

The *Analects* in the Classroom

Book Four as a First Step

By Sarah Schneewind

The Confucian *Analects* can be as difficult to teach as it is necessary for teaching East Asia or world religion. How does one both set it in historical context and lead high school and college students to think through its message? Following the lead of philologists Brooks and Brooks, who argue that part of Book Four is the oldest part of a text compiled over several centuries; and of Edward Slingerland, who delineates the way Confucius was remaking old social concepts; and inspired by historian Susan Mann's proposal that we imagine ourselves into the scene of textual production, I have retranslated Book Four and imagined it as a real dialogue.¹

The question is, who was Master Kong ("Confucius" is a European creation) talking to? He was not mumbling to himself in a corner; nor was he preaching from a pulpit; but neither was he usually admonishing rulers to their faces, as Mencius did later. He was teaching a few young men from the bottom level of the Zhou aristocracy: the *shi*. Socially distinct from commoners, they had been educated at home in the elite arts of war, in ritual and music, and in the poetry and speeches later compiled in the Classics, but inherited no great estates or high offices. Political power was still central to *shi* identity, but they had to make their own way into politics by serving men of higher rank. How to do that? And once there, how to act? All around, hereditary ministers were usurping the power and privileges of feudal lords, who themselves encroached on the primacy of the Zhou king. Master Kong set himself to persuade smart young upwardly mobile aristocrats, who valued fame, knowledge, and worldly advantages, to do what was right.

Book Four coheres. Sayings often link one to the next, but also form a net of cross-references. I include the Chinese in key places to demonstrate how repetition, parallel construction, and puns structure the prose (and sometimes make translation awkward). For as we teach this text, we create a dialogue between the Chinese of the fourth century BCE and the English of the twenty-first century CE. I hope that having read one such imagined dialogue will help students relate to their counterparts 2,500 years ago by imagining contexts for the sayings in other books, and indeed in other historical texts. With a sense of the social situation and with an initial understanding of Humaneness (*ren*), some aspects of filial piety, and the ritual management of emotion, students may be alert to similarities and differences elsewhere in the text (and in later Confucianism). This lesson is not meant as a substitute for reading one of the expert translations I drew on (see Bibliography), but as a bridge into the whole *Analects*, whether taught mainly as history or philosophy.

Students are searching for their place in life. Master Kong offers them a metaphorical neighborhood: a way of life, a state of mind, a group of comrades. The metaphor of "where you live or abide" runs through Book Four.

4.1 子曰，里仁為美，擇不處仁，焉得知。The Master said, "Of neighborhoods, Humaneness is the most beautiful. If you choose not to live in Humaneness, how can you acquire knowledge?"

Presumably, the students have come to Master Kong for knowledge. He responds by telling them that to get true knowledge, you need to settle into Humaneness: "ren" 仁, also translated as "benevolence." As many teachers do, he will try to bridge the gap between what they think they want and what he thinks they ought to want.

4.2 子曰，不仁者不可以久處約，不可以長處樂。仁者安仁，知者利仁。The Master said, "A person who is not Humane cannot live long in straitened circumstances (*yue*), nor can he live long in happiness (*le* or *yue*). Humane men are content with Humaneness; knowledgeable men see Humaneness as profitable."

Since this was a learning process, we need posit no permanent difference between "ren zhe"—the Humane man—and "zhi zhe," the wise or knowledgeable man. Rather, as in the "Great Learning," knowledge

(reached through "the investigation of things") can be the first step toward virtue. A Han-era commentator cited by translator Edward Slingerland explains that people who are not really Humane cannot stand poverty or difficulty for long: they will do wrong to improve their material life. But they will not enjoy prosperity long, either: they will become arrogant and lazy, and make mistakes. Those who really are Humane can feel content in wealth or poverty. Knowledgeable people, therefore, recognize that benevolence can benefit them by enabling them to endure poverty or maintain good fortune, even if they do not really (yet) love virtue for itself.

4.3 The Master said, "It is only Humane men who are able to [truly] love or hate others."

Figuring out who will work with you and who will betray you is a critical skill for a politician, and one would expect that a smart, knowledgeable person would judge others most accurately. But Master Kong argues that only the Humane man stands on a firm foundation. He alone can objectively assess others, unswayed by envying or wanting something from them.

In the next saying, Master Kong repeats the word "hate" 惡 but shifts the topic.

4.4 The Master said, "If only you set your intentions on Humaneness, you will not have what you hate."

Master Kong poses a puzzle in 4.4 and solves it in 4.5. It is not that by settling in the Humane you will get everything you desire; rather, once settled in the Humane, you will be content with what you have.

4.5 子曰，富與貴：是人之所欲也。不以其道得之，不處 (*chu*) 也。

貧與賤：是人之所惡也。不以其道得之，不去 (*qu*) 也。

The Master said, "Wealth and honor: those are what people want. [But] you won't/shouldn't abide in them if you don't/can't obtain them in accordance with the Way. Poverty and lowliness: these are what people hate. [But] do not avoid them if you cannot do so in accordance with the Way!

*Is Master Kong saying that you will eventually lose wealth and honor gained improperly, as in 4.2?, or that you ought not to pursue them improperly? Since, as you can see, the two lines are completely parallel (*chu* and *qu* even sound similar), he draws his hearers in with the first implication (warning that they could lose what they want), then shifts to the second, urging them to think beyond the utility of Humaneness to valuing it for its own sake.*

[4.5 continues:] 君子去仁，惡乎成名。 'If a nobleman (*junzi*) departs from *ren*, how can he make a name for himself?' The Noble Man (*junzi*) does not leave Humaneness even for the time it takes to eat a meal. Stressed out and pressured, he stays with it; in trouble and danger, he sticks with it."

*Proverbs appear elsewhere in the Analects, and the eight-character phrase may have been a proverb about how an aristocrat's reputation depended on his following the conventional code of etiquette. The students would have known the proverb, but Master Kong shifts the meaning. As Slingerland explains, Master Kong reworked old aristocratic, class-based values and terms into a new, ethical vision. The old term "junzi" 君子 meant literally the "son of a lord," an aristocrat or nobleman. Master Kong calls for a Noble Man, noble because of his own character, not because of a long family pedigree. Similarly, "ren" originally referred to the proper relationships among aristocrats, but the Noble Man relates to everyone with *ren*: the fundamental ethical value of the Analects. After the explanations, the students might have understood the eight-character proverb in a new way: "If the [would-be] Noble Man departs from Humaneness, how can he live up to the name [of Noble Man]?"*

4.6 The Master said, “Personally, I have never seen one who loved the Humane, nor one who hated the not-Humane. One who loved the Humane would esteem nothing above it [or, would himself be unsurpassed]. One who hated the not-Humane would [at least] act in a Humane way enough to keep the not-Humane away from himself.

One who truly loves the Humane will love it more than wealth and rank. There may be no such person, Master Kong rather sarcastically remarks! But even somebody who has only learned enough to dislike not-Humaneness because he knows that it endangers good fortune (as in 4.2) can at least behave enough like a Humane man to surround himself with the Humane (as in 4.1) and keep his distance from the not-Humane.

We can imagine a student objecting: Sticking with Humaneness through thick and thin is too hard! For instance,

6.12 Ran Qiu said, “It is not that I do not delight in your Way, Master; it is just that my strength is insufficient!”

Master Kong responds to the objection in 4.6:

[4.6 continues:] Is there anyone able, for just one day, to employ all his strength in Humaneness? Personally, I have never seen one who did not have enough strength. Maybe there is such a person, but I myself have never met him.

Everyone has the strength to be Humane; it is a question of making up your mind, setting your will on Humaneness, sticking to it through thick and thin, settling in the right neighborhood.

Perhaps another student objects: But Master, you just told us that it is only the Humane man who can really judge others, who can love or hate based on objective qualities. So how can someone who hates not-Humane, but is not yet 100 percent Humane himself, figure out how to keep at a distance the not-Humane (people or actions)? Master Kong tries to answer this question:

4.7 The Master said, “People in committing mistakes each fall into a category. If you observe someone’s faults, you will know whether he is virtuous.”

Commentators puzzle over the next saying, which seems out of place. Maybe Master Kong is reminding his students that even though he is about to give them practical guidelines for distancing the not-Humane, his Way is not just for practical advantage: it brings its own contentment, even joy.

4.8 The Master said, “In the morning hear about the Way—that evening die content.”

Next, how do you know what is Humane and not-Humane by observing people’s faults, including your own? Some clues:

4.9 The Master said, “A gentleman (shi) who has set his will on the Way, and yet is ashamed of bad food and bad clothing, is not worth talking with.”

4.10 The Master said, “The Noble Man, in relating to the whole world, is not prejudiced for or against anyone (or any action). Whoever (or whatever) is right (yi), that is who (or what) he associates with.”

If you are biased for or against people, instead of observing and judging them objectively according to the standards of the Way, you are not Noble. Even a born lord, if he pre-judges others, is morally a “little person” or “petty man” (小人). Just as with junzi in 4.5, Master Kong, now in 4.11, reworks the meaning of “little person” from an inherited social rank—commoner—to an ethical category.

4.11 The Master said, “The Noble Man cherishes Virtue (de 德); the petty man cherishes his locality. The Noble Man cherishes justice (literally “punishments,” xing 刑); the petty man cherishes special favors.”

There are various translations of the terms here, but the gist is clear. The small man thinks about material comfort, his family, his buddies, and his home village, about what he can get or get around. The Noble Man thinks about principled action that is fair to all, taking the large view from his standpoint on the Way, free of prejudice for or against anyone. After all, the most beautiful neighborhood is Humaneness.

Now you know several ways to judge others truly, says Master Kong, and to judge whether you yourself are living up to the name of Noble Man. You cannot talk grandly about the Way, yet be ashamed of shabby clothes; you cannot pre-judge people based on their rank or wealth or clothing; you must stand up for the public good and justice, not trade favors with your homeboys.

4.12 The Master said, “If you act only with a view to profit: lots of resentment!”

Recognizing that his students are still not completely committed to Humaneness, Master Kong again argues for its utility. Acting like a petty man—looking for advantages and special favors—is dangerous, because people will turn against you; and thus counterproductive: it will assure that you cannot abide long in happiness. Further, Master Kong’s students hope to enter government, so he now explains how his Way works there.

4.13 The Master said, “If by using ritual and deference one can manage the state, what is the obstacle [to your accepting my Way]? If one could not use ritual and deference to manage the state, what good would they be?”

Deferring to superiors (instead of ruthlessly pursuing political advantage), and commanding inferiors politely through established codes of etiquette and ritual is not only right. It is also the most practical way to govern. Otherwise, Master Kong asks rhetorically, why would I be wasting your time with it?

Now perhaps a student says, “All right, once I hold office I’ll govern in accordance with the Way. But since those in power now are hardly Humane, I have to finagle a job using special favors or flattery. That should be justified since I’ll do the right thing once I get there!”

4.14 The Master said, “Don’t worry that you have no government post 位; worry about the way in which you establish 立 [yourself]. Don’t worry that no one knows of you; strive to make yourself worthy of being well-known.”

As Slingerland explains, Master Kong distinguishes things you cannot control in life, such as whether a ruler or minister picks you for a post, from things you can control: your own being, your actions in private life. Not much point in fretting about what you can’t control—just work on what you can.

[4.15 omitted.]² (Editor’s note: See endnote 2 for author’s explanation.)

Well, students ask, “If not by pursuing a career by any means necessary, how should we establish ourselves and make ourselves worthy of being well-known?” Master Kong responds, “I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again:”

4.16 The Master said, “The Noble Man concentrates on what’s right (yi 義); the petty man concentrates on profit (li 利).”

And furthermore:

4.17 The Master said, “When you see a worthy person, think about equaling him. When you see an unworthy person, then look inward and examine yourself”

When you look at others, don’t be thinking “How did HE get into office instead of me? I’m better than he is!” Focus on correcting your own faults; then, if you do win a post, you will deserve it. Master Kong himself only held office sporadically. He was not happy about that, but he argued that one need not hold office to improve the world.

2.21 Some people said of Master Kong, “Why is he not working in the government?” The Master said, “The *Book of Documents* says: ‘Filial! Oh, so filial! And friendly to his brothers: influencing those who govern.’ This is also governing! Why speak of ‘working in the government?’ ”

If families work smoothly, society will too. So when students fret about not holding office, he tells them to concentrate on improving themselves. Their most immediate social context is the family. They can practice Humaneness by being filial sons.

4.18 The Master said, “In serving your father and mother, you may remonstrate gently with them. If you see that they are determined not to follow [your advice], be extra reverent and/do not depart from [your parents’ will? your own view?]. It will be hard! But don’t be resentful.”

How, then, should a student act at home? Master Kong worries that he may be self-righteous, full of what he has learnt about following the Way and not angling for petty profit. His parents, however, have a family and estate to manage. The enlightened son may urge them to treat their serfs or tenants well and eschew corrupt practices, but may not argue with them. If the parents persist in “petty” practices, the son must be reverent and obey, but without giving up his own understanding of the Way, without leaving his home in Humaneness.

Well then, students ask, can we avoid home altogether and travel around while we wait for a job?

- 4.19 The Master said, "While your father and mother are alive, you may not travel far away. If you do travel, you must have a fixed destination."

Just as being filial is a contribution in itself, not being filial undermines your character and your contributions. Since parents are the first people we know, filiality is the foundation of Humaneness. Whenever possible, stay home to look after your parents. If you must travel, tell them where you're headed, so they won't worry.

Well, a student perhaps says, at least when my father passes away, I can run the family estate in accord with the Way and earn a reputation that way—right, Master Kong?

Not so fast, says the teacher:

- 4.20 The Master said, "If you do not change your father's way for three years [after his death], then you can be called a filial son"

After all, your father is an experienced person. You should respect him enough to try managing the family and property his way for a short three years! And anyway, during that time you will be in ritual mourning, and you should not be thinking about worldly affairs. So let things go on at home as they are, and see how it goes. Then, after three years, you can change things. To underline the point, Master Kong brings up the emotions proper to a child in a further instruction on filial piety.

- 4.21 The Master said, "You must know the age of your parents: on the one hand to be happy about it, on the other hand to be anxious about it."

It is wonderful that your parents have lived so long, but time brings their weakness and death closer, too. Much of life calls forth such mixed emotions; fortunately, we have ritual to guide us in expressing them properly. Ritual sets three years as the limit of mourning, and ritual guides every human interaction, when raw emotion—so complicated! so up-and-down!—would lead us astray.

- 4.22 The Master said, "The ancients did not issue statements, fearing they would not live up to them."

- 4.23 The Master said, "Use restraint and rarely will you miss the mark."

- 4.24 The Master said, "The Noble Man wishes to be slow to talk and quick to act."

You students may think that by blowing your own horn, by bragging about your ambitious plans, you will make a name for yourself. You may think that is the only way; you may think modesty will leave you isolated. But I will make you a promise, says Master Kong. Talk less and work more, restrain your impulses with ritual, train yourself to do right and think

right. Do that, and you will not be alone. Do that, and like the ancient sage-kings with their mystical charisma or virtue (*de* 德), you will attract allies and comrades to your neighborhood.

- 4.25 The Master said, "Virtue is not alone, but will certainly have neighbors." ■

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NOTES

1. I thank Bruce Tindall and Joe Esherrick for their comments.
2. Brooks and Brooks and Yearly consider 4.15 an interpolation, and it makes little sense no matter how hard one puzzles over it (as van Norden shows). 4.26, too, is later; the disciple Ziyou is speaking and it spoils the closure of 4.25.

SARAH SCHNEEWIND is Associate Professor in the Department of History at University of California, San Diego. She is the author of *Community Schools and the State in Ming China* (Stanford University Press, 2006) and of a study of the telling and retellings of one small incident in the early Ming, *A Tale of Two Melons: Emperor and Subject in Ming China* (Hackett, 2006), a book designed as an undergraduate-level introduction to traditional China, to Ming state-society relations, and to historiography. She runs a website with translations from the official Ming History (1739) and other resources; see "The Ming History English Translation Project" at <http://chinesestudies.ucsd.edu/mingstudies/index.htm>.

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