

*World
Religions*

Confucianism

Third Edition

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE MODERN CONFUCIAN WORLD

Worldwide there are about 6 million people who today call themselves Confucians. The majority live in Asia, more particularly east Asia, because the birthplace of Confucianism was China. Still, in Europe, in North and South America, and on other continents there are small numbers of people who identify themselves as Confucians. Most are of Asian descent. However Confucianism has an influence far greater than the number of its active followers would indicate. For more than 2,000 years Confucianism was the dominant philosophical system of China. As a result, it infused all phases of Chinese life. It is reflected in China's poetry and history, its government and social life, and the ethics that shaped society. Because Chinese civilization spread to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, elements of Confucianism can also be found in the cultures of those countries. Although few Japanese would call themselves Confucians, the values of Confucianism still exist in modern Japan. The same is true of Vietnam, North and South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. Even the

A street scene in Suzhou, China. Confucian principles are still influential in the relationships between family members, citizens and government, and in the underlying principles that shape and maintain good relations within communities.



People's Republic of China, whose Communist government repudiated the nation's Confucian past, cannot escape its influence.

WHAT IS CONFUCIANISM?

Confucianism is a system of thought based on the teachings of Confucius, who lived from 551 to 479 B.C.E. If only one word were to be used to summarize the Chinese way of life for the last 2,000 years, that word would be *Confucian*. No other person has had as great an effect on the life and thought of China as Confucius. He is the most revered person in Chinese history and is accorded such titles as Sage of All Time and First Teacher. Though he is called Confucius throughout most of the world, that name is actually the Latinized form of his Chinese name, Kong Fuzi, or Master Kung.

WISDOM OF THE PAST

For himself Confucius claimed no great originality. Instead he looked to a past era that he saw as a golden age. He told a disciple, "I transmit but I do not create. I am sincerely fond of the ancient. I would compare myself to our Old Peng who was fond of talking about the good old days." Confucius served as a creative transmitter of the wisdom of the past. From his study of Chinese tradition, he gleaned the teachings that would influence China throughout time to the present.

The Golden Rule

Confucius taught a moral code based on ethics, humanity, and love. One day a disciple asked Confucius, "Is there one word that should cover the whole duty of man?" To this question Confucius replied: "Fellow-feeling, perhaps, is that word. Do not do to others what you would not wish them to do to you." Thus, from very early times, this "golden rule" became an important part of Chinese thought.

ORDER AND HARMONY

Despite the fact that Confucius lived during the troubled times leading up to the Warring States Period (476–221 B.C.E.), a time of turmoil when feudal states were contending with each other for dominance, his philosophy emphasized the ideals of order and harmony. Central to Confucianism is the idea that people should live in harmony, both with each other and with

No portraits of Confucius exist from his lifetime. However, this 19th-century Korean manuscript shows Confucius in the robes that he wore according to ancient tradition. A similar style of folded robes is still worn for Confucian rituals and ceremonies.



Five Virtues

Confucius taught his disciples to be gentlemen. In his philosophy a gentleman was a person who had developed the five virtues of courtesy, magnanimity, good faith, diligence, and kindness; and a man with those qualities should employ them in governing the state.

Confucius believed that through education anyone could reach the high standard of a gentleman.

THE FAMILY UNIT

In China the basic unit of society was the family. The family served as an economic, social, and political unit, since family members participated as a group in those areas of life. The family was the natural environment for moral training and the bridge between the individual and society. Confucius taught that it was within the family that the individual fully achieved his or her human potential.

Confucius stressed the duties and obligations of each family member and believed that each should act according to his or her particular role. Of the five human relationships, according to Confucius three were within the family: father/son, husband/wife, and older brother/younger brother. (Note that Confucius viewed the family as a patriarchal institution. He did not include mother/daughter or older sister/younger sister in his basic human relationships.) The other two relationships were friend/friend and ruler/subject.

The strongest of those relationships was that of father and son. The son owed respect and obedience to his father to a much greater degree than was required in European civilization. As an adult the son was required to pay the utmost honor to his father, even after the father's death. Then the son was responsible for

nature. To attain those goals Confucius advocated a system of interpersonal relationships and good government. The system had a hierarchy, with age favored over youth and the only equals were friends.

To Confucius government service was the highest calling of all, because good government would bring happiness to all people. "The gentleman first practices what he preaches and then preaches what he practices," he said. Furthermore Con-

offering sacrifices to his father's spirit. Known as filial piety, this duty to father became deeply ingrained in Chinese civilization. In return the father was expected to provide for his family. Similarly, children were also expected to show filial respect to their mother. The strength of the parents' authority was demonstrated when they arranged marriages for their children—a decision in which the children themselves had no say.

Confucius stressed the hierarchical nature of human relationships. Of the five relationships, only one was between equals—that between friend and friend. Age was favored over youth; thus younger brothers were subservient to elder brothers.

POSITION OF WOMEN

A wife was subservient to a husband. In childhood a young girl was duty bound to obey her father. When she married she entered into the family of her husband. She was expected to obey and serve both her husband and his parents. It was only when her own

Relationships within the family unit were central to Confucian teachings. Respect for the elderly was part of this structure and is a Confucian value that still remains important in the cultures of east Asian nations.



Kinship

Francis L. K. Hsu, a Chinese-American scholar, wrote:

The Chinese way in kinship gave the individual a great sense of security and the wherewithal to deal with the problems he faced in the world. Women who were not beautiful did not need to frequent lonely-hearts clubs. Their marital destinies were assured by their parents. Men who just hoped to get through life with minimum effort did not have to seek their own identity and make a world of their own. If their parents were not poor, all they had to do was to take advantage of the shadow of their ancestors.

(In Francis L. K. Hsu, *The Challenge of the American Dream*.)

sons married that she would have power over someone else: her daughters-in-law.

RULER AND SUBJECT RELATIONSHIPS

The teachings of Confucius were directed particularly toward government. The last of the five relationships was that between ruler and subject. Just as the son owed loyalty and obedience to his father, so did the subject owe the same respect to the ruler. Indeed the state, the nation, was seen as an expanded family. The emperor was regarded as the "father and mother" of his people. He offered sacrifices to heaven for the good of the people, the land, and all creatures under heaven. Aptly, the emperor's official title was Son of Heaven. Centuries after his death in 479 B.C.E. Confucius's philosophy became the official doctrine of the Chinese government. One of the many

duties an emperor had toward his people was that of carrying out the rites that had been codified by Confucius.

FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATION

After Confucianism became a state religion in 136 B.C.E. it formed the basis of the Chinese education system for 2,000 years. Confucius had said: "Study as if you were never to master it, as if in fear of losing it." No people were ever given greater incentive to study, for the one way to attain power and influence was through government service. And it was through state-run examinations that a young man could win appointment to a government post. So important was this that any child who showed promise was set aside by the family for intensive teaching and training. Families even built special "scholar towers" where the student was locked in day after day, year after year. The family and village invested in the possibility of his success, for from that fortune flowed.

Over the years a system of examinations was developed that emphasized the student's knowledge of Confucian thought. There was no greater prize than to pass those examinations. Great scholars were honored as the superheroes of sports are revered in the United States. Not only the student but also his family and village shared in the honor. A successful candidate was allowed to raise a flagpole in his courtyard and display a banner describing his triumph. Even more important, wealth, honor and status followed, not just for the successful candidate but also for the family and village. The examinations were open to most males regardless of class, although the years of study required to pass them meant that most candidates came from the wealthier families. Still, China offered a career for the academically talented, which meant that the brightest individuals were in fact the officials of the government. These scholar-officials, or mandarins as they were known, commanded greater respect and prestige than any other group in China.

Confucianism was a force for unity and stability in China. Over China's long history its ruling dynasties rose and fell, but Confucianism remained the social and governmental ideal. Throughout the vast territory of the Chinese empire scholars studied the same books and shared a common legacy. Although Confucianism developed and changed, certain core ideals remained and became a stabilizing force for Chinese civilization.

THE THREE RELIGIONS

Throughout much of their history the Chinese have practiced and been influenced by Daoism and Buddhism as well as Confucianism—faiths that they often combine in different ways.

DAOISM

Other than Confucianism Daoism is the most important native philosophy of China. Its legendary founder was Laozi, who,

In Essence

*The Dao pours out everything into life
It is a cornucopia that never runs dry
It is the deep source of everything
It is nothing and yet in everything*

(In Man-Ho Kwok, Martin Palmer, and Jay Ramsay, *Tao Te Ching*.)