

Wisdom and Beliefs

Human beings have only one home under the heavens. How we arrange our domestic lives and how we live together in harmony is the essence of traditional Chinese thinking. First and foremost, Chinese culture regards human life as part of nature and, as such, the only way for us to survive is to live in harmony with nature. The fundamental significance of civilization lies in the creation of a peaceful world, which also requires avoiding conflict between humans and nature. Instead of dictating to nature, people should hold nature in awe and gratitude. A second characteristic of Chinese culture is its emphasis on harmonious human relationships. An individual cannot live without community and society. Thus Chinese culture strives to build a world of harmony based on friendship between individuals, mutual assistance between families, and respect between nations. Thirdly, Chinese thinking stresses self-reflection. People should not only understand the external world, but also and more importantly, improve their internal state of mind. Only after humans have cleared away any intentions of combating nature, are we able to live up to the philosophy of living in harmony with nature.





1. *Confucian Thought on Heaven and Humanity*

Confucius (551-479 BC), known in China as Kongzi, given name Qiu and alias Zhongni, was a native of Zouyi (present-day Qufu in Shandong Province) of the State of Lu during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC). A great thinker, educator and founder of Confucianism, Confucius is an ancient sage to the Chinese people. His words and life story were recorded by his disciples and their students in *The Analects (Lunyu)*.

An enduring classic of Chinese culture, *The Analects* has influenced all thinkers, writers and politicians in the over-2,000-year-long history of China after Confucius. No scholar could truly understand this long-standing culture or the inner world of the ancient Chinese without this book.

Much of Confucian thought on Heaven and people represent universal human values. This is perhaps why Confucian thought in the 21st century still retains the interest of not only the Chinese but also people in other parts of the world.

Confucius on Heaven: the Source of Everything

In the Shang (1600-1046 BC) and Zhou (1046-256 BC) dynasties, the prevalent concept of “Heaven” was that of a personified god, which influenced Confucius. Generally, however, Confucius regarded “Heaven” as nature. He said, “Heaven does not speak in words. It speaks through the rotation of the four seasons and the growth of all living things.” Obviously, Heaven equaled nature, in the eyes of Confucius. Moreover, nature was not a lifeless mechanism separate from humans; instead, it was the great world of life and the process of creation of life. Human life was part and parcel of nature as a whole.

Confucius’ equation of Heaven with the creation of life was an innovative idea in his time. The natural process of life creation was the “way of Heaven.” This idea was later developed in *The Book of Changes (Yijing)*, as it stated “Continuous creation of life is change.”

As the natural process of creation of life, Heaven was the source of all living things and the source of all values. This was the “virtue of Heaven.” Thus, *The Book of Changes* said, “The great virtue of Heaven and Earth is creating life.”

In the natural process of creation of life, Heaven had its inner purpose in creating all things as well as protecting and improving life. Heaven had originated humanity, and humans were obliged to accomplish this purpose. In other words, humans are born with a sense of “heavenly mission,” and this is the meaning of human life.

Confucian “Heaven” also had a certain sacred element, which was related to it being the source of life. Thus Confucius required people to hold Heaven in awe. He says that a person of virtue must “respect his heavenly mission,” listen to and live out the purpose of Heaven by caring for and improving life.

Under the influence of Confucius, the ancient Chinese developed a sense of awe and belief in Heaven. To them, Heaven was the highest sacred being, with its

profound mystery never to be fully understood by mortals. It was not a supernatural, personified deity, but was the world of ever-generating life. As the most intelligent of all beings, humans should take to heart the purpose of Heaven by cherishing life. If one remained “ignorant and disrespectful of one’s heavenly mission” by killing or maiming life, one would be punished by Heaven. Confucius said, “He who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray.” The Confucian respect for and belief in Heaven represented a form of religious spiritualism of the ancient Chinese.

In the 21st century, the Confucian caveat of “standing in awe of the ordinances of Heaven” still holds true, as human society begins to pay greater attention to ecological civilization. Humans should indeed listen to the voice of nature, respecting and loving it as the world of life. This is our sacred mission and gives value to all human life.

Confucius on People: *ren* (仁) and *li* (礼)

Ren and *li* are the two core concepts of Confucius’ doctrine about people.

When his student Fan Chi asked him about *ren*, Confucius replied, “Love of people.” This is Confucius’ most important interpretation of *ren*. Love for the people is universal love. Confucius further emphasized that this kind of love should “begin with the love of one’s parents.” He believed no one could love people in general if they did not even love their own parents. Confucius regarded “filial piety and fraternal duty” as the essence of *ren*. *The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong)* quotes Confucius as saying, “The greatest love for people is the love of one’s parents.” He also said, “Children should not travel far while their parents are alive. If they have no choice but to do so, they must retain some restraint.” He did not mean that children should not leave their parents at all. What he meant was that children should not make their parents anxious about them while away from home. Confucius said again, “Children should think often of the age of their parents. They should feel happy for the health and longevity of their parents. They should also feel concern for the aging of their parents.”



Cry of Deer in a Red Maple Forest (detail), unknown artist, Song Dynasty, a scene of contentment and harmony, as valued by Confucian scholars

By *ren*, Confucius meant universal love based on love of one's parents. How should people love one another then? Confucius said, "One should be aware that other people may have similar desires as oneself. While fulfilling one's desires, allow others to fulfill their desires as well." He further said, "Do not do toward others anything you would not want to be done to you." Thus from oneself to one's family, from family to society, one should extend love to all people. Mencius (c. 372-289 BC), a great Confucian scholar, best summarized *ren* as, "loving one's parents, loving the people, loving everything in the world."

Today, the Confucian doctrine of "Do not do toward others anything you would not want to be done to you" still holds true for humankind.

Li refers to rituals, traditions and norms in social life. Of these, Confucius regarded burial rituals and ancestral worship rituals as the most important, because they arose from human feelings. He said, "A child should not leave his parents' bosom until he is three years old." He naturally loved his parents.

The ritual of wearing mourning for a deceased parent for three years was an expression of the child's love and remembrance.

Confucius placed emphasis on *li* with the aim of preserving social order, stability and harmony. *The Analects* says, "The role of *li* is to maintain harmony among people."

Li also has philosophical implications. While individuals have a limited lifespan, life in nature is everlasting. Life is given by one's parents and extended through one's children. In this way, a limited, individual life becomes merged with the limitless life of nature; the individual dream of eternal life can thus come true. Through burial rituals and ancestral worship rituals, people are able to experience the everlasting continuity of life, appreciating the value and meaning of life. This gives people metaphorical solace.

Confucius on the State of Life

Before Confucius, only the nobility had the right to education. He was the first figure in Chinese history to initiate private education. According to historical records, Confucius taught for many years and trained 3,000 disciples. A total of 72 of them excelled in the "six arts," i.e., ritual, music, archery, (carriage) driving, calligraphy, and mathematics. A great educator, Confucius has been admired by later generations as the "sage of sages."

Confucius believed the basic goal of education was to cultivate "persons of virtue," who should have sound character and uplifted minds. Such persons should be able to shoulder important social responsibilities and to make contributions to society. Confucius regarded lofty ideals, great virtue, love of people, and the "six arts" as the general principles of education. Of these, virtue was the most important. His students were involved in a variety of professions, including politics, trade, education, diplomacy, ritual ceremony, and classifying ancient books. Whatever they did, they all wanted to improve their learning of the humanities and to enhance their virtue.



Three Masters Smiling beside Tiger Stream, *unknown artist, Song Dynasty*. Buddhist master Huiyuan (334-416), of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, bids farewell to two honored visitors at sunset – Confucian scholar and poet Tao Yuanming (c. 365-427), and Daoist high priest Lu Jingzhi (birth and death dates unknown). They are smiling as they walk along, though they have crossed Tiger Stream without knowing it. Huiyuan has thus broken his own rule of not seeing guests off across Tiger Stream.

Confucius emphasized aesthetic education. He said, “Studying *The Book of Songs (Shijing)* inspires the spirit and helps one appreciate beauty. Studying *The Book of Rites (Zhouli)* enables one to behave properly as a person of enlightenment. Studying music lifts the spirit and helps one to enjoy life.” He also said, “Simply knowing the highest standard of virtue (i.e., love of people) is not as good as setting it as one’s goal. Setting it as one’s goal is not as good as enjoying the practice of it.”

On one occasion, Confucius asked several of his disciples to talk about their aspirations. Zi Lu and Ran You wanted the opportunity to administer a state. Gongsun Chi wanted to become a master of rituals. Zeng Dian said, “My aspiration is different from theirs.” “That is acceptable,” said Confucius. “We are only talking about our own aspirations.” Zeng Dian then said, “(My dream)