

Two Fables Inspired by the Wisdom of Confucius

By Daniel Redman

Illustrated by Alex Thomas

As a sophomore in high school, I began an independent study of the Confucian Analects that culminated two years later in a commentary on the text and three original short children's stories. Printed here are two of those stories, dealing with the important Confucian concepts of humility and the rectification of names (i.e., living up to one's responsibilities).

I am currently a senior at Johns Hopkins University, and, while I have not had the opportunity to use these stories widely, I think that they could be useful in a variety of educational settings. As a senior in high school, I presented all three stories to a second grade class as part of a one-hour presentation on Confucian philosophy. Overall, it went well. The children enjoyed the stories and demonstrated comprehension of the ideas.

For an older class, junior high or high school, a teacher could focus on the stories as a gateway to primary source study. Each fable begins with a quotation from the Analects themselves. Confucian opposition to arrogance and advocacy of acting responsibly are values shared by many philosophical traditions. Because of this, the stories can be used as a bridge to comparative study.

By demystifying the tradition and presenting a small part in an entertaining format, the stories aim to make Confucianism itself more accessible and interesting to an American audience.

Summaries

[Note about proper names: To add a further layer of interest to the stories, I chose to use the proper names of actual people mentioned in the Analects. Emperor Yao, one of the legendary sage-kings of ancient China, appears as Emperor Yao, King of the pandas. Zi-gong, one of Confucius' primary students, appears as Zi-gong, the arrogant bird, and so on.]

Min Sun and the Importance of Respect and Responsibility.

Min Sun is a disrespectful and irresponsible child who refuses to listen to his parents. After being told to sleep in the barn following a particularly bad episode, he runs away to the forest where he is confronted by the part-bird, part-woman Lady of the Winds (a creature I invented with no connection to actual Chinese mythology). She urges him to be a filial son and fulfill his obligations. When he refuses, challenging her reasoning, she turns the world upside down to teach him a valuable lesson. *Topics addressed include filial piety, the rectification of names, respect, and acting responsibly.*

Zi-gong and the Foolishness of Arrogance. Zi-gong is the most talented flyer in the avian world, zooming and darting across the sky and earning the admiration of all his feathered companions. However, when he flies down to Earth to show off for some common farm animals, he receives a rude awakening. Yes, he is better at flying than any of them, but there are things each of them can do (making milk, running fast) that he cannot. Dejected, Zi-gong flies to the bamboo forest where unexpectedly he comes upon Emperor Yao—King of the pandas. Emperor Yao listens to his story and raises his spirits with a reflection on the foolishness of arrogance and the true value of talents. *Topics addressed include humility, arrogance, and the proper use of talents.*



Min Sun and the Importance of Respect and Responsibility

“Master Yu said, Surely proper behavior towards parents and elders is the trunk of Goodness.” *The Analects of Confucius* 1:2

“Duke Ching of Chi asked Confucius about government. Confucius answered, ‘Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, the son a son.’ The Duke said, ‘Splendid! Truly, if the ruler be not a ruler, the subject not a subject, the father not a father, the son not a son, then even if there be grain, would I get to eat it?’” *The Analects of Confucius* 12:11

Many years ago during the reign of the Emperor Shun, there lived a boy named Min Sun who saw no need to respect his parents. When his father asked him to help in the garden, he would reply, “Pull up the weeds yourself!” When his mother asked him to help carry clothes down to the river for washing, he would refuse, saying, “Such a lazy washerwoman!”

One day, Min Sun was so disrespectful that his father became furious. He yelled at him, “If you will not act respectfully towards your parents under this roof, you will sleep with the horses. Perhaps you will learn a lesson in respect from them!” As he walked to the stable, Min Sun began to cry. Though disrespectful and rude, he still loved his parents, and he was very sad that they were angry with

him. So, he decided to run away. "If my parents think that I'm as shameless as an animal, I'll go live with the animals in the forest."

With tears in his eyes, Min Sun set off for the forest. He walked and walked until night had fallen and the trees and sky were dark and black. The whole forest seemed to be alive with sounds. Little Min Sun was filled with fear and tried to find his way home, to no avail. After many hours of walking, he became exhausted and fell asleep beside a tree. When he awoke, his eyes opened in awe, for there in front of him was the Lady of the Winds.

"Hello, Min Sun," said the Lady. She had the face and voice of a beautiful woman but the body and feathers of a magnificent bird. Her feathers seemed to be made of spun silver, and her talons were pure gold.

"How do you know my name?" Min Sun replied.

"I have been watching you from the sky, little Min, and I have seen how you have acted towards your parents and elders. You have a good heart, but you act with such disrespect that this goodness will never be enjoyed by the world. It will be like a jewel buried in the dirt. I am here to help you learn the right way."

"But I don't understand this 'right way' you speak of. I don't understand why I must be respectful to my parents and elders when they are just simple people no better than I am. All this respect and responsibility I hear of makes no sense, and I believe that we would all be much better off without it."

A gust of wind blew through the forest, and the trees shuddered from its powerful force. The Lady of the Winds spread her enormous wings.

"As you wish, Min Sun. The Winds of Change have blown through the empire, and you shall have your desire. Return now. Return!"

In a burst of light, the Lady of the Winds vanished, leaving only a pearl behind. Min Sun picked up the pearl, and amazingly, after only three steps, he found himself back home.

Excitedly, Min Sun ran up the steps of the house to see if anything was different. "Everything looks the same here," he thought. "Perhaps the Lady of the Winds was trying to trick me. Oh well, I'm very hungry after that long night without dinner. I'll find my mother and ask her to make me a bowl of rice."

Min Sun walked around the house, but he could not find his mother. He looked in the garden, and he didn't find his father. When he was searching for them in the orchard, he received quite a surprise.

"Ow!" cried Min Sun as an apple hit him on the head.

"Ha Ha! I hit him with an apple! Ten points for me," said Min Sun's mother.

"That wasn't fair. I didn't have one ready to throw. No points," said Min Sun's father.

Min Sun looked up and was shocked to find his parents in the tree branches above arguing about the rules to his own favorite game. Min Sun had spent many hours flinging apples at people and animals as they passed under the branches of the tree. His parents had scolded him many times for this game.

"Get down from there, crazy parents! What are you doing playing games in trees? Mother, I want a bowl of rice. Could you make it for me . . . please?" Min Sun was shocked to find himself using that unfamiliar word.

"I will not!" Min Sun's mother laughed as she stuck out her tongue at him. "I am not your little servant girl. Go get some rice yourself."

That said, a rain of apples showered Min Sun from above as his father shook the most bountiful branch of the tree.

"Stop wasting all the apples," Min Sun cried. "We won't have any good ones for market; they'll all be bruised."

"I don't care, little boy. I'll do what I like. We can worry about the market some other day."

Min Sun was furious as he ran towards the house. He tried to make himself a bowl of rice, but he didn't know how, and all he ended up eating was lettuce.

That made him think. If his father was playing in the apple tree, then who was weeding the garden? Min Sun ran outside to find the vegetable patch overrun with weeds. He set to work pulling them out. Some had grown too strong, and he had to use the rake to pull them out. While trying to pull out a particularly strong weed, the top of the rake came off, and Min Sun fell flat on his back.

"I must go to the market to buy a new rake. If the weeds overrun the vegetable patch, we'll have nothing for the market, and we'll have no money for the winter."

Min Sun hurried to the market. However, when he finally got there, what he saw made him sick with terror. The usual stalls and tables had all been turned over, and the vegetables and other wares that people had brought to sell lay all over the street in an enormous mess. "There must have been bandits!" Min Sun thought to himself. He was very frightened of bandits so he kept very quiet as he walked down the street to the Department of Justice. When he got to the building, he was surprised to find the Minister of Justice himself locking the door behind him.

"Good Minister," whispered Min. "I believe there have been bandits in the market. The Emperor's troops must be called to catch them."

"There weren't any bandits, little boy. The people brought their wares to the market, and everyone attacked them and stole their merchandise. The villagers wanted vegetables, so they took vegetables. I myself got a very nice rake." With a smile, the Minister held it up proudly.

Min Sun couldn't believe his ears, but he had another question to ask the Minister. "Why are you locking up the Department, sir?"

The Minister replied, "The Emperor today announced that the Ministry of Justice had been abolished. He said that there was no use for it anymore. Honestly, I don't even remember what 'justice' means. I'm very busy now, though, I'm going to go steal from the Emperor's treasury. Good-bye."

Min Sun realized that the Winds of Change had indeed blown through the empire. But no sooner had he thought of this than he heard the rumble of horse hooves off in the distance. "What is that noise?" he puzzled. "Is the Emperor's army practicing near the village?"

Full of hope, Min Sun ran to the cliff near the market, and peered down into the valley below. It certainly was an army practicing—but not the Emperor's army. The banners were foreign, and the screaming soldiers spoke a language Min Sun had never heard before.

The knot of fear in Min's stomach only tightened. "It's the Barbarian Army, and they have come to conquer and invade the empire! I must run and tell the Emperor to assemble the troops!"

Min Sun set off for the capital. Even though he knew it would take days to get there, he felt he had no choice. However, just like before, after three steps he found himself at the gates of the Emperor's palace. He ran through the open, unattended gates, through the dragon hall, the jade hall, the gold hall, until finally he found himself in the throne room. However, where the Emperor should have been consulting with advisors, giving orders to ministers, and receiving guests, there was just one person, and he was crouched behind the throne.

Urgently, Min Sun ran across the vast room to the man. He asked him, "Where is the Emperor? I must see him! The Barbarian armies are approaching, and our forces must be assembled. Where is he?"

"Shhhhh!" replied the man.

"What?" said Min Sun.

"Be quiet. I'm hiding."

"Why are you hiding? Have the armies already invaded?"

"Armies? No, little boy, there are no armies here. We're playing a game. First, all of the Ministers hide, and then the Emperor has to find us. I'm the Minister of Agriculture. However, if you're going to keep standing here talking to me, you'll give away my hiding spot, so please go away! If I'm found I'll be the one who has to go finding people."

"But . . . the Barbarian army?!"

"Shhh. Get away from here so I won't be found!"

With that, Min Sun had learned his lesson. He now realized what a truly foolish boy he had been. In his anger and frustration he took out the pearl that the Lady of the Winds had left and threw it against the ground. "Enough!" he cried.

The Lady of the Winds appeared in a flash of light. This time she was even grander than before. Her wings filled the room, and her razor-sharp gold talons shone in the setting sun's rays.

"So now you see what your attitude leads to?"

"Yes, good Lady. It leads to destruction and shame."

"You have learned a great lesson Min Sun. I may now return to the sky knowing that you will fulfill your responsibilities from now on, and that you will pay the proper respect to your parents and elders." The roof of the palace separated, and the Lady of the Winds shot up into the sky. The roof settled, and all was quiet.

As the ministers began streaming back into the room, rubbing their eyes as if they'd just awakened from a tiring dream, Min Sun mounted the throne and spoke. "Ministers, a valuable lesson has been learned today. It is only when the Emperor acts like an Emperor, a minister like a minister, a father like a father, and a son like a son that the Empire is strong and filled with goodness." Min Sun stepped down from the throne and began to walk towards the door of the palace. He was stopped by a loud and noble voice.

"This is true, young boy. What is your name?" Everyone in the room fell to the ground and bowed three times. It was none other than the Emperor himself.

With a wavering voice, he replied, "My name is Min Sun, honorable and enlightened Emperor. What do you ask of me?"

"It is rare to hear wisdom like that from such a small child. When you are older, I command you to come to the palace and receive instruction from the royal teachers. You are destined to become a great minister, Min Sun."

Min Sun did not know what to say in response to this honor. He simply bowed lower and replied quietly, "Thank you, great Emperor."

In a royal chariot led by a team of forty horses, Min Sun returned home to his parents. From that day forth, he treated his parents with great respect, and as he grew older, he became well known throughout the Empire as a wise, kind man. In the palace, he was educated by the royal teachers and rose to the rank of Chief Advisor to the Emperor, the second most powerful post in the land. ■



Zi-gong and the Foolishness of Arrogance

“Confucius said, If a man has gifts as wonderful as the Duke of Zhou, yet is arrogant and mean, all the rest is of no account.” *The Analects of Confucius* 8:11

Once long ago, high in the treetops of the Northern Forest, there lived a bird named Zi-gong. He was very talented at flying and swooping, and all the other birds bowed their heads in respect when he passed by. Turning spirals in the clouds, Zi-gong could spot a mouse below and swoop down to catch it with great speed. Zi-gong was the best, and he did not hesitate to let others know it.

One day, while flying amidst the small, puffy clouds of summer, Zi-gong spotted a farm. He said to himself, "What lucky animals live on that small farm below! Today will be a great day for them, for I am going to pay them a visit. Surely, they have never met a bird quite as handsome, talented, and wonderful as me."

Zi-gong made one last spiral in the clouds and aimed for the earth. With great power and speed, he swooped down to the farm and perched on a fence between the horse and the cow. Standing guard outside the hen house was a large, wary dog.

"Good afternoon cow, horse, and dog. My name is Zi-gong, and I have come here to display my great talents in flying and swooping. As you can see, I am also very handsome. According to many birds I know, I am also a very wonderful and grand animal."

The old cow responded slowly, "It is very nice to meet you, Zi-gong, and it is a great honor for all of us simple, farm animals to talk to such a wonderful creature as yourself. However, I have no interest in seeing you fly. In fact we have often admired the birds in the sky from here on the ground. What I would like to see is how such a grand and wonderful animal makes milk. I don't see any udders on your underbelly, so I don't know how you do it."

Zi-gong did not know what to say, so he responded only after a long pause.

"Good cow, I can turn magnificent spirals in the clouds, but I cannot make a single drop of milk."

The cow was visibly perplexed.

"But surely a magnificent animal such as yourself can do anything that we simple animals can do. Are you sure you can't make milk?"

"Quite sure, simple cow. Now I would like to present for your enjoyment a trick that I have practiced for many months. I call it the swoop and turn and . . ."

The horse ignored Zi-gong's offer and interrupted him with a question.

"You cannot make milk, and neither can I, but surely a grand and magnificent animal is able to run very quickly and carry a man on his back. Even an everyday horse can do that."

Zi-gong was silenced again, and again there was a pause.

"Good horse, I can fly swiftly through the air and spot mice in the fields from the heights of the sky, but I cannot carry a man on my back or run quickly. My legs are short and clawed; my body is small and weak. As I was saying before, though, I would be very happy to demonstrate for you my newest feat which . . ."

The dog ignored Zi-gong and began to speak.

"Honorable Zi-gong, we simple farm animals are not used to being in the presence of a magnificent animal or even a grand animal for that matter, so perhaps we are confused. But, how can an animal be so great if there are so many things that it cannot do? Are you truly so magnificent, Zi-gong, or are you just an arrogant bird with talented wings?"

Zi-gong bowed his head. He didn't answer the dog's question, and the animals' laughter stung his ears as he flew away. "What a fool I am," he thought. The wind blew coldly as he sadly glided to the bamboo forest. No birds ever came to this place, and he knew he would be alone. It was night when he arrived, so he fell asleep.

Many hours later he awoke to the sound of crunching bamboo. He stretched his wings, opened his eyes, and was surprised to find none other than Emperor Yao, King of the Pandas, sitting before him! The Emperor was ten feet tall when he stood. On his head was an enormous gold crown, and on his feet were sandals made of jade and bamboo.

"Young friend, what brings you to our kingdom? It is rare for birds to visit us."

"I came here for solitude, Great Emperor. I realized today that I have been a fool for many years. Perhaps, with your wisdom, you can help me."

Zi-gong told Emperor Yao the story of his day at the farm. The Emperor nodded thoughtfully, crunching more bamboo in his teeth. Zi-gong barely lifted his eyes.

After thinking for several long, silent minutes, Emperor Yao stated simply, "The dog was both right and wrong in what he said."

Zi-gong looked up to the Emperor and listened closely.

"He was right in pointing out how foolish arrogance is. A talent is something we can neither purchase nor give away. It is a gift we did nothing to earn but are lucky enough to receive anyway. A talent is something to be thankful for and something to be developed. It is never something to brag about. As you realized today, although you are a very talented flier, you are completely unable to do many things. Each of us is like this. I can climb trees, and you can fly in the sky. Neither talent is better, but each is useful in different situations. In this the dog was right, and he taught you a very important lesson."

"You are certainly as wise as all animals say you are, good Emperor. But how was the dog wrong in what he said to me?"

"Ah, that is the most important part, Zi-gong. The dog was wrong to say that to be a magnificent animal one must have *every* talent. You see, what makes an animal great is how he uses his talents, and, most important of all, if he acts with goodness and respect towards his fellow creatures. If the horse uses his strong legs to trample people, and the cow is stingy with her milk, no matter how talented they may be, they could not be considered good. On the other hand, when the horse uses his fast legs to help an animal in need, the cow uses her milk to feed a stray calf, and you, Zi-gong, use your superior flying ability to teach a younger bird to soar, then truly all of you can be considered magnificent animals. Magnificence comes from goodness, Zi-gong, because even if you could make milk, run fast, and fly high into the clouds, it wouldn't matter at all if you were evil and cruel."

Just at that moment, a flock of birds flew overhead. Zi-gong looked up, and recognizing his family, spread his wings, preparing to fly. Hesitating, he realized that he had forgotten to thank the Emperor, but when he looked back, the great panda had already shuffled away. Zi-gong smiled and flew up into the sky. ■

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