CONFUCIUS: HIS LIFE AND TEACHING

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THE third of October, 1949, was the 2,500th anniversary of Confucius' birth. This date has been under dispute for more than 2,000 years. Early and reliable accounts state that the birth was on a certain day of the Chinese sixty-day cycle and that it was fifty days after an eclipse of the sun. But those same accounts list eclipses of the sun in two successive months, something that is impossible in China. Only recently has any one bothered to calculate which eclipse actually occurred and discover that, in a period of twenty years before and after the birth, only one eclipse of the sun occurred on that day of the cycle and was visible at Confucius' birthplace. So this date can be fixed accurately by modern scientific methods.[1]

The tardy knowledge of this date is typical about our knowledge of Confucius. It has long been recognized that he was one of the world's greatest men. But important incidents in his life have been neglected and his teaching has been misunderstood for these thousands of years. The reason is simple: he was pronounced to be a sage and the greatest of the sages by Mencius, less than two centuries after his time. Now a sage is supposed to be inerrant, so that he cannot fail in anything he tries to do. Hence the political career of Confucius became distorted. Moreover, he became the great authority for the Confucians. Then each Confucian philosopher, and some Daoists too, read into Confucius' teaching the beliefs that this philosopher wanted to be accepted, because by putting them into the mouth of the great authority, these teachings also became authoritative. So the real teaching of Confucius became distorted anew each time a new Confucian philosophy appeared. Many sayings were put into his mouth which he never could have uttered. During the last five hundred years his teaching has been interpreted in accordance with the medieval Neo-Confucian philosophy, which in some ways is widely different from what Confucius thought. Consequently it is necessary, before we can begin to discover what sort of a person Confucius was or what he taught, to make a thorough and careful examination of the available evidence. Such a proceeding, however, takes very much time and care.

Here I shall not bother you with such preliminary matters, for they would occupy us much too long. I shall merely attempt to summarize the conclusions to which years of study have led me. If my account appears different from those that you have heard, please do not think

[1] H. H. Dubs, "The Date of Confucius' Birth," *Asia Major*, N.S., vol. I, 1949, part 2, pp. 139–146.

that I am ignorant of those views or have failed to consider them. I have tried to keep abreast of work on Confucius and believe that these other views are misunderstandings.

First, what sort of a man was Confucius in his active life? He was the son of a brave fighter and administrator, who had become the governor of a city and county in the state of Lu, located in northeastern China, in the present Shandung province. Lu considered itself to be the most civilized of Chinese states. Perhaps it was. At that time occupations were hereditary. Confucius came of a clan that hereditarily held government office—a sort of civil service nobility, ranking just below the titled nobility. He was orphaned early in life. When he came of age, he was given a quite minor government post, being made the keeper of the public granary, later keeper of the public fields. To supplement his income, he took private pupils. He made quite an impression by his teaching, for we hear that young people from the best families in the state came to him and that he finally acquired the reputation of being the most learned person in the country.

But Lu was not a peaceful place. Its ruler was a duke, but the army was controlled by three viscounts, who were the duke's cousins. They were also the three hereditary ministers of the state. There was continual friction between the duke and the viscounts. There were also feuds between the viscounts. When Confucius was thirty-five, the situation came to a head when Duke Jao made a sudden attack upon the prime minister, Viscount Ping of the Ji clan, and captured him. While the duke was gloating over his victory and debating whether he should kill his cousin, the other two viscounts collected their forces and rescued Viscount Ping. Duke Jao had to flee and died in exile. Confucius followed Duke Jao into exile. That establishes his political sympathies. He was a legitimist, who would have defended such a person as King Charles I. He is sometimes called a democrat, but this act establishes him as an upholder of duly constituted royal authority.

Confucius soon returned to Lu, for the duke was really a worthless person. But Confucius refused to take office under Viscount Ping, who had usurped the ducal authority and power. Instead he quietly resumed his teaching. He seems to have been the first professional teacher of higher subjects in China—a profession which Confucians have ever since esteemed and aspired to. Because Confucius was a great scholar, scholarship has ever since been esteemed in China more than anywhere else in the world. Until quite modern times, there were more books in China than in all the rest of the world. Confucius has made a deep impression upon his country.

Thirteen years later there was a worse civil disturbance. Younger members of the ministerial clans, under the leadership of an adven-

turer, Yang Hu, plotted to kill the three viscounts and take their places. The plot was discovered at the last minute, but it took half a year of hard fighting before this rebellion was put down. This experience seems to have convinced the rulers of the state that Confucius' teaching of uprightness and loyalty was badly needed. So he was summoned to office. There was then a new duke and a different viscount of the Ji clan, Viscount Huan. So Confucius accepted.

In typical Chinese fashion, the scholar was first tried out as the administrator of a city. After a year, he was brought to the court and given the highest position open to a commoner, being made Director of Crime (*Sz-kou*). That year he distinguished himself at a meeting between the Dukes of Lu and its larger neighbour, Tsi, and showed himself a man of boldness, prompt action, and forethought.

Then he put forward his plan for restoring peace to the state—which was that the three viscounts should restore to the duke the actual government of the state and hand over to him their military power, dismantling the fortifications of the city castles upon which their power depended. This plan had from the outset little chance of success. Never in history has a noble in undisturbed possession of military power willingly given up that power and dismantled his fortifications. But it was the only way that continual civil turmoil could have been avoided—by concentrating the power in the legitimate ruler. Confucius knew the risk he was running—failure would ruin his career. But he felt it his duty to run the risk, for only in this way could his country be restored to peace and good government.

It speaks well for Confucius that, supported by his pupils and the minor nobility, his plan was adopted and agreed to by the three viscounts. But they were intensely jealous and suspicious of each other. After one had dismantled his previously rebellious castle, Viscount Huan tried to evade his agreement by secretly ordering a force of his men to attack the capital, possibly to kidnap Confucius. But Confucius was not caught napping. He put Viscount Huan in a position where the viscount must openly support this raiding force or have it defeated. If he did so, he would confess that he was rebelling against the duke and violating his agreement—an attitude that would set the burghers of the capital unitedly against him. The viscount did not dare to take the risk and the attack failed. Then the viscount, much against his will, had to dismantle his own city-castle.

But Confucius had angered the prime minister and made him the laughing-stock of all China—a bold warrior had been put to shame by a mere scholar! The third viscount point-blank refused to honour his agreement. The duke could not take this third fortress by siege. Confucius' life was now in danger. He had to flee the state and could not return for thirteen years until Viscount Huan had died and a disciple who had done the state a signal service induced Viscount

Kang to invite Confucius back. He died in Lu five years later, on the fourth of March, 479 B.C., an old man in his seventy-third year.[1]

This attempt to reform the government of Lu shows that Confucius had a very high degree of diplomatic ability, high courage, and a willingness to sacrifice his own future and possibly his life for the welfare of the country. The remarkable fact is not that he failed, but that he came within an ace of success. Had the third viscount not been so entirely careless about dishonouring his oath, Confucius would have been successful. We can only esteem him as a far-sighted statesman of the first rank and a man of high moral and intellectual character. His followers have honoured the tradition that Confucius set—that a cultured man's highest duty is to his state and that he should exalt moral idealism in government as well as in personal conduct. The service of the state has been the great Confucian ideal and duty.

We come now to Confucius' teaching. He did not profess to be original. As a matter of fact, he did not originate the moral idealism that he taught. While however he had a deep reverence for tradition, yet he could not bring himself to believe that the great men of ancient times had taught anything less than the highest ideals. So Confucius actually read his own high ideals into the teachings of ancient Chinese, and then taught them to his disciples. This may have been self-deception, but it was also idealism. Furthermore it was effective and impressive teaching. In his time, no other except an appeal to the authority of the great past could have produced immediate results. Confucius influenced his age and subsequent times, not only because of his own high character and teachings, but also because he asserted they were also the teachings of the greatest men in the past.

On two virtues Confucius laid the most stress: on *li* and *ren*. These two Chinese words are difficult to translate, first, because they have been interpreted differently in different ages, and secondly, because no single English word will translate them. The greatest mistake has been in attempting to interpret them in accordance with the way that later thinkers taught them. We must take Confucius' own interpretation, not that of others, who may have had different ideas.

The first of these virtues, *li*, may be conveniently translated as proper conduct or the rules of proper conduct. It was however a much broader term than what we mean by propriety. *Li* included matters of politeness, court etiquette, religious ritual, governmental practices and the state constitution, codes of conduct, and ethical principles. Perhaps the best interpretation is that a man of *li* lives in accordance with the highest code of conduct that can be expected of a true gentleman in a very broad sense. It is also more than mere conformity to a code, for Confucius required it to be heartfelt and

[1] "The Political Career of Confucius," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 66, 4, Oct., 1946, pp. 273–282.

sincere. It represents Confucius' loyalty to the established order, but it also includes his criticism of the existing order in favour of an ethically ideal order. For example, it justified both Confucius' following of the criminal duke into exile and also Confucius' attempt to reform the actual constitution of the state in favour of a better one. Confucius was a gentleman of the best type and he prized gentlemanly conduct. We should not be surprised that he emphasized it in the virtue of *li*.

The second of his two important virtues, *ren*, was a newer conception, possibly original with Confucius. He found this word used by the great founder of the state of Lu, the Duke of Jou. This duke once described himself as a man of *ren*—meaning thereby that he was a lord who was graciously kindly to his subordinates. This virtue Confucius took as fundamental. He broadened it to mean love for others and once equated it with the ordinary word for love, *ai* (*An.* XII, xxii). Today this word is often translated by such terms as "human-heartedness" or by some other term than "love." "Human-heartedness" was Mencius' interpretation. This word however has little concrete meaning. In view of Confucius' own definition, I see no reason for following Mencius, and shall tranlate it as "love" or "benevolent love."

Confucius made love for others the highest virtue for human conduct. He enunciated it in his statement, "Do not do to others what you do not like yourself," a rule that is negative only because Chinese style prefers a negative to a positive statement. Elsewhere Confucius shows that he means by this statement almost what we mean by the golden rule. Two other great teachers emphasized love as the central virtue—Jesus of Nazareth and the historic Buddha. Confucius must be ranked among the greatest of moral teachers.

If we want to know what Confucius meant by *ren* as the central virtue, we should recall St. Paul's statement, "Love is the fulfilment of the law, i.e. love for others includes the whole of virtue. So Confucius understood *ren*. Indeed, *ren*, in some of his sayings, means merely "perfect virtue." Confucius had the highest of moral ideals.

But Confucius was also a man of his own time. China was a feudal country in which a person's duties to others varied with his rank. A vassal has not the same duties as a lord. Confucius was no democrat. In a feudal society there are no equals. For him, *ren* was the attitude of an ideal ruler or an ideal father to his subjects or children. *Ren* is furthermore qualified by social relationships—one has different and stronger duties to those closer to oneself. So *ren* is not an equal love to all, but a graded love. A son, for example, should not report his fathers' misdeeds to the authorities, but must in love shield his father. Confucius taught a special love to one's own family and to one's own state. This graded love is a defect in Confucius' ethics. It was remedied

by the great medieval Confucians, but it remains as a permanent feature in Confucianism. I suspect that it is also a feature in the conduct of most persons in Christian countries. It shows that Confucius was not only a great moral teacher, but also a man of his age—a feudal age.

In addition to proper conduct and love, Confucius also taught various other virtues, especially loyalty, trustworthiness, wisdom, rightness, a sense of shame, courtesy and humility. A man must not put himself forward. He must wait until others put him forward and then he must decline an honour when it is first offered to him. Only when an honour is repeatedly offered in spite of his refusals may he accept it. Confucius summed up his conception of the ideal moral life in the notion of the true gentleman or ideal lord, the *jün-dz*. A true gentleman seeks constantly to progress. He is modest and efficient, courageous, sociable, capable in dealing with large problems. His fundamental quality is love for others.

When thus we have surveyed Confucius' own teaching, we must confess that he was one of the world's greatest moral teachers. He has influenced China profoundly and much of China's greatness must be traced back to him.

Confucius' religion was equally profound, although he spoke about it as little as did Socrates. Since he was a great authority upon *li* or proper conduct, he was expected to teach religious rites, which were a part of *li*. He did so, but in a non-committal manner. Religious rites had been laid down by the great sages of past ages, who were the authorities, so these rites must be carefully and exactly performed. But such rites have no power to move the gods to any favouritism to the worshipper. We do not know whether Confucius did or did not believe in the existence of the popular gods or spirits. But we do know that he believed at most that they were merely agents of the highest god, Heaven. The gods or spirits, if they exist, act merely as Christians believe that angels act. Confucius said that if one has offended Heaven, it is useless to pray to any other god for aid (*An.* III, xiii, 2). There is, then, only one effective god in the universe, Heaven (*Tien*), who was also called the Lord on High (*Shang-di*). In a polytheistic age, Confucius was a monotheist. This supreme God, he believed, had sent him to teach his people. He also believed that God would protect him as long as God needed him (*An.* VII, xii). Such a religious attitude stamps Confucius as possessing an extraordinarily deep insight into the fundamentals of religion. For it implies a belief, not only in one supreme God, but also in his complete goodness and his providential care over men. It is fundamentally the same as the Christian belief in a personal, moral, providential God, who makes men his instruments and protects them in their work.

The foregoing is perhaps sufficient to indicate the sort of person

Confucius was. A man of high ability in many lines—a great statesman who was both courageous and high-minded, he sacrificed a successful political career to his state's good. A successful teacher and eminent scholar, he made China the country that has honoured scholarship more than any other. A man of deep insight into morality, he proclaimed the highest of ideals—a man must live by the code of complete gentlemanly conduct and by love for others. Even though he admitted that such love should be graded, in his own conduct such a graded love led to no defects. In religion, he rose to heights rarely equalled in China, for he was far ahead of his own time and of later ages. He was truly one of the world's greatest men, a treasure to his race and to others.