

5-3 The Confucian and Daoist Philosophies

5-3a Confucianism

China's greatest single cultural force, the historical figure Kong Fuzi (551–479 B.C.E.), or [Confucius \(\(con-FYOO-shus\) The fifth-century B.C.E. philosopher whose doctrines were permanently influential in Chinese education and culture.\)](#) (con-FYOO-shus), appeared during the turmoil of the Warring States period, when China was plagued by chronic conflict and insecurity. Though his teachings initially comprised one of many schools of thought, Confucius molded Chinese patterns of education and his ideas became the authority on what a true Chinese should and should not do. Confucius's interests were practical and centered on the hierarchy of ethical and political relations between individuals—especially between the citizenry and the governor. His ideas shaped China's culture for the next two millennia.

The great model for Confucius's politics was the Chinese family. Among the Chinese, the yin-yang principle identifies the female as the passive element and the male as the active, creative one. All phenomena are a dynamic blend of these two basic forces. Although all civilizations we have studied thus far gave pride of place to the father, none applied this principle so systematically as the Chinese. In ancient China children and grandchildren were meant to accord their fathers absolute obedience, and wives supposedly never raised their voices in contradiction to their husbands. A widow owed the same obedience to her father and sons. This arrangement remained the ideal in modern China before the Communist revolution, although one can question the degree to which it was a reality. (There is no scarcity of reports of independent Chinese wives within the four walls of the home in both traditional and modern times.) Without a doubt, however, the principle of male superiority and female inferiority was promoted and implemented systematically throughout Chinese history.

In Confucius's view the state and society should function like a harmonious family: The father was the undisputed head, each person had his or her special rights and duties, and the wisdom of the aged guided the young. The oldest male was responsible for protecting and guiding the others, who owed him absolute obedience even when he appeared to be wrong.

Confucius insisted on benevolence and righteousness (*ren* and *yi*) as the chief virtues of human society, especially for those serving in public roles. He taught that the rich and the strong should feel a sense of obligation toward the poor and the weak. A gentleman was made, not born. A man of wealth and power might not be a true gentleman, whereas a low-born person could learn to be one. The proper calling of a gentleman was government. He should advise the ruler and see to it that government policies were fair and promoted the

general welfare. A ruler who followed the advice of his gentlemanly counselors would surely retain the mandate of Heaven. Confucius was himself a member of the emerging class of professional administrators that would become the true elite of imperial China.

This philosophy of public service by scholarly, virtuous officials was to have enormous influence on China. Rulers came to be judged according to whether they followed the Confucian prescriptions for good government. A corps of officials educated on Confucian principles, subscribing to his values and believing him to be the Great Teacher, came into existence. These *shi*—or [mandarins \(\(MAN-dah-rihns\) Chinese scholar-officials who were trained in Confucian principles. Usually associated with the landed elite.\)](#) (MAN-dah-rihns), as the West later called them—were the actual administrative class of China for 2000 years.

In Confucius's admonition that the state should resemble a well-run family, the rulers naturally tended to see a condemnation of revolt for any reason. In time, many Confucian-trained bureaucrats not only agreed but also came to believe that the status quo was the only natural and proper way of doing things. The insistence that harmony was the chief goal of politics and social policy sometimes led to an emphasis on stability over innovation. Also, like many Chinese, Confucius had a low opinion of people who lived by trade, so the Confucian notion of the ideal society placed merchants at the bottom of the social ladder. Both of these factors led to contempt for the new, a fear of change—however necessary—and a distrust of foreigners. From time to time in China's long history, these tendencies led to acute problems.

Framing History

Law & Government: Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.)

The most revered of all Chinese statesmen and philosophers was Master Kong, known in the West as Confucius. As a lasting influence on a nation, he has no equal in world history. During his long lifetime, he acquired a devoted group of followers who gave educated Chinese their moral and ethical landmarks for 2000 years. Confucianism has, of course, evolved considerably over the centuries, and no one now knows precisely what the Master's original thoughts may have been. But by reading what his disciples said about him and about their own understanding of his message in [The Analects \(Book of Confucius's sayings collected by his students.\)](#), we can appreciate his greatness and his importance in the life of the Chinese people.

Confucius was born into an impoverished but aristocratic family in the state of Lu at a time when the Zhou Empire was falling apart and the Era of the Warring States was beginning. Given a good education, the young man set out to find a suitable place for himself in the world. His ambition was to acquire a post in the government of his home state, which would allow him to exert a real influence for good and to assist the princely ruler in providing wise and benevolent rule.

Frustrated by the intrigues of his rivals in Lu, where he briefly obtained a post in the ministry of justice, Confucius was forced to seek a position elsewhere. But in the neighboring states, too, he was disappointed in his quest, never securing more than minor and temporary positions before running afoul of backbiting competitors or speaking his mind when doing so was dangerous. He had to return to Lu to earn a modest living as a teacher, and for the rest of his life he subsisted on only the tuition fees of his wealthier students.

Confucius accepted this fate with difficulty. For many years he continued to hope for appointment as an adviser to the prince and thus to translate his beliefs into government policy. Only gradually did he realize that through his teaching he could have more influence on the fate of his people than he might ever attain as a minister to a trivial and corrupt ruler. By the end of his life, his fame had already reached much of China's small educated class (*shi*), and his students were going out to found schools of their own, reflecting the principles the Master had taught them.

Portrait of Confucius.

This undated illustration, much like other depictions of Confucius made after his death, was based on a relief from the stela in the Bei Lin (Forest of Stelae) in Xian.



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Confucius taught that all human affairs, public and private, were structured by the [Five Great Relationships \(Confucius's scheme of the five forms of hierarchical human relationships that govern family and community life.\)](#) : father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, ruler and subject, and friend and friend. The fact that three of these relationships are within the family circle shows the Confucian emphasis on the family. He believed it to be the model and building block of all other social or political arrangements. This emphasis continues in Chinese life to this day.

Confucius was not so much an original thinker as a man with a great ability to summarize and reformulate truths already embraced by his people. He did not attempt a complete philosophical system and was not at all interested in theology or what is now called *metaphysics*. Rather, his focus was always on the relationship of human being to human being, and especially of governor to governed. He was an eminently secular thinker, and this tradition, too, has continued among educated Chinese to the present.

Two of the sayings attributed to him in the collection of his teachings called *The Analects* give the flavor of his instruction:

Ziguang [a disciple] asked about government.

Confucius said: "Sufficient food, sufficient armament, and sufficient confidence of the people are the necessities." "Forced to give up one, which would you abandon first?" "I would abandon armament." "Forced to give up one of the remaining two, which would you abandon?" "I would abandon food. There has always been death from famine, but no state can exist without the confidence of its people."

The Master always emphasized the necessity of the ruler setting a good example:

Replying to Ji Gangze who had asked him about the nature of good government, Confucius said, "To govern is to rectify. If you lead the people by virtue of rectifying yourself, who will dare not be rectified by you?"

Analyze and Interpret

After a generation of contemptuous treatment and proscription, the Chinese Communist government has recently allowed the reintroduction of Confucian teaching and commentary in schools. Why do you think this has happened? Do you think Confucius has anything to say to modern people?

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