Chinese Religions—the eBook
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2 The Classical Confucian Tradition

In this chapter

For over two millennia the Confucian tradition occupied a central position and exerted significant influence on the various spheres of life in China, including politics, society, culture, and religion. With the collapse of the imperial state and the customary way of life in the early twentieth century, Confucianism lost much of its traditional prestige and influence, but its basic principles still continue to shape the values and behaviors of many people in China and the rest of East Asia. This is first of two chapters on Confucianism, covering the formative epoch of the tradition's history: from its early origins during the time of Confucius (c. 552–479 BCE) some twenty-five centuries ago, through the gradual elaboration of its teachings and their codification into a classical form, and ultimately its break into the Chinese mainstream, marked by its acceptance as an ideology of the imperial state during the early part of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE).

Main topics

- The many faces of the Confucian tradition.
- The "Five Classics" and the historical context behind the rise of Confucianism.
- The life and times of Confucius.
- Basic principles and teachings of Confucius.
- Competing ideas propounded by the Legalists and the followers of Mozi.
- Diversity of perspectives within the early Confucian movement.
- Grand Confucian synthesis of the early Han period.

Various Faces of Confucianism

The term "Confucianism" has fairly recent origins. It was invented by Jesuit missionaries upon their arrival in China in the sixteenth century (see chapter 9). They used it to describe what they perceived to be "the sect of the literati." Confucianism is thus somewhat of a misnomer, or perhaps a useful even if a bit confusing neologism. It roughly covers what in pre-modern China was usually referred to by terms such as the "school (or tradition) of the scholars" (*rujia*) or the "teaching of the scholars" (*rujiao*). The scholarly followers of this tradition were called *ru,* which can be rendered as "literati" or "scholars," but usually it is referred to as "Confucians." The term *ru* initially covered a class of specialists who transmitted the texts and rituals of the ancient Zhou dynasty. Those *ru* who were subsumed within the broader tradition we call Confucianism performed archaic rituals, revered Confucius, were steeped in ancient texts traditionally associated with the great sage, and espoused time-honored values and principles.

Many of the *ru* were also involved in government service, and as a group they esteemed the holding of public office. Renowned for their learning, which often went together with an air of cultural refinement, they constituted an elite segment of Chinese society. Their advantageous status brought many privileges, but also certain responsibilities. Theirs was a somewhat amorphous tradition that lacked many of the trappings and institutions of organized religion, as known and experienced by Europeans at the time when the Christian missionaries entered China. Confucianism was also a many-sided tradition, with many faces. While it concurrently engaged and influenced various aspects of Chinese life— including social organization, political involvement, and educational activities—the Confucian tradition was marked by often fuzzy boundaries and somewhat tentative criteria of membership.

For a very long time, a primary feature of Confucianism was its role as the official ideology of the Chinese imperial state and the ruling elites. In that capacity, it provided a system of political philosophy, bureaucratic models and organizational structures for running the government, and blueprints for organizing the society and the economy. Unabashedly humanistic and this-worldly in its basic orientation—even if usually accepting of various divinities, including many of the gods of popular religion—Confucianism also provided a comprehensive ethical system that shaped public mores and personal behavior. Moreover, Confucian learning was a central part of the educational system in traditional China. Confucius was widely revered as a paradigmatic educator; emphasis on study and educational attainment, inspired in large part by him and his followers, became an essential cultural value. Some also see Confucianism, especially in its later incarnations (discussed in chapter 8), as a philosophical tradition that engaged in rarefied metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological speculations about the nature of human life and ultimate reality.

Figure 2.1. Stele that contains the text of the *Classic of Filial Piety*, Forest of Stelae Museum, Xi'an

In light of the above considerations, it is possible to question the characterization of Confucianism as a "religion." The problem is compounded by the facts that the term religion itself is problematic, especially given that its varied connotations or analytical frames of reference developed within Western milieus that in significant respect differ from the situation that obtained in China. There are many aspects of Confucianism, however, that are either explicitly or implicitly religious, especially if we accept the kind of open-ended and broadminded understanding of religion suggested in the introduction. Throughout the history of Confucianism, there are recurrent expressions of belief in Heaven, often accompanied by efforts to divine its will and act accordingly. There is also a tacit acknowledgement of a supernatural realm, populated with various gods and spirits, along with a pervasive emphasis on ritual.

Furthermore, a central aspect of Confucianism in many of its historical manifestations is the quest for sagehood. Besides the study of canonical texts, that also involves various forms of spiritual cultivation, including contemplative practices. All of this makes it possible to talk of Confucianism as a religion, even if not in exactly the same terms as many might be accustomed from their background or familiarity with the monotheistic traditions of the West. The Confucian tradition's complex character and many-sided applications thus challenges us to re-

think the basic contours and character of religion as a pervasive force in human history, as well as a field of academic study.

Another consideration, which sometimes unwittingly complicates the study of Confucianism, is its diffused character and the fact that it is embedded into a broader system of values and a traditional way of life. It is often debatable if particular aspects of Chinese mores or social practices can be traced back directly or solely to Confucian teachings and ideals, as they are also shaped by other systems of values and sources of meaning, which together serve as building blocks of larger patterns of social order and cultural identity. Moreover, as we observe the various changes and adaptations of Confucianism in response to new social circumstances or political demands, we also have to keep in mind the tradition's historical impact beyond China. The influence of Confucianism was especially strong in Korea and Vietnam, and to a smaller degree in Japan, with the conservative and long-lasting Korean Chosŏn (Joseon) dynasty (1392–1910) being arguably the most Confucian state in history.

The Five "Confucian" Classics

Although the putative founding of Confucianism as a distinct tradition is often traced back to Confucius, there were ancient systems of values, outlooks on life and society, and traditions of ritual that existed before and during his lifetime, which in profound ways inspired and shaped the development of early Confucianism. Some of those ancient perspectives and traditions were written down and transmitted in a variety of textual forms. Gradually they were codified into a coherent canon, with five texts becoming closely associated with the Confucian tradition under the rubric of the "Five Classics" (see box), a designation that is first attested in sources from the second century BCE. Tradition ascribes to Confucius the writing, compilation, or editing of these texts, although critical scholarship has shown that they had complex literary origins and were assembled together over extended time periods. Some of them incorporate materials that predate Confucius, but others include parts of considerably later provenance, including the Han dynasty.

The Five Classics

- *Book of Songs* (*Shijing)*, an anthology of verses from the early Zhou through the Spring and Autumn periods.
- *Book of Change* (*Yijing*), a manual of divination from the Zhou dynasty, with Han-era additions.
- *Book of Documents (Shujing*), a chronological collection of speeches, proclamations, and stories about ancient rulers from the pre-Zhou and Zhou periods.
- *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*), a chronicle of the state of Lu up to the time of Confucius.
- *Three [Texts about] Rituals* (*Sanli*), discussions of traditional rituals and governmental institutions, from the Warring States and the Han periods.

The *Book of Music (Yuejing)* was at some point known as the sixth classic, but it was lost before the Han period.

Although traditionally these texts are interpreted as adopting a single point of view and conveying a unified message, in fact they contain a rich variety of materials, written at different times and in diverse styles. The texts also deal with a broad range of subjects and present a multiplicity of perspectives. One of the pitfalls in the study of these and other related texts is the tendency to categorize and read them in terms of a particular school of thought, namely Confucianism. It is helpful to keep in mind the possibility of interpreting the texts within the context of the intellectual debates that unfolded at the times of their creation, as well as in reference to their subsequent incorporation into the Confucian canon and their important uses as linchpins of Confucian ideology.

The *Book of Songs* (sometimes also translated as the *Book of Odes* or the *Classic of Poetry*) contains folk songs about common people's everyday existence and hymns about courtly life that go back to the Western Zhou period, namely before the time of Confucius. On the other hand, the *Book of Documents* (also called the *Classic of History*) purports to contain governmental documents and records of conversations and proclamations issued by ancient kings and other members of the ruling elites. While some of those materials go back to the early Zhou period, the text has a very convoluted history, and over the centuries it existed in a number of forms and editions. Scholars have established that substantial parts of the text were forged at much later dates, some as late as the fourth century of the Common Era.

The overriding concern with the recording of history that is evident in the *Book of Documents* is also a central element in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. This text provides a chronological outline of events and activities centered on the rulers of the state of Lu, covering the historical period that obtained its name from the text's title. From early on and throughout successive dynastic epochs, respect for official historical narratives, along with the habitual use (and misuse) of historical records or precedents, became important parts of the classical tradition. Historical events and personages, especially those recorded in these two classics, were frequently evoked in all sorts of predicaments, from court discussions of governmental policy to personal reflections or flights of poetic imagination.

On the other end of the spectrum, the *Book of Change* is basically a manual of divination, over which generations of editors and commentators superimposed philosophical speculations about the manifold phenomenal transformations of the Dao (Way). Conceived as a unitary source of all things, the basic patterns of the Dao are expressed in the text by recourse to graphic symbols. Finally, detailed information about rituals and rules of conduct, along with idealized descriptions of governmental structures and institutions, are covered in the texts of varied provenance subsumed within the three classics of rites, collectively known as the *Three [Texts about] Rituals* (*Sanli*): *Ceremonials and Rites* (*Yili*), *Record of Rites* (*Liji*), and *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli*). The *Record of Rites* contains the "Great Learning" (see quote box) and the "Doctrine of the Mean," which became especially popular from the Song dynasty onward with the growing influence of the Neo-Confucian tradition (see chapter 8; for more on the Five Classics, see Nylan 2001).

Realization of the Way according to the "Great Learning"

In ancient times, those who wanted to illuminate their bright virtue throughout the entire world first governed their states well. Wanting to govern their states well, they first managed their own families. Wanting to manage their families well, they first developed themselves. Wanting to develop themselves well, they first rectified their own minds. Wanting to rectify their minds, they first made their intentions sincere. Wanting to make their intentions sincere, they first extended their knowledge. The extension of knowledge is grounded in the investigation of things.

"Great Learning" (Daxue), *Record of Rites*; cf. Sommer 1995: 39 .

Despite the somewhat tenuous connections between particular classics and the early Confucian tradition—and notwithstanding the fact that they were part of a broader cultural heritage and an ancient tradition of classical learning, rather than simply elements of a narrowly conceived

Confucian canon—these texts played very important roles in the history of Confucianism. Until the onset of the modern period, they were widely read and were part of the upbringing of virtually every educated Chinese. They were also prominently featured in the curriculum for the state examinations (see chapter 8). The classics' prominent status as valued repositories of ancient wisdom, as well as conveyors of enduring cultural archetypes and blueprints of civilization with continuing relevance, bolstered Confucian claims about their tradition's role as guardian and transmitter of the essence of Chinese civilization, although of course there were always other voices and perspectives.

Confucius and his Times

Confucius was born in the small state of Lu in Northeast China (present-day Shandong province). His original name was Kong Qiu and later he became popularly known as Kongzi or Kong fuzi (Master Kong). The widely-used moniker Confucius is a corrupted Latinized form of the later, introduced by Christian missionaries. Relatively little is known about the life of Confucius and the information we have comes from relatively late sources. He was born in a respectable upper-class family that had fallen on hard times. His father died when he was only three years old and he was brought up in modest circumstances by his single mother. The young Confucius is described as a precocious child and a keen learner.

Figure 2.2. Painting of Confucius, Confucian Temple, Tainan, Taiwan

Confucius got married at the age of nineteen, and he had his first child a year later. He had a few jobs, including a stint as a bureaucrat in the government of his native state. He was member of the class of scholar-officials (*shi*), who held low and middle level positions in the government. While later records state that for a time he occupied the position of justice minister and was successful in instituting good governance, most likely his actual stature and accomplishments in public office were less remarkable than that.

Confucius lived during the Spring and Autumn era (770–476 BCE) of the Zhou dynasty (1122–256 BCE), a turbulent epoch in ancient Chinese history marked by political fragmentation and social upheaval. As the feudal system of government under Zhou rule—that initially worked well and was commendable for ensuring stability—largely collapsed and social order deteriorated, the various feudal states struggled for power and jockeyed for supremacy (or mere survival, in the case of the smaller states). Confucius was one of the many innovative thinkers who responded to a prevalent sense of crisis engendered by the chaotic sociopolitical situation. He sought to revive Chinese society and shore up its ethical foundations by reforming the system of government, largely by infusing it with proper ritual and moral frameworks, modeled on those purportedly established by the ancient sages.

The main objective of Confucius was to reinstate the timeless Way (Dao) that was revealed and followed by the ancient sages, which echoed the norms and designs of Heaven and brought perfect harmony between Heaven and humanity. In antiquity the Way supposedly provided a blueprint for just governance and proper ethical conduct, but according to Confucius it was lost in the social disarray and moral confusion of his time. Growing despondent about the prospect of transforming the government of his native state, Confucius is said to have traveled extensively late in life in search of a ruler who would follow his advice and implement his policies, which were meant to establish proper order in the state and the society. That was to serve as a prelude to restoring peace and harmony to "all under Heaven" (*tianxia*), namely the whole civilized world, which in traditional parlance was equated with China.

Confucius's search for a receptive ruler was repeatedly frustrated, and ultimately it proved to be unsuccessful. Late in life he despondently returned to his native state, where he dedicated himself to teaching his disciples. Although Confucius thus failed in his ambition to get a high position under a righteous ruler receptive to his counsel, he was successful as an educator, attracting a sizable group of dedicated disciples that transmitted his teachings after his death. He was an innovator in the area of pedagogy and was the first known individual to make teaching his primary vocation.

Confucius on his spiritual development

At fifteen, I was intent on learning; at thirty, I had established my stand; at forty, I was without doubts; at fifty, I knew the mandate of Heaven; at sixty, I was in accord with things; at seventy, I could follow my heart's desires without transgressing conventions."

Analects 2:4; trans. adapted from Lau 1979: 63, and Sommer 1995: 43.

Confucius derived the idealistic model for the just and enlightened society he wanted to institute from China's romanticized past. The utopian vision of a perfect society propounded by him was supposedly realized in ancient times: for instance, during the reigns of ancient sage-kings such as Yao and Shun (see chapter 1), but especially during the glorious rule of the early Zhou dynasty. Confucius considered the early Zhou era to be a golden age of Chinese civilization, a magnificent epoch characterized by peace, social stability, sagacious governance, and cultural effervescence. He unequivocally declared Zhou culture to be "resplended" and proclaimed that he follows the way of the Zhou (*Analects* 3:14; Lau 1979: 69). While the true Way has therefore been realized in the course of human history, it was believed to have been lost by the time of Confucius; that was a cause of profound disconcert and alienation, but also a call for action.

The person that best embodied the exceptional moral standards and wise governance of the Zhou era, according to Confucius, was the Duke of Zhou (fl. 1042–1030 BCE), who ruled as a regent after the death of King Wu (d. 1043 BCE), his brother and the founding ruler of the Zhou dynasty. He was also considered to be an ancestor of the ruling family of the state of Lu, the native place of Confucius. Traditionally depicted as a selfless public servant, the duke consolidated the newly-founded dynasty, and with his wise rule he ushered a celebrated era of peace and prosperity. For Confucius, he served as a paradigmatic model of a wise leader and a loyal subject. Being a paragon of virtue—infallibly humble and with impeccable integrity—the duke refused to usurp the throne and dutifully stepped down when King Wu's son reached mature age and was able to assume the role of a ruler. Because of the respect accorded to him by Confucius and his disciples, the Duke of Zhou became a patron saint of sorts within the early Confucian tradition and for a number of centuries he was worshiped alongside Confucius.

In light of the above, we can say that Confucius saw himself primarily as a restorer and transmitter of ancient values and traditions, not as a creator of a new system of thought, let alone a founder of new religion. Even so, there were undeniable elements of innovation in his inspired reinvention or reimagining of past traditions. In due course, his creative synthesis blossomed into an immensely influential tradition and earned him the status of a seminal thinker. To this day he is widely esteemed as a paradigmatic individual, a visionary figure that occupies central position in the history of Chinese, or more broadly East Asian, civilization.

Teachings of Confucius

It is probable that Confucius never wrote any text, akin to the Buddha and Christ. The main source about his teachings is the *Analects of Confucius* (*Lunyu*), a sundry collection of aphorisms and conversations between Confucius and his followers that lacks clear organizational structure. Legend has it that the text is a verbatim record of the sayings and discussion of

Confucius, compiled soon after his death by the surviving disciples. Scholarly analysis of the text has uncovered differences in style, along with internal contradictions and anachronisms. That suggests it is a later compilation, which incorporates several strata of materials composed at different times, some perhaps as late as the middle part of the third century BCE. On the other hand, some of the material probably goes back to the time of Confucius, constraining the recollections of his disciples; moreover, for the most part the text presents a conceptually coherent point of view. Consequently, the text of the *Analects* is widely used in the study of Confucius's life and thought, even if it is not always easy to distinguish between the ideas of the master and the exegesis of his disciples.

Confucius on the supernatural

To work at doing what is right on behalf of the people, and to show reverence to the ghosts and the spirits while keeping a distance from them—that can be called wisdom.

Analects 6:22; cf. Lau 1979: 84, and Sommer 1995: 47.

If you cannot serve men, how can you serve the spirits? ... If you do not know the meaning of life, how can you know about death?

Analects 11:12; cf. Lau 1979: 107.

Confucius was primarily interested in human life and social order. Throughout his teaching career, he is said to have spoken about the moral foundations of a just and harmonious society. Notwithstanding his principally humanistic orientation, he believed in Heaven and asserted that the social and political systems he advocated reflected the cosmic patterns of the Dao (Way), which placed human beings in a larger universal order. While like most of his contemporaries he acknowledged the existence of various spirits and divinities, apparently he was keen to keep them at a respectful distance and was mostly disinterested in the supernatural realm (see quote box). Similarly, he was disinclined to discuss the afterlife. Some passages in *Analects* also suggest that he was critical of those who left society and went on to live as recluses (*Analects* 18:7), a theme that often appears in early Daoist writings, especially *Zhuangzi* (see chapter 3).

The main concerns of Confucius and the central tenets of his thought converged on the perfection of human conduct in this life, which was to be cultivated within a communal context. That involved interacting with other people in an appropriate manner and gracefully mastering the intricacies of complex webs of social relationships. The two principal virtues and fundamental

concepts in the moral teachings of Confucius are ritual (*li*)—understood in the sense of ritual propriety—and benevolence (*ren)*. For him these two virtues served as indispensible foundations for proper human conduct. When perfected and enacted in the public arena with genuine sincerity, they naturally bring about positive social transformation. The two go together and reinforce each other: a good person who manifests benevolence in all his acts is a person whose behavior is in perfect accord with ritual.

Originally *li* had the meaning of a religious rite or ceremony, especially the sacrificial rites directed towards gods and ancestors in ancient China. Later its connotations were expanded to include formal behavior of any kind, from ceremonies enacted at the court to common patterns of conduct and polite manners of everyday life. Within early Confucianism, the notion of ritual came to function as a primary standard of social conduct, encompassing sacred rituals, ceremonials, and all manners of proper behavior. That, in a sense, implied the introduction of a sacramental dimension in all aspects of human life. The adherence to set guidelines and principles that regulated the various patterns of behavior and social interaction enabled individuals to properly relate to each other in terms of their prescribed social roles and positions. That amounted to the institution of a total sociopolitical order, which Confucius deemed essential for the realization of a harmonious and well-structured society.

According to that point of view, social harmony prevails when each individual dutifully performs his or her appropriate role with authentic sincerity. As famously put in the *Analects* in reference to the realization of proper governance, everything works wonderfully when each member of society acts fittingly within a proper ritual framework: the ruler acts as a ruler should, his subjects behave as they are supposed to, and the same principle is extended to the behavior of fathers and sons (*Analects* 12:11). The society as a whole is harmonious when each individual performs correctly his or her discrete roles, in accord with a specific template of ritual propriety. But Confucius's conception of ritual goes beyond mechanical adherence to prescribed norms of proper conduct: it also requires a proper state of mind to accompany external actions. Accordingly, correct ritual conduct goes together with proper inner disposition. Ideally, it involves spontaneous adherence to preset behavioral forms that is based on real insight into their true meaning and significance. Within this interpretative scheme, proper ritual is internalized: functioning as a blueprint for correct moral action, ritual is primarily expressed in the manifold interactions with other individuals that occur in the course of daily existence.

Ren or benevolence, the other cardinal virtue—sometimes also rendered as "humanity" or "human-heartedness"—refers to an attitude of genuine love for others and compassionate concern for their wellbeing. It is a key virtue in the ethical system formulated by Confucius, anchoring the realization of human excellence and serving as a foundation for the cultivation of other virtues, such as righteousness (*yi*), loyalty (*zhong*), and faithfulness (*xin*). The holistic virtue of benevolence effectively stands for the intimate relatedness of a shared humanity; it accords with the supreme Way of Heaven, its perfection making the individual a truly human and civilized being. Benevolence involves a move away from selfish desires and egoistical obsessions,

which are replaced with altruistic concern for the well-being and happiness of others, along with a placid acceptance of both good and bad fortune. Its original crucible and primary sphere of application is the family, where one first experiences or learns about love and nurturing, but it also extends outward to encompass other people.

The five relationships

- Father and son
- Ruler and subject
- Husband and wife
- Elder and younger brother
- Friend and friend

The cultivation of moral conduct that embraces and exemplifies these basic virtues was intended to take place within the context of social relationships and interpersonal interactions. Confucius basically accepted as a given the class divisions and codified sociopolitical structures of ancient Chinese society, especially as formulated during an idealized past, which he took as being sanctioned by Heaven. There is no indication that he considered the possibility of a more egalitarian system of social or political organization, say something along the lines of the democratic principles that were formulated by his contemporaries in ancient Greece. Accordingly, Confucius believed in a natural hierarchy that underlines and configures all social relationships, the most basic forms of which were schematized under the rubric of the "five relationships" (see box). The five relationships presuppose a patriarchal social structure, which is why the basic bond between a child and a parent is expressed in terms of the father-son relationship. The same applies to the relationship between siblings—hence we have "elder brother and younger brother"—although in modern parlance these relationships can easily be reformulated in terms of the bonds between parents and children, or between two (or more) siblings in a manner that includes both genders.

The rigid structure of hierarchical social relationships—in which there is clear distinction between seniors and juniors, superiors and inferiors—typically engenders power dynamics that can easily lend themselves to abuse. Within the Confucian scheme, that danger is partially addressed by the incorporation of discrete mutual responsibilities and personal bonds into each set of relationships. Accordingly, the husband has a superior status vis-à-vis his wife (as men in general have over women), which means that she owes him obedience and respect, but he also has to act in accord with the ideal role of a good husband. That means the husband is ex-

pected to treat his wife with kindness and take care of her and the family. The same principle applies to the stratified relationships between ruler and subjects, parents and children, etc.

Figure 2.3. Calligraphy featuring the Chinese character for filial piety, Confucian Temple, Tainan, Taiwan

While early Confucianism was concerned with the whole spectrum of social relationships, the basic pattern of interpersonal interaction was formulated in terms of the parent-child relationship, which became the principal relationship in Chinese society. That was accompanied with a focus on virtues associated with the family, especially filial piety (*xiao*). The virtues that redeem a rigidly stratified society and smooth its rough edges are therefore first learned within the context of the family, where ideally power is exercised primarily on the basis of overt moral expectations and kinship ties, rather than by external compulsion or brute application of force. Accordingly, filial piety was construed as a central virtue and an indispensable initial step in the path of moral cultivation, while family ethics became the foundation of public mores and key element in the realization of an ideal social order.

Although children (and by extension inferiors) were expected to invariably show respect and listen to their parents (superiors), the imposition of those norms and strictures did not necessarily translate into an obligation to engage in or condone immoral behavior instigated by one's parents. The Confucian ethical system had an inbuilt requirement to raise objections when one's parent/superior is behaving in an unethical manner, although of course in most situations that required considerable courage, tact, and poise, which were not always present in abundance.

Government Service, Cultural Virtuosity, and Pursuit of Sagehood

Throughout his life, Confucius was committed to an ideal of public service and steadfast in his pursuit of government employment as a vocation, although he was not very successful in the latter. These priorities reflected his class background and were in tune with the general tenor of

his thought, which aimed to reshape the world by transforming the sociopolitical order. Within his thought there was no clear line of separation between politicking and philosophizing as two discrete spheres of human endeavor. The Confucian Dao primarily was concerned with an all-encompassing normative order that was firmly centered in the human realm. Above all, it was about patterns of human behavior and social institutions, which inevitably brought it into the political arena. The overriding focus on governmental organization and operation, evident throughout the early Confucian tradition, was in tune with the times, and it was also to be expected from a system of thought that first and foremost was concerned with the codification of communal mores and practices, and whose main goal was to bring about a good and harmonious society.

Confucius accepted the legitimacy and moral authority of the Zhou kings, even as he was also eager to offer advice on good governance to the rulers of the various states that existed in his time. According to him, primarily the ruler had to serve as a moral exemplar, inspiring the respect and obedience of his subjects. The best rule therefore has a soft touch, and there is even a natural or spontaneous quality to it. Ideally the government should minimize aggressive intervention; instead, it should primarily rely on moral persuasion and the setting of good example. It is best to avoid imposition of a harsh system of rules and punishments, although there are situations where violence and reliance on penalties might be unavoidable.

While Confucius and his followers frequently evoked concern for the well-being of the common people, they assumed a condescending attitude towards them. They took a somewhat dim prospect at trying to make the common people comprehend the finer points of their moral teachings, which were principally directed towards the elites, even if Confucius was willing to accept as students diverse individuals coming from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Because of their limited knowledge and restricted intellectual abilities, common people should be made to follow the Way, but there is little point in trying to make them understand its subtleties (*Analects* 8:9). The setting up of the main agenda and the organizing of the social and political surroundings were the prerogatives of the ruling elites, although ideally they were expected to take into account the needs of the masses they ruled over.

By performing his ritual duties, being concerned with the well-being of his subjects, and manifesting exemplary virtue, the good ruler provided a worthy model and set the tone for his administration. The actual governance, however, was to be done by his officials (*shi)*, who formed a distinct privileged group in ancient Chinese society. The prerequisites for governmental service included adherence to established ritual forms, possession of proper moral character, and mastery of specific cultural forms and practices. Within such framework, exemplary moral character was deemed a more important qualification for governmental service than narrow bureaucratic expertise, which in practical terms meant that the ideal official was somewhat of an upright generalist. The stresses on moral cultivation implied a redefinition of nobility, with far-reaching ramification; being a noble person became a question of character rather than a matter of birth. Accordingly, within Confucian circles nobility came to be con-

strued as a quality attainable by the cultivation of key virtues and the development of wisdom, not as something that is obtained by simply being born into the right aristocratic family, although in practical terms Confucians had to content with the power and concerns of the established aristocracy.

Confucian moral cultivation was conceived as a path of continuing self-improvement, involving the nurturing of proper conduct and disposition. It was to be undertaken within a clearly defined social context, and it was primarily expressed via humanitarian service. The program of Confucian learning involved study of the classics and technical mastery of appropriate rituals, which were to be accompanied with a constant reflection on their meaning and an effort to apply the lessons learned in the course of one's daily life. It is worth mentioning that self-cultivation also incorporated literature, dance, and music. The integration of music as part of Confucian practice implied a clear distinction between rarefied music that elevates the spirit and has positive influence on proper character formation on one hand, and vulgar music that does the opposite on other hand. The first kind of music was to be promoted, while the second kind was to be proscribed. This suggests that Confucius looked beyond dry moralizing and promoted the development of the whole person, an ideal that encompassed the attainment of a commendable level of cultural virtuosity.

A person of cultivated moral character who exemplified those traits was called a "gentlemen" (*junzi*), while the highest level of moral perfection was that of the sage (*shengren*). The valorization of sagehood as the highest ideal of perfection accessible to humanity opened up the possibility of constituting Confucian practice outside of the customary framework of governmental service and the exercise of political power. While Confucius allegedly humbly declined to proclaim himself a sage, and also spoke about the difficulty of attaining moral perfection (*Analects* 7:34), he came to be widely glorified as the "Supreme Sage," the embodiment of an ideal person to be emulated by all.

Alternative Ways of Thought

After the death of Confucius his teachings were transmitted by groups of dedicated disciples, who expounded them and tested their application amidst different circumstances. For a long while, however, the early Confucians were just one among the many groups that propounded diverse doctrines, peddling them to various rulers in an ongoing quest for influence and patronage. The few centuries after the time of Confucius, known as the Warring States period (403–221 BCE), are customarily characterized as a chaotic age. As the various Chinese states fought for supremacy or survival, there was a collapse of social and moral order, while great suffering was inflicted on the common people.

Notwithstanding the intermittent warfare and the lack of central authority, the Warring States era was actually a time of intense intellectual ferment and openness to new ideas. Leading intellectuals put forward a number of creative points of view regarding key issues in the social and political spheres, which is a reason why this era is also known as the age of a "hundred schools of philosophy." This was an important transitional period in Chinese history, marked by intellectual and religious pluralism. During it Confucianism interacted and competed with other systems of thought, responding to their challenges or absorbing elements of their worldviews. The two main rivals to the nascent Confucian movement—if we put aside the proto-Daoists discussed in the next chapter—were the Mohists and the Legalists.

Mohism refers to the movement and the teachings of Mo Di (479–381 BCE?), also known as Mozi (Master Mo), and his followers, which are elaborated in the [*Book of*] *Mozi*. Mozi's life in many ways paralleled the life of Confucius. He probably hailed from a family of commoners, but he read widely during his formative years, including the "Confucian" classics and the teachings of Confucius, and became well versed in traditional Chinese culture. He sought a position in government service and traveled in search of a ruler who would be willing to adopt his policy prescriptions. Being largely unsuccessful in that endeavor, he dedicated his energies to teaching his disciples, who became organized into disciplined groups.

Mozi and Confucius shared some basic premises. They both were dedicated to the realization of a perfect society in which prosperity, peace, and harmony would prevail, but they disagreed about the way to achieve that goal and presented different perspectives on the human predicament. The Mohists were sharply critical of Confucian teachings and practices, including the Confucians' belief in destiny and their fascination with music and ritual. They also condemned the extravagant veneration of ancestors, which found its most wasteful expression in the elaborate burial rites practiced by the Confucians.

Mozi and his followers believed in a supernatural world presided over the Supreme Lord of Heaven, whom some commentators have compared to the anthropomorphic God of monotheistic religions. Many centuries later, that connection endeared the Mohists to Christian missionaries who were active in China. Mozi and his followers also believed in a supernatural realm populated by various ghosts and spirits, who interfered in human affairs. The Mohists are best known for their advocacy of universal love, which was to be extended equally to all people. This novel doctrine went along with their promotion of an egalitarian ethos, which involved advocacy of frugal lifestyle and concern with the well-being of the common people.

The notion of universal love clashed with a prevalent emphasis on the primacy of kinship ties, which as we saw was incorporated into Confucianism with the assumption that partiality towards one's family members is both natural and morally correct. The prototype of universal love advocated by the Mohists was to be found in Heaven's impartial love for all people. Mozi and his disciples were also renowned for their pacifism. In tune with their activist approach and utilitarian spirit, their opposition to war went beyond mere sermonizing: they were ener-

getically involved in war prevention, for instance by lending their considerable military expertise to bolster the defenses of weaker states when they were attacked by stronger states.

The Legalists (*fajia*) had little use for impracticable ideals such as universal love or benevolence. Cognizant of the less savory aspects of human nature and behavior, they also summarily dismissed as naïve the Confucians' beliefs about the realization of harmonious society by the mere adherence to ritual or by the setting of a moral example from above. Legalist thinkers like Han Feizi (d. 233 BC), a prince and a student of the prominent Confucian philosopher Xunzi (fl. 298–238 BCE), affirmed that people are inherently selfish and harbor antisocial tendencies that need to be corralled and channeled by the institution of a comprehensive system of laws, which incorporated a strict penal code. The Legalists had little interest in individual rights; instead, their foremost concern was preservation and strengthening of the state and expansion of its power.

The Legalist philosophy was unabashedly utilitarian. Its proponents were advocates of practical statecraft, providing methods of management for an efficient administration that relied on the authoritarian enforcement of punitive decrees, along with the recourse to war and violence. In their version of realpolitik, the end justifies the means. Accordingly, they were willing to use the penal system in order to meet their objectives, and to rely on institutional force or violence in order to preserve the state's monopoly of power, as well as prevent the arising of social discord or political resistance. To that end, the totalitarian state controlled knowledge and instilled fear and docility in the population.

The Legalists were criticized by the Confucians for their utilitarian ethos and their lack of concern with morality. They were also discredited by the pivotal role they played in the harsh rule of the Qin dynasty, which in 221 BCE unified China for the first time under the banner of an imperial regime that claimed legitimacy to rule over the whole of China. Nonetheless, the general outlook and even some of the practical prescriptions of the Legalists became incorporated into the Chinese polity. Typically, the hard edges of Legalism became softened, as they were packaged together with lofty-sounding Confucian creeds and intuitions. Ever since, echoes of Legalism have remained readily discernable in the Chinese exercise of political power and authority, down to the present.

Mengzi's and Xunzi's Contrasting Views of Human Nature

There were certain ambiguities and creative tensions in the thought of Confucius, which fostered the development of diverse interpretative frameworks and new lines of thought. That is evident when we look at the teachings of the two main Confucian thinkers active during the Warring

States period, Mengzi and Xunzi, who are sometimes depicted as representing the idealistic and rationalistic strains (respectively) of early Confucianism. While both of them followed the teachings of Confucius and took them as a key source of authority, they adopted different perspectives and in specific key areas arrived at diametrically opposed conclusions. That is best illustrated when we look at their contrasting views regarding human nature (x*ing*), a central theme in the writings of both thinkers.

Figure 2.4. Children perform a play about young Mengzi's formative education, Zhongtaishan, Taiwan

Relatively little is known about the life of Mengzi (or Mencius, 371–289 or 391–308 BCE?). His father died while he was very young and he was brought up by his wise mother, who supervised his early education (see figure 2.4). Like Confucius, he traveled widely in search of a ruler willing to adopt his proscriptions about governance and ethics, with little success. He was also involved in the larger intellectual debates and doctrinal polemics of his time, vigorously advocating a Confucian point of view and striving to shore up the legacy of Confucius. Mengzi was opposed to war and promoted humane governance as the best way to deal with the pressing social and political problems of his time. He argued for reliance on the moral charisma and good example set by the ruler, which he believed would naturally win the respect

and allegiance of the people. He also spoke against the institution of strict regulations and harsh punishments.

Mengzi propounded a doctrine about the essential and intrinsic goodness of human nature, which accords with Heaven. He believed that all men are basically good, even if they often stray from their basic goodness and act in unwholesome ways. The fundamental goodness of the human heart is evident in the instinctive compassionate response when people are confronted with the suffering of others, for instance when seeing a child falling into a well. Each individual is naturally endowed with all qualities needed to actualize moral perfection, as the four basic virtues are already instilled in the mind at the moment of birth and provide each person with an innate moral sense (see box).

The four inborn virtues

- Benevolence (*ren*): caring concern for others.
- Righteousness (*yi*): conformity of thought and action with moral principles.
- Ritual (*li*): ceremonial propriety and proper behavior.
- Wisdom (*zhi*): ability to distinguish right from wrong.

At its core, according to Mengzi, moral cultivation involves recovering and polishing the lost mind of virtue (see quote box). That is a gradual process that entails developing one's basic humanity, according to a blueprint that is already inscribed in the mind by Heaven. Successful practice depends on one's personal commitment, but it is also affected by the presence or absence of a social environment conducive to moral cultivation. When one perfects the ability to fully tap into the human potential for goodness and wisdom, that person fulfills his ultimate destiny and becomes a sage.

Mencius on human nature being good

Benevolence is the very mind of human beings; righteousness is the path they need to take. To neglect this path and not follow it is to lose one's [original] mind and not know where to find it. What a pity! When people lose a chicken or a dog, they know how to look for them, but when they lose this mind, they do not. The way of study and inquiry is nothing but seeking this lost mind.

Mengzi 6a:11; trans. adapted from Sommer 1995: 58-59.

In contrast to Mengzi's overly optimistic assessment of the human predicament, Xunzi asserted that by nature human beings are fundamentally predisposed towards evil. That leads them to seek satisfaction of their selfish desires by various kinds of unethical and antisocial behaviors, which are readily observable throughout society. Morality and goodness do not come naturally or spontaneously: they are akin to an acquired taste, and their active manifestation presupposes discipline and the application of effort. Xunzi thus started with the premise that human nature is evil, in a sense of human beings lacking an innate moral compass or inborn ability to distinguish right from wrong. But then he went on to emphasize that they can be trained to act in a civilized fashion and in harmony with proper ethical principles. That is precisely the task of Confucian education, which when put into practice has the potential to modify human behavior and change society, so that it comes to correspond to the ideal templates presented in the classics and explicated by Confucius.

From Xunzi's point of view, the accomplishment of moral excellence requires a conscious effort and the application of right teachings. He acknowledged an element of artifice in the process of acquiring proper inner virtues and external mores, which are conveyed by a cumulative tradition that was originally formulated by the ancient sages. That is not an easy task, requiring the learning of orthodox doctrines and correct ritual patterns of behavior, under the guidance of learned teachers. Nonetheless, proper education leads to the accumulation of virtue and wisdom, and without it ordinary people remain lost in a state of abject ignorance and moral confusion.

Xunzi on human nature being evil

Human nature is evil… If people follow their nature and indulge their emotions, inevitably there will be struggle and contention, causing them to transgress their proper duties, usurp the correct principle, and turn to violence. Therefore, only by being transformed by the examples of teachers and the ways of ritual and righteousness can they achieve courtesy and civility, so that they can develop cultural refinement and ritual, and return to good order. When looking at it in this way, it is clear that human nature is evil, and that goodness is a product of conscious effort.

"Human Nature is Evil (Xing e)" chapter, *Xunzi*; trans. adapted from de Bary and Bloom 1999: 179–80, and Sommer 1995: 69

During his lifetime Xunzi was a prominent intellectual, teaching a wide range of subjects at the invitation of various rulers. Often he is linked with the Legalists tradition, because of a realistic streak in his political vision and his connections with prominent Legalists such as Li Si (the prime minister of Qin) and Han Fei, although he positioned himself firmly within the Confucian mainstream. He openly criticized Mengzi's theoretical stance, while he also was greatly concerned with clearly delineating the parameters of Confucian orthodoxy. The intellectual debate between the two is the earliest record of disagreements and fissures within the nascent Confucian movement. During the early Han era and for much of the subsequent millennium, Xunzi was considered to be a more important thinker than Mengzi. However, during the Tang era Mengzi's standing in the pantheon of Confucian sages started to rise noticeably. From the Song era onward, Mengzi was widely regarded as the most significant classical thinker, second in stature only to Confucius, as indicated by the popular appellation of Second Sage that was assigned to him.

In summary, inspired by the teachings and personal example of Confucius, the two thinkers adopted different premises and arrived at contrasting explanations of human nature. For Mengzi the human propensity for goodness is innate and it is in our nature to try to perfect it, while for Xunzi the impetus for proper behavior and moral cultivation is something that needs to be learned and comes from without. Nonetheless, both of them shared a common belief in human perfectibility and in the power of Confucian teachings to bring about positive change and far-reaching moral transformation. They each sought the institution of a just, prosperous, and harmonious society. Holding similar ideas about the basic framework of the ideal society and the essential character of sagehood, the two Confucians parted ways in their understanding of human nature and in their explication of the process of moral cultivation.

Emergence of Confucianism as Official Ideology

Confucianism was negatively affected during the rule of the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty (r. 221–210 BCE), when as part of a policy aimed at controlling all knowledge and information in the newly unified empire, the emperor ordered the notorious burning of books not approved by his regime. Some Confucian books were destroyed in the process, although pro-Confucian historians most likely exaggerated the scope of the calamity and its effects on Confucianism. It seems that Confucianism was not singled out for persecution, which perhaps reflected its relative lack of influence at the time. The fortunes of the Confucians changed markedly during the subsequent Han dynasty, when for the first time their tradition rose to a position of unprecedented preeminence. The assigning of a unique status to Confucianism during the Han era was practically tantamount to it becoming an official ideology of the Chinese imperial state.

The Six Schools of Classical Leaning, according to Sima Tan (d. 110 BCE)

- School of Yin and Yang
- Confucians (Ru)
- Mohists
- Legalists
- Logicians
- Daoists

The early Han dynasty was a period of significant social change and intellectual ferment, as diverse schools of thought interacted with each other and vied for prominence. An early historical work identifies six major schools of classical learning that flourished at the time (see box). Adoption of syncretism was a major tendency at the time, amidst a prevalent climate of intellectual openness and tentative embrace of religious pluralism. There was rich cross-fertilization of diverse political philosophies, systems of ethics, and cosmological theories, with leading thinkers not being shy about incorporating into their theoretical models concepts and ideas derived from other traditions.

The embrace of pluralism and the tendency towards syncretism are evident in the eclectic incorporation of elements derived from other schools of thought into the new and expanded form of Confucianism that was formulated by prominent scholars such as Dong Zhongshu (c. 179–104 BCE), the most famous Confucian of the Han era. Intent on creating a new model for organizing and aggrandizing the Han empire, Dong produced a grand Confucian synthesis that brought together Heaven and humanity in a harmonious relationship of mutual responsiveness, and situated the imperial state into a broad cosmic scheme. In this new theoretical paradigm, he secured a crucial position for the Han state and its sovereign, which were legitimized by being infused with supreme power and moral authority.

Within the context of this new Han version of Confucianism, the ruler was to wield absolute autocratic power as the Son of Heaven, but he was also supposed to serve as a moral exemplar and be open to the counsel of his officials, who were to be recruited from within Confucian circles. The emperor played central role in a larger cosmic scheme, in which Heaven, earth, and humanity formed an essential triad. He was a crucial link that secured their harmonious relationship, aligning his state and his subject with the norms of Heaven and earth. His failure to maintain proper balance and moral order, however, brought all sorts of calamities, including natural disasters, which served as omens of Heaven's displeasure with events on earth.

Figure 2.5. Main shrine hall, Confucian Temple, Taipei, Taiwan

The initial bestowal of imperial endorsement upon Confucianism occurred during the reign of Emperor Wu (r. 140–86 BCE), who was influenced by Dong Zhongshu's theories, but was also guided by political expediency. The Confucian scholars' expertise was useful in the consolidation of the Han dynasty's power and the development of its state institutions. From the emperor's perspective, the Confucians were especially useful because of their knowledge of religious and courtly rituals, along with their skill in bureaucratic administration. The emperor issued a series of proclamations regarding the role of Confucianism as an ideological basis of imperial rule, starting with the establishment in 136 BCE of official positions to be filed by scholars versed in the Confucian classics. He also established an imperial academy in 124 BCE that used the Confucian classics as its core curriculum. The academy's main function was to produce officials for the imperial bureaucracy, which bolstered Confucians' preeminence in the political arena.

Those policies were accompanied with the institution of an official cult of Confucius as part of the state's ritual program. In the process, the ancient sage became deified, with Dong Zhongshu proclaiming him to be an "Uncrowned King." On the other hand, the emperor was primarily concerned with the prerogatives of the royal house, and he retained some ambiguity about the power and influence of his Confucian scholars and advisers. Accordingly, notwithstanding the unquestionable rise to prominence of Confucianism under Emperor Wu and his successors, the Confucianization of Han imperial ideology and institutions was probably not as thorough as later generations of pro-Confucian historians made it to be.

To conclude, the Han era was a crucial period in the history of Confucianism, an important point when a reinvigorated and transformed brand of Confucianism moved into the limelight and came to occupy central place in the social, political, and cultural spheres. A key upshot of the dynasty's engagement and use of Confucianism was the forming of a long-lasting marriage of convenience, between an autocratic system of imperial governance and a Confucian-centered orthodoxy, with enormous ramifications for the subsequent history of China. Nevertheless, other voices and perspectives continued to flourish, both complementing and competing with the Confucian tradition. Among them, especially important were those of the Daoist tradition, surveyed in the next chapter.

Key Points

- While some key aspects of Confucianism, such as its historical uses as political philosophy and blueprint for the organization of society, problematize its categorization as a religion, there are many features in traditional Confucianism that are either overtly or implicitly religious in orientation, for instance the belief in Heaven and some of the forms of spiritual cultivation utilized in the quest for sagehood.

- The various texts included in the so-called "Five Classics" contain a wealth of information about ancient systems of values, outlooks on life, social institutions, and traditions of ritual. Although they had diverse origins, these texts were appropriated by the early Confucian traditions and became the centerpiece of its canon.
- Confucius primarily saw himself as a restorer and transmitter of ancient values and traditions, rather than as a creator of radically new system of thought. While he failed in his quest to find an upright ruler who will implement his teachings and policy proposals, he was successful as an educator, leaving behind a sizable group of dedicated disciples who transmitted his teachings and established the foundations of the early Confucian tradition.
- Confucius was principally concerned with the organization of human life and the structuring of society. In his view, a just and harmonious society must rest on sound moral foundations. That entails the perfection of human conduct within a communal context, via processes of inner cultivation and mastery of predetermined patterns of social interaction, exemplified by the key virtues of ritual propriety and benevolent concern for others.
- Early Confucian teachings about moral cultivation included redefinition of nobility, which came to be understood as a quality attainable by all, via the cultivation of assorted virtues and the development of wisdom. The person of exemplary moral character was called a "gentlemen," while above that was the "sage," who embodied the highest level of moral perfection.
- During the Warring States era the Confucians continued to have limited influence, being merely one among the various contending groups that propounded a wide range of doctrines and practices. Their main competitors included the Legalists and the Mohists.
- Mengzi and Xunzi, the two most important Confucian thinkers of the Warring States era, adopted different theoretical premises and arrived at contrasting views about human nature, even as they shared a belief in human perfectibility and asserted the power of Confucian teachings to bring about comprehensive moral transformation. Mengzi emphasized the inherent goodness of human nature, while Xunzi highlighted the natural human propensity towards evil and taught that proper moral behavior is something that needs to be learned.
- The Confucian tradition first rose to great preeminence during the second century BCE, when Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty initiated a series of policies that were tantamount to establishing the syncretic form of Confucianism that flourished at the time as an official ideology of the imperial state.

Discussion Questions

1. What was the attitude of Confucius towards the cumulative traditions of the past and how he perceived his life mission in relation to them?

2. Describe the views about human nature (*xing*) articulated by Mengzi and Xunzi. What were the main points of contrast between the two, and on which key issues they agreed?

3. When did Confucianism first officially become the ideological basis of imperial rule and what were the long-term historical ramifications of that event?

Further Reading

See also the reading suggestions for chapter 8.

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