

# Relationship between family and government under confucianism history essay



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Confucianism has had a powerful influence on Chinese behavior and social structure for the past 2, 000 years. It has an important role to play in East Asian philosophy, religion, politics, ethics and culture. It stretches deeply into every aspect of people's daily life.

If we were to characterize in one word the Chinese way of life for the last two thousands years, the word could be “ Confucian”. No other individual in Chinese history has so deeply influenced the life and thought of his people, as a transmitter, teacher and creative interpreter of the ancient culture and literature and as a molder of the Chinese mind and character.(de Bary, et al., 1960, vol. 1¼š15).

Confucianism is primarily a Chinese, or more precisely, East Asian, tradition. Its essence is humanity. Confucius said “ Only the humane can love others and hate others.” He holds that “ A man with lofty ideals or a humane man never gives up humanity to save his life, but may sacrifice his life to achieve humanity.” “ The root of the world is nation. The root of nation is family. The root of family is individual”. Every fabric of the world is inter-related and inter-dependant.

To carry out his ideals, he has some concrete opinions on family and government to reach the harmoniousness of the universe. We are going to talk about it in the following.

# 1. General Confucianism on family and government

## 1.1 general Confucianism on family

There are many viewpoints on family and government in Confucianism.

Family is the cell of society while government is very helpful in keeping the cell bank in order and in harmony.

There is an old saying in China: “ If family goes well, everything goes well.” It makes great sense. How to keep a family running is a great task. To complete this task is to guarantee the happiness of every individual. Confucius attaches high importance in “ kindness”, “ obedience”, “ benevolence”, “ love and respect” in family life.

In detail, Confucianism regards “ happiness and harmony” as the basic of family life. Ideal family life should have harmonious life principles, atmosphere full of family love, comfortable and peaceful family lifestyle. We should aspire to thrifty life, settled and friendly family environment. To live a happy family life rests on a delicate and well-organized family order. To keep a good order in family is to deal with relationship between father-son, husband-wife and elder-younger. So the core of family values under Confucianism is to pay high attention to family morals.

In modern society of China, especially after the reform and open up to the outside world, Chinese nation made great achievement in economy. Family income surged up greatly. Material conditions like dwelling and education have been improved accordingly. However, the family moral and values tend to be varied greatly. Some disorders in family values, morals and family education prevailed. Marriage stability fell down and family violence

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intensified and so on. All of them constitute the factors of a inharmonious family. So a harmonious family is closely related to our happiness. As the saying goes “ if family goes well, everything goes well.”

Filial piety and brotherly love plays a great role in shaping a happy family. Youzi said, “ There is hardly anyone who is filial to his parents and respectful to his elder brothers but offends his superiors. There is never anyone who is not inclined to offend his superiors but is inclined to offend his superiors but is inclined to rebel. The gentleman directs his efforts to the foundation of things, because only when the foundation is established can the Way emerge. Filial piety and brotherly love are, perhaps, the foundation of humanity.

To shape a happy family sometimes need to resort to government. Let’s see what Confucius’s opinion on government is.

## **2. 2 General Confucianism on government**

Confucius was a well-known politician of his day. Many people respected him as their beloved teacher and learned from him. He made many traveling from government to government to offer his services. He once gave endless assistance to many nations, but he himself never held any high position in office. However, his strategies in government are applied frequently even in nowadays.

What Confucius aspired to is a harmonious entirety between individual and those governed. At the end of the Zhou Dynasty, China was plagued by endless wars. The powerful authorities just implemented their harsh rule

upon common people. Confucius happened to live in that period. So he sought for a more efficient and benevolent way of ruling.

There would be an emperor to rule. But his rule should be based on benevolence and virtue. Even if there are some written laws and people will be punished for breaking it, the only true method for people to follow that was good was to have a good leader as a positive example. That's to say, according to Confucius, the leaders should set a good example. That's the most practicable way to create a great nation.

Confucius said, " If guided by government orders and regulated by penalties, the common people will try to avoid punishments but will not have a sense of shame. If guided by virtue and regulated by the rites, the common people will have a sense of shame and abide by what is required of them."

Not only the Emperor should be virtuous, but every post in this government office would be applied to virtue and justice. It would enable the subjects being ruled to see that their rulers were benevolent and upright. In return, they will feel grateful for their emperor or statesmen and will follow their good deeds.

Confucius also strongly advocates that the state is above all and we should put it as our priority. A military force may fall apart, the people maybe be starved, but as long as the people still lay confidence in their leader, the state would be very secure and stable for the leader.

### **3. The relationship between family and the government under Confucianism**

#### **3.1 They are analogous.**

After the analysis above, naturally we are curious in seeking the relationship between the family and the government under Confucianism.

From the Confucian point of view, a government is analogous to a family, where the ideal of government is essentially an extension of the ideal family. We can see the closeness of family and government. In a sense, they are interdependent and inter-related.

In an ideal family, Confucians consider the father as being omnipotent. He is supported to be stern, powerful, and relatively uncompromising. In return for striving for the well-being and unity of the family, he can demand obedience and total deference but not explicit criticism from his children. In analogue, Confucianism suggested that the wise father is a model for the benevolent ruler and dutiful children are the models for the submissive subjects.

When it comes to maintain harmony and order, Confucians attached great importance to paternalistic authority and emphasized the difference between ruler and common people. The task of the former was to take control of the latter, whereas the task of the latter was to support and obey the ruler.

When discussing the elements of civil society in Chinese tradition, Shils (1996) notes that Confucians considered society as having one major center, and all initiatives and decisions are concentrated in the major center.

Although the common people are not altogether outside of society, they are the passive periphery. Under common circumstances, the common people

are believed to have no initiative and no voice in any discussions about the society in which they live, but are expected to engage in hard work, be obedient to the ruler, and deference to parents and ancestors. Consistent with this view, Sung(1965) states that when asked about the essence of government, Confucius replied that to rule means to make right. If the Highness desires that which is good, the people will become good. The character of the ruler is the wind; the character of the common people is the grass. The grass must bend when the wind blows over it. Evidently, the Confucian approach stressed the banding together of ruler and subjects. As father figure, the leader is responsible for looking after his subjects; in return, the subjects are expected to be submissive and make sacrifices for the collective good.

The Confucian ideal is a society governed by morally exemplary rulers while Confucius generally said nothing of the benevolence of the common people, rulers were constantly being reminded of acting benevolently. According to the Confucius, Heaven presided over organic whole and was the force for harmony and balance; but humans, through ignorance, perversity, or misconduct were the ones who caused serious disruptions. As only the learned and the wise could restore harmony, Confucians insisted that by practicing moral virtue, rulers could tap omnipotent forces, which give order to the entire country. Chen (1995) has observed that Confucius scarcely spoke of legislation. He did not seem to think that “ punishments” and “ edicts” were the means to ensure an orderly, harmonious society. For the Confucians, if one guides by means of decrees and regulates by means of punishments, the people evade and have no conscience. But if one guides

through the force of personality and through morals, the people have a conscience and attain the good.

According to Confucius, a man who is upright is obeyed even if he gives no orders; a man who is not upright is not obeyed even if he gives orders. Confucius prefers rites and morals governing people rather than laws and regulations. In a family, we also would like to have family morals to regulate our behavior other than severe punishment from father.

Confucius once said “ To govern means to be upright. Who would dare not to be upright if you took the lead in being upright?” It emphasized the important role of the ruler. Similarly, we can see the essential role of father in a family. If the father sets a very good example, other family member will follow him and secure a happy family.

Contrary to the Confucian view in governing by moral force, social order in the West lies with the notions of objectivity and impersonality. The Protestant ethic places emphasis upon conquering nature and competing with fellow human beings. In order to provide individuals with fair treatment and equal opportunity in their pursuits, universalistic rules are adopted and implemented. But the traditional Chinese social structure accepted and sanctioned by Confucian ethics was predominantly subjective and particularistic, which means that its ethical sanction is applied only to a specific individual in relation to another specific individual. Confucians were concerned with human affairs, and they preferred the ethical-moral order that was based upon relationships between people rather than upon laws.



### **3. 2 They are a harmonious entirety.**

After analyzing the analogy of family and government under Confucianism, we have a better understanding of these two important fabrics of society. In fact, family and government are a harmonious entirety. With the inter-comparison, we can take in some precious experience from each other to guarantee orderly family and government. Only orderly family and benevolent government can bring about a harmonious society. Confucians are oriented toward a hierarchically organized society. According to Wright and Twitchett (1962), Confucius characterized the good society as one that has frictionless, holistic order. That order was a hierarchy, a system in which every man knew his place and was content. There is a Chinese saying that goes "The King shall be king, and the subjects shall be subjects. Everyone must play his/her proper role to ensure harmony." Confucianism also evolved the "five relationships": ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, older brother-younger brother, and friend-friend. Except for the last, all of those relationships are based on differences of status and expressed differences of power in society. Confucians clearly believe that power and authority should fall into a hierarchy. An efficient society is one that requires a broadly accepted ordering of people. For Confucians, order is believed to arise and persist in a hierarchical universe where all the individuals faithfully perform their duties.

### **Conclusion**

As two important fabrics of society, family and government are so analogous that we can learn a lot from it. If we can realize and deeply understand the relationship between them, we can learn how to keep an orderly family from

a government, and how to keep a benevolent government from a family. If we can reach a better relationship between family and government, we can expect a very harmonious society.

For Confucians, harmony is the universal way of the world and of all things. Confucians believed that when all things realize their essence, the world is on the right path. Its conception is precisely the conception of a total order in which everything and every person under heaven has its proper place in the proper time. It is Confucius's contention that when things and persons fall into proper places, they become related to each other in such supportive manner that harmony will rein the universe forever.