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Confucius' World and His Life

Confucius say, "Man who shoots off mouth, must expect to lose face."¹ Who is this Confucius with his fractured English and trite sayings?

In the West we tend to have a cartoon-like view of Confucius: as a man who churned out dull maxims – the "dictum coining sage," says the Lonely Planet travel guide² – or as a conservative old foggy whose sayings show up in fortune cookies.

In the Chinese city of Qufu, Confucius' birthplace, on any given day you will see hundreds and hundreds of people, most in family groups or tour groups. The majority of the three million visitors a year are from elsewhere in China, or from Korea or Japan. They wend their way through the historic sites in the area – the temple of Confucius, the Apricot Pavilion where Confucius taught his students, Confucius' grave, and Confucius' family home. Some burn incense and bow before the central statue of Confucius. Everyone takes pictures and listens to the tour guides' spiel. While not especially reverent, everyone seems attentive and interested. This is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Throughout the city, hawkers will sell you Confucius medallions, key chains, books, pictures, statues, and even tea "from the Sage Confucius' land." There is no trace of a boring, trite Confucius here.

It is not just the Western image of Confucius that is a problem. In modern China, if you talk about "Confucius" most people will not know who you are talking about. That is because Confucius' name is not actually Confucius. The name "Confucius" was coined by Catholic missionaries to China in the sixteenth century. It is the Latin form of the Chinese "Kong Fuzi," or Master Kong (the "Fu" is an honorary addition). In Chinese he is "Kongzi."³ "Kong" is Confucius' family name and the "zi" means "Master" or "Teacher"; in Chinese, titles come after the family name, not in front of it as in English. I will use the Western convention, "Confucius," because it is most familiar to English speakers, but we should probably begin by knowing his real name.⁴

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Westerners also tend to see China and things Chinese as very much the opposite of the West: for example, Western philosophy is rational while Chinese thought is mystical. As children many of us in North America believed that if we dug a hole through the earth we would come out on the “other” side, in China. A “Chinese fire drill” is a messy and disorganized event; “Chinese whisper” is a children’s game where a sentence is whispered from one to another, finally ending as nonsense. Is stereotyping one of the reasons why Confucius, central to Chinese culture, is solely a figure of fun, while our important religious and philosophical figures are not?

Confucius' World: Looking Back to a Long, Unified Civilization

By the time Confucius was born in 551 BCE, there had been a civilization and a political structure in China for about 1,500 years, and possibly longer than that. He and his contemporaries looked back to the reigns of the sage-kings who were said to have lived two to four thousand years earlier. These sage-kings were described as bringing the arts of civilization and government to China, inventing everything from farming to flood control. Modern scholars argue whether these sage-kings were early rulers around whom fabulous supernatural stories were built or ancient gods who were reinvented as historical rulers of a very ancient past.⁵ For Confucius and those of his time, the sage-kings represented the best of rulers and the heritage of Chinese civilization.

Dynastic rule came with the Xia dynasty (c.2183–1500 BCE) and the Shang dynasty (c.1500–1100 BCE). Their China was not the China we now know. The area they ruled was centered around the Yellow River basin; gradually political authority would stretch north, west, and south to take in the China of Confucius’ time (see map), though even that China was not as large as contemporary China.

The Zhou Dynasty

King Wu, one of the founders of the Zhou dynasty, fell ill. His brother, the Duke of Zhou, was so distressed that he prayed to their ancestors, asking that he might be taken instead of his brother. While King Wu recovered on that occasion, when the King did die, his son, King Cheng, was very young and the Duke of Zhou ruled on his behalf as regent. The Duke rejected suggestions from other nobles that he should kill the child and take the throne himself. The Duke’s rule was considered to be the model of good government. When King Cheng was old enough, the Duke handed over the government to him

and, so it is said, retired to write the hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* and ritual texts. (See chapter 8.)⁶

The Zhou dynasty defeated the Shang rulers in about 1027 BCE, bringing under their rule what was then western and central China. The Zhou government, like the Shang before it, was a feudal state where the king claimed ownership of all the land and then parceled territories out to lords who pledged allegiance to him. Government offices were hereditary among noble families and it was birth, not merit, that determined one's place in society.

When we use the word "feudal" we should not think of a king and his few advisors sitting about in a castle. The Zhou government structure was complex. There was a prime minister, a minister of the household, a minister of justice, and a director of public works whose job it was to build and repair dykes, bridges, irrigation channels, and water reservoirs. There was a minister of war and ministers who were in charge of fortifications. The ministry of religion carried out divination, interpreted dreams and celestial phenomena, and saw to sacrificial offerings. Other departments dealt with everything from entertaining foreign guests, directing the music conservatory, overseeing and storing the harvest, hunting, and crafts. Other officials advised the ruler on the law, rewards for service to the crown, and proper conduct.

By the time of Confucius, not only was there a complex government, but China had a sophisticated society and culture. By the time of the Zhou dynasty, there was a writing system that was already centuries old, books, histories, music, and poetry. Skill in metal work was so refined that great sets of bells could be cast, each one playing more than one note when struck. The Chinese used the decimal system and a metallic form of money; they traded with people outside the China of the time. There were large market towns, roads, bridges, and irrigation systems using canals, bridges, and dams. By the time of Confucius, China is estimated to have had a population of about 50 million people.

The rulers and nobles were a warrior aristocracy whose prestige and power was based on warfare, hunting, and sacrificial rituals to their ancestors. These things set nobles apart from commoners. Noble families were defined by kinship ties and each great family had its own estate, temples, and military forces. Nobles lived on their own estates and on the wealth they produced there. Commoners and farmers were like serfs, working on the estates and called on for military service by their local lord.

When an elite is defined by prowess in war, manhood is defined by military courage and honor is central. Nobles saw themselves as obliged to take vengeance on anyone who took liberties with their honor; any small slight had to be avenged to preserve one's honor. Courage, loyalty, honor, family name, and sacrifices to the ancestors who founded the lineage were central to the nobility's understanding of who they were.

Ancestors and Spirits

The ancestors of those nobles were powerful. They were thought to control success in war, hunting, and agriculture. They were capable of punishing the living for any neglect in the regular offerings that were made to them; the ancestors might also appear to punish their enemies, and to cause trouble for the living.

The ancestral halls of the nobles contained tablets representing the ancestors. Ceremonies were performed in which food and drink were offered to ancestral spirits; descendants took on the role of the ancestors in these rituals. There was no clear line between the living and the dead as the living nourished the ancestors and the ancestors cared for the family.

It is not clear where these ancestors were. They are often referred to as “ascending” but we are not told where. The dead (that is, all the dead, not just the ancestors of noble families) were also said to go to the Yellow Springs, a gloomy underworld where what was left of their life force gradually disappeared.

Ancestors who had become too remote to be known, the dead who had no one to sacrifice to them, and the dead of other families were thought to be supernatural too. Often dangerous, these ghosts could bring disease, death, or calamity and had to be guarded against. Another range of supernatural beings, the spirits, included ancestors and what we would call gods. These were the gods of natural phenomena, of particular areas, and gods with specific responsibilities such as fire, childbirth, or rain. Later texts would refer to all of these kinds of beings as “ghost-spirits”⁷ when talking about some sort of survival after death or supernatural beings. The beings of the other world continued to be involved in this one, in both positive and negative ways.

Religious ceremonies for ancestors were performed by their noble descendants. There were also religious professionals, like shamans, who treated the sick with ritual and with herbal medicine; they exorcized evil spirits and opened up communication with the dead through divination. These shamans had a number of ways to foretell the future. They held official positions at court and were mostly women.

Heaven and the “Choice of Heaven”

Central to Zhou dynasty religious thinking was the concept of Heaven. This is not a heaven as we might think of it, that is, a place where one goes after death. Heaven may be a god, but not the creator God of the biblical traditions. This is a central deity or concept that was understood as the

primary supernatural power. There are some ancient texts that talk about Heaven as a god, and a god with a personality, who is pleased or angered by the actions of human beings and who then blesses or punishes based on Heaven's standards. On the other hand, Heaven is sometimes described as being something closer to nature, an impersonal and automatic force not at all like human beings.

Whether Heaven was understood as a god or as nature, we frequently find Heaven closely allied to the interests of the common people: "Heaven hears and sees as our people hear and see; Heaven approves of actions and displays its warnings, as our people approve of actions and hold things in awe: this is the connection between the upper and lower worlds."⁸ While there is a separation between the supernatural world and ours, these two worlds were thought to hear, see, and approve of things, in the same ways.

The Zhou dynasty made use of the idea of Heaven in what began as a neat bit of propaganda called the "choice of Heaven" (sometimes translated as the "mandate of Heaven"). The theory behind the choice of Heaven is simple: Heaven dislikes bad rulers and sends sign of displeasure – drought, earthquakes, or floods. If the bad ruler ignores these signs and does not reform, Heaven chooses an upstanding and moral man to replace the bad and corrupt ruler. With Heaven's support, the upstanding man will overthrow the corrupt ruler and become the new ruler. So, if you are the ruler, you have the choice of Heaven; if you are overthrown, you have lost Heaven's favor and the new ruler now has it.

The reason the leaders of the Zhou dynasty used the choice of Heaven theory was that they had overthrown the Shang dynasty. They claimed that it was the choice of Heaven that gave them the authority to do so; that they became the rulers shows that they did indeed possess the choice of Heaven. What began as an effort of self-justification by the early Zhou dynasty rulers continued on throughout Chinese imperial history where emperors were thought to have the choice of Heaven by virtue of being emperor. Confucius and other thinkers will also use the concept of the choice of Heaven to widen the concept and to demand accountability from rulers.

The Decline of the Zhou Dynasty and the Rise of the Warring States

For almost three hundred years, the Zhou dynasty used the choice of Heaven to justify their rule and ruled successfully over China. In 771, the Zhou capital in the west was captured by non-Chinese enemies and the Zhou king was killed. Some of the royal family escaped and established their new capital further to the east in the present-day city of Luoyang. This loss of the western territories, and, even more, the loss of prestige,

signaled the beginning of the decline of the Zhou rulers' political power. If the Zhou rulers could not even protect their own capital city, then they were incompetent or weak – or both. Local lords took more and more control of their own estates and saw no reason for obedience to a weak Zhou ruler.⁹

As the Zhou ruler's power declined, local lords set up their own governments, often mirroring those in the Zhou court; they took on royal roles and titles and their estates became independent states. The power of a local lord came from his ability to call up men and assemble a strong army. The bigger his territory, the more men a lord would have to call on. This gave lords a considerable incentive to try to annex their neighbors' land and increase their territory.

Local lords faced threats everywhere they looked. Family members could be plotting to assassinate them. Other noble families in their state could be planning to overthrow them. Neighboring states might be working out plans to invade them.

One of the major problems facing these local lords was that they had no political legitimacy. There was no reason for any particular lord to be the ruler of that state. He did not have the choice of Heaven; if he did, he would rule the entire kingdom. He might claim a right to rule on the basis of his relation to the Zhou ruler, or as the head of his noble family. But there were other members of his own family – brothers, sons, uncles, nephews – who could make the same claim. Added to that, there were other noble families in his own state who saw no reason why the present ruler's family should be the ruling family. If his rule was based solely on the nobility of his family, any other noble family might be just as noble. This meant that any ruler faced rebellion both from within his family and from other noble families. As we move into the Warring States era (403–221 BCE) most of the original lords were overthrown by other noble families. Families that had overthrown their rulers faced similar challenges from other noble families and, increasingly, from newly rich families who had little claim to nobility but whose power lay in their wealth.

Members of ruling families plotted against each other. For example, in 696 BCE, in the state of Wei, the Duke of Wei had an affair with one of his dead father's concubines and he favored the son born from that union. When this son grew up and married, the Duke liked his son's bride very much indeed and had an affair with her from which two sons were born. The bride, confident of the support of her father-in-law, the Duke, plotted with her sons to kill her husband, the Duke's son. This would allow at least one of her sons (the Duke's illegitimate sons) to become ruler. The plot was only successful when the Duke came in on it. And so it was that the son was killed by his father, his wife, and his half-brothers.¹⁰

A prince might be supported by another of the state's noble families in his bid to overthrow his father. When the son was successful in killing his

father and becoming ruler, he was indebted to the noble family that had supported him. If conspirators were unsuccessful, they were beheaded, drawn and quartered, their families were all killed, and their wealth went to the ruler. So it was to the ruler's financial advantage to charge his subjects with treason.

Life at the courts of these rulers could well be full of assassinations, poisonings, and plots. Sons rebelled against fathers, younger brothers against older brothers, families against families. Inter-family plotting was not the only danger for a ruler, or his successor.¹¹ Externally, states threatened and attacked one other or made temporary alliances that shifted easily.

As part of their duties as ruler of a state, rulers would travel, with great pomp, to the courts of other rulers where they would be greeted with feasts, musical performances, and gifts. Treaties would be signed and terrible oaths of lifelong friendship and political alliance sworn. This would be followed, almost inevitably, by treachery and attack.

Warfare was unending. By the 720s BCE, with the Zhou dynasty in decline, there were about 120 feudal states. Two hundred and fifty years later, by the time of the death of Confucius in 479 BCE, only 40 states survived. These 40 states continued to fight each other until, 250 years later, there were only seven states left.

The rulers of these states answered to no one. If you are looking for examples of despicable behavior, reading through the histories of the time, you will be spoiled for choice. Rulers were able to follow their own inclinations, and these inclinations were often greedy and immature. When Duke Zhuang, the ruler of the state of Zhu, was not able to punish an officer when he wanted to, he flew into a violent rage and flung himself onto his bed with such force that he fell off into the embers of the fire and burned to death. Before dying he gave orders that five men be put to death to accompany him in the tomb along with five chariots. The history says, "Duke Zhuang was an excitable and ferocious man."¹²

Living in a state of war and threat did not mean that nobles and rulers in these small states lived frugally. They had enormous gardens, and great orchestras and dancers providing music and entertainment at parties and feasts. They dressed in the latest fashions and enjoyed pastimes like hunting. One ruler, Duke Ling of the state of Qin (608 BCE), amused himself by shooting a crossbow at ordinary people from his city walls. When his chef did not prepare a dish properly, the duke had him killed and his body stuffed in a basket and paraded through the palace as a warning to others.¹³ In 494 BCE King Fuchai of the state of Wu was described by his contemporaries as so self-indulgent that whenever he traveled, even if he was just staying for one night, he would insist on towers and pavilions being built for him. Ladies and maids must be ready to serve him. Even when he went out just for the day, all his games and pastimes had to accompany him. He

was an avid collector of art and precious rarities and enjoyed spectacles and grand musical performances.¹⁴ The nobility and rulers of the time were frequently corrupt, immoral, interested in extravagance and luxury, and often not very bright.

Shifting alliances and intrigues, both inside and outside the state, meant that concepts like honesty and loyalty were considered hopelessly old-fashioned. Anyone trying to behave well was obviously not smart enough to figure out the *realpolitik* of the day. There were good and responsible rulers and loyal and honest government officials, but often they did not fare well. One official, Shi Qi, was captured by enemy forces. He refused to disclose the whereabouts of his lord's body, because he had taken an oath to keep the burial site secret. They threatened to kill him. Shi Qi responded by saying, "When it comes to this kind of thing, if I had won, I would have become a high official; as I've lost, I'm going to be boiled alive. That's how it goes; I can hardly object." His torturers then boiled him alive.¹⁵

In another story of courage, a noble, Cui Zhu, had killed his ruler and so took the title of prime minister, setting his son up as the new ruler. The state's Grand Recorder, the historian who kept the records of the court, wrote in the record, "Cui Zhu assassinated his ruler." Cui Zhu had him killed. The Grand Recorder's younger brother then took over the post and recorded the same thing. He too was killed, as was yet another brother who succeeded to the position. When the fourth brother took over the job and made the same entry, Cui Zhu finally gave up. While all this was going on, a minor historian who was living in the south of the city heard that the Great Recorder had been killed. He gathered up his writing kit and headed to the court, only to turn back when he heard that the facts had indeed been recorded.¹⁶ There were examples of loyalty and dutifulness, but they were few and far between.

The collapse of the feudal system headed by a dynastic ruler and the social breakdown that followed meant that there were also major social, cultural, and economic changes. Many of the older noble families fell on hard times financially or in the struggle for dominance in their state. A new merchant class rose along with a money economy, replacing the feudal bonds that had traditionally kept relationships together.

As the old nobility declined, their inherited government positions were increasingly filled by salaried appointed officials. These new bureaucrats were scholars, an intelligentsia who moved from one state to another as they liked, or as they were offered jobs. Although they were members of the nobility, they were not necessarily tied by family or clan bonds to the ruler or the state they served.

As well, there were innovations in warfare: iron weapons were now used, the crossbow had been invented, traditional chariot attacks by noble

charioteers were replaced by massive infantry and cavalry formations and generals were chosen for their skill in tactics, not for their noble birth. There were innovations in farming too. Agriculture increased because of better irrigation and the use of iron tools. With the breakdown of feudalism, farming was more and more in the hands of nuclear families. Cities expanded as political and trade centers.¹⁷

The breakdown of the Zhou dynasty's rule led to major changes in Chinese politics, society, and culture. A once unified China was divided into many warring, small states. War, and the pestilence that often followed it, brought death and suffering to ordinary people. Even without war, life could be hard with high taxes and the ever-present threat of conscription into the army. Amongst the nobility, notions of loyalty and honor changed to calculating self-interest and a passion for money. A great deal of this may sound familiar to us in our world. For Confucius, and many of the thinkers who came after him, all of these things were signs of the decline of society and the loss of civilization itself. The past centuries of Chinese civilization were about to be lost.

One of Confucius' students spent the night at Stone Gate. In the morning the gatekeeper asked him where he had come from. The student answered, "From Confucius' home." The gatekeeper replied, "Confucius – isn't he the one who knows what he wants to do is impossible, but keeps trying anyway?"¹⁸

The Life of Confucius

Confucius was born in 551 BCE into the troubled times of war, intrigue, and great economic and social changes; his life and teachings need to be understood in light of them. When it comes to the facts of Confucius' life and teachings, we have a number of written sources. As we shall see, ancient texts, and the versions of these texts, like all ancient texts, present problems. The next section is an introduction to some of these texts and some of the problems around them. There are additional problems given that Confucius was so famous that it was only natural that all sorts of myths would be built up around him. There is an extensive hagiography, pious stories that have accumulated over 2,000 years. In the final section we will see that scholars have been able to put together a biography of Confucius that, while still sketchy, is considerably more probable than the legends. While we have a good idea of what Confucius taught, just who Confucius was in terms of the events of his life, or his personality, are much more difficult matters. We do not even know what he looked like – though traditionally he was said to have been tall and well built. Our sources do not always tell us things we might like to know.

Sources

When we try to piece together the life of Confucius we come across the same problem that we have with the life of any figure from long ago. While we have texts that give us a great deal of information, how trustworthy and accurate are they? Who wrote them? Why? Is the picture they give us accurate?

After the death of Confucius in 479 BCE, his students, and their students after them, generated texts that claimed to set out, or elaborate on, his thought. We will look at these texts in more detail in chapter 8. We have, for example, texts like the *Analects* (*Lun Yu*), a collection of the sayings of Confucius. The *Analects* is said to have been put together by his students. For the last one thousand years, the *Analects* has been seen as the primary source of direct quotations from Confucius, though, as we will see, the text presents its own problems. It does not contain a complete biography of Confucius. There are other texts that purport to give us information about Confucius' life, though they are considered less reliable: for example, the *Kongzi Jia Yu*, a record of sayings of Confucius and his students; the *Three Character Classic*, a primer for boys; and the *Classic for Girls*. While they too give us information about Confucius' life and teachings, they are much later texts from the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Generated by Confucius' followers, all of these texts claim that they are quoting Confucius, describing episodes in his life, and accurately reporting his teachings. So there are a great number of sources.¹⁹

Versions of the Texts

To confuse the sources further, there are not only texts, but there were versions of these texts. Texts evolved, first transmitted by students, then copied by others. If we take the *Analects* as an example, we can see how this works. The *Analects*, or sayings of Confucius, were traditionally understood to be the notes taken by Confucius' students at the time or recollections that his students gathered together later. The text presents quotations from Confucius, or a conversation between Confucius and others, but often without a context, so that we do not know what question was asked, or why Confucius was prompted to say certain things. The text we now have is divided into 20 chapters or parts; these are subdivided by numbering the sayings within each chapter. While scholars continue to debate which of these sayings are authentic, it is agreed that the text was written, or compiled, by a number of people over the course of about two hundred years. By the Han dynasty, two to three hundred years after Confucius' death,

there seem to have been three versions of the *Analects* in circulation, and the text we have now is likely a synthesis of all three.²⁰

There are some sayings in the *Analects* that are quite clear and there are others that are far more cryptic. An example of the former is a story about one of Confucius' students, Zai Wo, who was found having a nap during the day. Confucius commented that, as one cannot carve rotten wood, there was no point in scolding Zai Wo.²¹ Evidently Zai Wo's lack of energy made him "rotten wood," so there was no point in Confucius correcting him. An example of a somewhat more cryptic saying is this one: "One day the stables burned down. When Confucius returned from court, he asked, 'Was anyone hurt?' He did not ask about the horses."²² It is only when we know more about Confucius' teachings that we can understand his remark. It does not mean that Confucius did not care for animals. His first concern was with the stable hands and whether any had been killed or injured. He was concerned with people first; the horses, expensive and prized possessions of the ruler, came second. So reading the *Analects* requires information from the text itself, from commentaries written about it, and information about Confucius' teachings from other Confucian texts.

Modern scholars sift through classical Chinese texts like the *Analects* using modern tools such as linguistic and textual analysis to try to date them, trace their transmission, and penetrate the layers of interpretation. The result is a consensus about many of the important parts of Confucius' life and thought, while interpretations of them, and arguments about these interpretations, continue.

Confucius is like other important figures from the past, Jesus and the Buddha, for example, in that complex traditions grew up around them. While scholars agree on many of the basics of their lives and teachings, there can still be wide variations in interpretation. Within these limitations, we can reconstruct the broad outline of Confucius' life and teachings.

Hagiography, the Pious Stories of Confucius' Life

The first attempt at a full biography of Confucius can be found in the *Historical Records (Shi Ji)* written in the Han dynasty, 250 years after Confucius' death. Unfortunately, this biography contains many of the legends and fancies that had already gathered around the life of Confucius.²³

These legends maintain that Confucius' ancestors were descended from royalty and moved to the state of Lu, modern Shandong province, from the state of Song. Confucius' father is traditionally identified as Kong Shu Lianghe. The histories record that he used his terrific strength and courage to save his fellow soldiers.²⁴ While he may have been a great soldier, he was less successful at being a civil servant. When he was 60, he married



Figure 1.1 Traditional rendering of Confucius

Confucius' mother, Yan Zhizai, who was only 20. Either with her husband, or alone, Confucius' mother went to Mount Niqiu to pray for a son²⁵ and there received the spirit of Heaven.

Other stories tell us that shortly before Confucius' birth, a unicorn appeared to Confucius' mother carrying a plaque that said that, with the decline of the Zhou dynasty, the child would be the "uncrowned king." After it left, Yan Zhizai gave birth to her son. Two dragons descended from heaven, circling the house, and five gods descended to the courtyard. His mother heard celestial music announcing the birth of a sage. At birth, the crown of Confucius' head looked like the shape of Niqiu mountain and so he was named "Kong Qiu."²⁶

When Confucius was three, his father died. As a very young child, Confucius could play music and practiced rituals (see chapter 2 for a discussion of these rituals). As a boy he attended a school set up by a prime minister. When he was 17, his mother died. Even as a teenager, he was recognized by some officials in the state of Lu as a descendent of sages and as having a natural ability to understand and perform even the most ancient of rituals.

When he was 20, Confucius began his career as minor official. When his first son was born, the Duke of Lu sent the gift of a carp in honor of the birth, and so the son was named Kong Li (Li, “carp”).

Tradition also has it that, at an early age, Confucius was appointed by the rulers of Lu to the post of police commissioner, then to a higher level as Minister of Public Works, moving on to become Minister of Justice, and finally to the position of prime minister of Lu.²⁷

In the histories Confucius is shown as using his knowledge of diplomatic protocol to help the Duke of Lu set up an advantageous treaty with the state of Qi. The envoys from Qi, aware of Confucius' intelligence and skill, tried to intimidate him by sending armed men to the negotiations. Confucius, however, handled the situation so that Lu got what it wanted in the treaty. A paragon of virtue, Confucius did not fold when faced by force; without swagger, Confucius was courageous enough to correct his lord and wise enough to know the precedents.

Confucius continued to study with the most renowned Music Masters and Masters of Ritual. There are tales that say that, when a new ruler took over in the state of Lu, the state of Qi sent three beautiful women to the new ruler; the women were successful in making the new ruler distrust Confucius. Offended, Confucius withdrew from government, and began his fourteen years of travel throughout China (497–484 BCE), giving wise advice to other rulers and teaching the students who gathered about him. Traditionally it was thought that he had 72 students who were close to him and more than three thousand students altogether. These travels were sometimes dangerous with so many groups of armed men everywhere. In the state of Wei, Confucius and his students were attacked and beaten; on his way to the state of Chu, he and his followers were surrounded and besieged by a group of undisciplined soldiers. Sometimes political intrigue threatened Confucius: in the state of Song there was an attempt to assassinate him. During his travels he dealt with hunger and hardships. Still, he taught his students and attempted to advise rulers.

If Confucius was such an accomplished sage, why did rulers not take his advice? Later texts tell us that despite consistently wise advice to the rulers of the states of Wei and Lu, Confucius was ignored. The texts give three reasons for this. First, in order to follow Confucius' advice, rulers would have had to accept Confucius' criticism of their behavior and reform themselves; they would then have been required to govern with care and restraint. No ruler of that time was interested in doing any of these things. Second, other government officials were envious of Confucius and feared him; they did their best to thwart his plans. They slandered Confucius to their rulers, undercut his authority, and encouraged their rulers to behave badly in the hope that Confucius would become disgusted and leave. The corruption of the time meant that Confucius was not able to find a job in the

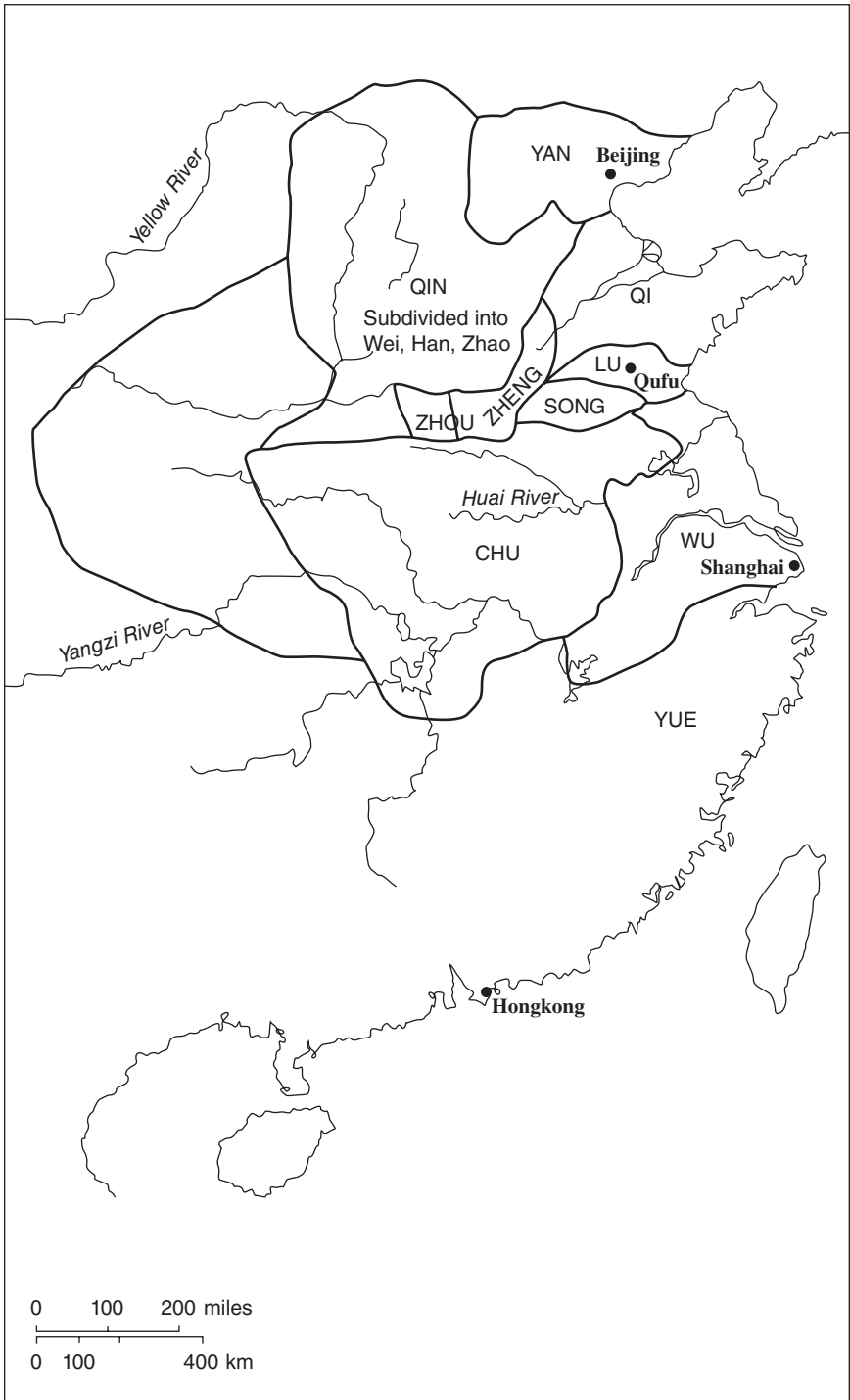


Figure 1.2 Map of Warring States, China (with modern cities)

many states he traveled to. Third, people of the time were incapable of really understanding what Confucius was teaching. Had the rulers and officials of the state of Lu, the inheritors of the Zhou tradition, really understood and followed what Confucius advised, they would have attained the choice of Heaven and become founders of a new dynasty that unified China. The stories that accumulated around Confucius contain these justifications for his lack of political success.

The stories continue by saying that, when Confucius returned to the state of Lu, he was not offered an office, so he spent his time teaching and writing or editing the ancient texts, *The Book of History*, *The Book of Poetry*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and the *Book of Changes* (see chapter 8). When he had completed the texts, he lived on a vegetarian diet and prayed to the spirit of the Pole Star; a red rainbow flashed down from the heavens and changed into an inscribed tablet of yellow jade. Other traditions hold that Confucius himself was the Pole Star, representing the god of literature, who had come down to earth.

As death neared, Confucius was such an accomplished sage that he could often tell the future: predicting the outcome of natural events and the futures of some of his students. We are told that, near the end of his life, some hunters in the state of Lu captured a beast and killed it. Confucius was the only person who could correctly identify the beast as a unicorn. He wept and asked aloud why the unicorn had appeared at this time. The unicorn, a sign of a new dynasty, had been killed. This was taken to mean that Confucius understood that the state of Lu would never rise to greatness. In another version of this story, hunters killed a beast they did not recognize. When Confucius saw it, he knew it was a unicorn. He wept to see it dead because a unicorn appears when morality and justice will prevail. The hunters had killed the unicorn, an omen of good government. This was also a portent of Confucius' impending death.

After Confucius' death, some of his students kept a vigil at his grave. They brought trees from their native places to plant. This custom has continued and to this day one finds trees from all over in the Kong family graveyard.

Traditions around these stories and scenes are still recounted and can now be found in books and at tourist sites. For example, in the city of Qufu, which claims to be the birthplace of Confucius, one can be shown the seat where Confucius wrote the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the pavilion where Confucius taught his students, the well that belonged to Confucius' family, and other sites to match these stories.

We can see a number of themes in these stories. First, as with many important figures from the past, Confucius had a special birth, complete with supernatural figures and events. His birth and death are rounded by appearances of unicorns; Confucius' failure to reform the times is

represented by a dead unicorn just before Confucius' own death. Throughout his life, there are signs of Confucius' special status. As he matures, his sagely abilities border on the supernatural. Second, Confucius' abilities, even at a young age, are noted by the wise men of his time. Third, it is clear to some that Confucius is the greatest sage and he gathers around him thousands of students eager to learn from him. Fourth, despite recognition by some of the people of his time, Confucius is not recognized for what he is by any of the rulers. He fails, not through any fault of his own, but because the authorities at the time could not understand his vision. Confucius is the frustrated visionary who is always right, but never listened to. Had he been listened to, history would have been different. Confucius was the "uncrowned king" of the era. He was the Sage who attained the choice of Heaven, but he was, tragically, never given the chance to rule.

It is possible that some of these stories are true. But it is more likely that they were created to honor the Sage. They are charming, just as charming as the story of the three wise men at Jesus' birth, but pious stories of Confucius' life are not things we need to rely on.

Scholarly Versions of Confucius' Life

It is generally agreed that Confucius was born in the village of Zou or Zouyi in the state of Lu, near the modern city of Qufu in Shandong province, in 551 BCE. This would make him an approximate contemporary of the Greek thinker Pythagoras (585–497 BCE). He was named Kong Qiu. As was often the case, Confucius had a second given name, a "style," Zhong Ni. His father, Kong Shu Lianghe, was a well-known military figure in the army of Lu with a reputation for courage and loyalty. Of his mother, little is known as Confucius did not refer to her directly. All we know for certain is that her family name was Yan. His parents may not have been married or it may be that Confucius' mother was a concubine. Confucius' father seems to have separated from his mother, and she died early.

By the time Confucius was born, the state of Lu was besieged by its neighbors and internally divided among three powerful noble families; the hereditary duke was a mere figurehead. One of the three great families, the Ji family, took over the post of chief minister of Lu and from this position of power carried on as if they were royals, even offering sacrifices at Mount Tai – a royal prerogative.

Little is reliably known about Confucius' childhood, though Confucius himself remarked: "I was of lowly status when I was young. That is why I am skilled in many things."²⁸ There is a long tradition that Confucius' immediate family, while of noble lineage, were poor, and lived in genteel poverty.

It is likely that Confucius was a minor noble of a class called “knights” – the lowest rank of the noble class.²⁹ As a member of the nobility, a knight might be able to get one of a number of jobs at court: historian or record keeper, secretary, the tutor of princes or the sons of nobility, the overseer of rituals and music, or the master of ceremonies. By the sixth century BCE knights were part of the groups of professionals who performed funeral, marriage, and sacrificial rituals; they might also find employment as tutors or advisors. The usual translation of “knights” then becomes “scholars” or “bureaucrats.”

These scholar/bureaucrats served as officials in various capacities at the royal Zhou court and in the courts of the independent states. They formed an emerging professional group. To a large extent they blamed extravagant rulers who listened more to friends, family, and shamans than to officials, like them, who knew their job.

One of the reasons we know Confucius was a member of the nobility was that he had an education, possibly in a local school, possibly in the company of other noble boys at a noble house. We know that, because Confucius was skilled in what were called the “six accomplishments.” These were: rites, music, archery, charioteering, the study of history and literature, and the study of mathematics.³⁰ They were noble accomplishments, things a gentleman was expected to be conversant with. We can think of an English gentleman of the nineteenth century, for example, who would have known some Greek and Latin, been able to quote the Bible and Shakespeare, and known how to ride well. Like them, Confucius had the skills and training a man of his class would be expected to have.

In his early adulthood, Confucius visited the neighboring state of Qi (to the northeast of Lu) and spoke to its ruler, Duke Jing. Presumably he was looking for employment in that state. He returned home to Lu just as a noble began a rebellion against the Ji family. Confucius apparently considered joining this rebellion in the hope, he said, of gaining a position of influence in the new government and returning the state of Lu to the glories of the old Zhou dynasty.

The rebellion was unsuccessful and Confucius accepted some minor posts in the government of Lu, but then resigned them. Later commentators say that Confucius was disgusted by the improper behavior he saw in the government.

His resignation left Confucius unemployed and so, in his fifties, he traveled to a number of states over the next dozen years, going first to Wei and then to Song, hoping for employment. As a scholar visiting the court of one of these small states, Confucius would have been welcomed as a guest and given a place to stay and possibly something to cover living expenses for a while. At some point in his stay, the ruler or his ministers would have asked him about his opinion of current affairs or government. Depending

on his advice, the ruler and senior ministers would decide about hiring him. Confucius seems to have been spectacularly unsuccessful in these interviews. Like many of his class, Confucius hoped that his ideas would be accepted by one of the rulers and that he would be given an influential post in government. This did not happen.

In 484 BCE, unable to find a job or to influence rulers, Confucius returned to Lu where he was given what was probably a merely ceremonial position. On the one occasion that Confucius gave advice to the rulers of Lu, his advice was rejected.

Confucius is often credited with establishing the first school – accepting fees from his students in return for his teaching. Confucius taught his students the classical learning that included the things that Confucius himself had learned as a boy and young man: poetry, history, literature, ritual, and music. While he taught traditional subjects, he always interpreted these classical studies in his own way. The education Confucius offered was not merely rote learning nor was it aimed only at making his students employable. Confucius interpreted history, poetry, ritual, and music, teaching them as a foundation for moral behavior and good government, as we will see in chapters 2 and 3.

While Confucius might have been one of the first to make teaching his sole occupation, there is no evidence that he established a formal school. Rather, students, mostly people from the same class of knights or nobility that Confucius belonged to, paid him for training. Confucius himself says that he accepted even the poorest of these men as long as their character and hard work made them good students. It is not clear just where he taught his students. It may be that lessons took place in rooms or courtyards in his home, but there was no school building. Rather than the 3,000 students attributed to him, scholars have identified 110, and, though there may have been more, it is unlikely that there were the thousands the legends speak of.

Confucius' students describe him as talking mainly about *The Book of Poetry*, history, and ritual. In his discussion of poetry, Confucius said, "*The Book of Poetry* has three hundred poems that can be summed up in one sentence: 'Have no evil thoughts.'"³¹ Confucius' son reported that his father had asked him if he had studied *The Book of Poetry*. Confucius said, "If you do not, you will be unable to speak."³²

The kind of speech that Confucius was referring to was quite practical: Confucius argued that poetry had many applications; he said to his students,

My children, why do you not study *The Book of Poetry*? For it inspires thought, increases one's scope, cultivates one's ability to be sociable, and shows one how to express feelings of resentment. At home one learns the

personal duty of serving one's father, and in public the duty of serving one's lord. In addition, one learns the names of birds, beasts, and plants.³³

The reason for Confucius' emphasis on poetry was that quotations from poems were used in diplomatic etiquette, in documents, and in speeches. A cultivated gentleman quoted poems and understood quotations, just as, in earlier times in the West, people quoted the Bible or Shakespeare. The inability to follow poetic references meant that one was low-class and ignorant.

Confucius taught history, but not just as the study of historical facts and dates. History was to be understood as a study in morality: students learned the events of earlier times so as to model themselves on the great founders of the Zhou dynasty, for example.

When Confucius taught his students ritual, he was teaching them the requirements of court ritual: proper greetings for guests, state marriages and funerals, rituals of ancestral veneration. Again, all of this was to prepare his students for jobs in government.

Not only did Confucius teach his students about music, he himself was an avid musician. Throughout the *Analects*, Confucius is described as singing, playing, and talking about music. When Confucius was with a person who was singing and who sang well, he would ask him to repeat the song, while he joined in.³⁴ One of Confucius' students was playing a zither when he replied to Confucius' question about what he had his heart set on. He put down the instrument to answer, "In the third lunar month of the late spring, dressed in our spring clothes, I would like to go with five or six grown men and six or seven boys to bathe in the river Yi. There, in the breeze, we would dance and come home singing." Confucius sighed and said, "I agree. ..." ³⁵ Confucius not only sang, but played as well. He is described as playing the sounding chimes and the zither. Some music moved him deeply: the *Analects* says that when Confucius was in the state of Qi he heard classical music called the *Shao*, and for three months after he was so distracted thinking about it that he did not notice the taste of his food.³⁶

There are some hints of Confucius' personality from the texts especially the *Analects*. His students were not always the sharpest pencils in the box and he was sometimes impatient with them. He said that if he had pointed out one corner of the mat to a student, he expected the student to find the other three; one student was so lacking in understanding that Confucius called him "a boor."³⁷ Confucius said that he was not about to teach anyone who "has not been driven crazy trying to understand a problem or has not gotten into a frenzy trying to put his ideas in words."³⁸ On the other hand, Confucius' heart was broken when his favorite student died young. And Confucius, described so often as an old fogy, said, "We should look upon the younger generation with awe,

because how do we know that those who come after us will not surpass us now?"³⁹

Confucius' students describe him as never having the faults of dogmatism, inflexibility, or egoism.⁴⁰ This seems to have been true. Confucius never claimed to be a sage or even more intelligent than others; he claimed only to love learning and to be quick in seeking out knowledge. This was matched by the eagerness he said he felt to teach what he had learned.

He gave a description of his own inner journey by saying, "At the age of fifteen, I set my mind on study. At the age of thirty, I established myself; at forty, I had no doubts. At fifty I knew the choice of Heaven; at sixty, my ears were tuned to it; and, at seventy, I could follow the desires of my heart without going beyond the bounds of proper behavior."⁴¹ He had finally learned enough that he could match his desires completely to what is proper. In case this sounds a bit pompous, Confucius never stopped criticizing his own behavior and he did not think he was perfect. He once said that "When I fail at cultivating virtue, when I do not put into practice what I have learned, when I know what is right and still cannot follow it, when I am not able to change what is not good within me – these are the things that worry me."⁴² Like all of us, Confucius may have known what was right, but that did not mean he was always able to do it.

Nor was Confucius someone who felt superior about his intelligence or learning. He once said, "Do I possess wisdom? Indeed I do not. There was a fellow who asked me a question and I was completely blank. So, we discussed the issue from beginning to end until we finally sorted it out." Acknowledging that he did not know, Confucius then went on to figure out the answer to the problem.

Confucius was not caught up in worrying about wealth and status – unlike some of his students. As we have seen, he was quite happy to go swimming with his friends and come home singing. He said, "Eating plain food, drinking water, and having one's elbow as a pillow – there is joy in this! Wealth and high position – when gotten improperly – as far as I am concerned are nothing more than passing clouds."⁴³ When asked about his ambitions, Confucius answered, "I would like to bring comfort to older people, to inspire trust in my friends, and to be cherished by the young."⁴⁴ Confucius described himself as a man who would forget to eat when trying to solve a problem, was so joyful that he could forget his worries, and did not notice old age creeping up on him.⁴⁵

Confucius was married and had a son and a daughter, but he seems to have spent little time with his family; from what we see of him in texts like the *Analects*, his attention and affections are aimed at his students and male friends.



Figure 1.3 Confucius' tomb

Confucius died in 479 BCE at the age of 72. There is a story that when Confucius fell gravely ill, his students attended him as if he were a great lord and they were his ministers – serving him with elaborate protocol. They did this because they believed Confucius to be a great sage and his lack of high rank was embarrassing to them. At one point, when Confucius regained consciousness, he saw what they were doing and said, “You’ve been carrying out this make-believe for a while, haven’t you? I have no government ministers, but you are acting as if I do. Who do you think I am going to fool? Can I fool Heaven? Anyway, why wouldn’t I rather die in the arms of my students than in the arms of government ministers? I may not have a grand funeral, but it’s not as if I’m going to die by myself on the side of the road.”⁴⁶ His students had no choice but to carry out his funeral according to his low rank. Confucius’ affectionate reproach in this story gives it the ring of truth.

One wonders what he thought about his life as it came to a close. On the one hand, he had never been able to put his ideas into practice because he had never been able to get a senior government position. Many of his former students who did achieve high government positions seem to have

forgotten most of what he had taught them about proper behavior and good government. He might have thought that his life was in vain and his teachings would be lost. On the other hand, he was a passionate man who believed that the standards he followed were timeless, so he may yet have had hope for the future. The one thing that is certain is that he had no idea that he would be seen as the most influential thinker in Chinese history and that his name would be known in countries he had never imagined.