

Confucianism

Along with Buddhism and Daoism, Confucianism is one of China's three great teachings and likely the most influential, deeply impacting all elements of East Asian culture (from philosophy to morals, aesthetics, and social interactions).

Confucius is one of the most influential humans to have ever lived.

Encounter World Religions

Confucianism

Biography

- Born as Kong Qui (551 – 479 BCE), "Confucius" is the Latinized form of "Kong Fu-Tzu" or Master Kong.
- Family is poor but has a noble lineage. He receives an education and thrives at school.
- Gets married, has children, and works as a teacher and occasional government official.
- Fails in lifelong quest to become a ruler's chief advisor. Does acquire a large cadre of students and starts an academy. Dies feeling he has largely failed.
- After his death, his students spread far and wide and his teachings quickly acquire recognition and influence.



Kong Fu-Tzu

Context

- Religiously, people pray to many spirits in nature (wind, hills, sun) and elsewhere (kitchen god). They revere ancestors and try to live in accord with Tian/Heaven (an order or being, but with no personality as such).



- Weak central government is losing control. Feudal lords go to war which leads to the "Warring States Period." Many seek a solution to the political and social chaos.
- Search for answers fosters the Hundred Schools (including Confucianism). Prominent ones include:
  - **Rationalists:** Promote order through law, punishment and force of arms
  - **Mohists**: Promote harmony through universal love (idealistic)
  - **Daoists**: Promote harmony by returning to nature, simplicity and spontaneity

Confucius' Solution



- His conservative approach looks back to the past and the examples of the great sage-kings.
  - He saw himself as merely a transmitter, not an innovator…although he innovates more than he admits
- Believed we should cultivate **ren** (humaneness), study and practice **li** (propriety) and thus follow the **dao** (way) so as to acquire **de** (virtue, effectiveness, power)



Book of Changes (Yi Ching). One of the Five Classics.

- Education, morality and ritual propriety act as the key pillars of his approach
  - Emphasizes study, self-cultivation. In China, Confucianism is called Rujiao or Ru-ism meaning the school of scholars. Confucius is associated with schools/education to this day
  - A humanistic, rationalistic tradition
  - He urged studying the Five Classics of China which tradition says he collected and edited.
  - Emphasized five virtues: **ren** (humaneness), **li** (propriety), **yi** (righteousness), **zhi** (wisdom) and **xin** (fidelity, honestly, trustworthiness). Ren and li are especially critical to understanding Confucianism.



Confucian temple

Ren and Li

Ren

- Written from the ideograms for "two" and "human." Translated as benevolence, love or **humaneness**.
- Confucius makes the term central (it appears 100 times in his Analects) and alters its meaning
  - Previously seen as something only rulers and elites could cultivate
  - Confucius democratizes it. Anyone can pursue it thus becoming a **junzi** (noble). Noble now indicates character, not lineage.
  - Confucius gives a version of the golden rule and sees reciprocity as the core practice of life
- Effective governing requires virtue
  - Others claim authority and fear of punishment is how to govern
  - Punishment just encourages stealth and deception. A righteous ruler acts as a pole-star that others follow. As grass bends in the wind, the ruler's example inclines people in the same virtue (or corruption)



Confucius argued that people are pulled by the leaders' example much as grass bends in the prevailing wind

Li

- Linjiao (religion of li) is another name for Confucianism
- Li meant ritual but again Confucius redefines the term
  - He expands it to include etiquette, customs, manners, ceremony, courtesy, civility and propriety
  - He suggests it applies to everything from government to the home
    - Works at three levels: the political/government; the familial/social; the individual
    - Li also connects us to the cosmic (Heaven, spirits, ancestors)
    - Aligning with Heaven also affects natural processes (fertility of the land, meteorological events). So li affects nature as well.



Scene from the Classic of Filial Piety

Li

Government

Confucian state is **theo-political**. All state affairs are religious

- Rulers have the **Mandate of Heaven** which grants the state authority. Rulers liked this idea but it can be a double-edged sword – if they lack virtue, many will say they have lost the Mandate to govern.
- Three grand state rituals were regularly performed until the 20th C
- State is thus upheld by the ren (humaneness) of the ruler and the proper performance of li (ritual)



The Chinese Court

Family

- Term "**filial piety**" is used indicating reverence for the family
- Family is first school of behaviour/virtue.
- Etiquette and customs should govern family life.



Gravesite

- Suggests **identity is social**
  - Identity is via relationships, not the autonomous individual of the West
- Connects us to parents, ancestors and spirits
  - People revere gravesites and have spirit tablets with ancestors' names often in their home where they make offerings
  - Ancestry/lineage is part of identity
- Family is also the **model for government**
  - Parent/child is like ruler/subject (authority comes with a duty of care)

Social

- Li should govern social life and Includes:
  - Showing hospitality towards a visitor
  - Respectful deference towards a boss
  - Letting your teacher speak first
  - Comportment
  - Dressing appropriately (esp. at important occasions)
  - Serving/eating food gracefully
  - Remembering to ask about someone's family
- Includes aesthetics (appreciation for poetry, elegant space, etc.)
- Li encourages values of **beauty, grace, and decency**



Five Relationships

Individual

- Western thought tends to privilege the **interior** self
  - Inner thoughts direct outer behaviour
  - Inner is authentic – outer might be artifice
  - Even in philosophy, Plato believed immaterial ideas were the ultimate and physical things were less valuable (prone to decay); Christianity idealizes the soul over the body; Descartes suggests our thoughts validate the self: "I think therefore I am."
- Confucius, however, believes the outer really matters which leads him to emphasize li
  - Fosters social harmony (which private thoughts cannot do)
  - **Outer shapes/trains the inner**
    - Rituals and manners are not inauthentic; rather they train us in how to feel and think
  - Practicing li is the schooling for becoming a good person
  - Li is a **practice,** a **skill**, a **discipline**
- Becoming a dancer or meditator or soldier brings a set of practices that shape the person. We become attuned to expressing emotion, to stilling the mind, to duty and order, in ways that shape the whole person.
- Li – meaning **ritual as a way of life** – similarly shapes the person

Five Relationships

- The social, familial and political rules of li are based on hierarchy
- Confucius said society worked via 5 relationships
  - Ruler/subject
  - Father/son
  - Husband/wife
  - Older brother/younger brother
  - Friend/friend
- Note that order/harmony comes through hierarchy, not equality
  - Based on the family which is hierarchical but often very nurturing
  - Duties extend in both direction (obedience from one side, care coming from the other)
  - Critics note sexist thinking in the Five Relationships
- Such relationships rely on ren as a motivation and li as a practice to govern the interactions



Disciplines such as dance, meditation and soldiering focus on the outer as a way of shaping the inner self

Humanism or Religion?

- Confucianism is very humanistic, focusing on social interactions and well-being more than with deities or afterlives
- Is Confucianism a religion? There is a lively debate:

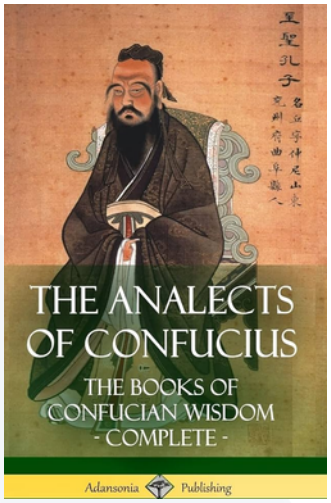
Against	For
No official priesthood	Immense attention to ritual
No congregational life	Great emphasis on reverence
Key texts are not divinely inspired	Concerned to align with the will of heaven
Confucius temples dedicated to regular humans	One honours the spirits of one's ancestors
Focus is on ordinary concerns, not some reality beyond this world	
Rites seem less directed at saving our souls or fostering rain than at forging a harmonious society	

- A few scholars describe Confucianism as more than just humanism
  - Imbues ordinary people and life with the sacred
  - Makes the secular...sacred



A rare Confucian temple in Beijing

After Confucius



- His students disperse and spread his teachings. His teachings become well known within two centuries of his death.
- Of the original corpus of his teachings, much was lost
  - The Analects preserves sayings attributed to him (written by his students or possibly students of students)

Mencius and Xunzi

Key debate in Confucianism stems from these two later thinkers

- Mencius
  - Believes people are fundamentally good
  - Evil comes from nurture, not nature
  - Education is about nurturing what is within
- Xunzi
  - Believes people are fundamentally bad
  - People must be kept in line with strict rules and punishments
  - Education does not cultivate our nature, it alters it



Mencius believed humans were naturally good. He became the second most important thinker in Confucianism.

Development over time

Political Power

- The Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE) aligns with Legalism (a rival school) and prosecutes Confucianism (killing scholars, burning books)
  - Much is lost and never recovered
- Han dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE) makes Confucianism the state orthodoxy
  - Creates a set of imperial exams
    - Students study the Five Classics
    - They thus create a merit-based civil service
  - Establish temples to Confucius

Development over time

Neo-Confucianism

- After 600 CE, Confucianism loses strength to Daoism and Buddhism
- In ensuing centuries, key Confucian thinkers create Neo-Confucianism which challenges/critiques Daoism and Buddhism but also borrows from them
  - Neo-Confucian thinkers adopt spiritual practices and reflections…but for purpose of earthly goal of ethical refinement rather than metaphysics
- Change the canon
  - Exams shift from the Five Classics to the Four Books (The Analects; the Mencius; the Great Learning; the Doctrine of the Mean)
  - Every schoolboy learned these by heart until 1905

Beyond China

- Confucianism spread to Korea, Vietnam and Japan. Became central to the education system in these countries

Modernity

- Some blamed Confucianism for why China fell behind the West
  - Criticized for being backward-looking
- Mao worked to erase Confucianism
- Is inseparable however from East Asian culture
  - Respect for elders, valuing education, less individualism
- Revival
  - Some Communist officials post-Mao have quoted Confucius
  - Students read Confucius and Mencius alongside Marx and Mao
  - Some claim Confucian values on education and work have propelled the economic miracle of East Asia in the last half century



The Three Teachings Buddha, Lao Zi, Confucius,

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