

Confucianism – Ju Chia

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A basic question which will arise in any discussion of Confucianism, for which the Chinese word is "Ju Chia," will have to be whether Confucianism can legitimately be described as a religion. In its original form it does not directly identify or speak of a god, does not envision a judgment or a life after death, seems far more concerned with life on this earth and politics than with possible future punishment or reward. More often than most religions it is described as a philosophy. Yet it is very deeply concerned with ethics or morals. It does reflect on man's relation to "T'ien" or Heaven, especially as this has to do with the ruler, his coming to power, his authority, and expressions of its displeasure over an evil rule. It speaks on rituals of worship. It bears astonishing resemblances to much more formal religions. And so to apply the litmus test of the recent election year that, "if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck," we would likely concede that, though not perhaps perfectly, it fits into the category of a religion. It is one of the truly major religions of Asia, although I'm not sure that the present tense is fully appropriate, and therefore it lies in our field of interest.

Already you have heard me use two Chinese terms and more will appear in the course of this presentation. Never having received instruction in the Chinese language, I am using pronunciation tables found in the works I consulted and hope that I understand these correctly. If all else fails, one can always fall back on the solid, Wisconsin Synod mode of pronunciation: when in doubt, say it in German. One of the tables even drew a comparison with the dots above vowels and the German umlaut.

I. The Setting: an Overview of Chinese History

Our earliest knowledge of the development of China and its population, based almost entirely on archaeological information, goes back to around the beginning of the third millennium B.C. The earliest settlements were primitive agricultural villages centered around the Yellow River. The transformation to a civilized society is evident around the middle of the millennium. During this time aristocratic leaders began to arise. In common with most early civilizations the Chinese were concerned about trying to foretell the future: an occupation associated with shamans, some of whom practiced astrology but others of whom made use of "oracle bones" - animal bones which under scorching cracked and the cracks became the omen interpreted for divining the future. This remained something of a preoccupation well into that future. Burials were generally beneath the floors of the houses and already there was evidence of ancestor worship.

Chinese recorded history begins with three somewhat mythical figures: the "three great emperors" who gave themselves completely to providing for the welfare of their people: Emperors Yao, Shun, and then, around 2205 B.C., Emperor Yu the Great, credited as the founder of China's first dynasty, the Xia or Hsia. Yu supposedly descended from supernatural ancestry. He was credited with great powers of divination; invented the net for hunting and fishing; and introduced flood control by persuading the people to unite in building dikes to control the annual flooding of the Yellow River. During the Hsia dynasty, which ruled for about 500 years, the arts of civilization progressed with jade carving, bronze casting, and the use of pictograms - the earliest form of writing in any society. However Hsia rule was harsh, based on military might. And there is significant evidence of the cultic use of human sacrifice. The dynasty lasted for sixteen generations.

The period from 1766 to 1122 B.C. is the period of the Shang dynasty which overthrew the Hsia. A more centralized political structure arose and controlled most of northern China. During this period Chinese writing developed, although it survives from this period only in inscriptions and no books of the time are known. The use of the oracle bones continued, as Shang kings consulted their predecessors for information and to get aid. In the later part of the dynasty, central control began to disintegrate and feudalism arose.

During the entire period the form of religion which dominated the Chinese people was animism. Not only were spirits of dead ancestors worshipped with offerings and prayers. Virtually all, even inanimate, objects were believed to be inhabited by spirits to whom sacrifice must be made for the sake of propitiating anger or for earthly favors. The god of the Ho or Yellow River had to be periodically provided with a richly clad girl floated out on a raft as her bridal bed, never to return. The sacrifices of animals and people with a dead ruler were to give him life. The deity of the earth was important in providing for productive agriculture. "Shang Ti" or the Lord on High, associated with heaven, was the supreme deity, important for rain and for giving victory in battle. All were worshipped with appropriate ceremony.

The Chou dynasty, 1122 to 221 B.C., longest lived in Chinese history, began really significant changes in culture. In most of the period the dynasty maintained its power by harsh military dominance. Sharp divisions in society became more widespread. Many new musical instruments were invented. Although some of it continued into even later dynasties, human sacrifice began to disappear. The kings became known as the "Son of Heaven." The cult of ancestor worship became even stronger and the role of the extended family grew in importance. The period from c. 600 to 300 B.C. was a golden age intellectually and was known as the "Era of the 100 Philosophers."

Succeeding dynasties are less important until the later stages of our field of interest. The Chin or Qin dynasty, 221 to 206 B.C. began construction of the Great Wall and introduced uniform writing. It was the "Legalist" period in religion, a time of totalitarian rule, when the "great burning of books" took place. It ended with the Han dynasty, 206 B.C. to 220 A.D., a period of tremendous invention, which included paper, the compass, and the seismograph. Confucianism became state orthodoxy and Confucian education for civil service examinations was begun. But this great period came to an end with the Age of Division, 220 to 589 A.D., when feudalism replaced unified monarchy and Confucianism was considered to have failed.

With 589 the Sui dynasty reunited the country and thereafter six more dynasties ruled China until 1911 and the end of the Manchu or Qing dynasty. The record of ongoing Chinese inventions, explorations, conquest of the Orient's greatest empire, and flowering of the arts of civilization is amazing. The variant fortunes of Confucianism will be considered later. But almost constant warfare and revolution, resulting in tremendous bloodshed, marred the picture, so that the student of Chinese history will hardly be surprised by the recent events in Tiananmen Square.

II. The Founder: Kung Futzu

The "ju" philosophy had its beginning with Kung Futzu, latinized as Confucius, whose reputed dates were 551 to 479 B.C. He was then born in the very year when Cyrus the Great began founding the Persian Empire and when the tyrant Pisistratus was bringing Athens to new heights of culture. Confucius, whose Chinese name means "the Master Kung Fu," originated in the state of Lu. Traditions clash as to his ancestry and what can be said for certain is that his family was not a very important one, although they may have been of the aristocrats. He was orphaned at the age of three.

His schooling probably began at the age of seven and it mainly consisted of learning to read, no mean feat in a language with something like 30,000 characters; reading literature; and memorizing it. Confucius gives little description of his education and it appears that to a high degree he was self-taught. He had to begin working during his early teens to help support the family. Indications are that he was quite successful in the positions which he held. At the age of 19 he married and had a son a year later. The son was a disappointment to Confucius in that he did not have great scholarly gifts, although his son in turn was a great joy to "the Master."

In 528 B.C. Confucius' mother died and he abandoned public service to mourn for her for three years, during which time he practiced abstinence and became deeply involved in the study of the ancient "li" or ritual ceremonies. It can be only conjecture as to how he was supported during this period. When the mourning was over, he seems to have begun his career as a public teacher. By the time he was thirty, he was highly respected

and it appears that there had gathered around him a significant number of young men who became his disciples and received schooling from him.

The role of teacher had not been the goal of Confucius. His ambition was to become involved in and to exercise influence for good on government. In this he personally was not very successful. Although he held a number of minor governmental posts, he could not refrain from quite explicitly pointing out the wrongs and excesses of the rulers and it inevitably led to his removal from government office. Nevertheless it remained his primary interest in life to influence government for good, so that the people and the nation would benefit. Essentially his teaching of his disciples was to prepare them to try to achieve that goal.

The school of Confucius prepared young men ultimately for service to government and rulers. But it was not a narrowly vocational school, simply to make them ready to participate in the bureaucracy. The ideal was to prepare the student to serve government and at the same time to be instrumental in reforming it. Confucius offered his teaching without distinction of rank, both to the sons of wealthy families and also to the very poor. He was more interested in his pupils' ability and willingness to learn than in their capacity to pay. His teaching was not in structured classes with formal examinations. It was more in the tutorial manner, dealing with individuals and small numbers, sometimes talking himself, sometimes questioning them, often responding to their questions. The student was expected to read deeply by himself and discussion would follow. He did not hesitate to criticize or to deal very gently, dependent on the nature of the student. He would expel those who did not meet his standards, not so much academically but in the carrying out of his teachings. He did not demand blind faith or acceptance of what he taught, allowed disagreement and criticism, and tried to convince by the use of reason. Unlike later Confucian schools, he strongly encouraged the development of independent thinking. Essentially the goals of Confucius were to serve government, to teach youth, and to transmit the ancient culture to posterity. His instruction was based on ancient writings, all of which had originated long before. But it seems that these were simply the basis for Confucius' discussions with his disciples.

Confucius held mostly honorary government posts in later life, situations in which he was provided for, was occasionally consulted, but had little real influence on government. He spent quite a few years traveling in a kind of self-imposed exile but being received everywhere with great honor. He accomplished little reform in government in his own lifetime. The teaching went on. He seems to have collected manuscripts and may have edited some of them. Toward the end of his life he summed it up, saying, "At fifteen, I set my mind on learning; at thirty, I stood firm on li; at forty, I had no doubts about the purpose of life; at fifty, I knew the Decree of Heaven; at sixty, I was ready to listen to it; and now, at seventy, I can follow my heart's desire, without transgressing what is right."¹ He died, revered by his disciples, and, in spite of ups and downs in the acceptance of his philosophy, as one who probably would have the greatest impact on the future course of Chinese history.

III. The Basic Teachings of Confucius

Our western minds would like to approach the study of a set of teachings neatly wrapped up for us in a dogmatic system. That's what we are accustomed to. It won't work that way with Confucianism. To begin with Confucius did not attempt to establish a single standard for truth. Basically he seems to have felt that every man must find that for himself. Instead, when we read what has been written about the teachings of Confucius, we find that a number of concepts receive strong emphasis but without a necessarily discernible order or sequence. They center around human behavior toward others.

His attitude toward the supernatural is not that of an agnostic but the supernatural was not a matter of great concern for him. He will speak of Heaven (Tien) in a physical and supernatural sense but not strictly as a god or a being. It is more in the nature of a moral force. Similarly spirits, of great concern to most Chinese, were not a major preoccupation with him. When Tzu Lu, a disciple, asked how to serve spirits, it is said that Confucius answered, "You are not yet able to serve men, how can you serve spirits?"²

This is not to say that Confucius showed no respect for the supernatural. He spoke of "Ming" - the decree of Heaven, and regarded it as destiny. Yet he did not treat it fatalistically but insisted on man's moral

responsibility to do his best and after that resign himself to what Heaven had decreed. It was simply beyond man's control.

A very important aspect of Confucianism, in fact that of which Confucius was regarded as a preeminent teacher, was "Li," a word which related to rites or ceremonies. Originally it had to do with sacrifices and included many kinds of ceremonies which paid honor to the spirits, communicated with them, and obtained their essential help for the welfare of humanity. By the time of the Chou dynasty, this was very complete and elegant. But what was important to Confucius in "Li" was not the outward trappings of proper ritual but the reverence with which one performed the ceremonies and the propriety of behavior with regard to the spirits and to the living. "Li" was then proper conduct and a sense of balance and harmony in the individual. He is quoted as saying: "Reverence, if not regulated by Li, becomes labored effort; prudence, if not regulated by Li, becomes mere timidity; courage, if not regulated by Li, becomes unruliness; frankness, if not regulated by Li, becomes mere impudence."³ Confucius began to change "Li," a set of rules for rituals, into a system of ethics.

A central concept in Confucianism is "Tao" - the way or road. It was something which considerably antedated Confucius and also Taoism, which regarded it differently from Confucius. For him the "Tao" was a way of life or action, the way in which an individual should conduct himself. If an individual has "the Way," he acts as he should and is a person of high moral character. If government acts as it should, in accord with its "Tao," then all will be well with the world. In fact Confucius' vision was that of a cooperative world. One author describes it: "It was a profound faith that men's true interests did not conflict but complemented each other, that war and injustice and exploitation inured those who profited by them as well as those they caused to suffer."⁴ For Confucius this was a better way of conduct and anticipates a kind of Utopia.

Personal behavior was to be regulated by a number of characteristics, the first and most important of which was "jen," a term which emphasizes the relationship between a man and his fellowman. Within the family it includes filial piety and fraternal love. This went beyond the immediate family and included first of all the extended family, the larger relationship including departed ancestors, then continued on to the rest of mankind. It involved benevolence toward all and doing one's best for the welfare of others. A man of "den" would know his moral responsibility in relation to others and at the same time would be conscious of his relation to Heaven. "Jen" was something within the individual, a kind of guiding principle which the individual should follow.

There remain a number of closely related characteristics which Confucius sought to develop in his disciples. One was "Shih", a combination of gentlemanliness, zeal and devotion. Confucius tried to develop in his scholars the virtues of nobility without its vices. He was successful to the degree that in China the scholar was finally regarded more highly than the warrior. "Chung Shu" was a combination of faithfulness to oneself or conscientiousness and altruism or regard for one's fellowman. It was a positive way of practicing "Jen" and at the same time showing feelings of good will to others. Finally Confucius urged always siding with "I," what is right. This referred to what is fitting or suitable and basically was an inner standard of conduct.

The Confucianism of Confucius himself, an ethical philosophy, was concerned about the relation of man to man, man to the family, and man to the government. The relation of the man to the supernatural, other than within the aforementioned framework, was of secondary consideration. All forces for good lay within man himself and their potential was virtually unlimited. However the realization of the potential was exclusively for this world. It was intended to bring into being a perfect worldly situation. It didn't work in his time. Confucianism would undergo considerable change in the ages after him.

IV. Sacred Writings

If we look for a book similar to the Bible or to the writings of most other eastern religions and expect to find it within Confucianism, we shall be disappointed. Not only was Confucius Socratic in much of his teaching but also when it came to committing his teachings to writing. There are traditions that Confucius gathered some older writings and edited them but most modern authors either disagree with the legends or claim them difficult to prove.

This does not mean that within Confucianism there are not writings or texts which served as conveyances for what Confucius taught. He personally made use of what are known as "The Five Ching": classics which came down from earlier times. These included the "Shu Ching," a book of historical documents covering a period of about 1600 years and including historical accounts, laws, philosophical instructions about government, and having a didactic purpose. Next was the "Shih Ching," a book of songs which Confucius considered important and may have edited; he stressed the moral value of poetry and music. Next was the "I Ching" or Book of Changes, used in divination. The fourth was the "Li Ching," a collection of texts dealing with rituals and etiquette, which Confucius regarded as important but, as we have seen, gave a decidedly ethical twist. The last was the "Ch'un Ch'iu" or Spring and Autumn Annals, which several authors feel may have been dictated by Confucius and which were records of his home state of Lu, covering about two and a half centuries.

Books on the teachings of Confucius were written by his disciples after his death. Most of the quotations which appeared earlier in this paper were from what is known as the Analects, a digest of conversations of Confucius with his disciples and some of his wise sayings. Their authenticity is not total as, according to a number of authors, both friends and enemies interpolated them with their own thoughts. Another is known as the "Ta Hsüeh" or Great Learning; it gives instructions on how to perform rituals. A third is known as "Chung Yung," a mystical work on what is called "the central Way." Finally there is the "Book of Mencius," an interpretation of Confucianism by Mencius, 372 - 289 B.C.

These are the main early works which purport to set forth the teachings of Confucius. One could concede that there can be found some practical human wisdom in them, although one would not always agree with it, even from the earthly standpoint. The inferiority of such writings to God's inspired word is obvious.

V. Friends or Foes? Developments in Confucianism over the Centuries

While Confucianism became a dominant feature of Chinese culture in the period immediately after him, it by no means stood alone. Almost concurrently there arose the rival religio-philosophy known as Taoism. Several hundred years later Buddhist priests from India came to China and made Buddhism a very popular religion. Quite early divisions also began to arise within Confucianism itself. Two great champions of Confucianism within the next two centuries gave very diverse renditions of the teachings of "the Master." The first was Meng Tzu or Mencius, already mentioned in connection with his writings. He advanced what has been called the idealistic school of Confucianism. He championed the teachings of Confucius which were under attack by other philosophers. He added a strong emphasis on "Yi" or righteousness which advanced it beyond Confucius emphasis on "Jen." He insisted on an innate moral goodness in all men. He argued for economic and agricultural reform and in some respects anticipated communal or collective farming.

Another and rival school of Confucian thought was known as the "realistic school," founded by Hsün Tzu in the third century B.C. He began to incorporate into his Confucianism aspects of Taoism and other rival religions. He taught that man by nature is evil. Heaven is indifferent to man and is simply the laws of natural phenomena. But man is capable of knowledge and must strive by the use of "Li," the proper performance of rituals, to make himself righteous. Then Heaven will have to provide adequately.

Worse was ahead for Confucianism. The short lived Ch'in dynasty was dominated by a philosophy known as "Legalism," which essentially agreed with the totalitarian ruler. There was a decree ordering the burning of all rival philosophic books and, as a result, Confucianism as well as freedom of thought suffered.

The Han dynasty, which succeeded in 206 B.C., reversed this. Confucianism became the religion of the state, but it often meant that it was modified at the whims of the ruler, who might be influenced by other religious ideas. One segment of Confucians even began seeking the deification of Confucius. An opposing group, led by Tung Chung-shu, developed what was known as the "yin yang" doctrine. The "yin" was a negative, female cosmic force, the "yang" a positive, male cosmic force, and they were always complementary. Tung Chung-shu used them to justify all facets of the social order and this contributed to growing authoritarianism. Even more was Confucius worshipped and regarded as the patron saint of education.

As we arrive at the period around the year 1000 A.D., we see the rise of even greater divergence with the founding of what was called Neo-Confucianism. But this too was not a unified religion. There were so many differing groups within it that it would be impossible here to cover them all. One of the principal divisions was Rationalistic Neo-Confucianism. This was closest to original orthodox Confucianism. It stressed the extension of knowledge as the means of gaining moral cultivation. It involves exhaustive study of the "Li," which by now meant "the principles," and was said to lead eventually to a "sudden enlightenment." The opposing school was Idealistic Neo-Confucianism. It is supposed to be much more closely related to Ch'an or Zen Buddhism. It taught the existence of only the world of the mind. The mind is one with the universe. It is even described as the "heavenly principle." Man's task must be to make use of his mind or intuitive knowledge to overcome obstacles such as his desires and then bring about unity of knowledge and practice.

After the fall of the last dynasty and the beginning of the republican era in China, an attempt was made to have Confucianism recognized in the constitution as a state religion. It made little difference that the move was defeated because of opposition from other religions. The twentieth century was so crowded with violence in China with the period of the warlords, then the conflict with the Japanese, and finally the Communist take-over, that republicanism and the constitution had no chance of success. And though under Communism Confucianism does not hold the official respect it once did, even the Communists have made use of Confucian principles to further Marxist ideology and their hold on the nation.

VI. The Spread of Confucianism in the Orient

On the mainland of Asia Confucianism spread with the expansion of the Chinese Empire. It thus penetrated not only all China proper but also particularly Korea and to some degree into southeast Asia or Indochina. It also made considerable headway in Japan, after arriving in the 4th century A.D. In 1608 a Confucianist was appointed as an advisor to the Tokugawa Shogun. The claim is made that it had its greatest influence on the thinking of the samurai. Perhaps this prepared them to more submissively accept the end of feudalism in Japan which came with "Meiji." And another Confucian served as the Japanese Emperor's tutor and guide for twenty years, as Japan was changed into a modern nation.

VII. Effects of Confucianism

I undertook this study with the thought of possibly being able to establish a relation between the Confucian philosophy and the success currently being experienced by Oriental students at almost all levels of schooling vis-a-vis people of other racial backgrounds. I am not sure that I could claim to have proven a direct causal relation; considerably more research would be necessary for that. But aspects of Confucianism, both in its original and in its later adulterated forms, suggest that there is such a relation. There is first and most obviously the strong emphasis on education, especially coupled with the self-discipline of independent study, in-depth reading, and critical and independent thinking. There is, as a reinforcement to the desire and determination to succeed the close familial relation which would look upon any achievement less than the best as a disgrace for the entire family. Other religious philosophies of the Orient very likely contribute to the situation. But as it is, Oriental students, whether in their native lands or in the United States, have in the past decade achieved a degree of academic success completely out of proportion to the segment of the population which they represent.

In addition to the field of education, the results of Confucianism can be seen in the area of social reform in China, though to date this has not been spectacularly successful, especially politically. Perhaps in the arts any impact of Confucianism was largely preempted by art forms distinctively Chinese long before Confucius.

VIII. Did Confucianism Influence any Modern Sects or Cults?

In modern China one Neo-Confucianist prior to the Communist takeover advocated what he called "Ta Tung," a one world view in which he hoped that universal love would gradually abolish all the boundaries which separate mankind. It would eventually result in global peace and unite humanity in a single civilization. I was not able to discover whether this ever extended beyond China.

In Korea, where Confucianism had at least some influence, two cults were established. One was the Full Gospel Central Church. Established in the late 1950s, it appears to be a curious mixture of Christianity and some New-Confucian ideas, particularly improvement of the physical conditions of life. It has spread to the U.S.

The more familiar cult from Korea is the Unification Church of the Reverend Sun Yung Moon. There was Confucian education in his background, though there was also a family conversion to Presbyterianism. In the mid-1950s he began the establishment of the Unification Church. Where there is some background of Christianity, there is strong emphasis on marriage, family, and especially being "blessed" by Moon in one's marriage - a sure passport to heaven. There is a readiness by adherents to sacrifice temporal comfort in the present, anticipating that in the long run there will be even greater good in this world. Rather obviously there is a perversion of both Christianity and Confucianism.

Confucianism, originally an ethical philosophy with vague connections to earlier Chinese religion, did not long retain its original form or teachings. Over the centuries it has undergone modification from refiners within and to meet threats from without. It has, over the centuries, become more of a religion than it was at first. Today it is more an influence on the mind than a viable religion.

Endnotes

¹. Ch'u Chai and Winberg Chai. *Confucianism*. (Woodbury, New York, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1973), p. 47.

². *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³. *Ibid.*, p.43.

⁴. H.G. Creel. *Confucius, The Man And The Myth*. (Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1949), p. 123.

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