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Lesson Plan 3: Confucius

Level/Class:

This lesson is designed for World Studies – an honors course combining team teaching of World History and World Literature in the 10th grade.

Objectives:

The student will learn about the teachings of Confucius and their impact on the society and culture of China.

The student will also learn to recognize and interpret maxims.

Time Period:

The lesson will take place in two sections (probably most of two class blocks). The first part of the lesson will introduce Confucian thought and its impact not only on the social structure and government of China, but also to the literary and cultural heritage of China. The second part of the lesson will focus on the *Analects* and study of maxims and how they impact human conduct and behavior.

Materials:

World Literature textbook
Handouts
Paper
Pen/Pencil
Projector
Whiteboard and markers

Assessment:

Students will be assessed on their participation in class discussions, written responses to the text, and on a final exam of the unit study on China.

Instructional Procedures:

Part One

The instructors will introduce the study of China and shortly after distribute the handout: Confucian Thought. The students will read the selection silently and be instructed to mark the text for notations and questions. A detailed lecture and discussion of the material will take place. Brief notes on Daoism will be given; followed by a discussion of Daoism and Legalism when compared with Confucianism. The chart and questions for Chinese Ethical Systems will be placed on the projector. Students will be instructed take notes and answer the questions. A guided discussion will follow.

Part Two

The instructors will segue way the discussion to refocus on Confucius and his teachings in the *Analects*. The teacher will write on the whiteboard: MAXIMS and explain: Maxims are direct statements that express a basic rule of human conduct or general truth about human behavior. The teacher will link previous study of African proverbs and their relationship to maxims.

Next, the instructors will distribute the handout: Confucius, The Teacher and Person. Students will be asked to read the selections from the *Analects* and place notation next to any that appeal or seem significant to them. After being given sufficient time to complete the reading the instructors will ask students to share what they noted as they read and discuss them as a class.

Students may then work with the person sharing their table to form discussion question partnerships. Students should be instructed to write their own answers after discussion. The teachers will then open the class for discussion based on their answers.

As a final activity the students will be instructed to consider the many rules of conduct we have in society today and one or more general truths about the human experience that are important to them and write several down on paper. After they write these rules or simple truths they will rewrite them in the form of a maxim, such as: "The more things you own, the more they own you." Students will take their favorite maxim and create a colorful bumper sticker. The final product will be placed on display in the classroom.

Confucian Thought

- Reading: Introduction to Confucian Thought
- Reading: What Did Confucius Say?
- Primary Source: Selections from the *Analects* of Confucius: Confucius: The Teacher, and Person

Introduction to Confucian Thought

Government and society in China were grounded in the Confucian philosophy, which held that there was a basic order in the universe and a *natural harmony linking man, nature, and the cosmos (heaven)*; it also held that man was by nature a social being, and that the natural order of the universe should be reflected in human relations. The family unit was seen as the primary social unit; relationships within the family were fundamental to all others and comprised three of the "five relationships" that were the models for all others: sovereign-subject; husband-wife; parent-child; elder brother-younger brother; friend-friend. In this hierarchy of social relations, each role had clearly defined duties; reciprocity or mutual responsibility between subordinate and superior was fundamental to the Confucian concept of human relations. The virtue of *filial piety*, or devotion of the child to his parents, was the foundation for all others. When extended to all human beings, it nurtured the highest virtue, *humaneness ("ren" or "jen")*, or *the sense of relatedness to other persons*.

In traditional China it was assumed by adherents of all schools of thought that government would be *monarchical* and that *the state had its model in the family*. The ruler was understood to be at once the Son of Heaven, and the father of the people, ruling under the Mandate of Heaven. Traditional thinkers, reflecting on the problem of government, were concerned primarily not with changing institutions and laws but with ensuring the moral uprightness of the ruler and encouraging his appropriate conduct as a father-figure. The magistrate, the chief official of the lowest level of government and the official closest to the people, was known as the "father-mother" official. Even today, under a radically different form of government, the Chinese term for state is "*guo-jia*" or "*nation-family*", *suggesting the survival of the idea of this paternal and consensual relationship*. The first and third of the "five relationships" - i.e., emperor and minister, father and son - indicate the parallels between family and state.

The notion of the *role of the state as guarantor of the people's welfare* developed very early, along with the monarchy and the bureaucratic state. It was also assumed that good government could bring about order, peace, and the good society. Tests of the good ruler were social stability, population growth (a reflection of ancient statecraft where the good ruler was one who could attract people from other states), and ability to create conditions that fostered the people's welfare. The Mandate of Heaven was understood as justifying the right to rule, with the corollary right to rebel against a ruler who did not fulfill his duties to the people. The state played a major role in determining water rights, famine control and relief, and insuring social stability. The state encouraged people to grow rice and other grains rather than commercial crops in order to insure an adequate food supply; it held reserves in state granaries, in part to lessen the effects of drought and floods, particularly common in northern China. For fear of losing the Mandate of Heaven governments levied very low taxes which often meant that the government could not provide all the services expected of it, and that officials ended up extorting money from the people.

The Perfectibility of Man and the Moral Role of Government

The dominant strain of Confucian thought stressed the *perfectibility of man*. Confucius (a political philosopher who lived c. 551-479 B.C.) expressed a belief in the fundamental similarity of all persons and in the perfectibility and educability of each individual. Mencius and Hsun Tzu, two of his prominent successors, held different views on human nature, Mencius arguing that it contained the seeds of goodness, and Hsun Tzu that, in its uncultivated state, human nature tended to evil. Both, however, believed that human beings were perfectible through *self-cultivation* and the *practice of ritual*. From the 11th century onward, Neo-Confucian philosophers, engaged in the renewal and elaboration of Confucian

thought, subscribed to the Mencian line, stressing the potential goodness of human nature and the importance of developing that goodness through *education*.

Belief in the innate goodness and perfectibility of man has had strong implications for the development of the Chinese political system. *The ruler's main function in the Confucian state was to educate and transform the people*. This was ideally accomplished not by legal regulation and coercion, but by *personal rule, moral example, and mediation* in disputes by the emperor and his officials. Confucian political theory emphasized conflict resolution through mediation, rather than through the application of abstract rules to establish right and wrong in order to achieve social harmony.

The belief that the state was the moral guardian of the people was reflected in a number of institutions. Most important among these was the *merit bureaucracy, or civil service*, in which all officials were to be selected for their moral qualities, qualities that would enable them not only to govern, but to set a moral example that would transform the people. Because Confucianism was a moral system, the Confucian classics had to be mastered by prospective officials. Official position and examination degree, not wealth or business acumen, were universally recognized marks of status.

Legalism and a Strong State

A complementary philosophical strain in Chinese thought was Legalism, first applied in the short-lived dynasty of the first emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi (Ch'in Shih Huang-ti, 221-207 B.C.). Proponents of Legalism stressed an administrative approach to efficient and pragmatic government; universal and codified law rather than morality (in contrast to the Confucian emphasis); and state power as an end in itself. As first applied, Legalism proved too harsh and disruptive, but for two millennia thereafter the Chinese state combined aspects of the Legalist structure with the Confucian spirit, recognizing the effectiveness of a *centralized, bureaucratic rule* which could oversee massive public works, state monopolies, standardized weights, measures, and even script, attempt intellectual control, and enforce social order by suppressing revolt.

What Did Confucius Say?

If power, prestige, and wealth were taken as the standards of achievement, Confucius would hardly be considered to have been a success in his own lifetime. K'ung Ch'iu, or Master Kung, the man who later became known in the West by the Latinized name of Confucius, was born in the state of Lu in northeastern China about the middle of the sixth century B.C. This was a period when China was divided into several feudal kingdoms.

Not much is known about Confucius's personal life. Even his traditional dates, 551-479 B.C., are only approximate. It appears that his family, which probably once ranked among the aristocracy, had fallen on hard times and may even have been quite poor. While he was an educated person, Confucius never held high political office. His highest aspiration was to contribute to the cause of civilization as he knew it. For him, this meant being employed by a ruler and having the opportunity to translate his ideas into action. Though many years of his life were spent traveling from one feudal state to another trying to gain an audience for his ideas, he never was rewarded with a high post. Eventually he returned to his native state of Lu and died without knowing the impact his ideas and his example as a teacher would have for centuries to come, not only in China but in all of East Asia.

During the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), Confucius came to be recognized as a great teacher. In time, his teachings became the basis of the Chinese educational system, which in turn was used to select government officials throughout much of Chinese history down to the twentieth century. Equally important, the ideas of Confucius and his followers penetrated to the very core of the lives of ordinary Chinese people. These ideas became the guiding principles of Chinese life. They gave structure and focus to the Chinese sense of what it means to be human.

When we want to know what Confucius said, we turn to a small book that records some of the conversations he had with his students and their accounts of his actions of particular occasions. The Chinese name for this book is the *Lun-yü*, which means discussions or conversations. This title is usually translated into English as the *Analects*, meaning selection or choice. Since the *Analects* of Confucius is not a philosophical or religious treatise with a single point of view but rather a selection of words and deeds of Confucius that his followers found most impressive, this English translation is quite appropriate.

One of the distinctive features of Confucius's teaching is the confidence that he expressed that human beings are essentially alike by nature. Confucius thought that the important differences in human beings are determined by environment and education, by the habits and preferences they develop and the lives they lead. For this reason Confucius put great emphasis on learning. But because he saw people as constantly changing and growing, his teaching was not the same for everyone. Readers of the *Analects* are always struck by the fact that Confucius never failed to take into account the personality of each individual and his particular stage of development. Even the principles of humaneness and filial piety (devotion to one's parents and family members), which are so fundamental to Confucius's view of human relations, were not set doctrines or fixed rules of behavior. What Confucius offered was a guide to the way human beings ought to feel about themselves and others and to the way that feelings and actions should be related.

Except as otherwise indicated, all translations from the *Analects* are taken or adapted from those of Wing-tsit Chan in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963). The other source for the translations is *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960). The number of the section in the complete text of the *Analects* follows in parentheses.

Confucius, The Teacher and Person

For centuries Confucius has been a source of inspiration to the people of China and East Asia, educated and illiterate. He has served as an example of how life can be well lived. This is not only because of his words and deeds but because of the total personality expressed in those words and deeds. As you read the following selections, try to imagine how Confucius's students or disciples must have felt about him, and how you might have felt about him if you had been among them.

1. Confucius said, "At fifteen my mind was set on learning. At thirty I had no more perplexities. At fifty I knew the will of Heaven. At sixty I was at ease with whatever I heard. At seventy I could follow my heart's desires without transgressing moral principles." (24)
2. Tzu-kung (one of Confucius's disciples) asked about the superior man. "He acts before he speaks and then speaks according to his action," Confucius said. (2:15)
3. Confucius said, "He who learns but does not think is lost; he who thinks but does not learn is in danger."
4. Confucius said, "Yu (another disciple, also called Tzu-lu), shall I teach you (the way to acquire) knowledge? To say that you know when you do know and say that you do not know when you do not know--that is (the way to acquire) knowledge." (2:17)
5. Confucius said, "In the morning, hear the Way; in the evening, die content!" (4:8)
6. Confucius said, "A superior man in dealing with the world is not for anything or against anything. He follows righteousness as the standard." (4:10)
7. Confucius said, "Ts'an (another name for disciple Tseng Tzu), there is one thread that runs through my doctrines." Tseng Tzu said, "Yes." After Confucius had left, the disciples asked him, "What did he mean?" Tseng Tzu replied, "The Way of our Master is none other than loyalty and reciprocity." (4:15) (Note: reciprocity involved not treating others in a way you would not want to be treated.)
8. Confucius said, "The superior man understands righteousness; the inferior man understands profit." (4:16)
9. Tzu-kung said, "What I do not want others to do to me, I do not want to do to them." Confucius said, "Ah, Tzu! That is beyond you." (5:11)
10. Confucius said, "I transmit but do not create. I believe in and love the ancients. I venture to compare myself to our old P'eng (an official of the Shang dynasty, 1766-1122 B.C., who loved to recite old stories)." (7:1)

11. Confucius said, "There has never been anyone who came with as little a present as dried meat (for tuition) that I have refused to teach him something." (7:7)
12. Confucius said, "With coarse rice to eat, with water to drink, and with a bent arm for a pillow, there is still joy. Wealth and honor obtained through unrighteousness are but floating clouds to me." (7:15)
13. Confucius said, "I do not enlighten those who are not eager to learn, nor arouse those who are not anxious to give an explanation themselves. If I have presented one corner of the square and they cannot come back to me with the other three, I should not go over the points again." (7:8)
14. The Duke of She asked Tzu-lu about Confucius, and Tzu-lu did not answer. Confucius said, "Why didn't you say that I am a person who forgets his food when engaged in vigorous pursuit of something, is so happy as to forget his worries, and is not aware that old age is coming on?" (7:18)
15. Confucius said, "I am not one who was born with knowledge; I love ancient (teaching) and earnestly seek it." (7:10)
16. Confucius said, "When walking in a party of three, I always have teachers. I can select the good qualities of the one for imitation, and the bad ones of the other and correct them in myself." (7:21, translation from *Sources of Chinese Tradition*)
17. Confucius taught four things: culture, conduct, loyalty, and faithfulness. (7:24)
18. Confucius was gentle yet firm, dignified but not harsh, respectful yet well at ease. (7:37, translation from *Sources of Chinese Tradition*)
19. Confucius was completely free from four things: He had no arbitrariness of opinion, no dogmatism, no obstinacy, and no egotism. (9:4)
20. Yen Hui (Confucius's favorite disciple) heaved a sigh and said: "You look up to it and it seems so high. You try to drill through it and it seems so hard. You seem to see it in front of you, and all of a sudden it appears behind you. The Master is very good at gently leading a man along and teaching him. He has broadened me with culture, restrained me with ritual. I just could not stop myself. But after I have exhausted every resource, there still remains something standing distinct and apart from me. Do what I can to reach his position, I cannot find the way." (9:10, translation from *Sources of Chinese Tradition*)
21. Tzu-lu asked, "Should one immediately practice what one has heard? Confucius said, "There are father and elder brother (to be consulted). Why immediately practice what one has heard?" Jan Yu (the disciple) asked, "Should one immediately practice what one has heard?" Confucius said, "One should immediately practice what one has heard." Kung-hsi Hua (another disciple, also called Tzu-hua) said, "When Yu (Tzu-lu) asked you, 'Should one immediately practice what one has heard?' you said, 'There are father and elder brother.' When Ch'iu (Jan Yu) asked you, 'Should you immediately practice what one has heard? you said, 'One should immediately practice what one has heard.' I am perplexed, and venture to ask you for an explanation." Confucius said, "Ch'iu is retiring; therefore I urged him forward. Yu has more than one man's energy; therefore I kept him back." (11:21)
22. Confucius said, "It is man that can make the Way great, and not the Way that can make man great." (15:28)
23. Confucius said, "In education there should be no class distinction." (15:38)
24. Confucius said, "The superior man has nine wishes. In seeing, he wishes to see clearly. In hearing, he wishes to hear distinctly. In his expression, he wishes to be warm. In his appearance, he wishes to be respectful. In his speech, he wishes to be sincere. In handling affairs, he wishes to be serious. When in doubt, he wishes to ask. When he is angry, he wishes to think of the resultant difficulties. And when he sees an opportunity for gain, he wishes to think of righteousness." (16:10)
25. Ch'ang-chu and Chieh-ni were cultivating their fields together. Confucius was passing that way and told Tzu-lu to ask them where the river could be forded. Ch'ang-chu said, "Who is the one holding the reins in the carriage?" Tzu-lu said, "It is K'ung Ch'iu (Confucius)." "Is he the K'ung Ch'iu of Lu?" "Yes." "Then he already knows where the river can be forded!" Tzu-lu asked Chieh-ni. Chieh-ni said, "The whole world is swept as though by a torrential flood. Who can change it? As for you, instead of following one who flees from this man or that man, is it not better to follow those who flee the world altogether?" And with that he went on covering the seed without stopping. Tzu-lu went to Confucius and told him about their conversation. Confucius said ruefully, "One cannot herd with birds and beasts. If I do not associate with mankind, with whom shall I associate? If the Way prevailed in the world, there would be no need for me to change it." (18:6)
26. Confucius said: "By nature men are pretty much alike; it is learning and practice that set them apart." (17:2, translation from the *Sources of Chinese Tradition*.)

Discussion Questions

1. What qualities of Confucius do you think might have made him a good teacher? Do you think he would still be considered a good teacher if he were alive today in our own society? Why or why not? (Note: What do you learn in particular about his teaching from passage [21](#)?)
2. What qualities do you think Confucius would look for in an educated person?
3. How do you think Confucius saw his own role? (See, for example, passages [10](#) and [25](#).)

Chinese Ethical Systems		
Confucianism	Daoism	Legalism
<p>Social order, harmony, and good government should be based on family relationships</p> <p>Respect for parents and elders is important to a well-ordered society</p> <p>Education is important both to the welfare of the individual and to society</p>	<p>The natural order is more important than the social order</p> <p>A universal force guides everything</p> <p>Human beings should live simply and in harmony with nature</p>	<p>A highly efficient and powerful government is the key to social order</p> <p>Punishments are useful to maintain social order</p> <p>Thoughts and their ideas should be strictly controlled by the government</p>

Which of these three systems stress the importance of government and a well-ordered society?

Which system emphasizes the natural order over the social order?

Which of these systems seems to be most moderate and balanced? Explain.