CONFUCIANISM

Confucianism, along with Buddhism and Taoism, is one of the three dominant belief systems of China. Western observers sometimes characterize Confucianism as a religion, but it is more accurately viewed as a set of guidelines for living a moral life. Confucianism's teachings on ethical behavior have been immensely influential in China and throughout east Asia, even among populations that subscribe to other belief systems. Confucian precepts concerning education, filial piety, and humane behavior formed an important component of Chinese imperial policy for most of the last 2,000 years. Although the belief system fell out of favor with China's communist government in the 20th century, it has remained ingrained in the thoughts and actions of Chinese people into the present day.

Confucianism is named after Kong Qiu, a sixth-century-BCE civil servant and philosopher who provided the first comprehensive statement of Confucian principles. Europeans Latinized his name to "Confucius." According to tradition, Confucius was born in 551 BCE at Qufu in the state of Lu, in what is now Shandong province. He lived during a particularly volatile time in Chinese history, which undoubtedly motivated his search for a more harmonious government.

In his thirties, Confucius began teaching others about his philosophy of government, and it is said that at one point he had more than 3,000 students. His primary goal, however, seems to have been to affect government from within, not just as a commentator from outside, so he appealed to the ruler of Lu to let him reform the government. By that time, however, Confucius had alienated a number of powerful people who benefited from the inefficiency and injustice of the current administration. Consequently, Confucius and his followers were forced to move on.
to another state.

Confucius spent 13 years searching around China for a ruler who would let him reform his government. While many lords received him graciously, none was willing to turn over the reins of government to such a radical reformer. At the age of 67, Confucius returned home to teach and to compile the writings he felt were most useful in helping a person lead a moral life. He died in 479 at the age of 72.

Confucius' followers continued his work after his death. They promoted the study of the Five Classics texts as a means of understanding the moral life. They also collected their teacher's sayings into a work known as the Analects, which reached its final form sometime around 400 BCE. The early Confucians sought to fill out the details of the belief system and to address questions that Confucius had left unanswered.

A question that concerned many Chinese (and people of other cultures as well) is whether people are basically good or evil. Confucius, perhaps intentionally, always avoided answering that question. The philosopher Mencius proclaimed that people are basically good and that with proper education and opportunities, can be expected to lead moral lives. Mencius also taught that wealth and morality could coexist harmoniously and that common people had a right to rebel against an unjust ruler. Mencius' teachings were codified in the Discourses of Mencius, one of the canonical Four Books of later Confucian scholarship.

The last great Confucian philosopher of the classical era, Xun-zí, disagreed with Mencius about human nature. He argued that people were inherently immoral and that governments need to impose strict laws and punishments in order to force people to lead moral lives. Xun-zí's teachings have been less popular among Confucian scholars than those of Mencius. They have been influential, however.
A series of Chinese imperial dynasties used interpretations like Xun-zi's to justify strict and even oppressive legal systems. In fact, the use of Confucianism by imperial governments to justify oppressive regimes is one of the main reasons Confucianism fell out of favor with the revolutionary governments of 20th-century China. It is unfair, however, to place the blame for this use—or misuse—of Confucian principles on the shoulders of either Xun-zi or Confucius; governments throughout history have shown a willingness to adapt ideologies and religions to their own purposes, whether or not their uses are consistent with the originator's intentions.

Confucianism enjoyed a wide following among Chinese intellectuals in the centuries after Confucius' lifetime, but it did not gain official acceptance by a government until the beginning of the second century BCE. During the dynasty of the first emperor of China, Shi Huangdi, Confucius' beloved books were burned en masse amid an atmosphere of anti-intellectual suspicions.

During the reign of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), however, the Han emperors promoted Confucianism as a stabilizing force in society. They adopted Confucian scholarship of the Five Classics as the basis of their civil service examinations; in that way, knowledge of Confucian principles became essential for anyone who wanted to advance in a Han administration. Confucian principles also formed the basis for the Han legal system, although in a much more pragmatic form than Confucius probably intended. Chinese governments over the next 2,000 years generally based their legal systems on this combination of Confucian ideals and pragmatic Legalism.

Confucianism had a similarly profound effect on the governments of other east Asian countries. After the Han emperors conquered Vietnam and Korea, they introduced bureaucracies based on Confucian principles. Even after these countries regained their independence in following centuries, they retained Confucian principles in their legal systems and civil service examinations. The Yi dynasty of Korea was probably the most thoroughly Confucian government in history. The Japanese also adopted Confucian
So what is Confucianism about? At the risk of oversimplifying a profound and wide-ranging philosophical system, Confucius taught that a harmonious society begins at home. The central value in Confucianism is filial piety—the honor, respect, love, and duty owed between a parent and child. If a person can fulfill his duties in this relationship—by caring for his parents and working hard to meet their expectation—he will then be able to meet his obligations to his spouse and larger family. If he has met the obligations of his family, he will be able to coexist harmoniously with his employer, his community, his ruler, and so on. Confucianism has a great deal to say about a wide range of human interactions—between a ruler and his subjects, a teacher and his students, etc.—but the basis for all harmonious interactions begins with filial piety.

Another central value of Confucianism is education. A person cannot fully understand the concepts of morality and filial piety unless he has knowledge. He cannot have knowledge unless he studies. In order to be a moral person, therefore, a person must study such texts as the Five Classics so he can understand his role in a harmonious world. The impact of this belief can be seen in the respect Chinese culture has traditionally held for teachers. Indeed, it is difficult to separate "traditional" Chinese values from Confucian values. Confucius and his followers undoubtedly had an enormously influential role in shaping Chinese views on ethics, education, and government, but it is also true that Confucius based his teachings on preexisting Chinese values. It could be said that Confucius articulated and refined traditional Chinese values into a comprehensive ethical system.

Students of Confucianism have traditionally held up nine texts—the Four Books and the Five Classics—as the central statements of their philosophy. These works held a status in Chinese society that could be seen as equal to that of the Bible in Christian culture.
or the Koran in Islamic cultures, although the Confucian texts were never considered to be divinely revealed. Rather, the Confucian texts were all credited to human authors.

The Five Classics preceded Confucius and were already revered in his day as great sources of wisdom. The Five Classics are: the *Classic of Changes* (commonly called the *I Ching*), the *Classic of Documents*, the *Classic of Poetry*, the *Record of Rites*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. A sixth text, the *Classic of Music*, seems to have been included among this group at the time of Confucius, although it was lost prior to the third century BCE.

According to tradition, Confucius composed some of these texts himself, and he edited the Five Classics into their final form. Modern scholars think these texts were completed prior to the time of Confucius and that the editing process was an ongoing concern that continued into the Han dynasty. The value that Confucius placed on these texts, however, was crucial for their inclusion in the Confucian canon. The Five Classics formed the basis for the educational system and the Chinese civil service examinations during the Han dynasty and later eras.

The Four Books, which were composed during and after Confucius' lifetime, had entered the Confucian canon by the time of the Song dynasty. The Four Books include: the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Great Learning*, and the *Doctrine of the Mean*. As with the Five Classics, a deep knowledge of the Four Books became an essential part of a classical Chinese education. The *Analects*, in particular, achieved the status of an almost sacred text during the Han dynasty. Many view it as the most influential book in the history of China.

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**Further Reading**


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