

Confucius



Figure 1: Confucius, in an early 20th-century illustration.

(551–479 B.C.). For more than 2,000 years the Chinese people were guided by the ideals of Confucianism. Its founder and greatest teacher was Confucius, whose humane philosophy also influenced the civilization of all of eastern Asia.

Many legends were spread to illustrate Confucius' beliefs. According to one story, he and his disciples passed a cemetery where a woman was weeping at a graveside. She told them she was crying because “My husband’s father was killed here by a tiger, and my husband also, and now my son has met the same fate.” When they asked her why she did not leave such a fatal spot, she answered that in this place there was no oppressive government. “Remember this, my children,” said Confucius, “oppressive government is fiercer and more feared than a tiger.”

In such teaching and with such wise sayings, Confucius tried to bring people to a virtuous way of life and a respect for the teachings of the wise men of older generations. He always said of himself that he was a “transmitter, not a maker.” He collected and edited the poetry, the music, and the historical writings of what he considered the golden age.

Confucius laid no claim to being more than a man. Yet when he died he was revered almost as a god. Temples were erected in his honor in every city of China. His grave at Qufu, in what is now Shandong Province, became a place of pilgrimage.

Although Confucianism is commonly called a religion in the West, it is rather a system of moral conduct. Confucius did not talk of God but of goodness. He did not teach about any god, saying simply, “Respect the gods, but have as little to do with them as possible.” His attention was centered on making people better in their lifetime, and his *Analects* are wise sayings.

Confucius is the Latinized form of the philosopher’s Chinese name, which was Kongfuzi or Kongzi, meaning Master Kong. He was born as Kongqiu in a poor but noble family. His father died when the boy was 3 years old. When he was only 6, people noted his fondness for setting out sacrifices and for ceremony. After his marriage at age 19, he worked for the governor of his district, first as a keeper of

stores and then as an overseer of parks and livestock. At the age of 22 he began his lifework as a teacher by establishing a school. He accepted valuable aid from some of his students, but he also welcomed students who could afford to pay only a small fee.

After some years of teaching and travel, he settled in Shandong for 15 years. When he was 52 years old, he was rewarded with an appointment as governor of a province. He performed his task so well that a neighboring governor became jealous and plotted his overthrow. Confucius then went into voluntary exile and wandered about for 13 years. Discouraged, he returned to his native state of Lu in his 69th year and died three years later. He had one son and two daughters. In spite of the communist revolution his teachings have had a great effect on Chinese history and culture.



Figure 2: A statue of Confucius stands at a temple in Shanghai, China.

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