

# Review: Wisdom from ancient China

Salvatore Giuffrè succeeds in conveying the thoughts of the original work elegantly and idiomatically

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Review

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The cover of the book

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## *L-Analetti, Konfuċju*

by Salvatore Giuffrè

edited by Sergio Portelli

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“The gentleman understands what is right. The small man understands what is profitable.” This is one of those memorable sayings attributed to Kong Fuzi (Master Kong), China’s most famous teacher, philosopher and political theorist, who later became known in the West by the Latinised name Confucius (551-479 BCE).

Like Socrates and Christ, Confucius never wrote any work. It was his disciples who later published his thoughts in a book called the *Analects*, a collection of quotations and short dialogues between teacher and student, promoting the moral virtues of benevolence, wisdom, trust, filial piety, righteousness, responsibility and courage, and demanding strict observance of ceremonial rites and customs.

*L-Analetti* is an annotated translation of the *Analects* from Chinese into Maltese by Salvatore Giuffrè, a young Italian polyglot and researcher who lectures in Chinese

language and literature at various levels.

The text was revised and edited by Sergio Portelli, Professor and head of Department of Translation, Terminology and Interpretation at the University of Malta.

Confucianism is a secular, nontheist philosophy dealing with the goals people should aim at in this world. There is no reference in Confucius to a creator god, an afterlife, or liberation from the material world as one finds in Hinduism and other offshoots of Indian philosophy and religion.

Nor is there in Confucius any appeal to 'illumination' or revelation as a source of knowledge as there is in Buddhism. One acquires knowledge through learning and becomes virtuous through self-discipline and interaction with others in the social milieu one finds oneself in.

The central figure in the *Analects* is that of the *junzi*, the morally and intellectually accomplished individual who represents humanity at its best, the ideal or perfectly balanced person who follows Confucius's version of the Golden Rule: "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire" (12.2).

The *junzi* are driven to act by *ren*, a moral disposition that enables them to live in harmony with themselves, their family, their neighbours, and society at large. They follow the Middle Way, avoiding all kinds of extremes, and developing their abilities by performing their duties faithfully according to their station. Their behaviour is marked by benevolence, righteousness, respect for ritual, wisdom, and trustworthiness.

Benevolence entails unselfishness, consideration of the needs of others, and compassion in their distress, while righteousness involves public accountability, fairness and integrity. It is what keeps a person uncorrupted when faced with profit or gain.

The pursuit of knowledge features prominently in the *Analects* as one of the ingredients of the good life. The virtuous person has a craving for learning and will never stop studying. "Learn as if you're chasing something you're afraid of losing," the master tells his students (8.17).

Those who are not interested in learning cannot serve society in any way. “If a man doesn’t ask ‘What’s that? How come?’, I do not know what to do with him” (15.16).

Teachers should stimulate their students to think critically and creatively, to discover for themselves aspects of the topic the teacher doesn’t deal with directly (7.8). “To study without thinking is a waste of time. To think without studying is dangerous” (2.15). If you revise what you’ve learnt and learn new things, you’ll be a good teacher (2.11).

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Education is important not just for the individual’s self-improvement but also for the good of society. It helps reduce friction between groups and leads to social harmony (12.13). This is why education should be open to everyone. “When we teach we do not discriminate between classes” (15.39).

Knowledge is not the mere accumulation of information. It shifts you as a person and gives you a broader vision of things and events. Nobody is born wise. One only becomes wise through learning, which cannot be achieved without effort (7.20).

The contents of one's thoughts are closely related to what one learns, and it is practically impossible to separate the two. "I spent the whole day without food, and one whole night without sleep, thinking, and gained nothing of it. Learning is better" (15.31). One always thinks about something, and what one reads features regularly as the object of one's thought. You cannot open a book without learning something.

One should call objects by their proper name and speak the truth. Every word is precious because it means something. If a jug loses its shape, you should stop calling it a jug (6.25).

When asked about what would be his first priority if he were entrusted with the task of governing a state, Confucius replied that he would start by "rectifying names". When names are used incorrectly, what is said does not sound reasonable, actions do not produce the desired result, punishments will not fit the crimes, and people would

feel completely lost. A well-bred, morally upright person will try to get the facts right before expressing an opinion, and avoid using words in a slipshod manner (13.3).

““ Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire

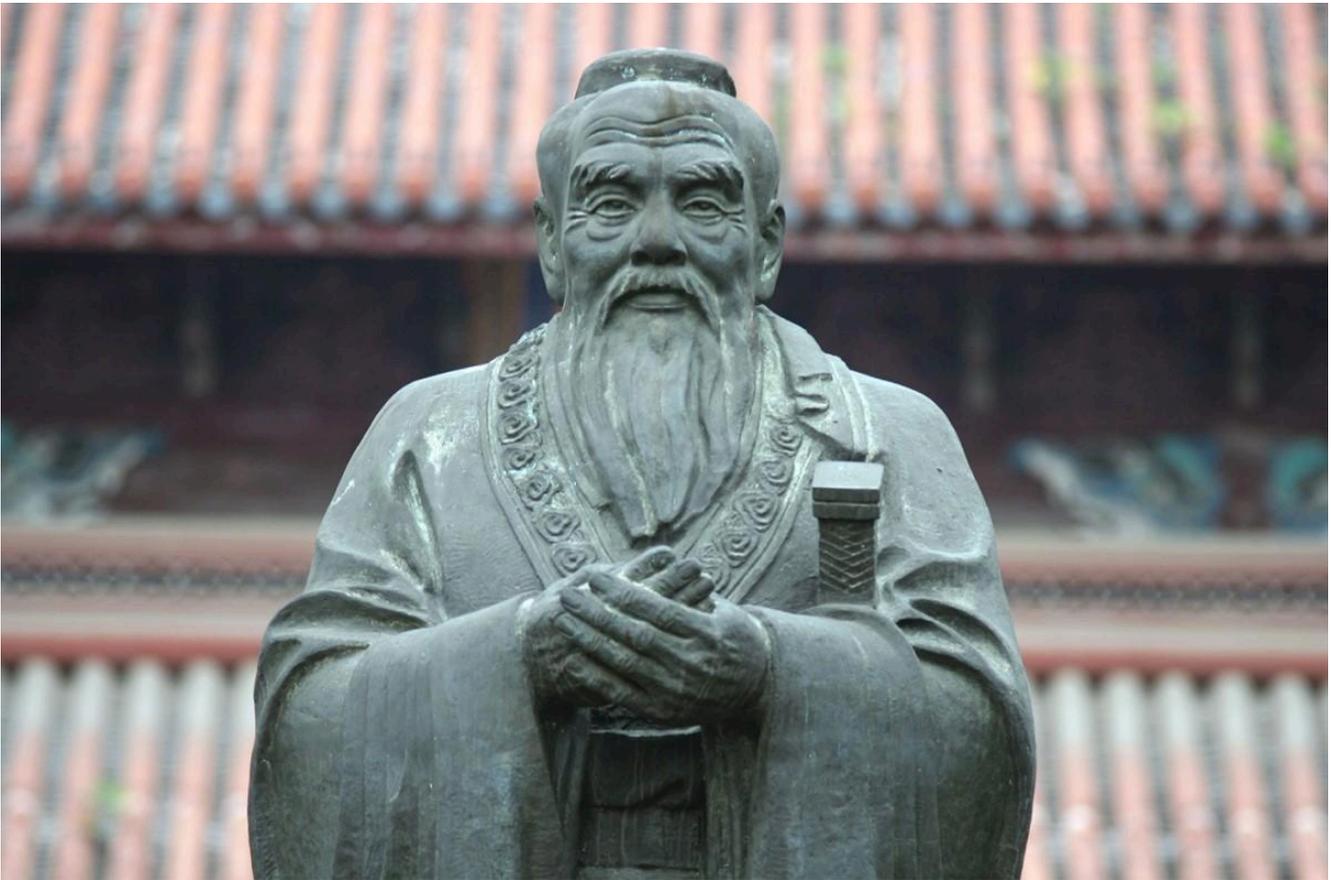
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In conversation or at a meeting, you should neither say too little nor too much. “Say what is necessary to make your point, and leave it at that” (15.41). “If a person is able to recite three hundred poems by heart but cannot express themselves clearly when asked to rule, or answer questions on their own when on a diplomatic mission, despite their knowledge, what kind of help can they offer?” (13.5).

Confucius considered poetry, ritual and music as playing a crucial role in his followers’ education. “Raise yourself up with poetry. Establish yourself with ritual. Complete yourself with music” (8.8). Poetry stimulates the imagination, teaches friendliness, tolerance and restraint, improves the reader’s vocabulary, and leads to a better understanding of the human condition by giving the mind “keener eyes”. The master told his son, “Unless you learn the Odes, you won’t be able to speak” (16.13). The Odes were the first collection of poetry in ancient China.

Ritual helps people acquire psychological stability, while performing and listening to harmonious music refines the spirit and accompanies people on their way to virtue.

Confucius strongly believed that the moral transformation of society depended on the example of its leaders. He compared the influence of the morally upright individual on the rest of the population to the way the wind blows on grass, forcing it to bend



A statue of Confucius in China. Photo: Shutterstock.com

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(12.19). If a social superior behaves righteously, “the common people will all comply” (13.4).

One should not breach righteousness for profit, nor try to curry favour with the rich and powerful. Confucius taught by example. Rather than act against righteousness, he preferred to eat coarse rice, drink nothing but water, and sleep using his arm as a pillow. For him, wealth and glory, if not rightfully acquired, were just a passing cloud (7.16).

Controlling subjects by law and fear of punishment will make them stay out of trouble, but they will have no sense of shame. It is only if they are guided by virtue that they will have a sense of shame and, moreover, reform themselves (2.3).

As Giuffrè says in the introduction to his translation, the significance of the views put forward by Confucius in the Analects reaches far beyond the context of their genesis in ancient China. The salient themes of his philosophy still feature prominently on the agenda of today’s moral and political debate.

These include his portrayal of the fully active and socially engaged moral person, his passion for education, his critique of the behaviour of rulers, and his vision of a harmonious, morally ordered society.

Confucius strongly believed in the bonds that exist, or should exist, between individuals and the community of which they form part. Though he could tolerate those who, like Daoist hermits, removed themselves from the rest of society to lead a secluded form of existence, this was clearly not the kind of life he would recommend to his students.

For him, persons are fully embedded in society, and the individuals who deserve the highest praise are those who work for the welfare of others.

In his rhythmic use of the Maltese language, Giuffrè succeeds in conveying the thoughts of the original work elegantly and idiomatically. His extended commentaries place the *Analects* in their proper historical context and offer convincing interpretation when their meaning is not immediately clear. Scholars as well as a wider spectrum of non-specialists will be delighted to add this book to their collection of translations of classical texts into Maltese.