Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.) was a Chinese thinker, educator, and political theorist. The name Confucius is a Latinized version of Kong-fuzi, or Master Kong, introduced into European languages by Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century. His surname was Kong and his personal name, Qiu. He was also known by his courtesy name (Zhongni). Confucius is considered by many to be the greatest sage in human history in the sense that he influenced the largest number of people over the longest period of time.

The Master and His Time

Confucius was born to an impoverished aristocratic family in the state of Lu by the end of the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 B.C.E.). As a young man, he served as a functionary charged with duties such as accounting and husbandry. Opportunities for him to apply his political theories did not come until he was over 50 years old. He served initially as a local administrator and eventually ascended to the position of prime minister of the state of Lu. Nevertheless, his stint of premiership turned out to be brief. Because of differences in political and moral principles with the Duke of Lu, Confucius went into exile. In an attempt to put his ideals of morality and good government into practice, Confucius and his students traveled from one state to another to appeal to their rulers. His arduous efforts, however, did not bring forth any tangible results. At age 68, an exhausted Confucius returned to Lu to spend his last years teaching as well as compiling and editing classics.
Confucius's time was replete with social and political crises. The realm of the Zhou was under the constant threat of incursion by neighboring groups. Meanwhile, the established social norms were falling apart. Many feudal states that owed fealty to the Zhou king had grown so strong that they became virtual independent sovereigns. In turn, within some of them, powerful ministerial families coveted the seats of the rulers and in some cases actually usurped the thrones or caused the states to split. As a result of social norms being ignored, including the principle of primogeniture, succession disputes were commonplace in many states.

The Philosophy of Confucius

Throughout his adult life, Confucius was concerned with reforming society to put an end to turmoil and to restore morality, harmony, and stability. His students recorded his thoughts and compiled them into a book known as the *Analects of Confucius*, which includes historical anecdotes and Confucius's comments on learning, morality, governance, aesthetics, ritual decorum, social relations, and cultural differences.

Inside and outside of China, Confucianism is often mistaken as a religion. However, it is not concerned with deity and has nothing to do with the afterlife. Rather, Confucianism is about cultivating intrinsic morality, nurturing harmonious social relationships, and promoting good governance in the world. Therefore, Confucianism is more appropriately defined as a social philosophy.

At the core of Confucius's ideas are the notions of ren or "benevolence" and zhong-shu or "loyalty reciprocity." Simply put, these intrinsically related concepts require one to love all people, to have empathy for others, and to discipline oneself according to the decorum of high antiquity. The first step to practicing the notion of ren is to fulfill filial piety toward one's parents and forebears. Confucius acknowledged the irresistibility of natural law ("heaven" or the "way of heaven," in his words).

For Confucius, however, the way of heaven was comprehensible and he believed that everyone should strive to understand the way of heaven. The ruler should rule by virtue to maintain the mandate of heaven, whereas his subjects should conduct themselves according to superior moral standards. Society is related through pairs of reciprocal positions, such as monarch-subjects and fathers-sons. Individuals in each position should faithfully perform the duties and obligations appropriate to that position. Ritual and music symbolizing hierarchical statuses are important mechanisms of social maintenance. For a society as a whole, justice and fairness are more important than an abundance of wealth. To maintain social order, benevolence and cultivation of intrinsic morality are more effective than penalties or punishment.

While the ultimate goal is to construct a harmonious and stable society, this goal can be reached only by creating individuals with knowledge and conscientiousness. For this reason, continued learning is of such importance that it is not just a means to a goal, but is in itself a life goal. Regardless of social or cultural background, every individual can be educated. Constant self-improvement is a requirement for all gentlemen. From the perspective of ren, aesthetics is based on ethics. Beauty and virtue are inseparable. Human differences are defined by culture, which is acquired through the process of enculturation and mutable by one's own volition. Thus, a barbarian can become Chinese as long as he is willing to adopt the Chinese way, and vice versa.
Legacy and Impact
Over two millennia, Confucianism was the orthodox ideology in Imperial China. It has shaped the ways of thinking and behavior of the Chinese people. It has also been deeply entrenched in Asian countries like Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam. Because Confucianism performed many functions fulfilled by religions in other societies, China never developed a state religion. Thanks to its culturistic approach to human differences, various ethnic minorities who ruled China could claim to be legitimate inheritors of the Chinese tradition. This is likely one of the most important reasons why China is the only ancient civilization that has survived uninterrupted into the 21st century.

See Also:
Mencius, Philosophy, Zhou, Eastern, Zhou, Western

Further Readings


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