

**SELECTIONS FROM THE CONFUCIAN ANALECTS:  
ON GOVERNMENT**

**Introduction**

Confucius (the Latinized version of Kong Fuzi, “master Kong”) or, to call him by his proper name, Kong Qiu (551-479 BCE) lived at a time of political turmoil and transition. The China of his time consisted of a number of small feudal states, which, although theoretically subject to the kings of the Zhou Dynasty, were actually independent. Confucius and many of his contemporaries were concerned about the state of turmoil, competition, and warfare between the feudal states. They sought philosophical and practical solutions to the problems of government — solutions that, they hoped, would lead to a restoration of unity and stability. Confucius had no notable success as a government official, but he was renowned even in his own time as a teacher. His followers recorded his teachings a generation or two after his death, and these teachings remain influential in China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan to this day. The anecdotes and records of short conversations compiled by his disciples go under the English title of the *Analects*. The excerpts from the *Analects* presented below are specifically concerned with the problem of government.

**Document Excerpts with Questions** (Longer selection follows this section)

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*Selections from the Confucian Analects:  
On Government*

1:5           The Master said, “In ruling a state of a thousand chariots, one is reverent in the handling of affairs and shows himself to be trustworthy. One is economical in expenditures, loves the people, and uses them only at the proper season.”

2:3           The Master said, “Lead them by means of regulations and keep order among them through punishments, and the people will evade them and will lack any sense of shame.<sup>1</sup> Lead them through moral force (*de*) and keep order among them through rites (*li*), and they will have a sense of shame and will also correct themselves.”

12:11       Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, “Let the ruler be a ruler; the minister, a minister; the father, a father; the son, a son.” “Excellent,” said the duke. “Truly, if the ruler is not a ruler, the subject is not a subject, the father is not a father, and the son is not a son, though I have grain, will I get to eat it?”

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<sup>1</sup> Or, as Arthur Waley interprets it, “self-respect.”

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**Questions:**

1. Why is reverence an important part of rulership? What do you think that Confucius meant by reverence?
2. Confucius lived in an agricultural society — what might he mean when he advises a ruler to use the people “only at the proper season?” How would this benefit the people? How would it benefit the ruler himself?
3. What does Confucius think is the proper way of ruling: ruling through law or ruling by moral example? Why? Do you think that Confucius is right? Why or why not?
4. Do you see any similarity between family structure and government in Confucius’ mind? How so? What might be the role of women in government?
5. Compare Confucius’ ideas on government to those of the Legalist philosophers who lived a few generations after Confucius. What are the differences between Confucius and the Legalists? Do they share any points of view or assumptions about government?

**Longer Selection**

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1:5           The Master said, “In ruling a state of a thousand chariots, one is reverent in the handling of affairs and shows himself to be trustworthy. One is economical in expenditures, loves the people, and uses them only at the proper season.”

2:1           The Master said, “One who governs through virtue may be compared to the polestar, which occupies its place while the host of other stars pay homage to it.”

2:3           The Master said, “Lead them by means of regulations and keep order among them through punishments, and the people will evade them and will lack any sense of shame.<sup>2</sup> Lead them through moral force (*de*) and keep order among them through rites (*li*), and they will have a sense of shame and will also correct themselves.”

3:19          Duke Ding asked how a ruler should employ his ministers and how ministers should serve their ruler. Confucius replied, “The ruler should employ the ministers according to ritual; the ministers should serve the ruler with loyalty.”

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<sup>2</sup> See footnote 1, above.

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11:25 Zilu, Zeng Xi, Ran You, and Gongxi Hua were seated in attendance. The Master said, "Never mind that I am a day older than you.<sup>3</sup> Often you say, 'I am not recognized.' If you were to be recognized, what would you do?" Zilu hastily replied, "In a state of a thousand chariots, hemmed in by great states, beset by invading armies, and afflicted by famine — You,<sup>4</sup> if allowed to govern for the space of three years, could cause the people to have courage and to know their direction." The Master smiled.

"Qiu, what about you?" He replied, "In a state of sixty or seventy *li*<sup>5</sup> square, or even fifty or sixty — Qiu,<sup>6</sup> if allowed to govern for three years, could enable the people to have a sufficient livelihood. As for ritual and music, however, I should have to wait for a noble person."

"Chi,<sup>7</sup> what about you?" He replied, "I do not say that I am capable of this, yet I should like to learn it. At ceremonies in the ancestral temple and at the audiences of the lords at court, I should like, dressed in the dark robe and black cap, to serve as a minor assistant."

"Dian,<sup>8</sup> what about you?" As he paused in his playing the *qin*<sup>9</sup> and put the instrument aside, he replied, "My wish differs from what these three have chosen." The Master said, "What harm is there in that? Each may speak his wish." He said, "At the end of spring, when the spring clothes have been made, I should like to go with five or six youths who have assumed the cap, and with six or seven young boys, to bathe in the River Yi, to enjoy the breeze among the rain altars, and to return home singing." The Master sighed deeply and said, "I am with Dian."

When the other three went out Zeng Xi remained behind and said, "What did you think of the words of the others?" The Master said, "Each one spoke his wish, that is all." "Why did the Master smile at You?" "One governs a state through ritual, and his words reflected no sense of yielding. This is why I smiled." "Was it not a state that Qiu wanted for himself?" "Yes, could one ever see a territory of sixty or seventy *li*, or of fifty or sixty *li*, that was not a state?" "And was it not a state that Chi wanted for himself?" "Yes, is there anyone besides the lords who frequent the ancestral temple and the audiences at court? If Chi were to play a minor role, who would play a major one?"

12:7 Zigong asked about government. The Master said, "Sufficient food, sufficient military force, the confidence of the people." Zigong said, "If one had, unavoidably, to dispense with one of these three, which of them should go first?" The Master said, "Get rid of the

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<sup>3</sup> Confucius, while acknowledging indirectly that his disciples respect him in part because of his age, tries to ease their sense of restraint and to encourage them to speak openly.

<sup>4</sup> Referring to himself.

<sup>5</sup> A *li* is equal to about one-third of a mile.

<sup>6</sup> Referring to himself.

<sup>7</sup> Referring to Gongxi Hua.

<sup>8</sup> Referring to Zeng Xi or Zeng Dian.

<sup>9</sup> A five-stringed musical instrument, such as a zither.

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military.” Zigong said, “If one had, unavoidably, to dispense with one of the remaining two, which should go first?” The Master said, “Dispense with the food. Since ancient times there has always been death, but without confidence a people cannot stand.”

12:11 Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, “Let the ruler be a ruler; the minister, a minister; the father, a father; the son, a son.” “Excellent,” said the duke. “Truly, if the ruler is not a ruler, the subject is not a subject, the father is not a father, and the son is not a son, though I have grain, will I get to eat it?”

12:19 Ji Kang Zi asked Confucius about government, saying, “How would it be if one killed those who do not possess the Way in order to benefit those who do possess it?” Confucius replied, “Sir, in conducting your government, why use killing? If you, sir, want goodness, the people will be good. The virtue of the noble person is like the wind, and the virtue of small people is like grass. When the wind blows over the grass, the grass must bend.”

13:3 Zilu said, “The ruler of Wei has been waiting for the Master to administer his government. What should come first?” The Master said, “What is necessary is the rectification of names.” Zilu said, “Could this be so? The Master is wide of the mark. Why should there be this rectification?” The Master said, “How uncultivated, You! In regard to what he does not know, the noble person is cautiously reserved. If names are not rectified, then language will not be appropriate, and if language is not appropriate, affairs will not be successfully carried out. If affairs are not successfully carried out, rites and music will not flourish, and if rites and music do not flourish, punishments will not hit the mark. If punishments do not hit the mark, the people will have nowhere to put hand or foot. Therefore the names used by the noble person must be appropriate for speech, and his speech must be appropriate for action. In regard to language, the noble person allows no carelessness, that is all.”

14:23 Zilu asked how to serve a ruler. The Master said, “You may not deceive him, but you may stand up to him.”