

What constitutes a good life for an individual person? How can people live together in communities most effectively? These are among the central questions that have occupied human beings since the beginning of conscious thought. And they certainly played a major role in the emerging cultural traditions of the classical era all across Eurasia. The document that follows presents a sample of this thinking drawn from Confucian traditions.

Reflections from Confucius



No one was more central to the making of classical Chinese culture than Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.). In the several generations following their master's death, his disciples recalled his teachings and his conversations, recording them in a small book called *The Analects*. This text became a touchstone for all educated people in China and across much of East Asia as well. Over the centuries, extensive commentaries and interpretations of Confucius's teachings gave rise to a body of literature known generally as Confucianism, though these ideas encompassed the thinking of many others as well. In the translation that follows, the word "virtue" refers to the qualities of a complete or realized human being, sometimes referred to in Confucian literature as a "gentleman" or a "virtuous man."

Confucius
The Analects
ca. 479–221 B.C.E.

Source: Confucius, *The Analects*, translated by James Legge (1893).

The philosopher Yu said, "They are few who, being filial and fraternal, are fond of offending against their superiors. There have been none, who, not liking to offend against their superiors, have been fond of stirring up confusion. . . ."

The Master said, "To rule a country of a thousand chariots, there must be reverent attention to business, and sincerity; economy in expenditure, and love for men; and the employment of the people at the proper seasons."

The Master said, "A youth, when at home, should be filial, and, abroad, respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow in love to all, and cultivate the friendship of the good. When he has time and opportunity, after the performance of these things, he should employ them in polite studies."

Tsze-hsia said, "If a man withdraws his mind from the love of [beautiful women], and applies it as sincerely to the love of the virtuous; if, in serving his parents, he can exert his utmost strength; if, in serving his prince, he can devote his life; if, in his intercourse with his friends, his words are sincere: although men say that he has not learned, I will certainly say that he has."

The philosopher Tsang said, "Let there be a careful attention to perform the funeral rites to parents, and let them be followed when long gone with the ceremonies of sacrifice; then the virtue of the people will resume its proper excellence."

The Master said, "He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn toward it."

The Master said, "If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good."

The Duke Ai asked, saying, "What should be done in order to secure the submission of the people?" Confucius replied, "Advance the upright and set aside the crooked, then the people will submit. Advance the crooked and set aside the upright, then the people will not submit."

Chi K'ang asked how to cause the people to reverence their ruler, to be faithful to him, and to go on to nerve themselves to virtue. The Master said, "Let him preside over them with gravity; then they will reverence him. Let him be final and kind to all; then they will be faithful to him. Let him advance the good and teach the incompetent; then they will eagerly seek to be virtuous."

The Master said, "If the will be set on virtue, there will be no practice of wickedness."

The Master said, "Riches and honors are what men desire. If they cannot be obtained in the proper way, they should not be held. Poverty and meanness are what men dislike. If they cannot be avoided in the proper way, they should not be avoided."

The Master said, “In serving his parents, a son may remonstrate with them, but gently; when he sees that they do not incline to follow his advice, he shows an increased degree of reverence, but does not abandon his purpose; and should they punish him, he does not allow himself to murmur.”

Fan Ch’ih asked what constituted wisdom. The Master said, “To give one’s self earnestly to the duties due to men, and while respecting spiritual beings, to keep aloof from them, may be called wisdom.”

The Master said, “The superior man, extensively studying all learning, and keeping himself under the restraint of the rules of propriety, may thus likewise not overstep what is right.”

The Master’s frequent themes of discourse were the Odes, the History, and the maintenance of the Rules of Propriety. On all these he frequently discoursed.

The Master was wishing to go and live among the nine wild tribes of the east. Someone said, “They are rude. How can you do such a thing?” The Master said, “If a superior man dwelt among them, what rudeness would there be?”

Chi Lu asked about serving the spirits of the dead. The Master said, “While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits?” Chi Lu added, “I venture to ask about death?” He was answered, “While you do not know life, how can you know about death?”

Yen Yuan asked about perfect virtue. The Master said, “To subdue one’s self and return to propriety, is perfect virtue. If a man can for one day subdue himself and return to propriety, all under heaven will ascribe perfect virtue to him.”

Chung-kung asked about perfect virtue. The Master said, “It is, when you go abroad, to behave to every one as if you were receiving a great guest; to employ the people as if you were assisting at a great sacrifice; not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself; to have no murmuring against you in the country, and none in the family.”

Chi K’ang asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, “To govern means to rectify. If you lead on the people with correctness, who will dare not to be correct?”

Truly, if the ruler is not a ruler, the subject not a subject, the father not a father, the son not a son, then even if there be grain, would I get to eat it?

The Master said, “Of all people, girls and servants are the most difficult to behave to. If you are familiar with them, they lose their humility. If you maintain a reserve toward them, they are discontented.”

Analects Questions

- How would Confucius define such a person?
- How might one become this kind of person? The terms “propriety” and “rites of propriety” point to an elaborate set of rituals or expectations that defined appropriate behavior in virtually every circumstance of life, depending on one’s gender, age, or class.
- What role does propriety or ritual play in the making of a virtuous man?
- What understanding of “learning” or education comes through in this text?
- What is “filial piety” and why is it so important in Confucius’s understanding of a good society?
- How do “virtue,” “filial piety,” and “learning” relate to the larger task of creating good government or a harmonious society?
- How does Confucius understand the role of the supernatural—gods, spirits, and ancestors for example?
- In what ways was this text reacting *against* the conventional wisdom of their times? How was each shaped by the social and political circumstances in which they were composed?
- What is the relationship between religion (the transcendent realm of the gods or the divine) and moral behavior on earth in this document? How does the “good life” relate to politics?
- How does this text characterize the superior person or the fully realized human being? How do they define personal virtue?

The Leisure Life of China’s Elites

From the earliest centuries of Chinese civilization, that country’s artists have painted — on pottery, paper, wood, and silk; in tombs, on coffins, and on walls; in albums and on scrolls. Relying largely on ink rather than oils, their brushes depicted human figures, landscapes, religious themes, and images of ordinary life. While Chinese painting evolved over many centuries, in terms of both subject matter and technique, by most accounts it reached a high point of artistic brilliance during the Tang and Song dynasties. Here, however, we are less interested in the aesthetic achievements of Chinese painting than in what those works can show us about the life of China’s elite class — those men who had passed the highest-level examinations and held high office in the state bureaucracy and those women who lived within the circles of the imperial court. While they represented only a tiny fraction of China’s huge population, such elite groups established the tone and set the standards of behavior for Chinese civilization. For such people, leisure was a positive value, a time for nurturing relationships and cultivating one’s character in good Confucian or Daoist fashion.

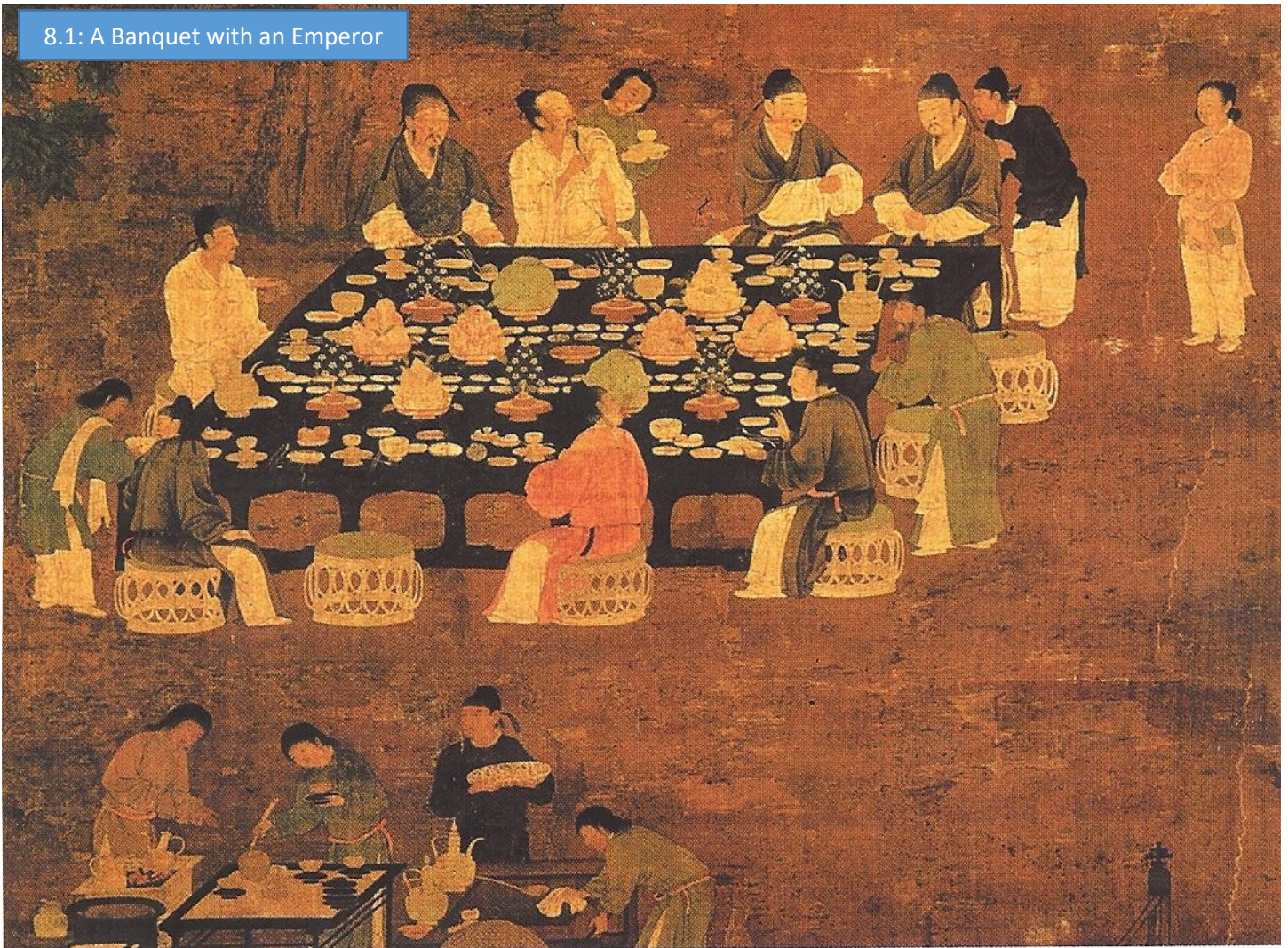
According to the Tang dynasty writer and scholar Duan Chengshi:

Leisure is good.
Dusty affairs don't entangle the mind.
I sit facing the tree outside the window
And watch its shadow change direction three times.³⁶

Action and work, in the Chinese view of things, need to be balanced by self-reflection and leisure. In the images that follow, we can catch a glimpse of how the Chinese elite lived and interacted with one another, particularly in their leisure time.

Leading court officials and scholar-bureaucrats must have been greatly honored to be invited to an elegant banquet, hosted by the emperor himself, such as that shown in Source 8.1. Usually attributed to the emperor Huizong (1082–1135) – who was himself a noted painter, poet, calligrapher, and collector – the painting shows a refined dinner gathering of high officials drinking tea and wine with the emperor presiding at the left. This emperor's great attention to the arts rather than to affairs of state gained him a reputation as a negligent and dissolute ruler. His reign ended in disgrace as China suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of northern nomadic Jin people, who took the emperor captive.

8.1: A Banquet with an Emperor



- What features of this painting contribute to the impression of imperial elegance?
- What mood does this painting evoke?
- What social distinction among the figures in the painting can you discern?
- How is the emperor depicted in this painting in comparison to that on page 335? How would you explain the difference?
- How might you imagine the conversation around this table?

Elite women of the court likewise gathered to eat, drink, and talk, as illustrated in Source 8.2, an anonymous Tang dynasty painting on silk. Hosting the event is the empress, shown seated upright in the middle of the left side of the table, holding a fan and wearing a distinctive headdress. Her guests and paid professional musicians sit around the table.



8.2: At Table with Empress

- How does this gathering of elite women differ from that of the men in Source 8.1? How might their conversation differ from that of the men?
- To what extent are the emperor and empress in Sources 8.1 and 8.2 distinguished from their guests? How do you think the emperor and empress viewed their roles at these functions? Were they acting as private persons among friends or in an official capacity?
- What differences in status among these women can you identify?
- What view of these women does the artist seek to convey?
- What does the posture of the women suggest about the event?

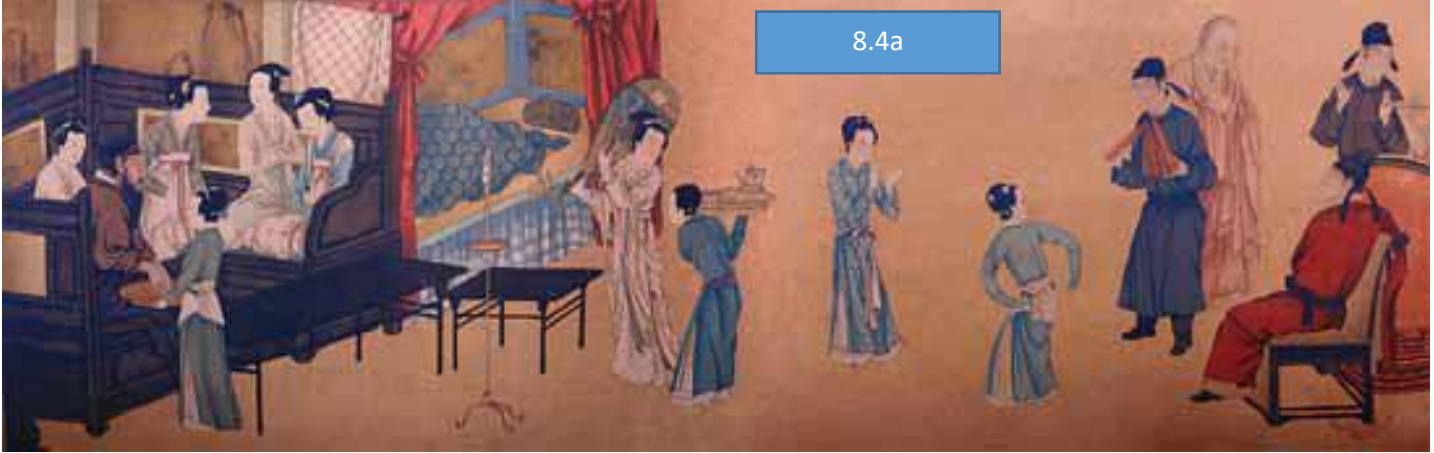
Confucian cultural ideals gave great prominence to literature, poetry, and scholarly pursuits as leisure activities appropriate for “gentlemen.” Confucius himself had declared that “gentlemen make friends through literature, and through friendship increase their benevolence.” For some, a more reclusive life devoted to study, painting, poetry, and conversation with friends represented an honorable alternative to government service. Thus, literary gatherings of scholars and officials, often in garden settings, were common themes in Tang and Song dynasty paintings. Source 8.3, by the tenth-century painter Zhou Wenju, provides an illustration of such a gathering.



8.3: A Literary Gathering

- What marks these figures as cultivated men of literary or scholarly inclination?
- What meaning might you attribute to the outdoor garden setting of this image and that of Source 8.1?
- Notice the various gazes of the four figures. What do they suggest about the character of this gathering and the interpersonal relationships among its participants? Are they interacting or engaged in solitary pursuits?
- Do you think the artist was seeking to convey an idealized image of what a gathering of “gentlemen” ought to be or a realistic portrayal of an actual event? What elements of the painting support your answer?

Not all was poetry and contemplation of nature in the leisure-time activities of China’s elite. Nor were men and women always so strictly segregated as the preceding sources may suggest. Source 8.4a & b illustrates another side of Chinese elite life. These images are part of a long tenth-century scroll painting titled *The Night Revels of Han Xizai*.



8.4a



Apparently, the Tang dynasty emperor Li Yu became concerned that one of his ministers, Han Xizai, was overindulging in suspicious nightlong parties in his own home. He therefore commissioned the artist Gu Hongzhong to attend these parties secretly and to record the events in a painting, which he hoped would shame his wayward but talented official into more appropriate and dignified behavior. The entire scroll shows men and women together, sometimes in flirtatious situations, while open sleeping areas suggest sexual activity.

- What kinds of entertainment were featured at this gathering?
- What aspects of these parties shown in the scroll paintings might have caused the emperor some concern? Refer to the female musicians shown below, which derives from the same painting. In what respects might these kinds of gatherings run counter to Confucian values?



This tenth-century rendering by the painter Gu Hongzhong shows these upper-class women serving as musicians for a high official of a Tang dynasty emperor. It was titled *The Night Revels of Han Xizai*. The painter was apparently sent by the emperor to spy on the suspicious behavior of the minister, who in various tellings was suspected of either rebellion or undignified activity. (Beijing Palace Museum, Imperial Palace [Forbidden City], Beijing, China/Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY)

- How are women portrayed in these images? In what ways are they relating to the men in the paintings?

Final Questions

1. Describing elite society: Based on these paintings, write a brief description of the social life of Chinese elites during the Tang and Song dynasties.
2. Defining the self-image of an elite: What do these sources suggest about how members of the elite ideally viewed themselves? In what ways do those self-portraits draw upon Confucian, Daoist, or Buddhist teachings?
3. Noticing differences in the depiction of women: In what different ways are women represented in these paintings? Keep in mind that all the artists were men. How might this affect the way women were depicted? How might female artists have portrayed them differently?
4. Using images to illustrate change: Reread the section on The Role of Chinese Women on PohlmanPavilion & pages 331–32 from the text: How might these images be used to illustrate the changes in women's lives that are described in those pages?
5. Seeking additional sources: What other kinds of visual sources might provide further insight into the lives of Chinese elites?