

FEATURE

CONFUCIANISM

Founded by K'ung-fu-tsu (Confucius) and Meng-tzu (Mencius)

TIMELINE

551 BCE: Confucius is born

515 BCE: Confucius becomes one of the first teachers in China

497-484 BCE: Confucius and his disciples wander through China

400 BCE: After Confucius's death, his disciples finish the Analects

213 BCE: Qin Shihuangdi declares that all Confucian books should be burned

2nd Century BCE: Han Empire comes in and promotes Confucianism as the stabilizing force in society

BELIEF

-Benevolence, also known as Jen

-Respect for Elders (filial piety)

*Filial piety: respect towards elders, family duties

-Importance of education: help people live a productive life and achieve morality and virtue

-Encourage diligence

HOW TO PRACTICE CONFUCIANISM

-Respect and act accordingly to the Five Relationships

-Educate oneself and always work to gain more knowledge

-Practice benevolence to others

MAJOR RITUALS

Honoring Ancestors

People practice a ceremony to worship their ancestors.

They burn paper money and offer food to the ancestors.

It is meant to educate the younger generations and honor the family.

TEACHER'S DAY

On Confucius's birthday, September 28th, Confucians celebrate and honor not only Confucius but all the teachers who have helped and guided them. It is a national holiday in Taiwan, and people often give as present letters of appreciation or a successful project of their own.

QUOTE

"By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest" (<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/c/confucius.html>).

-Confucianism encouraged wisdom, which they thought would lead people to understand how to live a moral and virtuous life.

CONNECTIONS WITH RELIGIONS

Many religions shared many ideas and beliefs with the ones of Confucianism. One example is the role of women and what duty they play in society. The beliefs of the Romans and Greeks were that women were in general inferior, serving purposes that were not of great duty, in other words, they performed the hard and dirty work.

Confucianism saw the existence of women as people who would nurture and take care of children in hopes of a better future.



CONFUSION ON CONFUCIUS

By Ruby Tsao

Are you confused about Confucius? You are not alone. Even people in China were confused about Confucius. Twice in modern China, attempts were made to eradicate Confucianism which has dominated Chinese society for the past 2500 years.

There were doubts on Confucianism in the early days of the Chinese Republic established by Sun Yat-sen in 1911 after he led a revolution to overthrow the Chinese monarchy of 2,200+ years. Intellectual elites wanted to do away with the old Confucian traditions and to adopt the Western concepts of Science and Democracy. Alas, the deep-rooted traditions persisted in Chinese society.

During China's Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Confucianism, viewed as hindering the progress of "a new social revolution", was a target for attack as well as religions and other old traditions. As a result, people's moral values deteriorated. Now, there is a complete reversal in promoting traditional values for moral training and character building. Confucianism as well as Taoism and Buddhism, are again on the rise; people are hungry for Chinese Classics. TV lectures on Chinese Classics have catapulted some speakers to rock star status.

Just who was Confucius? He was born in Qufu, Shandong Province of China in 551 BC, before China became a united country established by Qin Shi Huang Di (First Emperor) in 221 BC. In fact the First Emperor of Qin, in his efforts to exert iron grip on people, tried to ban Confucius' ideas by burning his books and burying Confucian scholars. Without benevolent rule of

Confucian principles, Qin Dynasty's tyranny lasted a mere 15 years (221-206 BC), overturned in a people's uprising who established the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220AD). Fortunately, a set of Confucius' books was hidden in the walls by his followers that escaped burning.

During Confucius' life, he was ignored by rulers who were busy fighting with neighboring states. Sun Zi's Art of War was more popular and sought after than Confucius' ideas of kindness and harmony. He traveled from state to state, but no ruler offered him employment as a consul. He never enjoyed fame and fortune in his lifetime. He may have earned the distinction to be the first one to start a "school" when he taught a group of students under an apricot tree. Reportedly, he had 72 disciples and 3000 students. This group of devoted followers preserved and spread his philosophy that has influenced Chinese people for 2500 years.

How does this unemployed philosopher come to dominate Chinese culture? Learning from the mistakes of Qin Dynasty, the great Chinese emperor— Han Wudi (141-87 BC) — made Confucianism the state doctrine. Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) was a long period of 426 years of stability and prosperity that people of various groups assimilated into the melting pot of one race called "Han" people. Today, 95% of the population in China is still called "Han" people. Chinese language is called "Han" language. Confucianism became the mainstream thought of Han culture ever since.

Can a philosopher born 2500 years ago have anything to do with the current prosperity in China? This essay tries to delve into the mystery. Although there are many books in Chinese on Chinese culture, there are not enough reading

materials in English for people in the West, such as the special issue on Confucianism (Chinese American Forum, December, 2008.)

Chinese Americans with bicultural background are in a unique position to explain Chinese culture to American people in promoting mutual understanding for world peace. This essay is an attempt to shed some light on the essence of Confucianism. I can only scratch the surface as I am not a scholar on Chinese Classics. With no resources in English, translations of Chinese into English in this essay are strictly my own.

The Essence of Confucianism



Confucianism is not a religion. Confucius (Master Kong) said: "Not knowing life, how do we know death?" "Not able to serve humans, how do we serve spirits? Because he never claimed divinity, his philosophy did not exclude other beliefs. In fact, he reportedly consulted Lao Zi who originated Taoism. He was an advocate of life-long learning. Confucius said: "Walking among three, there is a teacher for me". In an atmosphere of respect for other beliefs, all later religions like Buddhism, Islam and Christianity have coexisted with Confucianism peacefully. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism coexisted throughout Chinese history. They were compatible in their beliefs of peace and harmony. Confucius, Lao Zi

and Buddha were considered saints of wisdom, not divine gods in a religious sense. There was never a war in China in the name of "God".

The essence of Confucianism is in kindness and harmony among people. Confucianism has been the dominant ideology in Chinese society for the last 2000 years since the Han Dynasty when it became the state doctrine. The goal was to develop individual's character-

perfection: to be a good citizen, to be the best son, father, brother, husband, and friend a person can be. In China, it was a mistake to eradicate Confucianism during the Cultural Revolution. People had no code of ethics to live by. It was a period of moral deterioration and social upheaval. Although Confucianism was born under a monarchy, Confucian qualities have universal value in today's world for moral quality of people. Now there is a Confucianism revival in China. Over 300 Confucius Institutes have been established around the world amidst growing interest in Chinese culture.

Confucius made a great contribution when he organized the FIVE CLASSICS:

BOOK OF RECORDS, BOOK OF POETRY, BOOK OF CHANGE, BOOK OF RITES and SPRING AND AUTUMN ANNALS.

These were ancient historical, literary and philosophical legacies before Confucius' time.

Confucianism as we know it today was organized into "FOUR BOOKS" by the great Confucian scholar Zhu Xi (1130-1200) of Song Dynasty. The FOUR BOOKS are: ANALECTS, DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN, THE GREAT LEARNING and MENCIOUS. They contain philosophies and thoughts of Confucius and his followers. Hence we call the whole realm of philosophy: CONFUCIANISM.

FOUR BOOKS

- "ANALECTS" is a collection of Confucius' teachings and sayings as recorded by his disciples. The essence of Confucianism can be distilled in eight virtues: — loyalty, filial piety, kindness, love, trust, righteousness, harmony and peace. As the Teacher of Ten Thousand Generations, Confucius made "education" his important legacy. He was democratic in his idea

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of education. For example, he believed that everyone can be improved by education. People from all walks of life deserve an education regardless of rank or status. Not only was he democratic, he also believed in individual teaching to suit students' talents and abilities.

In Chinese culture, parents hold the highest authority and command the most respect in a family. Filial piety is the most important virtue in Confucian society—the basis for all other virtues. The rationale is: if one is not good to one's parents, how can he/ she be expected to be good to others? The equivalent of the word "filial piety" is not a word we can find in the English dictionary. It means love, respect, devotion and care for parents and elders...etc. For lack of better words, "filial piety" is used in America for it. These 2 awkward words do not convey any obvious meaning of its essence. They still require further explanation.

In the traditional Chinese society, caring for the old is never a problem. Children take care of their parents as a matter of course. In turn, parents care for grandchildren as the best babysitters and teachers. Old people lives with the family surrounded by love ones. They lend a helping hand to the second generation in cooking and housework. Furthermore, they are able to interact with the third generation to pass on love and wisdom to the great benefit of grandchildren. In a society of traditional Chinese culture, there are no problems of Social Security and Medicare expenses, no burden on the taxpayers, no nursing home payments, or babysitting cost, etc. There is only love and care for one another in this picture of family harmony.

In 2200 years of Chinese monarchy as a united country, even emperors with absolute powers had to strive for Confucian qualities to be considered good kings worthy of the love and

support of the people. Those who won people's hearts won the world; those who lost people's hearts lost the world. Under benevolent rulers of Confucian qualities, people enjoyed long periods of peace and prosperity. Confucius set a high standard for rulers even though not all emperors could live up to it. Undeserving kings were soon overthrown by people for new dynasties to begin.

- **“DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN”** is another book of FOUR BOOKS Classics, by Confucius' grandson Zi Si to summarize Confucius' teachings. It stressed centrism or moderation—not going to extremes in anything. The doctrine means the middle way—not to deviate from the center. It also means tolerance and respect for other ideas. Extremism always leads to problems of intolerance, and sometimes, violence. Confucian idea of “MEAN” mirrors Taoist's balance of Yin and Yang. Even in today's world, we have seen enough trouble caused by extremism.

- **“MENCIUS”** is one of the FOUR BOOKS of Confucian Classics. Mencius (372-289 BC) was an important figure in Confucianism. He believed in the innate goodness of human nature. A child's heart is always pure. We learn evil in later life. He was democratic in his thinking: “People first, society second, the sovereign last” was how he ranked the importance in a country. Some emperors banned the democratic ideas of his book because he placed people first and the sovereign last. However, he was already revered in people's hearts as a saint. Even emperors could not banish the noble ideals. He believed in universal love: “Care for others' old as our own; love others' young as our own”. His ideas are essential parts of Confucianism, second only to Confucius' own.

- **“GREAT LEARNING”** gives us the Confucian roadmap to “Utopia” - a logical process starting from education and perfection of self to family harmony to good government to world peace. To translate this one line into English, it would take several paragraphs. The beauty of Chinese language is that it's so concise.

The “FOUR BOOKS” and “FIVE CLASSICS” were studied by the Chinese since childhood. Everyone aspired to do well on these subjects in a series of civil service examinations—on the county level, provincial level and national level. The examinations were a democratic process open to the public regardless of rank or status. Anyone could aspire to rise to the top through examinations. It had become a tradition that people studied hard to excel in the civil service examinations in order to be in a position to serve the country. Those winning top honors were appointed by emperors to important positions to serve in the government. Although the subject matter of examinations on classics is out of date, the entrenched practice has instilled a life-long learning and hard-working habits in Chinese people starting from childhood. Today even Asian students born in America continue the tradition to pursue academic excellence in modern subjects of science and technology as well as in humanities.

Confucianism has been the dominant philosophy of life in China. Other chopsticks countries such as Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Singapore ...etc. also have cultures with strong Confucian influence. There are Confucius “temples” not only in China, but also in Japan, Korea, Vietnam and other Asian countries.

Confucius Hometown Qufu

We visited Confucius' hometown “Qufu”, now a tourist Mecca. There is a palatial compound with three parts—Confucius Temple, Kong family home and family burial ground. When Confucius died, his disciple built a simple hut to be near Master Kong's grave. Later, as his influence grew over the centuries, emperors in succeeding dynasties kept building palatial structures and attended memorial services to show their reverence. Confucius Temple and Kong family home became one of the three major palace groups in China, the other two being The Forbidden City in Beijing and the Summer Palace in Chengde.

All Confucius' descendants were buried in the family burial ground called "Kong Forest" which is like a botanical garden with exotic plants brought by his followers. There is a cedar tree still alive today planted by Han Wudi (140-87 BC, Emperor of Han Dynasty). Emperor Qianlong (1736-95) of Qing Dynasty even made a drawing of this tree and had it carved on a stone tablet. One of his daughters was married into the Kong (T) family. A wall of 15 kilometers long was erected around Confucian's family compound. During the War with Japan (1937-45), Japanese soldiers refrained from attacks on this compound out of their reverence for Confucius. It is remarkable that this family compound has been preserved for 2500 years—the longest-lasting in the world. Not even emperors in the history of China could claim such honor.

We also visited the nearby famous mountain Tai Shan. There is a stone marker commemorating the place where Confucius climbed to the top of the mountain. Later Tai Shan became a sacred mountain for emperors who came after Confucius to perform ceremonial services to pray for good fortunes to befall on the country and people.

This essay is only an attempt to summarize the essence of Confucianism and to stimulate discussions by Confucian scholars in the hopes "to throw a brick to draw a jade" as in the Chinese saying. Confucianism is the main ideology in China, but it is not the totality of Chinese culture. Taoism and Buddhism as well as art and poetry are also important elements in Chinese culture which I will elaborate in other essays.

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