

# CONFUCIANISM—THE WAY OF RITUAL PROPRIETY


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- Compared to most world religions, Confucianism is decidedly humanistic and mostly agnostic. On the other hand, it has valued ritual ever since Confucius first began teaching the cultivation of individual ethics to benefit society. This centrality of ritual has led scholars to identify Confucianism as a religion. This ancient system has shaped Chinese thought and culture for more than 2,500 years.



- Confucius was born in China in 551 BCE and died, relatively unknown, in 479 BCE
- His students began composing commentaries on his teachings which spread throughout China. These writings, over the centuries, became known as the Analects, one of the most influential books in Chinese history.



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- China was polytheistic and animistic (nature deities). Confucius had little interest in gods or religion. Instead he focused on man's innate goodness and social cohesion.
  - These ethical teachings had profound influence on Chinese society, and within a few centuries of Confucius's death they were viewed as supernatural in origin.



# CONFUCIUS SAYS...

- “Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.”
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- "To be wronged is nothing unless you continue to remember it."

# FIVE RELATIONSHIPS

- Confucians have traditionally fixed on what they call the Five Relationships:
- 1. ruled and ruler
- 2. parent and child
- 3. husband and wife
- 4. younger child and older child
- 5. younger friend and older friend



- There is no self apart from these relationships because we are social beings who become more fully ourselves by engaging with others.
- As more of us become more truly human, the families, communities, and societies in which we live become more ordered and harmonious.




**WHAT ARE THE TECHNIQUES OF SELF-TRANSFORMATION THAT PROMOTE HUMAN FLOURISHING AND SOCIAL HARMONY?  
FIRST AND FOREMOST IS LEARNING.**

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- Today, education is increasingly seen in the West largely as a means to the end of employment. Confucius commends it for its own sake. It empowers students to become truly human beings—people who understand and enact the virtues






Confucius affirmed **FIVE VIRTUES** that emerge from the long and difficult process of self-cultivation and self-realization

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- ❖ Humaneness
- ❖ Righteousness
- ❖ Ritual Propriety
- ❖ Wisdom
- ❖ Integrity



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- Of these virtues, the two that are most emphasized are **humaneness (ren)** and **ritual propriety (li)**
  - Another absolutely essential virtue in the Confucian tradition is **filial piety**, which calls for proper relations inside the family, and in particular for children of all ages to respect their parents. To be filial is to respect your parents when they are alive and to worship them as ancestors after they have passed away.
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– **REN**

- Benevolence
  - Humaneness
  - Kindness
  - Human-heartedness
  - Justice
  - Integrity
  - tolerance
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– **LI**


- Everyday manners
- Courtesies
- Customs
- Ceremonies
- Etiquette
- Civility
- Propriety (what is appropriate in China may not be appropriate somewhere else)

# CONFUCIUS SAYS. . .

- “What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others.”
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# CULTURAL REVOLUTION (1966-1976)

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- With the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the new Communist government named five official religions—Protestantism, Roman Catholic, Islam, Daoism and Buddhism—But each had to report to the state via its own patriotic religious association. The PRC did not name Confucianism, which it sought to destroy rather than just control.
  - “Feudal superstitions” of all sorts were caught in the crosshairs of this new anti religious religion of the messiah of the working people, Chairman Mao, whose *Little Red Book* had become China's new scripture.
  - But a special sort of hatred was reserved for Confucianism and for Confucius himself, who became the antihero of authoritarianism, nepotism, antimoderism, slavery, capitalism and feudalism





# CONTEMPORARY CONFUCIAN REVIVAL

- The Cultural Revolution expired with Chairman Mao in 1976. His successor prioritized economic development over the Marxist-Leninist purity, trying to find an alternative to those policies and unbridled capitalism. The search led to a Confucius revival. What followed were conferences and panels, along with the restoration of temples and renewed interest in Confucianism in the school curricula.
- By the 1990's "Confucian fever" was rising, as research centers, scholarship, and popular publications championed a rehabilitated Confucius.
- In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Chinese Communist Party began to laud Confucius as a long-lost hero. Among the Confucian values party officials stressed were education, hard work, deference to authority, social stability, and harmony



# CONFUCIANISM IN THE US

- Confucianism arrived in the US in the 1840's with Chinese immigrants. Some of these immigrants came to mine gold in California while others worked on farms, in factories, and as railroad workers. The epic Transcontinental Railroad was build to a large extent on the backs of Chinese laborers.
- Like other immigrants, the Chinese who came to the West Coast brought their gods with them. America's first Chinese temple was built in San Francisco's booming Chinatown. Before the turn of the century there were at least 400 similar temples, which mixed Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian influences with Chinese folk religions.
- The World's Parliament of Religions in 1893 at the Chicago's World Fair, Confucianism was presented as more of a social philosophy than an a religion. There is no word for religion in Chinese.





# ANCESTOR VENERATION

- Of all the Confucian rituals, the most widespread is ancestor veneration, a practice so common it is now seen as simply Chinese or East Asian.
- In the Confucian world it is the expression of filial piety.
- The Chinese Spiritual Life survey of 2007 found that 72% of those surveyed had venerated ancestral spirits at gravesides in the past year.
- The popularity of this practice led the Chinese government in 2008 to declare Tomb-Sweeping Day a national holiday.



# CONTEMPORARY CONTROVERSY: IS CONFUCIANISM A RELIGION?

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- Confucianism has what Protestant theologian Paul Tillich identified as the essence of religion: an “ultimate concern”.
- “Being religious, in the Confucian perspective, means being engaged in the process of learning to be fully human.”



# CONFUCIANISM AT A GLANCE

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Problem: Social chaos

Solution: Social harmony

Techniques: Humaneness, ritual propriety, and various methods of self-cultivation

Exemplar: Juzi (“profound person”) and Shengren (“sage”)

In short, Confucianism is a tradition in which individuals seek to cultivate social harmony by reverting to the humaneness and ritual propriety of the sage-kings of ancient China.

