Confucianism

Confucianism from Collins English Dictionary

1 the ethical system of Confucius, emphasizing moral order, the humanity and virtue of China's ancient rulers, and gentlemanly education

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Summary Article: Confucianism
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Confucianism is a philosophical system of beliefs, sometimes referred to as a religion, instituted in varying degrees during the past 2,500 years throughout several East Asian nations—including China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Vietnam—and globally through Asian diaspora communities. The English word Confucianism can be traced back to 16th-century Jesuit missionaries in China who used the term to describe a tradition that had Chinese philosopher Kung-Fuzi (551-478 BCE) as its figurehead.

Because Confucianism evolved within several different cultures concurrently, there are cultural differences in doctrinal emphases, expressions, and manifestations. However, the positing of humans within correct social and moral structures to achieve harmony remained foundational within the Confucian worldview. Sources often refer to early or classical Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, and modern New Confucianism, which points to various Confucian practices and philosophies spanning different time periods. Confucianism has had to coexist, although not always without tension, with several other philosophies/religions/belief systems, and it has been integrated into sociopolitical and economic structures of the East Asian countries mentioned. Academics are investigating the prevalence and relevance of Confucianism today as it encounters modernity for the East Asian nations mentioned, their diasporic communities, and the global community.

Early Confucianism

Kung-Fuzi (Confucius) was born in eastern China to an aristocratic family during the Zhou Dynasty. Supposedly founding his own school when he was 22 years old and teaching up to 3,000 students, Confucius is most commonly associated with the Analects of Confucius (Lunyu), a collection of his sayings composed by his followers between 500 and 300 BCE. Confucius believed he was rediscovering and promoting a philosophy that extended back to ancient times. This philosophy tried to explain the roots and develop theories of human relationships to promote collective and individual stability, prosperity, and harmony. Confucius did not make theological assertions about deities, gods/god, or the afterlife, although Confucianists did discuss heaven's relation to humanity. Confucius's work, along with that of his followers Meng-zi (Mencius) (372-289 BCE), author of the Four Books (Si Shu), and Xun-zi (310?-211? BCE), formed the backbone of classical Confucian thought. Confucius has been referred to as “the sage of all times.”

Generally, collective well-being was prioritized over fulfilling individual desires and aspirations. Humans
were essentially social creatures who could attain fulfillment by perfecting their individual and social moral natures, which was a self-realizing process. Confucian scholars debated the essence of human nature, whether it was inherently good and moral (Mencius) or not (Xunzi), and whether all individuals had the potential to reach sagehood. They stressed several values believed to be unchanging in natural laws and essential in forming social bonds: humaneness/humanity/compassion (ren), ritual/propropriety/etiquette (li), righteousness/moral sense (yi), wisdom (zhi), and faithfulness/honesty/heart (xin). In addition, the Way (dao), virtue (de), filial piety/love for the family (hsiao), loyalty (chung), reciprocity, empathy (shu), and courage (yung) were central. Each of these concepts tended to be broadly interpreted, encompassing numerous aspects and forms.

Within the Confucian worldview, a ranked pattern of society was visible—of rulers over subjects, parents over children, and husbands over wives. Observing these clearly defined hierarchical relationships, which could include the deceased, and one’s duties maintained social, and therefore divine, harmony. In general, subordinates were expected to respect their superiors, and Mencius asserted that those of “higher order” were to protect those below, displaying “benevolent hegemony”/humane government (ren sheng) along with socially and morally exemplary behavior. Confucianists believed that this true moral virtue of the rulers could effectively govern and maintain order. Emperors were said to be “Sons of Heaven” (tien tzu) and were expected to uphold the “Mandate of Heaven.” Proper conduct, morality, virtue, and ethics, along with each individual’s fear of “loss of face” or shame, would necessarily ensure obedience to authorities. That said, mass uprisings against particular governments have occurred in Vietnam and China on the basis that rulers were not acting benevolently or virtuously.

Confucianism has experienced waves of popularity, imperial support, and institutionalization throughout its history. Where China's Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE) saw the persecution of Confucian scholars, Confucianism served as the state and educational systems' intellectual basis during the subsequent Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE). Several Confucian schools emerged, classic texts were annotated, and the Grand Academy established; Confucianist thought disseminated through all levels of Chinese society. Confucianism was then transported to other East Asian nations during China's Wei-Jin dynasties (220-420). Entering Korea from China in the 4th century (when Buddhism was also introduced to Korea), Confucianism provided tools for government administration and academic and artistic development. Korea's National Academy was established in 372 CE, and Confucian studies were established during the Silla Kingdom (365-965). As in China, Korean officials emphasized social structures, obligations, and harmony. The Analects were brought to Japan possibly around 400 CE by a Korean scholar, and 200 years later, the nation witnessed the incorporation of Confucian ideas into its constitution. China had meanwhile introduced a formal civil service examination system, which tested candidates on their writing skills and on their knowledge of Confucian classics and philosophy.

**Confucian Renaissance**

Confucianism was revived during China's Song Dynasty (960-1279) and is referred to as a renaissance of Neo-Confucianism. The “cultivation of the gentleman” (junzi) became an important theme, and Confucius and Mencius were, as the prime fullfillers of the potentiality of human nature, iconic sage-gentlemen. Chinese aristocratic education, heavily imbued with Confucianist doctrine, was thought to cultivate appropriate behavior, leadership skills, and morality. Sagehood was therefore realized through both study and a conscious process of self-cultivation. Moreover, the pursuit of “gentleman-ness” was to be aligned to principles of heaven eventually culminating in the unity of heaven and humanity.
Aristocratic education, with the ultimate goal of ren, involved learning in six arts: rites, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and arithmetic. Important rites of passage included those of adulthood, marriage, mourning, and burial, and ancestral veneration became widely practiced as a family ritual at all social levels. The elite literati class that emerged from state educational practices was powerful politically and socially, but social class was not hereditary, nor was social stratification ultimately fixed in Chinese society.

Up until the end of China's Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the Confucian "canon" was expanded on; civil servants were increasingly recruited through the examination system; and several new movements, schools, shrines, and trends of Neo-Confucian thought were instituted. This occurred alongside (although often in contention with) Buddhism, Daoism, geomancy, Mohism, and other local religious practices and philosophies, with elements of different belief systems sometimes being practiced together or being criticized. Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) is particularly noted for introducing Neo-Confucianism to Europe through his correspondence and for integrating some Confucian ideas with Christianity. It was he who after learning that Confucian scholars were the society's aristocrats, dressed himself as a Confucian sage and educated himself about Confucianism while working on his mission. He tolerated several Neo-Confucian practices and rituals, including ancestor veneration. Academics have stated that Neo-Confucianism remained the dominant school of philosophical thought within Chinese culture until the 20th century.

Neo-Confucianism became influential in Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, with highly regarded scholars and forms of state institutionalization emerging out of each culture. Korea's National Confucian Shrine (Munmyo), established in 1392 in Seoul toward the end of the Koryo Dynasty (918-1392), acted as a ritual site for paying homage to Confucius and other Confucian sages, but friction between Confucianism and Buddhism grew. It was also in this period that Korea introduced its version of the civil service examination and built a national university that helped to inculcate Confucian values. Similarly, Vietnam instituted public civil service examinations modeled on the Chinese examination system, which continued into the 19th century. As in China, Vietnam's ruling elite was recruited from the examination system, which necessarily required knowledge of Confucian ethics and political theory. In Tokugawa Japan (1603-1867), a Neo-Confucian worldview was propagated, affecting both the elite and the popular levels of society. Tokugawa Yoshinao (1601-1650) had a Confucian temple built on the site of a shogunal palace, and Confucian intellectuals such as Fujiwara Seika (1561-1619) and Hayashi Razan (1583-1657) helped to establish several Neo-Confucian schools within Japan, separate from Shinto and Buddhist authorities.

Confucianism in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Imperial, state, and popular support for Confucianism/Neo-Confucianism has not always remained consistent, and the last 150 years offer several examples of anti-Confucian movements. In China, it encountered resistance during the May Fourth Movement, and its relationship with Marxism was particularly contentious as people became increasingly suspicious of imperial ideologies and feudalism. Furthermore, Confucianism was condemned as having caused the country's prerevolution "economic backwardness." More recently, anti-Confucianism was linked with the anti-Lin Biao movement (1973) when certain political leaders were accused of following Confucian policies. Alternatively in Japan, both pro- and anti-Confucian arguments were used to support Meiji nationalism, the first using Confucian principles in support of state and the latter condemning Confucianism as a foreign import.

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Some critics have claimed that Confucianism is outmoded, patriarchal, incompatible with a scientific worldview, and a barrier to democracy, liberalism, and modernization. Tu Wei-Ming, who is often associated with 20th- and 21st-century Confucian humanism, states Confucianism can bring authentic meaning to the world and that it has global appeal, not just within East Asia. He argues it is relevant and adaptable to modernity because it provides an ethical framework in which to act. Similarly, Japanese thinker Takehiko Okada states that Confucianism could help integrate human values into modern society as scientific and technological developments should consider the ethical nature of humanity and show sensitivity to human life.

Academics analyze Confucianism's interaction and negotiation with modern issues. For example, some have used Taiwan as a case study to examine how democratic liberalism and capitalism develop within a Confucianist society. It and the other “Big Four”/“Asian Tigers” (referring to the economic strengths of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea, although some economists have suggested adding other Asian nations to the list) have likewise been used as examples to suggest that there is nothing inherent in Confucianism that impedes modernization or capitalism. Some studies show that Confucianism has influenced and continues to influence several East Asian cultures. Confucius's birthday, September 28, is celebrated annually as a national holiday, Teacher's Day, in Taiwan; in South Korea, vocabulary terms such as “filial piety” and “losing face” are still used; Singapore had plans to introduce Confucian moral education in its school system; and Taiwanese and Singaporean politicians continue to draw on Confucian ideas to gain popular support. How Confucianism interacts with current salient issues, such as globalization, cosmopolitanism, democracy, communism, liberalism, nationalism, capitalism, authoritarianism, anti-authoritarianism, education, gender stratification, modernization, transnational identities, and technological development, continues to be investigated by Confucian and non-Confucian scholars alike.

See also:
Diasporas, Global Religions, Beliefs, and Ideologies, Identities, Traditional, Religious Identities, Religious Politics, Values

Further Readings

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