

THE CONFUCIAN SCHOOL

Major thinkers and texts

The Confucian School is represented in ancient philosophical writings by the teachings of three major thinkers and by a few other important texts that are by unknown authors. The three major thinkers are:

Confucius (Kongzi 孔子)	(551-479)
Mencius (Mengzi 孟子)	(c. 380-300)
Xunzi (荀子)	(c. 310-230)

These men were all identified in Chinese as “Ru” 儒, a term of uncertain origin and obscure meaning that ultimately came to denote people whom we now call “Confucians” in English. Whether there were Ru before Confucius is an issue that has not been settled.

The teachings of Confucius are conveyed to us through a collection of sayings by and about him and his immediate disciples. In English, this collection is called *The Analects of Confucius* (“analects” means “sayings”). The teachings of Mencius and Xunzi are collected in books that use the names of these two thinkers as book titles: we call them *The Mencius* and *Xunzi*. Among the anonymous Confucian texts of the ancient period, the ones we will discuss in this course include *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean*. This reading will describe some features common to all early Confucian texts, and then focus on Confucius and the *Analects*.

Basic themes of Confucianism

The ancient Confucians comprised a “school” in a true sense: during the period of the Warring States (450-221) Confucian teachings were passed down from masters to disciples who studied together in groups, and who viewed themselves as part of a well-defined movement to change people’s ideas and behavior and construct a new society. A very important aspect of Confucian teaching was the belief that the traditional forms of Zhou Dynasty society represented the cumulative Dao (道; “Way,” or teaching) of a series of sage rulers, and Confucian training groups conveyed to students both the ideas of major Confucian teachers and also the social arts that characterized traditional culture.

Until recently, there existed throughout America a special type of school, called a “Finishing School,” that trained upper class young ladies in the social arts they would need to appear refined in wealthy society; Confucian training groups were, in part, a type of Finishing School for young men of the Warring States period who wished to be recognized as cultivated candidates for high social position.

The Finishing School aspect of Confucianism laid great stress on the importance of certain prized behaviors: filial devotion to parents, graceful deference towards elders, and thorough mastery of all features of etiquette and stylish elegance. These features, which we might be tempted to view as superficial, artificial, and priggish, were linked to a set of ethical teachings that demanded of students a rigorous commitment to self-transformation and moral excellence. Among the main ideas of these teachings were the notion that every person should nurture in himself a thorough devotion to the interests of others, a commitment to righteous action regardless of personal cost, the flexibility to fulfill any social role, no matter how demeaning, that could further the betterment of the world, and a willingness to suffer poverty and disgrace in the service of this ethical Dao.

It is hard to see how the priggishness of the Confucian Finishing School and the crusading and self-denying morality of Confucian ethics could have blended in harmony in early Confucianism. As you gain a perspective on the school that indicates how this partnership worked, it may become easier to understand how Confucianism was able to become until this century the most dominant system of ideas and conduct in all of East Asia.

Confucius and His Teachings

Confucius is usually regarded as the first philosophical thinker in China, and while some claim that his thought was far too unsystematic to be called “philosophy,” it is certainly true that he was the earliest Chinese thinker to articulate a coherent ethical vision. (The name Confucius is a “Latinized” version of a respectful way of referring to Confucius in Chinese. Confucius’s Chinese family name was Kong 孔, and people referred to him as “Kong Fuzi” 孔夫子 because “*fuzi*” means “honorable master.” Westerners first learning about Chinese culture in the 17th and 18th centuries usually wrote scholarly works in Latin, and “Kong-fuzi” became “Confucius.”)

Confucius himself did not write a book, but a collection of his teachings and of brief descriptions of him and his life was collected over a period of three centuries in the book we call the *Analects*.

Confucius's life

Confucius's father seems to have been a member of a family with ties to an important clan within the traditional aristocracy the state of Lu魯, located in the interior of the Shandong Peninsula in northeast China.* Confucius seems always to have been poor, but his noble connections meant that he did not have to labor as a peasant, and minor positions in his home state of Lu were available to him. As a young man, Confucius came to take a keen interest in the codes of ritual etiquette that had governed all aristocratic interaction during the grand days of the Zhou Dynasty, several centuries earlier. He became concerned that these codes were increasingly discarded in ordinary conduct, and even in religious and court ritual settings where they had been most elaborate. In the mind of the young Confucius, the chaotic and dangerous social and political conditions of the Warring States era was linked to the decay of these codes, which Confucius came to see as the binding force that had preserved the social and political harmony of the first few centuries of Zhou rule.



Confucius's expertise in Zhou ritual forms led to his becoming a teacher of aspiring aristocrats in the state of Lu. Many regard him as the first professional private teacher in Chinese history. Fathers anxious that their sons take advantage of new opportunities to gain power and influence at the courts of the duke of Lu and other powerful aristocratic power-holders sent their children to study with Confucius. This is the origin of Confucianism as a “Finishing School.”

But Confucius trained these young men with other ideas in mind – he hoped that his work as a teacher would have far reaching political consequences. For Confucius, the harmonious past had been a peak of human excellence, while the disorderly present was a time of decline. He was not willing simply to accept tuition payments from wealthy fathers and enhance their sons' chances of achieving wealth and rank in a debased age. He wanted to use

* For any who are curious about the specifics of Confucius's personal background (and of the origins of the Ru) I've written a rather technical historical article that you can link to, called [“The Background of the Kong Family of Lu and the Origins of Ruism.”](#)

the leverage of his position as teacher of noble youth to change the age – to link the revival of Zhou ritual forms to the generation of a new era of excellence.

One of the features of the political life of the state of Lu, in which Confucius lived, was that political power was no longer actually in the control of the supposed leader of the state, the duke, whose ancestors had been granted the right to rule by the founders of the Zhou dynastic house. Real power had for some time fallen into the hands of the leaders of three warlord clans, who each lived in large fortified palace towns and who each held court over a group of “ministers” and “officers” as if they were legitimate rulers of state. The real duke’s court had become little more than an empty show. This was a situation very common among the various mini-countries of Warring States China, and reflected the large-scale problem that the nominal king who supposedly ruled over all the feudal states of China, the inheritor of the Zhou throne, was actually no more than a figurehead ruler, without real power to control any of the feudal states.

Confucius believed that for a new era of excellence to begin in his state of Lu, the first order of business was to overthrow the power of the warlords and restore control of the state to the duke and his court. He believed that if he could engineer this result, he would also gain enough leverage with the duke to convince him to reform the manner in which he ruled the state of Lu by restoring the institutions of the Zhou in their original and proper form.

Once this had been done, Confucius believed that Zhou institutions were so powerful and the ruler who re-adopted them would carry so much prestige personally that the peoples of the states next door to Lu would quickly acknowledge their legitimacy. They would either submit directly to the reformed rule of the duke of Lu, or join with the duke and others in a movement to restore Zhou institutions throughout China and recentralize power in the long-powerless figure of the Zhou king. In this way, the new era dawning in Lu would quickly spread throughout China. Either the Zhou would recover its past grandeur or a new king would found a new dynasty building on Zhou ritual and institutions. Either way, the harmony that had characterized the great eras of the Zhou founder and of earlier generations of sage rulers would be recovered in a new utopia.

At sometime near the year 500, as he approached the age of fifty, Confucius determined that the time had come to implement this grand plan. Among his students now numbered several who had over the years risen to key positions at the court of the duke of Lu and at the courts of the warlord power-holders of the state. Along with these disciples, Confucius

initiated a diplomatic initiative designed to lead to the disarmament of the warlord clans, the de-fortification of their palaces, and the return of power to the duke.

We don't know the details of Confucius's plan. What we know for certain is that the result was a fiasco for Confucius. The warlords did not disarm; instead, they reasserted their power over the duke and drove Confucius into exile. For the next fifteen years or so, Confucius wandered from state to state in Eastern China, in search of a ruler who would listen to his Dao, adopt his vision of government, and grant Confucius a role in the reform of the state and the dawn of a new era. During these years, Confucius and those disciples who traveled with him endured bitter hardships. Several times they found themselves isolated on the point of starvation, at other times they were threatened by local warlords who feared Confucius's political message. In the end, although Confucius did attract the support of important people in several states, enemies of his Dao always prevailed. Confucius never did find a feudal ruler who would adopt his Dao or provide him with official patronage.

The wanderings of Confucius and the hardships he and his disciples endured became an important legend for later generations of followers. Not only was Confucius pictured as almost saintly in his ethical determination and endurance, many of the disciples who remained faithful to him became important inspirations for later students. This is one reason why, when we read the *Analects*, so many of the passages about Confucius also include the words or actions of major disciples, such as the noble Yan Hui 顏回, Confucius's finest student, who died young, Zixia 子夏, the disciple who most thoroughly mastered the ancient Zhou texts that Confucius taught, Zigong 子貢, the follower whose questions to Confucius probed deepest, and Master Zeng 曾子, the youngest disciple, who after Confucius's death emerged as the most influential Confucian teacher of the next generation.

After years in the wilderness, the warlords of Lu finally agreed to let Confucius return to his homeland and live out his final years as a teacher, poor, but honored by many, and served to the end by a faithful corps of disciples, who attended to his needs in old age and mourned him as sons in death (Confucius's only son died before him).

The essential components of Confucian thought

The teachings of the school that bears Confucius's name go well beyond the ideas that Confucius himself articulated during his lifetime, but throughout the Classical period they

remain well within the spirit of Confucius's original Dao. The following ten points list some of the most important features of the thought of the Confucian school.

1. People do not become fully human without effort. We are only truly human -- unique among all living species -- to the degree that we are as sensitive to the needs and human feelings of others as we are to our own needs and feelings. The perfectly human person Confucius called "**Humane**," using a word (*ren* 仁) that was almost identical to the word for "person" in ancient Chinese. (See the Glossary: "**Ren**.") To the degree that we are *not* Humane, we are not fully human; we are still governed by animal dispositions, which Confucians pictured as totally self-regarding (selfish).

2. Social patterns that express the perspective of true Humanity have been embroidered in the past by successive great Sages, inspired by Heaven, of whom the latest were the founders of the Zhou Dynasty. These Heaven-ordained patterns constituted a complex set of social, political, and religious conventions and ceremonies known as **Ritual** (in Chinese, *li* 禮, see Glossary). These rituals, which covered both everyday and ceremonial conduct were no longer properly practiced in the chaotic society of Confucius's time and after (the Classical era) -- restoring these patterns of Chinese civilization was the practical path back to the ideal society.

3. Individuals should seek to recapture the patterns of Ritual in their own conduct. The best place to begin is in one's conduct towards one's own parents. Rituals were not isolated ceremonies to be practiced alone; they expressed the norms that were meant to govern all human relationships. Of these, the parent-child relationship was most basic. Therefore, the first duty of every person was to act towards his or her parents in a perfectly "**Filial**" (*xiao* 孝)manner. ("Filial" refers to obedient support of one's parents.)

4. Once a person has mastered the patterns of filial ritual in the role of the child, he or she would discover that the key to Humanity (the virtue of *ren*) was the mastery of all **social roles** that the human community needed him or her to play in a lifetime. The most basic of these roles were expressed as a set of **Five Relationships**: *parent/child; elder/younger; ruler/subordinate; husband/wife; friend/friend*. While Confucians understood that social life actually included all sorts of roles, they claimed that the patterns of these five relationships could be adapted to all of them. Once everyone understood and acted out the proper ritual forms for each social role they occupied, the world would return to order.

5. The person who had fully embodied Ritual and Humanity would represent a superior type of ideal person: the fully human being. Confucius referred to such a person by a special term, borrowed from the vocabulary of the aristocratic feudal order: the **True Prince**, or *junzi* 君子 (pronounced "*joon-dzŭ*" see Glossary). The term originally meant someone who was a prince by birth, but for Confucius, nobility was a matter of moral

skills, not birth. By using this term, Confucius pictured his perfected person as a new type of “ethical aristocrat.”

6. People who have progressed far towards ethical perfection may be characterized as possessing **Virtue of Character**, or *de* 德 (see Glossary), which for Confucians meant both an inner strength and an accompanying natural prestige or power among others. It was an article of faith among Confucians that moral self-cultivation would generate a type of behavioral confidence and authority that others could not help but respect and hold in awe. It was this link that led Confucians to believe that the path to perfecting society would begin with the ethical transformation of individuals, who would become natural leaders.

7. The personal authority of the *junzi* was also pictured as the engine that drives orderly government. Because of the powerful prestige of moral self-perfection, people will spontaneously seek to place themselves under the political governance of such leaders. The government of a *junzi* will be characterized by the qualities that marked the legendary and historical reports of the sages of the distant past. States will be ordered according to an ever evolving network of ritual patterns and roles, and the people of the state will be treated with caring Humanity by rulers.

8. Since, in practice, the path to such a utopia must begin with the complexities of present realities and will present unexpected obstacles beyond the control of the politically determined moral person, some practical guidelines for action in an *imperfect* world are necessary. These guiding moral rules are generally referred to as the **Right**, or **Righteousness** (*yi* 義; see Glossary). Confucians believed that issues of righteousness arose when people made choices in complex situations. As individuals deepen their ethical self-cultivation, they become increasingly able to identify the way in which selfish and moral motives compete in steering us towards choices. In real practice, the discipline of making righteous action choices out of regard for one’s ethical goals rather than self-interest is the moral compass one needs.

9. Most Confucians believed that the *junzi*, like the sages of the past, would be aided by **Heaven**, or Tian 天 (see Glossary) in the effort to transform the world into an ethical utopia (the major thinker Xunzi is an exception). They believed that the ritual patterns that the ancient sages had designed for society were inspired by Heaven, and that Heaven guaranteed the eventual triumph of Confucianism (though it “worked in mysterious ways,” and seemed unwilling to impose a Confucian victory outright on an immoral world).

10. During the period between the Warring States present and the utopia of the future, the path to social perfection could not be mapped in advance by any set of moral action rules. All formulas for ethical action – all general imperatives of righteousness -- had to be adjusted in light of the context of the times. Only the moral vision of the *junzi*

could perfectly adapt moral rules. For this reason, the *junzi* might sometimes seem to violate ritual or righteousness from the perspective of ordinary people. This was because real sages always obeyed the dynamically changing imperatives of **Timeliness** (*shi* 時) rather than inflexible ethical rules. In the end, *the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong is the virtuous perspective of the moral person rather than general rules about right and good.*

One of the most important consequences of holding a set of views such as this is that they strongly propelled Confucians towards a view of knowledge that pictured true wisdom – knowledge of the important things in life and the world – in terms of a certain type of *practical or applied knowledge*. Human excellence was not conceived in terms of learning a great many facts. Facts were important only if they helped inform a proper view of righteousness; for example, knowing about the sages of the past was important, but knowing about the motions of the planets and stars was not. Nor was human excellence pictured in terms of an ability to think creatively, form theories independently, or argue logically. The works of centuries of sages were viewed as tools far more powerful than products of any one individual’s thought could be, and words were seen as slippery devices that could undermine valid teachings when strung together in clever arguments. Rather than gathering many facts and using our powers of thought to search for truths, the Confucians propose that we master the action patterns created by the sages and so cultivate the ethical skills of the *junzi*, who steers through the complexities of life effortlessly, guided by a fully internalized moral compass. That’s true wisdom. (Note how fundamentally different this picture of the etiology [origin] of knowledge is from Plato’s view.)

The Confucian syllabus

Confucianism was not only a “school” of thought; it was a school in the strict sense. During the Classical period, Confucianism was taught and learned in small teacher-study training groups. Young aristocrats whose fathers wanted them to deepen their grasp on Zhou cultural skills, non-aristocratic youths who wished to acquire the polish that might attract a ruler’s patronage and gain them a court appointment, and ethically ambitious young men of both classes were likely to seek out a master trained in the arts promoted by Confucius, present some form of tuition payment, and then “enroll” as a long- or short-term disciple, coming daily to the home of the master to receive with other students Confucius’s Dao. This was the model that Confucius himself established, as the first truly independent private teacher in

China. After Confucius's own death, many of his disciples became teachers and continued this pattern, which was then passed on generation after generation.

The syllabus that Confucius and his followers taught included at least four elements, apart from the basic diet of ethical discussion that we see reflected in texts such as the *Analects*:

Martial arts. We know from the *Analects* that, at least at the beginning, students were trained in arts such as archery and charioteering. Teaching these aristocratic skills of the warrior Zhou culture was consistent with the “Finishing School” side of Confucianism.

Texts. The second element consisted of textual study. There were at least two traditional texts that Confucius himself regarded as the products of the former sages and authoritative sources of wisdom. The two texts were called *The Book of Poetry* and *The Book of History*. The *Poetry*, a collection of 305 poems of various genres, was probably compiled during the two centuries before Confucius's birth. The *History* is a very diverse set of “ancient” political documents – dull reading by any standard – that was a principal source for the Confucian version of the records of sages such as Yao, Shun, Yu, and the Zhou Dynasty founders. Confucian students were required to *memorize* these texts, learn to interpret them according to Confucian doctrines, and also become adept in citing them appropriately in their speech in order to convey ethical points.

Ritual. Although we do not know precisely what ritual codes Confucius used, we know that his students and those of later generations of Confucian masters were drilled intensively in Zhou ritual codes. These included the ceremonies of major events, such as state sacrifices, court rituals, marriage and funeral rites, and so forth, and also the more everyday codes that governed private life. Students aspired to acquire through this training not only control of the vast ceremonial corpus of Zhou codes (which, for many, would become the economic basis of their professional lives as masters of ceremony at weddings and so forth), but also a stylish grace and certainty of social presence that would attract the respect and trust of people in society at large.

Artistry. Zhou rituals represented the highest development of the human arts of the Classical era, and Confucian disciples studied these arts intensively. Ritual performance included musical elements, and disciples learned how to sing and harmonize, how to dance and choreograph lavish musical spectacles, and how to play musical instruments. So important were the elements of costume, music, and dance to Confucianism, that their enemies, the Mohists, claimed that the chief means by which Confucianism polluted the minds of the young was by attracting them through “chanting songs and beating out dance rhythms, and prancing about with wing-like gestures.”

The course of Confucianism after Confucius

After Confucius's death, his disciples continued to spread his teaching by taking on students of their own, and in this way the Confucian School began to perpetuate itself over the generations of the Classical period. Confucian masters spread from the state of Lu into other states, and although Confucian masters and students were never very great in numbers and enjoyed little or no success in altering the political behavior of power-holders in China, they did come to occupy a particular social niche that provided them with some degree of prestige and income. Because of their mastery of Zhou ritual forms, Confucians came to serve as the chief masters of all sorts of ceremonies in Warring States China. If a ruler or warlord wanted to increase his prestige, he might invite a Confucian and his students to settle at his court and supervise ritual ceremony there. If a noble family wanted to provide its children with elaborate ceremonies of marriage, it might hire a Confucian for the occasions. If a wealthy person died, his family marked their respect by asking a Confucian to design a full ritual funeral, with all the trappings. And of course, noble fathers continued to send their sons to Confucian Finishing Schools so that they might acquire polish.

In this way, the Confucian School, despite a political vision that actually undermined the chaotic power structure of the Warring States era, came to represent a certain type of orthodoxy. This association with established wealth and power spurred a strongly negative reaction among people who were excluded from or who had separated themselves from the aristocracy.

Philosophically, there were two early manifestations of this reaction against Confucianism: the schools of Daoism and Mohism. The inspirations for these two schools were very different, and they are in many ways opposites of one another, but they share a common origin as rejections of Confucianism and searches for an alternative path to human excellence. We will discuss these schools in subsequent readings, but it is important to note here that an important feature that these schools shared was the fact that they both attacked the Confucian belief in the importance of Ritual and the Confucian portrait of the *junzi* as a sage who discovers the path to ethical righteousness through the mastery of Zhou ritual practices.

In this way, throughout the remainder of the Classical period, the feature of Confucianism that clearly distinguishes it from all other schools of thought is precisely its stubborn emphasis on Ritual. Since we today tend not to feel that Ritual is a very significant aspect of human life, and since there may be no one on earth who feels that the particular

institutions of Zhou ritual are of any value whatever, the Confucian stress on Ritual tends to make early Confucian philosophy seem irrelevant to our world. One of the main ways in which the study of early Confucianism challenges us is its demand that we grasp how the Confucian celebration of Ritual could have somehow made clear sense to Confucius and his followers.