

Confucianism (from <http://www.religioustolerance.org/confuciu.htm>)

Confucianism means "The School of the Scholars"; or, less accurately, "The Religion of Confucius") is an East Asian ethical and philosophical system originally developed from the teachings of the early Chinese sage Confucius. It is a complex system of moral, social, political and religious which had tremendous influence on the history of Chinese civilization down to the 20th century.

Some have considered it to have been the "state religion" of imperial China. Debated during the Warring States Period and forbidden during the short-lived Qin Dynasty, Confucianism was chosen by Han Wudi for use as a political system to govern the Chinese state. Despite its loss of influence during the Tang Dynasty, Confucianist doctrine remained a mainstream Chinese orthodoxy for two millennia until the beginning of the 20th century, when it was vigorously repressed by Chinese Communism.

However, there are recent signs of a revival of Confucianism in mainland China. The cultures most strongly influenced by Confucianism include Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese. This includes various territories, including mainland China (including Hong Kong and Macao), Taiwan, Singapore (settled predominantly by ethnic Chinese), the Korean peninsula, and Vietnam. Confucianism as passed down to the 20th and 21st century derives primarily from the school of the Neo-Confucians, led by Zhu Xi, who gave Confucianism renewed vigour in the Song and later dynasties.

Neo-Confucianism combined Taoist and Buddhist ideas with existing Confucian ideas to create a more complete metaphysics than had ever existed before. Many forms of Confucianism have, however, declared their opposition to the Buddhist and Taoist belief systems, despite their importance and popularity in Chinese tradition.

Development of early Confucianism

Confucius (551- 479 BCE) was a famous sage and social philosopher of China whose teachings deeply influenced East Asia for twenty centuries. The relationship between Confucianism and Confucius himself, however, is tenuous. Confucius' ideas were not accepted during his lifetime and he frequently bemoaned the fact that he remained unemployed by any of the feudal lords.

As with many other prominent figures such as Siddhartha Gautama, Jesus, or Socrates, we do not have direct access to Confucius' ideas. Instead, we have recollections by his disciples and their students. This factor is further complicated by the "Burning of the Books and Burying of the Scholars", a massive suppression of dissenting thought during the Qin Dynasty, more than two centuries after Confucius' death. What we now know of Confucius' writings and thoughts is therefore somewhat unreliable.

However, we can sketch out Confucius' ideas from the fragments that remain. Confucius was a man of letters who worried about the troubled times he lived in. He went from place to place trying to spread his political ideas and influence to the many kings contending for supremacy in China.

The disintegration of the Zhou Dynasty in the third century BCE created a power vacuum filled by small states. Deeply persuaded of the need for his mission - "If right principles prevailed through the empire, there would be no need for me to change its state" Analects XVIII, 6 - Confucius tirelessly promoted the virtues of ancient illustrious kings such as the Duke of Zhou.

Confucius tried to amass sufficient political power to found a new dynasty, as when he planned to accept an invitation from a rebel to "make a Zhou dynasty in the East" (Analects XV, 5).

As the common saying that Confucius was a "king without a crown" indicates, however, he never gained the opportunity to apply his ideas. He was expelled from states many times and eventually returned to his homeland to spend the last part of his life teaching.

The Analects of Confucius, the closest we have to a primary source for his thoughts, relates the discussions with his disciples in short sayings. This book contains a compilation of questions and answers, excerpts from conversations, and anecdotes from Confucius' life, but there is no account of a coherent system of thought. Unlike most Western philosophers, Confucius did not rely on deductive reasoning, the law of non-contradiction, logic, or proofs to convince his listeners.

Instead, he used tools of rhetoric such as analogy, aphorism and even tautology to explain his ideas. Most of the time these techniques were highly contextualised. For these reasons, Western readers might find his philosophy

muddled or unclear. However, Confucius claimed that he sought "a unity all pervading" (Analects XV, 3) and that there was "one single thread binding my way together." (op. cit. IV, 15).

The first occurrences of a real Confucian system may have been created by his disciples or by the disciples of his disciples. During the philosophically fertile period of the Hundred Schools of Thought, great early figures of Confucianism such as Mencius and Xun Zi (not to be confused with Sun Zi) developed Confucianism into an ethical and political doctrine.

Both had to fight contemporary ideas and gain the ruler's confidence through argumentation and reasoning. Mencius gave Confucianism a fuller explanation of human nature, of what is needed for good government, of what morality is, and founded his idealist doctrine on the claim that human nature is essentially good.

Xun Zi opposed many of Mencius' ideas, and built a structured system upon the idea that human beings were essentially bad and had to be educated and exposed to the rites (li), before being able to express their goodness. Some of Xun Zi's disciples, such as Han Feizi, became Legalists (a kind of law-based totalitarianism, quite distant from virtue-based Confucianism) and helped Qin Shi Huang to unify China under the strong state control of every human activity.

The culmination of Confucius' dream of unification and peace in China can therefore be argued to have come from Legalism, a school of thought almost diametrically opposed to his reliance on rites and virtue.

The spread of Confucianism

Confucianism survived its suppression during the Qin Dynasty partly thanks to the discovery of a trove of Confucian classics hidden in the walls of a scholar's house. After the Qin, the new Han Dynasty approved of Confucian doctrine and sponsored Confucian scholars, eventually making Confucianism the official state philosophy (see Emperor Wu of Han). Study of the Confucian classics became the basis of the government examination system and the core of the educational curriculum. No serious attempt to replace Confucianism arose until the advent of communism in the 20th century.

After its reformulation as Neo-Confucianism by Zhu Xi and the other Neo-Confucians, Confucianism also became accepted as state philosophies in Korea and Japan.

Rites

Lead the people with administrative injunctions and put them in their place with penal law, and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence and put them in their place through roles and ritual practices, and in addition to developing a sense of shame, they will order themselves harmoniously. (Analects II, 3)

The above explains an essential difference between legalism and ritualism and points to a key difference between Western and Eastern societies. Confucius argues that under law, external authorities administer punishments after illegal actions, so people generally behave well without understanding reasons why they should; whereas with ritual, patterns of behaviour are internalised and exert their influence before actions are taken, so people behave properly because they fear shame and want to avoid losing face.

"Rite" stands here for a complex set of ideas that is difficult to render in Western languages. The Chinese character for "rites" previously had the religious meaning of "sacrifice" (the character 禮 is composed of the character 礻, which means "altar", to the left of the character 廾, representing a vase full of flowers and offered as a sacrifice to the gods; cf. Wenlin).

Its Confucian meaning ranges from politeness and propriety to the understanding of everybody's correct place in society.

Externally, ritual is used to distinguish between people; their usage allows people to know at all times who is the younger and who the elder, who is the guest and who the host and so forth.

Internally, they indicate to people their duty amongst others and what to expect from them. Internalisation is the main process in ritual.

Formalized behaviour becomes progressively internalised, desires are channelled and personal cultivation becomes the mark of social correctness.

Though this idea conflicts with the common saying that "the cowl does not make the monk", in Confucianism sincerity is what enables behaviour to be absorbed by individuals.

Obeying ritual with sincerity makes ritual the most powerful way to cultivate oneself. Thus "Respectfulness, without the Rites, becomes laborious bustle; carefulness, without the Rites, becomes timidity; boldness, without the Rites, becomes insubordination; straightforwardness, without the Rites, becomes rudeness" (Analects VIII, 2).

Ritual can be seen as a means to find the balance between opposing qualities that might otherwise lead to conflict.

Ritual divides people into categories and builds hierarchical relationships through protocols and ceremonies, assigning everyone a place in society and a form of behavior.

Music, which seems to have played a significant role in Confucius' life, is given as an exception as it transcends such boundaries, 'unifying the hearts'.

Although the Analects promotes ritual heavily, Confucius himself often behaved otherwise; for example, when he cried at his preferred disciple's death, or when he met a fiendish princess (VI, 28).

Later more rigid ritualists who forgot that ritual is "more than presents of jade and silk" (XVII, 12) strayed from their master's position.

Another key Confucian concept is that in order to govern others one must first govern oneself. When developed sufficiently, the king's personal virtue spreads beneficent influence throughout the kingdom. This idea is developed further in the Great Learning and is tightly linked with the Taoist concept of wu wei: the less the king does, the more that is done.

By being the "calm center" around which the kingdom turns, the king allows everything to function smoothly and avoids having to tamper with the individual parts of the whole.

This idea may be traced back to early shamanistic beliefs, such as that of the king (wang, sa) being the axle between the sky, human beings and the Earth. (The character itself shows the three levels of the universe, united by a

single line.) Another complementary view is that this idea may have been used by ministers and counsellors to deter aristocratic whims that would otherwise be to the detriment of the population.

Although Confucius claimed that he never invented anything but was only transmitting ancient knowledge, he did produce a number of new ideas. Many western admirers such as Voltaire and H.G. Creel point to the (then) revolutionary idea of replacing the nobility of blood with one of virtue. Junzi which had meant "noble man" before Confucius' work, slowly assumed a new connotation in the course of his writings, rather as "gentleman" did in English.

A virtuous plebeian who cultivates his qualities can be a "gentleman", while a shameless son of the king is only a "small man". That he allowed students of different classes to be his disciples is a clear demonstration that he fought against the feudal structures in Chinese society.

Another new idea, that of meritocracy, led to the introduction of the Imperial examination system in China. This system allowed anyone who passed an examination to become a government officer, a position which would bring wealth and honour to the whole family.

Though the European enthusiasm toward China died away after 1789, China gave Europe one very important practical legacy: the modern civil service. The Chinese examination system seems to have been started in 165 BCE, when certain candidates for public office were called to the Chinese capital for examination of their moral excellence by the emperor.

Over the following centuries the system grew until finally almost anyone who wished to become an official had to prove his worth by passing written government examinations.

Confucius praised those kings who left their kingdoms to those apparently most qualified rather than to their elder sons.

His achievement was the setting up of a school that produced statesmen with a strong sense of state and duty, known as Rujia, the 'School of the Literati'.

During the Warring States Period and the early Han dynasty China grew greatly and the need for a solid and centralized corporation of government

officers able to read and write administrative papers arose. As a result Confucianism was promoted and the corporation of men it produced became an effective counter to the remaining landowner aristocrats otherwise threatening the unity of the state.

Since then Confucianism has been used as a kind of "state religion", with authoritarianism, legitimism, paternalism and submission to authority used as political tools to rule China.

In fact most emperors used a mix of legalism and Confucianism as their ruling doctrine, often with the latter embellishing the former. They also often used different varieties of Taoism or Buddhism as their personal philosophy or religion.

As with many revered men, Confucius himself would probably have disapproved of much that has been done in his name: the use of ritual is only part of his teachings.

Concepts in Confucian thought

Ritual originally signified "to sacrifice" in a religious ceremony. In Confucianism the term was soon extended to include secular ceremonial behaviour before being used to refer to the propriety or politeness which colours everyday life. Rituals were codified and treated as an all-embracing system of norms. Confucius himself tried to revive the etiquette of earlier dynasties, but following his death he himself became regarded as the great authority on ritual behavior.

One theme central to Confucianism is that of relationships, and the differing duties arising from the different status one held in relation to others. Individuals are held to simultaneously stand in different degrees of relationship with different people, namely, as a junior in relation to their parents and elders, and as a senior in relation to their children, younger siblings, students, and others. While juniors are considered in Confucianism to owe strong duties of reverence and service to their seniors, seniors also have duties of benevolence and concern toward juniors. This theme consistently manifests itself in many aspects of East Asian culture even to this day, with extensive filial duties on the part of children toward parents and elders, and great concern of parents toward their children.

Loyal is the equivalent of filial piety on a different plane, between ruler and minister. It was particularly relevant for the social class to which most of Confucius' students belonged, because the only way for an ambitious young scholar to make his way in the Confucian Chinese world was to enter a ruler's civil service. Like filial piety, however, loyalty was often subverted by the autocratic regimes of China. Confucius had advocated a sensitivity to the real politik of the class relations that existed in his time; he did not propose that "might makes right", but that a superior who had received the "Mandate of Heaven" (see below) should be obeyed because of his moral rectitude. In later ages, however, emphasis was placed more on the obligations of the ruled to the ruler, and less on the ruler's obligations to the ruled.