

## CHAPTER 12

# Confucianism: The Life of Confucius

### Background

China is the oldest continuous civilization in the world. Its culture can be traced back to the second millennium BC. By the sixth century BC, China was already an old society in which people looked back to the "good old days" of an ancient past. The Chou dynasty came to power in 1122 BC, following the Shang dynasty (1766 to 1122 BC). Earlier still was the prehistoric Hsia dynasty, founded by the sage king Yu, who was preceded by the legendary sage kings Yao and Shun.

The early Chou dynasty had been a Golden Age. People wore beautiful, subtly woven silk garments and used well-made bronze and pottery vessels. The wealthy lived in large houses with pleasant gardens. A calendar was developed based on the movement of the stars, musical notation was invented, and poetry was composed using ideograms. The Shang civilization revered an ancestor called *Shang-ti*, but in later times the Chinese people referred to an impersonal "heaven," representing their ancestors and other supernatural beings collectively. The ancestors were worshiped, sometimes in brightly painted temples at the bottom of a garden surrounding the house.

Confucius and Lao Tzu, the two greatest sages of Chinese antiquity, lived in a period when the Chou dynasty had long since passed its glory. Chinese society was collapsing. The old regime had lost its legitimacy and anarchy reigned. Because of its corruption and failure to protect the people, the regime became the chief source of oppression and injustice. Its leaders had drifted far from the idealism of their predecessors. The old ideology that had sustained the regime for generations had been discredited. No longer were people prepared to serve the state or the society, since in the past they had been taken advantage of and the promised prosperity had not materialized.

With no leadership or accepted values to guide them, people started to ruthlessly pursue their self-interest, regardless of how others were affected. Parental authority was ignored as young people abandoned the traditions of their ancestors, which they blamed as the cause of past problems. Robber barons and gangs seized control of parts of the country, extorting tribute from those who lived or did business there. The government was unable and unwilling to protect the ordinary people from these thugs who grew rich off the hard work of others. Violent crime and robbery increased as people took what they wanted and settled old scores, knowing that they would not be punished.

The country was in debt and had lost its standing in the world. The surrounding nations which had been its vassals looked elsewhere for reliable allies. Realizing that the center had collapsed, the far-flung reaches of the empire were asserting their independence and snubbing the government. With the decline of unifying values and

traditions, each person did what was right in his own eyes. People did as they pleased, stole what they desired and violently abused those they disliked. Foreigners were treated as scapegoats for the current problems as people refused to recognize their own responsibility for the state of their country.

Confucius described this time as a “spring and autumn period.” This is a poetic way of saying that things started out well but became steadily worse. Both Confucius and Lao Tzu developed unique responses to this turmoil and confusion. Each embodied the essence of the traditional Chinese way of life. Their philosophies were different but complemented one another. Confucius attempted to discover the way to restore the lost traditions of social behavior and thus re-create Chinese civilization. Lao Tzu’s teachings were more enigmatic, articulating a way of life for changing and uncertain circumstances. Sometimes it is said that Chinese people are Confucianist in public and Taoist in private. The teachings of Confucius and Lao Tzu left a very deep impression on Asian culture and have been passed on from generation to generation.

## Confucius

Confucius, or Master Kung, as he is known in China, was born in 551 BC in the province of Lu of a poor family who were of noble ancestry. Confucius’ father, a brave soldier and military commander, died shortly after the birth of his son, leaving him to be brought up by his mother. Although this was a difficult situation in which to start life, Confucius never denied his modest beginnings. “When I was young we were very poor,” he said. Then he added, possibly with a smile at his well-born pupils, “That is why I am skilled in so many menial things.” As a student, Confucius achieved all-round excellence, his studies ranging from archery, chariot riding and lute playing, to historical and literary scholarship. Together these pursuits constituted the ideal learning of the educated gentleman. He learned etiquette and the rites for the appeasement of ancestral spirits. One of the earliest traditions of his boyhood, in fact, relates how Confucius enjoyed creating his own ceremonies.

As a young man, he held several minor government posts. He was a capable administrator and, as the director of a granary, was noted for the fairness of his measures. Legend notes that when he was put in charge of the cattle and sheep, they quickly multiplied. During this period of his life Confucius immersed himself in learning. He discovered the ancient classics written on bamboo strips and read about the Duke of Chou, who became his hero.

The death of Confucius’ mother caused him great grief, and he mourned for 27 months as prescribed by tradition. He placed his mother in a temporary tomb while he returned to his home district to find people who knew the location of his father’s grave. He found the grave and re-buried his mother there. Even afterwards, he said that when he took up his lute his grief prevented him from singing.

Confucius became increasingly aware of the difference between the Golden Age and the time he himself inhabited. Rulers in the earlier time had been virtuous, and through them virtue had infused the land. This virtue could be found first in the rhythm of nature, then in the order of poetry and music. He studied music intensely to recover a sense of composure and order.

By the time he reached his late 20s, Confucius was the most educated man in the land. Despite his obvious ability, he did not receive the important and influential government posts he craved. Even though he was a man of few words, his outspoken nature prevented him from achieving a position of responsibility in a corrupt political system. Once, when the duke Ching asked him what he thought was the secret of successful





government, Confucius pithily replied, "Let the prince be a prince. Let the minister be a minister. Let the father be a father, and the son a son." Good government hinged upon creating a society where words meant exactly what they said. Thus, a prince had to have all the virtuous and noble qualities suggested by the word "prince." He should not, for example, be a philanderer or play the fool. Likewise, a servant should be a servant and not a secret enemy or rebel.

Confucius was eventually reconciled to the fact that his political career was going to be a failure.

Jealous courtiers made sure a person

of such unimpeachable integrity did not make much progress up the hierarchy. He later commented to his pupils, "Do not worry about not having a high position. Worry about filling the one you have got." And still later, "Don't worry about who knows you. Just make sure you are worth knowing." Even though at times he was reduced to poverty, he knew that it was what was within him that determined his value: "In the eating of coarse rice and the drinking of water, the using of one's elbow for a pillow, joy is to be found. Wealth and rank attained through immoral means have as much to do with me as passing clouds."

Confucius left government service and opened a school which became the model for subsequent Chinese education. The main orientation of the school was how ethics could be practiced in society and, more importantly, how it could be applied to government. Its curriculum consisted of the traditional six disciplines: history, poetry, government, propriety, music, and divination. Although many of his students came from wealthy families, Confucius was proud to say that no student was ever turned away for lack of money. He had a very high opinion of education and its role in creating a civilized and harmonious society.

But he also gave his pupils this advice: "At home respect your parents. Away

from home respect your elders. Be honest; love man; love what is good. If you have time afterwards, study." Study was to be based on the proper experience of life and was not simply the abstract accumulation of knowledge.

Although a failure as a politician, Confucius was undoubtedly one of the world's greatest teachers. He attracted brilliant and devoted disciples. They were very struck by the manner in which he taught. He was always informal and instead of lecturing would converse on various subjects, asking questions and recommending reading. Although Confucius encouraged the study of the classics, he was notable among the ancient teachers for not placing an excessive emphasis upon learning by rote. "Suppose a man can recite all the Odes," he said, "and suppose he is on a mission of state; and then at a critical moment, it turns out that he doesn't know how to think. He may know the Odes, but he is not much use as a diplomat."

Often people find it difficult to study because they cannot see the point in accumulating meaningless facts and theories.

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If a man loves kindness but doesn't love study, his shortcoming will be ignorance. If a man loves wisdom but does not love study, his shortcoming will be having fanciful or unsound ideas. If a man loves honesty and does not love study, his shortcoming will be a tendency to upset or spoil things. If a man loves simplicity but does not love study, then his shortcoming will be sheer following of routine. If a man loves courage and does not love study, his shortcoming will be unruliness or violence. If a man loves decision of character and does not love study, his shortcoming will be self-will or headstrong belief in himself.

— Confucius

Confucius explained that before one could concentrate and study well, one needed to develop a certain attitude: “The superior person seeks neither a full belly nor a comfortable home, is quick in action but cautious in speech, and goes to those possessed of the Way to be put right. Such a person can be described as eager to learn.” Of himself he said, “I am not wise by nature, I have become wise through hard work.”

The following long passage is taken from the Great Learning, one of the Confucian classics learned by heart by Chinese schoolchildren for centuries.

The way of learning to be great consists in preserving man’s clear character, in giving life to the people, and in dwelling in perfection or the ultimate good. Only after knowing the goal of perfection can one have a definite purpose in life. Only after having a definite purpose in life can one achieve calmness of mind. Only after having achieved calmness of mind can one rest peacefully. Only after resting peacefully can one begin to think. Only after one has learned to think can one achieve knowledge. Things have roots and branches. A course of events has a beginning and an end. Therefore, to know the proper sequence or relative order of things is the beginning of wisdom.

The problem, as Confucius saw it, was that people were always looking for quick solutions to long-term problems. They tried to treat the symptoms but not the disease.

The ancients who wished to preserve the fresh or clear character of the people of the world would first put their nation in order. Those who wished to establish order in their nation would first set about regulating their family life. Those who wished to regulate their family life would first improve their character. Those who wished to improve their character would first make their hearts right. Those who wished to make their hearts right would first make their wills sincere. Those who wished to make their wills sincere would first achieve true knowledge. The achieving of true knowledge depends upon the investigation of things. When things are investigated, true knowledge is achieved; when true knowledge is achieved, the will becomes sincere; when the will is sincere, the heart is set right; when there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character; when there is beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home; when there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation; and when there is order in the nation, there will be peace throughout the world.

It has been estimated that 3,000 students graduated from Confucius’ school, of whom 72 became his close personal disciples. Once a king asked one of these disciples about his master. The disciple could not give an answer. When he told Confucius of the incident, Confucius replied, “Why didn’t you tell him that I am a man who forgets to eat when he is enthusiastic about something, who forgets all his worries when he is happy, and who is not aware that old age is coming on?” In this statement we see something of the joy of life, the enthusiasm and the positive, persistent urge to be active. One captures something of Confucius’ reputation for optimism in another anecdote. A disciple called Tzu-lu was spending the night at an inn, and the gatekeeper asked him where he came from. Tzu-lu replied that he was a follower of Confucius. The gatekeeper asked, “Oh, is he the fellow that knows that a thing can’t be done and still wants to do it?”

Confucius was not a religious leader in the conventional sense. He did not speculate or talk much about God or the gods. He said his ambition was “that the old people should be able to live in peace, all friends should be loyal and all young



people should love their elders." When one disciple asked about serving the spirits of the dead, he replied, "You are not able even to serve man. How can you serve the spirits?" This followed from his motto: "Recognize that you know what you know, and that you are ignorant of what you do not know." Still, Confucius had a sense of vocation and mission. He believed he had been called and sent forth by Heaven. This belief gave meaning to his life and sustained him, especially during his years of wandering and rejection. Although he kept his distance from popular religion and superstition, he was in his own way a devout person.

In the last years of his life he wandered from state to state offering advice to rulers. On several occasions he was forced into awkward situations in which he had to decide with whom his loyalty lay. With difficulty he avoided being co-opted into joining the government of an upstart dictator in the province in which he was living. When this ruler sought his advice, Confucius told him that he should learn to govern himself before trying to govern others. Despite his pointed criticism of such men, they rarely bore grudges toward him, sensing perhaps that his ideas were ahead of the times.

According to tradition, when Confucius turned 50, Duke Ting made him a governor. The policy he pursued can be guessed at from his statements "Misdistribution is a greater evil than scarce resources" and "Insecurity is a greater evil than poverty." He was elevated to the post of Minister of Justice, and he observed that, "Among the ordinary people, the parents labor to sow and reap, but their sons do not understand hard work. They lounge in the streets, vulgar in speech, disorderly in behavior." He eventually resigned from this post, as he could no longer serve the duke, who continually forgot his duties and behaved inappropriately.

Although later Confucianism as a state ideology came to be associated with the status quo and was used to support government authority, Confucius himself was very democratic in his outlook. He encouraged leaders to listen to the people and not to be too confident that their own opinions were necessarily right or best for the country. He said, "Heaven sees as the people see; Heaven wills as the people will."

Everywhere Confucius went, he visited libraries and conducted historical research. In the process, he compiled and edited many books on Chinese traditions, music and philosophy. Once his disciple Tze Kung was asked how Confucius managed to learn so much about administration of the states through which he passed. "Does he demand information, or is it given to him?" Tze Kung replied, "He gets it through a gentle willingness to listen." This habit of not talking much himself, but drawing forth from others all they knew, reinforced the suspicion of some people that Confucius was a spy. During this time Confucius was imprisoned and attacked on several occasions. He was often bitterly frustrated at not having been called upon for advice and having his wisdom put to use. In disappointment he cried out, "Am I only a gourd to be hung up to dry without being eaten?"

During all this time Confucius claimed that he was not an innovator. Instead he declared that he was merely trying to restore the lost ideal and traditions, saying, “I do not create. I only transmit.” He continually referred to the Golden Age of the Emperor Shun and pointed out that contemporary society was in confusion because it had forgotten the true way of life. This is one reason why Confucius spent the last years of his life editing the Chinese classics: so that they could be passed on to future generations. Still, his attachment to the past should not blind us to his originality. He creatively redesigned what he transmitted. “If by studying the past, a man learns to understand the present — only then is he fit to be a teacher.” Confucius initiated four of the characteristic features of Chinese civilization.

- ✘ He created the role of private teacher. Up until then officials relied on nothing but on-the-job training.
- ✘ He developed the contents, methods and ideals of Chinese education. Insisting upon broad liberal arts learning as a prerequisite for public service, he produced well-rounded and cultured gentlemen, rather than technicians or politicians.
- ✘ He accepted students from a variety of social backgrounds. No longer would mere noble birth guarantee entry into public office. He permanently destroyed the closed society of his time by disregarding the traditional privileges of aristocrats. Superior men, in his opinion, were made not born, made by their wisdom, education, idealism and social graces.
- ✘ He stressed the moral nature of education and politics. For him there was no such thing as learning for its own sake. As a man of integrity, he demanded that his disciples become trustworthy advisors to the government.

Confucius remained faithful to his quest. Power and wealth could have been his for the asking if he had been willing to compromise with those in authority. He preferred, instead, his integrity. He never regretted his choice.

In his old age, though, the bitterness he had carried since childhood was lifted from his heart. He mellowed and learned to curb his temper. However, he continued to be sorely disappointed. His son, who was not a great scholar, died before him, as did some of his closest disciples. He buried his disciples in the same way that he buried his son, since he regarded them all as his sons. Finally, Confucius himself passed away at the age of 72, certain that posterity would soon forget his name. Just before he died he said of himself:

At 15 I began to be seriously interested in study. By 30 my character had been formed. At 40 I had no more perplexities. At 50 I understood the will of heaven. At 60 nothing that I heard disturbed me. At 70 I could follow my desires without trespassing the moral law.

Although Confucius thought his own career had been a complete failure, within a few generations he was regarded as the great teacher of Chinese civilization. His disciples spread out across China as able administrators, gentlemen, scholars and teachers, professing, defending and transmitting certain modes of behavior and attitudes of mind. One, Tzend Tze, said, “Every day I ask myself three questions: Have I helped others? Have I been a good friend? Have I passed on what I was taught?”