

Confucianism

China was ruled for centuries by one dynasty, or ruling family, after another. The first great dynasty was the Shang, which ruled much of China for about 400 years. The next dynasty was the Zhou. The Zhou Dynasty clung to power for more than 800 years—from 1027 B.C. to 221 B.C. But it ruled in name only for the last 500 years. Mongolians attacked from the north. Dropping their loyalty to the Zhou Dynasty, nobles battled one another for control of parts of China. Wars constantly raged.

During this disorderly and dangerous time, Chinese society was falling apart. Many people came up with ideas for putting it back together. So many ideas were in the air that this time was known as the period of the Hundred

Pronunciation Key

Confucianism (kun FEW shun izm)

Confucius (kun FEW shus)

Daoism (DOW izm)

de (duh)

Kongzi (KONG zuh)

li (lee)

Shandong (SHAN dong)

yi (ee)

Zhou (joe)



Living in a time of war and disorder, Confucius had ideas on how to establish peace and harmony.

Schools of Thought. The two most important of these schools were Confucianism and Daoism.

Confucius (551–479 B.C.)

The founder of Confucianism was a man named Kongzi, or Master Kong. Outside of China, he is called Confucius. He was born in 551 B.C. in northeastern China in the state of Lu. (Lu is today called Shandong Province.)

Confucius lived a simple life, spending most of his time as a

teacher. Only a few facts are known about his life. But because he is considered one of the greatest Chinese thinkers, many stories have arisen about him.

His family was poor, and his father died when he was 3. His mother taught him, and he studied hard. By 15, he decided to spend his life learning. He studied the classic Chinese books on rituals, math, poetry, and history. He learned about music. He mastered archery. He practiced driving a chariot. He mastered the art of Chinese writing.

When he started teaching, Confucius quickly attracted a band of loyal students. He said he taught anyone who came to him "from the very poorest upward . . . no one has ever come to me without receiving instruction."

He is called the "First Teacher" in China. Before Confucius, rich people had hired tutors to teach their children. Confucius did not think learning should just be for the rich. He believed every man in China should learn. He saw teaching as a way to improve people's lives and change society.

When he was about 50, he was appointed to work in the government of Lu. He wanted to apply his ideas to make society better. He was soon made minister of justice. But Confucius saw that those

above him did not like his ideas. So he left.

He spent the next 12 years traveling around China. He was looking for a ruler who would listen to his ideas. He never found one. His students, however, continued to follow him. When he was 67, he returned to Lu. He taught and also edited classic Chinese books on history, poetry, and ritual. He died in 479 B.C.

Many years after his death, the students of his students wrote down Confucius' teachings in a book. It is called the *Lun Yu*. In English, this book is usually called the *Analects* or the *Sayings of Confucius*. It has hundreds of short sayings of Confucius.

Confucianism

Confucius highly valued the past. He wanted people to adopt ancient truths. By adopting them, he believed society would return to peace and harmony.

Confucius stressed several basic ideas. The most important one is *ren*. *Ren* is what makes a person human. It can be translated as "humaneness" or "goodness." *Ren* is what makes life worth living.

The goal of everyone should be to achieve *ren*. Confucius calls a person who achieves *ren* a "superior person," "ideal person," or "sage."

To become a sage, a person must do the right things.

One of the right things is *yi*, doing one's duties. Confucius talked about duties in unequal relationships: parents and children, elder child and younger child, husband and wife, older friend and younger friend, teacher and student, ruler and subjects. In each relationship, the higher-ranking person must take care of the lower-ranking person. In turn, the lower-ranking person must obey and honor the higher-ranking person. For example, parents should treat their children well and raise them carefully. Children should obey and be loyal to their parents.

Confucius saw everyone as having a duty to everyone else. When asked for a single idea to guide a person's actions, he answered, "What about fairness? What you don't like done to yourself, don't do to others."

Another part of the sage is *de*, virtue or moral force. Confucius said: "The sage cares about virtue (*de*). The inferior person cares about things."

Ren, *yi*, and *de* are expressed through *li*, or ritual. Ritual can mean ceremonies. It also includes the actions of everyday life: greeting people, talking, asking for favors, saying goodbye. Rituals are the correct forms for action,

and they work magic. This may sound strange, but think about the magic words "please" and "excuse me" and their power. For example, you can move someone much larger than yourself by simply saying, "excuse me." Confucius saw rituals as the way to make society run smoothly.

Confucius believed that rulers did not need to use force to return harmony to society. Confucius said: "If you govern them by means of virtue (*de*) and keep order among them by ritual (*li*), people will gain their own sense of shame and correct themselves."

For Discussion

1. What was life like in China at the time of Confucius?
2. What do we know about Confucius' life?
3. What are the main ideas that Confucius believed in? Which of these ideas do you think is most valuable? Which do you think is least valuable? Why?
4. Confucius believed that a ruler must treat his people well and that the people should obey the ruler. Do you think Confucius believed people must obey a ruler who abuses them? Explain.

Selections From the *Analects* of Confucius

1:5: Confucius said: "If you would govern a state . . . pay attention to business, be true to your word, be careful in spending, love the people, and use peasant labor at the right time of the year."

1:6 Confucius said: "A young man should serve his parents at home, be respectful to elders outside his home. He should be earnest and truthful, loving, and humane. After doing this, if he has energy to spare, he can study literature and the arts."

2:1 Confucius said: "If you govern with the power of your virtue (*de*), you will be like the North Star. It just stays in its place while all the other stars go around it."

2:3 Confucius said: "If you govern the people with laws and control them by punishment, they will . . . have no personal sense of shame. If you govern them by virtue (*de*) and keep order among them by ritual (*li*), they will gain their own sense of shame and correct themselves."

2:5 . . . Confucius said, "When your parents are alive, serve them with ritual (*li*); when they die, bury them with ritual, and then worship them with ritual."

2:17 Confucius said: ". . . When you know something, to see that you know it, and when you don't know something, to see that you don't know it. That is knowledge."

2:20 Qi Kang Zi asked: "How can I make the people respectful and loyal, so they will work positively for me?" Confucius said, "Approach them with dignity, and they will be respectful. . . . Promote the able and teach the unskilled, and they will work positively for you."

3:3 Confucius said: "If a man has no humaneness (*ren*), what can his ritual (*li*) be like?"

4:5 Confucius said, ". . . If a sage departs from humaneness (*ren*), how can he be worthy of that name? A sage never leaves humaneness for even the time of a single meal. . . ."

4:13 Confucius said: "If you can govern the country by putting ritual (*li*) first, what else will you need to do? If you can't govern your country by putting ritual first, how could you even call it ritual?"

4:17 Confucius said: "When you see a good man, think of becoming like him. When you see someone not so good, reflect on your own weak points."

7:8 Confucius said: "If a student is not eager, I won't teach him. If he is not struggling with the truth, I won't reveal it to him. . . ."

7:15 Confucius said: "I can live with rice to eat, water to drink and my arm as a pillow and be happy. Wealth and honors that one possesses in the midst of injustice are like floating clouds."

7:33 Confucius said: "I dare not claim to be a sage or a humane man. But I strive for these without being disappointed, and I teach without becoming weary. . . ."

7:36 Confucius said: "The sage is always at ease with himself. The inferior man is always anxious."

Daoism

Daoism (also spelled Taoism) is far different from Confucianism. Its founder is said to be Lao Zi ("Old Master"). But not much is known about him. Many even doubt that he ever lived. But stories of his life abound. He is said to have lived around the time of Confucius. As the story goes, Lao Zi was so upset with the constant warfare that he decided to leave China. At the border, a guard stopped him. He recognized the wise man and urged him not to leave. Lao Zi would not change his mind. The guard told him he would only let him pass if he wrote down his wisdom. Three days later, Lao Zi returned with the *Dao De Jing* and handed it to the guard as he left China.

The *Dao De Jing* ("The Way and Its Power" or the "Classic Way of Virtue") is one of the basic texts of Daoism. The whole book is 81 short verses.

Dao means "way." The *Dao De Jing* begins by saying that the way

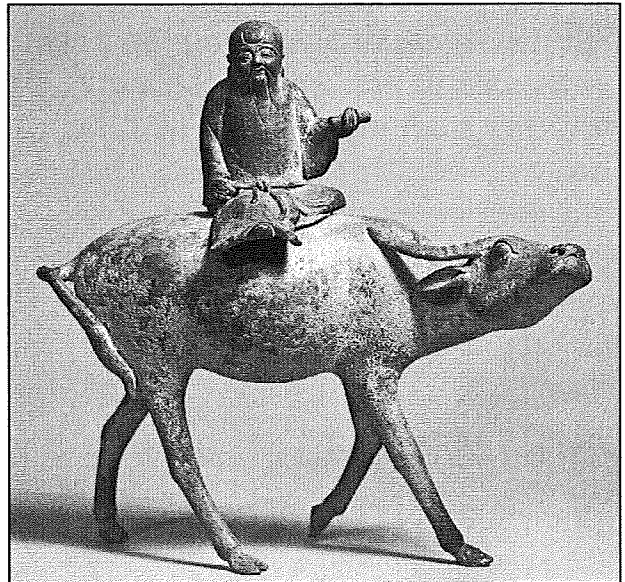
Pronunciation Key

Dao De Jing (dow duh JING)

Daoism (DOW izm)

Lao Zi (lao zuh)

wu-wei (woo way)



Little is known about Lao Zi, but the writings of this master of Daoism urged rulers not to pass too many laws.

(*dao*) cannot be described. It goes on to tell about the *dao* in poetic language. Like much poetry, it can be interpreted in different ways.

But the *Dao De Jing* openly rejects the basic ideas of Confucianism—*ren*, *yi*, *de*, and *li*. It says that when a society practices these ideas, it has lost the way (*dao*) and is falling apart:

. . . when the *dao* is lost
there is virtue (*de*)

When virtue is lost there is
humaneness (*ren*)

When humaneness is lost
there is doing one's duties
(*yi*)

And when doing one's duties
is lost there is ritual (*li*).

Ritual is the end of compas-
sion and honesty

And the beginning of disor-
der.

According to the *Dao De Jing*, a
true sage is "humble," "low," "soft,"
and "empty." The sage does not
compete or strive for anything.
Yet the sage is successful:

The sage wanders without
knowing,

Sees without looking,

Accomplishes without acting.

The idea of *wu-wei* is central to
Daoism. *Wu-wei* means "non-
doing" or "not doing something
for another purpose." The sage is
"at one" with everything he does.
The sage does not think about
other things, like fame or money.
If the sage were, for example,
playing a game, the sage would
not worry about winning or think
about how well the sage was play-
ing. These are distractions. By not
being distracted, the sage accom-
plishes much.

Water is one of the main images
in the *Dao De Jing*. It stands for
flexibility and power.

Nothing in the world is
softer than water.

Yet it wears down stone.

The soft overcomes the hard

And the gentle overcomes
the strong.

Every person knows this,

But no one does it.

The *Dao De Jing* urges rulers to be
fair and gentle and not pass too
many laws:

When the government is
relaxed,

The people are relaxed.

It complains about rulers who "tax
too much," spend money on them-
selves, and let the people starve. It
also denounces war:

If you used the *dao* for
ruling,

You would not rule with
military force,

For violence has a habit of
returning.

But the *Dao De Jing* does not com-
pletely reject war. It says that a
ruler should go to war "only when
there is no choice"

For Discussion

1. What are the main ideas of
Daoism?
2. How is Daoism different from
Confucianism? How is it simi-
lar?
3. If you were living in ancient
China, would you have favored
one school of thought over the
other? Explain.

Selections From the *Dao De Jing*

10

. . . Give birth to it and nourish it.
Produce it but don't possess it.
Act without expectation.
Excel, but don't take charge

17

The best rulers are scarcely known
by their subjects
When rulers finish their work on
a job,
Everybody says: "We did it!"

22

. . . A sage does not show off and
so is seen
Does not boast, so gets credit
Does not strive, so succeeds
Does not compete, so no one com-
petes against him. . . .

30

. . . Where the general has
camped
Thorns and brambles grow.
In the wake of a great army
Come years of famine.

64

. . . A thick tree grows from a tiny
seed.

A tall building arises from a
mound of earth.

A journey of a thousand miles
starts with one step.

Striving, you are defeated;

Grasping, you lose. . . .

67

. . . here are three treasures that I
prize:

The first is gentleness,

By which one finds courage.

The second is frugality,

By which one finds generosity.

And the third is unimportance,

By which one finds influence.

71

There is nothing better than to
know that you don't know.

Not knowing, yet thinking you
know—

This is sickness.