

# Confucianism

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Confucianism is a man-centered philosophy and a way of life primarily based on the teachings of Confucius (551–479 BCE), the statesman and teacher honored as the Sage and Master in imperial China. Its chief concerns are a man's moral perfection and his contribution to the welfare of state and society via public service. Its aim is good government by the learned and the morally sound. Confucian learning included studying ancient books on literature, history, philosophy, government institutions, and ritual protocols, later on known as the Classics, practice of rites and music, and knowledge of state regulations and law. It was imperial China's state ideology for two millennia. It influenced the minds and government of East Asian countries like Korea, Japan, and Vietnam in the past. Its humanistic vision still appeals to intellectuals in these countries as well as in China, Southeast Asia, and the West.

Confucianism's core teaching is the proper living of the five cardinal human relationships of father and son, husband and wife, brother and brother, ruler (the state) and subject, and friend and friend. Man's relationship with nature also counts as an extension. Proper maintenance of these relationships is what government and good living are all about. Hierarchy, authority, and responsibility are means to maintain them. A man's fulfillment of his duties and obligations corresponding to his roles is a moral must. The supreme expression of this fulfillment is the manifestation of humaneness (*ren*), revealed through sympathy and empathy, observance of rites

and commonly accepted social conduct. For example, don't do to others what you don't want to be done to you; you want to establish yourself and be flourishing, but for that reason you also want to establish others and see them flourishing; behave only in a manner that befits your role and position; don't be bad mannered; and don't forget to return a favor.

Government and education are two basic ways to make these human relationships work properly. Government functions best as a source of morality and as a moral example to the governed. Governing people by virtuous conduct and rites is much better than governing them through regulation and punishment, which only make them opportunistic and shameless. But a proper match of name and reality – the honest delivery of what is required of one's social and political role – by all concerned is a prerequisite for moral government to work. Education of the people, in addition to providing them with a decent material base in life, is the right way to begin. Government has the duty to ensure this happens.

Confucianism has an unswerving faith in the educability and perfectibility of man. Whether man's nature is innately good or evil, as differently maintained by Mencius (372–289 BCE) and Xunzi (313–238 BCE), the two greatest early expounders of Confucius, man can improve himself to perfection through learning and effort of personal cultivation. He can learn to manage his sentiments and emotions for a balanced and harmonious state of mind, which makes him live a proper life effectively.

The ideal education that Confucius committed himself to for men of all classes and family backgrounds was the molding of a person into a gentleman (*junzi*), a virtuous man

who was versed in the six arts of rites, music, archery, riding, writing and arithmetic, and who could rise to call of noble causes. The gentleman should at least study literature, including poetry, history, and ritual protocols, proper conduct, loyalty, and faithfulness. He could also specialize in the exemplification of virtues, the art of speech for official tasks, knowledge of government administration, and literary learning which includes mastery of classical literature.

Confucianism is not an organized religion, but its religious nature is obvious in the cultural tradition Confucius inherited and transmitted. Ancestor worship and state sacrificial offerings to men and things that contributed to the welfare of humanity were common practices by Confucius' time. Conducting offerings to ancestors and deities and spirits was in fact a knowledge a Confucian was supposed to have. But the idea is one of thanksgiving, not salvation in the afterlife. Confucius acknowledged the existence of gods and ghosts but did not talk about their world. He cared more about man's living world. Immortality for him rests on people's memory of the things one has achieved, of which three counted most: exemplary virtues, meritorious deeds, and words of lasting value.

As a way of life, Confucianism cherishes knowledge and practice of what is learned. A gentleman would have a lifelong love of learning and studying, befriend virtuous and learned persons, be loyal and faithful in his words and serious in his deeds even when dealing with uncultured people, be earnest in observing proper human relationships, beginning from loving and caring and being respectful to his parents and siblings, and be resolute in shouldering the manifestation of humaneness to the end of his life. He should excel in the virtues of wisdom, humaneness, and bravery respectively, shown in his distinguishing the right and the good from the wrong and the evil, being kind

and benevolent, and doing what he believed to be morally correct. He should show a grasp of fine cultures, especially in rites and music, poetry and history, and should exhibit qualities such as kindness, gentleness, broadmindedness, respectfulness, faithfulness, diligence, and generosity. In short, he should live morally for his own welfare and that of other people.

A Confucian empire began to emerge a century or so after the fall of China's first unified empire in 207 BCE. The succeeding Han dynasty made it a state ideology when Emperor Wudi (157–87 BCE) proclaimed that "those teachings that lie outside of the Six Arts [i.e., the Five Confucian Classics then surviving] or not in accord with the sages' teachings should be abolished." Legalism as practiced by the fallen Qin dynasty ended forever as a state-championed principle of government. Bureaucracy began to be staffed by students in the Central University taught by endowed professors of Confucian Classics called Erudites. Confucian education was also set in local schools, and Confucian-cherished conduct was a prerequisite for persons recommended for government office.

The Five Classics, namely, the *Book of Changes*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Odes*, *Ceremonies and Rituals* (which was expounded in the *Book of Rites* and related to the *Zhou Institutions*), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, convey what modern scholars suggest to be the metaphysical, political, poetic, social, and historical visions of Confucianism, respectively. Together with the *Confucian Analects*, which contains Confucius' sayings and dialogs with his students, and the *Classic of Filial Piety*, they became sacred books in the Han and formed the intellectual foundation of those who aspired to an official career right to the end of imperial China. Classical scholarship in Han times generally displayed a pragmatic attitude in seeking evidential explanation and factual

knowledge for application. Text-based exegesis was brought to use in bureaucratic administration and legal deliberation, as in social education and moral indoctrination.

The exaltation of Confucianism owed a great deal to the efforts of Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE) who recommended its dominance to Emperor Wudi. Dong advanced the theory of mutual responsiveness between Heaven and humanity to the effect that the monarch's conduct and government are responsible for all political and social outcomes upon which Heaven decides whether the dynasty has the mandate to rule. Thus, natural calamities and unusual phenomena are signs of Heaven's dissatisfaction and are signals for government reform or monarchical self-discipline. Integrating Confucian ethics with *yin-yang* naturalistic cosmology, this worldview provided the Confucians with a higher law by which to judge the conduct of the ruler and to urge political improvement.

Confucianism nonetheless turned rigid and formalistic, doctrinaire and dogmatic toward the end of the Han dynasty. It became less convincing and competitive against the doctrines and practices of indigenous Daoism and imported Buddhism. It witnessed a long decline, roughly from 220 to 960 CE when China was first divided into regimes based in the north and in the south and then unified under the Sui and Tang Empires before disintegrating once again. In effect it lived in a syncretic way with Buddhism and Daoism, only to be inadvertently influenced by them. The Daoist doctrine of achieving freedom from worldly concerns and constraints appealed to intellectuals in an age of hypocrisy and despair. The Buddhist theory of reincarnation was a relief to many people in the age of war and turmoil. Mahayana Buddhism's doctrine of salvation for the self through living a correct life and for all that live did not contradict the Confucian doctrine of personal cultivation and public service for social good. The

Chan Buddhist sect's teaching that a man's salvation did not depend upon scriptural learning but upon an enlightenment that could be attained through the direct examination of one's inner consciousness was especially appealing. But when the anti-logical and highly speculative teachings of Chan Buddhism became more abstruse and less comprehensible after the 8th century, a revival of Confucianism gradually emerged. The movement of "ancient style essay" writing, which drew inspiration from the Confucian classics and writings of Qin and Han times, rekindled literati interest in classical teachings and eventually led to the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the 11th century.

Neo-Confucianism gained theoretical strength from a cosmology that drew ideas and vocabularies from the Confucian *Book of Changes* but also unacknowledged concepts and conceptualizations from Buddhist and Daoist philosophies. This cosmology was advanced by Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073) and synthesized by Zhu Xi (1130–1200). It postulates that the universe is made up of cosmic force (*qi*) but functions according to well-defined rules (*li*) such that a coherence exists which gives birth to all things substantial and conceptual. The very beginning of reality is the Supreme Ultimate (*taiji*), the source of which is the infinite Non-Ultimate (*wuji*) that is void of shape, sound, and odor. The Supreme Ultimate, embodying the Heavenly principle, which is wholesomely positive and good, generates the opposite but complementary forces of *yin* and *yang*, which interact and become part of the other to give rise to the five primary elements of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth, which interact in an unendingly successive process of production and destruction to produce things of all complexities, each with unique attributes in itself but which share the primordial property of the Supreme Ultimate. All things born of this differentiating and transforming process are

endowed with the same Heavenly principle. The one and the myriad are thus unified. In the case of man, his innate goodness can be recovered through the removal of his impure *qi* by the effort of personal cultivation. Moral perfection is indeed possible; human effort to overcome the dictates of nature is required.

Zhu Xi's contribution to this Confucian optimism was tremendous. His Neo-Confucianism redefined the goal of learning – to become a sage, who is perfect in himself and can perfect other people and society – and articulated a way to achieve it. His dictum was summed up as “preserve Heavenly principles and get rid of human desires.” His method was called “staying in reverence and plumbing principles.” It begins by following the *Great Learning*, which stipulates a sequence of learning beginning from the investigation of things, which means exhaustive inquiry into the very reason for the existence of a thing and its logical development in the human realm. This inquiry can proceed by personal observation, knowledge of past experiences recorded in documents, discussion with the virtuous and the learned, and reflections from one's own thought and action. But a state of seriousness in mind and in action must accompany it to make the process effective. This learning can be extended to everything in the universe; in effect it is fundamentally ethical, moral, and social in orientation. The major doctrines were derived from the books *Great Learning*, which teaches the ways to personal character building that would lead to peace in the world, and *Doctrine of the Mean*, which teaches moderation to reach balance and harmony in one's self and for the myriad of things. Together with the *Confucian Analects* and the *Mencius*, the writings of Mencius, they formed the *Four Books*, which constituted the core of ethical and moral education and the principles and ideals of government and society in late imperial China.

Confucianism in Zhu Xi's version, termed *lixue*, or “learning of principles,” was in full sway during the native Ming dynasty (1368–1644) after China was ruled by the alien Mongol Yuan dynasty for about a century. Institutions Zhu Xi fine-tuned and promoted, such as the classics-mat lecture to educate and enlighten the emperor, the community compact to uplift social morality and render mutual aid, and the ancestral hall, articulated in his ritual book, *Family Rites*, to inculcate family morality and social cohesiveness, now became active. Confucian schools and temples, academies of the scholars, and village elementary schools were also founded throughout the empire to reaffirm and promote Confucian values, and the civil service examinations based on the *Four Books* were there to recruit Confucian-educated administrators. The Confucian state and society the Ming created thrived. The rise of Wang Yangming's (1472–1529) philosophy in the early 16th century, which stressed the extension of innate knowledge and the unity of knowledge and action, added freshness to Confucianism. Critical of the excessive commentarial details characteristic of Zhu Xi's followers, Wang urged prompt action for the improvement of the self and for active service to the state and to communities. His emphasis on the power of the mind and conscience as a guide to moral decision was so powerful that his followers soon multiplied. But it also induced an individualism that indulged in egotism, selfishness, pleasure seeking, and speculative discussion that were held accountable for the fall of the Ming dynasty to the alien Qing dynasty of the Manchus.

*Lixue* along with an orthodox viewpoint continued to be the preferred teaching in the Qing dynasty. Emperor Kangxi (1654–1722) even elevated Zhu Xi to be equal to the best of Confucius' students in official rites that paid homage to Confucius throughout the empire.

But most Qing scholars only revered Zhu Xi and other Song Neo-Confucian masters as exemplars of ethical conduct. The dominating Han school of classical learning in the Qing advocated philological studies of the ancient texts as a way to get at the truth of Confucianism. Scholars of this school exalted evidential studies as practiced in Han times. The best of them added solid learning of practical use. The worst became irrelevant textualists. Society in the meantime was tired of imperial indoctrination like the Kangxi emperor's Sixteen Sacred Injunctions, which demanded every conveyable moral and ethical obligation from the populace.

Confucianism gradually lost its appeal following China's defeats in wars against foreign powers in the 19th century. The Western impact subsequently led to Confucianism being blamed as the source of China's backwardness and weakness. When the time-honored civil service examination system was abolished in 1905, much of Confucianism's institutional strength was also lost. The end of imperial China in 1911 further weakened Confucianism's social relevance. The new religion, new political institution, new economic theories, and new things from new science and technology imported from the West offered powerful contending ideas and an alternative way of life. A huge setback for Confucianism followed in the anti-Confucian promotions of the May Fourth Movement in 1919 and the People's Republic of China's wholesale denouncement during the decade of the Cultural Revolution beginning 1966. Confucianism was equated with everything that made China unsatisfactory: authoritarianism, bureaucratism, nepotism, conservatism, and male chauvinism. But human bonds and trust were never so unreliable, as it turned out.

Nevertheless, Confucianism remained cherished by some most creative and influential intellectuals in China and those outside China who were inspired by liberal democratic ideas.

In recent decades Confucian values, such as education, thrift, hard work, were also credited with the successful economic development in some East Asian nations and regions. Some scholars in contemporary China have urged a return to Confucianism for ways to deal with China's social and political predicament resulting from the economic reforms and the opening policy in the generation past. Chinese government has promoted some Confucian values as useful for inducing loyalty to the state, social stability, and the revival of Chinese civilization. Some international scholars have explored whether Confucianism is compatible with the social and political manifestations of modernity – democracy, capitalism, and the rule of law. The debate and the discourse are going on for a new Confucianism that can adapt to existing institutions like the modern family and the party state, contemporary marriage law, and gender roles, as well as the force of the market economy and international competition.

How to reach and maintain a balance between personal freedom and social integrity and state security remains a challenge to the advocates of Confucianism, especially those in China. Realization of some of Confucianism's vital aspirations – a morally healthy individual, a caring community, a stable state, a decent government, and a harmonious international relationship – remains to be articulated.

SEE ALSO: China, imperial: 1. Qin dynasty, 221–207 BCE; China, imperial: 2. Han dynasty, 206 BCE–220 CE; China, imperial: 3. 220–c.580; China, imperial: 4. Sui, Tang, and Five dynasties periods, c.581–960; China, imperial: 5. Song dynasty period, 960–1279; China, imperial: 6. Yuan dynasty period, 1279–1368; China, imperial: 7. Ming dynasty period, 1368–1644; China, imperial: 8. Qing or Manchu dynasty period, 1636–1911

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