

Confucianism

When in doubt, follow the golden rule: “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do unto others.”

This universal moral principle is simple yet powerful. It’s also a core tenet of Confucianism, an ancient philosophy that plays a foundational role in Chinese society and politics to this day.

Confucianism arose during a tumultuous time for China. After hundreds of years of peace and prosperity, the Zhou Dynasty started to collapse in the fifth century BCE. Local feudal rulers vied for control over China and engaged in constant warfare. The following centuries are known as the Warring States Period.

Uncertainty during this period created a longing for stability. And amidst the chaos, Confucianism, along with many other schools of thought, emerged as a source of moral guidance.

Confucianism was founded by Kong Fuzi, whose name was later latinized to Confucius in the 16th century. Most of the information we know about Confucius comes from a book written by his students and followers called Lun Yu, or the Analects. This book not only serves as a record of his life and teachings but also as the main foundation for Confucianism.

Living in a time of conflict, Confucius contemplated how to establish a more stable society. He didn’t believe that strict rules were the answer. Instead, he was convinced that a harmonious society starts with good moral character. Confucius didn’t take all the credit for his ideas. He acknowledged that his views were formed from older philosophies and encouraged others to learn from the past and its traditions, as well.

Confucianism focuses on three main values: education, relationships, and ritual. As a teacher, Confucius was passionate about education and its direct impact on self-cultivation. According to the Analects, he stated, “Education breeds confidence. Confidence breeds hope. Hope breeds peace.”

Confucianism also places a strong emphasis on relationships. There are five key relationships: ruler and subject, parent and child, husband and wife, elder sibling and younger sibling, and friend and friend.

Except for friendship, which was considered a relationship of equals, Confucius believed that these relationships were based on hierarchy. He stressed the importance of showing respect for elders—a concept called filial piety. Filial piety, according to Confucius, was the foundation for everything. And a harmonious society could only be achieved when everyone fulfilled their roles with compassion and respect.

Relationships can be further developed through ritual, which encompasses religious rites, social rules, and etiquette. Sometimes social rules might seem arbitrary, like holding the door open for the next person—and picking up your pace when someone is holding the door open for you. But Confucius believed these seemingly small actions are what make all the difference. He viewed rituals as shared practices that cultivate deeper and more meaningful relationships. And if everyone could build these habits, it would benefit society as a whole.

It wasn't until centuries after Confucius's death that Confucianism was recognized as the dominant philosophy and moral system of China. When the Warring States Period came to an end, the Qin Dynasty adopted Legalism, a philosophy based on strict laws, and banned other schools of thought. But the Qin Dynasty was short-lived and ended in a violent rebellion. In 202 BCE, the new Han Dynasty restored Confucianism and made it the official state ideology. People were encouraged to study Confucian classics, and Confucian scholars held influential positions in government.

Confucianism soon spread to other countries, including Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Despite the various political and cultural changes that have occurred, Confucian ideals are still deeply ingrained in Chinese culture more than 2,500 years later.