

CIS BULLETIN: CONFUCIANISM

A Publication of the Center for Interfaith Studies, Inc.

Gary Leazer, Ph. D.

© 2009 All Rights Reserved

The Life of Kong Qiu (Confucius)

Kong Qiu (whose Latin name is Confucius) was born 28 September 551 B.C. (according to the Gregorian calendar in current use in the USA) in the Lu kingdom or province (now Shandong province), along the Yellow Sea coast in eastern China. Confucius' name in Chinese is also spelled Kung Fu-Zi, K'ung-fu-tze, or in other variations. The name is unrelated to the martial art known as kung fu.



His father, ShuLiang He, died when Confucius was three years old.

His mother, Yan Zheng-zai, died when he was 16.

Confucius married JiGuan, the daughter of an office holder in Soong, when he was 19; they had a son named Li Bo-yu, a year later.

At age 21, he became employed as a clerk at a sheep ranch and a year later was working as a clerk in a warehouse. Around the age of 30, Confucius began serving as a tutor for the sons of one of the prominent clans in Lu.

China had begun to disintegrate into a loose confederation of city-states during Confucius' life. When Confucius was 35 he backed a king who was defeated in one of the city-state conflicts. He fled with the king but returned a couple years later.

It was about this time that Confucius is said to have met Lao-Tzu, the founder of Taoism, although some scholars believe this meeting never happened.

When Confucius returned at about the age 37, it is believed he began teaching ritual, music, history, and poetry.

Confucius finally obtained the position he wanted in 501 with the legitimate government of Lu. He first served as magistrate of the city of Chang-tu where he established policies on food, work, gender etiquette, honesty, and funerals, and later was appointed Deputy Administrator for Land Management. He was soon -- promoted to the important position of minister of justice and as Master of Ceremonies between Lu and a neighboring province where his skills forced the neighboring province to return three areas they had annexed.

However, by 497, the changing political scene ended

the honeymoon Confucius enjoyed in the Lu government. After seeing the handwriting on the wall, he left Lu. For the next several years, Confucius wandered among the various kingdoms, but did not remain in any one place very long.

His wife died in 485 and his son in 482.

Relative peace was restored in the Lu kingdom in 484 and Confucius returned for the remainder of his life. He died in 479 at the age of 73 (March 4 according to the Gregorian calendar).

He is said to have had 3,000 disciples, of whom 72 became proficient in his teachings.

Qufu was the capital of the kingdom, Lu, (770 BC-476 BC) and is the hometown of Confucius. Most tourists go there in order to see the places where Confucius lived, studied and was buried. In Qufu, one can visit Confucius' residence, a Confucian temple, and his tomb in the Confucian Woods. One fifth of the residents of Qufu have the surname Kong and they claim to be Confucius' descendants.

On the island of Taiwan (Republic of China), a festival celebration occurs on September 28 in the temples of Confucius around the island. Known as the "Grand Ceremony Dedicated to Confucius," the ceremony begins at 6 am with drum beats. Fifty-four musicians dress in robes with blue belts and 36 (or 64) dancers dress in yellow with green belts are led by Confucius' chief descendant (currently Kung Te-cheng) and followed by ceremonial officers. Three animals — a cow, a goat, and a pig — are sacrificed. The hairs plucked from these sacrificed animals are called the Hairs of Wisdom. In addition, local education institutes and civil offices award certain teachers for their excellence and positive influence.

Confucius' teachings dominated Chinese thought for over 2,000 years until the Communist victory in 1949 when they were largely discarded. During China's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and '70s, the Confucius' teachings were attacked by many in the Communist party.



An engraving of Confucius

But today, there is a resurgence of Confucius' teachings in China, encouraged by the government. The government is establishing Confucius Institutes around the world. Observers believe this change is being made to highlight China's presence and culture in the world. The only other culture in China is communism, which is not popular anywhere in the world, except for rulers of countries like North Korea, China and Cuba. So Confucius and his teachings are being dusted off and displayed as the ideal in Chinese culture.

A second reason for this change has been noted. Few Chinese believe in communism or even in socialism, so they really have nothing to believe in. Leaders hope Confucius' teachings can fill that void for Chinese people and give them something to believe in. Students are encouraged to memorize Confucius' classics and the morals and values found in them. Confucianism teaches people how to treat your friend, your enemy and the people in your neighborhood, and parents hope Confucius' philosophy will cause their children to be better behaved.

The Five Classics of Confucianism

The classics of Confucius consist of what are referred to as the *Five Classics*. The term "classics" in China refers to writings from the Qin dynasty (221-206 B.C.) or earlier. Despite its short dynasty, the Qin influenced later regimes, and from its name, the name China originated.

Persons wishing to become government officials were expected to have mastered the classics. One had to have mastered the classics to be considered a scholar or even a military officer.

The Five Classics are:

- The *I Ching* or *Book of Changes* is an ancient manual of divination adopted by Confucians after the death of Confucius. It is based on the yin and yang and combines the influences of Taoism and Confucianism.

Typically, a person asks a general question and then throws three coins six times. How the coins land each time is recorded; one side of the coin (usually heads) has a value of two, and the other side (tails) three. After six throws with the three coins one has

what's called a hexagram, a collection of six straight (yang) and/or broken lines (yin) stacked on top of one another. Sixty-four hexagrams are possible. The *I Ching* gives the 64 hexagrams and the meaning of each.



This form of divination is still popular among folk religionists in China and was popular, along with astrology and tarot cards, among many college students in the 1960s and 1970s.

- The *Classic of Poetry* is made up of 305 poems divided into 160 folk songs, 74 minor festal songs, traditionally sung at court festivities, 31 major festal songs, sung at more solemn court ceremonies, and 40 hymns and eulogies, sung at sacrifices to gods and ancestral spirits of the royal house. This book is traditionally credited as a compilation from Confucius.

- The *Three Rites* or *Classic of Rites* are ritual texts listed among the classics of Confucianism. They describe the social forms, ancient rites, and court ceremonies of the Zhou Dynasty (1022 to 256 B. C.). As such, it is believed the *Three Rites* were restored and edited by Confucius' disciples after the *Three Rites* had been burned in 213 B.C.

- The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is chronologically the earliest history; consisting of about 16,000 words, it records the events of the State of Lu from 722 to 481 B.C. The focus is on various feudal states' diplomatic relations, alliances and military actions, as well as births and deaths among the ruling families. The chronicle also takes note of natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, locusts and solar eclipses, since these were seen as reflecting the influence of heaven on the world of humans.

Most Chinese scholars do not believe Confucius wrote this work; it has been included with the writings of Confucius since Mencius, Confucius' best known and influential disciple, attributed it to his Master.

- The *Classic of History* is a collection of documents and speeches alleged to have been written by rulers and officials of the early Zhou period (1022 to 256 B. C.) and before. It is possibly the oldest Chinese narrative, and may date from the 6th century B.C. It includes examples of early Chinese prose.

The Four Books of Confucianism

In addition to the Five Classics, other classics of Confucianism include the Four Books. Two of the four are chapters from the *Classic of Rites* and are listed separately because it is believed they were written by different authors.

Another of the Four Books is a conversation between Mencius, Confucius' most famous disciple, and some kings of his time.

Mencius (372-289 B. C.), born Meng Ke or Meng-tzu, is arguably the most famous Confucian after Confucius himself.

Like Confucius, according to legend, he travelled China for forty years offering advice to rulers. He argued that it is acceptable for the subjects to overthrow or

even kill a ruler who ignores the people's needs and rules harshly. This is because a ruler who does not rule justly is no longer a true ruler.

He taught that true improvement results from education cultivated in favorable environments. Likewise, he said, bad environments tend to corrupt the human will. His mother is said to have moved three times when Mencius was born: from near a cemetery, to near a market, to near a school, so her son would be raised in a good environment.

He retired from public life when he could not affect changes in ethics and social and political philosophy he sought in society.

Mencius's teachings have been preserved in a book titled *Mencius (Meng-tzu)*, a seven-chapter work of anecdotes most likely collected by his disciples.

By far, the most famous of the Four Books is the *Analects*.

The *Analects*, its Chinese title is *Lunyu*, are a compilation of teachings attributed to Confucius and to some of his prominent disciples. It is one of the most influential texts in Chinese history.

It consists of twenty chapters of dialogues between Confucius and his disciples. The chapters are grouped by individual themes, but the chapters are not arranged in any organized flow. In the *Analects*, Confucius outlined his basic ideas how humans should act toward one another and what is right behavior.

It has been widely translated into many languages, including English.

The following are a few of the teachings from the *Analects*:

"The Master said: 'Don't be concerned that others do not know you. Be concerned that you do not know others'." -- 1.16.

"The Master said: 'Learning without thinking is

useless. Thinking without learning is dangerous.'" -- 2.15.

"The Master said: 'A gentleman pursues righteousness; a common man, personal gain'." -- 4.16.

"The Master said: 'Early on, I listened to one's words and believed that his action would follow. Nowadays, I listen to one's words and watch his action'." -- 5.11.

"The Master said: 'I was not born with knowledge. I gained it by my interest in ancient history and culture'." -- 7.19.

"The Master said: 'Learn as if you are unable to catch up; learn as if you are afraid to lose out'." -- 8.17.

"The Master said: 'A gentleman demands of himself. A common man demands of others'." -- 15.21.

"The Master said: 'One who listens to gossips along the way and passes them to others on the street is the scorn of virtue'." -- 17.14.

— *The Analects of Confucius: A New Millennium Translation*, translated and annotated by David H. Li. Bethesda, Maryland: Premier Publishing Co., 1999.



Mencius, from *Myths and Legends of China*, 1922 by E. T. C. Werner.