**CHW3M Bettany Hughes - Genius of the Ancient World - Confucius**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TII9ucKT70o>

**Context and Early Life**

In the 550s BCE a soldier in the state of Lu was to be the end of his family line; he needed a son to honour his ancestors; took a young wife, she prayed for a boy, had future Kong Fuzi.

Ancient China was advanced and innovative. Since 1000 BC the political system incorporated vassal lords who were loyal to one king.

Stability declined at Kong Fuzi’s time: cycle of war, invasions, lords rebelling, independent states all fought each other. At the same time, cast iron made weapons more easily producible.

This context made Kong Fuzi’s philosophy possible.

He was 3 when his father died, and the family was doing poorly, so his mom raised him. Education was his lifeline: history, poetry, ritual.

**Chinese Worldview at the Time**

**8 min:** Chineseworldview saw order and harmony as essential goals for life on earth’s continuity. Rituals were not directed toward a creator god or supreme power. There were 2 cosmic forces (natural) – the dragon is the heavenly force, the phoenix is the female earthly force – locked in tension. Humans’ role is to keep the balance through ritual.

Kong Fuzi saw the gap between the idea and the reality of his time – he sought out a solution based on this worldview. Some people were doing better through trade and technology and could get beyond subsistence. This gave them time to think.

When Kong Fuzi was 20 years old, he worked for the gov’t managing grain stores. He was preoccupied by humanity’s state. He engaged in systematic philosophical inquiry (first time in Chinese history). He was naturally curious.

**Kong Fuzi’s Travels**

**12:00** Left state of Lu, went west, met people who lived in nature (recluses who were forerunners of Taoists – believed in *the way* – humans shouldn’t influence it, society took us away from the spontaneous way, need harmony through nature). Kong Fuzi didn’t like this way of thinking.

He sought a practical/political angle – *the way* was not a cosmic force, but the harmony resulting from an ordered society that could be achieved through human action.

Met an older man with whom he talked. LaoTze – founder of Taoism -– told him to put away his proud ways. Solutions to today’s problems lie in the past – a reservoir of truth.

**Model Philosophy on the Golden Age**

This inspired his own philosophy. Evidence can be found in 800 bamboo slips found in 1993 in the tomb of a nobleman in the 4th century BCE, 100 years after his death. Do everything in accordance with humanity. He read the classics, book of ritual and music, book of history, early kings of western Zhou who led a harmonious society. Found an ideal model by the early Zhou, the Duke of Zhou.

Duke’s brother died. He ruled as regent for his nephew. Then he handed over power to nephew when he grew up. The story is not necessarily true but Kong Fuzi saw potential in it. Social order was possible. He wanted people to follow examples of the past to solve problems of the present. Comforting golden age.

Kong Fuzi’s version of the way: harmony through high standards in terms of ritual. Ancient rites had been corrupted and needed to be reinstated. Descendants of Kong Fuzi still hold rituals of ancestor worship. Ritual is more than ceremony; it incorporates etiquette and customs. He loved details and precision of ritual as a way of harmonizing life, not trivializing it (as he has sometimes been accused of).

Kong Fuzi travelled to promote his ideas. He was not always positively received by people who felt too many rules had to be learned. He discovered something new in rituals, not just the movements or details.

**Kong Fuzi’s New Philosophy of Relationships and Virtue**

Kong Fuzi’s mother died in his mid-20s. He performed ancestral rites for 3 years. Expensive bronze vessels were used in ancestor worship to make offers. He believed in ancestors but shifted emphasis toward the living. He urged people to develop proper relationships while still alive: serve the living. It informs how to serve the dead. People’s way of living reflects their state of mind, feelings, love and sincerity toward the people around them.

He felt following this way of life could change who we are, transform our way of thinking. Virtuous thinking can come of it. Reverence, respect, internal goodness. Sounds radical. It was not meant as mere mechanical actions, but instead it was to affect people psychologically through meaning. He was an innovator. He said he was only a transmitter but really he reinterpreted ritual. Virtue through rituals – how we eat, sleep, dress, play music. Music could transform a person. Practical use of philosophy in day to day life.

**Family as Model for the Emperor**

He felt we need to have moral individuals to have a good society. His mission was to teach people how to be virtuous in a world of political disorder and social decay. He found inspiration in the family where there were hierarchical relationships with fixed responsibilities and learned relationships from birth. People recognize their place and fulfill mutual relationships. Families are driven by loyalty, honesty, duty, respect and love for those around them. He saw fair and productive order through mutual assent in families. Love travelled downward and obedience upward. Kong Fuzi felt he could apply this to rulers. Chinese leaders at his time were devoted to the pursuit of personal gain. They didn’t have virtue if it got in the way of wordly success. Look at their deaths: buried with 26 chariots, 70 horses sacrificed. A good father could bring up a good son. If a ruler sees people as his children, with love, compassion, firmness, it trickles down. Kong Fuzi felt rulers had to use might right.

Ruler has the right to rule through heaven (as he is known as the son of heaven). This could be taken away by heaven when there were signs of natural disasters. Kong Fuzi added that if rulers are corrupt, people had the right to rebel and overthrow the ruler.

**Rejections**

Kong Fuzi wanted to influence power by getting a gov’t job. He was not well liked – seen as too arrogant, too blunt. With enemy armies on the borders rulers didn’t take him seriously. His ideas seemed frivolous given the times.

Being tenacious and resourceful, by his early 50s he changed his strategy – moved again with a group of 70 devotees (students). This time he got more traction. With his compellingly charismatic and intellectual personality he sought to be the moral vanguard to guide rulers how to rule respectfully. He accepted even the poorest students, based on merit. He sought rule through virtue, not bloodlines. Egalitarianism shared with Socrates and Buddha. But it didn’t apply to women. Confucius didn’t even think of women.

Kong Fuzi’s goal was to become a jinza – the aristocratic word for son of the lord. Used to be for social elite. Now Kong Fuzi wanted it to be applied to a moral elite: the ultimate moral person, a new kind of gentleman. To think, to know how to behave in different situations.

**Ren - Humanity**

He and his students faced hostility and they debated what to do. Should the jinza accept office in bad times? In corrupt regimes? They looked to Kong Fuzi for answers. *Ren*: human-heartedness, good or goodness, humanity. Courage with ren. Justice with ren. Human justice not harsh punishment. Wisdom with ren is being wise, not just smart. Every person can be in touch with ren, but to realize it fully requires learning. Learning to do one’s character is the highest ideal and minimum requirement to be human. Had Kong Fuzi felt he achieved ren? No, continuous struggle to the end of his (and everyone’s) life to be fully human.

Golden Rule: empathy. Don’t do to others what you do not wish for yourself. Ren means compassion. We don’t operate in isolation. Our relationships are key.

**The End**

He continued to teach, however, few of his students went into political office. When he fell sick at 73 he felt discouraged. No ruler would take him as his master. Students planted trees around his grave and kept his dream alive. But it was just one more theory for the next 300 years.

**Kong Fuzi’s Legacy**

When China was reunited in stability his ideas became more relevant. A Han dynasty emperor felt rule by virtue would make his empire more legitimate. Education became central. Poetry, arts, music of the early Zhou were revived. Kids learned the Confucian classics. They became a civil service requirement and an integrative force in China’s culture. Children learned “master says.” Until the 20th century.