Confucianism

Out of the disorder of the Era of Warring States after the fall of the Zhou dynasty came a number of philosophies designed to create order in China. Among these philosophies was Confucianism, named after its founder Confucius, or Kung Fu-tse (551-478 B.C.E.). The son of an aristocratic family from northern China, Confucius spent most of his life trying to gain a high position in government. But he was very strong-willed, and often his thinking was at odds with state policy. As a result, he never achieved his goal. Instead, he served as an educator and political advisor, and in this role he had a tremendous influence on China. He attracted many followers, some of whom helped share his teachings and others who collected his thoughts and sayings in the Analects, which would come to have a profound influence on Chinese thinking, both politically and culturally. Confucius believed that the source of good government was in the maintenance of tradition; tradition, in turn, was maintained by personal standards of virtue. These included respect for the patriarchal family (filial piety) and veneration of one's ancestors.

Confucius also believed that governmental stability depended on well-educated officials. To this end, he required his followers to study history and literature from the Zhou dynasty to determine the value of these subjects for government officials. The Han dynasty appreciated Confucian philosophy because it supported order and submission to the government. The civil service examination that developed during the Han dynasty was based on the Analects and the course of study developed by Confucius. The Confucian values of veneration of one’s ancestors and respect for the patriarchal family, as well as good government staffed by a responsible, well-educated bureaucracy, became basic traditions that defined Chinese culture.

Confucianism’s founders believed in the existence of gods and spirits but gave little place for them in their philosophical system. They argued that a morally concerned person should be interested in how he or she acted in the material world. What happened beyond one’s physical life was of less importance.

Confucianism proposes that a harmonious society can be created by a combination of benevolent rulership from above and good behavior from below. The well-being of the group comes before that of the individual. Order and hierarchy are paramount. Good government is the responsibility of the ruler, and as long as the ruler performs his duties well, his people have an obligation to obey him. Meng-tzu (Mencius, 371-289 B.C.E.) taught that a just ruler possess the Mandate of Heaven, a moral justification for his authority. Unjust rulers who abuse their power lose the Mandate of Heaven, and can therefore be removed by their people.

Ideally, society operates as a model family, with junior members paying respect to their elders. If the home is blessed by filial piety (Xiao), society at large is healthy. This vision is reflected in the five relationships Confucius described as most important to social tranquility: The ruler should be just, those who are ruled should be loyal; the father should be loving, the son respectful; the husband should be righteous, the wife obedient; the older brother should be gentle, the younger brother humble; the older friend should be considerate, the younger friend deferent. These relationships are supported with the values of Ren (a sense of humanity, kindness and benevolence), Li (a sense of propriety, courtesy, respect and deference to elders), and Xiao (a respect for family obligation).

Confucianism also established the female as the subservient sex. Men ruled society, fought wars, and acted as scholars and ministers. They could keep more than one wife and divorce any wife who failed to produce a male heir. Women were exclusively homemakers and mothers. Lows prohibited women from owning property, and they were not provided financial security through a dowry system. However, Confucianism allowed women to have a limited education.

Implicit in these relationships are the concepts for reciprocity and mutual respect. Confucianism concentrates on the formation of junzi, individuals considered superior because they are educated, conscientious, and able to put aside personal ambition for the good of the state. Confucius believed that individuals who possessed these traits would be not only good administrators but also influential in the larger society because they would lead by example. He also was convinced that to restore political and social order, morally strong individuals were required to exercise enlightened leadership. This is why Confucius did not support a particular political system, but rather favored good people running whatever system was in place.

Central to Confucian thought is a “golden rule” similar to the one found in Christianity: in the Analects, Confucius declares “Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you.” Confucianism’s assumption that people are inherently good contrasted with the logic behind a rival doctrine, Legalism, which viewed people as innately immoral, and advocated harsh punishments as the only way to control them.

Confucianism coexisted with and at times competed with Daoism and Buddhism. Several times, it gained, lost and regained its status as an official, imperially sanctioned code of conduct. By the 600s C.E., a newer version of the creed, called Neo-Confucianism, appeared. Even when it was not in official favor, Confucianism’s influence persisted. China’s traditional emphasis on filial piety, social hierarchy, and respect for authority stems in large part from Confucianism and has persisted into the modern era, even under the Communist regime.
Another philosophy that developed in response to the Era of Warring States was Daoism (sometimes referred to as Taoism). Like Buddhism (in its original form), Daoism was less a religion and more a philosophical system, whose founding figure made no claim to divinity. Its founder was Lao-zi (or Lao-tsu), who is believed to have lived during the fifth century B.C.E. He is referred to as the “Old Master” who may or may not be an actual historical figure. He is also said to have written Daoism’s central text, the Two-te Ching, although most scholars believe this collection was compiled in the 300s or 200s B.C.E. Another figure associated with Daoism is Zhuangzi (Chuang-tse), known to have lived approximately from 369 to 268 B.C.E.

The philosophy adapted traditional Chinese concepts of balance in nature, or yin (male, assertive) and yang (female, submissive). According to Daoist philosophy, human understanding comes from following “The Way” or “The Path”, a life force which exists in nature. Daoist belief maintains that the universe is governed by an invisible, yet irresistible force that can be sensed intuitively. Daoism is deliberately antirational, using parables to train the worshipper to perceive the world in nonlogical ways. (The most famous Daoist paradox is found in the writings of Zhuangzi, who asks himself if he is a man who has just awoken from a dream that he was a butterfly, or a butterfly still dreaming that he is a man.). According to Daoism, all life is interdependent, and human beings should exist in harmony. Its advice is to relax and get in harmony with the Dao. In order to solve the problems of the day, Daoists taught the concept of wu wei, which means act by not acting.

A Daoist seeks wisdom in nature, poetry, and spontaneous behavior. He or she is not concerned with politics, money or material possessions, because all of these are illusory or meaningless. Daoism places an emphasis on individuality, since each person pursues the dao in his or her own unique way. Daoists believed it was useless to try to build institutions to govern men, because institutions (or anything that rewarded knowledge) were dangerous. Institutions lead to competitions and eventually to fighting. The less government the better; the ideal state is a small, self-sufficient town. The ultimate goal should be cultivate the virtues of patience, selflessness, and concern for all.

How could a philosophy like this bring an end to the Era of Warring States? In reality, it couldn’t, but the idea of it was a rejection of some strict guidelines in society, and a way to find an alternative way of life. In Chinese society, it provided an escape from the proper behavior of Confucianism – it encouraged people to take time off, relax, just let things happen. It allowed the Chinese to be Confucian at work and Daoist while not at work.

Daoism’s attitude toward war was that it should be used only for defensive purposes. The Han followed this idea by stationing its troops along the Great Wall to maintain the safety of trade routes.

After a time, Daoism became associated with mystical and magical practices, such as alchemy and fortune-telling. The I-Ching, or “Book of Changes,” is a Daoist text used in reading the future. Daoism’s most famous symbol is the yin-yang, a circle whose black and white halves are divided by a double-curved line, serving to illustrate that nothing is absolute, and that opposites flow into each other. As an advocate of harmony with nature, Daoism promoted scientific discoveries. Daoists became great astronomers, chemists, and botanists.

A flexible religion, Daoism has traditionally coexisted with other faiths. It is not uncommon for a worshipper to blend Daoist worship with Buddhism and Confucianism. Since Daoism and Confucianism arose in China at approximately the same time, the relationship between the two has generally been a tight one, even though their outlooks are, for the most part, diametrically opposed. Chinese thought and practice gradually blended both Confucianism and Daoism to include a concern for responsibility for the community and time for personal reflection.

Daoism spread throughout its native China. Certain elements were transported to parts of Asia where China had a strong cultural influence, especially Japan and Korea.