

Overview of Confucianism and the Basic Content of Confucianism

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Abstract: Confucianism from the moment of its birth has a fundamental difference with the ideology of religions, especially in matters of people, concern for people, life and the enjoyment of life. Buddhism for life is miserable, so find a way to freedom. Taoism also cynical, pessimistic, should need the “Pure, not scrambled”. Only Confucianism is a more important life than. People living in this life take care of their own work. The story of a human being when he was alive, was not worried at all, what to worry about after he died! This can be said to be the most distinctive of Confucianism compared to other theories, and perhaps because of that it, Confucianism has held a unique and popular position for a very long time of history.

Keywords: Confucianism, primitive Confucianism, Han Dynasty, Song dynasty.

INTRODUCTION

Confucianism (儒教) is a system of ethics, social philosophy, educational philosophy and political philosophy initiated by Confucius and developed by his followers with the aim of building a harmonious society, in which people know how to behave according to reason and morals, a peaceful and prosperous country. Confucianism, the way of life propagated by Confucius in the 6th-5th century BCE and followed by the Chinese people for more than two millennia.

Although transformed over time, it is still the substance of learning, the source of values, and the social code of the Chinese. Its influence has also extended to other countries, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. It is one thing to explain why Confucianism has such an immense influence on many East Asian countries. Explaining this would certainly be difficult to convince if the mere theory of its richness and depth. It must have the conditions to be born and exist in the socio-economic base of East Asia, first of all in China, where it was born. The conditions for its birth only exist in China, but the conditions for its long-term survival are in all three countries of Korea, Japan, and Vietnam and must be similar to those in China, at least about culture generally.

Confucianism, a Western term that has no counterpart in Chinese, is a worldview, a social ethic, a political ideology, a scholarly tradition, and a way of life. Sometimes viewed as a philosophy and sometimes as a religion, Confucianism may be understood as an all-encompassing way of thinking and living that entails ancestor reverence and a profound human-centered religiousness. East Asians may profess themselves to be Shintoism, Daoism, Buddhism, Muslism, or Christians, but, by announcing their religious affiliations, seldom do they cease to be Confucianism.

Although often grouped with the major historical religions, Confucianism differs from them by not being an organized religion. Nonetheless, it spread to other East Asian countries under the influence of Chinese literate culture and has exerted a profound influence on spiritual and political life. Both the theory and practice of Confucianism have indelibly marked the patterns of government, society, education, and family of East Asia. Although it is an exaggeration to characterize traditional Chinese life and culture as Confucian, Confucian ethical values have for well over 2,000 years served as the source of inspiration as well as the court of appeal for human interaction between individuals, communities, and nations in the Sinitic world.

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PRIMITIVE CONFUCIANISM

Confucius (Kongzi) is one of the most influential religious thinkers, philosophers, and political figures in Chinese history [1]. He was well known for his aphorism and models of social interaction. His works and teachings on respect, honesty, education, kindness, and strong family bonds gave rise to Confucianism. Today, Confucianism is the official imperial philosophy of China. Besides this, there is more to this philosopher than meets the eye. Thus, this article will attempt to trace the origin of Confucius and his contributions to humanity and philosophy at large.

The ancient book wrote about Confucius that still exists today is the book *Chronicles of Sima Qian* [2]. Confucius was a Chinese philosopher who lived in the 6th century BCE and whose thoughts, expressed in the philosophy of Confucianism, have influenced Chinese culture right up to the present day [1]. Confucius has become larger than life figure and it is difficult to separate the reality from the myth. He has been considered “*Vạn thế sư biểu*” (the first teacher - everlasting teacher) and his teachings are usually expressed in short phrases that are open to various interpretations [2]. Chief among his philosophical ideas is the importance of a virtuous life, filial piety and ancestor worship [3]. Also emphasized is the necessity for benevolent and frugal rulers, the importance of inner moral harmony and its direct connection with harmony in the physical world and that rulers and teachers are important role models for wider society [4].

There are varying accounts regarding Confucius's early life [3]. However, most reports state that Confucius was born in 551 B.C. in Qufu, Shandong Province, China. Touted as an eminent officer in Lu military, his father died when he was only three years old, leaving him under the sole care of his poor mother Yan Zhengzai who later died at the age of 40. Historical accounts show that Confucius was educated at schools for commoners. There he learned and mastered six Arts (rites, music, archery, chariot racing, calligraphy, and mathematics).

Confucius was believed to have lived from c. 551 to c. 479 BCE in the state of Lu (now Shandong or Shantung) [2]. However, the earliest written record of him dates from some four hundred years after his death in the Historical records of Sima Qian [1].

There is not much information regarding Confucius's adult life. However, history has it that Confucius studied under the tutelage of Lao Dan and Daoist Master [1]. These two men undoubtedly had a significant influence on him. As an adult, Confucius held tightly to make-believe temple rituals he was taught while growing up. This quickly earned him a reputation as someone who is fair in his dealings, polite in all his ways and above all an ardent lover of knowledge.

He raised in the city of Qufu and worked for the Prince of Lu in various capacities, notably as the Director of Public Works in 503 BCE and then the Director of the Justice Department in 501 BCE [3]. There is not much information regarding Confucius's adult life. However, history has it that Confucius studied under the tutelage of Lao Dan and Daoist Master [1]. These two men undoubtedly had a significant influence on him. As an adult, Confucius held tightly to make-believe temple rituals he was taught while growing up. This quickly earned him a reputation as someone who is fair in his dealings, polite in all his ways and above all an ardent lover of knowledge.

Confucius married at the age of 19, fathering three children [1]. During his lifetime, Confucius worked as a shopkeeper, superintendent of parks as well as a teacher. Notwithstanding, the zenith of his influence were recorded during his teaching career. As a teacher, Confucius mentored young children, teaching them the principles of right conduct and good governance. Because of his dedication to teachings and quest for knowledge, his fame spread throughout China. Regrettably, Confucius died on November 21, 479 B.C. in Qufu, China, a year after losing his son Tzu-lu in battle [3].

Later, he traveled to a lot of places in China and met with several minor adventures including imprisonment for five days due to a case of mistaken identity. Confucius met the incident with typical restraint and was said to have calmly played his stringed instrument until the error was discovered [3]. Eventually, Confucius returned to his hometown where he established his own school in order to provide students with the teachings of the ancients. Confucius did not consider himself a 'creator' but rather a 'transmitter' of these ancient moral traditions. Confucius' school was also open to all classes, rich and poor. This was the basic difference between Confucius and his contemporaries [3].

Confucius and his followers held many beliefs that are today the basis for religious and moral life in China. Confucius believed that good governance was the foundation of a peaceful society. Also, Confucius believed that the keys to a stable society are strong family values and relationships. As a member of the upper class, Confucius believed education and knowledge belonged to anyone who had the desire to learn.

In process did the work of imparting knowledge (in the words of Confucius), Confucius started to write, he has written many books [1]. Five books (Five Classics) were “Kinh Thi” (Shi Jing), “Kinh Thu” (Classic of History), “Kinh Dich” (Yi Jing) (was a collection of treatises on divination), “Kinh Xuan Thu” (Lin Jing) (The Spring and Autumn Annals), “Kinh Le” (Classic of Rites) [1]. Unfortunately for posterity, none of these works outlined Confucius’ philosophy and Confucianism, therefore, had to be created from second-hand ancient and the most reliable documentation of the ideas of Confucius. It has been considered being the Analects book although, even here there is no absolute evidence that the sayings and short stories were actually said by him and often the lack of context and clarity leaves many of his teachings open to individual interpretation [3]. In addition to the Analects book, the other three major sources of Confucian thought were Mencius, Great Learning and Mean [2]. The same with Analects book, these works constitute the Four Books of Confucianism otherwise referred to as the Confucian Classics. Through these texts, Confucianism became the official state religion of China from the second century BCE.

The thoughts of Confucius were further developed and codified by two important philosophers, Mencius (or Mengzi) and Xunzi (or Hsun Tzu) [1]. Whilst both believed that man’s sense of morality and justice separated him from the other animals. Mencius expounded the belief that human nature was essentially good whilst Xunzi has left that perspective that human nature was bad. Although of the opposite position, he was slightly more pessimistic about human nature and he, therefore, stressed the importance of education and ritual to keep people on the right moral track.

Confucianism, therefore, expounded the importance of four virtues which we all possess [3]: benevolence (Jen), righteousness (I), observance of rites (Li) and moral wisdom (Te). A fifth was later added - faith - which neatly corresponded to the five elements (in Chinese thought) of earth, wood, fire, metal, and water [2]. Once again, the belief that there is a close link between the physical and moral spheres is illustrated. By stating that all men have such virtues, two ideas are consequent: education must nurture and cultivate them and all men are equal – “Within the four seas all men are brothers”. With a suitable application, anyone can become a sage (sheng). It is not the innate talent that has been important but one’s will to mold one’s character into the most virtuous possible.

Although the later generations revered Confucius as a sage of almost divine origins, the conversations recorded in the Analects book show that he was a wise and courteous teacher and deeply concerned with human behavior and social order [2]. Common themes in his lectures elicit compassion for people (personalities), filial piety or respect for family (filial piety), ritual practice (ceremony) [5].

Confucius commanded that everyone in society has a role to play. Some are in a high position and have a leading role, while others are in a lower position and have a compliant role. Confucius believes that if everyone, especially leaders and the elderly, behaves well, society will function properly.

Confucius never achieved the position he wanted, but his influence increased sharply after his death at the age of 72. Following his death in 479 BCE, Confucius was buried in his family’s tomb in Qufu (in Shandong) [3]. Two hundred years later, his lectures became an important foundation for those wants to be a government official. During the Han Dynasty, those wishing to serve as mandarins needed to pass an examination of Confucius’ thought. Later philosophers such as Mencius and Xun Zi developed new philosophical schools based on Confucian writings.

Confucianism of the Han Dynasty and Song Dynasty

Over the following centuries, his stature grew so that he became the subject of worship in schools during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) [2]. In the Han dynasty, the Great learning book and the Mean book and were included in the “Le Ky” book (the book chronicles the Han Dynasty’s rituals). Han Wu De brought Confucianism to become the state religion and used it as a tool to unify ideology in whole the country. From here, Confucianism became the mainstream ideology that protected Chinese feudalism for two thousand years. Confucianism in this period was called “Han Nho”. The difference from primitive Confucianism is that Han Nho upholds the power of the ruling class. “Thiên tử” was the son of heaven, using the “ceremony of the rule” to cover up the “rule of law”.

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The Song Dynasty (960-1279), after the Han Dynasty (202 BC-220 AD) and the Tang Dynasty (618-906), was one of the greatest dynasties in Chinese history that saw great cultural flourishing [3]. It was also one of the dynasties that saw foreign invasions both before and during (as well as after) the dynasty.

This was the period when Confucianism flourished [3]. The temples were established in his name at all administrative capitals during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) [4]. Throughout the feudal dynasties of China, extensive knowledge of the fundamental texts of Confucianism was a necessity in order to pass the civil service selection examinations [3]. Educated people often had books of Confucius' writings prominently displayed in their house. Sometimes also statues of Confucius, most often seated holding a book and dressed costume of the king to symbolize his status as 'the king without a throne'. Portrait prints were also popular, especially those taken from the lost original attributed to Wu Daozi (or Wu Taoutsi) and made in the 8th century CE [4]. Unfortunately, no contemporary portrait of Confucius survives but he was most often portrayed as a wise old man with long grey hair and mustaches, sometimes carrying a book.

Viewed against this context, the Song scholars' struggles against the Buddhists and Daoists to rescue Confucian learning from metaphysics could be seen as an attempt to preserve Chinese "cultural integrity" in the face of foreign invaders [3]. It was during this dynasty that Confucian learning underwent canonization for a second time, and new Confucian texts were selected as standard texts for scholars preparing for the imperial examinations.

In contrast to the times of Confucius and Mencius, when Confucian were just in the process of forming into a social intellectual group, by the Song Dynasty, they had already formed into a social class called the gentry scholar class, made possible by the imperial examinations based on the five Confucian classics [3]. Starting from the 6th century Kim [2], statewide imperial examinations were started to select government officials. By the mid-Tang Dynasty, the majority of the hereditary aristocracy were threatened their political positions, and by late Tang and early Song, the gentry scholar had firmly established his social control of China [3]. Since the majority within the government since the Tang Dynasty were Confucian scholars who had been selected via the imperial examinations, these scholars became officials who served at the capital or at the provinces; those who passed the lower levels of examinations would serve at lower levels. But even if without a government position, scholars who passed the lowest levels of imperial examinations were respected at the local regions, who were often hired as private tutors to villagers in China where there were very few formal schools [6]. On the other hand, scholars who did become senior government officials would ultimately retire to their hometown and purchase large tracts of land with the money they made while serving as government officials. The retired officials, now called gentry, assumed leadership in the local regions: they served as the go-between between the higher levels of government: prefectural, provincial, and central, and their local regions [2].

The respect they enjoyed in the local regions also led them to take local leadership. Often, their descendants would pass imperial examinations and become government officials, further consolidating the prestige of the clan in the local region. The gentry's scholar class, although not hereditary, since no Confucian could determine his son would pass the imperial examinations, became a firmly established phenomenon in Chinese society (Cultural history of China, 2000); it was a socially mobile class [2]. On the whole, one can say though that the Confucians constituted the upper class in China. The Confucians, in this context, also identified with Chinese culture in their attempt to preserve Chinese "cultural integrity".

The greatest scholar in this second wave of canonization of Confucianism learning was Zhu Xi [2]. Like so many of his contemporaries, although he started writing in the Northern Song Dynasty, it was in the Southern Song Dynasty, when the Chinese capital moved south to give up the northern territories to the new state established by the Tartars in the north, that he began to talk more in terms of a systematic reorganization of Confucian learning. Instead of the "Ngũ Kinh" (Five Classics) of Confucianism learning standardized in the Han Dynasty, Zhu Xi proposed the adoption of the "Tứ Thư" (Four Books) as standard Confucian texts to be used in the imperial examinations: the Analects, and the Mencius, plus Doctrine of the Mean (Zhong Yong), and "Đại học" (Great Learning), the latter two both selections from the book of documents, one of the five classics canonized in the Han Dynasty [7]. These four books focused more on the Confucianism and Mencian emphasis on inner cultivation than the general orientation of the five classics [2].

As Fairbank [8] comments, two characteristics stand out about Zhu Xi's selection: the "relative autonomy of the scholar, who is called upon to exercise his own conscience and perceptiveness in his classical studies, etc to find the Way in oneself, which sounds so very Mencian: echoing the Mencian argument that when one properly undergoes moral cultivation, one can constitute a moral universe on his own. The second characteristic is the emphasis on "rational, moral learning," with a focus on the Five Relationships expounded by Confucius, including: king-minister, father-son, wife-husband, younger and older siblings, and friends [5].

The teachings of Confucius and his followers have, then, been an integral part of Chinese education for centuries and the influence of Confucianism is still visible today in contemporary Chinese culture with its continued emphasis on family relationships and respect, the importance of rituals, the value given to restraint and ceremonies, and the strong belief in the power and benefits of education.

THE MAIN CONTENT OF CONFUCIANISM

Nhân (Human heartedness)

“Nhân (Jen) is mentioned by Confucius many times and depending on each subject, each situation that “nhân” is understood in many different meanings. In the deepest sense, “nhân” is a moral principle in Confucianism philosophy. “Nhân” is regarded by him as the regulation of human nature through “ceremony” and “meaning”; stipulating the relationship between people and people from the family to society. “Nhân” is closely related to other ethical categories in Confucian philosophy in order to create a consistent and coherent philosophical system, and so it has been said that if one considers ethical categories in Confucius philosophy as concentric circles, “nhân” is the center because it shows the most essential nature of human nature [7]. “Nhân” can also be understood as “loyal”, it means how to treat people, but also how you live. In a conversation with students, Confucius said: My religion has only one reason but is transparent. Regarding this, Tang Zi - a disciple of Confucius said that Confucius’ religion is “secondary”. “Nhân” here is to do our best, and “thing” is to deduce from our hearts to know people’s hearts, we don’t want anything then people don’t want that either. “Loyalty” is to live up to oneself and to be kind to people.

Such, “nhân” (Jen or Wren): human heartedness; goodness; benevolence, man-to-man-ness; what makes man distinctively human (that which gives human beings their humanity), including:

The virtue of virtues; Confucius said [5] that he never really saw it fully expressed. The other virtues follow from it. He never gives and defends a definition of it although he does characterize it.

It is dearer than life itself, the man of “nhân” (Jen) will sacrifice his life to preserve “nhân”, and conversely, it is what makes life worth living.

“Nhân” is a sense for the dignity of human life, one feeling of humanity towards others and self-esteem for yourself.

“Chính Danh” (Li or Lee)

Most Confucianism and Confucius researchers have acknowledged that the Righteous doctrine is a new Confucianism initiative [2]. Because he himself observed the state of social disorder, social relationships are turned upside down; the king did not fulfill the king’s duties, the mandarin did not fulfill the duties of the mandarin, the people did not fulfill the duties of the people. Therefore, he proposed the theory of “Chính Danh”. In fact, the theory of “chính Danh” was not only valid in his time. In the words of the scholar Nguyen Hien Le [9], when writing the crest for the book of Confucius, he said: “Any philosophy is only to save the bad of a time. To evaluate a philosophy, we must put it in its own time, see if it solves the problems of that time, is it an improvement compared to previous times, an inspiration for future generations. And if after ten generations it is found that it is still improving human morality, it must be considered a great contribution to humanity”.

Such, “Chính Danh” (Li or Lee): The principle of gain, benefit, order, propriety; a concrete guide to human activities, including: Two basic meanings to Li:

- (1) Concrete guide to human relationships or rules of proper action that genuinely embody Jen.
- (2) General principle of social order or the general ordering of life;

Confucius recognized that you need a well-ordered society for wren to be expressed.

First Sense: the concrete guide to human relationships: The way things should be done or propriety: positive rather than negative (“do’s rather than don’t’s). The main components of propriety emphasizes the openness of people to each other. The reification of names:

- (1) The language used in accordance with the truth of things;
- (2) The Doctrine of the Mean: So important that an entire book is dedicated to it in the Confucian canon: the proper action is the way between the extremes;
- (3) The Five Relationships: The way things should be done in social life; none of the relationships are transitive. (Note that 3 of the 5 relationships involve family, the family is the basic unit of society):

- (a) Father and son (loving and reverential);
- (b) Elder brother and younger brother (gentle and respectful);
- (c) Husband and wife (good and listening);
- (d) Older friend and younger friend (considerate and deferential);
- (e) Ruler and subject (benevolent and loyal).

- (4) Respect for age: Age gives all things their worth: objects, institutions, and individual lives.

Second Sense of Li: The principle of social order; ritual; ordering of life; conforming to the norms of Jen (the limits and authenticity of Li:

- Every action affects someone else-there are limits to individuality;
- Confucius sought to order an entire way of life;
- You shouldn't be left to improvise your responses because you are at a loss as to how to behave.

The "Chính Danh" doctrine invented by Confucius more than 2,500 years ago from China, was still in a decentralized feudal regime, with his desire to restore the good regime and ritual of the original Zhou Dynasty when he found the social situation quite chaotic and disordered. He was a peacemaker, although he had revolutionary ideas but did not like war, so he proposed the theory of "Chính Danh" to gradually improve society.

Theory of "Lễ" (Yi)

Confucianism's "Lễ" are all rituals and norms in the relationship between people, from linguistic behaviors to costumes and houses. The "Lễ" also includes all rituals in social activities, the regulations detailing individual activities (eating, dressing, walking, greeting, weddings and festivals of each type of people in society). Those who are in any position can use it only, depending on the nature of the different jobs and the different ceremonies.

There is a close relationship between the "Chính Danh" and the "Lễ": If the "Chính Danh" is righteous (correct and suitable to the real ones), the "Lễ" is required for performing and cultivating the "Chính Danh". When Nhan Uyen (student of Confucius who was recognized as the best by Confucius) asked how virtuous people are, Confucius said: Those people know how to correct himself, according to the "Lễ" and he further explained, according to the "Lễ" is not to look at the "Lễ", not to listen to the "Lễ", not to say the thing that is not the "Lễ", not to work with the "Lễ". He persisted in the policy of harmonizing and alleviating class conflicts, he propagated "an bần nhi lạc" (poor but happy); advising people below to be happy with your position, should not be resentable ("Bần nhi vô lạc"). He opposed all struggles, whether of the masses against the yoke or between the ruling classes [1].

However, Confucius added new content, developed it. The "Lễ" of the Zhou Dynasty was purely a manifestation of religious beliefs and behavior, Confucius turned the "Lễ" into a category of profound social and human meaning, with the effect of regulating, develop the human nature.

Such, "Lễ" is righteousness; the moral disposition to do good thing (also a necessary condition for Jen or for the superior man). The "Lễ" connotes a moral sense: the ability to recognize what is right and good; the ability to feel, under the circumstances what is the right thing to do? Including:

- (a) Not moral wisdom per person, but intuition.
- (b) Most of us live under the sway of different kinds of "I's". In this case, the identification is with an impersonal ego (In Freudian terms, almost like the super-ego).
- (c) The impersonal ego is the assimilated or appropriated values of our culture-the Confucianism true self.

Some actions ought to be performed for the sole reason that they are right--regardless of what they produce; not for the sake of something else. The value in the act is the rightness of the action regardless of the intention or the consequences of the act. Hence, the "Lễ" is a different way than either stoicism (intention with soft determinism) or utilitarianism (consequences with free will). Confucianism is similar to Kant's ethics of duty: the action is done as a good-in-itself, not as a means to an end.

Confucian view on education

Confucianism values "Hien talented" (people who have both talent and virtue). The monarchial dynasties revered Confucianism advocated recruiting talents for the country through the "Khoa bảng" (Exams organized by the court). Candidates who achieved high academic qualifications in these examinations, most were selected as officials for the court [3].

Since Confucius' goal was to reform the government, his goals for education were to produce men who were capable to serve in government in decisive roles. He attempted to produce Chun Tzu (people with class and status in society). Originally Chinese words meant one born into a high social station, but both came to mean one with proper and suitable behavior and cultivation, regardless of birth. His main goal was the cultivation of character, through observation, study and reflective thought.

One of the main points of Confucianism's progress was the policy of encouraging education [2]. Confucianism has many progressive elements when it comes to the notion that education is necessary for all people, "hữu giáo vô loại" (the teaching does not distinguish people) so everyone has the opportunity to study and was educated. This is a way to direct people to noble qualities such as "Nhân, Lễ, Nghĩa, Trí, Tín" (Nhân - compassion for people; Lễ - respect others;

Nghĩa - gratitude living; Trí - always strive, rise in life; Tín - always be loyal, create a trust for others). Confucianism said that educating people is one of the basic tasks of the government and is also an effective means to turn society from chaos into a “prosperous peace”.

Confucianism’s educational philosophy advocates holistic education. Confucius said: “A gentleman cannot be like an instrument and has only one effect” [10]. In addition, he once said, Studying for three years without spending much money on praying for fortune, it is not easy to have such a person”.

Confucianism featured the view of promoting morality education. Virtue must be placed on Knowledge. Confucius said: “Young people want to be good people, stay home to be filial with their parents, go out to respect people older than their own age, behave carefully, words must keep their beliefs, and love people widely, know close to the virtuous person. If you do so, if you still have the capacity, you have still time to study knowledge” [10].

Regarding learning methods, Confucius said: “Learning without thinking will not yield anything, just thinking without learning will be very dangerous” [10]. Trung Dung’s book has the paragraph “Unless you refused to study, studied but did not understand, did not stop, if you asked but did not know clearly, had thought but did not find a solution, argued but was not right, had if you do it but it is not good, then you will not stop. Other people do it once, ten times and you can achieve it, you should give it a hundred times and a thousand times how foolish you become, become intelligent, even if you are weak, you will become tough” [10]. Confucius promotes a democratic spirit in education. He said, “anyone who is not warm-hearted because he has not understood, I am not open to understanding. Whoever is not resentful for not expressing ideas, then I can not guide but speak. Learners knowing one corner and not knowing how to know the other three, I will teach him no more” [10].

Confucianism’s learning spirit can be generalized in Confucius’ saying: “In the morning if you know the truth, even if you die in the afternoon, you will be satisfied” [10].

CONCLUSION

After more than two thousand five hundred years of development, Confucianism has made a great impression on Chinese culture and strongly influenced several countries in the region. The values that Confucianism brings to China and some countries in East Asia (Japan, Korea and Vietnam) are undeniable. As a political and social doctrine but Confucianism contains idealistic and mystical elements. It generated a high ideal for social and family interaction: members were to treat each other with love, respect, and consideration for the needs of all. It prescribed a lofty ideal for the state. It required officials to criticize their rulers and refuse to serve the corrupt. This inner and idealist wing spawned a Confucianism reformation known in the West as Neo-Confucianism. The movement produced reformers, philanthropists, dedicated teachers and officials, and social philosophers from the eleventh through the nineteenth centuries.

The idealist wing of Confucianism had a religious character. Its ideals were transcendent, not in the sense that they were otherworldly, but in the sense of the transcendent ideal-perfection. On the one hand, Confucianism values are so closely linked with everyday life that they sometimes seem trivial. Everyday life is so familiar that we do not take its moral content seriously. We are each a friend to someone, or apparent, or certainly the child of a parent. On the other hand, Confucianism remind us that the familiar ideals of friendship, parenthood, and filiality are far from trivial; in real life, we only rarely attain these ideals. We all too often just go through the motions, too preoccupied to give our full attention to the relationship. If we consistently and wholeheartedly realized our potential to be the very best friend, parent, son, or daughter humanly possible, we would establish a level of caring, of moral excellence, that would approach the utopian. This is Confucianism transcendence: to take the actions of everyday life seriously as the arena of moral and spiritual fulfillment.

The outer and inner aspects of Confucianism were in tension throughout Chinese history. Moreover, the tensions between social and political realities and the high-minded moral ideals of the Confucians were an ongoing source of concern for the leaders of this tradition. The dangers of moral sterility and hypocrisy were always present. Confucianism, they knew well, served both as a conservative state orthodoxy and a stimulus for reform. Great Confucianism, like religious leaders everywhere, sought periodically to revive and renew the moral, intellectual, and spiritual vigor of the tradition. Until the 1890s, serious-minded Chinese saw Confucianism, despite its failures to realize its ideal society, as the source of hope for China and the core of what it meant to be Chinese.

Although since the revolution, the public ideology of the People’s Republic has abandoned Confucianism teachings, one can say that there is a continuity of form: like Confucianism before it, Maoism teaches a commitment to transform the world by applying the lessons of utopian ideology to the actions and institutions of everyday life. This is

not to claim that Mao was a “closet Confucianism”, but to emphasize that the Confucianism way was virtually synonymous with the Chinese way.

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