

# Confucius: China's Great Teacher

In order to appreciate Taoism, we must first learn about the great Chinese teacher and sage, Confucius. Born in 551 BCE, many of the ideas Confucius taught still remain central to Chinese life.

Like the birth of so many sages, Confucius' birth also was preceded by a divine vision. Legend has it that his mother saw five elderly men leading a unicorn toward her. The magical animal knelt and spit out a piece of jade which was inscribed with the promise that her baby would be a "king without a crown." When his mother retreated to a cave to give birth, the dwelling was protected by dragons. The nature spirits rejoiced, and a heavenly stream appeared.



But Confucius was born in a difficult time. China, once unified, was now in disarray, divided by warring provinces. The Emperor, who once held the country together, was powerless within the separate provinces.

When Confucius was only three years old, his father died. His mother raised him, seeing him through school, where he excelled. Soon he went to work as a tax collector, but in time he was disillusioned by the ways of government and the condition of China. So, at the age of 22, the young man set out to become a teacher, feeling deeply that he had something useful to share.

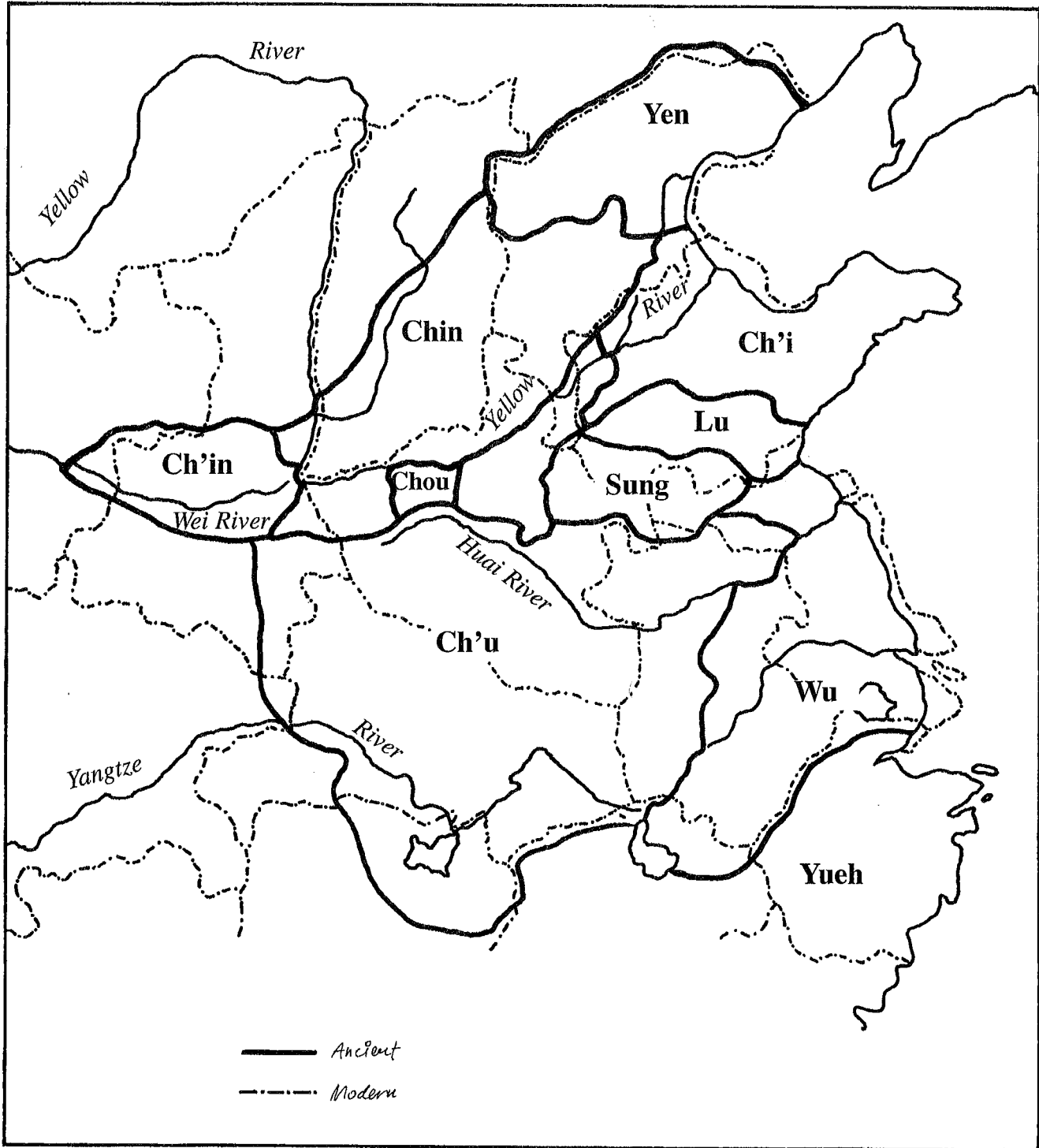
In many ways, Confucius was a revolutionary teacher. Besides learning skills—such as writing, music, and mathematics—he felt that students should learn to be virtuous, to achieve moral character, and to live a life of harmony. He was also equally concerned with *how* to learn as much as *what* to learn. Education, he felt, is more than memorizing facts and learning skills. It is the flowering of intelligence and sensitivity. In this spirit, Confucius accepted all as his students, regardless of their social positions, as long as they were serious about learning. The only students he turned away were lazy ones! Soon he had thousands of followers.

In a time of political uncertainty and civil violence, Confucius looked to China's past for guidance. He felt that some rulers of the past maintained harmony because their own lives were in order. Thus, he taught that a peaceful society begins in the family. If there is goodness and respect in relationships, then the community will benefit.

Confucius focused on five basic relationships. These include (1) parent and child, (2) husband and wife, (3) siblings, (4) emperor and subject, and (5) friends. The most important of these is the relationship between parent and child. It is the child's duty to have reverence for the parent and for the parent to love the child. If this central connection is harmonious, then the other four basic relationships will follow.

Confucius believed most of all in moral conduct and good education. These would lead to wisdom. Therefore, he proclaimed that China's rulers should be the highly educated, those who have acquired wisdom from studying the Chinese classics. These texts of poetry and history contain rules of behavior from which Confucius gained many of his ideas. In fact, in the latter part of his life he studied and edited the classics. However, his ambition to advise China's rulers never came to pass. Sadly, at the time of his death in 479 BCE, Confucius considered himself a failure. He died at the age of seventy-two.

# China in the Time of Confucius and Lao-Tzu



# The Analects: Teachings of Confucius

Although Confucius felt himself a failure, his teachings were preserved by his students and spread throughout China. As his ideas gained popularity, they were written down in a text called *The Analects*. The book contains accounts of his life and conversations with students. The whole of his teaching became known as Confucianism. Here are a few passages from *The Analects*.

**The first dialogue takes place as Confucius is traveling with a student, Jan Yu.**

**Confucius:** What a dense population!

**Jan Yu:** The people have grown so numerous. What is to be done?

**Confucius:** Enrich them.

**Jan Yu:** And when they are enriched, then what is to be done?

**Confucius:** Educate them.

**Next, Confucius is questioned by several students:**

**Tzu Lu:** How should one worship ghosts and spirits?

**Confucius:** We still don't know how to serve people; how can we learn about ghosts and spirits?

**Tzu Lu:** What about death?

**Confucius:** We don't yet know about life; how can we know about death?

**Tzu Kung:** Is there one rule for moral conduct?

**Confucius:** Do not unto others as you would not want others to do unto you.

**One day Confucius saw a woman weeping by a tomb.**

"You weep as though so sad," he said.

"It is so," she replied. "Here where I stand my husband and son and father-in-law were killed by a fierce tiger."

"Then why don't you leave this awful place?" asked Confucius.

"Here there are tigers," the woman answered, "but at least the government is not bad."

"My students!" announced Confucius, "listen and remember: bad government is worse than a fierce tiger!"

Name \_\_\_\_\_

# Questions: The Life and Teachings of Confucius

Respond to the following questions in full sentences. Be sure to use details to support your answers.

1. In her vision, the mother of Confucius was told that her son would be a “king without a crown.” In what ways did this prophecy hold true? In what ways did it not come to pass?

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2. Describe the condition of China at the time of Confucius’ birth. How did this state of affairs contribute to the content and effectiveness of his teaching?

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3. According to Confucius, what constitutes a good education? What things are important for the student to learn? Do you feel like these things are valued in your own educational experience?

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4. Deeply concerned about government, Confucius had strong feeling about who should govern the people. According to him, what are the qualities of a great ruler? Who should rule the country?

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5. List the five relationships that Confucius considered most important. Of these, which was most critical and why?

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# Lao-Tzu and the Origin of Taoism

Throughout Chinese history, Taoism has paralleled Confucianism, influencing all areas of Chinese culture, including literature, art, and government. Like Confucianism, the origin of Taoism can be traced back to one man. He is Lao-Tzu.

Lao-Tzu was a distinguished scholar and keeper of royal archives in the province of Luoyang. Interestingly, tradition has it that as a young man, Confucius met Lao-Tzu. But when he spoke to the scholar about his attempts to improve China's social order, Lao-Tzu answered thus: "This talk of duty to others drives me crazy! Leave the world in its original simplicity. As the wind blows where it will, let virtue establish itself." Finally, Lao-Tzu told Confucius that his teachings were "of no use."

Lao-Tzu's response captures the essential difference between Taoism and Confucianism: one is concerned with social order and regulating behavior, while the other focuses on individual life and spirituality. However, they are not mutually exclusive. In China, a person might be both a Taoist and a Confucian.

But how did Taoism begin? What are its doctrines? The essence of Taoism lies in a collection of meditations called the *Tao Te Ching*. These sayings set forth the virtue of *Tao*, the eternal "way." Although the origin of the book is disputed, legend tells us that when Lao-Tzu was preparing to leave his city for the remote West, the gatekeeper demanded that he leave the people some words of wisdom. He consented and created one of the most influential scriptures of all time.

Unlike Confucius' doctrines of moral conduct, the Way of the Tao is the way of "no action." This means allowing the universe to take its natural course, to be one with the flow of nature, and thus to penetrate the mystery and unfathomable source of all life. To be concerned with artificialities and personal ambitions could only interfere with the Tao. Lao-Tzu taught that human beings are inherently good, but blinded by their opinions and their need to do things. This creates internal disharmony, which contaminates social order and nature.

Lao-Tzu felt that people should not concern themselves with the "spirit world" or the formalities and superstitions of religion. Those were merely distractions. Rather, by being quiet and following the ways of nature, one would spontaneously discover what is true and eternal. However, as Taoism evolved, magical practices continued among the people.

Like Confucius, Lao-Tzu believed that those in power should be wise. If the leaders have no personal ambition, then the country will have harmony. But Lao-Tzu's emphasis on non-action included the government. Thus, he deplored taxation and warfare and social "improvement." In fact, the whole notion of morality, he believed, was deceptive. The *Tao Te Ching* stresses that both good and bad are only ideas. Ultimately, the answer lies in a life of simplicity, holding close to one's heart the "three treasures." They are love, frugality, and non-ambition.

Although Lao-Tzu never intended to begin a new religion, about 700 years after his death, a group adopted him as their leader and formed Taoism. As you will see, it is questionable whether Lao-Tzu would want to be associated with the pursuit of supernatural powers and mythic islands that are now found in popular Taoism.

# Reading from the Tao Te Ching

## One

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.  
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.  
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.  
Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.  
Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.  
These two spring from the same source but differ in name;  
    this appears as darkness.  
Darkness within darkness.  
The gate to all mystery.

## Six

The valley spirit never dies;  
It is the woman, primal mother.  
Her gateway is the root of heaven and earth.  
It is like a veil barely seen.  
Use it; it will never fail.

## Thirteen

Accept disgrace willingly.  
Accept misfortune as the human condition.  
What do you mean by “accept disgrace willingly”?  
Accept being unimportant.  
Do not be concerned with loss or gain.  
This is called “accepting disgrace willingly.”  
What do you mean by “accept misfortune as the human condition”?  
Misfortune comes from having a body.  
Without a body, how could there be misfortune?

## Thirty-Seven

Tao abides in non-action.  
Yet nothing is left undone.  
If kings and lords observe this,  
The ten thousand things would develop naturally.  
If they still desired to act,  
They would return to the simplicity of formless substance.  
Without form there is no desire.  
Without desire there is tranquility.  
And in this way all things would be at peace.

# Reading from the Tao Te Ching *(cont.)*

## Forty

Returning is the motion of the Tao.  
 Yielding is the way of the Tao.  
 The ten thousand things are born of being.  
 Being is born of not being.

## Forty-Three

The softest things in the universe  
 Overcomes the hardest things in the universe.  
 That without substance can enter where there is no room.  
 Hence I know the value of non-action.  
 Teaching without words and work without doing  
 Are understood by few.

## Seventy

My words are easy to understand and easy to perform,  
 Yet no man under heaven knows them or practices them.  
 My words have ancient beginnings.  
 My actions are disciplined.  
 Because men do not understand, they have no knowledge of me.  
 Those that know me are few;  
 Those that abuse me are honored.  
 Therefore the sage wears rough clothing and holds the jewel in his heart.

## Seventy-Eight

Under heaven nothing is more soft and yielding than water.  
 Yet for attacking the solid and strong, nothing is better;  
 It has no equal.  
 The weak can overcome the strong;  
 The supple can overcome the stiff.  
 Under heaven everyone knows this,  
 Yet no one puts it into practice.  
 Therefore the sage says:  
     He who takes upon himself the humiliation of the people  
         is fit to rule them.  
     He who takes upon himself the country's disasters deserves  
         to be king of the universe.  
 The truth often sounds paradoxical.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

## Questions: Lao-Tzu and The Tao Te Ching

Respond to the following questions and prompts in full sentences. Be sure to use details to support your answers.

1. Explain briefly the essential difference between the teachings of Lao-Tzu and the teachings of Confucius. Why did Lao-Tzu discourage Confucius? What beliefs did they share?

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2. How did the *Tao Te Ching* come to be written?

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3. How is water like the Tao?

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4. Explain what Lao-Tzu means by “non action.” Why is it best?

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5. What did Lao-Tzu feel about religious ritual and superstition?

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6. According to the *Tao Te Ching*, what are the qualities of a great leader?

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7. Describe the tone of the *Tao Te Ching*.

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