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CONFUCIUS

551 B.C. - 479 B.C.



The great Chinese philosopher Confucius was the first man to develop a system of beliefs synthesizing the basic ideas of the Chinese people. His philosophy, based on personal morality and on the concept of a government that served its people and ruled by moral example, permeated Chinese life and culture for well over two thousand years, and has greatly influenced a substantial portion of the world's population.

Confucius was born about 551 B.C., in the small state of Lu, which is in the present province of Shantung, in northeastern China. His father died when he was quite young, and Confucius and his mother lived in poverty. As a young man, the future philosopher served as a minor government official, but after several years he resigned his post. He spent the next sixteen years teaching, attracting a considerable number of disciples to his philosophy. When he was about fifty years old, he was awarded a high position in the government of Lu; however, after about four years, enemies at court brought about his dismissal, and, indeed, his exile from the state. He spent the next thirteen years as

an itinerant teacher, and then returned to his home state for the last five years of his life. He died in 479 B.C.

Confucius is often credited as the founder of a religion, but this description is inaccurate. He very rarely referred to the Deity, refused to discuss the afterlife, and avoided all forms of metaphysical speculation. He was basically a secular philosopher, interested in personal and political morality and conduct.

The two most important virtues, according to Confucius, are *jen* and *li*, and the superior man guides his conduct by them. *Jen* has sometimes been translated as "love," but it might better be defined as "benevolent concern for one's fellow men." *Li* describes a combination of manners, ritual, custom, etiquette, and propriety.

Ancestor worship, the basic Chinese religion even before Confucius, was reinforced by the strong emphasis that he placed on family loyalty and respect for one's parents. Confucius also taught that respect and obedience were owed by wives to their husbands and by subjects to their rulers. But the Chinese sage did not approve of tyranny. He believed that the state exists for the benefit of the people, not vice versa, and he repeatedly stressed that a ruler should govern primarily by moral example rather than by force. Another of his tenets was a slight variant of the Golden Rule: "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others."

Confucius's basic outlook was highly conservative. He believed that the Golden Age was in the past, and he urged both rulers and people to return to the good old moral standards. In fact, however, the Confucian ideal of government by moral example had *not* been the prevailing practice in earlier times, and Confucius was therefore a more innovative reformer than he claimed to be.

Confucius lived during the Chou dynasty, a period of great intellectual ferment in China. Contemporary rulers did not accept his program, but after his death his ideas spread widely throughout his country. However, with the advent of the Ch'in



The legendary meeting of Confucius (left) with Lao Tzu.

dynasty, in 221 B.C., Confucianism fell upon evil days. The first emperor of the Ch'in dynasty, Shih Huang Ti, was determined to eradicate Confucius's influence, and to make a clean break with the past. He ordered the suppression of Confucian teachings and the burning of all Confucian books. This attempt at suppression was unsuccessful, and when the Ch'in dynasty came to a close a few years later, Confucian scholars were again free to teach their doctrine. During the succeeding dynasty, the Han (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), Confucianism became established as the official Chinese state philosophy.

Starting with the Han dynasty, Chinese emperors gradually developed the practice of selecting government officials by means of civil service examinations. In the course of time these examinations came to be based to a large extent on a knowledge of the Confucian classics. Since entry into the government bureaucracy was the main route to financial success and social prestige in the Chinese empire, the civil service examinations were extremely competitive. Consequently, for generations a large number of the most intelligent and ambitious young men in China devoted many years to intensive study of the Confucian classics, and, for many centuries the entire civil administration of China was composed of persons whose basic outlook had been permeated by the Confucian philosophy. This system endured in China (with some interruptions) for roughly two thousand years, from about 100 B.C. to about 1900 A.D.

But Confucianism was not merely the official philosophy of

the Chinese administration. Confucian ideals were accepted by the majority of the Chinese people, and for over two thousand years deeply influenced their life and thought.

There are several reasons for Confucius's enormous appeal to the Chinese. First, his personal sincerity and integrity were beyond question. Second, he was a moderate and practical person, and did not demand of men what they could not achieve. If he asked them to be honorable, he did not expect them to be saintly. In this regard as in others, he reflected the practical temperament of the Chinese people. And this perhaps, was the key to the immense success that his ideas achieved in China. Confucius was not asking the Chinese to change their basic beliefs. Rather, he was restating, in a clear and impressive form, their basic traditional ideals. Perhaps no philosopher in history has been so closely in touch with the fundamental views of his countrymen as Confucius.

Confucianism, which stresses the *obligations* of individuals rather than their rights, may seem rather stodgy and unappealing by current Western standard. As a philosophy of government, though, it proved remarkably effective in practice. Judged on the basis of its ability to maintain internal peace and prosperity, China, for a period of two thousand years, was on the average the best-governed region on earth.

The ideals of Confucius, closely grounded as they are in Chinese culture, have not been widely influential outside East Asia. They have, however, had a major impact in Korea and Japan, both of which have been greatly influenced by Chinese culture.

At the present time, Confucianism is in low estate in China. The Chinese Communists, in an effort to break completely with the past, have vigorously attacked Confucius and his doctrines, and it is possible that the period of his influence upon history has drawn to a close. In the past, however, the ideas of Confucius have proven to be very deeply rooted within China, and we should not be surprised if there is a resurgence of Confucianism in the course of the next century.