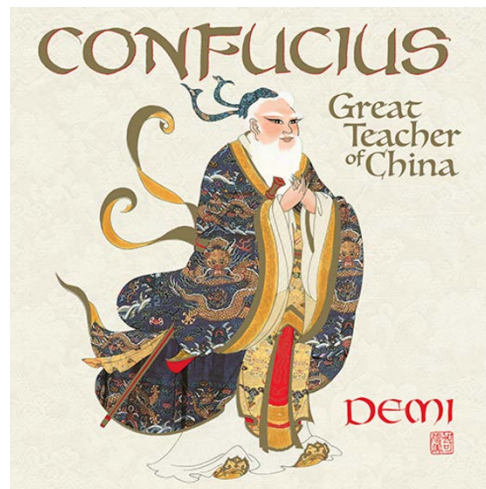


Culture Notes

Confucius: Great Teacher of China

By Demi

Lee & Low Books Inc., 2018 **Non-fiction, Set in China**
2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Awards for Children's Literature



Before approaching Confucius and Confucianism there are some very important points to bear in mind:

1. The relevance of Confucius in cultural terms is comparable to that of Jesus of Nazareth, the Buddha and Muhammed. Trying to understand the East Asian world without any knowledge of Confucianism would be akin to trying to understand the Western world without any knowledge of Christianity.
2. Dependable historical data on Confucius's life story is utterly scarce. What we have received is a life story rich in legendary elements.
3. A strand of Confucianism was adopted as the official ideology of the Chinese empire in the Western Han dynasty and, generally, maintained this position until the advent of the Republican period in 1912. Much of what is now understood as Confucianism actually is the orthodoxy that developed throughout these twenty-three centuries. Both the narrative of Confucius's life story and his teachings are deeply colored by this role as official ideology. A case in point is the depiction of Confucianism as supporting authoritarianism.
4. Confucianism, as any other philosophical and/or religious tradition, has been internally diverse, has constantly evolved and continues to be reinterpreted.
5. The representation and assessment of Confucius and the teachings ascribed to him have varied widely in different periods. Although the government of the People's Republic of China now supports a view of Confucius as a cultural hero



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and has invested in the creation of Confucius Centers worldwide, just 60 years ago, during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), he was vilified by communist leaders as a symbol of decadence and a champion of the feudal system that had prevented China from progressing.

6. Confucius did not write anything himself, rather, the teachings ascribed to him were recorded by his disciples and their disciples.

In what follows, you will find some more details about these points but first we need to place Confucius in his historical context.

Historical context in a nutshell

What we now call China has a very long history. In fact, China is considered one of the four great ancient civilizations of the world (the other three being, Babylon, Egypt and India). Its Neolithic cultures are dated as far back as 10,000 BCE while its dynastic period probably started around 2100 BCE and lasted until the advent of the Republican period in 1912. One of the characteristics of the dynastic history of China is that periods of unity were often followed by periods of deep fragmentation. Such was the case of the Zhou (pronounced: "joe") Dynasty (1046-256 BCE), into which Confucius was born in 551 BCE. Whereas the first part of the dynasty—the Western Zhou (1046-771 BCE)—was a period of unity, peace, and great social and economic development, the second part—the Eastern Zhou (771-256 BCE)—was characterized by constant vying and warring among the principalities that rejected the authority of the Zhou court and proclaimed themselves independent kingdoms. The Eastern Zhou is also divided into two periods, the Spring and Autumn Period (ca. 770 to 479 BCE), and the Warring States (ca. 475 to 221 BCE).

Confucius witnessed the chaos and decadence of the Spring and Autumn Period and saw his mission as aiding in the recovery the ways of the Western Zhou, that in his view represented the Golden Age. The Confucian Dao (Way) was in fact the normative sociopolitical order of the early Zhou. Although it is true that the Eastern Zhou was one of the bloodiest periods of Chinese history, it was also one of the most intellectually productive. Indeed, Confucianism was one of the so-called Hundred Schools of Thought, that included, Daoism, Legalism, Mohism, the Yinyang school, etc. Each of them offered

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a path to solve the ills of their time. Confucius was aware of them and we find him explicitly or implicitly debating with and responding to these other views.

The Book

Demi, the author, presents Confucius as a great teacher, and gives quite a nuanced account of his teachings. Her account is, in general, accurate and reliable but as any other non-academic account of Confucius's life the author had to make many choices about the sources and competing versions. She has made an excellent choice of quotations and has adapted some of them for the benefit of a younger audience.

Confucius's Life Story

Demi starts off by briefly narrating the legend about Confucius's conception. This is a good reminder that Confucius's life story is shrouded in myth and legend. Indeed, there is very scarce data about his life that can be considered historically reliable. Just as is the case for other spiritual leaders, his life story was embellished by his followers with myths and legends that depict him as a superhuman.

This brief narrative also gives us an opportunity to discuss the complex topic of mythology. Myths are often presented as sheer fiction and/or a lesser form of knowledge in comparison to science. I often encounter this bias in college students and observe how this view has the detrimental consequence of feeding a lack of appreciation for other modes of thinking and for other cultures, which are often seen as lesser in comparison to modern Western scientific culture. By teaching about myths as stories that arise from human creativity, and the desire to express profound spiritual insights into a language that is as much memorable as it is appealing to our senses and emotions, we can invite students to think and imagine with them and explore their rich symbolism. For instance, in the conception narrative we encounter one of the most significant mythical beings in Chinese culture, the *qilin* (麒麟, pronounced: "chee-lean"). As it is correctly depicted in the book, the *qilin* is a one-horned animal that resembles a dragon but has feet similar to those of a horse and a tail similar to that of a lion. Its appearance was considered an



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auspicious political omen and it became one of the four benevolent creatures of folklore. We can see that not too subtly Confucius is presented as a *qilin*, a being characterized by kindness and goodness, that ushers in peace, and expresses the hope that harmony and order could be restored and the chaos of war could be overcome.

The author correctly establishes that there are differing, even at times contradictory, legends about Confucius, so much so that according to some narratives Confucius was quite an ugly looking baby while in others he was a handsome child. Even the earliest source of Confucius's life story, a chapter of *Records of the Grand Historian* by Sima Qian (c. 145-86 BCE) (pronounced: "see-mah | chee-an") includes various disparate versions that were already current then. Having parsed the available sources, the prominent sinologist, J. D. Spence aptly summarized the kernel of what we know with some certainty about Confucius:

The scraps of information about Confucius are so slight that they barely give us an outline, let alone a profile, of the man [...]. We are almost certain that he was born in 551 B.C. We have a definite year of death, 479 B.C. He was born in the kingdom of Lu, one of the many small states into which China was then divided and which corresponds roughly to the area of modern Shandong province. His parents may have had aristocratic roots, but they were neither prominent nor wealthy, and though Confucius received a good education in historical and ritual matters, his parents died when he was young, and the youth had to fend for himself. He acquired a number of skills: in clerical work, music, accounting, perhaps in charioteering and archery, and in certain 'menial activities' on which we have no other details. Sometime between 507 and 497 B.C. he served in the state of Lu in an office that can be translated as 'police commissioner' and that involved hearing cases and meting out punishments. Before and after that stint of service he traveled to various neighboring states, seeking posts as a diplomatic or bureaucratic adviser but meeting with little success. Because of some feud he was, for a time, in mortal danger, but he handled himself with calmness and courage. He married and had one son and two daughters. His son predeceased him, but

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not before producing an heir. One of his daughters married a student of Confucius who had served time in jail. Confucius approved the match because he believed that the young man had in fact done no wrong. During his later years, Confucius was a teacher of what we might now call ethics, ritual, and philosophy; the names of 35 of his students have come down to us. (Spence 1993, 32-33)

Beyond this, other details are the result of later additions, speculation, apologetics, etc.

Confucius's character

Demi repeatedly portrays Confucius as a joyful person. I see the benefit of doing this to counteract the image of a resentful, inflexible, somehow sour Confucius that predominates in both the Eastern and Western imaginary. As with other aspects of Confucius, it is difficult to ascertain what his character was like. We find passages in the *Lunyu* (*The Analects*; pronounced: "loon-you") that depict him as being extremely kind to his disciples, in others he seems to be rather short tempered, or intolerant towards those who did not abide by what he considered to be the treasured customs of the past. What seems beyond doubt is that he was an extremely resilient and committed person, often idealized by his disciples and sometimes ridiculed by those who disagreed fundamentally with him as we see in the last chapters of the *Zhuangzi* (pronounced: "jwang-zuh"), one of the earliest and most important Daoist classics.

The Main Teachings of Confucius

Here we also need to rely on sources that claim to accurately report his words and teachings but whose truthfulness we cannot fully corroborate. One of the main sources, if not the main source, is the *Lunyu* often translated as *The Analects*. It is one of the Four Books of the Confucian canon (the other three are the Great Learning, the Mencius, the Doctrine of the Mean). *The Analects* ostensibly reports Confucius's conversations with his disciples, as well as comments, and observations by his disciples. Most of them are very brief, sometimes truly puzzling, and it is not always self-evident why his disciples would choose to include a passage or comment. For simplicity's sake, in what follows I will refer



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to what Confucius said but please bear in mind that I really mean what his disciples (and his disciples' followers) said that Confucius said!

When describing Confucius childhood and youth the author correctly establishes the centrality of learning and ritual in his life and philosophy. However, it is necessary to underscore that both learning and ritual need to be explained from the perspective of the Confucian project rather than anachronistically ascribing them current colloquial meanings. The Chinese word translated as ritual is *li* (pronounced: "lee"). *Li* has many dimensions: it encompasses ceremonies, rules of etiquette, prescriptions for proper behavior, customs, grand state as well as family rites, and ritual propriety. They are all connected, and they all foster the cohesion and correct ordering of society. Sometimes Confucius' emphasis on ritual is seen as empty formality but multiple passages in *The Analects* give the sense that the purpose of ritual is ultimately the transformation of our mind and habits. It is through ritual that we enact virtues and values. For instance, Confucius promoted ritual veneration of the deities, but he seems to have done so not to benefit the deities but to evoke specific qualities in human beings, such as respect and gratefulness. I have chosen this example purposefully, as ritual is often connected to God or Gods in the Western imagination. However, it is very clear that Confucius was mainly concerned with this world and that this concern took precedence over understanding the world beyond. For Confucius, commitment and practice, not belief, was central. Becoming truly human meant unceasingly cultivating virtues, such as, filial piety, trustworthiness, compassion, wisdom, and righteousness.

The highest virtue for Confucius was *ren*, often translated as humanness or benevolence. These translations are useful but they inevitably fall short, as *ren* subsumes all other virtues. The Chinese character for *ren* 仁 (pronounced: "ren") can give us a sense of how encompassing it is and also of another central feature of the Confucian vision. Two elements make the character up: 人 (person) and 二 (two). *Ren* is of necessity relational, it can only be enacted in our interactions with others. Thus, for instance, we cultivate filial-piety by greeting our parents respectfully, this, in turn, is understood as a ritual action. We can say that it is through ritual practice that we enact and cultivate virtues.

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This constant striving was for Confucius the best possible way to attain true and lasting social harmony.

In this regard, Demi states that "Chinese society at that time emphasized that children should obey parents, wives obey husbands, common people should obey leaders, and everyone should know their places. It was believed this orderly living would bring continual harmony and peace." This is partially correct but can give an inaccurate sense of what the society Confucius lived in was like. That children owed obedience to their parents, wives to husbands, etc. was a view that, for Confucius, the ancient people of the Golden Age (which for Confucius had been the Western Zhou) upheld, and he saw the need to re-establish it. Thus, Confucius placed great importance on what he called the five relationships (sometimes translated as the five basic, constant or eternal relationships):

Father - Son

Ruler - Subject

Husband - Wife

Older brother - Younger brother

Friend - Friend

Demi mentions one side of the relationship, for instance, that wives should obey husbands. This one-sidedness has been common even in academia with the consequence that the teachings of Confucius are often seen as inherently authoritarian, misogynistic, and/or dogmatic. It is very important to present a more thorough description of the tradition to avoid this tendency. Confucius did think that a virtuous wife should obey her husband, but he also stated that a husband should provide for his wife. There was a sense of reciprocity that is all too often ignored, and yet reciprocity is absolutely central to the Confucian project. Just as a husband would be right in divorcing a wife that did not obey him, a wife would be right in divorcing a husband who did not provide for her, and in this

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Confucius was way ahead of his time. Similarly, just as a subject owed obedience to the ruler, the ruler must be humane and rule for the benefit of the subjects. In the *Mencius* (a book named after one of Confucius's most influential disciples, pronounced: "men-see-us"), one of his students complains about an inhumane, oppressive ruler and asks Mencius if it would be permissible to overthrow him. Mencius replies "such a man does not deserve to be called a 'ruler.' He is a tyrant, I would not condone overthrowing a ruler, but to overthrow a tyrant is just" (Book 1B, Chapter 15).

In chapter 18 of the *Analects* we also find Confucius stating that "When serving your parents, you may criticize them gently; if they do not follow your advice, you may press further, but you should be even more respectful. Never let your efforts lead to anger." Clearly, obedience, even to one's parents, does not mean blind or abject obedience for Confucius as it is all too often believed.

The role of education

The title of the book is *Confucius: Great Teacher of China*, and the author emphasizes the centrality of education in the Confucian project. Indeed, Confucius can be considered a paragon of learning and education. Although he is often described as very conservative, he was also quite revolutionary in several ways. In this period (fifth century BCE), literacy and education in China (as everywhere else in the world) were the preserve of a very limited elite. Confucius changed that situation in China forever. He would not discriminate against anyone and was willing to teach anyone who wanted to learn from him. His only requirement was that the person had a real desire for and commitment to learning: "I won't teach a man who is not anxious to learn, and will not explain to one who is not trying to make things clear to himself. If I hold up one corner of a square and a man cannot come back to me with the other three, I won't bother to go over the point again" (VII, 8). A very interesting quotation to discuss with students to be sure!



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