

The Great Courses: Books that Matter *The Analects of Confucius*

AUTHOR AND NARRATOR: PROFESSOR ROBERT ANDRÉ LAFLEUR

COURSE GUIDEBOOK (PDF DOWNLOAD), 240 PAGES

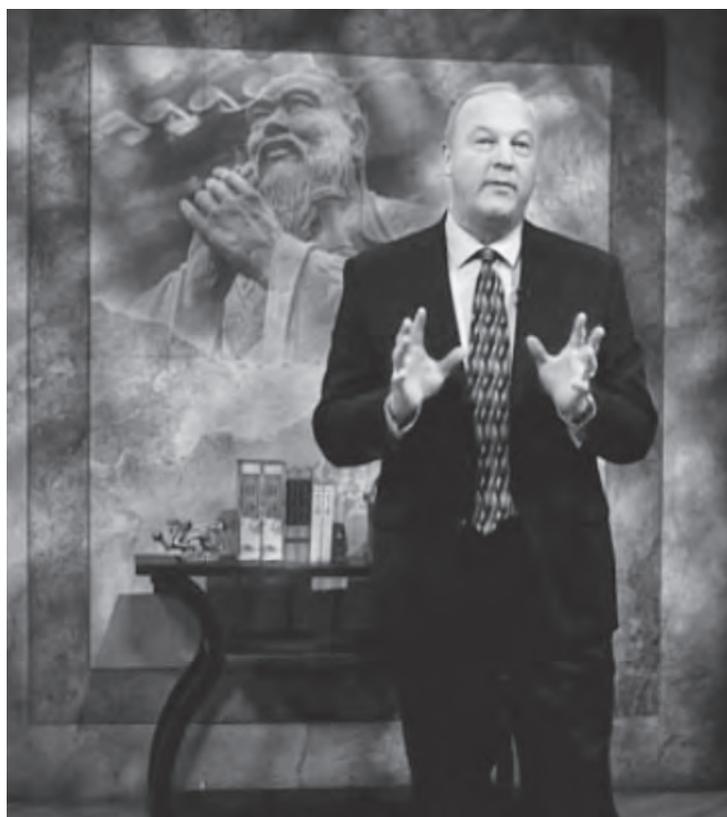
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By Carol Stepanchuk



Professor Robert André LaFleur. Source *The Great Courses* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y4em52q8>.

Look, learn, imagine, teach . . . action must be crafted . . .

“Imagine a world,” author/narrator Professor Robert André LaFleur suggests, “in which the gift of a book could change your life forever. Imagine a world in which you didn’t just read, but read, reread, read again, and lived a book.” This is the dynamic instruction that drives twenty-four half-hour lectures on Confucius and the *Analects* for listeners/viewers who are new to, or even those well-acquainted with, the teachings of one of China’s greatest thinkers and educators.

The *Analects* is an action plan to living, a how-to guidebook, and, as LaFleur maintains in *The Great Courses: Books that Matter*, as relevant now as it has been over the course of more than 2,000 years.

Embracing a historian’s perspective and a philosopher’s breadth, LaFleur’s lectures first help the audience understand what the *Analects* is in the context of Confucius’s life and turbulent times. Then, integrating ideas from Western thinkers, poets, psychologists, and sociologists, he creates a comparative framework for understanding Confucius’s teachings as a means of appreciating human affairs and actions.

LaFleur takes us on a quest not only to understand better the vibrancy and veracity of a book compiled centuries ago—and not actually written by Confucius—but also to untangle the legacy of a teacher who was a failed administrator, a wandering adviser without steady employment, and an educator who taught for only five years. Speaking in clear and concise language, LaFleur never tries to bury the *Analects* in academic language, but brings it to life, for example sprinkling his lectures with connections to popular culture (e.g., *The Simpsons*). He keeps it constantly alive by telling us to engage with the work, live what is taught, enter the conversations that often take the form of questions and answers with the Master and his disciples, and appreciate the cadence of a text that was performative—chanted as it was learned.

THE ANALECTS OF CONFUCIUS

A relatively short book with 500 assertions in twenty chapters, the *Analects* should be as effortless to read as skimming over a barrage of tweets. The question is how to make sense of this text that has scattered content in a narrative that doesn’t seem to have any continuous plot. It’s as if we are asked to understand an abstraction, to fill in the blanks of a course book for which we have no background for comprehension. Recalling the Chinese aesthetic *xieyi* (“writing meaning”), reading the *Analects* is an exercise that demands the reader to imagine the full reality of what is presented—in this case, social engagement and ethical behavior. But how do we start this journey?

BACKGROUND—Person, Process, Pattern, and Provenance

In the first five chapters of the course, LaFleur’s voice, evenly paced and engaging, introduces the audience to the person we recognize as Confucius. Next, he explains Confucius’s teaching dynamic, the overall pattern contouring the shape and chapters of the work, and, finally, provenance as proven through archaeological discovery. We are urged to grasp the rhythms, to read the entire book (after first absorbing the lectures), and to eventually interpret the nuances of the text on our own with all its variegated moods and expressions.

DIGGING IN—Kernels, Students, Purpose

In the following lessons, LaFleur takes us through reading the actual text using selected themes and passages with the goals of understanding Confucius’s relationships and teaching style with his four core students (Zai Wo, Yan Hui, Zilu, and Zigong) and appreciating the critical purpose of learning, particularly to serve self, family, and society. LaFleur explains the overall shape of the *Analects*: chapters 1–3 containing introductory and very popular passages; chapters 4–8, written by Confucius’s direct students (“The Master said . . .”); chapters 9–11, written by students of his students; and the final chapters as reflections by scholars working at much later times, so that the audience can, in time, navigate the work themselves, chapter by chapter.

Essentials

The foundational concepts of Confucius next take center stage and comprise a core fourth of the course’s chapters—the notions of filial devotion, remonstrance, loyalty, trust, virtue, sincerity, and—the most crucial of all—consummate conduct. Consummate conduct is how all the basic skills intertwine—from filial obligation, critiquing those in authority, and exerting all of one’s efforts to relating to the needs of others, being true to one’s words, and cultivating excellence.

LaFleur emphasizes that the Confucian focus on hierarchy in a network-driven society is still fluid—that consummate conduct is situational. Circumstances change, and remonstrance (or correction) is a necessary component of good rule. Hierarchies tell us where we belong but are also dynamic—one moves up the ladder, gradually working out new relationships.

Some listeners might have preferred a more linear route through this material, but in accord with the nature of the *Analects* itself, LaFleur weaves the reader around and through, emphasizing key lessons, all the while providing the commentary and context in a way that would have accompanied a reading of the *Analects* in classical times.

PRESSING ONWARD—Ritual and Rule, Critics and Sages, Revival and Reach

Digging further into the practice of the *Analects*, LaFleur sets up the final flourish where all the skills come together—the all-consuming enactment of ritual or ceremony. These are the actions that, when performed with passion and energy, transform interactions among people. LaFleur keeps us moving to the next historical phase: to the sage who expanded Confucian thought, Mencius, and to those contending beliefs that stood apart, Legalism and Daoism, followed by the rise of Buddhism and its influence over Chinese culture and thought. Confucianism continued to be reinterpreted over 1,000 years later in the form of neo-Confucianism, eventually being woven into the foundation of Chinese civil service education. These chapters capture well the legacy of Confucianism, but might be better sectioned off as a separate part of the course. This would help the listener better retain the immediacy and vibrancy of the *Analects* as presented in the first eighteen lectures.

Fast-forwarding to contemporary times, LaFleur takes us to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when reform and/or rejection of traditional ideas was deemed necessary for remaking China in a modern age. LaFleur recalls the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) on the streets of Qufu, where Confucius once lived. This reviewer walked the very places traveled by LaFleur in roughly the same time in the 1980s. Confucianism was steamrolled over and replaced with the ideology of Mao Zedong. Large and small mounds of dirt dotted the cemetery of Confucius, an area with carved and uncarved tablets marking the sites of minor and major officials. Much of the grounds were in ruins following damage incurred during the Cultural Revolution. A trip to the neighboring village of Ni Shan where Confucius was born, was highlighted by a cave-like grotto where he was supposedly raised. A nearby temple dedicated to Confucius, his parents, and the god of the mountain was starkly furnished, without carvings or images, most everything having been destroyed during the chaotic 1960s.

LaFleur explains the trajectory that has led to a fractured interpretation of Confucius in modern China. We witness a figure once considered a feudal relic, denounced by the contemporary government of the People's Republic of China (PRC), now restored to a position of respect, one where Confucius is revered again as a sage and visionary at the heart of political and moral reform. The course eventually leaves us at a juncture at which we want to know more about the impact of Confucian ideology on the contemporary political structure of the PRC today. How indeed does Confucianism's past both support and diminish a rapidly changing social, political, and economic force that is contemporary China?¹

The course package as a whole, DVDs, CDs, and course guidebook, absorbed together or independently, should be excellent learning and teaching tools. Each component can be appreciated alone but offers distinct advantages if mixed and matched: the CDs for their obvious pop-in, pop-out convenience; selected chapters in the DVD, as they can be used

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for class instructional videos with the advantage of supplemental imagery; and the text for its well-captured summaries, as well as its annotated bibliography, with an essential note in the foreword on translation, Chinese characters, and key terms.

There is also room, as LaFleur suggests in his afterword, to keep learning, whether by the teacher, student, or interested citizen of the nation and/or world. He suggests reading various translations (six are recommended), exploring language (create your own glossary), becoming a language field worker, teaching what you have learned, and reading more about the meaning of life in various cultural traditions. One wonders if there is a grounded understanding of a common humanity through which we might compare, for example, Confucius's and Gandhi's "experiments in truth." Who are the great thinkers throughout history and modern times that have brought about personal and societal change fueled by their own turbulent times and surroundings? This course can be a steppingstone for further inquiries and comparative outlooks.

There is no end, either, to the various forms for interpreting Confucius or the Confucian outlook today. Digital media and libraries are brimming with podcasts, YouTube videos, and assorted histories (martial arts, for example). One of the best and most recent translations, particularly for students in secondary schools, is a graphic version from Princeton University Press.² This innovative translation by Brian Bruya includes the Chinese text in sidebars and is illustrated by C. C. Tsai, a well-known cartoonist who presents a punchy and zesty image of Confucius in practice, as he goads, plays, and inspires both his followers and rulers.

In summary, by the last chapter of this edition of *Books that Matter*, the listener will appreciate the *Analects* through the lens of philosophy, intellectual history, pedagogy, politics, state ideology, and even humor.

LaFleur creatively and concisely unpacks a worldview on behavior, learning, and morality that resonates strongly and urgently with conscientious minds today. For those who want to "unlock the mystery and wisdom of Confucius," LaFleur anchors you, grips your inner being, and exhorts you to, most importantly, continue the journey. ■

NOTES

1. See Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution to Reform* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2003). Thank you to LRCCS postdoctoral fellow Dr. Lei Duan for highlighting this resource.
2. *The Illustrated Library of Chinese Classics: The Analects*, adapted and illustrated by C. C. Tsai, trans. Brian Bruya, foreword by Michael Puett, 2018.

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