

BOOK REVIEW

Confucius: The Man and the Way of Gongfu. By Peimin Ni. Lanham: Roman & Littlefield, 2016. Pp. xxii + 165. Paper \$29.00, ISBN 978-1-4422-5742-9.



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In *Confucius: the Man and the Way of Gongfu*, Peimin Ni offers an overview of the historical Confucius and his organic vision of how to live. Ni's motivation is that many comparable introductions are "simply repeating his life story and listing his main ideas" (p. xi). Ni insists that, "we have to get to the depth required by Confucius' thought" (p. x), which will then explain why Confucius' influence has endured. The book is structured as six chapters, each focusing on one aspect of Confucius: as historical figure, as spiritual leader, as philosopher, as political reformer, as educator and as a person. A full understanding of Confucius, Ni states, requires seeing how the different aspects inform each other, like a "crystal" (p. xi).

This carefully constructed portrait of Confucius is ordered around a guiding idea, captured by the Song-Ming Confucian term *gongfu* 功夫. This refers to skills and abilities cultivated over time, and which equip a person to excel at the art of life, broadly understood, in ways that evade abstractions or principles. This characterizes the teachings and "mission" of Confucius and the *Analects*. Through consistent application and training, a person's entire sensibility and thought patterns can be transformed, creating an exemplar for others and for posterity.

Instructions must be "lived" in order to be grasped, and often cannot be grasped through a simple act of cognition. "Lived" here means whole-hearted and embodied commitment to realize a teaching—such as a passage from the *Analects*—reflecting on it, practicing it, turning it into a practical habit or disposition. As Ni notes, "...to be *ren* [human-hearted] is not a matter of having an intellectual understanding of it" (p. 126).

A *gongfu* reading thus emphasizes what a passage can contribute to one's personal cultivation rather than its literal truth or falsity. Here, Ni draws heavily on Austin's theory of speech acts. Consider the infamous passage on unreliable "women and petty people" (17.25), often cited for sexism. Ni argues that this passage's significance lies beyond the surface meaning; it is not a criticism of any group but a lesson in responsibility and inclusion (p. 140). Exemplary persons must learn how to accommodate all manner of people. The reference to women and petty people helps to make this practical point—they are not important objects of doctrine.

A feature of this approach is Ni's intent to convey the humaneness of the historical Confucius. In the "Confucius as a Person" chapter, Ni notes two common and competing visions of Confucius (p. 131): a lofty paradigm of moral perfection who transcends mere humans, and a dogmatic conservative and mouthpiece of authoritarian social order. Ni shows how both of these miss the mark and that Confucius should instead be seen as a very human figure—a man of rich sentiments and humor who was also fallible.

This humanistic approach is also seen in Confucius' approach to education (chapter six). This meant accepting all who wanted to learn, and it stressed the teacher's ability to make tailored responses to students and to teach by example. The master sees that what a student must learn sometimes cannot be explained verbally, since the pupil is not sufficiently advanced to see the wisdom of what is said. Statements of fact or truth might be ineffective and other means of teaching are needed. One distinctive method is the use of ritualized behavior. Here, the burden of transforming the person is taken up by the repetition and habit formation of ritualized conduct. Notably, social engagement and embodied training not only produce better behavior, they also change thinking. They lead to greater empathy and understanding of what is required in various social situations. Thus, exemplary personhood emerges from embodied practice as much as from the actions of an inner mind.

Ni's work offers a nuanced and wide-ranging examination of the philosophical and practical suppositions that inform the *Analects*. For example, by considering the influence of parts of the *Book of Changes* on the text, he brings alive the Confucius who was aware of need to coordinate with the fluid nature of events in the natural and human worlds, as a precursor to becoming exemplary. Also prominent is the implicit naturalism in the text, with Confucius' mission partly characterized as the regulation and transformation of natural desires (p. 134). Accordingly, *xiao* 孝 (filial conduct) is not mere duty but rather has its roots in the distinctive contours of human life—such as the extended period of care by humans for their offspring, which contributes to a sense of self that is social and other-regarding. *Xiao* is also organic in that it must be sustained through practice and ritualized habit, since children's motivations readily move away from parents. Ni's discussion of *xiao* is thus a complex and compelling picture of the sources and challenges facing Confucian ideals of filial conduct. There is also a refreshing boldness to Ni's approach, which is seen, for example, in his willingness to utilize notions such as the meaning of life to explain the appeal of a Confucian outlook. Having children, for example, bestows meaning upon a life, and confirms the importance of family and filial conduct.

Another convincing aspect of the book is the scholarly array of stories and insights gathered from various Confucian texts, including the *Kongzi Jiayu*, and various Song and Qing commentators. This makes explanations of key Confucian terms fuller and more vivid—particularly valuable for undergraduates exposed to Confucian thought for the first time—and makes his broader explanatory

framework of *gongfu* more convincing. Ni makes a strong case that his interpretation captures an approach that runs through the Confucian tradition more broadly.

While the exegesis is scholarly and the argument convincing, there are times when the whole-hearted promotion of the original vision of Confucius raises unanswered critical questions. Some comparisons between Confucius and the Western tradition seem a little tilted in favor of Confucius. For example, Confucius' non-discriminatory attitude in education is contrasted with Martin Luther King Jr. still fighting discrimination in American education as late as the 1960s (p. 107). Such comparisons overlook long-standing progressive forces in Western education, including the influence of the Christian conviction that all are created equal. A similar worry arises in the attempt to make a sharp contrast between Aristotelian virtue (as something principled and abstract) and Confucian practice (pp. 59-60). Arguably, this undersells Aristotelian practical rationality since Ni's appeal to discretion or contextual judgment (*quan* 權) (p. 144) seems similar to it. In Ni's defense, such comparisons at least help orient students new to Confucius and will motivate further study.

In general, greater critical discussion of the Confucian mode of approaching the world might have strengthened the argument. Consider the discussion of harmony in the chapter on Confucius' political stance: "...the harmony of a broth is not only dependent on having multiple ingredients, but also on the condition that no ingredient is sharply at odds with other ingredients" (p. 84). While insightful, this statement also raises a very modern question: how much harmonious alignment can be expected in modern and diverse societies? Is such an ideal the best one to aim at? Ni explains Confucius as offering a viable ideal for how to live, so this worry is not artificial or anachronistic. Some might wonder whether harmony conveys an undercurrent of restriction or even coercion. Of course, the vision that Ni lays out dismisses inappropriate force, and harmony itself entails some disagreement. But ideals and heuristics have their blind spots and it is legitimate to question whether this ideal works better for smaller collectives or more local interactions, rather than as a political philosophy for a pluralized world. The same might be said about the extent to which the relation of benevolent parent to child can be a model for political authority. The point here is not the identification of damaging objections to the vision *per se*, but rather the desirability of raising them explicitly in the text in order to stimulate readers to think further about their significance and possible responses to them.

Overall the book is a highly serviceable introduction to the life and values of the historical Confucius, and an excellent companion text for the *Analects*. It covers key themes and ideas in a thoughtful and pleasingly systematic way, offering a wealth of textual references. At the same time, the discussions of less-widely known Confucian classics and modern Chinese-language scholars reward a more scholarly reading.