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## *Confucius and Confucianism*

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### **The Confucian Ethos**

Confucianism, a generic Western term that has no counterpart in Chinese, is a worldview, a social ethic, a political ideology, a scholarly tradition, and a way of life. Although Confucianism is often grouped together with Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Taoism as a major historical religion, it is not an organized religion. Yet, it has exerted a profound influence on East Asian political culture as well as on East Asian spiritual life. Both in theory and practice, Confucianism has made an indelible mark on the government, society, education, and family of East Asia. It is an exaggeration to characterize traditional Chinese life and culture as "Confucian," but Confucian ethical values have, for well over 2,000 years, served as the source of inspiration as well as the court of appeal for human interaction at all levels—between individuals, communities, and nations in the Sinic world.

Confucianism did not have an organized missionary tradition, but by the first century B.C., it had spread to those East Asian countries under the influence of Chinese literate culture. The age of Confucianism, in the centuries following the Confucian revival of Sung times (A.D. 960–1279), embraced Choson dynasty Korea from the fifteenth century and Tokugawa Japan from the seventeenth century. Prior to the introduction of Western powers into East Asia in the mid-nineteenth century, the Confucian persuasion was so predominant in the art of governance, the form and content of elite education, and the moral discourse of the populace that China, Korea, and Japan were all distinctively "Confucian" states. Moreover, Vietnam and Singapore in Southeast Asia have also been under Confucian influence.

The story of Confucianism does not begin with Confucius (Latinized form of K'ung-fu-tzu, Master K'ung; 551–479 B.C.). The Chinese term *Ju-chia*,  
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which is inadequately rendered as Confucianism, literally means the "family of scholars," signifying a genealogy, a school, or a tradition of learning. Confucius was not the founder of Confucianism in the sense that Buddha was the founder of Buddhism and Christ was the founder of Christianity. Nor did Confucius live up to the highest Confucian ideal, the sage-king. Throughout Chinese history, followers of Confucian tradition openly acknowledge that only the legendary sage-kings such as Yao and Shun fully embodied the Confucian idea of "inner sageliness and outer kingliness."

Confucianism is a historical phenomenon. The emergence of the Confucian tradition as a way of life, its elevation to the status of a state cult, its decline as moral persuasion, its continuous influence in society, its revival as a living faith, its metamorphosis into a political ideology, its response to the impact of the West, and its modern transformation, can all be analyzed as integral parts of East Asian culture. The Confucians do not have an internalist hagiographic interpretation of their past narrative. Indeed, a distinctive feature of Confucianism is its expressed intention to regard the everyday human world as profoundly spiritual. By regarding the secular as sacred, the Confucians try to refashion the world from within according to their cultural ideal of the unity between human community and Heaven.

The period of 550–200 B.C., historically known as the age of the "hundred philosophers," was a golden age in classical Chinese thought. Contending vigorously in proposing solutions to the pressing problem of bringing order out of chaos and in giving meaning to human life under constant threat of brutal warfare, four major schools of thought emerged as four substantially different responses to the decline and fall of the glorious Chou civilization, an elaborate "feudal" ritual system that had provided economic well-being, political order, social stability, and cultural elegance in China proper for several centuries.

The Taoists, who developed a philosophy of nature and spiritual freedom, advocated a total rejection of human civilization, which they believed to be the source of suffering. The Moists were concerned about the aggressiveness of the newly arisen hegemonic states, the wastefulness of the aristocratic style of life, and the pervasive injustice. They organized themselves into military units to bring about love and peace through self-sacrifice. The Legalists accepted the inevitable disintegration of the "feudal" ritual system and allied themselves to the centers of power. The Confucians opted for a long-term solution to the collapse of the Chou dynasty through education as character-building. They believed that one could attain true nobility through self-cultivation and inner enlightenment. Their ideal humanity (sagehood) and their practical model (the nobleman) were not only prophets and philosophers but also teachers and statesmen. This combination of theory and practice made them men of spiritual vision and political mission who shared a common faith and creed.

For several centuries, Confucius was counted as one of the philosophers and Confucianism one of the schools in the Chinese world of thought. It took

a few generations of concerted effort by the followers of Confucius to establish the "scholarly tradition" advocated by Confucius as the dominant intellectual force in China. However, Confucianism never existed alone as the exclusive orthodoxy of the state and the attempt to promote Confucianism as the state ideology at the expense of other schools in the second century B.C. was short-lived. Rather, the gradual expansion of the Confucian cultural movement into different layers of an alien despotic polity and various echelons of society enabled the tradition to become truly influential. The carriers of the Confucian tradition were the scholars. They were men of action as well as ideas. Through their efforts, the Confucian persuasion penetrated virtually all dimensions of life in traditional China.

A viable way of life for so many and for so long, Confucianism has sometimes been viewed as a philosophy and sometimes as a religion. As an all-encompassing humanism that neither denies nor slights Heaven, it is not only the faith and creed of the Chinese scholars but a way of life in East Asia; so deeply ingrained in the fabric of society and polity that it is often taken for granted as naturally human. East Asians may profess themselves to be Shintoists, Taoists, Buddhists, Muslims, or Christians, but rarely, if ever, do they cease to be Confucians.

### **The Life and Thought of Confucius**

Confucius considered himself a "transmitter" rather than a "creator"; he consciously tried to reanimate the old order to attain the new. He proposed that we retrieve the meaning of the past by breathing vitality into the seemingly outmoded rituals. Confucius's love of antiquity was motivated by his strong desire to understand why certain rituals, such as the ancestral cult, reverence for Heaven, and the mourning ceremonies, had survived for centuries. His journey into the past was a search for roots, roots of humanity grounded in the deepest needs for belonging and communication. He had faith in the cumulative culture. The fact that traditional ways had declined did not diminish their great potential for innovation in the future. In fact, Confucius's sense of history was so strong that he saw himself as a conservationist responsible for the continuity of the cultural values and the social norms that had worked so well for the Chou civilization.

#### *The Historical Context*

The scholarly tradition envisioned by Confucius can be traced back to the sage-kings of antiquity. Although the earliest dynasty confirmed by archaeology to date was the Shang dynasty (c. twenty-third century B.C.), the history that Confucius claimed to have been relevant was much earlier. Confucius may

have initiated a cultural process known in the West as Confucianism, but he and those who followed him considered themselves part of a tradition, later identified by Chinese historians as *Ju-chia*, "scholarly tradition," which had its origins two millennia previously when, legend has it, the sage-kings Yao and Shun formed a moral community by their exemplary teaching.

Confucius may have dreamed of the golden age of Yao and Shun as "great harmony," but his hero was the Duke of Chou (d. 1094 B.C.), who was said to have helped to consolidate and refine the "feudal" ritual system, thus enabling the Chou dynasty to survive in relative peace and prosperity for more than five centuries. Inspired by the statesmanship of the duke, Confucius's lifelong dream was to be in a position where he could emulate the duke by putting into practice the political ideas that he had learned from the ancient sage-kings. Although Confucius never realized his political dream, his conception of politics as moral persuasion became more and more influential.

The idea of Heaven, unique in Chou cosmology, was compatible with the concept of the Lord-on-High in the Shang dynasty. The Lord-on-High may have referred to the progenitor of the Shang royal lineage so that the Shang kings could claim their position as divine descendants as the emperors of Japan later did, but Heaven to the Chou kings was a much more generalized anthropomorphic God. They believed that the Mandate of Heaven (the functional equivalent of the will of the Lord-on-High) is not constant and that there is no guarantee that the descendants of the Chou royal house will be entrusted with kingship, for "Heaven sees as the people see and heaven hears as the people hear"; the virtues of the kings are essential for the maintenance of their power and authority.

This emphasis on benevolent rulership, as evidenced in the pronouncements of numerous bronze inscriptions, was both a reaction to the collapse of the Shang dynasty and an affirmation of a deep-rooted worldview. Although the Chou military conquest, which may have occurred in 1045 B.C., was the immediate cause for the downfall of the Shang dynasty, the Chou conquerors strongly believed that the last Shang king lost the Mandate of Heaven because of his indulgence in debauchery. Since the Mandate of Heaven was never wedded to a particular lineage and since the only guarantee for the preservation of the Mandate was the superior performance of the rulers, the Chou kings were apprehensive of losing the trust of the people. The rhetoric of benevolent rulership was also predicated on the worldview that since one is intimately connected with one's ancestral line—which, for the royal household, extends virtually to all members of the nobility—one acts on behalf of a community, and that the mutuality between Heaven and the human community further demands that the kings, as Sons of Heaven, conduct themselves in the spirit of filial piety not only toward their own ancestors but toward Heaven as well.

Partly because of the vitality of the "feudal" ritual system and partly because of the strength of the royal household itself, the Chou kings were able to control their kingdom for several centuries, but in 771 B.C. they were forced to move their capital eastward to present-day Lo-yang to avoid barbarian attacks from Central Asia. The real power then passed into the hands of feudal lords. However, since the surviving line of the Chou kins continued to be recognized in name, they still managed to exercise some measure of symbolic control.

The "feudal" ritual system was based on blood ties, marriage alliances, and old covenants as well as newly negotiated contracts and was an elaborate system of mutual dependence. The appeal to cultural values and social norms for the maintenance of interstate as well as domestic order was predicated on a shared political vision: authority lay in the universal kingship, which was heavily invested with ethical and religious power by the Mandate of Heaven. Organic social solidarity was achieved not by legal constraint but by ritual observance.

By Confucius's time, the "feudal" ritual system had been so fundamentally undetermined that political crises precipitated a profound sense of moral decline: the center of symbolic control could no longer hold the kingdom from total disintegration. Archaeological and textual evidence shows that the period witnessed unprecedented economic growth (e.g., the use of iron for agricultural implements, the availability of metallic coinage, commercialization, and urbanization) and the loosening of the kinship bonds of rigidly stratified society. Both contributed to a major restructuring the political order.

Confucius's response was to raise the ultimate question of learning to be human; in so doing he attempted to reformulate and revitalize the institutions that, for centuries, had been vital to political stability and social order: the family, the school, the local community, the state, and the kingdom. Confucius did not accept the status quo, which held that wealth and power spoke the loudest. He felt that virtue, both as a personal quality and as a requirement for leadership, is essential for individual dignity, communal solidarity, and political order.

### *The Life of Confucius*

If the English-speaking community were to choose one word to characterize the Chinese way of life for the last two thousand years, the word would be "Confucian." It assumed that no other person in Chinese history has so profoundly influenced the thoughts and actions of his people, as a teacher of humanity, as a transmitter of culture, an interpreter of history, and as a molder of the Chinese minds. The other religious philosophies, notably Taoism and Buddhism, have also significantly shaped the Chinese character; but Confucian values and norms have never ceased to be defining characteristics of the

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Chinese way of life. Many Chinese have professed to be Taoist, Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian, but seldom have they abandoned their Confucian roots. From the time that Confucianism was generally accepted by the Chinese populace (second century B.C.), it has become an integral part of Chinese society as a whole and of what it means to be Chinese.

Considering Confucius's tremendous importance, his life seems starkly undramatic, or as a Chinese expression has it, "plain and real." The plainness and reality of Confucius's life, however, illustrate his humanity not as revealed truth but as an expression of self-cultivation, the ability of human effort to shape his own destiny. The faith in the possibility of ordinary human beings' becoming awe inspiring sages and worthies is deeply rooted in the Confucian heritage, and the insistence that human beings are teachable, improvable, and perfectible through personal and communal endeavor is typically Confucian.

Although the facts about Confucius's life are scanty, they provide us with an unusually precise time frame and historical context. Confucius was born in the twenty-second year of the reign of Duke Hsiang of Lu (551 B.C.). The traditional claim that he was born on the twenty-seventh day of the eighth lunar month has been questioned by historians, but the twenty-eighth of September is still widely observed in East Asia as Confucius's birthday. It is an official holiday, "Teachers' Day," in Taiwan.

Confucius was born in Ch'u-fu in the small feudal state of Lu in modern Shantung Province, which was noted for its preservation of the traditions of ritual and music of the Chou civilization. His family name was K'ung and his personal name Ch'iu, but he is referred to as either "K'ung Tzu" or "K'ung Fu-tzu" ("Master K'ung") throughout Chinese history. The adjectival "Confucian," conveniently derived from the Latinized Confucius, is not a meaningful term in Chinese; nor is the term "Confucianism," which was coined as recently as the eighteenth century in Europe.

Confucius's ancestors were probably members of the aristocracy who had become virtually poverty-stricken commoners by the time of his birth. His father died when Confucius was only three years old. Instructed first by his mother, Confucius then distinguished himself as an indefatigable learner in his teens. Toward the end of his life he recalled that by the age of fifteen his heart was set upon learning. An historical account notes that, even though he was already known as an informed young scholar, he felt that it was appropriate to inquire about everything while visiting the Grand Temple.

Confucius served in minor government posts managing stables and keeping books for granaries before he married a woman of similar background when he was nineteen. It appears that he may have already acquired a reputation as a multitalented scholar at an early age. He had just turned twenty when he named his newborn son "Carp," allegedly after the gift of the Lu king had sent him. Confucius's mastery of the six arts—ritual, music, archery, charioteering,

calligraphy, and arithmetic—and his familiarity with the classical traditions, notably poetry and history, enabled him to start a brilliant teaching career in his thirties.

We do not know who Confucius's teachers were. There is a story that he sought instructions on ritual from the Taoist master, Lao Tzu, that is obviously apocryphal, but it is well known that he made a conscientious effort to find the right masters to teach him, among other things, ritual and music. Confucius is known as the first private teacher in China, for he was instrumental in establishing the art of teaching as a vocation, indeed a way of life. Before Confucius, aristocratic families had hired tutors to educate their sons, and government officials had instructed their subordinates in the necessary techniques, but he was the first person to devote his whole life to learning and teaching for the purpose of transforming and improving society. He believed that all human beings could benefit from self-cultivation. He inaugurated a humanities program for potential leaders, opened the doors of education to all, and defined learning not merely as the acquisition of knowledge, but also as character-building.

For Confucius, the primary function of education was to provide the proper way of training noblemen (*chun-tzu*), a process that involved constant self-improvement and continuous social interactions. Although he emphatically noted that learning is “for the sake of the self” (the end of which is self-knowledge and self-realization), he found public service a natural consequence of true education. Confucius confronted learned hermits who challenged the validity of his desire to serve the world; he resisted the temptation to “herd with birds and animals” to live apart from the human community and opted to try to transform the world from within. For decades, Confucius was actively involved in the political arena hoping to put his humanist ideas into practice through governmental channels.

In his late forties and early fifties, Confucius served first as a magistrate, then as an assistant minister of public works, and eventually as minister of justice in the state of Lu. It is likely that he accompanied King Lu as his chief minister on one of the diplomatic missions. Confucius's political career was, however, short-lived. His loyalty to the king alienated him from the power holders of the time, the big Chi families, and his moral rectitude did not sit well with the king's inner circle, who enraptured the king with sensuous delight. At fifty-six, when he realized that his superiors were uninterested in his policies, he left the country in an attempt to find another feudal state to render service. Despite his political frustration, he was accompanied by an enlarging circle of students during this self-imposed exile of almost thirteen years. His reputation as a man of vision and mission spread. A guardian of a border post once characterized him as the “wooden tongue for a bell” of the age, delivering Heaven's prophetic note to awaken the people (*Analects* 3.24).

Indeed, Confucius was perceived as the heroic conscience who knew realistically that he might not succeed, but fired by a righteous passion, continuously did the best he could. At the age of sixty-seven, he returned home to teach and to preserve his cherished classical tradition by writing and editing. He died in 479 B.C. at the age of seventy-three. According to the Records of the Historian, seventy-two of his students mastered the “six arts” and those who claimed to be his followers numbered three thousand.

### *The Analects as the Embodiment of Confucian Ideas*

The *Analects* (*Lun-yu*), the most revered sacred scripture in the Confucian tradition, was probably compiled by the second generation of Confucius's disciples. Based primarily on the Master's sayings, preserved in both oral and written transmissions, it captures the Confucian spirit in form and content in the same way that the Platonic dialogues underscore the Socratic pedagogy. The *Analects* has often been viewed by the critical modern reader as a collection of unrelated conversations randomly put together. This impression may have resulted from the mistaken conception of Confucius as a mere commonsense moralizer who gave practical advice to students in everyday situations. If we approach the *Analects* as a sacred scripture centered around a sagely personality that is intended for those who want to revive and reanimate an historical moment, a sacred time, we come close to what has been revered in China for centuries. The *Analects* is a communal memory, a literary device on the part of those who considered themselves beneficiaries of the Confucian way to continue the memory and to transmit a form of life as a living tradition. The purpose in compiling these digested statements centering around Confucius is not to present an argument or to record an event but to offer an invitation for its readers to take part in an ongoing conversation. Dialogue is used to show Confucius in thought and action, not as an isolated individual, but as a center of relationships. Actually the sayings of the *Analects* reveal the inner person of Confucius—his ambitions, his fears, his joys, his commitments, and above all, his self-image. Confucians for centuries learned to reenact the awe-inspiring ritual of participating in a conversation with Confucius through the *Analects*.

One of Confucius's most significant personal descriptions is a short autobiographic account of his own spiritual development found in the *Analects*:

At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I firmly took my stand; at forty I had no delusions; at fifty I knew the Mandate of Heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the boundaries of right. (2.4)



Confucius's life as a student and teacher exemplified the Confucian idea that education is a ceaseless process of self-realization. When one of his students reportedly had difficulty describing him, Confucius came to his aid: "Why did you not simply say something to this effect: he is the sort of man who forgets to eat when he engages himself in vigorous pursuit of learning, who is so full of joy that he forgets his worries and who does not notice that old age is coming on?" (7.18).

Confucius was deeply concerned that the culture (*wen*) he cherished was not being transmitted and that the learning (*hsueh*) he propounded was not being taught. However, his strong sense of mission never interfered with his ability to remember silently what had been imparted to him, to learn without flagging, and to teach without growing weary (7.2). What he demanded of himself was strenuous: "It is these things that cause me concern: failure to cultivate virtue, failure to go deeply into what I have earned, inability to move up to what I have heard to be right, and inability to reform myself when I have defects" (7.3). What he demanded of his students was the willingness to learn: "I do not enlighten anyone who is not eager to learn, nor encourage anyone who is not anxious to put his ideas into words" (7.8).

The community that Confucius created through his inspiring personality was a scholarly fellowship of like-minded men of different ages and different backgrounds from different states. They were attracted to Confucius because they shared his vision and in varying degrees took part in his mission to bring moral order to an increasingly fragmented polity. This mission was difficult and even dangerous. The Master himself suffered from joblessness, homelessness, starvation, and, occasionally, life-threatening violence. Yet his faith in the survivability of the culture that he cherished and the workability of the approach to teaching that he propounded was so steadfast that he convinced his followers as well as himself that Heaven was on their side. When Confucius's life was threatened in K'uang, he said:

Since the death the King Wen [founder of the Chou dynasty], does not the mission of culture (*wen*) rest here in me? If Heaven intends this culture to be destroyed, those who come after me will not be able to have any part of it. If Heaven does not intend this culture to be destroyed, then what can the men of K'uang do to me? (9.5)

This expression of self-confidence may give the impression that there was presumptuousness in Confucius's self-image. However, Confucius made it explicit that he was far from attaining sagehood and that all he really excelled in was "love of learning" (5.28). To him learning not only broadened his

knowledge and deepened his self-awareness but also defined who he was. He frankly acknowledged that he was not born of knowledge (7.20) and that he did not belong to the class of men who could innovate without possessing knowledge (7.28). Rather, he reported that he used his ears widely and followed what was good in what he had heard, and used his eyes widely and retained what he had seen in his mind. His learning constituted "a lower level of knowledge" (7.28). This level of knowledge is presumably accessible to the majority of the human community. In this sense, Confucius was neither a prophet with privileged access to the divine nor a philosopher who has already seen the truth, but a teacher of humanity who is an advanced fellow traveller on the way to self-realization.

As a teacher of humanity, Confucius stated his ambition in terms of human care: "to bring comfort to the old, to have trust in friends, and to cherish the young" (5.26). Confucius's vision of the way to develop a moral community began with a holistic reflection on the human condition. Instead of dwelling on abstract ideas such as the state of nature, Confucius sought to understand the actual situation of a given time and use that as a point of departure. His aim was to restore trust in government and to transform society into a moral community by cultivating a sense of human caring in politics and society. To achieve that aim, the creation of a scholarly community, the fellowship of *chun-tzu* (noblemen), was essential. In the words of Confucius's disciple, Tseng Tzu, the true nobleman "must be broad-minded and resolute, for his burden is heavy and his road is long. He takes humanity as his burden. Is that not heavy? Only with death does his road come to an end. Is that not long?" (8.7). However, the fellowship of *chun-tzu*, as moral vanguards of society, did not seek to establish a radically different order. Its mission was to reformulate and revitalize those institutions that were believed to have for centuries maintained social solidarity and enabled people to live in harmony and prosperity. An obvious example was the role and function of the family.

It was related in the *Analects* that when Confucius was asked why he did not take part in government, he responded by citing a passage from an ancient classic, the *Book of Documents*, "Simply by being a good son and friendly to his brothers a man can exert an influence upon government!" to show that what one does in the confines of one's private home is politically significant (2.21). This is predicated on the Confucian conviction that the self-cultivation of each person is the root of social order and that social order is the basis for political stability and universal peace. This assertion that family ethics is politically efficacious must be seen in the context of the Confucian conception of politics as "rectification" (*cheng*). The rulers are supposed to be moral exemplars who govern by moral leadership and exemplary teaching rather than force.

The government's responsibility is not only to provide food and security but also to educate the people. Law and punishment are the minimum requirement for order; social harmony can only be attained by virtue through ritual performance. To perform ritual is to take part in a communal act to promote mutual understanding.

One of the fundamental Confucian values that ensures the integrity of ritual performance is filial piety. Confucius sees filial piety as the first step toward moral excellence. He seems to contend that the way to enhance personal dignity and identity is not to alienate ourselves from the family but to cultivate our genuine feelings for our parents. To learn to embody the family in our minds and hearts is to enable ourselves to move beyond self-centeredness, or to borrow from modern psychology, to transform the enclosed private ego into an open self. Indeed, the cardinal Confucian virtue, *jen* (humanity), is the result of self-cultivation. The first test for our self-cultivation is our ability to cultivate meaningful relationships with our family members. Filial piety does not demand unconditional submissiveness to parental authority but recognition of and reverence for our source of life.

The purpose of filial piety, as the Greeks would have it, is "human flourishing" for both parent and child. Confucians see it as an essential way of learning to be human. They are fond of applying the family metaphor to the community, the country, and the universe. They prefer to address the emperor as the son of Heaven, the king as ruler-father, and the magistrate as the "father-mother official" because they assume that implicit in the family-centered nomenclature is a political vision. When Confucius responded that taking care of family affairs is itself active participation in politics, he made it clear that family ethics is not merely a private and personal concern because the public good is realized by and through it.

In response to his best disciple, Yen Hui, Confucius defined humanity as "conquer yourself and return to ritual" (12.1). This interplay between inner spiritual self-transformation (the Master is said to have freed himself from four things: "opinionatedness, dogmatism, obstinacy, and egoism" [9.4]) and social participation enabled Confucius to be "loyal" (*chung*) to himself and "considerate" (*shu*) of others (4.15). Understandably, the Confucian "golden rule" is "Do not do unto others what you would not want others to do unto you!" (15.23). Confucius's legacy, laden with profound ethical implications, is captured by his "plain and real" appreciation of learning to be human as communal enterprise:

A man of humanity, wishing to establish himself, also establishes others, and wishing to enlarge himself, also enlarges others. The ability to take an analogy of what is near at hand can be called the method of humanity.

### Formation of the Classical Confucian Tradition

According to Mo Tzu (fl. 479–438 B.C.), shortly after Confucius's death, his followers split into eight distinct schools all claiming to be the legitimate heir to the Confucian legacy. Presumably each school was associated with or inspired by one or more of Confucius's disciples. Yet the Confucians did not exert much influence on the intellectual scene in the fifth century B.C. Although the mystic Yen Hui, the faithful Tseng Tzu, the talented Tzu Kung, the erudite Tzu-hsia, and others may have generated a great deal of enthusiasm among the second generation of Confucius's students, it was not at all clear at the time that the Confucian tradition would emerge as the most powerful persuasion in Chinese history.

Mencius (371–289 B.C.?) complained that the world of thought in the early Warring States period (403–222 B.C.) was dominated by the collectivism of Mo Tzu and the individualism of Yang Chu (440–360 B.C.). Judging from the historical situation a century after Confucius's death, the disintegration of the Chou "feudal" ritual system and the rise of powerful hegemonic states clearly showed that the Confucian attempt to moralize politics was not working and that wealth and power spoke the loudest. The hermits (the early Taoists) who left the mundane world to create a spiritual sanctuary in nature in order to lead a contemplative life and the realists (the proto-Legalists) who played the dangerous game of assisting ambitious kings to gain wealth and power so that they could influence the political process were actually setting the intellectual agenda. The Confucians refused to be identified with the interest of the ruling minority because their social consciousness impelled them to serve as the conscience of the people. They were in a dilemma. They wanted to be actively involved in politics but they could not accept the status quo as the legitimate arena in which authority and power were exercised. In short, they were in the world but not of the world; they could not leave the world, nor could they effectively change it.

#### *Mencius: The Paradigmatic Confucian Intellectual*

Mencius is known as the self-styled transmitter of the Confucian Way. Educated first by his mother and then allegedly by a student of Confucius's grandson, Mencius brilliantly performed his role as a social critic, a moral philosopher, and a political activist. He argued that cultivating a class of scholar-officials who would not be directly involved in agriculture, industry, and commerce was vital to the well-being of the state. In his sophisticated argument against the physiocrats (those who advocated the supremacy of agriculture), he intelligently employed the idea of the "division of labor" to defend those who "labor with their minds," and observed that "service" is as important as "pro-

ductivity." To him, Confucians serve the vital interests of the state as scholars not by becoming bureaucratic functionaries but by assuming the responsibility of teaching the ruling minority the "human government" (*jen-cheng*) and the kingly way (*wang-tao*). Understandably, in his dealing with feudal lords, Mencius conducted himself not merely as political adviser but also as a teacher of kings. Mencius made it explicit that a true man cannot be corrupted by wealth, subdued by power, or affected by poverty.

To articulate the relationship between Confucian moral idealism and the concrete social and political realities of his time, Mencius criticized the pervading ideologies of Mo Tzu's collectivism and Yang Chu's individualism as impractical. Mo Tzu advocated "universal love," but Mencius contended that the result of the Moist admonition to treat a stranger as intimately as one would treat one's own father would be to treat one's own father as indifferently as one would treat a stranger. Yang Chu, on the other hand, advocated the primacy of the self. Mencius contended that excessive attention to self-interest will lead to political disorder. Indeed, in the Moist collectivism, "fatherhood" cannot be established and, in Yang Chu's individualism, "kingship" cannot be established.

Mencius's strategy for social reform was to change the language of profit, self-interest, wealth, and power into a moral discourse with emphasis on rightness, public-spiritedness, welfare, and exemplary authority. However, Mencius was not arguing against profit. Rather, he instructed the feudal lords to opt for the great benefit that would sustain their own profit, self-interest, wealth, and power in a long-term perspective. He urged them to look beyond the horizon of their palaces and to cultivate a common bond with their ministers, officers, clerks, and the seemingly undifferentiated masses. Only then, he contended, would they be able to maintain their own livelihood. He encouraged them to extend their benevolence and warned them that this was crucial for the protection of their own families.

Mencius's appeal to that which is common to all people as a mechanism of government was predicated on his strong "populist" sense that the people are more important than the state and the state is more important than the king, and that the ruler who does not act in accordance with the kingly way is unfit. In an apt application of the Confucian principle of the "rectification of names," Mencius concluded that an unfit ruler should be criticized, rehabilitated, or, as the last resort, deposed. Since "Heaven sees as the people see; Heaven hears as the people hear," revolution, or literally "to change the Mandate" in extreme cases, is not only justifiable, but a moral imperative.

Mencius's "populist" conception of politics is predicated on his philosophical vision that human beings are perfectible through self-effort and that human nature is good. While he acknowledged biological and environmental factors in shaping the human condition, he insisted that we become moral

simply by willing to be so. According to Mencius, the reason that willing entails the transformative moral act is that our nature's propensity to be good is automatically activated whenever we decide to bring it up to our conscious attention. As an illustration, Mencius built his idea of the human government on the assertion that every human being is capable of commiseration:

No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others. Such a sensitive heart was possessed by the former kings and this manifested itself in humane government. With such a sensitive heart behind humane government, it was as easy to rule the world as rolling it on your palm. (IIA.6)

Mencius continued to observe that each human being is endowed with four feelings: commiseration, shame, modesty, and right and wrong. These feelings, like fire starting up or as a spring coming through, serve as the bases for cultivating the four cardinal virtues: humanity, rightness, ritual, and wisdom. The message is that we become moral not because we are told we must be good but because our nature, the depth-dimension of humanity, spontaneously expresses itself as goodness.

Mencius taught that we all have the inner spiritual resources to deepen our self-awareness and broaden our networks of communal participation. Biological and environmental constraints notwithstanding, we always have the freedom and the ability to refine and enlarge our Heaven-endowed nobility (our "great body"). Mencius's idea of degrees of excellence in character-building vividly illustrates this continuous refinement and enlargement of our selfhood:

He who commands our liking is called good (*shan*).  
 He who is sincere with himself is called true (*hsin*).  
 He who is sufficient and real is called beautiful (*mei*).  
 He whose sufficiency and reality shine forth is called great (*ta*).  
 He whose greatness transforms itself is called sagely (*sheng*).  
 He whose sageliness is beyond our comprehension is called spiritual (*shen*).

Furthermore, Mencius asserted that if we fully realize the potential of our hearts, we will understand our nature, and by understanding our nature, we will know Heaven. This profound faith in the human capacity for self-knowledge and for understanding Heaven by tapping spiritual resources from within enabled Mencius to add an "anthropocosmic" dimension to the Confucian project. Learning to be fully human, in this Mencian perspective, entails the cultivation of human sensitivity to embody the whole universe as one's lived experience.

All the ten thousand things are there in me. There is no greater joy for me than to find, on self-examination, that I am true to myself. Try your best to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself, and you will find that this is the shortest way to humanity. (VIIA.4)

The Confucian nobleman, as envisioned by Mencius, is an exemplary teacher, a political leader, a meaning-making thinker, and a prophetic intellectual.

### *Hsun Tzu: The Transmitter of Confucian Scholarship*

If Mencius brought Confucian moral idealism to fruition, Hsun Tzu (fl. 298–238) conscientiously transformed the Confucian project into a realistic and systematic inquiry on the human condition with special reference to ritual and authority. Widely acknowledged as the most eminent of the notable scholars who congregated in Chi-hsia, the capital of the wealthy and powerful Ch'i state in the mid third century B.C., Hsun Tzu distinguished himself in erudition, logic, empiricism, practical-mindedness, and argumentation. His critique of the so-called "twelve philosophers" gave an overview of the intellectual scene of his time. His penetrating insight into the shortcomings of virtually all the major currents of thought propounded by his fellow thinkers helped to establish the Confucian school as a forceful political and social persuasion. His principal adversary, however, was Mencius and he vigorously attacked Mencius's view that human nature is good as naive moral optimism.

True to the Confucian and, for that matter, Mencian spirit, Hsun Tzu underscored the centrality of self-cultivation. He outlined the process of Confucian education, from nobleman to sage, as a ceaseless endeavor to accumulate knowledge, skills, insight, and wisdom. He believed that unless social constraints are well articulated, we are prone to make excessive demands to satisfy our passions. As a result, social solidarity, the precondition for human flourishing, is undermined. The most serious flaw in the Mencian commitment to the goodness of human nature is the practical consequence of neglecting the necessity of ritual and authority for the well-being of society. By stressing that human nature is evil, Hsun Tzu singled out the cognitive function of the mind (human rationality) as the basis for morality. We become moral by voluntarily harnessing our desires and passions to act in accordance with societal norms. This is alien to our nature but perceived by our mind as necessary for both survival and well-being.

Like Mencius, Hsun Tzu believed in the perfectibility of all human beings through self-cultivation, in humanity and rightness as cardinal virtues, in humane government as the kingly way, in social harmony, and in education,

but his view of how this could actually come about was diametrically opposed to Mencius's. The Confucian project, as shaped by Hsun Tzu, defines learning as socialization. The authorities of ancient sages and worthies, the classical tradition, the conventional norms, the teachers, the governmental rules and regulations, and political officers are all important for transforming human nature. A cultured person is by definition a fully socialized participant of the human community who has successfully sublimated his instinctual demands for the public good.

Hung Tzu's tough-minded stance on law, order, authority, and ritual seems precariously close to the Legalists whose policy of social conformism was designed exclusively for the benefit of the ruler. His insistence on objective standards of behavior may have ideologically contributed to the rise of authoritarianism, which resulted in the dictatorship of the Ch'in (221–206 B.C.). As a matter of fact, two of the most influential Legalists, the theoretician Han Fei (d. 233 B.C.) from the state of Han and the Ch'in minister Li Ssu (d. 208 B.C.), were his pupils. Yet, Hsun Tzu was instrumental in the continuation of the Confucian project as a scholarly enterprise. His naturalistic interpretation of Heaven, his sophisticated understanding of culture, his insightful observations on the epistemological aspect of the mind and social function of language, his emphasis on moral reasoning and the art of argumentation, his belief in progress, and his interest in political institutions so significantly enriched the Confucian heritage that he was revered by the Confucians as the paradigmatic scholar for more than three centuries.

### *The Confucianization of Politics*

The short-lived dictatorship of the Ch'in marked a brief triumph of Legalism, but in the early years of the Western Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 8), the Legalist practice of the absolute power of the emperor, complete subjugation of the peripheral states to the central government, total uniformity of thought, and ruthless enforcement of law was replaced by the Taoist practice of reconciliation and non-interference. This practice is commonly known in history as the Huan-Lao method, referring to the art of rulership attributed to the Yellow Emperor (Huang Ti) and the mysterious "founder" of Taoism, Lao Tzu. A few Confucian thinkers such as Lu Chia and Chia I made important policy recommendations, but before the emergence of Tung Chung-shu (c. 179–104 B.C.) the Confucian persuasion was not particularly influential. However, the gradual Confucianization of Han politics must have begun soon after the founding of the dynasty. The decisions of the founding fathers to allow the reinstatement of the feudal system and the first emperor to implement an elaborate court ritual opened the gates to Confucian influence on the basic structure of the Han government. The imperial decision to redress the cultural



damage done in the book-burning fiasco of the Ch'in by retrieving the lost classics through extensive search and oral transmission indicated a concerted effort to make the Confucian tradition as integral part of the emerging political culture.

By the reign of the Martial Emperor (Wu Ti, 141–87 B.C.), who was by temperament a Legalist despot, the Confucian persuasion was deeply entrenched in the central bureaucracy through such practices as the clear separation of the court and a government that was often under the leadership of a scholarly prime minister, the process of recruiting officials through the dual mechanism of recommendation and selection, the family-centered social structure, the agriculture-based economy, and the educational network. Confucian ideas, which were also firmly established in the legal system as ritual, became increasingly important in governing behavior, defining social relationships, and adjudicating civil disputes. Yet it was not until the prime minister Kung-sun Hung (d. 121 B.C.) had persuaded the Martial Emperor to formally announce that the Ju school alone would receive state sponsorship, that Confucianism became an officially recognized imperial ideology and state cult.

As a result, Confucian classics became the core curriculum for all levels of education. In 136 B.C., the Martial Emperor set up at court five Erudites of the Five Classics and in 124 B.C. assigned fifty official students to study with them, thus creating a de facto imperial university. By 50 B.C., the student enrollment at the university had grown to an impressive three thousand, and by A.D. 1, a hundred men a year were entering government service through the examinations administered by the state. In short, those with a Confucian education began to staff the bureaucracy. In A.D. 58, all government schools were required to make sacrifices to Confucius, and in A.D. 175, the court had the approved version of the classics, which had been determined by scholarly conferences and research teams under imperial auspices extending over several decades, and which were carved on large stone tablets. These stelae were erected at the capital and are today well-preserved in the national museum of Hsi-an. This act of committing to permanence and to public display the precise content of the sacred scriptures symbolizes the completion of the formation of the classical Confucian tradition.

### *The Five Classics*

A concrete manifestation of the coming of age of the Confucian tradition is the compilation of the Five Classics. By including both pre-Confucian texts, *Book of Documents* and *Book of Poetry* and contemporary Chin-Han material such as certain portions of the *Book of Rites*, it seems to have been an ecumenical attempt to establish the core curriculum for Confucian education. The Five Classics can be described in terms of five visions: metaphysical,

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political, poetic, social, and historical. The metaphysical vision, symbolized by the *Book of Changes (I Ching)*, combines divinatory art with numerological technique and ethical insight. According to the philosophy of change, the cosmos is a great transformation occasioned by the constant interaction of two complementary as well as conflicting vital energies, *yin* and *yang*. The universe, which resulted from this great transformation, always exhibits organismic unity and dynamism. The nobleman, inspired by the harmony and creativity of the universe, must emulate the highest ideal of the "unity of man and Heaven" through ceaseless self-exertion.

The political vision, symbolized by the *Book of Documents (Shu Ching)*, addresses the kingly way in terms of the ethical foundation for a humane government. The legendary Three Emperors (Yao, Shun, and Yu) all ruled by virtue. Their sagacity, filial piety, and work ethic enabled them to create a political culture based on responsibility and trust. Through exemplary teaching, they encouraged the people to enter into a "covenant" with them so that social harmony could be achieved without punishment or coercion. Even in the Three Dynasties (Hsia, Shang, and Chou), moral authority, as ritualized power, was sufficient to maintain political order. The human continuum, from the undifferentiated masses, via the enlightened people and the nobility, to the sage-king, formed an organic unity as an integral part of the great cosmic transformation. Politics means "rectification" and the purpose of the government is not only to provide food and maintain order but also to educate.

The poetic vision, symbolized by the *Book of Poetry (Shih Ching)*, underscores the Confucian value of the common human feelings. The majority of the verses express emotions and sentiments of persons and communities from all echelons of society on a variety of occasions. The internal resonance, the basic rhythm, of the poetic world characterized by the book is mutual responsiveness. The tone as a whole is honest rather than earnest and evocative rather than expressive. The social vision, symbolized by the *Book of Rites (Li Chi)*, defines society not as an adversary system based on contractual relationships, but as a community of trust with emphasis on communication. The society organized by the four functional occupations—the scholar, farmer, artisan, and merchant—is, in the true sense of the word, a cooperation. As a contributing member of the cooperative enterprise, each person is obligated to recognize the existence of others and to serve the public good. By the principle of "the rectification of names," it is the king's duty to act kingly and the father's duty to act fatherly. If the king or father fails to behave properly, he cannot expect his minister or son to act in accordance with ritual. It is in this sense a chapter in the *Rites* entitled "The Great Learning" specifies, "From the Son of Heaven to the commoner, all must regard self-cultivation as the root." This pervasive "duty-consciousness" features prominently in all Confucian literature on ritual.

The historical vision, symbolized by the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Ch'un-ch'iu*), emphasizes the significance of collective memory for communal self-identification. Historical consciousness is a defining characteristic of Confucian thought. By defining himself as a transmitter and as a lover of antiquity, Confucius made it explicit that a sense of history is not only desirable but is necessary for self-knowledge. Confucius's emphasis on the importance of history was in a way his reappropriation of the ancient Sinic wisdom: reanimating the old is the best way to attain the new. Confucius may not have authored the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, but it seems likely that he applied moral judgment to political events in China proper from the eighth century to the fifth century B.C. In this unprecedented political criticism, he assumed a godlike role in evaluating politics by assigning ultimate "praise and blame" in history to the most powerful and influential political actors of the period. This practice inspired not only the innovative style of the Grand Historian, Ssu-ma Ch'ien (d.c. 85 B.C.) but was widely employed by others writing dynastic histories in imperial China.

The Five Classics, as five visions—metaphysical, political, poetic, social, and historical—provide a holistic context for the development of Confucian scholarship as a comprehensive inquiry in the humanities.

#### *Tung Chung-shu: The Confucian Visionary*

Like the Grand Historian, Tung Chung-shu (c. 179–104 B.C.) also took the *Spring and Autumn Annals* absolutely seriously. However, his own work, *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn Annals* is far from being a book of historical judgment. It is a metaphysical treatise in the spirit of the *Book of Changes*. A man extraordinarily dedicated to learning (he is said to have been so absorbed in his studies that for three years he did not even glance at the garden in front of him and with a strong commitment to moral idealism (one of his often-quoted dicta is "rectifying rightness without scheming for profit; enlightening his Way without calculating efficaciousness"), Tung was instrumental in developing a characteristically Han interpretation of the Confucian project.

Despite the Martial Emperor's pronouncement that Confucianism alone would receive imperial sponsorship, Taoist, yin-yang cosmologists, Moists, Legalists, shamanists, seances, healers, magicians, geomancers, and others all contributed to the cosmological thinking of the Han cultural elite. Indeed, Tung himself was a beneficiary of this intellectual syncretism, for he freely tapped the spiritual resources of his time in formulating his own worldview. His theory of the correspondence between man and nature, which involves a forced analogy of the four seasons, twelve months, and 366 days in a year to the four limbs, twelve sections (three in each limb), and 366 bones in the

human body, is predicated on an organismic vision in which all modalities of being are interconnected in a complex network of relationships. The moral to draw from this metaphysics of consanguinity is that human actions have cosmic consequences.

Tung's inquiries on the meaning of the "Five Agents" (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth), the correspondence of man and the numerical categories of Heaven, and the sympathetic activation of things of the same kind, as well as his studies of cardinal Confucian values such as humanity, rightness, ritual, wisdom, and trustworthiness enabled him to develop an elaborate worldview integrating Confucian ethics with naturalistic cosmology. What Tung accomplished was not merely a "theological" justification for the emperor as the "Son of Heaven." Rather, his theory of mutual responsiveness between heaven and man provided the Confucian scholars with a higher law to judge the conduct of the ruler. As a matter of fact, his rhetoric of "portents of catastrophes and anomalies" specified that floods, droughts, earthquakes, comets, eclipses, and even benign but unusual natural phenomena such as "growing beards on women" are celestial signs warning against man's wicked deeds. Later these acted as an effective deterrent to the whims and excesses of the monarchs. Tung offered the Confucian intellectuals an interpretive power with far-reaching political implications.

Tung's mode of thought reflects the scholarly penchant for prognostication, divination, and numerological speculation prevalent during his time. Known as adherents of the "New Texts" school, these scholars, basing their arguments on the reconstructed classical texts written in the "new script" of the Han, were intensely interested in exploring the "subtle words and great meanings" of the classics in influencing politics. The Usurpation of Wang Wang (9–23) was in part occasioned by the popular demand of the Confucian literati that a change in the Mandate of Heaven was inevitable. Despite Tung's immense popularity, his worldview was not universally accepted by Han Confucian scholars. A reaction in favor of a more rational and moralistic approach to the Confucian classics, known as the "Old Text" school, had already set in before the fall of Western Han. Yang Hsiung (c. 53 B.C.–A.D. 18), in *Model Sayings*, a collection of moralistic aphorisms in the style of the *Analects*, and the *Classic of the Great Mystery*, a cosmological speculative in the style of the *Book of Changes*, presented an alternative worldview. This school, claiming its own recensions of authentic classical texts allegedly rediscovered during the Han period and written in an "old" script before the Ch'in unification, was widely accepted in the Eastern Han (25–220). As the institutions of the Erudites and the imperial university expanded in the Eastern Han, the study of university expanded in the Eastern Han, the study of the classics became more refined and elaborate. Confucian scholasticism, like its counterparts in Talmudic and biblical studies, became too professionalized to remain a vital intellectual force.