

Confucius' Travelling Among the States

As the orthodoxization of Confucianism progressed, titles such as **"Sage" (圣人)**, **"Supreme Sage and Foremost Teacher" (至圣先师)**, and **"Model Teacher for All Ages" (万世师表)** were successively bestowed upon Confucius. He gradually ceased to be perceived merely as a historical figure born in the Lu State's Zouyi over two millennia ago, but rather became a cultural symbol embodying concepts such as **"benevolence" (仁)** and **"ritual propriety" (礼)**. To genuinely comprehend Confucius as an individual and grasp the profound implications of the *Analects* (论语), one of the most effective approaches may be to **return to his historical context** and retrace the intellectual and physical paths he traversed.

Background

According to *Records of the Grand Historian: The Hereditary House of Confucius (Shiji-Kongzi Shijia)* by Sima Qian, Confucius lost his father in early childhood, and his mother passed away when he was seventeen. The successive deaths of his parents instilled in the young Confucius the understanding that survival in an era of **"collapsed rites and corrupted music" (礼崩乐坏)** depended solely on self-reliance.

As an adult, Confucius's first occupation was as a **granary keeper**—a lowly position, yet he adhered to rigorous self-discipline, all while nurturing his grand ambition to **restore the Zhou rites (礼)**. From the age of fifteen, he devoted himself to the study of **Ruist traditions (儒术)** and later established a private school to instruct disciples.

His influence grew swiftly, attracting even the Lu aristocracy—**Meng Xizi (孟懿子)** and **Nangong Jingshu (南宫敬叔)**—who sought his tutelage.

After gaining prominence in Lu, Confucius journeyed to the **Qi State** with disciples to seek office but was rebuffed. Returning to Lu, he immersed himself in teaching. It was not until his fifties—the age at which he claimed to **"understand the Mandate of Heaven" (五十而知天命)**—that his political aspirations seemed within reach. At that time, the Lu ruler was a mere figurehead; real power lay with the **Three Huan clans (三桓)**, dominated by the **Ji Family**, which was itself controlled by its steward, **Yang Hu (阳货)**.

Both Yang Hu and another steward, **Gongshan Furao (公山弗扰)**, sought Confucius's service. Though tempted, Confucius faced his disciples' bewilderment: these very magnates were the **"usurpers and rebels" (乱臣贼子)** he had denounced. Yet Confucius saw an opportunity—by cooperating with them, he might realize his vision of **recreating a Zhou-like golden age**. Ultimately, this plan failed due to unforeseen circumstances.

A turn of fortune followed: Yang Hu, unsatisfied with his power, attempted a coup against the Three Huan but failed and fled to Qi. Only then did **Ji Huanzi** recognize Confucius's loyalty and appointed him **Chief Magistrate of Zhongdu (中都宰)**.

Within a year, Confucius's governance proved exceptional, earning him rapid promotion to **Minister of Works (司空)** and then **Minister of Justice (大司寇)**. Domestically, his reforms revitalized Lu's social order within months; externally, his diplomatic prowess at the **Jiagu Summit (夹谷之会)** forced Qi to return the **Wenyang territories (汶阳)**.

However, Qi, alarmed by Lu's resurgence under Confucius, sent **a troupe of female musicians and fine steeds** as gifts to Lu. Seduced by these luxuries, **Ji Huanzi** neglected governance, even omitting ritual meat distributions at sacrifices—a profound betrayal of Confucian propriety. Disillusioned and thwarted by aristocratic opposition to his policies, the **55-year-old Confucius** departed Lu, embarking on his **fourteen-year exile** in search of a ruler worthy of his ideals.

The Journey

According to historical records, the term “**周游**” (**itinerant journey**) refers to Confucius’s prolonged quest for political employment across various states. Accompanied by his closest disciples, Confucius spent over a decade traveling through the neighboring regions of Lu, traversing the territories of **Wei, Cao, Song, Zheng, Chen, and Cai**, as well as the borderlands of Chu. This journey, which began at the age of 55 and concluded at 68, ultimately led him back to Lu. **Wei**, the first stop on his itinerary, marked the beginning of his politically charged odyssey.

The Strategic Choice of Wei

Wei shared a border and close ties with Lu. Confucius’s decision to begin his journey there was likely not merely geographical but also ideological: Wei was a fiefdom established by a direct descendant of **King Wen of Zhou** and ruled by the **Ji clan**, the same lineage as the Zhou kings. Confucius once remarked, *“The governance of Lu and Wei is like that of brothers.”* He may have believed that the **Zhou rites (周礼)** could be revitalized in such a culturally resonant state.

Initial Optimism and Early Setbacks

Upon arriving in Wei, Confucius was ambitious and hopeful. As recorded, his disciple **Ran You**, while driving his chariot, observed the bustling capital and inquired: “The population here is thriving—what should we do?” Confucius answered: “Enrich them.” “Once they are enriched, what next?” “Educate them.”

This exchange reveals Confucius’s grand vision for **statecraft through moral and economic cultivation**. **Duke Ling of Wei** initially received him with honor, but within months, court intrigues led the duke to distrust Confucius, assigning an official, **Gongsun Yujia**, to surveil him. Fearing political persecution, Confucius departed after only **ten months**.

The Incident at Kuang: A Test of Conviction

En route to Chen, Confucius and his disciples were besieged in **Kuang** after being mistaken for **Yang Hu**, a despised Lu official who had oppressed the locals. While his disciples panicked, Confucius remained composed, declaring:

“After King Wen perished, did not the cultural legacy of Zhou reside in me? If Heaven intends to destroy this culture, I would not have been entrusted with it. If Heaven does not, what can the people of Kuang do to me?”

For **five days**, Confucius **played the qin and sang**, steadying his followers’ resolve. The crisis was resolved only after securing aid from **Ning Wuzi**, a Wei statesman.

Return to Wei and the Controversy with Nanzi

Forced to return to Wei, Confucius remained there for **three years**, during which a contentious episode arose: his meeting with **Nanzi**, Duke Ling’s politically influential but morally controversial consort. Though Confucius initially resisted, he ultimately complied with ritual propriety, swearing:

“I did not wish to meet her, but having done so, I adhered strictly to ritual. If I have acted improperly, may Heaven reject me!”

This incident strained his relationship with **Zilu**, who objected to Confucius engaging with a figure of dubious virtue. Confucius’s insistence on **ritual correctness over personal disdain** underscored his commitment to principled conduct.

Final Disillusionment and Departure

Wei's political decay became undeniable when Duke Ling, more interested in military expansion than governance, asked Confucius about battle formations. Confucius rebuffed him:

"I have knowledge of sacrificial rites, but warfare I have never studied."

Recognizing that the duke and Nanzi sought only to **exploit his prestige** rather than implement his ideals, Confucius left Wei permanently.

Hostility in Song and Unwavering Resolve

In Song, the minister **Huan Tui** threatened Confucius by felling a tree where he taught. Undeterred, Confucius affirmed:

"Heaven has vested in me the mission to uphold virtue—what can Huan Tui do against me?"

Nevertheless, he prudently departed, continuing his quest for a ruler worthy of the **Way (道)**.

The "Homeless Dog" Incident in Zheng

Upon arriving in the unfamiliar territory of **Zheng**, Confucius became separated from his disciples outside the eastern gate of the capital. As his followers searched frantically, **Zigong** encountered a local who described a man at the gate:

"His forehead resembles [the sage-king] Tang Yao, his neck resembles Gao Yao, and his shoulders resemble [the statesman] Zichan of Zheng—yet from the waist down, he is three inches shorter than Yu the Great, utterly disheveled, like a 'homeless dog.'"

Recognizing his master, Zigong rushed to the gate. When Confucius heard the account, he laughed heartily:

"The physical comparisons may be off, but 'homeless dog'—how apt! How apt!"

This episode reveals Confucius's **self-awareness and humility** despite his lofty ideals.

Brief Tenure in Chen: Superficial Engagement

Confucius eventually secured an advisory role under **Duke Min of Chen**, yet their exchanges focused on **anecdotes of the early Zhou dynasty** rather than governance—a fact underscored by the *Analects'* silence on Chen's political consultations. After **three years**, Chen became embroiled in the **Jin-Chu rivalry**, forcing Confucius to depart.

Crisis in Cai and Temporary Refuge in Chu

En route to Cai, Confucius's party faced **famine** during Wu's invasion of Chen. With disciples falling ill, they were rescued by **Chu's Lord Ye**, who had led troops to aid Chen. Though Lord Ye (notorious for the **"Lord Ye Loves Dragons"** parable) respected Confucius, their **political incompatibility** prompted Confucius's departure.

Return to Wei: The Crisis of Legitimacy

Passing through **Wei** again (now ruled by **Duke Chu**, the exiled heir **Kuai Kui's son**), Confucius confronted a **succession crisis**: Duke Chu barred his father's return, violating **filial piety (孝)**. When **Zilu** asked how to reform Wei, Confucius insisted on **rectifying names (正名)**:

"If names are not correct, speech cannot be consequential."

Despite lingering for **four years**, Confucius failed to reconcile the conflict. His frustration peaked when the noble **Kong Wenzi** sought his counsel on attacking a rival—a request antithetical to Confucian principles.

Reiterating his stance to **Duke Ling decades prior**, Confucius declared:

"I understand rites and music, not warfare."

Final Return to Lu: The Sage at Ease

At **age 63**, weary of exile, Confucius returned to Lu. Though politically sidelined, he embraced the role of teacher, epitomizing his maxim:

"At seventy, I followed my heart's desires without overstepping bounds."

His later years were marked by **intellectual freedom** and **acceptance of unfulfilled ambitions**.

Final Remarks

The accounts of Confucius's *itinerant journeys among the states* (周游列国) reveal a profoundly humanized figure—one who was never an aloof ascetic but an active *practitioner of the Great Way* (行道者), engaging directly with the world's complexities.

To inquire wherein lay Confucius's *sageliness* (圣) is to recognize:

- His **unyielding commitment to the morally imperative yet politically unattainable**, as encapsulated in his ethos of *"persisting even when knowing it cannot be done"* (知不可为而为之).
- His **existential vigor**, expressed in his declaration: *"So ardent that I forget to eat, so joyous that I forget sorrow, unaware that old age approaches"* (发愤忘食，乐以忘忧，不知老之将至).
- His **indomitable spirit**, exemplified by his assertion that *"an army may be deprived of its commander, but a common man cannot be deprived of his resolve"* (三军可夺帅也，匹夫不可夺志也).

For modern seekers of understanding, grasping Confucius's legacy demands more than textual engagement with the *Analects*. It requires **retracing his footsteps**—the landscapes he traversed, the societal turmoil he witnessed, and the tribulations he endured—to apprehend why Sima Qian revered him as the *"ultimate sage"* (至圣), whose virtue was *"a mountain to be gazed upon in awe, a path to be followed with reverence"* (高山仰止，景行行止).

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