

The practiced by
many, especially in
the educated



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The history of Chinese civilization spans thousands of years and encompasses countless ideas, beliefs, and societal and political doctrines. However, from a modern standpoint one distinct perspective prevails above the rest in the manner and degree it has influenced the development of China. For the previous 2, 000 years the teachings of Confucius, and the systems of thought and behavior that have evolved from them, have had significant effects on Chinese thought, government institutions, literature and social customs.

Confucianism has served a primary role as a social and moral philosophy and as practiced by many, especially in the educated upper classes, Confucianism had definite religious dimensions. The teachings of Confucius served to unite a developing society, binding together various aspects of civilization and culture into one coherent body that functions under common values and attitudes. Confucius sought a type of all encompassing unity for the world and for his people; his wisdom was intended to serve as guide. In the Analects, a compendium of Confucian teachings, Confucius said, 'Be of unwavering good faith and love learning. Be steadfast unto death in pursuit of the good Way. Do not enter a state which is in peril, nor reside in one in which the people have rebelled.

When the Way prevails in the world, then show yourself. When it does not, then hide. When the Way prevails in your own state, to be poor and obscure is a disgrace; but when the Way does not prevail in your own state, to be rich and honored is a disgrace.' (Analects 4.

5) This lesson serves well as a paradigm for Confucian thought; it shows the direction that Confucius aspired toward, and the proper methods for the journey. Before endeavoring to understand Confucianism and its connection with China, it is necessary to develop an understanding of China in the pre-Confucius era, in which this philosophy evolved. The most ancient evidence of Chinese religious and social civilization dates back to the Shang dynasty, circa 1500 B. C. E. In this early agricultural society, there is evidence of some of the basic fundamentals of most Chinese religious thought; the pursuit, establishment, maintenance and enjoyment of harmony in the earthly world.

During the Zhou dynasty (1122 – 771 B. C. E.

), the path initiated by the Shang was sustained and expanded upon. The Zhou quest for harmony and order led to the development of some extremely crucial concepts that would directly effect the development of Confucianism. It was in this era that the notion of Tian, the force that can be best understood as heaven, first came to light. This later led to the conception of the idea of the Mandate of Heaven (Tian-ming) from which rulers derived all power and sense of legitimacy, due to the accordance of their behaviors with the norms of morality and ritual correctness. In connection with this, the relatively stable feudal society of Zhou era was responsible for the emergence of the tao.

This principle made cosmic order and harmony possible; the tao can be thought of as the road or path from which come perfect unity, harmony and order. This idea played a critical role in the development of Confucianism

and dramatically affected the course of Chinese development. In the eighth century B.

C. E., the Zhou dynasty began to fall apart as barbarous tribes invaded from the west. This led to the disintegration of Zhou rule and the creation of a number of contending smaller states hoping to re-unify China under a new dynasty. This serious breach in the structure of society and the disharmony that prevailed led to new movements of thought. The sages of this time felt strong aspirations to find solutions to the numerous problems that surrounded them. It probably is for this reason that the six-century B.

C. E. was characterized by distinct progress in Chinese thought, and became known as the age of the hundred philosophers.

Foremost in this era, Confucius was born. Kung Fu-tzu was the given name of the great moral philosopher and teacher, Confucius is merely a romanized version of this. He is thought to have been born in the principality of Lu, in what is now Shantung Province, in Northeast China. This is the only information about Confucius that is known to be unyielding fact; almost all of the biographical information on this man is derived from the Life of Confucius by the historian Szema Ch'ien.

Nearly all the data contained in this book is held to be accurate, being derived from dependable oral traditions. Confucius is said to have embarked on his quest for knowledge, order and harmony in an effort to dispel the conflict and dissension that existed in his time. Throughout his life he would seek to bring about a return to the ancient values, through a standardization of rituals, the creation of a system of rationalized feudalism and, most

importantly, the establishment of ethical relationships based upon the principals of reciprocity and benevolence. Confucius most likely started his career in a very lowly position (although some scholars dispute this) and through his intense devotion and perseverance was able to rise to a respected position in the civil service.

It was at this time that Confucius is thought to have traveled widely in China, studying ancient rites and ceremonies. His devotion to antiquity was genuine and passionate. Confucius said, 'I transmit but do not create. I have been faithful to and loved antiquity' (Analects 7. 1) Confucius then developed a reputation for overtly criticizing government policies, arguing that the governments of the time were leading the people away from li, a Confucian inspiration that can best be understood as a amalgamation of the terms ritual, custom, propriety and manners. Because of this Confucius began to devote the preponderance of his labors to teaching and edification.

Confucius is accredited to have said, ' I silently accumulate knowledge; I study and do not get bored; I teach others and do not grow weary – for these things come naturally to me.'(Analects 7. 2) Confucius quickly began to develop a reputation as a prominent instructor and sage. Even though he had ceased to function as a political administrator, his teachings were steeped in politics and state affairs. In fact, an inordinate number of Confucian pupils achieved great success as office seekers. In his last years, Confucius wholeheartedly devoted himself to editing the classical books of Chinese history now known as the Wu Jing or Five Classics. In these books Confucius sought to permanently preserve the ancient knowledge that he

valued so dearly, and it seems to serve as a perfect legacy for this distinguished academic.

Confucianism can be most easily understood by breaking its complexities into distinct vocabulary, in fact Confucius himself was reasonably obsessed with terminology. Li, the principle of social conduct to be observed by the moral personality that assumes the form of ritual and social order, was Confucius' answer to the problems of his era. As he saw the state of affairs, the adamant ritualization of life would facilitate the creation of a harmonious society. The first step in the Confucian program to establish the proper order of things, tao, was to reform the government. Confucius' approach to this is quite distinct when looking from a western point of view that favors a democratic and egalitarian ideal. Confucius believed that direction must come from the uppermost levels of the state, thus working its way down to everyone.

However Confucius held no value in any type of official coercion. Instead he believed that if the leaders were accomplished and virtuous (te), and they lived by li, that the people would correct their behavior by their own initiative. In the Analects, Confucius said, Lead the people with legal measures and regulate them by punishment, and they will avoid wrongdoing but will have no sense of honor and shame. Lead them with the power of virtuous example and regulate them by the rules of li, and they will have a sense of shame and will thus rectify themselves. (Analects 2. 3) Confucius sought to create an environment in which people would naturally be harmonious and thus virtuous.

He believed that harmony was an unavoidable result of li, because li was a perfect reflection of cosmic order. From a Confucian perspective, any land that acted according to li was civilized, and any land that did not was not civilized. This idea was even expanded to claim that a in populace that did not abide by li, the people were not fully human, in the sense that they had no means of realizing the full potential of humanity, called ren. Another important aspect of Confucianism was an ideal known as chun-tzu, which is contemporarily defined as superior man or true gentleman. Confucius likely envisioned this concept due to his struggles against the resolute privileges of the feudal hereditary aristocracy of his day. Confucius saw many of the aristocracy using their political power to protect their own wealth and status, which he saw as a gross distortion of the proper order. The superior man of Confucian thought was a man honored for individual merit and character, which were derived from meticulous adherence to the Way of the ancients.

The chun-tzu was embodied in a man who was above egotism, a man who thoroughly understood li, and a man of ren, altruistic and humane. Confucian thought continued to flourish and develop in China, even long after the death of Confucius himself. Around the tenth century a great revival of Confucianism spread across China, triggered by two philosopher brothers, Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi. They ignited the spark that would lead to Neo-Confucianism with their highly respected commentaries on the Confucian classics. Neo-Confucianism blended the old Confucian way with Buddhism, which had a significant following in China. From old Confucianism it derived an emphasis on moral principals, proper order, rule governed behavior and harmonious human relationships. But these ideas were filtered through a

Buddhist perspective, creating the notion that all thought, ordinary experience, and performance of rituals are based on a single, absolute ultimate reality.

This absolute was called Li, though had a completely different meaning than the original use of this word. In the Neo-Confucian outlook, Li comprises the ideas of reason, principle and order. This was the fundamental principle that governed the thought of the Neo-Confucian, it became a metaphysical entity to them; Li was reality itself. Along with this newfound fixation with the absolute, Neo-Confucians also developed a clear definition of the most important Confucian virtues, called the five moral principals. Ju Xi, a prominent Neo-Confucian philosopher said, Man's original nature is pure and tranquil. Before it is aroused, the five moral principals of his nature, called humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faithfulness, are complete. As his physical form appears, it comes into contact with external things and is aroused from within.

As it is aroused from within, the seven feelings, called pleasure, anger, sorrow, joy, love, hate and desire, ensue. As feelings become strong and increasingly reckless, his nature becomes damaged. For this reason the enlightened person controls his feelings so that they will be in accord with the Mean. He rectifies his mind and nourishes his nature. (Ibid 2. 3) According to this train of thought, emotions are grounded in Li, the absolute, and are stimulated by the activities of everyday life. By nature the emotions, even anger and hate, are not considered bad. But when the emotions become over stimulated, a disparity may appear between one's inner essential nature and one's outer, conscious life.

When this takes place, one's actions will no longer be in accordance with the Principal and disharmony will persist unbridled. In addition to Neo-Confucianism's emphasis on emotional control, the old moral and political stance of Confucius was held to be paramount. Respecting the ancient knowledge in the true Confucian manner, Neo-Confucianism continued to emphasize the regulation of public and private lives.

Everything was to be kept in its proper place, and ritualized social patterns prevailed. Enacting a firmly regulated social life was inner harmony and the direct experience of the ultimate Li. Confucianism almost exclusively regulated the social and political structure of China from the eleventh century through the nineteenth. Much can be ascertained about China by studying this phenomenon. Confucianism was always an elite tradition, and it generally did not appeal greatly to the masses. For this reason, in Confucian ruled China, few attempts were made to root out and dissolve other religious practices and institutions. Although this could have likely been done without excessive effort, the original Confucian stance of rule-by-example was strictly adhered to. Thus the Confucian attitude toward Daoist, Buddhist and folk religious practices was one of bemused toleration.

It only catalyzed into active persecution if one of the groups entered a position where it was a threat to political stability. Confucianism held its related position in China through intense promotion of Confucian institutions acting on the state, village, occupational guild and family level. At the state level, Confucian practices and many groups were strictly adherent to rituals. The educated elite, intellectuals and office holders were often devout supporters of Confucian structure.

Twice a year government officials gathered at Confucian temples to practice determined rituals. These rituals were quite important, serving to show the officials' loyalty to the state and their loyalty to the ideas of chun-tzu, the superior man. In the Imperial court, there was also an intense devotion to Confucian rituals. The emperor himself played a vital role in most of these practices, symbolically acting on behalf of the entire Chinese nation.

Throughout the entire record of Chinese history as we know it today, few things remained constant. Yet because of the extent at which Confucianism was integrated into Chinese society, politics and daily life, it stayed invariable for many hundreds of years. Confucian thought played a dominant role in the gradual development and evolution of a society. Even though dramatic changes have reshaped China in the recent history, it seems like many Confucian attitudes and ideas must still influence the way Chinese think and live.

Few factors could have helped to shape the Chinese character more dramatically. It is for this reason that I see Confucianism as a valuable tool for developing a lucid and precise understanding of China. To understand Confucianism similar to understanding the manner in which a river helps to shape a canyon.

Confucianism holds many direct contrasts to the majority of western the philosophies that I have experienced. Understanding this has helped me bridge the cultural and philosophical gap between China and the West that has hindered my comprehension in the past. Wright, Arthur F. Confucianism and Chinese Civilization. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975. Dawson, Raymond.

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