


Virtuous Confucius

BY Sue De Pasquale

LEGEND HAS IT that on the night before Confucius was born, his 15-year-old mother went into a cave and prayed for a son. The Black Emperor deity appeared to her and granted her wish. Just to make sure, she returned to the cave the next day to give birth—in fact she had to rush to get there in time. She baptized her new son with water from the cave's warm spring.





From this humble beginning sprang a child who would go on to become one of the foremost Chinese thinkers. A political reformer, teacher and philosopher, Confucius inspired a universal system of ethics and morality that has survived the test of time.

Confucius founded a school of philosophy known as the Ru school, which holds that people should strive to live harmoniously to create a society founded on virtue. For Confucius, the sum of all virtues was considered to be “ren” or human heartedness, benevolence or goodness—best practiced by loving others. He connected this concept closely with “shu” or reciprocity, which he summed up by what has come to be known as the “Silver Rule”: “Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you.” Though he claimed to be merely a transmitter of wisdom that he gleaned from antiquity, Confucius, in fact, originated many of the core ideas that would sustain

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Chinese civilization for more than 2,000 years.

Today Confucianism remains one of the major spiritual traditions of the world—and Confucius’ insights and nuggets of wisdom, handed down through *The Analects of Confucius*, a collection of his teachings, continue to hold relevance for people grappling with the ethical complexities of modern life. (For other major religious traditions in China, see *The Three Teachings*, page 20.)

Though Confucius’ mother must have been overjoyed to give birth to the boy she had prayed for so ardently, it’s hard to guess what she thought

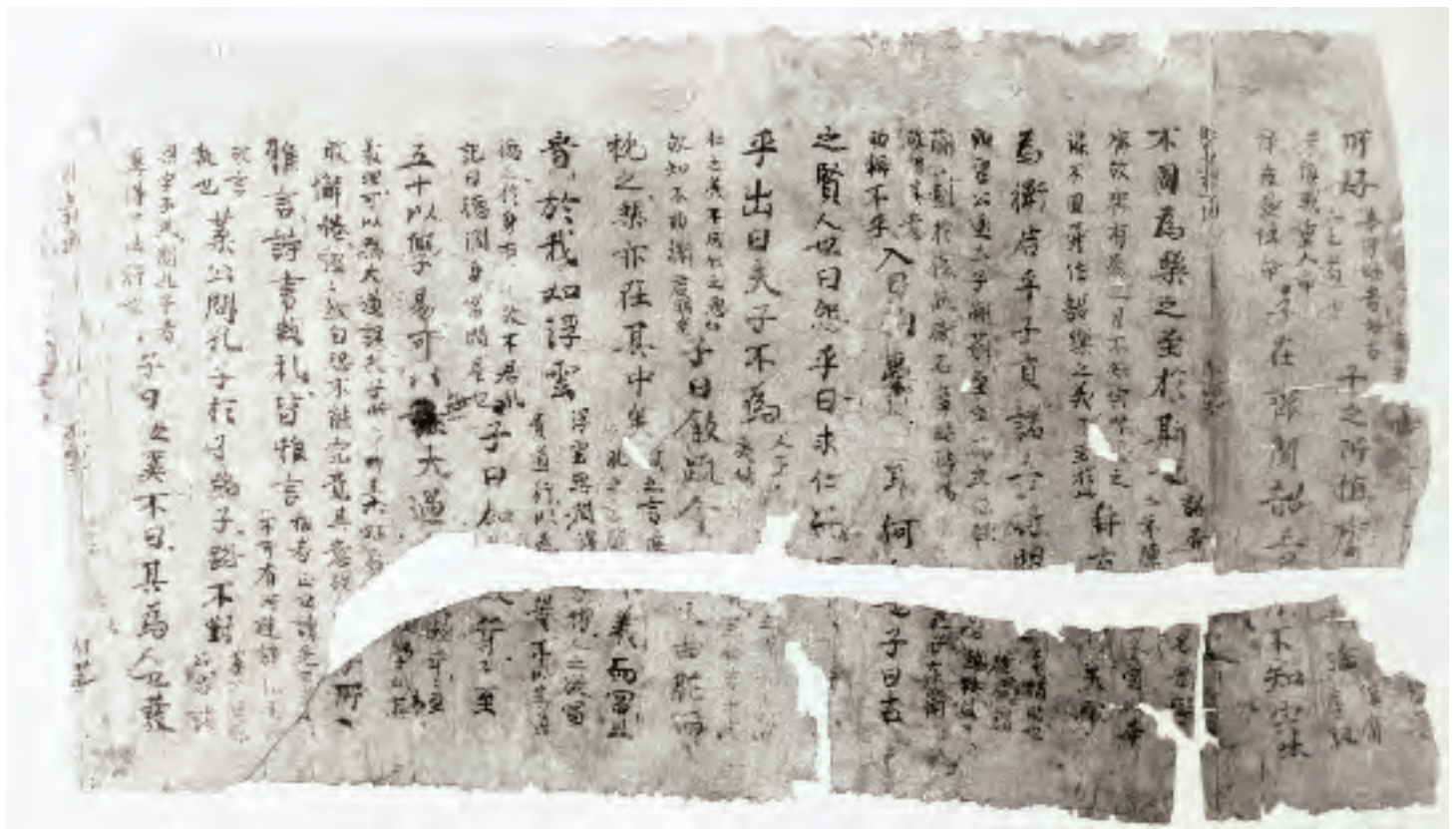
when she gazed down upon her newborn son in 551 B.C. in that cave in the state of Lu (today the Shandong Province). Historical accounts report that young Kong Fu Zi (Latinized by Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century as “Confucius”) was an ugly baby with an exceptionally large head.

Appearance-wise, things didn’t get much better, according to historian Diane Morgan in *The Best Guide to Eastern Philosophy and Religion* (Renaissance Books). She writes that the adult Confucius was described as having a bulging forehead, lips like an ox and teeth like a rabbit.

Born out of wedlock to a poor but respectable family, Confucius came into the world during China’s Spring-Autumn period (722-481 B.C.), a time when the kings of the Zhou Dynasty had lost nearly all their authority and were mere figureheads. Power instead rested within the hands of the aristocratic leaders of China’s various provinces, who jockeyed for ever more influence and authority at the expense of their neighbors. As he grew to young adulthood, Confucius undoubtedly was affected by the disharmony of China’s political milieu.

According to Zuo Zhuan, a commentary on the chronicles of Lu that included mention of Confucius’ upbringing, the boy’s father was an exceedingly strong man who once enabled his comrades to escape by single-handedly holding up a heavy iron portcullis, or gate. Already 70 years old at the time Confucius was born, he died three years later. Like other boys his age, Confucius spent his childhood learning the Six Arts: ceremonies, music, chariot driving, archery, writing and arithmetic. Not surprisingly, the young Confucius showed an early love of learning. He particularly venerated the early rites and music developed by the early Zhou kings during the so-called Golden Age of Antiquity at the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty (c.1027-256 B.C.).

Looking around him, at what he considered to be the moral decline of his



society, Confucius committed himself to reviving the peace and harmony of this earlier age. To do so, he studied (and would later be credited with editing) the Six Classics—Changes, Odes, History, Rites, Music, and Springs and Autumns. The book of Odes, in particular, was his constant companion, notes scholar John Chinnery in *The Sacred East* (Seastone). With its 305 songs, many of which had been sung at the Zhou court, the book of Odes was believed by Confucius to offer wisdom about how best to serve one's father and the king, and to provide an outlet for emotions.

As Confucius grew into adulthood and beyond, his studies of the Golden Age required great discipline. "I was not born with possession of knowledge, but being fond of antiquity, I ardently pursue it," he would later be quoted as saying in the *Analects*. And, "As we use a mirror to reflect the forms of things, so we study antiquity to understand the present."

Confucius married at age 19, and is known to have fathered at least two children, a son and a daughter. By age 30, he started teaching students, becoming the first sage of the day to take on students without regard to social class or money. As word spread, male students—eventually numbering in the

thousands—flocked to learn at his side. Some records indicate that he cultivated 72 disciples, though only 25 have been identified in historical records by name. Describing himself as "tireless in learning and tireless in teaching," to the point that when inspired he would "forget to eat," Confucius was open to the insights of others. "When three people walk together," he said, "there is sure to be one from whom I can learn."

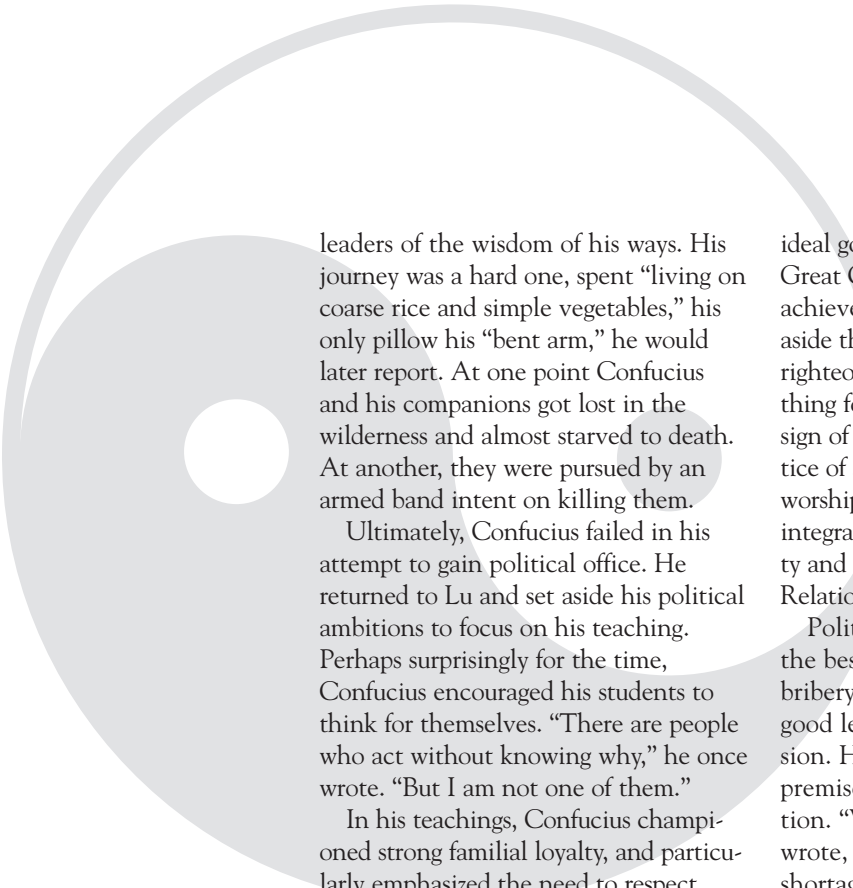
Confucius served for a time as justice minister of Lu, but reportedly resigned

because he disagreed with the politics of his prince. Convinced that his theories could transform China's turmoil-filled political realm, he set out from Lu in 497 B.C. to travel the countryside. His goal: to gain a high government post and a bully pulpit from which to advance his ideas.

Accompanied by a few hand-picked students, he spent the next 12 to 14 years traveling through principalities in what is now northern China, passionately trying to convince political

WRITTEN AFTER CONFUCIUS' DEATH, OVER A PERIOD OF 30 TO 50 YEARS, *The Analects of Confucius*, PICTURED ABOVE, IS A WORK OF 20 CHAPTERS THAT CAPTURE THE HEART OF THE GREAT SAGE'S TEACHINGS. A SAMPLING OF HIS WISDOM:

- I AM NOT BOTHERED BY THE FACT THAT I AM UNKNOWN. I AM BOTHERED WHEN I DO NOT KNOW OTHERS.
- HE WHO IS IMPATIENT OVER TRIFLES WILL MAKE MISTAKES IN MAJOR ENTERPRISES.
- RULE BY THE POWER OF MORAL EXAMPLE.
- TO LEARN WITHOUT THINKING IS FATAL BUT TO THINK WITHOUT LEARNING IS JUST AS BAD.
- IS IT NOT A PLEASURE TO HAVE FRIENDS COME FROM AFAR?
- IF YOU GOVERN WITH THE POWER OF YOUR VIRTUE, YOU WILL BE LIKE THE NORTH STAR. IT JUST STAYS IN ITS PLACE WHILE ALL THE OTHER STARS POSITION THEMSELVES AROUND IT.
- JUNIORS SHOULD BE RESPECTED.
- IF YOU DO NOT GIVE A THOUGHT TO THE DISTANT FUTURE, YOU WILL BE IN TROUBLE WHEN IT COMES NEAR.



leaders of the wisdom of his ways. His journey was a hard one, spent “living on coarse rice and simple vegetables,” his only pillow his “bent arm,” he would later report. At one point Confucius and his companions got lost in the wilderness and almost starved to death. At another, they were pursued by an armed band intent on killing them.

Ultimately, Confucius failed in his attempt to gain political office. He returned to Lu and set aside his political ambitions to focus on his teaching. Perhaps surprisingly for the time, Confucius encouraged his students to think for themselves. “There are people who act without knowing why,” he once wrote. “But I am not one of them.”

In his teachings, Confucius championed strong familial loyalty, and particularly emphasized the need to respect one’s parents. Only by establishing harmonious relationships between father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, friend and friend, and sovereign and subject (known as the “Five Relationships”) he wrote, could an

ideal government built on virtue (the Great Commonwealth or Utopia) be achieved. He urged his disciples to set aside their own selfish desires to pursue a righteous path, or *yi*: doing the right thing for the right reason. The outward sign of righteousness was *li*, or the practice of sacred rites. Rites such as ancestor worship and sacrificial ceremonies were integral to preserving the order of society and strengthening the Five Relationships, according to Confucius.

Politically speaking, he taught that the best government leads not through bribery or force but through genuinely good leaders who act by moral persuasion. His economic theory was premised on the idea of fair distribution. “Where there is harmony,” he wrote, “there will be no complaint of shortage. Where there is contentment, there will be no rebellion.”

As Confucius neared the end of his life, he seemed confident that the decades he had spent in the pursuit of wisdom had been well spent. “At fifteen, I set my heart on learning,” he wrote. “At thirty, I became firm. At forty, I had no more doubts. At fifty, I understood Heaven’s will. At sixty, my ears were attuned to this Will. At seventy, I could follow my heart’s desires, and know they were right.”

One night when he was 73 years old, the great thinker dreamed of his own death. These words came to him: “The great mountain crumbles. The strong man breaks. The sage withers away.” Historical accounts show that he died a week later.

Confucius’ teachings did not die with him, thanks to the efforts of his disciples; his only grandson, Zisi; and later influential thinkers Mencius and Xun Zi. At the time of death, however, the great sage wouldn’t have known that he would be venerated for centuries to come. No matter to Confucius. “I am not bothered by the fact that I am unknown,” he once said. “I am bothered when I do not know others.”

“THE THREE TEACHINGS”

IN CHINA TODAY, CONFUCIANISM IS ONE OF “THE THREE TEACHINGS” THAT MANY PEOPLE PRACTICE SIMULTANEOUSLY BECAUSE THEY ARE SO COMPLEMENTARY. AS THE POPULAR CHINESE SAYING GOES, “THE THREE TEACHINGS MERGE INTO ONE.” ALL ARE PREMISED ON THE CENTRAL IDEA THAT THE COSMOS IS A SACRED PLACE AND THAT ALL ASPECTS OF IT ARE INTERRELATED. THE OTHER TWO TEACHINGS ARE:

DAOISM (OR TAOISM): Indigenous to China, this tradition (dating from the sixth century B.C.) focuses on harmony between humankind and nature. Dao (or “Way”) represents the natural pattern underlying cosmic change and transformation. Practitioners strive to practice *wu-wei* (non-interference) with the Dao by growing in their attunement to natural forces. Humans are thought to reach full potential by being like rivers—flowing, receptive, powerful. Though there is some debate over his historical existence, philosopher Lao Tzu is recognized as the founder of Daoism. Today there are about 20 million practicing Daoists in the world.

BUDDHISM: Introduced from India in the first century, Buddhism took root and came to accommodate the Chinese perspective. Unlike other indigenous traditions, this one lays out the promise of universal salvation. Buddhism is centered on the teaching of the Buddha Sakyamuni, and holds that followers should strive for an understanding of the nature of reality (experiencing an “Awakening” or “Enlightenment”) through years of spiritual cultivation. Across the world today there are about 350 million followers of Buddhism.