

# CONFUCIUS

## Confucius's China

By the time Confucius was born in the sixth century BCE, China was already an ancient civilization. China was also an *anguished* civilization, in desperate need of renewal. Confucius was acutely aware of both facts. China's antiquity and its political and social problems informed Confucius's personal life profoundly, as well as the insights that ultimately shaped his philosophical vision and spiritual practice. Understanding his life and teachings thus requires a good grasp of China as it was 2,500 years ago, at least to the degree that our historical sources will allow. Because written documents from this time are rather scarce, the fine details of this sketch may at times recede into indistinctness, rendering an image that leaves much to the imagination, not unlike an old Chinese ink drawing. This image will be the background against which we will brush in our portrait of Confucius himself.

## What Do We Mean by "China"?

Today we refer to the immediate world of Confucius as "China," but this was not a word that he would have known. It is rather ironic that the man who is renowned as perhaps the greatest Chinese of all time could not have identified himself as "Chinese." The term "China" is a word of Sanskrit and Persian origin, most likely based on the name Qin, one of the many ruling dynasties of East Asia. Since the Qin Dynasty did not come to power until

the third century BCE, long after the death of Confucius, he would not have thought of himself as living in a country called China.

Confucius and his contemporaries would have referred to their civilization by many names, including *huaxia*—a word that could be translated as the Grand Florescence or Illustrious Blossoming. As this translation implies, the term *huaxia* suggests a cultural rather than a geographical or political identity. Instead of thinking of themselves as subjects of a kingdom or inhabitants of a terrestrial location, the ancient Chinese primarily identified themselves as participants in a specific way of life, a way they regarded as more refined than others. They considered those outside of *huaxia* culture to be “barbarian.” These “barbarians” may have been ethnically indistinguishable from the “Chinese” and may have even lived within the geographical region we would call “China,” but their style of life was different from that of *huaxia*. Since the difference between Chinese and barbarian was cultural and not ethnic or racial, barbarians could become “civilized”—that is, become Chinese—simply by adopting the distinguishing marks of *huaxia* culture, such as wearing particular clothing, eating certain kinds of food, and most important, practicing Chinese etiquette. We know today that the *huaxia* culture of Confucius’s time was itself an amalgam of many different and distinct regional cultures that gradually influenced one another to form the grand florescence that Confucius and later Chinese considered to be a single culture and the primary identifier of the “Chinese” people.

Another word that denotes this sense of cultural rather than ethnic identity is *zhongguo*,<sup>1</sup> a term meaning the “central kingdom.” As the name intimates, those who belonged to the central kingdom regarded themselves as the center of civilization, not unlike the way Bostonians sometimes to refer to their city as the “Hub of the Universe.”<sup>2</sup> But *zhongguo* also had a more literal sense. By the time of Confucius, the ruling dynasty of this region—the Zhou Dynasty—governed from a kingdom surrounded by numerous vassal states that owed allegiance to the Zhou family. The central kingdom was indeed in the middle of things.

Throughout its long history, the geopolitical contours of *huaxia* culture have changed greatly.<sup>3</sup> For much of its past, Chinese culture was centered in the Yellow River Valley, located in the northeastern quadrant of the area occupied by the present-day People’s Republic of China. In the last four

1. The term *zhongguo* first appeared in the *Shujing (The Classic of History)* in the sixth century BCE.

2. The phrase “Hub of the Universe” was coined by Oliver Wendell Holmes. The hub is more precisely located at Filene’s in downtown Boston.

3. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Territories\\_of\\_Dynasties\\_in\\_China.gif](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Territories_of_Dynasties_in_China.gif) to see how these contours have changed.

millennia, the external boundaries of China have expanded, contracted, and assumed an array of shapes; its internal divisions, likewise, have changed in many different ways.

### Why the Past Mattered

When Confucius reflected on his cultural identity, he thought not only of his immediate era but the whole of its past as well. For Confucius, the past was profoundly significant and simply could not be separated from the present. His view of the world embraced the ancient as well as the contemporary. In a sense that modern Westerners might find difficult to grasp, the past was still alive for the Chinese. One can observe this characteristic in ancestor reverence, a fundamental religious practice that runs throughout Chinese history. In ancestor worship, the dead are treated as still existent and significant in everyday life. Ancestors must not be neglected by their descendants, who must attend to them with food and gifts and seek their advice on important matters. The veneration of ancestors symbolizes the way past and present interrelate in Chinese thought.

As moderns, we often take a cavalier attitude toward the past, in part because we frequently judge our own era as more advanced than that of bygone ages. As Henry Ford so bluntly put it, “History is more or less bunk.”<sup>4</sup> Such a quip about the past would have appalled Confucius. In fact, he would have considered that judgment itself to be both a symptom and a *cause* of the sorry state of the world. For Confucius, forgetting the past did not condemn us to repeat it, as the philosopher George Santayana famously said,<sup>5</sup> but rather dooms us to moral and spiritual decline. A true conservative, Confucius *longed* to repeat the past—or at least one outstanding part of it.

His orientation to the past is one thing that sets Confucius apart from the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. While these other three were not necessarily inattentive to the past, the focus of their teachings took different temporal trajectories. The Buddha, as we shall see, grounded his spirituality in the present moment, even to the extent that some of his later interpreters regarded him as denying the reality of the past and the future altogether. Jesus and Muhammad, on the other hand, placed a great emphasis on the future. Jesus proclaimed the coming of new divine order, and Muhammad regarded the approaching day of requital as the final moment of reckoning for believers and unbelievers alike. Only in Confucius do we find a teacher

4. Ford, *Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 1916.

5. “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana, *Life of Reason*).

whose fundamental spiritual practice involved taking the past as the guide to, and the standard for, living in present. “If by keeping the old warm one can provide understanding of the new,” he told his followers, “one is fit to be a teacher.”<sup>6</sup>

### The Legendary History of China

The past for which Confucius pined was the early society of the Yellow River Valley. Dating to at least the fifth millennium BCE, the Yellow River culture was old enough and sophisticated enough for it to be considered in modern times as one of “cradles of civilization.” The evidence disclosed by archaeologists suggests that by the end of the Neolithic period, the citizens of this area were practicing elaborate burials and other rituals and had established social hierarchies regulated by patrilineal descent. Both ritual performance and social stratification were extremely important elements throughout later Chinese history, and both figured prominently in the life and teachings of Confucius. Sometime after 2,000 BCE, the citizens of the ancient Yellow River culture had mastered the use of bronze and developed the rudiments of a writing system.

By tradition, the Chinese remember this ancient past in a slightly different manner than just described. To be sure, Chinese tradition, like modern historiography, regarded this predynastic period as the time in which the basic features of civilization were established, including agriculture, carpentry, religious rituals, government, and writing. But the traditional legends also recall this era as an age when wise and benevolent monarchs ruled the land. Stories mention numerous philosopher-kings who were pious individuals reigning with only the welfare of the people at heart. Of special note were Yao, Shun, and Yu, the last three of a group called the Five Emperors. From the perspective of modern historiography, these figures were either altogether fictional or greatly exaggerated representations of actual rulers. Be that as it may, these three were often invoked as models of moral kingship, an ideal image against which lesser rulers were compared when times were bad. The last of these great sage-emperors—Yu—is traditionally considered the founder of China’s first dynasty, the Xia. But just as the historicity of these great kings is in doubt, so too the historicity of the Xia Dynasty is debated. This time in China’s past is in that area of our sketch where the details become fuzzy and ultimately vanish.

6. Dawson, trans., *Analects* 2:11 (p. 7).

## The Shang Dynasty

As we enter the next era of Chinese history, details slowly begin to come into greater clarity. This period is known as the Shang Dynasty, the earliest epoch that has been amply verified as historical. The Shang probably began sometime in the sixteenth or fifteenth century BCE in the Yellow River Valley. For many years, most scholars thought that the Shang Dynasty was part of the mythic prehistory of China, simply because there was no tangible evidence from the Shang period.

A little more than a century ago, however, the discovery of a curiosity first known as “dragon bones” changed that. These dragon bones, which actually turned out to be tortoise shells and bovine shoulder blades, not only proved the historicity of the Shang Dynasty but also revealed a good deal about the religious and political practices of the time. Inscribed on these shells and bones in an archaic script were all manner of questions inquiring about such things as the best time to plant a crop, the meaning of a dream, whether or not a particular ancestor was pleased with a sacrificial gift, and when to leave for a journey or to set out on a military expedition. Modern scholars determined that after they were inscribed, the shells or bones were heated, which caused them to crack. The resulting patterns were then interpreted as providing answers to the questions posed. There is no doubt that these animal artifacts were used for the practice of divining—the art of consulting the spirit world to gain knowledge that could not otherwise be available to human beings. The fact that over one hundred thousand such fragments of bone and shell have been recovered indicates that divination was an extremely important part of this early period in China and that it was used for both religious and political purposes.

The questions etched into these fragments are what provide us with the greatest insight into the Shang period. From them we learn that the Shang was an agrarian culture whose members revered the dead and ritually offered them sacrifices of food and wine. We know that the king played an especially important role in these rituals, and his success in pleasing the ancestors and keeping harmony with the spirit world was essential to the welfare of the kingdom. We also learn that Shang armies fought frequent wars with neighboring realms and with nomads from the inner Asian steppes. These facts are significant for our purposes because they bear greatly on our understanding of Confucius, who had much to say about respect for ancestors and family members, about the king’s role in effecting the happiness of his subjects, about war and peace, and about the importance of ritual. Confucius’s concern with these subjects put him in a long-standing Chinese tradition.

## The Early Zhou Dynasty

Scholars are not absolutely sure when the Shang Dynasty began, but they have a fairly precise idea of when it ended. In or around the year 1045 BCE, the Shang rulers were conquered and deposed by the rulers of a neighboring realm, thus initiating the next epoch in Chinese history, the Zhou Dynasty. This dynasty ruled, at least in name, for some eight hundred years, until it was supplanted by the Qin Dynasty in 221 BCE.

The founder of the Zhou Dynasty is traditionally considered to be King Wen, who was known as the “Cultured King” and who was also credited with contributing to a very important book of divination called the *Yijing*, or *The Book of Changes*. King Wen had been a feudal lord who was imprisoned by the last Shang king. When his son, later known as King Wu (the “Martial King”), overthrew Shang rule, he freed his father from imprisonment and bestowed on him the honorary title “king,” although King Wu himself was the actual ruler. But shortly after the conquest, King Wu died, leaving the throne to his thirteen-year-old son. Fortunately for the nascent dynasty, King Wu’s younger brother Dan stepped in to act as regent for the teenage sovereign. Although he might have attempted to gain the monarchy for himself, Dan, who is usually known by his title, the Duke of Zhou, chose instead to serve as the power behind the throne. These figures in the early history of the Zhou Dynasty—especially the duke—came to be regarded as the paragons of leadership and moral behavior by later Chinese, including Confucius. Confucius’s admiration of Dan was so deep that he reports having frequent dreams about the duke. Undoubtedly part of Confucius’s veneration of the Duke of Zhou derived from the sage’s own aspiration to high office as an advisor to royalty.

The duke’s reputation as a moral exemplar was shaped by what cynics might regard as a public relations campaign to legitimize the Zhou conquest of the Shang. Most scholars believe that the duke essentially invented the theory of *tianming*, the mandate of heaven. According to this concept, the ruler governed with divine sanction *as long as* he was virtuous. If a ruler became corrupt or inept, heaven withdrew its mandate and the ruler’s reign was no longer morally legitimate. On the basis of this doctrine, opposing and even deposing the king could be morally justified—and wresting power from the Shang rulers, of course, was exactly what the Zhou family had done. The Zhou people claimed that the Shang kings had neglected their commitment to virtue—and there probably was some merit to that allegation—and that consequently heaven’s mandate had passed to the Zhou. From that point on, the theory of the mandate of heaven came to assume a critical role throughout Chinese history, up until the twentieth century.

Those who would govern China had to invoke this doctrine to demonstrate their legitimacy as rulers.

Despite the high esteem in which later Chinese held the early Zhou rulers, the Zhou reign was not as culturally advanced as the Shang Dynasty it replaced. Zhou culture lacked a writing system and skill in bronzework, but it soon acquired these practices. The Zhou rulers also adopted many of the Shang's religious observances. The Zhou kings even gave a parcel of land to the remaining Shang family members so that they could continue to worship and sacrifice to their ancestors. The Zhou rulers themselves probably worshiped the Shang ancestors, although they had ousted their descendants!

### The Later Zhou Dynasty

Despite the adoption of Shang ways and the claim to govern by virtue of moral superiority, the Zhou period was not an altogether happy time in Chinese history. Even though it lasted eight hundred years and was China's longest dynasty, serious rifts began to appear just a few centuries after its establishment. In the year 771 BCE, the Zhou king was murdered by an invading alliance of Chinese and barbarians, and the capital had to be moved further eastward. This easterly move marked a division between what is known as the Western Zhou and Eastern Zhou periods. The Eastern Zhou, which lasted about 550 years, was further divided into two eras known as the Spring and Autumn Period and the Period of Warring States.

The Spring and Autumn age obtained its designation from a book titled *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, a chronicle that was traditionally—but probably incorrectly—attributed to Confucius. During this era, the power of the Zhou Dynasty declined significantly, destabilizing the entire region. Many smaller kingdoms that had been subject to the Zhou rulers saw this weakening as a chance to assert their independence. As these vassal states began to vie with one another to succeed the ancient dynasty, violence and lawlessness ran rampant. Political power became more localized and invested in so-called hegemony, who were essentially warlords powerful enough to dominate weaker rivals. Might, rather than virtue, now came to be seen as the hallmark of the ruler. This political flux engendered rapid social changes as well. The old nobility began to lose privileges based on birth, creating a new class of persons who were of noble descent yet who were increasingly required to prove themselves by talent and hard work. Confucius was born into this new social rank.

The political situation had greatly deteriorated when the Period of Warring States began. This era, which lasted from 403 to 221 BCE, was

characterized by extensive fighting among the many principalities that had once been loyal to the Zhou kingdom. By now, the nature of war itself had begun to change. Chariot warfare conducted by aristocrats was being replaced by a mounted cavalry and an infantry composed mainly of conscripted peasants armed with crossbows and weapons of iron. Military leadership was increasingly allotted to individuals who could prove their skill and expertise rather than automatically given to the nobles simply by virtue of their pedigree.

The pace of social and political changes continued to accelerate during the Warring States period. Government bureaucracy increased. New offices were created and filled by appointed administrators to regulate a population growing as a result of advances in agriculture and industry. As the old aristocracy gave way to a meritocracy, the peasantry began to have new opportunities—symbolized, for instance, by the emergence of a large class of peasants who were landowners. All of these changes were facilitated by the use of currency rather than barter as a means of exchange.

Interestingly, these latter years of Zhou Dynasty were also known as the Period of One Hundred Schools of Thought, because they were an immensely creative time philosophically and religiously. Although it is a poetic exaggeration, this alternative name indicates that this age of political and social disruption was a stimulus to innovative thought and lively debate among rival viewpoints. Clearly, the commotion created by the many changes rocking ancient China prompted the intellectuals to address the pressing issues of the day.

For the thinkers of Confucius's time, the most urgent problems were social and ethical in nature. Essentially, debate centered on the question of human harmony: What does it take for people to get along with one another? Many thinkers weighed in on this issue with proposals of various kinds. Although the matter is of a practical nature, it necessarily involved deeper questions and assumptions about the fundamental character of reality, the basic qualities of human beings, and the purposes for which human life is intended.

Confucianism was one of these schools of thought contributing to this lively philosophical conversation. China's other great indigenous philosophy, Daoism, was another. We do not know for certain how many different schools there were, but there were at least a half dozen prominent contenders. In terms of influence and longevity, Confucianism and Daoism have been the most successful, even though they provided perspectives that often seemed at odds with one another.



## Becoming a Sage

As we noted earlier, the name China probably derived from Qin, a dynasty that postdated the life of Confucius. Although the Qin emperors ruled for only fifteen years, they unified China and established it as an imperial power. But they had no use for Confucius and his philosophy. During this dynasty, his teaching fell into disfavor because his views were at odds with the highly authoritarian philosophy of the Qin government. The Confucian school was officially and vigorously suppressed; Confucian texts were burned, and hundreds of Confucian scholars were stoned to death or buried alive.

In the long history of Chinese culture, however, this episode was clearly and simply a blip, an aberration. Soon after the brief reign of the Qin rulers, Confucius and his way of thought were restored to a place of privilege in the Chinese world. Eventually, the man himself would be regarded as a demigod by many, and temples would be dedicated to his spirit and sacrifices made in his honor. After surviving the efforts of the Qin Dynasty to eradicate his teachings, Confucius became the fountainhead of virtually all aspects of Chinese life. Historian Annping Chin says in her biography, “Until the mid-twentieth century, China was so inseparable from the idea of Confucius that her scheme of government and society, her concept of self and human relationships, and her construct of culture and history all seemed to have originated from his mind alone.”<sup>7</sup> Confucius has even been credited with inventing the popular game of Mahjongg. An even more exalted accolade was offered by Mencius (Mengzi), the brilliant philosopher who lived almost two centuries after the sage: “Ever since man came into this world,” said Mencius, “there has never been one greater than Confucius.”<sup>8</sup> To judge solely by his humble beginnings and the course of most of his life, such high acclaim would hardly seem expected. For most of his seventy-odd years, Confucius was a virtual unknown.

Who was this man who garnered such high praise from people like Mencius, and what made his philosophy such a menace to people like the Qin emperors?

## Confucius and Kongzi

Just as this man would not have identified himself as Chinese, he would not have identified himself as *Confucius*. That was neither his given name nor the name by which the Chinese have known him, at least not until rather

7. Chin, *Authentic Confucius*, 2.

8. Lau, trans., *Mencius* 2a.2 (p. 80).

recently. Throughout the history of China, he has been called Kongzi, or Master Kong. Kong was his family name. His personal, or taboo, name was Qiu, and his courtesy, or social, name was Zhongni.<sup>9</sup> As is still common in many parts of Asia, it was often considered disrespectful to use someone's personal name, and so a social name or nickname was used for public purposes. The name Confucius did not come into existence until the seventeenth century, when European Jesuit missionaries in China Latinized his honorific title, K'ung-fu-tzu, which essentially means "Mister K'ung."<sup>10</sup> And Confucius is the name that has stuck, even for scholars who are quite aware of its imprecision.

### The Sources for the Historical Confucius

We cannot say much about the life of Confucius with historical dependability. This is true about lives of the Buddha and Jesus as well. In the case of Muhammad, the historical reliability of sources is also an issue, but much less so than with the other three. As we take up the life story of each of these individuals, we will discuss the matter of their historicity as real persons and the problems scholars have in gaining a clear picture of who they were and what they actually did and said. The problem of historicity as it pertains to Confucius illustrates many of the issues we encounter when we try to gain access to individuals from the ancient world by modern historiographical methods.

In the instance of Confucius, we have no documents written during his lifetime on which to base our portrait of him as a person. The same can be said of the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. Nor do we have any writings from their own hands. None of them committed their teachings to the written word, or if they did, no evidence of it remains. All four lived in cultures in which the spoken word was supreme, and writing was mainly reserved for legal and political matters. Literacy rates were very low. At the time of Jesus, for example, only around 5 percent of the population of Judea could read and write. It is not clear whether the Buddha and Jesus were literate, but it is almost certain that Confucius was and that Muhammad was not. If Confucius were literate, the absence of his own writings might be due to his conviction that the words of the ancient sages were more important than anything *he* had to say. In any event, all of our primary sources come from followers and others who were reporting their memories or the memories

9. Chin, *Authentic Confucius*, 2.

10. Italian Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci is traditionally credited with this coinage.

of others. No doubt many of them were even inventing “memories,” so to speak, consistent with their idea of who the individual was.

### *Sima Qian's Biography*

The first biography of Confucius probably contained both authentic and invented memories. It was written by Sima Qian (ca. 145–85 BCE), a court historian of the Han Dynasty, around the year 100 BCE, four hundred years after the sage's death. Sima Qian wrote under the new regime that arose after the Qin Dynasty came to a close. Under the Han, China had become a Confucian state. Sima Qian's biography of Confucius, which appears in a work known as the *Shiji*, or *Records of the Grand Historian*, must therefore be regarded with a healthy dose of suspicion, since it recounts the life of an individual who lived four centuries earlier and since it would have served the interests of the state to make Confucius seem larger than life. Nevertheless, this early biography is useful to help us understand how the example of Confucius was understood by many Chinese, even if that portrayal does not precisely correspond to the historical Confucius.

### *The Analects*

Despite the value of Sima Qian's biography, the best source for glimpsing the man Confucius is the *Analects*, the text known in Chinese as the *Lunyu*, a work that most scholars believe bears the imprint of his own thinking, if not some of his very words. Yet the *Analects* is by no means a biography—or even a narrative. Rather, it is a collection of aphorisms, conversations, and anecdotes related to the sage's life, most of which are attributed to Confucius himself. It is evident to critical scholars, though, that the text was written and compiled by his disciples after his death and that it probably took shape over the span of many generations.

The sayings and vignettes comprising the *Analects* are often very brief and sometimes rather cryptic, a fact that has helped shape the popular image of Confucius in the West as an old man uttering jewels of wisdom, as well as perplexing and sometimes irrelevant opinions. Not only are many of the pieces in the *Analects* obscure in themselves, but they do not seem to be compiled according to any organizing principle. One translator of the *Analects* describes its arrangement as “slapdash.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, as a source for understanding Confucius's life, it is woefully incomplete. There is much

11. Raymond Dawson's term.

about Confucius that the *Analects* does not consider important to report. Where there were gaps, later sources usually filled them in with imaginative stories that seemed congruous with the image of Confucius that emerges in the *Analects*. Despite its shortcomings, though, the *Analects* at least possesses the virtue of portraying Confucius as an ordinary person rather than the demigod he was later taken to be.

Compounding these interpretive difficulties is the fact that there is no consensus among modern historians about how much of the *Analects* is historically reliable. Almost everyone agrees that much of the text reflects the perspectives and words of his followers, some of whom may have been removed from him by many generations. Subtle—and sometimes glaring—contradictions within parts of the text itself suggest that many hands were involved in its composition.<sup>12</sup> Of twenty relatively short chapters, only the first half of the book is generally regarded as reflecting the thought and words of Confucius himself, but even here there is no universal agreement. Some say only chapters 3–9 contain words that Confucius *may* have actually spoken. Two scholars have recently argued that only a single section of chapter 4 is authentic.<sup>13</sup> Still another has gone so far as to claim that Confucius was not a historical figure at all, but an invented character who personified the values of the Chinese elite.<sup>14</sup> Since almost all scholars believe a similar thing about Laozi, the reputed founder of Daoism, the idea that Confucius was fictional is plausible, but the argument has not yet convinced the majority of researchers.

Most Confucius scholars believe there was an authentic historical person who at least inspired the school of thought associated with his name. For the last two millennia, virtually all readers of the *Analects* have assumed that all parts of the *Analects* derive from a real person named Confucius or Kongzi. For our purposes, we will not spend more time on these matters, even though they are part of a lively conversation among academics. We will

12. Benjamin I. Schwartz cautions against making too much of these apparent inconsistencies: “While textual criticism based on rigorous philological and historic analysis is crucial, and while the later sections [of the *Analects*] do contain late materials, the type of textual criticism that is based on considerations of alleged logical inconsistencies and incompatibilities of thought must be viewed with great suspicion . . . While none of us comes to such an enterprise without deep-laid assumptions about necessary logical relations and compatibilities, we should at least hold before ourselves the constant injunction to mistrust all our unexamined preconceptions on these matters when dealing with comparative thought.” Schwartz, *World of Thought in Ancient China*, 61.

13. Brooks and Brooks, trans., *Original Analects*.

14. Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*.

take Confucius to be a historical person (as most believe he was) and rely mainly on the *Analects* as the chief source for our investigation.

But even though the *Analects* is our best source for constructing a picture of Confucius, it is hardly an ideal work for biographical purposes. Although it is marked by the mind of Confucius—or at least someone known to history by that name—and probably contains some of the sage’s actual words, it is not a contemporaneous writing, and it is very fragmentary. Trying to sketch a literary portrait of Confucius from the *Analects* is somewhat akin to the way paleontologists try to understand how a prehistoric animal looked and lived based on a few fossil fragments. This does not doom the project from the outset, but it certainly advises caution in pressing our claims with too much conviction.

### Dating Confucius’s Life

So with the bits and pieces available to us, let us begin our sketch. At each point along the way, we will note when we are on firm historical ground and when we are moving into the legendary and mythical areas.

Chinese tradition suggests that Confucius was born around the year 551 BCE, during the Spring and Autumn Period, in the province of Lu, one of the several small principalities that began to compete with one another as the Eastern Zhou Dynasty started its slow decline. The same sources indicate that he died in 479 BCE. That would mean the sage lived seventy-two or seventy-three years. Of course, as we will also discover in the case of the Buddha, the traditional dates for Confucius are not accepted by everyone. There is good reason to be suspicious of the exactness of these traditional dates, since the sage lived during a time when the births and deaths of individuals were not recorded with great precision. Recently, some Confucius scholars have made the case that he lived closer to the end of the Zhou Dynasty, around the time of the Warring States period.<sup>15</sup> But in the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary, I suggest we simply stay with the time-honored dates.

### Heritage and Parentage

Although the *Analects* says nothing about this, the historian Sima Qian claims that Confucius’s lineage extends back to the royal family of the state of Song, one of the principalities of the early Zhou Dynasty. The members of

15. E.g., Brooks and Brooks, trans., *Original Analects*.

this noble family were appointed to conduct rituals dedicated to the Shang ancestors. There is no real evidence that Confucius was actually the descendant of such a family, but the theme of royal figures charged with maintaining ritual observances fits the image of Confucius perfectly, as we shall later see. In fact, this ancestral claim fits him almost *too* perfectly, which is one reason this heritage may be doubtful. As mentioned earlier, our four sages were all accorded aristocratic or royal heritage by later writers, although in each and every case the sage was unable or refused to enjoy the life of worldly privilege afforded by his noble descent.

Sima Qian goes on to flesh out the story of Confucius's ancestry. Confucius's great-grandfather had fled the state of Song, which was in political turmoil, and moved to the state of Lu, somewhere near the present town of Qufu, in southeastern Shandong province. Following the migration, however, the family fell on hard times and became impoverished, a state from which it never recovered. It was here that Confucius was born. Lu had been established five centuries earlier by one of the sons of the Duke of Zhou, the great regent who became the model of an ideal person for Confucius. Because of its connection to the duke, Confucius took pride in claiming Lu as his home province.

The story of Confucius's birth, as reported by Sima, is interesting in terms of our comparisons with the other three figures in our study, although the tale lacks independent corroboration. Apparently, Confucius's father, Shu-liang, was a very old man, and his mother a mere girl in her teens when Confucius was conceived. It is not clear if their relationship constituted a legal marriage. Shu-liang already had nine daughters by his chief wife and a crippled son by a concubine. Perhaps as he approached death he wanted a healthy male heir and so divorced his wife, or perhaps she had died. Sima Qian does say that Confucius was conceived while his parents were "making love in the field" (*yehe*), a reference that might suggest an illicit union because it does not occur under the auspices of a formal ritual. At least one scholar thinks this reference might also suggest a divine conception.<sup>16</sup> After this unconventional consummation, his parents' went to *Ni Qiu* (Mount Ni), a sacred mountain, to pray for a child, and when Confucius was born months later, they considered him to be the answer to their prayers. It is interesting to observe that Confucius's personal name was *Qiu*, the same Chinese word for "hill," and that Kong, his family name, can be used as an expression of gratitude for answered prayers. We cannot know if there is any historical validity to this story. It may have been invented by Sima as a clever wordplay on Confucius's Chinese names. What we want to observe at this

16. Chin, *Authentic Confucius*, 224-25.

juncture is simply the theme of an unusual conception that has become part of the life-story of Confucius as it has been accepted for over two thousand years.

### Young Man Kong

About his youth we know almost nothing with historical assurance. His father probably died early in his life, around the age of three, leaving him to be raised by his young mother. She too died when he was only twenty-three. The *Analects* reports that Confucius and his mother endured a poverty-stricken life. As a young man, he had to accept lowly jobs such as keeping accounts and caring for livestock. Later in life he tells his disciples that he was “skilled in many menial things,”<sup>17</sup> not out of desire but out of necessity. Sima tells us that as a boy he enjoyed pretending to officiate at mock rituals. Confucius seemed to delight in arranging ritual vases on sacrificial altars, or so the story goes. Again, this anecdote fits the later Confucius almost too perfectly, but it may bear some authenticity. One final note on his early life concerns his physical appearance. Tradition says he was born with a concavity on the crown of his head and was uncommonly tall for an ancient Chinese, reaching well over six feet at adulthood. He must have cut a striking figure indeed.

Despite his modest beginning—or perhaps because of it—Confucius was an eager and dedicated student. He says in one of the famous passages from the *Analects*, “At fifteen, I set my heart on learning,”<sup>18</sup> and this love of learning stayed with him for his entire life. He later described this dedication as one of his distinctive qualities: “In a community of ten households there will certainly be someone as loyal and trustworthy as I am, but not someone so fond of learning as I am.”<sup>19</sup> With no wealth or prestige, Confucius was nonetheless entitled to an education by virtue of his social standing. His ancestry placed him in the growing new class called the *shi*, or the common gentleman, situated between the declining nobility and the common peasantry. This emerging social rank comprised members of formerly aristocratic families whose success in life now depended on their own talents and determination rather than on mere birth. We do not know exactly how Confucius was educated, but it is safe to assume that he was schooled in all or most of the so-called Six Arts of ancient China: ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and mathematics. It is almost certain that

17. Lau, trans., *Analects* 9.6 (p. 97).

18. Dawson, trans., *Analects* 2.4 (p. 6).

19. Ibid., *Analects* 5.28 (p. 19).

he mastered at least ritual and music, because these two skills figured so prominently in his own philosophy and teaching.<sup>20</sup> As we shall see later, Confucius believed that ritual and music had important moral dimensions; performing ceremonies and listening to proper music served to make one a better person. Indeed, becoming a better person was what Confucius thought education was all about.

Confucius not only *loved* learning; he seems to have discovered a key aspect about the process of learning. The *Analects* quotes him as saying, “When I study, I do not get bored; in teaching others I do not grow weary.”<sup>21</sup> Confucius is not simply telling us about one of his inborn character traits, as if not getting bored were in his nature. I think he is talking about a skill that is an essential ingredient in learning. The twentieth-century American composer John Cage once wrote, “If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it’s not boring at all but very interesting.”<sup>22</sup> Cage’s remark suggests that boredom is not generated by anything outside oneself. The experience of boredom is really about the state of our own minds rather than about the thing we are reading or watching or listening to. “When people are bored,” said philosopher Eric Hoffer, “it is primarily with their own selves that they are bored.”<sup>23</sup> Cage believed that with the proper frame of mind, anything could be interesting and that without it, anything could be boring. Confucius was aware of the importance of this quality in the art of learning. We might call this quality mindfulness—or simply paying attention. Thus, he expected his students to share his love of learning and to practice the discipline of paying attention.

The Master said, “I will not open the door for a mind that is not already striving to understand, nor will I provide words to a tongue that is not already struggling to speak. If I hold up one corner of a problem, and the student cannot come back to me with the other three, I will not attempt to instruct him again.”<sup>24</sup>

Or to use the words of another august teacher, Confucius refused to cast his pearls before swine.<sup>25</sup>

20. Some traditions indicate that Confucius studied ritual with the Daoist Master Lao Dan, music with Chang Hong, and the lute with Master Xiang.

21. Dawson, trans., *Analects* 7.1 (p. 24).

22. Cage, *Silence*, 93.

23. Hoffer, *True Believer*, 52.

24. Slingerland, trans., *Analects* 7.8 (p. 66).

25. Matt 7:6.



## Marriage and Family

To add some finishing touches to our sketch of young man Confucius, let us briefly mention what takes him to the threshold of maturity: his marriage. We do know that he was married, although we know next to nothing about his wife, Qi Quan. The pair married in their late teens and had a son and a daughter together. The son predeceased Confucius. We do not know what Confucius was like as a father or husband, but there are suggestions in the early literature that his marriage ended in divorce. It is unfortunate that we have such sparse information about his family life, because familial relationships were an important aspect of Confucian ethics. In fact, Confucius viewed the political domain as the family writ large, and he derived many of his precepts for governance from what he understood to be appropriate for family life.

### A Gentleman and a Scholar

Confucius lived a meager existence as a young man, taking what he considered to be humble jobs to support himself and his family. What distinguished him from others in similar circumstances was his dedication to learning. From the time of his adolescence and marriage until his appointment as the minister of crime, Confucius was principally occupied with the study of the classic texts and traditions of *huaxia* culture. On the basis of what he learned by examining the past, Confucius pondered the decline of Chinese culture and developed his vision of what it would take to return China to the glory days of the Zhou and earlier dynasties. By his late twenties, he was recognized as an authority on history, ritual, and music, and served as an occasional ceremonial consultant to several rulers and aristocratic families in Lu and the adjacent states. In his thirties, he founded a private school to teach the classics to a wide range of male students, from the sons of the nobility to those brought up in modest conditions, as he had been. Some of his followers had even been criminals. He only required that his students be zealous learners like himself. Confucius was one of the first in Chinese history to offer such instruction to the members of lower classes, who were now beginning to regard education as the best way to improve their prospects in life. What Confucius was able to provide to them was training in gentlemanly conduct, or how to comport themselves so that they might serve the state and hence their fellow humans. Almost all of his disciples wanted a career in government, and it was to that end that they sought the services of Master Kong.

## Minister of Crime

It was not until around 500 BCE, when he was nearing the age of fifty, that Confucius is named in the records of Chinese history as a state official. His first appointment was as deputy minister of public works; shortly thereafter he was selected as the minister of crime. In this capacity, Confucius had opportunities to appear before the ruling court and confer with more powerful ministers of state. His tenure in the position was fairly unremarkable for the most part, although his later admirers go a bit over the top in describing his accomplishments. Xunzi, one his early interpreters, and Sima Qian both claimed that almost immediately after Confucius assumed office, a new wave of morality swept through the province, driven almost solely by his reputation. Shepherds stopped bloating their sheep with water before taking them to market, horse and cattle dealers no longer tried to swindle their buyers, husbands forced out their adulterous wives, and outsiders were made to feel welcome. If we are to believe reports such as these, we would have to accept that within just months of his appointment, Confucius had restored social harmony where there had been rampant discord for generations.

While such stories are surely exaggerations, they nonetheless highlight two important matters, one pertaining to Confucius's philosophy and the other to his personality. Concerning the first, Confucius believed that the pursuit of virtue by leaders—whether of the state or of the family—had salutary ramifications throughout the collective body. Virtuous leaders inspire virtuous behavior in their subordinates, thus stabilizing and harmonizing society. This belief would be quite consistent with the legends suggesting that when Confucius assumed office the world became a much better place. These accounts also say something about Confucius's personal qualities. Obviously, the stories are intended to relate that Confucius was the kind of person whose example and power of virtue could bring about such wholesome changes.

This is precisely the image of Confucius that emerges in the *Analects*. Piecing together his aphorisms and the impressions of his disciples, the sage emerges as the paragon of wisdom, compassion, and humility. One summary of his personal character describes him as “absolutely free from four things: free from conjecture [and unnecessary speculation], free from arbitrariness, free from obstinacy, free from egoism.”<sup>26</sup> Freedom from egoism—in other words, humility—seems to be the quality that most impressed his contemporaries. They remarked upon it in a variety of ways. It was evident even in his physical carriage and demeanor: The *Analects* reports that

26. Huang, trans., *Analects* 9.4 (p. 101).

“on going through the outer gates to his lord’s court, he drew himself in, as though the entrance was too small to admit him.”<sup>27</sup> He “was genial and yet strict, imposing and yet not intimidating, courteous and yet at ease.”<sup>28</sup> According to one of his closest followers, Zigong, the master was gentle, benevolent, respectful, frugal, and deferential.<sup>29</sup> Other disciples described him as “rather unassuming” and as someone who “seemed as if he were an inarticulate person.”<sup>30</sup> Yet at court he always spoke eloquently, with caution, carefully choosing his words. There seemed to have been not a shred of pretense in him. He never claimed to be a special individual or to possess any great knowledge. “As for sageness and humaneness,” he said, “how dare I claim them?”<sup>31</sup> He did not consider himself to be the ideal person that others took him to be. To the contrary, he appeared to be more focused on correcting his deficiencies than displaying his assets. The *Analects* quotes him as saying, “Virtue uncultivated, learning undiscussed, the inability to move toward righteousness after hearing it, and the inability to correct my imperfections—these are my anxieties.”<sup>32</sup> He advised his followers: “When you come across an inferior person, turn inwards and examine yourself.”<sup>33</sup> They confirmed that “when he made a mistake, he was not afraid to correct it.”<sup>34</sup>

Confucius was also a person capable of great empathy for others, particularly for those who were suffering. “On seeing a man in mourning, even an intimate friend, he always changed his countenance.”<sup>35</sup> If he “dined beside a bereaved person, he never ate his fill.”<sup>36</sup> His empathy for others evoked in him a keen attention to the gestures of respect and courtesy: “When the Master saw a man in mourning, or one wearing an official hat and suit, or a blind man—when he saw one, even a younger person, he always rose; when he passed one, he always quickened his pace,”<sup>37</sup> which was regarded as a sign of respect. When there were state ceremonies honoring the elderly, he would

27. Lau, trans., *Analects* 10.4 (p. 101).

28. Dawson, trans., *Analects* 7.38 (p. 27).

29. Huang, trans., *Analects* 1.10 (p. 49).

30. Dawson, trans., *Analects* 10.1 (p. 35).

31. Huang, trans., *Analects* 7.33 (p. 94).

32. *Ibid.*, *Analects* 7.3 (p. 87).

33. Dawson, trans., *Analects* 4.17 (p. 14).

34. Huang, trans., *Analects* 1.8 (p. 48).

35. *Ibid.*, *Analects* 10.19 (p. 114).

36. *Ibid.*, *Analects* 7.9 (p. 88).

37. *Ibid.*, *Analects* 9.10 (p. 103).

not leave until all the senior guests had left.<sup>38</sup> Yet, despite his concern with personal decorum and conduct, Confucius was never stiff or pompous.<sup>39</sup>

These images and memories signify the way Confucius appeared to his close followers and to others and probably have some basis in the historical Confucius. The details may be debatable, and perhaps occasionally altogether wrong, but the early literary images of Confucius cannot have been wholly disconnected from the person he was. Confucius appears in the *Analects* as a wise, compassionate, and modest individual because he was in fact that kind of person.

That is what led his biographers to make such high claims about his term as a government official. In all likelihood, Confucius's achievements as minister of crime in Lu were much more modest than his later biographers thought, but they were not insignificant. He is credited with negotiating an important agreement with the neighboring state of Qi that resulted in the return of previously stolen lands to the kingdom of Lu. This diplomatic victory was impressive because Confucius was able to succeed using his powers of moral persuasion where several military expeditions had failed. The appeal to virtue and rehabilitation was always a first resort for Confucius, and the use of violence and punishment was always an inferior final solution.

That preference, however, did not mean that Confucius was a pacifist or a proponent of absolute nonviolence. Although there are clear similarities in their teachings on virtue and expediency, Confucius was no Gandhi. As minister of crime, Master Kong was directly responsible for the deaths of several individuals. One incident occurred during the very negotiation celebration at Qi, where Confucius ordered the execution of a troupe of singers and dancers who had been sent to entertain the Duke of Lu. Confucius justified the order by saying the entertainers had "made a mockery" of the dignity of their ruler.<sup>40</sup> Presumably, Confucius found their spectacle "lewd" and "vulgar," and hence contrary to the rites of propriety. This was by no means the only occasion on which Confucius voiced his objections to what he considered rude entertainments.

Nor was it the only time he sent someone to his death. During his appointment as minister of crime, he ordered the execution of one Shaozheng Mao, a man well known in Lu and respected by many as a teacher of virtue. Shaozheng had violated no laws of the state, yet Confucius condemned him for what amounted to moral pretense and subversion, believing he constituted a threat to the social fabric by stealthily teaching dangerous

38. Ibid., *Analects* 10.7 (p. 112).

39. Ibid., *Analects* 7.4 (p. 87).

40. Chin, *Authentic Confucius*, 38, citing Sima Qian.

ideas under the guise of integrity. The charges were not unlike those leveled against Socrates and Jesus, which of course resulted in their executions. The condemnation of Shaozheng scandalized many of Confucius's own disciples, some of whom thought he was trying to eliminate a rival teacher. Yet, Confucius never regretted his decision. His later interpreters were at pains to reconcile his action with his teachings on benevolence and the sacredness of human life.<sup>41</sup> In Xunzi's spin centuries later, the episode portrays Confucius as a man of "keen discernment," to use one of the sage's own terms, capable of extraordinary penetration of the depths of personal character. No one else could see it, but Confucius recognized Shaozheng as a wolf in sheep's clothing, and hence deserving the ultimate penalty.<sup>42</sup>

Confucius's career as minister of crime was not long-lived. Within four or five years of his appointment, he unexpectedly left the position—and the province of Lu—to seek another ruler to serve in another state. The reasons for his departure are not clear and have long been the subject of scholarly speculation. Characteristically, the *Analects* is obscure on this matter, offering only this terse statement:

When the Duke of Qi presented a group of singing girls, Jihuanzi, the prime minister of Lu, accepted them and there was no court for the next three days. Confucius left.<sup>43</sup>

His interpreters, of course, felt compelled to elaborate on this incident to help explain an otherwise baffling event. Most regarded the exodus as a protest: Confucius refused to work for a government that was vulnerable to morally corrupting influences from outside officials. And then there are those entertainers again! We're not sure if Confucius objected to their music or sexually provocative behavior or both. In any event, it was the prime minister's fascination with the singing girls that left Confucius disconcerted. Mencius adds another element to the story, indicating that in spite of the prime minister's impropriety, Confucius decided to give the ruler another

41. See especially Wang and Xunzi, *Xunzi Jijie*, ch. 28, 341–42.

42. These executions trouble me and do not fit the image I have of Confucius, or perhaps the image I want to have of him. I prefer to think of Confucius as a believer in the redeemability of everyone, regardless of the depth of their depravity. Even if Shaozheng were as wicked as Confucius thought, I would like to think that somehow a sage like Confucius could have put him on the straight path. But perhaps this is too much to ask for, even from Confucius, who never professed to be perfect—or even to be a sage. He lived in desperate times, and his actions need to be viewed in that context. Capital executions and brutal military violence were standard practices of the day. Perhaps there is some comfort in knowing that Confucius exercised this power sparingly and with considerable forethought and conviction.

43. *Analects* 18.4, my rendering.

chance. When Confucius was not offered a sliver of the sacrificial meat at a state ritual a short time later, he quietly stood up and left. Some commentators suggested that the ceremonial blunder was part of a conspiracy cooked up by those in the kingdom intent on halting Confucius's campaign to restore virtue to the government. Mencius wants us to understand that Confucius was not *personally* offended by the slight but that the omission confirmed that the Lu rulers were not serious about observing traditional ritual and hence not serious about promoting moral reform. Confucius had no choice but to leave. To stay would be to squander his talents, which could be of genuine use elsewhere.

### Itinerant Counselor

So Confucius upped and left. Along with an entourage of protégés, he became an itinerant political consultant. He wandered from kingdom to kingdom for over a dozen years, seeking opportunities to put his ideas into practice as well as to continue to learn. But he could never find a job that suited him, and in many cases he consented to serve rulers who were far less worthy than those he had left in Lu. Some of them, like Duke Ling of Wei, frankly admitted that they were more interested in military conquest and sexual exploits than in taking seriously what Confucius had to offer. Apparently, the rulers of these kingdoms were simply not prepared to receive Confucius's advice on how to govern on the basis of virtue and ritual observance. After a while in one location, he and his followers would pack up and move along on foot to seek better horizons. He must have covered over a thousand miles in his years abroad, and he sought residence in at least four other kingdoms.

The journeys between states were arduous. On one occasion, Confucius and his company almost starved to death after their provisions were depleted in the wilderness. We are not certain how they were able to survive the ordeal, but they did, and the experience provided some good material for later writers to highlight the finer aspects of Confucian thought. The *Analects* reports that after they ran out of food, Confucius's disciple Zilu approached the master with considerable resentment and asked sarcastically, "So the superior person is also susceptible to adversity?" To which Confucius responded, "The noble one rests at ease in adversity; the petty person when faced with adversity is reduced to recklessness."<sup>44</sup> Confucius's retort sounds remarkably similar to his near contemporary, the Buddha, who also had much to say about the characteristics of the noble one and his or her

44. *Analects* 15.2, my rendering.

capacity to face the sufferings of life with equanimity. Both the Buddha and Confucius indicate that nobility does not imply avoidance of adversity but rather meeting it with an inner resolve and serenity. Furthermore, Confucius goes on to challenge his disciple's assumption that the pursuit of virtue necessarily results in some tangible or worldly reward. Shortly after Zilu left, according to Sima Qian, Zigong arrives and tells Confucius, "Your way is too demanding. The world is unable to attain it. Why don't you make it a bit easier?"<sup>45</sup> Confucius responded:

A good farmer can work as hard as he can but does not always reap a harvest. A fine artisan can produce wonderful craftsmanship but is not always appreciated. A gentleman can be cultivating a [superior] way for himself; he can outline and summarize what he has learned, and gather all the strands and sort them into [interlocking] principles. Yet people will not always accept what he can teach them. Now it seems you are not pursuing [learning and] self-understanding. Rather, you seek to have your ideas gain acceptance. Your goal is not far enough!<sup>46</sup>

Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad all had to contend with someone trying to persuade them to modify their teachings to make their precepts more palatable and popular. All had to face rejection by others and a sense of failing to accomplish their goals.<sup>47</sup> The response of each teacher was to locate the criteria for success in something other than popular acceptance and applause. For Confucius, success was to be measured by the depth of self-understanding and personal refinement, qualities that could be attained regardless of circumstance or public acclaim.

During his journeys, Confucius not only confronted death by starvation but also was twice the object of attempted murder. In one case, the would-be assassins mistook him for someone else; in the second, the minister of the army of the state of Song, Huan Tui, chopped down a tree in an effort to crush Confucius while he was performing a ritual. This was no case of mistaken identity, but we are not told of the army minister's motivations. In both instances, Confucius responded by recalling his sense of divine mission: "Heaven is author of the virtue that is in me. What can Huan T'ui do to me?"<sup>48</sup> By now—in his midsixties—Confucius had become convinced that his work in the world had been sanctioned by the highest realities and

45. *Shiji* 47:1930–32, paraphrased from Chin, *Authentic Confucius*, 107.

46. *Shiji* 47:1930–32, quoted in Chin, *Authentic Confucius*, 107–8.

47. In his famous parable of the sower, Jesus suggested that the teachers of unconventional wisdom are lucky if they bear fruit a quarter of the time (Matt 13:1–23; Mark 4:1–20; Luke 8:1–15).

48. Lau, trans., *Analects* 7.23 (p. 89). See also *Analects* 9.5.

that imprimatur secured the worth of his vision and the significance of his mission. The Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad also survived assassination attempts, and, like Confucius, remained undeterred by them. Each had discovered a source of courage rooted in a truth beyond the triumphs and failures of their individual lives.

### “The First of Teachers”<sup>49</sup>

Fourteen years on the road seems to have nourished Confucius’s courage and confidence. Certainly, it took a good measure of fortitude for him to leave the state of Lu in the first place and strike out on his own after finally landing a job he had long sought; but it is also fair to say that these years of itinerancy were important in maturing Confucius’s thought and the personal qualities that made him so attractive to many. Opening to the unfamiliar and the unexpected often strips away the inessential and discloses hidden parts of ourselves. Whatever agents of transformation were in play during his wanderings, at the end of his exile Confucius was sufficiently at home in his own skin to return to Lu.

His homecoming was probably prompted by an invitation from the government of Lu. He arrived home in 484 BCE, enjoying an even greater reputation than he had when he left. There was no lack of young men interested in apprenticing themselves to him. In part, his new status was due to the professional success of some of his older protégés who had left years earlier and proven themselves in the government bureaucracies. By now, Confucius was in his midsixties and no longer so keen to be intimately and actively involved in politics. Nor were the rulers of Lu really so eager to accept his advice, despite the enticements to bring him home. In his later years, he occasionally consulted with kings and counselors but increasingly turned his energies towards educating his young followers.

Tradition tells us that in these years he also devoted himself to editing the texts that became classics in later Confucianism, including the *Book of Songs*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and the *Yijing (Classic of Changes)*, the much revered book of divination. These claims are doubtful, though, and may only reflect the later tradition’s image of the man as a dedicated scholar doing what scholars do. Be that as it may, it is clear that during this period, his zeal for learning and teaching had not diminished in the least. The *Analects* records his incisive mind still at work, prodding his disciples to think for themselves and practice the hard, straight way that had become his hallmark.

49. *Xianshi*.



In this way—learning and teaching, constantly striving for self-improvement—Confucius occupied himself until the end of his days. Although less absorbed with the realm of politics, he never withdrew completely from society to become a recluse, as did other notable sages of his day. A man of the world throughout his life, he remained so up until his death. He died in 479 BCE, says tradition, and was buried in the time-honored manner by his followers, who then entered a three-year mourning period, the traditional pattern observed following the death of a parent.

We noted at the beginning of our study that some recent scholars have argued that Confucius was only a fictional character conjured up by later Confucians, just as Laozi was an invention of Daoist philosophers. If that were true, the fact hardly matters. “Confucius”—whether that name applies to a fictional character or an actual individual—was a superb embodiment of the Confucian worldview. In the final analysis, it was the *image* of Confucius—as portrayed in the *Analects* and the other sources—that succeeding generations of Chinese held up as their model of ideal humanity and not the historical Confucius, who may have been more or less consistent with the literary portrait of him. As we turn our attention to the teachings of Confucius, we will never be far removed from the life of the one who, according to Chinese tradition, embodied virtue more than any other.

## Heaven and Earth

Confucius would probably be surprised to find us engaged in a study of his thought, since he did not consider himself a great thinker. He was far more comfortable calling himself a “learner.” He once told his followers: “I used to go without food all day, without sleep all night, [in order] to think. No use, better to learn.”<sup>50</sup> He refused to claim originality for his ideas. “The Master said: I transmit rather than innovate. I trust in and love the ancient ways.”<sup>51</sup> Like many others through history, Confucius believed in a bygone golden age. He shared with other Chinese the belief that this brilliant period extended from the earliest dynasties down to founding of the Zhou, some five hundred years before his time. They regarded these halcyon days as a time in which virtuous rulers governed virtuous subjects, and high culture flourished. Much of the lore about this age, as we have seen, was mythical. Yet Confucius took this belief seriously. His study of the past had convinced him that the China of his day was in turmoil precisely because its leaders had neglected the traditions and values of these earlier eras. What was

50. *Analects* 15.31, in Graham, *Disputers*, 11.

51. Slingerland, trans., *Analects* 7.1, (p. 64).

desperately needed was to return China to its foundations, to the pristine practices and values on which it had been established. Discerning lessons from the past and implementing them in the present was necessary, he thought, to restore social harmony and well-being. Confucius would certainly have applauded our efforts to learn from our wise forebears, but he may have urged us to look past him to the sages of an even earlier time.

Needless to say, we shall disregard that suggestion. Notwithstanding his self-assessment, Confucius's interpretation of the past and his particular way of applying the received tradition to his own time attest to a keen intellect matched with a compassionate heart. One of his twentieth-century interpreters writes: "When I began to read Confucius I found him to be a prosaic and parochial moralizer . . . Later, I found him a thinker with profound insight and with an imaginative vision of man equal in its grandeur to any I know. He tells us things not being said elsewhere . . . He has a new lesson to teach."<sup>52</sup> That is high praise to give to someone who considered himself only a conduit of tradition.

### Sources and Approach

As with the study of Confucius's life, our investigation into his philosophy and spirituality relies principally on the *Analects*. It is hard to overestimate the importance of this small text for understanding not only Confucius but the last 2,500 years of Chinese history as well. As one recent translator put it, "if a single book can be upheld as the common code of a whole people, it is perhaps . . . *The Analects of Confucius*."<sup>53</sup>

With little more than this single brief text to grasp, comprehending the Confucian worldview might seem fairly easy, but that assumption would be wrong. Understanding Confucian philosophy through the *Analects* is not simple. The book is not easy to read. As we noted earlier, it can appear to be little more than a disjointed collection of proverbs and pieces of conversation. To present Confucius's ideas and practices in a more accessible way, we will use a structure by which we can discuss the salient themes in his sayings. Of course, it is highly unlikely that Confucius himself would have presented his thought in this way. His style of teaching was much more informal, allowing specific situations to provide the occasion for a particular lesson, which was usually imparted in an exchange with his students. Since we do not have the opportunity for such casual conversations here, we will have to settle for this rather un-Confucian approach to Confucius.

52. Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, vii.

53. Huang, trans., *Analects*, 4.

The framework that we use was outlined in the introduction. We begin by discussing the basic features and assumptions of Confucian thought: the metaphysics of his worldview. Under this rubric, we explore what Confucius thought about the nature of reality, particularly the divine and its relationship to the human. Then we examine the anthropological and ethical dimensions of the sage's philosophy, his ideas about how we should act as individuals and as a society, and conclude with a discussion of the disciplines of Confucian spirituality.

### Confucian Metaphysics

Among our four figures, Confucius is the one who seems to have said the least about metaphysics; he was far more loquacious about human behavior than he was about the basic structure of reality. He shared with the Buddha a reticence about the world of gods and spirits, but even the Buddha was more forthcoming about his understanding of the nature and character of reality. Like the Buddha, Confucius never denied the existence of spiritual beings, but neither did he make the belief in them central to his view. In the *Analects*, a student recalled—with only slight exaggeration—that the Master did not speak of “mysteries, violence, rebellions, and gods.”<sup>54</sup>

The marginal role of gods in the thought of Confucius and the Buddha has led many Western observers to argue that their worldviews are better characterized as philosophies than religions. I have some sympathies with that argument, but ultimately it is based on unnecessarily narrow definitions of religion. As we shall see, both Confucius and the Buddha practiced and taught specific spiritual disciplines and held particular realities as sacred, both of which are elements that characterize religious worldviews. Although divine beings do not figure prominently in the thought of Confucius and the Buddha, we are justified in describing their thinking and practice as *both* philosophical *and* religious. When we reach the comparative portion of our study, we will have occasion to discuss these issues in further detail. For now, we need only observe the reluctance of Confucius to speak of the gods and spirits, as well as noting his general hesitancy to make metaphysical assertions.

But hesitancy does not mean silence. Scattered throughout the *Analects* are references to the principal metaphysical concepts of ancient China. Although Confucius did not speculate or speak much about the world of gods and spirits, he clearly thought that acknowledging the divine in certain ways was essential to human welfare.

54. *Analects* 7.21, my rendering.

## The Harmony of Heaven and Earth

Like all Chinese of his day, Confucius accepted the ancient belief that reality comprised two worlds: the realm of heaven and the realm of earth. Heaven, or *tian*, was the domain of gods, spirits (*shen*), and ancestors; earth, or *di*, was the sphere of humans and nature. One of the Chinese terms for the universe or cosmos was *tiandi*, a simple compound of both words.<sup>55</sup> As this linguistic combination suggests, heaven and earth could not be thought of apart from one another. They formed a holistic and symbiotic unity. Each one depended on the other. The Western concept of the absolute transcendence of god, as exemplified in Søren Kierkegaard's famous claim that there is an "infinite qualitative difference"<sup>56</sup> between god and humanity, was utterly foreign to the Chinese way of thinking. Heaven and earth were permeable realms, and there was an intimate connection between them. The many gods and spirits of the universe were thought to be immediately available to human beings, and hence they could be consulted by means of divination and could even enter and possess individuals.

Due to the interdependence of heaven and earth, the well-being of everyone and everything in them rested on their harmonious relationship. Preserving this harmony was one of the king's principal functions. The *Commentary of Zuo*, one of the earliest narratives of Chinese history, states that the ruler's primary responsibility was "pacifying the multitude of spirits and putting in harmony the myriad of people," and if this was not done, "the spirits will be incensed against him and the people will revolt."<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, the king was charged with performing the appropriate rituals and sacrifices to curry the favor of the divine figures whose good graces were essential to the well-being of the state and its citizens.

## The Denizens of Heaven

The idea of heaven in Chinese philosophy and religion meant more than just the dwelling place of the divine beings, although it certainly included that. Originally, *tian* simply meant "sky," but over the centuries from the Shang Dynasty down to Confucius's time, the idea of heaven accumulated a rich variety of meanings. During the Shang, *tian* appears to have been a generic term for the heavenly realm. The people of the Shang imagined this divine world as a heavenly court that paralleled the royal court on earth. As

55. 天地, literally "heaven and earth."

56. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

57. Quoted in Fung Yu-lan, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 1:25.

the earthly king governed through a bureaucracy of nobles, counselors, and various other ministers of state, so the high god ruled heaven with his spiritual minions and assistants. The Shang people called the high god “Shang Di,” the Supreme Emperor or the Supreme Ancestor. Although he was never depicted by physical representations, Shang Di was imagined to preside over a court that included many lesser divinities, or *shen*, that controlled, or at least influenced, the powers of the natural and human worlds. These were the gods and spirits the Chinese turned to for help in matters of agriculture, hunting, military campaigns, health, and longevity. The high god would not be bothered with these trivial, mundane concerns. Unlike Shang Di, the lower gods were not universal and did not have broad powers; most were decidedly local, such as the town or village gods whose power extended only as far as the city limits, like the jurisdiction of a municipal magistrate.

In addition to the divine hierarchy, heaven was also home to ancestors and ghosts.<sup>58</sup> The ancestors—who were not sharply distinguished from the gods—were the deceased individuals who now existed in the spirit world. Ghosts (*gui*) were the spirits of the dead who had suffered an unfortunate or tragic death. They often caused misfortune to the living, particularly those who were involved in their deaths. The ancestors, on the other hand, were generally benevolent. Throughout Chinese history, the ancestors have been seen as having a continuing interest in the welfare of their earthly families. They were to be consulted on important family matters, and they needed to be honored with sacrifices and gifts. They were also believed to mediate with the higher gods, especially if they were ancestors of a powerful family such as that of the king. Confucius did not say much about the ancestors, although he thought it was necessary to revere them in ritual. He did, however, have much to say about venerating the members of one’s family who were still alive, especially one’s parents. The virtue of filial piety, indeed, was a cornerstone of his entire ethical outlook.

### Between Spirits and Humans

The relationships between the ancient Chinese and their gods were formal and rather businesslike. The human interest in gods was delimited by what the gods could do. We find no evidence to suggest that individuals sought friendships or close personal relationships with the gods of the sort we shall see in the life of Jesus.

58. Belief in ancestors is widespread throughout the world’s religions. American Indian, African, Polynesian, and Asian believers have all revered ancestors.

A collection titled the *Sayings of the State* reflects on China's golden age and remarks on the relationship between divine beings and humans. In those days, according to this commentary,

the people, having their duties differentiated from those of the spirits, were *respectful and not unduly familiar*. Therefore the spirits conferred prosperous harvest upon them and the people offered things up out of gratitude. Natural calamities did not arrive, and there was an inexhaustible supply of what would be useful.<sup>59</sup>

An intimate relationship between an individual and a god would have been regarded as encroaching upon the dignity of the divine and a threat to the proper order of things. A human being would no more try to buddy up to a god than a peasant would try to strike up a friendship with the emperor.

For their part, the gods were also reserved in their involvements with humans. In the earliest part of Chinese history, the gods were not even concerned with the moral behavior of human beings. These gods did not give commandments or grant favors on the basis of how well humans treated each other, and the ancient Chinese did not interpret disasters or other misfortunes as the gods' retribution for immoral behavior. The divine-human relationship was simply a quid pro quo arrangement. In exchange for agreeable sacrifices and tribute, the gods would assist humans with commonplace things such as producing an abundant crop, gaining victory over one's enemies, healing illness, and living a long life with many descendants. This sacred economy bound together the divine and human worlds.

### Theological Developments

The image of a polytheistic heavenly court that prevailed during the Shang Dynasty persisted into and throughout the Zhou era, even as other theological developments were taking place. During the Zhou Dynasty, the idea of heaven became more ambiguous and acquired richer meanings than it had in previous periods. Unlike the Shang, the Zhou people considered *tian* a *personal* deity, that is, a divine being conceptualized in anthropomorphic terms, as Shang Di had been. In fact, the people of Zhou initially used the names Shang Di and *tian* interchangeably to refer to the highest god. Over time, however, the name *tian* came to be used with much greater frequency and was viewed as less anthropomorphic and more impersonal than Shang

59. *Kuo Yü*, quoted in Fung Yu-lan, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 1:23 (italics added).

Di. By impersonal, I mean that *tian* assumed the character of an overarching principle or force, somewhat akin to the way Westerners might think of fate. By the time of Confucius, *tian* could mean both a supreme being conceived in personal terms and an impersonal, ultimate principle or power, although the latter meaning predominated.

The crucial difference between the Zhou and the Shang concepts of the divine powers was not the question of personality but of morality. As we have just observed, the Shang gods had little interest in how human beings behaved toward each other and did not make moral character a condition for granting favors. As long as the sacrifices were pleasing, the gods really could not care less whether you were a nice person. During the Zhou era, however, *tian* acquired a moral dimension. It is not completely clear just how far *tian's* moral interests initially extended, but it was evident that heaven had an interest in who the ruler was and how he treated his subjects. At the very beginning of the Zhou Dynasty, we recall, the concept of the mandate of heaven entered the Chinese lexicon, specifying that the ruler must govern morally in order for his reign to be legitimate. By the Spring and Autumn Period, the Chinese believed the will of heaven concerned not only the ruler but everyone.

Interestingly, this attribution of moral preferences to the divine world was part of a larger process occurring in many of the major centers of civilization during the first century BCE. During this period, which is known as the Axial Age (800-200 BCE), metaphysical conceptions such as god, rebirth, and the afterlife came to be closely associated with moral human behavior. In ancient Iran, for example, the prophet Zoroaster taught that the individual's personal destiny in the life to come was predicated on whether or not one identified with the supreme god, whose fundamental quality was absolute goodness. In ancient India, the belief in rebirth was connected to the principle of karma, which meant that one's status in the next life was determined by his or her moral actions in present existence. Today, because we live on this side of the Axial Age, we usually take the moral character of ultimate reality for granted. Yet the moral quality now usually assumed in concepts of god has not always been a part of the way humans have thought about the divine.

This overview of the evolving idea of heaven has revealed a rich variety of theological conceptions circulating in ancient China at the time of Confucius. The ultimate reality could have been understood as a kind of polytheism, with a supreme being in charge of a retinue of lesser gods and spirits. It could have been thought of as a virtual monotheism, if one focused exclusively on *tian* as an anthropomorphized entity. Or the ultimate reality might have been regarded as a rather abstract, impersonal force or cosmic

principle, to which the gods, ancestors, humanity, and nature were subject. Further complicating these concepts was the issue of morality—whether the ultimate reality was considered basically moral or amoral. Let us now turn to see how Confucius appropriated this rich tradition in his philosophy.

### Confucius's Appropriation of Chinese Metaphysics

During the Enlightenment period in Western history (ca. 1620–1790 CE), when the teachings of Confucius became more widely known among scholars, many intellectuals saw Confucius as a fellow rationalist who had articulated a sophisticated ethical system without the burden of belief in god.<sup>60</sup> Weary of the animosity generated by centuries of religious sectarianism, these Western thinkers wanted to develop a wholly secular, rational ethic, devoid of reference to the divine. They were able to point to certain passages in the *Analects* that suggested an agnosticism or theological skepticism on the part of Confucius. The most prominent of these passages was one in which a disciple asked the sage about wisdom. The Master replied, “To apply oneself to the duties of humanity and, while revering the spirits and gods, *to keep away from them*—this may be called wisdom.”<sup>61</sup> Many interpreters of Confucius from the Enlightenment into the twenty-first century construed this statement as evidence that he was at least agnostic, if not an outright atheist. Why else would Confucius counsel the wise to stay away from the gods? But this reading of the *Analects* neglects the formal, reserved way the Chinese have historically related to their gods and spirits. Confucius was merely encouraging the ancient practice of respecting the dignity of the divine. To advocate maintaining one’s distance from the gods is nowhere near the same as professing agnosticism. Yet, there is no denying that Confucius said very little about the gods and spirits, and the role that they played in his worldview was only tangential. What we shall discover in our study is that Confucius considered the formal rituals associated with revering the gods to be intrinsically beneficial to human flourishing. When he promoted ritual veneration of the deities, he did so not to benefit the gods, but to evoke specific qualities in human beings.

While understanding the gods and spirits had a very peripheral function in his thinking, the concept of heaven was clearly central, although he was still fairly reserved on that topic. When Confucius spoke of heaven, he occasionally seemed close to thinking of it as a supreme anthropomorphic

60. Western fans of Confucius include Voltaire, Diderot, Leibnitz, and Wolff.

61. *Analects* 6.22, my rendering and italics.



being, as when he claimed that heaven ordained his teachings,<sup>62</sup> or when he exclaimed, “The only one who understands me is perhaps Heaven!”<sup>63</sup> Still, the impersonal sense of *tian* overwhelmingly dominated Confucius’s sayings. One of his students remembered that Confucius had said, “Life and death are the decree of Heaven; riches and reputation depend on Heaven.”<sup>64</sup> In this aphorism, Confucius seemed to understand heaven as a kind of impersonal fate, to which humans and spirits are all subject. The gods, therefore, were not the ultimate or highest reality. In this sense, the Enlightenment interpreters of Confucius were correct, for he did not base his worldview on a god or the gods—at least not as divine beings are ordinarily understood in the West. Yet to regard Confucius’s philosophy as completely devoid of a transcendent dimension is simply not true to Confucius.

Confucius understood heaven as a dynamic, creative reality that gave and supported life on earth. It was the source of all things and of the processes of change.<sup>65</sup> Although he sometimes thought of heaven as a kind of fate, it would be a mistake to think that Confucius was fatalistic, believing that *everything* that happens is inevitable or predestined. Confucius certainly thought, for example, that it was possible for human beings to resist the will of heaven. In his view, heaven had certain powers, such as determining the span of one’s existence, yet it did not have *absolute* power.

Confucius was unambiguous, though, in his belief that heaven was moral and wanted human beings to be good. On this point, Confucius stood firmly with the view of *tian* emergent in the Zhou Dynasty. Heaven’s will for human beings was disclosed not by revealed commandments but in the lives and teachings of the virtuous sages of old, and now—he believed—in his own teaching.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, Confucius thought that heaven not only *wanted* human goodness but had also endowed human beings with a nature that makes it possible for us to cultivate this goodness in ourselves. In this sense, Confucius believed humans could work as collaborators with heaven, in a creative process of realizing our potential goodness and thereby fulfilling our purpose as human beings.

62. Dawson, trans., *Analects* 7.23 (p. 26).

63. Huang, trans., *Analects* 14.35 (p. 148).

64. *Analects* 12.5, my rendering.

65. *Analects* 17.19.

66. The Master said: “I wish to give up speaking.” Zigong said: “But Sir, if you do not speak, what shall your students pass on to others?” The Master said: “What does Heaven say? Yet the four seasons come and go and a hundred things are born and grow. What does Heaven say?” (*Analects* 17.18, my rendering).