

The Sayings of Confucius

by Confucius, about 500 B.C.

For thousands of years China has been shaped by the values of family loyalty and hard work. A major influence on Chinese civilization has been Confucius (kun FYOO shus), a philosopher and teacher born in 551 B.C. In the hope of preventing wars, Confucius taught that kindness and respect in the family form the foundation of a peaceful society. Confucius stressed that rulers are also obligated to be honest and just. The passages below are some of Confucius's teachings that his students later wrote down. How do the teachings of Confucius still relate to life today?

Having only coarse food to eat, plain water to drink, and a bent arm for a pillow, one can still find happiness therein. Riches and honor acquired by unrighteous means are to me as drifting clouds.

coarse: simple

unrighteous: unjust

Those who know the truth are not up to those who love it; those who love the truth are not up to those who delight in it.

By nature men are pretty much alike; it is learning and practice that set them apart.

Shall I teach you what knowledge is? When you know a thing, say that you know it; when you do not know a thing, admit that you do not know it. That is knowledge.

Tzu Kung asked: "Is there any one word that can serve as a principle for the conduct of life?" Confucius said: "Perhaps the word 'reciprocity': Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you."

The gentleman first practices what he preaches and then preaches what he practices.

The gentleman understands what is right; the inferior man understands what is profitable.

The gentleman makes demands on himself; the inferior man makes demands on others.

A government is good when those near are happy and those far off are attracted.

After Confucius died in 479 B.C., his teachings were handed down by others. His ideas about respect and honesty became part of the fabric of Chinese society and spread across Southeast Asia. His teachings remain a major influence throughout much of Asia and the world.

Source: Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1960.



reciprocity: mutual sharing

profitable: money-making