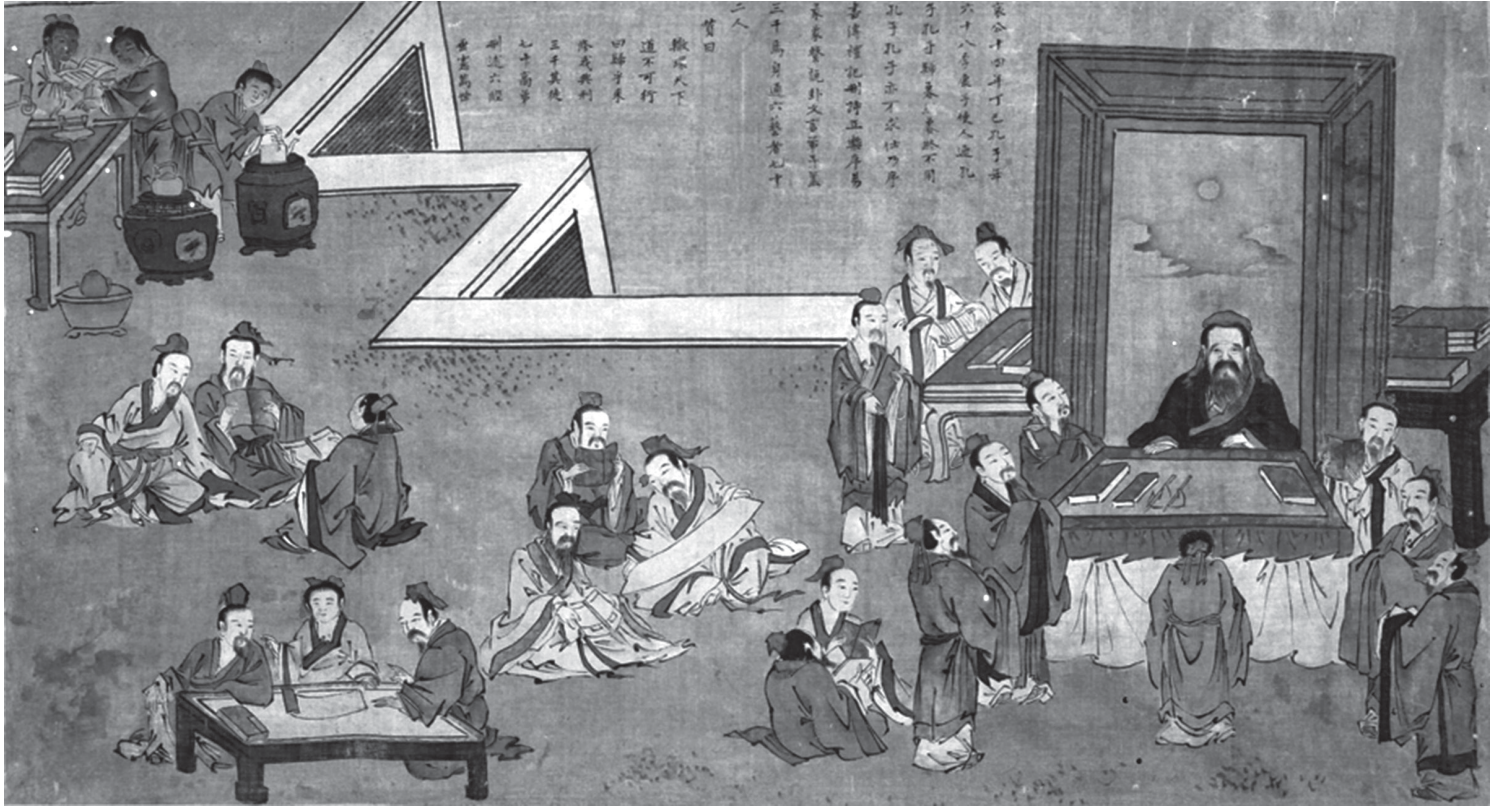


# Remonstrance

## The Moral Imperative of the Chinese Scholar-Official

By Anita Andrew and Robert André LaFleur



Confucius (behind table at right) and students. Source: China Institute: China 360 Online at <http://tinyurl.com/l6argga>.

### Introduction

This essay will offer an approach that helps instructors of survey courses in world or Chinese history to introduce the concept of remonstrance—a key component of the training, motivation, and behavior of scholar-officials in imperial China.<sup>1</sup>

We focus on *shi*, Chinese scholar-officials, because this is the group most identified with Confucian education and moral practice in premodern Chinese society. They dedicated themselves to understanding Confucian teachings and texts, and sought to become officials in the service of the emperor. In fact, Confucian society considered such service to be the highest level of achievement, and those who passed the highest examinations became *jinshi*—the very pictures of success in their time. Scholar-officials brought honor to their families, and Confucian morality taught the scholar-official to be virtuous, righteous, and loyal to both parents and ruler. It also taught them about remonstrance—one of the keys to making a complex hierarchical system work well.

In a nutshell, the remonstrance ideal in a Chinese context called upon an underling—an official of government or a child within a family—to provide guidance and even criticism for a superior when necessary, regardless of the risks encountered. In high-level positions—and especially in troubled times—this included the very real possibility of death. Confucian scholars accepted this risk as a part of their professional and

personal identities. Remonstrance became an essential part of the moral duty that defined the scholar-official, and the concept of remonstrance became embedded in the intellectual tradition of China throughout the Imperial Age.

### Teaching about Confucian Scholars and Remonstrance

Americans have long been fascinated with the lifestyle of the imperial Chinese scholar-official. There have been numerous museum exhibitions of the artifacts associated with the material culture of the scholar, including furniture from their studies, writing implements, and even early twentieth-century photographs of examination cubicles. Descriptions of scholar-officials and their lives are readily available online. Examples include Columbia University's *Asia for Educators* segment on scholar-officials of the Song dynasty (960–1279), the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art, and the Freer and Sackler Galleries of the Smithsonian's Museums of Asian Art.

Although some students, especially at the college level, might be familiar with Confucianism and the careers of scholar-officials, perhaps the greatest attractions for students in undergraduate and high school classes are significant political events and media phenomena involving Chinese culture. Major news coverage has included the 2008 Beijing Olympics; the Chinese government's imprisonment of Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo in 2010; the publication in 2011 of Yale Law School professor Amy

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## Defining Moral Action

One major dictionary, Tetsuji Morohashi's *Dai kanwa jiten*, gives a number of key ideas that contribute to the smooth flowing and functioning of remonstrance. For those who do not read "Sino-Japanese," the ideas behind the remonstrance concept will become clear if readers pay attention to the English translations below the characters.

直言

*Straight words*

禮儀を以て人の過を正す

*Using ritual and decorum to correct a person's faults*

These definitions clearly give the sense of direct words and correction, but there is more. One is to remonstrate with ceremony and deference, and this echoes the words of the texts we consider in this essay. In short, one follows the paths of correct behavior in criticizing a superior. It is rarely a matter of simply rebuking a leader; one smooths the way with ritual and decorum. The definitions below should make this clear.

諫者以禮儀正之

*The remonstrator uses ritual and decorum to correct (them)*

内之則諫其君之過也

*An insider employs remonstrance to correct his ruler's faults*  
諫止也

*Remonstrance (is a kind of) stopping*

One more quotation from the famed dictionary will help to solidify the meaning of remonstrance in a Chinese context.

諫，諫諍，直言以悟人也

*Remonstrance and remonstrating argumentation: straight words to awaken people*

The last sense of "to awaken" is significant. The key idea in remonstrance is to reawaken a sense of right conduct that the father or ruler *already knows*. This is not so much the teaching of new knowledge as it is *reminding* (gently or otherwise) a well-informed ruler of the principles at the heart of his government.

Taken together, these definitions give us a rich array of interpretive possibilities. They are much more than mere "protest" or "criticism." They are richly engaged with social status, hierarchy, and social action. They are part of a deep pattern of ritual ties that bind senior and junior in the social hierarchy. Above all, they tap into a shared tradition of knowledge that goes far beyond the opinions of just one member of government. They are part of a shared body of knowledge that, at least in principle, all participants have understood throughout Chinese history.

### SOURCES

Hucker, Charles O. *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985, 148-149.  
Morohashi, Tetsuji. *Dai kanwa jiten* 大漢和字典 [Comprehensive Chinese-Japanese Lexicon]. Tokyo, 1955.

—Anita Andrew and Robert André LaFleur

Chua's controversial book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*; and the role of China in the flight of Edward Snowden, National Security Agency leaker, and his extended stay in Hong Kong.

Most high school and college courses about Chinese history feature some treatment of Confucianism and the scholar-officials who served the rulers of imperial China. Students learn about the ideals of Confucianism and its application according to the goals of various dynasties and rulers. They also learn that scholar-officials committed the tenets of Confucianism to memory for the grueling examinations they took in order to be admitted to office—and they internalized its messages about admonishing rulers if they strayed from those shared ideals.

We have found that it is not typical for materials used in introductory world, Asian, and Chinese history courses to address the moral imperative of remonstrance when discussing the scholar-official. It is not clear why this is the case, but we think that such an omission makes treatment of the topic of the Confucian scholar-official incomplete and ultimately more difficult for students in the courses to understand why this group of intellectuals was so significant in premodern China.

At two different kinds of institutions, one a liberal arts college and the other a large state university, we both teach our students that remonstrance helped to define the scholar-official as a person of principle and moral action. We discovered independently that students developed a better understanding of the enduring importance of Confucianism in Chinese history, the rigors of Confucian education, and the sacrifices scholar-officials made to their careers and their lives when we began to include materials, discussions, and assignments dealing with remonstrance to course units about the scholar-official.

In this essay, we offer a number of suggestions to assist instructors in adding materials on remonstrance in history courses. We also provide links, which are published in the EAA online supplement that accompanies this essay, to easily accessible primary sources, academic textbooks, and websites for classroom use. It is our hope that this treatment of remonstrance will provide both instructors and students with a new appreciation for the moral commitment of the Confucian scholar-official.

### The Responsibilities of the Scholar and Remonstrance in Early Chinese Thought

Confucius (551–479 BCE) was the single most influential thinker in Chinese history. He left no writings himself, but the text known as the *Analects* (*Lunyu*) is composed of quotations attributed to him and compiled by followers after his death. The text established the roles and responsibilities of rulers, scholars, and subjects. In the *Analects*, Confucius speaks of a group he calls the *junzi*, calling upon them to provide moral leadership to society. For Confucius, these "noble persons" were the true role models for humanity. They studied the writings of the sages of Chinese antiquity and lived their lives according to their moral principles. Scholar-officials had the greatest opportunity to attain these ideals because they were able to devote themselves to study of the past. Confucius therefore expected a great deal from scholars:

*The scholar, who perceiving danger, is prepared to sacrifice his life; who, seeing the possibility of gain, thinks of rightness; who, in sacrificing, thinks of reverence; who, in mourning, thinks of grief, is worthy of approval.*<sup>2</sup>

Confucius stressed that rulers should also have responsibilities and were to interact with their officials according to established norms:

*Duke Ding asked how a ruler should employ his ministers and ministers should serve their ruler. Confucius replied, "The ruler should employ the ministers according to ritual; the ministers should serve the ruler with loyalty."*<sup>3</sup>

Mencius (372–289 BCE) took the role of the scholar a significant step further. He established remonstrance as a key role and responsibility of the scholar-official.<sup>4</sup> Confucian scholar-officials considered it an essential part



of their role in government to help the ruler maintain his virtue (*de*; 德). Their motivation was based on righteousness (*yi*; 義) and loyalty (*zhong*; 忠). These terms all focus on the models of behavior, which all Confucian scholars would understand and be expected to emulate. Thus, the moral interaction between the ruler and his Confucian scholar-officials was essential to the ruler's claim to legitimacy.

Confucian scholar-officials instructed the emperor and, when necessary, spoke up to rectify the ruler's behavior. In the ideal expression of remonstrance, they were not seeking to attack the ruler for their own purposes. They explained their concerns in moral terms, drawing references from China's past. They took their roles as moral leaders seriously. To come forward in this manner was dangerous for scholar-officials throughout Chinese history and in some periods could easily result in death. Although the near-certainty of punishment led many officials to seek safety, those dangers did not deter some scholars in all periods from speaking up, even when it was clear that they were risking their lives for principle.

Confucian officials would remonstrate with a ruler precisely in order to help him become a better ruler. They were not simply "whistle-blowers" or activists seeking to overthrow the regime. Their loyalty was to the principles at the heart of their classical educations even more than to the person of the emperor. China's autocratic rulers often responded to critiques of their policies and ruling styles with great violence, yet courageous writers and speakers still came forward, maintaining that it was their moral duty to do so.

There are numerous terms that explain the concept of remonstrance and scholar-officials' affinity for it. In order to understand the moral imperative of the concept, however, we think that the phrase "risking one's life in remonstrance" (*jiansi*; 諫死) is particularly useful, precisely because it indicates the commitment some scholar-officials were willing to make in order to fulfill their Confucian duty to the ruler. They were willing to die for their principles. The threat of reprisals from vengeful rulers was a very real horror in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 CE). Nevertheless, courageous officials still came forward to offer remonstrance.

### Remonstrance in Primary Sources From Early Confucian Thought

There are several important documents from early Confucianism that nicely illustrate the role of remonstrance for the Chinese scholar-official. These include Confucius's *Analects* (ca. 500 BCE), the *Classic of Filial Piety* (ca. 400 BCE), and the *Mencius* (ca. 300 BCE). There are a number of excellent English translations of these documents. In the examples listed below, we cite William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*.

The *Classic of Filial Piety* shows how the concept of filial piety influenced the scholar-official to move from filiality in the family—children's relationships to their parents—to filiality in the state, where the ruler serves as the dynasty's father figure.

*As one serves one's father, one serves one's mother, drawing on the same love. As one serves one's father, one serves one's prince, drawing on the same reverence. The mother draws upon one's love, the prince on one's reverence. Therefore, if one serves one's prince with the filiality one shows to one's father, it becomes the virtue of filiality (loyalty). If one serves one's superior with brotherly submission, it becomes the virtue of obedience. Never failing in filiality and obedience, this is how one serves superiors. Thus one may preserve one's rank and office and continue one's family sacrifices. This is the filiality of the scholar-official . . . ."*<sup>5</sup>

Confucius himself makes the connection between filial piety and remonstrance in a dialogue with his student Zengzi (505–436 BCE):

*Zengzi said, "I have heard your instructions concerning affection and loving respect, comforting one's parents, and upholding one's good name. May I presume to ask, if a child follows all of his parent's commands, can this be called filiality?"*

## The moral interaction between the ruler and his Confucian scholar-officials was essential to the ruler's claim to legitimacy.



Mencius, from *Myths and Legends of China*, 1922, by E. T. C. Werner.

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mencius>.

*The Master [Confucius] replied, "What kind of talk is this! What kind of talk is this! Of old the Son of Heaven had seven counselors, so that even if he himself lost the Way, he still would not lose his sway over all-under-Heaven . . . If a father had even one son to remonstrate with him, he still would not fall into evil ways. In the face of whatever is not right, the son cannot but remonstrate with his father, and the minister cannot but remonstrate with his prince. If it is not right, remonstrate!"*<sup>6</sup>

Mencius's view of remonstrance calls for a much more radical approach. He states, "If the ruler has great faults, they [ministers] should remonstrate with him. If, after they have done so repeatedly, he does not

listen to them, they should depose him."

For this section of the sourcebook, in which Mencius argues for re-proving then deposing a ruler for "crimes against humanity," Irene Bloom notes:

*Mencius says that before the situation in a state reaches a point at which the ruler must be deposed, his ministers should remonstrate with him, quit his court if not listened to, and then have the ministers of the royal blood [that is, from the royal line] depose him as a last resort. Thus Mencius's main emphasis is on the need for remonstrance and reproof, lest the situation in a state come to violence.*<sup>8</sup>

These references to both filiality and remonstrance are what stand out most for us when we present information about scholar-officials in our Chinese history classes.

### Increasing Autocracy in Chinese History and the Dangers of Remonstrance

We also think it is important for instructors to show not only Confucius's perspective but also how his ideas and teachings changed over time. The institutionalization of Confucianism in the former Han dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE) was not simply a continuation of the ideals and goals of Confucius and Mencius. Han Confucians could not help but reinterpret their beliefs in the light of the preceding Qin dynasty, which was based on Legalist political philosophy.

Legalism was originally associated with the harsh Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), China's first universal empire. The political influences of Legalism did not disappear when the Qin ended, however. Legalism continued to influence the way Chinese emperors ruled. It introduced the concept of an all-powerful ruler who was primarily concerned with taking and keeping power in his own hands. Scholar-officials continued to come forward to offer remonstrance to the ruler, yet even after Confucianism became the official ideology of the state, rulers did not always treat scholar-officials who offered remonstrance in a "Confucian" manner. For example, Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE) of the former Han dynasty punished Grand Historian Sima Qian (ca. 145–90 BCE) for his views on dealing with a

group of invading nomads by insisting on his punishment either by death or castration. He gave Sima Qian the choice. In a decision that went against the grain of the political culture, the grand historian chose castration in order to finish writing the early history of China begun by his father, Sima Tan (d. 110 BCE)—the *Shiji*, or *Historical Records*.<sup>9</sup>

Another important alteration to the style and tone of “Confucian” rulership occurred because of the philosophical and institutional influences of what Westerners call Neo-Confucianism, especially associated with the later empires of the Song (960–1279 CE), Ming, and Qing (1644–1911 CE) dynasties. Yet the Neo-Confucian approach to rulership was one of increased personal power and activism on the part of the ruler, leading to an increasingly autocratic imperial institution. In fact, it was not until the Song interpretations of imperial activism associated with Neo-Confucianism that rulers were able to increase their personal power while putting lasting checks on the influence of scholar-officials to interfere or limit their personal power.

## We have found in our classes that use of primary sources on remonstrance in discussions and other assignments makes the words of the scholar-officials more powerful and real for our students.

### Conclusions

In this essay, we have attempted to explain the importance of teaching students about remonstrance when presenting information and materials about the Confucian scholar-official. Although remonstrance has been an underemphasized element in the way most Chinese history courses treat the motivations of Confucian scholar-officials, we feel that the issue can easily be rectified. Our solution for instructors of world and Chinese history classes is to utilize a combination of primary and secondary source materials that focus upon this moral imperative of the scholar-official.

We have found that through the use of remonstrance as a regular part of any treatment of imperial Confucianism and the scholar-official class, our students are better able to understand the following generalizations:

- In the Imperial Age, remonstrance was an accepted and even noble part of the scholar-official tradition that defined intellectual and governmental life in China.
- The scholar-official could at any time find himself in a situation in which his life and those of his associates and family were at risk. Many still sought to make their rulers understand their concerns and principles.
- “Remonstrating at risk of death,” *jiansi*, was the most extreme form of a range of responses available to officials. It demonstrated most dramatically the importance of that moral imperative.
- Using materials such as the de Bary and Bloom document collection, and the volumes of the *Cambridge History of China* series offer a variety of ways for students to view the perspectives of both rulers and key scholar-officials. It also demonstrates how remonstrance connects to the more widely covered Confucian concepts of “humanity,” “loyalty,” and “righteousness” in textbooks.

We have recommended a number of resources that offer essential information about remonstrance for instructors and students. We offer examples of key Chinese primary sources on remonstrance from the perspectives of scholar-officials and rulers, especially those in the de Bary and Bloom print and digital collections, in order to demonstrate to

students how the scholar-officials in different dynastic periods expressed their moral imperative.

We have found in our classes that use of primary sources on remonstrance in discussions and other assignments makes the words of the scholar-officials more powerful and real for our students. They learn from the scholar-officials themselves why these respected and privileged people, who had invested enormous resources in their education and careers, would choose to stand up to a ruler when principle demanded it.

By including some treatment of remonstrance in world and Chinese history courses, we think our students are better able to understand that Confucian scholar-officials were not simply part of an unchanging and passive bureaucratic elite. They were rather the embodiment of an intellectual tradition that stressed putting their Confucian principles to the ultimate test, regardless of the consequences to their careers and lives. ■

### NOTES

1. Imperial tradition dates to the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE); Legalism was the ruling ideology of the Qin. When speaking of the era in which Confucian scholar-officials comprised the intellectual elite of Chinese society, however, we stress the period beginning with the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and ending with the Ming (1368–1644 CE). Our rationale for this timeline is that the Han represents the first dynasty to officially embrace Confucianism and the Ming represents the most autocratic period of “Confucian” government.
2. See Confucius, *The Analects*, 19:1; Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 63.
3. See *The Analects*, 3:19; de Bary and Bloom, 48.
4. “Selections From the Mencius: On the Duty of Ministers to Reprove a Ruler,” *Asia for Educators*, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/mscdqol>.
5. de Bary and Bloom, 327.
6. *Ibid.*, 328–329.
7. *Ibid.*, 147.
8. *Ibid.*, 124.
9. Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian: Qin Dynasty*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

**Author’s Note:** This essay grew out of a presentation on remonstrance at a 2011 undergraduate education studies teaching colloquium at Beloit College, Beloit, WI.

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