



Background Information on Confucianism

Directions: The following information will help your group create a character collage on Confucianism. Each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Confucianism is a belief system based on the teachings of Kong Fu Zi (called Confucius by Europeans), who lived in China from 551 to 479 B.C. Confucius lived when the Zhou empire, which had provided peace and stability for centuries, was weakening. With no central authority in control, war between provincial lords increased and poverty and crime rose. This violence and moral decay troubled Confucius. Confucius urged people to uphold the great traditions and customs of the past, so society could again be well ordered. To return to the past, he suggested a code of conduct based on strict moral ideas.

The Confucian code of conduct stressed virtues (good actions), or *li*, such as respect, loyalty, honesty, hard work, politeness, and generosity. It also established five basic relationships that created a hierarchical (ordered) society: (1) ruler and subject, (2) parent and child, (3) husband and wife, (4) elder sibling (brother or sister) and younger sibling, and (5) friend and friend. In each relationship, individuals had responsibilities and duties toward one another. The fifth relationship was the only one in which the persons were considered equals and had equal responsibility to respect and aid each other in times of difficulty. By contrast, in the first four relationships, one person was viewed as superior and worthy of respect and obedience. In turn, this superior person was expected to set a good example of moral behavior. According to Confucius, evil rulers were responsible for evil actions of their subjects. Similarly, a father was responsible for his children's good or bad behavior.

Stop here
and discuss



- What problems was Confucius concerned about?
- What behaviors did the Confucian code of conduct stress?
- What were the responsibilities of individuals in each of the five basic relationships?

Because the family was the basic unit of Chinese society, Confucius emphasized family relationships. He stressed *filial piety*, or repaying the kindness of one's parents, elders, and family ancestors. A child was supposed to be absolutely loyal to and obedient and respectful of his or her parents. In return, parents were obligated to provide for the child and raise him or her with proper manners and respect for others. Younger siblings were supposed to respect and obey their older siblings; older siblings were expected to be responsible and model good behavior. In addition, a wife was supposed to love and obey her husband absolutely, and the husband, in turn, was obliged to provide for and be good to his wife. Confucianism perceived women as inferior—as a child, a girl was supposed to obey her father; as a wife, a woman was supposed to obey her husband; and when she was old and her children were grown, a mother was supposed to obey her sons.

Stop here
and discuss



- In your own words, what is *filial piety*?
- According to Confucius, what are the responsibilities of each family member?

Confucius believed that if everyone behaved according to *li* in their relationships, society as a whole would be peaceful and harmonious. He believed that the emperor had to provide good leadership and set an example of how to live a virtuous (morally good) and responsible life. If he was a wise and just ruler, his subjects would be obedient, and there would be harmony (peace and good will) in the government. Likewise, if children respected and obeyed their parents, wives respected their husbands, and younger siblings obeyed older siblings, family life would be peaceful. If everyone at every level in society obeyed the *li* appropriate to their situation, police, jails, and war would not be necessary because everyone would naturally do what was best for the community.

Confucian philosophy strongly influences much of Chinese society today. Most families still operate according to Confucian principles, and children are expected to be loyal and obey their parents. The elderly are treated with great reverence (honor) and respect by the young. Government is still controlled by an elite (top) few; there has never been a democracy in China. Throughout China—in government, business, and many families—society is still governed by hierarchical relationships between superiors and inferiors.

Stop here
and discuss



- According to Confucius, what would make society harmonious?
- How does Confucianism influence Chinese society today?

Quotes from the Teachings of Confucius

Quote 1: “Be respectful at home, serious at work, faithful in human relations. Even if you go to uncivilized areas, these virtues [good qualities] are not to be abandoned.”

Quote 2: “Seeing that our body, with hair and skin, is derived from our parents, we should not allow it to be injured in any way. This is the beginning of filial respect [repaying a parent’s kindness]. We develop our own character and practice the way so as to perpetuate our name for future generations, and to bring honor to our parents.”

Quote 3: “Lead the people with governmental measures and regulate them by law and punishment, and they will avoid wrongdoing but will have no sense of honor and shame. Lead them with virtue and regulate them by the rules of propriety [*li*], and they will have a sense of shame and, moreover, set themselves right.”