

**CONFUCIUS  
FROM THE  
HEART  
YU DAN**

*Translated by Esther Tyllesley*

Timeless Wisdom for Modern Life

  
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## Foreword – Why Confucius?

Over two thousand five hundred years ago, the students of the thinker and philosopher Confucius wrote down every scrap and scattered fragment of his life and teachings that they could find. These records, based for the most part on classroom notes, were compiled and edited, and afterwards they became what we know as *The Analects of Confucius*. ‘Analects’ simply means a collection of writings.

Just over two thousand years ago, the great Han Dynasty emperor Wu rejected a hundred other philosophical schools in favour of Confucius, effectively making China a Confucian state.

A thousand years ago the first prime minister of the Song Dynasty, Zhao Pu, boasted that he could rule the known world with just half a book of the *Analects*. From this we can see the tremendously important role that Confucius played in the political and social life of ancient times, and the high esteem in which his collected teachings were held by the ancients.

But what practical meaning do they have for our society and our lives today?

When I entrusted the manuscript of my book to the Zhonghua Book Company in China at the end of 2006, I was content but also a little troubled. I started my master’s degree in pre-Qin Dynasty literature at the age of twenty-one, and I had grown up immersed in books from the Zhonghua Book Company, but I would never have dared to dream that one day this elite publishing house might bring out a book of mine, no more than I would have presumed to entertain the hope that I would ever dare to stand up and talk about *The Analects of Confucius* on television

I have always respected this book rather than fearing it, and my feelings towards it have always been plain, simple and warm.

Once, in a small town in north China, famous for its hot springs,

I saw something called the 'Ask Sickness Spring'. It is said that anybody who takes a comfortable soak in its water will at once understand the source of their illness: people with arthritis will get a tingling feeling in their joints, those with gastro-intestinal problems will experience a hot sensation in their gut, while people with skin complaints will feel a pleasant flush all over their skin, as if a layer of skin is being washed away, like the sloughed-off skin of a cicada.

For me, the wisdom of Confucius is just such a spring of warm, living water.

With my limited knowledge, even if I truly wanted to write an in-depth analysis of Confucius, I would never, ever dare to do such a thing. It would be like sending me off to make a chemical analysis of that hot spring, when I am totally unequipped to do so. The only possible role for me is that of someone who has been immersed in the spring myself, testing it with my own body and blood, like the thousands and thousands of people who over the last two hundred years and more have steeped themselves in this hot spring, and experienced its gifts.

The good will see goodness in it, and the wise see wisdom. Perhaps the value of this classical text is not in rituals and reverence that inspire awe and fear, but in its inclusiveness and fluidity, the wisdom in which so many people have immersed themselves down the ages, so that every life and every individual, though perceiving it differently, and following different paths, can arrive at last at the same final goal. In China we say 'The truth has never been far away from ordinary people' and here that is certainly the case.

It seems to me that the sages never used obscure classical quotations to intimidate people, nor did they load their writing with fancy phrases and difficult words to shut them out. Confucius said: 'I am thinking of giving up speech.' Zigong said hastily: 'If you did not speak, what would there be for us, your disciples, to transmit?' Confucius said, calmly and matter-of-factly: 'What does Heaven ever say? Yet there are the four seasons going round and

there are the hundred things coming into being. What does Heaven ever say?’

The easy truths of this world can enter into people’s hearts because they have never been about indoctrination, but rather an inner call to wake up every heart and soul.

The reason why these simple truths have survived down the millennia is that they have helped generation after generation of Chinese to stay grounded, to understand the nation and the culture that formed them, and not to lose their heads, even when confronted by immense social change and almost overwhelming choice.

Those who benefit from the wisdom of Confucius may experience a moment’s heart-stopping enlightenment, in which understanding suddenly floods through them; equally, they may undertake a lifetime of endless study in order to attain understanding.

I really must thank the television programme *Lecture Room* for encouraging me to approach Confucius from this angle of ‘*xinde*’ – an understanding that comes from the heart as much as the head. A thousand hearts will get a thousand different things out of his work, ten thousand will get ten thousand different things from it, and mine is no more than the understanding of one heart among many. When we read it in the course of our lives today, and everything suddenly becomes clear to us, Confucius must surely be smiling silently on us from across the centuries.

The Song Dynasty prime minister Zhao Pu’s boast is a respectful acknowledgement of Confucius as the source of Chinese traditional culture and thought. I, however, would rather say: ‘With half a book of the *Analects* I can enrich myself.’ Everybody should see it as a warm, gentle ‘Ask Sickness Spring’.

Therefore what we can learn from Confucius today is not the ‘Confucian Learning’ set out by Emperor Wu; it is not the solemn, dignified, ritualized ‘Confucian religion’ that stands alongside Daoism and Buddhism in China; nor is it the Confucianism of the scholars, full of deep argumentation and fettered by textual

research.

What we can take away from the *Analects* of Confucius are the simple truths that every person knows in his or her heart, though they may not let them out through their mouths.

In my view, the wisdom of Confucius does not burn your hands, nor is it icy cold, its temperature is just slightly above body heat, for it is a constant that will remain the same throughout the ages.

*Midnight, 16 November 2006*

*Part One*

# The Way of Heaven and Earth

*You should not think that the wisdom of Confucius is lofty and out of reach, or something that people today can only look up to with reverence.*

*The truths of this world are for ever plain and simple, in the same way that the sun rises every day in the east, just as spring is the time for sowing and autumn is the time to harvest.*

*The truths that Confucius gives us are always the easiest of truths.*

*They tell us all how we can live the kind of happy life that our spirit needs.*



The wisdom of Confucius can help us to obtain spiritual happiness in the modern world, to get used to the daily routine of our lives, and to find the personal bearings that tell us where we are.

We might sometimes think that what we read lacks a rigorous logic. Very many of the sayings concentrate on a single issue, there are few passages of any great length, and almost everything we find is simple and short.

We will see how this absence of words is also a kind of teaching.

Confucius said: 'What does Heaven ever say? Yet there are the four seasons going round and there are the hundred things coming into being. What does Heaven ever say?' (*Analects* xvii) Confucius said: See, the heavens are above us, solemn and quiet, never speaking a word, yet the four seasons come round again and again, and all of nature increases and multiplies around us. Do the heavens need to speak as well?

What we will find in Confucius is a way of thinking, which is plain, simple and warm. It is exactly this attitude with which Confucius influenced his students.

Confucius had three thousand students, seventy-two of whom were men of exceptional wisdom and virtue. Each of these men was a seed, and each in his turn spread the seed of this wisdom and this view of life far and wide.

That is why in China we call Confucius a sage. The sages are those people who in their time on this earth are the most practical and capable, and possess the most personal magnetism. They bring us conviction, and a kind of faith. Such men can only be the product of natural growth, emerging from within our lives, not dropping down from heaven.

This sense of natural, balanced growth can be found in China's creation myth, which tells of Pan Gu, who separated heaven and earth. This separation was not a sudden change, as in a Western creation myth, where Pan Gu might be expected to take a big axe

and split them apart with a bang, whereupon a golden light might perhaps shine out in all directions, and the heavens, earth and everything in them all appear at once. That is not the Chinese style.

The type of story that Chinese people are used to is like that described in the *San Wu Li Ji*, our very early

Chinese history, which includes stories of how the world was made. Here we find that creation was a very lengthy process: calm, relaxed and full of anticipation:

*Heaven and earth were jumbled together in a cosmic egg for eighteen thousand years, and Pan Gu lived in the midst of it. The heavens and the earth split apart. The pure Yang essence became the heavens, the heavy Yin essence was the earth. Pan Gu was between them, nine changes in one day, a god in the heavens and a sage on the earth. Every day the heavens rose higher by ten feet, the earth grew thicker by ten feet, and Pan Gu became ten feet taller. When he reached eighteen thousand years of age, the heavens were infinitely high, the earth was infinitely deep, and Pan Gu was infinitely tall.*

Afterwards, heaven and earth split apart, not in the way that a solid body splits in two with a crack, but rather as a gradual separation of two essences; the light, pure *yang* essence rose up and became the heavens, the heavy *yin* essence sank and became the earth.

But that was not the end of the separation of heaven and earth. The process had only just begun.

Notice how Chinese people pay a lot of attention to changes. Look at Pan Gu, who in between the heavens and the earth went through ‘nine changes in one day’: just like a newborn baby, tiny, subtle changes were taking place every day.

There is a stage in the changes which the text calls ‘a god in the heavens, a sage on earth’ when Pan Gu had become a wise and powerful being in both realms.

For the Chinese, this idea of mastery in both realms is an ideal

way of being, one to which we should all aspire: a heaven where idealism can spread its wings and fly freely, with no need to compromise with all the rules and obstacles of the real world; and the ability to keep our feet planted firmly on the ground, so that we can make our way in the real world.

People who have only ambition and no realism are dreamers, not idealists; those who have only earth and no sky are plodders, not realists.

Idealism and realism are our heaven and earth.

But Pan Gu's changes are still going on and our story continues.

After the heavens and the earth had separated, every day the heavens became higher by ten feet, the earth gained ten feet in thickness, and Pan Gu 'grew ten feet every day', along with the heavens.

In this way another eighteen thousand years passed, until at last 'the heavens were infinitely high, the earth was infinitely deep, and Pan Gu was infinitely tall'.

In other words, humankind is equal to the heavens and the earth: heaven, earth and people are referred to together as the Three Realms – the three equally great and important things from which the world is made.

Confucius viewed the world in this way: human beings are worthy of respect, and people should respect themselves.

When reading *The Analects of Confucius* we find that Confucius very seldom spoke harshly or sternly to his students, he usually talked things over with them in a relaxed, easy manner, giving them clues and hints so that they could work things out for themselves. We have all seen teachers scold their students, telling them not to do this or that. That is what happens when a teacher is not all he or she should be. A truly excellent teacher will be like Confucius, peacefully exchanging views with their students, together getting to the heart of how to make these Three Realms of heaven, earth and humanity all prosper and flourish together.

This relaxed, unhurried, assured spirit and modest, respectful attitude is something we should all aspire to. *The Analects of*

*Confucius* is the embodiment of this ideal.

Our ultimate aim is to let the key principles of Confucius enter into our hearts, uniting Heaven, Earth and humankind in a perfect whole, and giving us infinite strength.

In China today we often say that for a nation to survive and prosper, Heaven must smile on it, the Earth must be favourable to it and its people must be at peace. It is to this harmonious balance that Confucius can lead us today.

From it we can derive great strength, a strength that flowed from Confucius's inner heart. It is this strength that Mencius, another of China's great philosophers, who came after Confucius and further developed his ideas, described as 'the noble spirit'.

Only when the essences of Heaven, Earth and everything in between them combine within a person's heart, can they be as powerful as this.

What do we mean by heaven and humanity becoming one? We mean humankind and the natural world in perfect harmony.

We are working hard to create a harmonious society, but what is true harmony? It is more than just harmony within a small housing estate, nor is it merely cordial relations between people. It must also include the entire natural world, harmoniously and happily living and growing together on this earth. People should feel reverence for the natural world and a willingness to follow its rhythms.

This is a kind of strength. If we learn how to temper this strength, and to draw on it, then we will be able to attain a breadth of mind like that of Confucius.

Confucius's attitude was extremely placid, yet his inner heart was very serious. This was because he had a deep strength within him, rooted in the strength of his convictions.

His student Zigong once asked him what conditions were necessary for a country to be at peace, with a stable government.

Confucius's reply was very simple. There were only three: enough arms, enough food and the trust of the common people.

First, the internal apparatus of the state must be powerful, it must have enough military power to protect itself.

Second, it must have sufficient supplies, so its people can be well fed and clothed.

Third, the common people must have belief in the nation.

This student was always full of awkward questions. He said that three conditions were too many: Tell me, if you have to do without one of these, which one would you remove first?

Confucius said: 'Give up arms.' So we'll do without military protection.

Zigong asked again: If you had to get rid of another one, which would you give up?

Confucius in all seriousness told him: 'Give up food.' We are willing not to eat.

He continued: 'Death has always been with us since the beginning of time, but when there is no trust, the common people will have nothing to stand on.'

To do without food will certainly lead to death, but from ancient times to this day has anyone ever cheated death? So death is not the worst thing that can happen. The most terrible thing of all is the collapse and breakdown that follow when a country's citizens give up on their nation.

On a material level, a happy life is no more than a series of goals to be reached; but true peace and stability come from within, from an acceptance of those that govern us, and this comes from faith.

This is Confucius's concept of government. He believed that the power of faith alone was sufficient to hold a nation together.

In the twenty-first century we say that it is no longer enough to use the simplistic standard of GNP (Gross National Product) to assess the quality of the people's life in different countries. You must also look at GNH: Gross National Happiness.

In other words, to evaluate whether a country is truly rich and powerful, you should not just look at the speed and scale of its

economic growth, you should look more at the feelings in the heart of each ordinary citizen – Do I feel safe? Am I happy? Do I truly identify with the life I lead?

At the end of the 1980s, China took part in an international survey, which showed that at that time the happiness of our citizens was only around 64 per cent.

In 1991 we took part in the survey again. The happiness index had risen, reaching around 73 per cent. This came from an improvement in our standard of living, as well as all the reforms that were being carried out around then.

But by the time we took part for a third time, in 1996, the happiness index had fallen to 68 per cent.

This is a very puzzling business. It shows that even when a society is thriving materially and culturally, the people who enjoy the fruits of that society may nonetheless experience an extremely complex kind of spiritual bewilderment.

Let us travel back in time two thousand five hundred years, and compare what the sages and wise men were like in this less prosperous age.

Confucius was very fond of a student called Yan Hui. On one occasion he praised him: ‘How admirable Hui is! Living in a mean dwelling on a bowlful of rice and a ladleful of water is a hardship most men would find intolerable, but Hui does not allow this to affect his joy. How admirable Hui is!’ (*Analects* vi)

Yan Hui’s family was very poor. They never had enough to eat or new clothes to wear, and lived in a grim, run-down little alley. For most people, a hard life like this would be simply unendurable, yet Yan Hui could find happiness in what he had.

Perhaps many people would say: ‘That’s just the way life is, we all have to live, rich or poor, what can be done about it?’

What is truly admirable about Yan Hui is not that he could endure such rough living conditions, but his attitude to life. When everybody was sighing bitterly and complaining about how hard life is, Yan Hui’s optimism never wavered.

when it's time to put things down, put them down. By being tolerant of others, you are in fact leaving yourself a lot more room.

But what Confucius tells us is not just that we should let ourselves pick things up or let them drop, but that we also should do everything we can to give help to those who need it. This is what we mean by 'If you give a rose, the scent will remain on your hands': giving can bring more happiness than receiving.

There is a third word, besides faithfulness and forbearance, at the very centre of Confucian theory: 'benevolence'.

Confucius's student Fan Chi once respectfully asked his teacher: 'What is benevolence?' The teacher answered in two words: 'Loving people.' Loving other people is benevolence.

Fan Chi asked again: 'What is this thing called wisdom?' The teacher said: 'Knowing people.' The understanding of others is called wisdom.

To love and care for others is benevolence; to understand others is wisdom. It's as simple as that.

So what is the best way to be a person with a benevolent, loving heart?

Confucius said: 'A benevolent man helps others to take their stand in so far as he himself wishes to take his stand, and gets others there in so far as he himself wishes to get there. The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand can be called the method of benevolence.' (*Analects* vi)

If you wish to raise yourself up, immediately think of how to help other people raise themselves up too; if you want to realize your own ambition, think at once of how to help other people to realize their ambitions. This can be done starting with the small things near to you, treating others as you would like to be treated yourself. This is the way to live according to benevolence and justice.



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