

Confucianism

Confucianism is a way of life taught by Confucius in the 6th–5th century BC. Sometimes viewed as a philosophy, sometimes as a religion, Confucianism is perhaps best understood as an all-encompassing humanism that neither denies nor slights Heaven.

Confucianism has been followed by the Chinese for more than two millennia. It has deeply influenced spiritual and political life in China; its influence has also extended to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. East Asians may profess themselves to be Shintoists, Taoists, Buddhists, Muslims, or Christians - but seldom do they cease to be Confucians.

Fast Facts

Date founded: 6th-5th cent. BC

Place founded: China

Founder: Confucius (551-479 BC)

Adherents: 5-6 million

Confucius, the common name of Confucianism's founder, is a Latinized form of the Chinese K'ung-fu-tzu, "Master K'ung." The terms "Confucianism" and "Confucian," derived from the Latinized Confucius, are not meaningful terms in Chinese. They are western terms, coined in Europe as recently as the 18th century.

History

Life of Confucius

Confucius was born in 551 BC in the small feudal state of Lu in what is now Shantung Province. Confucius' ancestors were probably members of the aristocracy who had become virtual poverty-stricken commoners by the time of his birth. His father died when Confucius was only three years old. Instructed first by his mother, Confucius then distinguished himself as a passionate learner in his teens.

Confucius had served in minor government posts managing stables and keeping books for granaries before he married a woman of similar background when he was 19. It is not known who Confucius' teachers were, but his mastery of the six arts—ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and arithmetic—and his familiarity with the classical traditions, notably poetry and history, enabled him to start a brilliant teaching career in his 30s.

Confucius developed concepts about education, society and government that he hoped to put into practice in a political career. But his loyalty to the king alienated him from the power holders of the time, the large Chi families, and his moral rectitude did not sit well with the king's inner circle, who enraptured the king with sensuous delights. At 56, when he realized that his superiors were uninterested in his policies, Confucius left the country in an attempt to find another feudal state to which he could render his service. Despite his political frustration he was accompanied by an expanding circle of students during this self-imposed exile of almost 12 years. His reputation as a man of vision and mission spread.

At the age of 67 Confucius returned home to teach and to preserve his cherished classical traditions by writing and editing. He died in 479 BC, at the age of 73. In the Analects (2:4), Confucius is recorded as summarizing his life this way:

At 15 I set my heart on learning; at 30 I firmly took my stand; at 40 I had no delusions; at 50 I knew the Mandate of Heaven; at 60 my ear was attuned; at 70 I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the boundaries of right.

Also in the Analects, Confucius assists a student who was having difficulty describing him:
Why did you not simply say something to this effect: he is the sort of man who forgets to eat when he engages himself in vigorous pursuit of learning, who is so full of joy that he forgets his worries, and who does not notice that old age is coming on? (7:18)

Confucianism

The story of Confucianism does not really begin with Confucius, nor was Confucius the founder of Confucianism in the same way that Buddha was the founder of Buddhism. Rather, Confucius considered himself a transmitter who consciously tried to retrieve the meaning of the past by breathing vitality into seemingly outmoded rituals. Confucius' love of antiquity was motivated by his strong desire to understand why certain rituals, such as the ancestral cult, reverence for Heaven, and mourning ceremonies, had survived for centuries. He had faith in the cumulative power of culture. Confucius' sense of history was so strong that he saw himself as a conservationist responsible for the continuity of the cultural values and the social norms that had worked so well for the civilization of the Chou dynasty. Mencius, Xunzi, and others sustained Confucianism after Confucius, but it was not influential until Dong Zhongshu emerged in the 2nd century BC. Confucianism was then recognized as the Han state cult (introducing religious elements and sacrifices to Confucius), and the Five Classics (see Texts, below) became the core of education. In spite of the strong influence of Daoism and Buddhism, Confucian ethics have had the strongest influence on the moral fabric of Chinese society. A revival of Confucian thought in the 11th century produced Neo-Confucianism, a major influence in Korea during the Choson dynasty and in Japan during the Tokugawa period. In 1530 AD, a Ming emperor reformed the Confucian cult to focus more on Confucius' teachings than the sage himself (e.g. images of Confucius were replaced with inscribed tablets). The cult of Confucius declined after the founding of the Chinese Republic in 1912, but the influence of Confucianism continues.

Beliefs

The main principle of Confucianism is ren ("humaneness" or "benevolence"), signifying excellent character in accord with li (ritual norms), zhong (loyalty to one's true nature), shu (reciprocity), and xiao (filial piety). Together these constitute de (virtue).

Confucianism is characterized by a highly optimistic view of human nature. The faith in the possibility of ordinary human beings to become awe-inspiring sages and worthies is deeply rooted in the Confucian heritage (Confucius himself lived a rather ordinary life), and the insistence that human beings are teachable, improvable, and perfectible through personal and communal endeavour is typically Confucian.

Confucius regarded Heaven (T'ien) as a positive and personal force in the universe; he was not, as some have supposed, an agnostic or a skeptic.

Practices

Aside from its important ethical principles, Confucianism does not prescribe any specific rituals or practices. These are filled by the practices of Chinese religion, Taoism, Buddhism, or other religion which Confucians follow.

Texts

The Lun-yü (Analects) are the most revered sacred scripture in the Confucian tradition. It was probably compiled by the second generation of Confucius' disciples. Based primarily on the Master's sayings, preserved in both oral and written transmissions, it captures the Confucian spirit in the same way that the Platonic dialogues embody Socratic teachings.

The Confucian Canon achieved its present form in the Sung dynasty under the direction of Chu Hsi (1130-1200). It consists of the Five Classics and the Four Books.

The Five Classics are:

Shu Ching (Classic of History) - collection of documents and speeches dating from the Later Han Dynasty (23-220 CE)

Shih Ching (Classic of Odes) - collection of 300 poems and songs from the early Chou Dynasty (1027-402 BC)

I Ching (Classic of Changes) - collection of texts on divination based on a set of 64 hexagrams that reflect the relationship between Yin and Yang in nature and society

Ch'un Ching (Spring and Autumn Annals) - extracts from the history of the state of Lu 722-484, said to be compiled by Confucius

Li Ching (Classic of Rites) - consists of three books on the Li (Rites of Propriety)

The Four Books are:

Lun Yu (Analects) of Confucius

Chung Yung (Doctrine of the Mean)

Ta Hsueh (Great Learning)

Meng Tzu (Mencius)

References & Sources

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<http://www.religionfacts.com/a-z-religion-index/confucianism.htm>