

Philosophers: Confucius

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TOP: Confucius, circa 1770, Gouache on paper. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. BOTTOM: Temple of Confucius of Jiangyin, Wuxi, Jiangsu. This is a wénmiào (??), that is to say a temple where Confucius is worshipped as Wéndì (??), "God of Culture".

Synopsis

Confucius was born in 551 B.C., in the Lu state of China. He became an important philosopher, someone who studies knowledge, truth and the meaning of life. His teachings focused on creating models for good behavior and setting educational standards. He died in 479 B.C. Confucius' ideas later had a strong influence on Chinese customs and government.

Early Life

Confucius was born around 551 B.C. in present-day Qufu, China. Little is known about his childhood. A book called "Records of the Historian" offers the most detailed description of Confucius' life. However, some modern historians believe this book is more myth than fact. The book claims that Confucius was born into a royal family of the Chou Dynasty. A dynasty is a line of rulers from the same family. Other records say that Confucius was born into poverty. What is undisputed about Confucius' life is that he lived during a time of crisis in China.

Philosophy And Teachings

Over 2,500 years ago, China's Chou Empire began to fall apart. It had been in power for over 500 years. But warring Chinese states eventually led to its breakdown. Traditional Chinese values then began to decay, resulting in a period of moral decline. Confucius saw this as an opportunity to strengthen the old Chinese values and customs. His ideas were based primarily on the principle of "ren," or "loving others," while practicing self-control. He believed that ren could be put into action using the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule is "do not do to others what you do not wish for yourself."

Confucius' political beliefs were also based on the idea of self-control. He believed that a leader should practice self-control in order to stay humble and treat his followers with care. In doing so, he would set a good example. Confucius thought leaders could encourage people to follow the law by teaching them morals and good manners.

His principles of education focused on different arts of the time, like math, archery and music. Confucius believed a teacher should show people how to live with honesty and decency. He tried to bring back the old values of kindness and courtesy.

Major Works

Confucius wrote and edited some of the most important Chinese books. These include his edited copies of the "Book of Odes" and the "Book of Documents." He also put together a record of the 12 dukes of Lu, called "The Spring and Autumn Annals." Confucius' own followers wrote down his ideas in the "Four Books." One of these was translated into English as "The Analects of Confucius." It contains Confucius' sayings and ideas. It had a big effect on Chinese life and customs.

Death And Legacy

Confucius died in 479 B.C., in Qufu, China. His followers held a funeral and held a period of mourning in his honor. In the years that followed, Confucius came to be regarded as a man of wisdom. During China's first Han Dynasty, his ideas became the foundation for the state government. Today, he is widely considered one of the most important teachers in Chinese history.

Quiz

- 1 Select the sentence from the section "Philosophy And Teachings" that shows Confucius' attitude toward traditional Chinese ideas.
 - (A) Traditional Chinese values then began to decay, resulting in a period of moral decline.
 - (B) Confucius believed a teacher should show people how to live with honesty and decency.
 - (C) He believed that ren could be put into action using the Golden Rule.
 - (D) He tried to bring back the old values of kindness and courtesy.

- 2 Based on information in the article, which of these statements is TRUE?
 - (A) It is clear what Confucius' early life was like.
 - (B) Confucius' ideas impacted the Chinese government.
 - (C) Confucius promoted new ideas that broke from tradition.
 - (D) The Chou Empire was a time of peace and prosperity in China.

- 3 What effect did traditional Chinese values have on Confucius?
 - (A) They were the foundation of his philosophy.
 - (B) They were not relevant to his completely original ideas.
 - (C) They were ideas that he disagreed with.
 - (D) They were the ideas that the Chou Dynasty taught him.

- 4 Why is self-control central to Confucius' philosophy?
 - (A) because self-control is necessary in order to be a productive philosopher
 - (B) because self-control helps people be humble and set an example for others
 - (C) because self-control is the basis of the Golden Rule
 - (D) because self-control is the foundation of the principle of "ren"