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CONFUCIAN STATUE
AT THE SAN DIEGO
CHINESE HISTORICAL
MUSEUM. IT WAS
PRESENTED BY FORMER
MINISTER OF EDUCATION
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Abstract

Confucianism has been foundational in the political and social life of many Asian countries. Its influence pervades institutions and practices at every level of human activity. Martial arts have also benefited from this philosophy, as the traditional Confucian legacy continues to influence modern practices. This article briefly highlights some key figures and events, describes relevant core concepts of Confucian philosophy, and then shows exemplary applications to martial arts today. Modern martial artists can gain understanding of the traditional Confucian insights that deepen the significance of contemporary martial arts.

CONFUCIANISM AND THE ASIAN MARTIAL TRADITIONS

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The great learning takes root in clarifying the way wherein the intelligence increases through the process of looking straight into one's own heart and acting on the results.

~ Pound, 1951: 27

Introduction

Confucian philosophy has had a profound effect on Asian society and politics for many centuries, but its effects have also been felt by the entire world. Confucius was one of the supremely great figures in world history. His ideas inspire every person's better nature to express itself, and perhaps this is what makes Confucianism so important to humanity. Voltaire expressed the significance of this philosophy when he said, "To realize the theories of Confucius would bring about the happiest and most valuable period of human history" (Chang, 1957: 110).

One of Confucianism's most thriving legacies can be found in the practice of martial arts. Just as China, Korea, and Japan integrated Confucianism into the very heart of their cultures, so their martial traditions have been enriched by Confucian philosophy as an integral part of practice.

Confucian Roots

Kong Qiu (551-479 B.C.E.), known as Master Kong (*Kong Fuzi*, later Latinized to Confucius), is honored as China's "First Teacher" and the founder of Confucianism. He insisted he was not the originator of the ideas he taught; instead, he thought of himself as an emissary of ancient truths. Confucius addressed the problem of the human condition. He focused on the Dao of Humanity, the human world of action in social relationships. Through his complete devotion to ultimate ideals of living and learning, Confucius' teaching transcended the sphere of his own life to become an axiomatic pillar of China's great civilization for all time.

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Mengzi (Mencius) (371-289 B.C.E.) is considered by most historians to be the second great Confucian. He carried Confucianism forward, adding his own unique contributions, such as the ideal of benevolent government ruling for the welfare of the people. Mengzi began with the mind as the center. But the mind, to Confucians, was in the human heart, from which flows the natural tendency of human nature to be good. He explained by presenting a situation: A young child has wandered away from his mother and comes to the edge of a well. You see him just about to fall in. No one else is around. What do you do? Mengzi predicted that everyone would try to save the child. There is a tendency in human nature toward the good: “Man’s nature is naturally good just as water naturally flows downward” (*The Mencius*, 6A:2). How to best nurture and develop this natural tendency toward goodness is what Confucianism teaches.

Confucianism underwent a rebirth as Neo-Confucianism during the Song Dynasty (960-1279). The Neo-Confucians drew from the wellspring of classical Confucianism for inspiration. But they were also knowledgeable about Daoism and Buddhism. Rather than just opposing these perspectives, the Neo-Confucians absorbed concepts that were compatible with Confucian principles. Confucian teachings spread throughout Asia, finding expression in government, culture, and martial arts.

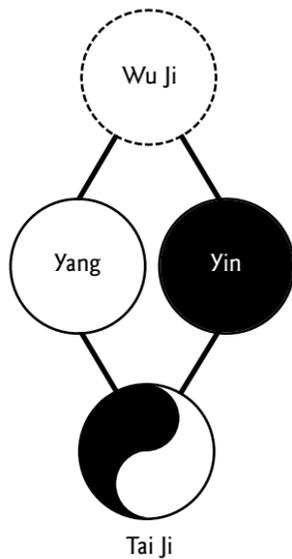
CONFUCIAN PRINCIPLES

Underlying Chinese thought is an ancient belief in a single cosmic universe—Oneness with no beginning or end. The world was seen as a limitless void called *Wu Ji*. From the void arose activity, the empty circle expressed as *yang*, and inactivity, the black circle expressed as *yin*. Together, these interactions of activity and inactivity were called *Tai Ji*, the famous yin-yang circle. The Chinese believed that the universe goes through continual cycles of change, according to an extraordinary handbook known as the *Book of Changes* (*Yi Jing*). The *Book of Changes* is considered the first book of the Confucian Classics, grounding the theory in universal cycles of continuous flowing change. Out of this ever-changing universe emerged the principles of Confucianism: *Ren*, *Chung Yong*, *Li*, and *Junzi*.

Ren: The Human Heart

Human nature is dynamic, in synchrony with the ever-changing universe. Given the right conditions, a seed will grow into a healthy plant. So too, human beings, if given the right environmental conditions, including the proper social order, will flower into cooperative, benevolent, fully functioning adults.

Since our human nature is good, people possess intuitive knowledge about right and wrong. The important and sometimes difficult task is to discover it and then follow it. Mengzi advised: “Let a man not do what his own sense of righteousness tells him not to do, and let him not desire what his sense of righteousness tells him not to desire—to act thus is all he has to do” (Legge, 1970: 457). Negative life experiences may lead people astray, but they can find their way back to the goodness within by sincerely turning to the human core of *ren*. Live with sincerity in accord with the best potentials of human nature. “*Ren* is all embracing, not a virtue among others, but the soul of all virtues” (Jaspers, 1957: 50).



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THE CHARACTER REN IS COMPOSED OF TWO PARTS: LEFT, THE CHARACTER FOR PERSON; RIGHT, THE CHARACTER FOR TWO. TOGETHER, THEY REFLECT HOW PEOPLE RELATE TO EACH OTHER.

Thus, the Confucian method for a happy and fulfilling life begins from *ren*, the timeless truth that resonates with the rhythms of the human heart. To live according to *ren* means to live in synchrony and harmony with benevolence.

Human goodness is never just within the individual, since we are always living with others in a community. The task is to find a balance between personal self-interest and the interests of others. Confucius believed that self-interest is served best by fostering the common interest. When a proper order is established, everyone benefits. Living with *ren* begins with the closest relationships. By treating the family with the benevolence of *ren*, a positive atmosphere is set in motion that radiates outward to transform the community, the country, and ultimately the whole world.

Chung Yong: The Mean

Adrift in the sea of a changing universe, we find a compass to steer by in our fully developed human nature. This human standard is called *chung yong*, the mean. The mean is the inner reference, the center of the personality, the alignment standard for self-cultivation, active and positive, pointing the Way.

Confucius did not dictate what the center point of interaction should be. *Chung yong* is the moderating center between extremes. The further away you get from the center, the more difficult it is to find the mean. Don’t fulfill every desire at one extreme, but don’t deprive yourself completely either. Wisdom for each situation is found in moderation, the balance between.

Li: The Fundamental Principle

As we navigate from *chung yong*, what actions should we take? We seek out principle, *li*, to help guide action. *Li* has been interpreted in many ways, but its meaning always refers to the essence, the principle, as the source of form. Principle is expressed in things, such as the principle of an airplane is flight, but it is also revealed in action, in conduct of social relationships, and patterns of life. “Principle is the transcendent [Dao] and is the root which produces all things” (Wittenborn, 1991: 32). When principle is understood by the mind, it synchronizes our actions like a compass.

Custom, ritual, and tradition foster and express *li*. For example, filial piety, the Chinese idea of respect for parents, strengthens loving and respectful bonds in families and promotes social harmony in general. Social harmony enhances community harmony, which enhances harmony in the whole country, and ultimately extends harmony to the entire world. But *li* is not just a particular form, custom or tradition. *Li* is the spirit within the customs, rituals or traditions. The scholar should study and participate in rituals to understand underlying principles.

Junzi: The Sage

Junzi is a sage, the full flowering of humanity at its best. Living according to *li* develops stronger personality. *Junzi*, true to the highest principle within, not only have the courage to do the right thing, but they want to. “Better than one who knows what is right is one who is fond of what is right; and better than one who is fond of what is right is one who delights in what is right” (Giles, 1998: 60).

The sage seeks to understand the world by exploring the principles, the very essence of things. Then the understanding gained is never superficial. Deep and careful thought must always accompany learning. Learning without thinking is a waste of time; Thinking without learning is dangerous (paraphrased from the *Analects*: 2-15).

中庸

chung yong

理

li

君子

jun zi

The sage is noble in action. To act in benevolent ways, setting aside petty concerns brings out nobility in others and in us. The comfort and security of the sage's benevolence inspires others to feel comfortable and at ease as well. The sage emphasizes the positive qualities in others, and helps them to become those qualities. The lesser person only sees the negative ones.

CONFUCIANISM & THE MARTIAL ARTS

Modern martial arts are more than just a set of techniques and skills. Martial arts are a Way that does not limit itself to proficiency in technique as an end in itself, but goes further in developing the whole person. The Way of Confucianism lights this path.

Honor and Respect

Respect and honor are primary virtues in martial artists as they are in Confucianism. Martial arts class begins and ends in courtesy with a bow, a show of mutual respect between students and instructor.

Within the structure of the martial system are opportunities to express virtue in action, the Confucian Way. The student bows to the tradition. Traditional arts have a hierarchy of belt ranks, up to Grandmaster. Honoring the teacher is the counterpart of filial piety. The teacher is highly respected. The student's task, throughout the learning relationship, is to respectfully and sincerely try to carry out what the instructor requires.

The instructor, in turn, honors the tradition and the student with respectful, correct, and careful teaching of the style. The teacher communicates correct patterns of movement that the students practice to learn the style's principles. Sincere and open receptivity of both teacher and student makes this deeper learning possible. All find themselves doing better and getting along in a special fellowship. The relationships of teacher-to-student and student-to-student become a trust. All are raised up, to become wiser and better than they were before the interaction. The principles, learned and expressed in these exemplary relationships, mold character.

Sincerity

Sincerity is one of the highest virtues to the Confucian, as it is to the martial artist of today. Sincerity fosters learning. Students at the martial arts school who take their learning seriously progress more quickly. So, if you are a new martial arts student, be a student—fully. Do not be a student only on weekdays and forget about your martial art on weekends. Try to be the best student, with all that it should stand for. Take seriously the responsibilities that are part of learning. By cultivating knowledge and wisdom about your style, you come to know the right thing to do. Sincere effort is rewarded with better skills. For instructors, taking your teaching role seriously will benefit the students, and correspondingly, you benefit too. You receive the satisfactions that come from being immersed in the progress of each student. Life continues to unfold in its ever-changing cycles, as the *Book of Changes* predicts, as you and the other members of your class mature to live fully.

Finding the Mean to Improve Technique

The practice of many basic hand and foot techniques comes from and goes through



THERE IS A LONG TRADITION AMONG MARTIAL ART PRACTITIONERS TO BEGIN AND END IN COURTESY AND RESPECT.

the center with balance. Punches are performed to the center, blocks sweep in to the center or out from the center. Kicks are also placed in the center.

Just as Confucius did not tell people what the center should be for all people, martial artists must discover their individual center. Where the center is depends upon your physique. A tall, heavysset person will have a different height and length for his stance to be centered than a small, thin individual.

There are many different techniques to be learned, each with varied possibilities for application. For example, a back stance has a different balance point than a front stance. An upper target punch is centered differently from a lower target punch. Yet all techniques share in a common central principle: *chung*. Discover it and stay close to it. For example, beginners make the mistake of punching out from the shoulder, but to the side, away from their centerline. As a result, the potential power that can be generated from the whole body is lost. The punch simply comes from the arm and shoulder, resulting in a much weaker technique. Your personal best must include all that you are, your whole body, working in balanced unity, for maximum power, agility, and speed.

Practice Routines: *Li* in Motion

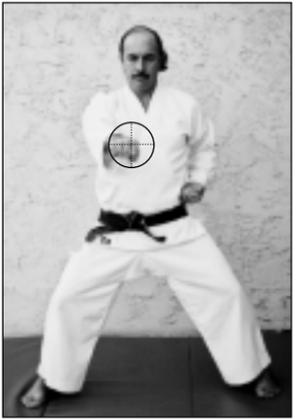
Routines are patterns of movements, passed along from generation to generation, the classic literature of the style. Like performing a Confucian ritual, practicing routines communicates the traditional spirit of the art and offers the student a standard for perfection. New understandings and improved skills unfold when you honor the routine through precise and careful practice.

To enter into the practice routine as a ritual, begin the practice with exact placement of hands and feet. Take a moment to stand quietly, directing all thought to the routine and only the routine. Wait until your mind is quiet and ready. Then perform the movements with attention focused on each movement. For the finish, come back precisely to the formal ending position.

When students learn to perform a routine well, they begin to have deeper insight into the multi-level meanings and patterns implied in the routines. Learning arises from *li* encoded in the movements. Thus, the understanding gained need not be superficial, if deep and careful thought accompanies routines learning. When you understand the principle, applications will occur to you. For example, think of a simple block in one of your routines. How is it unique? How does it express the principle of blocking in general? Next, consider the moves between moves, such as in a knife-edge block and you will discover other principles of movement, the soft within the hard, or the hard hidden in the soft. You can look at any particular move as an example of *li*, a source for varied applications and creative modifications.

Opportunities for *Ren*

Benevolence is the mind and justice the path. Martial artists evolve a sense of justice. Though they develop power from training, they learn to use it wisely. Through steady disciplined practice, training imbues practitioners with steadfastness. Through the act itself, ethical value comes to life. Traditional martial arts of today incorporate this sense of justice in the ethical codes that students adopt: to use their martial art for defense only, never as the initiator of an attack. Implied in this code is the underlying benevolence of *ren*. Routines begin with a block, not an attack, as a concrete manifestation of this principle.



THE PUNCH COMES FROM THE CENTER TO MAXIMIZE POWER.



PRACTICE ROUTINES ARE *LI* IN MOTION. Photograph courtesy of Wayne Van Home.



CONTEMPLATE THE MOTION OF ONE OF THE MOVES IN A PRACTICE ROUTINE, SUCH A KNIFE-EDGE BLOCK. HIDDEN IN THE BLOCK, THE MOVE WITHIN THE MOVE, IS A SOFT BLOCK.



BY CONTEMPLATING LI,
YOU WILL DISCOVER MANY
HIDDEN VARIATIONS.
HERE IS A TAKEDOWN
POSSIBILITY WITHIN A
BLOCKING MOTION.

Spiritually evolved martial artists do everything they can to avoid petty fighting. By developing a strong character, they are not easily drawn into fights. The principle of defense is to prevent harm to themselves and others, thereby preserving harmony. This strong sense of benevolence and justice are the guiding principles for the martial artist in action.

When we truly look for the positive in our friends and associates, we permit and even encourage their best qualities. The skilled martial artist becomes capable of extending *ren* even under attack. This true story illustrates: A youth with a nunchaku was looking for a fight. He began to provoke and threaten an innocent stranger, but unknown to the youth, the stranger was actually a high-ranking taekwondo practitioner. Rather than becoming provoked, the martial artist calmly invited the attacker to use his mind instead of his nunchaku. Without revealing his physical skill, the martial artist quietly asked, "What is the point of fighting? I believe people fight from weakness. The truly strong person can talk things out and resolve differences. Perhaps we have a misunderstanding. Let us straighten it out instead."

At first, the attacker became angrier, but as the martial artist sincerely, calmly, and confidently spoke, the attacker stopped, listened, and reconsidered. As Confucius would have predicted, the attacker eventually put away his weapon and talked out the problem. When we call forth positive tendencies in others, we permit and even encourage their best qualities to emerge.

Perfecting the Self Through Lifetime Learning

Martial arts should be studied with the goal in mind of perfection: perfection of form in movement, perfection of mind in activity, perfection of principle within the system. Therefore, to achieve true mastery, study the art to its roots. Strengthen and extend the roots, and many branches follow naturally. With mastery of the style, the martial artist becomes a *junzi* with a profound understanding that generalizes outward to life.

The sage recognizes that there is always more to learn. Learning in martial arts is a step-wise process, advancing through the proper order. But learning is infinite, ceaseless throughout life. The black belt becomes a part of the martial artist's identity, an attitude for approaching life's challenges with strength, courage, discipline, and respect. Accomplished practitioners know that earning a black belt is not the end, but only the beginning. The way to the source of virtue lies within each person. Train hard, and you will find wisdom's Way.

Conclusion

Confucianism encourages us to be fully evolved human beings, not only for personal development but also for development of others. There is hope, no matter how hard it may seem, that if we improve ourselves, the world will improve. Confucius said that the man of moral virtue, wishing to stand firm himself, lends firmness unto others. Through sincere steady practice of martial arts, principle may be found, leading to mastery, not just of the techniques, but also of life.



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Glossary

Dao	道
junzi	君子
Kong Fuzi	孔夫子
Kong Qiu	孔丘
Kong Zi	孔子
li	理
Mengzi	孟子
ren	仁
tai ji	太極
wu ji	無極
Yi Jing	易經
zhong yong	中庸