.
- China Confucius Foundation and Singapore East Asian Philosophy Institute. *Papers of the international symposium on Confucianism*. Jinan, Qi Lu Book Club, 1989.
- China Confucius Foundation. *Selected papers at the symposium in commemoration of the 2,540th birthday of Confucius*. Shanghai, Sanlien Bookstore, 1992.
- Du Jenzhi; Gao Shuzhi. *The finest system of Confucianism*. Xi’an, Shanxi People’s Publishing House, 1985.
- Gu Shusen. *Classified quotations of ancient Chinese educators*. Ahanghai Educational Press, 1983.
- Kuang Yaming. *A critical biography of Confucius*. Jinan, Qi Lu Book Club, 1985.
- Yang Bojun. *Annotations of the analects*. China Book Bureau, 1962.
- Zhu Qianshi. *The influence of Chinese philosophy on Europe*. Fuzhou, Fujian People’s Publishing House, 1985.
- * All the publications mentioned here were published in Chinese.