

Philosophy Group

November meeting – Confucius (551 – 479 BCE)



Confucius, he say, ...well, what, exactly? This was the topic for our most recent session, and we went some way to finding out about the man and his ideas, and ten of us enjoyed some very constructive discussion of them.

Confucius' vision was of social harmony and wise government, which certainly seems like a good idea. It was to be achieved by learning from the past, which he saw as a Golden Age.

Individuals should cultivate themselves by learning, behaving in moral ways and restoring social rituals. Rituals around all aspects of life, such as eating, greeting others, dressing and mourning the dead, serve as a civilizing influence and to educate children. They encourage social compliance, but is this at the cost of stifling innovation? Family was, and to a large extent still is, central to Chinese life, and filial piety is another vital facet of Confucianism. Children must respect and obey their parents, care for them as they age and preserve their good name after death. As third agers, what's not to like about that?

On the other hand, women don't feature much in this philosophy. Confucius' remark that, "Women and petty men are especially hard to handle" didn't go down too well with some of the group.

Confucius believed in government by virtue; the ruler's moral self realisation will spread like a ripple through society to bring about social harmony. Relying on force and harsh punishment will not work. Officials should be chosen likewise for their learning and morality. It's not about nepotism or loyalty. Fancy that! It was this principle which brought about China's famous civil service exams; passing them was the gateway to highly prized jobs in government. With some evolution, they endured for an astonishing 1,300 years.

Confucianism itself was a lasting, some might say a defining, feature of China from the time his ideas became established in the 2nd century BCE until the early 20th century. In the huge socio-political change that took place then, Confucianism was swept away in favour of revolution and class conflict. More recently, though, there have been some signs of a softening towards this enduring philosophy. Watch this space!

Our next meeting is on 28 January, when we'll look at the Philosophy of Art. All our meetings are at Enterprise House at 10am, all are most welcome.