

Contents

Part I Wisdom and Beliefs

Unit 1 Confucian Thought on Heaven and Humanity.....	3
Unit 2 Laozi’s Philosophy of Non-action.....	13
Unit 3 <i>Sunzi’s Art of War</i> : Source for All Books on War	23
Unit 4 The Temple of Heaven: Reverence with Awe and Gratitude	35
Unit 5 Eco-awareness in Traditional Chinese Culture	43

Part II Creativity and Exchange

Unit 6 Chinese Characters: Poetic Symbols.....	55
Unit 7 The Silk Road.....	61
Unit 8 Openness of the Great Tang	71
Unit 9 Zheng He’s Voyages to the Western Seas	81
Unit 10 The Great Wall	87
Unit 11 The Forbidden City: Glorious and Awe-inspiring	95

Part III Art and Aesthetics

Unit 12 Music: Govern the Country, Nourish the Mind	105
Unit 13 A Silent Army	113
Unit 14 The Eternal Smile of the Buddha	119
Unit 15 Flying Strokes of Calligraphy	129
Unit 16 Porcelain—Calling Card of Chinese Culture.....	137
Unit 17 Gardens South of the Yangtze River	147
Unit 18 Peking Opera: Artistry of Performers	159
Unit 19 A Variety of Splendid Folk Arts	171

Part IV Folk Customs

Unit 20 Urban Customs in <i>A Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival</i>	183
Unit 21 Customs and Charms of Old Beijing	193
Unit 22 Culinary Delights in China	207
Unit 23 Life with Fragrant Tea.....	215
Unit 24 Martial Arts and <i>Cuju</i>	227
<i>Key</i>	240
<i>Index</i>	267



Unit 1 Confucian Thought on Heaven and Humanity

- 1 Confucius¹ (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 Period² (770-476 BC). A great thinker, educator and founder of Confucianism, Confucius is an ancient sage (圣人) to the Chinese people. His words and life story were recorded by his disciples (弟子) and their students in *The Analects*³ (*Lunyu*).
- 2 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.
- 3 Much of Confucian thought on Heaven and people represents 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.



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- 1 Confucius: 孔子。名丘，字仲尼，春秋时期鲁国人。伟大的思想家，教育家，儒家学派创始人。
 - 2 the Spring and Autumn Period: 春秋时期。简称春秋，东周的一个时期，因鲁国编年史《春秋》而得名。
 - 3 *The Analects*: 《论语》。儒家经典之一，由孔子门徒及再传弟子编纂，主要记载了孔子及其弟子的言行。

Confucius on Heaven: the Source of Everything

- 4 In the Shang (1600-1046 BC) and Zhou¹ (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.
- 5 Confucius’ equation of Heaven with the creation of life was an innovative (革新的) 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*² (*Yijing*), as it stated “Continuous creation of life is change.”
- 6 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.”
- 7 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.
- 8 Confucian “Heaven” also had a certain sacred element, which was related to its being the source of life. Thus Confucius required people to hold Heaven in awe. He said 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.
- 9 Under the influence of Confucius, the ancient Chinese developed a sense of awe and belief



- 1 Zhou: 周朝。中国历史上继商朝之后的朝代,可分为西周和东周两个时期,其中东周时期又称“春秋战国”,分为“春秋”及“战国”两部分。
- 2 *The Book of Changes*: 《易经》。也称《周易》,儒家重要经典,包括《经》和《传》两部分,通过八卦的形式,推测自然和社会的变化,提出了若干富有朴素辩证法的观点。

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 (神), 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 (残害) 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.

- 10** In the 21st century, the Confucian caveat (告诫) 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)

- 11** *Ren* and *li* are the two core concepts of Confucius’ doctrine about people.
- 12** When his student Fan Chi asked him about *ren*, Confucius replied, “Love 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 for one’s parents”. He believed no one could love people in general if they did not even love their own parents. Confucius regarded “filial (子女的) piety and fraternal (兄弟的) duty” as the essence of *ren*. *The Doctrine of the Mean*¹ (*Zhongyong*) quotes Confucius as saying, “The greatest love for people is the love for 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.”



1 *The Doctrine of the Mean*: 《中庸》。儒家经典之一，原属《礼记》的一篇，宋代把它和《礼记》中的《大学》独立出来，同《论语》、《孟子》合称“四书”。



丹枫呦鹿图

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

- 13** By *ren*, Confucius meant universal love based on love for 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. Mencius¹ (c. 372-289 BC), a great Confucian scholar, best summarized *ren* as, "loving one's parents, loving the people, loving everything in the world."
- 14** 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.



1 Mencius: 孟子。邹(今山东邹县)人，孔子之孙孔伋的再传弟子，孔子学说的继承者与捍卫者，发扬了孔子的思想，后世常以“孔孟”并称，著有《孟子》一书。

- 15** *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 (胸; 怀) until he is three years old.” He naturally loved his parents. The ritual of wearing mourning for a deceased (已死的) parent for three years was an expression of the child’s love and remembrance.
- 16** 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.”
- 17** *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 (安慰).

Confucius on the State of Life

- 18** 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 (箭术), (carriage) driving, calligraphy (书法), and mathematics. A great educator, Confucius has been admired by later generations as the “sage of sages”.
- 19** 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.



虎溪三笑图

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.

20 Confucius emphasized aesthetic education. He said, “Studying *The Book of Songs*¹ (*Shijing*) inspires the spirit and helps one appreciate beauty. Studying *The Book of Rites*² (*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 for 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.”

21 On one occasion, Confucius asked several of his disciples to talk about their aspirations. Zi Lu³ and Ran You⁴ wanted the opportunity to administer a state. Gongxi Chi wanted to



1 *The Book of Songs*: 《诗经》。中国古代第一部诗歌总集，编成于春秋时代，分为“风”、“雅”、“颂”三大类，保存了西周到春秋中期的诗歌作品305首，原称《诗》，汉以后列为儒家经典之一，称为《诗经》。

2 *The Book of Rites*: 《礼记》。中国古代一部重要的典章制度书籍，儒学经典之一，所收文章是孔子的学生及战国时期儒学学者的作品，此书由西汉礼学家戴德和他的侄子戴圣编定。

3 Zi Lu: 子路 (前542–前480)。仲由，鲁国卞之野人 (今山东平邑县仲村人)，孔子得意门生，七十二贤者之一，以政事见称。

4 Ran You: 冉有。春秋时儒者，冉氏，名求，字子有，鲁国人，孔丘弟子，七十二贤者之一。青年时曾做过鲁国季氏的家臣，后随孔子周游列国，孔子晚年归隐鲁国，冉有出力不少。

- 22** become a master of rituals. Zeng Dian¹ 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 is) to wear spring robes in late spring and to swim in the Yi River² with five or six adults and six or seven children. We shall enjoy the breeze where people pray for rain. Then we shall go home, singing all the way.” Confucius sighed, “Ah, I share Dian’s aspiration.” The different aspirations of the four students reflected their different outlooks on life. Confucius’ agreement with Zeng Dian indicates that while he stressed individual contribution to society, he regarded the highest state of life as harmony among people and harmony between people and nature. His was a true aesthetic outlook on life.
- 23** Under the influence of Confucius, Chinese thinkers of later generations all believed that students and scholars should not only increase their knowledge, but also and more importantly, broaden their minds and enhance their spiritual ethos (精神特质). In other words, they should continually seek the greater meaning and value of life. Many modern scholars think the theory on the perspective on life is the most valuable feature of Chinese philosophy. It all began with Confucius.



寄畅园 涵碧亭

Hanbi Pavillion in Jichang Garden, Wuxi, Jiangsu Province. “Hanbi” means “encompassing green”, representing the Confucian ideal of keeping one’s mind open and inclusive.



- 1 Zeng Dian: 曾点。字子皙，亦称曾皙，春秋时期鲁国武城（今山东省平邑县魏庄乡南武城）人，孔门弟子七十二贤之一。
- 2 the Yi River: 沂河。又名沂水，淮河重要支流，发源于山东，经江苏流入黄海，是山东临沂的母亲河。

Comprehension

I. Skimming and Scanning

Go through the passage quickly and answer the following questions briefly.

- 1) What is *The Analects* mainly about?
- 2) What is Confucius' view on Heaven?
- 3) What is Confucius' innovative idea about Heaven?
- 4) What does the "heavenly mission" in Paragraph 7 refer to?
- 5) How is Confucius' concept of Heaven related to the modern ecological civilization?
- 6) What is Confucius' interpretation of *ren*?
- 7) According to Confucius, what is the most important part of *li*?
- 8) What qualities are "persons of virtue" supposed to have?
- 9) Why do people need to study music according to Confucius?
- 10) What did Confucius think of Zeng Dian's aspiration?

II. Careful Reading

1. Read the passage carefully and choose the best answer to each of the following questions.

- 1) All the following are the titles of Confucius EXCEPT _____.
A. an educator B. a biologist C. a scholar D. a philosopher
- 2) The expression "filial piety" most probably means being _____.
A. loyal to the state B. obedient to sister(s)
C. responsible for the family D. dutiful to parents
- 3) Which of the following can best describe Confucius' view on the relationship between man and nature/Heaven?
A. Brothers. B. Husband and wife.
C. Doctor and patient. D. Mother and son.
- 4) Through burial and ancestral worship rituals, people can learn that _____.
A. nature is lifeless so it will never die
B. individual's life can be everlasting by joining nature
C. they should be grateful to their parents for giving them lives
D. individual's lifespan is short, so they should enjoy life as much as possible
- 5) Which of the following is the most important part of Confucius' curriculum?
A. Music. B. Calligraphy. C. Virtue. D. Mathematics.

- 6) Zi Lu, Ran You and Gongxi Chi's aspirations represent _____, while Zeng Dian's reflects _____.
- A. personal ambition; selfishness
 - B. lofty ideals; meaningless pursuit
 - C. personal struggle; generous contribution
 - D. individual contribution to society; harmony

2. Put each of the following into English and then compare your translation with that in the passage.

- 1) 天何言哉？四时行焉，百物生焉，天何言哉？
- 2) 生生之谓易。
- 3) 天地之大德曰生。
- 4) 获罪于天，无所祷也。
- 5) 仁者，人也，亲亲为大。
- 6) 父母在，不远游，游必有方。
- 7) 父母之年，不可不知也。一则以喜，一则以惧。
- 8) 己欲立而立人，己欲达而达人。
- 9) 己所不欲，勿施于人。
- 10) 子生三年，然后免于父母之怀。
- 11) 礼之用，和为贵。
- 12) 知之者不如好之者，好之者不如乐之者。

Communication

The following are some English idioms related to God. Try to translate them and then name at least five Chinese idioms about Heaven (tian). Identify the similarity and/or difference between Westerners' attitude toward God and that of Chinese people's toward Heaven.

- 1) God bless
- 2) thank God
- 3) please God
- 4) for God's sake
- 5) God forbid
- 6) Man proposes, God disposes.
- 7) God helps those who help themselves.

Application

As is mentioned in the passage, Confucius'li is to maintain harmony. The following English quotes and proverb indicate that Westerners also place great emphasis on harmony. After studying the passage, how can we build a harmonious society in terms of our home, our campus, the country and the world?

If there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character. If there is beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home. If there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation. If there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world.

—proverb

Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance and order and rhythm and harmony.

—Thomas Merton

Observe good faith and justice toward all nations. Cultivate peace and harmony with all.

—George Washington

A life in harmony with nature, the love of truth and virtue, will purge the eyes to understanding her text.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Grace has been defined as the outward expression of the inward harmony of the soul.

—William Hazlitt