

Early Confucianism (Featuring [Confucius](#), [Mencius](#), and [Xunzi](#))

This chapter begins our investigation of three classical Chinese philosophies/religions: [Confucianism](#) 孔子思想, 儒家思想, 儒學, Daoism 道教, and Legalism 法家. We examine these three schools of thought (there were others) because they exerted a particularly strong influence on culture and institutions throughout the course of later Chinese history. Confucius was not widely influential during his own lifetime. However, the point of view that he advocated gradually, and with modification, came to dominate Chinese thinking in later centuries. Therefore, we examine Confucianism in somewhat more detail than Daoism or Legalism. This chapter covers the life and ideas of the two major founders of Confucianism, [Confucius](#) 孔子 and [Mencius](#) 孟子. We also contrast Mencius' view of human nature with that of another early Confucian, Xunzi. The next chapter examines select later developments in Confucianism. Chapters Five and Six examine Daoism and Legalism respectively. Let us now turn our attention to the world's most famous Chinese, Confucius.

Life & Career of Confucius

When I first sought to put "Confucius links" here, I discovered that the vast majority of current web sites suffer so many problems with scholarly accuracy that I could not recommend them. A search for "Confucius" will bring up dozens of sites, but only a small number generally accurate. Remember that anyone can put anything up on a web site. More recently, several readers have pointed out a site that is indeed a good resource: [#The Ultimate Confucius Resource Page#](#). Be aware that many of the pages to which this site links spell Chinese terms in Wade-Giles or modified Wade-Giles Romanization, not *pinyin*.

Here is an academic bibliography of [#Confucius and Confucianism#](#).

Traditional Chinese lore contains a wealth of quaint stories describing events in Confucius' life. His mother, for example, is said to have ascended Mt. Niqui 尼丘 to pray for a child. A year later, she gave birth to a child, and his head resembled the shape of the mountain on which she had prayed. She therefore named the child after the mountain. His given name was Qiu and his formal adult name was Zhong Ni 仲尼, the underlined portions deriving from the name of the mountain. While this and the many [*other stories*](#) about Confucius' life add a dash of color to a famous person's biography, modern scholars accept very few of them as based on reliable information.

When we try to reconstruct Confucius' life from reasonably reliable sources, we find that there is not much to go on. In fact, we are not even sure exactly when he was born, and we do not know [*what he looked like.*](#) Most traditional sources put the date at 552 BCE or 551 BCE. He died around the year 479 BCE. His family name was Kong, and to his

admirers he was Master Kong, or, in Chinese, Kong Fuzi 孔夫子. It is from this name that we get the Latinized “Confucius,” thanks to Jesuit priests. At the time of the Ming dynasty, it was Jesuit missionaries who first translated the [Analects](#) (*lunyu* 論語) a book of Confucius’ conversations, into a European language. Today Confucius is still known as Master Kong in Chinese, but usually in the shortened form of Kongzi 孔子.

Let us get a few things straight right away. Confucius never wrote a book or essay, at least none that is extant. He was never rich. He never held an important political office. Although tradition--and most web sites--credit him with extensive “editing” of some venerable classical writings, there is no reliable evidence that he did so. Many late Zhou contemporaries of Confucius probably regarded “the Master” and his followers as positively ridiculous. He seems to have been an antiquarian, deeply immersed in the lore of the past and a misfit in his own time.

Confucius loved learning and was well read. In his lifetime he acquired a vast store of knowledge about ancient ceremonies, customs, and literature. He was a man who delighted in the **study of antiquity**. Early in his life, he was convinced that reinstating the ceremonies and customs of high antiquity--which for Confucius was the early Zhou period--would remedy all the ills of his world. John E. Wills explains as follows: “[Confucius] also saw in the ancients the key to a solution to the political ills of the time. The Zhou founders had devised a harmonious social and political hierarchy, its ranks constantly displayed in distinctions of ceremonial display, forms of greeting, even tombs and coffins. Now [in the late Zhou period] both these ceremonial orders and the realities they represented were being constantly flouted.”⁽¹⁾ Recall that Confucius lived in the age of transition when the old Zhou aristocratic order and its values were fast declining, and increasingly centralized, bureaucratic states were emerging. Confucius himself may not have seen it in these terms, but he was well aware that the institutions, customs, and values of what he considered a glorious past were in decline. At a minimum Confucius wanted to preserve ancient culture. Ideally, he wanted to restore it to its rightful place at the center of society.

According to one recent interpretation, Confucius thought that restoring ancient culture would be relatively simple and could be accomplished in just a few years with determined effort. As he became more knowledgeable of the political intrigue of his day, however, he gradually realized “that there were no quick fixes, no possibilities of the restoration of ancient institutions within a few years.”⁽²⁾

Furthermore, as time went on, Confucius became less interested in the specific details of ancient Zhou ritual practices and more interested in general moral principles that would be applicable anywhere, anytime. Late in his life, in other words, Confucius became a moral idealist. He presented himself as “a would-be minister of any ruler who would employ him, with no power base, no selfish goals, nothing to offer except the fearsome integrity of himself and his teachings, who threatened not political intrigue or a coup but embarrassing and uncompromising criticism.”⁽³⁾ Conversations in

the *Analects* often portray a Confucius who stood firm on moral principles and never failed to criticize anyone, even a king, who failed to live up to those principles.

To what extent, however, was Confucius seriously “a would-be minister” in search of a ruler who would entrust Confucius with putting his ideas into action in government? The traditional interpretation is that Confucius and several followers [#traveled from state to state#](#) searching for a ruler who would employ them. Their high moral principles prevented any such employment, and Confucius returned to his native state of Lu (inland from the Shandong Peninsula, that is, inland from the mouth of the Yellow River) to do the next best thing: teach what he knew to the younger generation. In this traditional interpretation, Confucius regarded himself a failure for not having attained political office.

But it may have been that Confucius and his followers were not frustrated seekers of political office. Instead, perhaps their ideal moral teachings and uncompromising stand served--by design--to keep Confucius and his followers out of the world of politics. Perhaps Confucius and his students loved the study of antiquity and ritual mastery as an end in itself, and the assertion that a return to the values of antiquity would save society was mainly a justification or rationalization for their continued study. This view is a condensed version of the argument Robert Eno makes in a recent re-interpretation of the status of early Confucians. Eno argues: “Our conclusion will be that political idealism acted to shield [early Confucians] from the unpredictable results of practical political activism, and to legitimize the withdrawal of the [Confucian] community into a cult focused on group education and the quest for personal sagehood.”⁽⁴⁾ In this view, Confucius and his followers would have been something like the present-day [Society for Creative Anachronism](#) and other groups that try to replicate the living conditions of some past time and place. Confucius and his students [#practiced ancient ceremonies.#](#) chanted ancient songs and poems, [#played ancient music.#](#) wore ancient clothing styles, and may even have cultivated a style of speaking that they thought was characteristic of the early Zhou period. Imagine trying to speak the English--or whatever your native language may be--of 500 years ago.

Eno argues well for his interpretation. If he is correct, Confucius and his followers were not really political failures because their whole point was to avoid the politics of their day and delight in antiquarian learning. On the other hand, if the older interpretation is correct, Confucius and his followers were indeed political failures, at least in their own lifetimes, because they could not convince any significant power holder to give their program a try. In any event we know that:

- Confucius and his followers had no major impact on the politics *of their own time*;
- They nevertheless articulated a political theory based on ancient ritual practice;
- Educated Chinese *during the Han dynasty and later* began to take this political theory seriously.

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Confucius lived a modest life surrounded by a group of like-minded followers, whom we might call students or associates. Some of these followers apparently lived in or near Confucius' residence; others stopped by when they could. Confucius probably made a living working as a minor clerical official in charge of keeping records and perhaps by some of the various other odd jobs that would have been available to a highly literate person. At times he may have held minor advisory office in the government of his home state of Lu, and he went out on a diplomatic mission on behalf of Lu at least once. As his teaching activities grew, his followers also contributed to his support. Confucius enjoyed modest fame in his locale as an expert on ritual matters and ancient lore. Although one would not become rich or powerful through such knowledge, Confucius did see important visitors from time to time who came to ask his advice about ancient cultural forms. As we will see in detail later in this chapter, ritual was and is an important aspect of political practice and legitimization in premodern China. In his travels, Confucius occasionally met with heads of state. He was not insignificant or unknown in his day, but from his actual accomplishments while he was alive, his rise to fame and glory in the minds of later generations of Chinese would have been difficult to predict.

Confucius' Thought

Confucius' ideas covered such a wide range that it is impossible to deal with them all in a brief introduction. Therefore, here we present only a few of the most important points. We begin with **Confucius' understanding of history** and the notion of **siwen** 斯文, which we might translate initially as "**the cultural tradition.**" Like many other early Chinese thinkers, Confucius thought that human beings and their civilization had emerged from a past in which people lived in a primitive state of nature just like the other animals. As time went on, humans created social institutions such as marriage and the family. They created social norms and systems of government, as well as music, art, and literature. They developed tools and techniques of settled agriculture. Most important, humans created (or discovered) moral values and principles. These and many other items constituted human civilization and culture. This distinctly human culture is what distinguished people from the other animals, and, for Confucius at least, was highly desirable. Confucius and his followers had a deep love of human culture and institutions, which is why they studied the ceremonies and other cultural lore of antiquity.

Many interpretations of Confucius' thought take this love of antiquity and conclude from it that he thought that human civilization was in decline. This view is partially accurate. Confucius regarded the time in which he lived as a temporary setback in the progression of human civilization. In his view, society had declined from its peak of excellence in the early Zhou period. Roger T. Ames explains:

For Confucius, the early Western Zhou period marks a high point in the evolution of Chinese society. Unfortunately, however, this high point was short-lived. Having achieved the golden age of early Zhou, people were gradually deflected

from the Way by growing political strife. By the end of Western Zhou, the political institutions had been drained of substance and the Zhou kings had become puppets manipulated by ambitious feudal lords. In the process of degeneration, the glory that had been the early Zhou culture was divested of its underlying moral content; only the name and the ceremonial shell remained intact. In response to this process of spiraling decline, Confucius advocated a return to the Way of Zhou and a revival of the fertile and substantial culture which had fostered this golden age.⁽⁵⁾

It is in this sense that Confucius' view of history, and his teachings in general, have a strong *backward-looking component*.

Confucius, however, did not seek simply to reinstate the past, nor did he see the general course of human history as a downward spiral. Human history in its broad outline was an upward progression from the primitive state of nature to the sophisticated cultural forms of the early Zhou. He saw the late Zhou slump as a temporary aberration. Once human society returns to the proper path, we would expect cultural progress to resume. Ultimately, therefore, Confucius sought to *improve on* the past, not simply return to it. Returning to the old Zhou ways was simply a necessary step to get the derailed train of cultural progress back on its track.

Confucius had a high regard for certain ancient figures whom he saw as taking the first steps in lifting humans out of their primitive state of nature. Three of these ancient cultural pioneers of whom Confucius spoke were the pre-Xia, mythical sage kings [Yao](#) 帝堯, [Shun](#) 大舜, and [Yu](#) 大禹. There is no hard evidence that these three figures really existed in the flesh, but Confucius and later generations of educated Chinese believed they did. It was not the case that Confucius regarded the culture obtaining in the age of these sage kings as superior to that of later ages. On the contrary, although what Yao, Shun and Yu accomplished was great, later generations built on those accomplishments and made them even better. Xia culture built on the accomplishments of the sage kings; Shang culture refined human civilization even further. The Xia and Shang dynasties both had their periods of decline, Confucius thought, but on the whole they advanced the development of the cultural tradition started by the ancient sage kings. The Zhou dynasty, at least in its early years, was better still. "The culture of the Zhou is resplendent," said Confucius, "having had before it the examples of the two previous dynasties. I am for the Zhou!" A major reason for the excellence of early Zhou culture, in other words, was that its leaders--King Wen, King Wu, and the Duke of Zhou--took the best of Xia and Shang culture and combined it with their own creations to form an even better culture. Confucius thought that "culture--the social refinements developed primarily to encourage and articulate proper moral feelings" was "cumulative and progressive."⁽⁶⁾ In this important respect, therefore, he was a *forward-looking* thinker. (Note: be sure to compare Confucius' view of history with the classical Daoist and Legalist views in the following chapters.) Study [*this diagram.*](#)

Notice two things at this point. First, Confucius regarded *examples* as terribly important for human development. We learn from the examples of those who have come before us. Second, because past examples were so important, the first order of business for Confucius and his followers was *preservation of the inherited cultural tradition*. The term *siwen* 斯文 is comprised of the element “this” 斯 plus “culture” 文. On the surface, therefore, the term seems of no great importance. In Confucius’ usage, however, it had special significance: “With King Wen dead, is not *this cultural tradition* [*siwen*] invested here in me? If Heaven intends that *this cultural tradition* be destroyed, those who come after me will not partake of it. If Heaven does not intend that *this cultural tradition* be destroyed, what can the men of Kuang possibly do to me?” Confucius allegedly uttered this statement when an [#angry mob had surrounded him#](#) and his band of followers in Kuang, after mistaking them for followers of a military adventurer who had previously raided the area. We see from this statement that Confucius regarded the preservation of the culture of King Wen--early Zhou culture including all previous cultures that had gone into it--as his Heavenly (i.e., “*tian-ly*”) charge. The term *siwen* may be rendered into English in several ways, such as “This Culture of Ours” (Peter K. Bol), “This Literary Heritage” (John E. Wills), “the cultural tradition,” “the accumulated cultural legacy,” and so forth. The idea of *siwen* and its preservation is a cornerstone of Confucius’ teachings and practice.

In their attempt to preserve early Zhou culture, Confucius and his associates pursued personal cultivation and training. This training consisted in the practice of ancient ceremonies, the chanting of ancient poems, practicing music, reading books, and discussion and debate. The goal of this training was not only preservation of the cultural tradition but also moral perfection. For Confucius, cultural perfection and moral perfection were closely interconnected (recall Ames’ definition of culture for Confucius as “the social refinements developed primarily to encourage and articulate proper moral feelings”). Confucius called the process and pursuit of moral and cultural excellence [*“the Way”*](#) (*dao* 道). He regarded this Way as universally applicable to all humans. Not everyone chose to follow the Way, he lamented, but anyone anywhere could and should.

Confucius’ Way was *human-centered*. Although Confucius would almost certainly have agreed that the Way is part of the workings of nature, “It is humans that extend the Way,” he said, “not the Way that extends humans.” Because humans must *make* the Way what it is, it can be a difficult path to walk. “The superior person must be strong and resolute,” pointed out one of Confucius’ leading followers, “for his burden is heavy and the Way is long. He takes authoritative humanity as his burden. Is that not heavy? Only with death does the road come to an end. Is that not long?” Confucius’ Way was not easy. Once a student complained about its difficulty saying, “It is not that I dislike your Way, but rather that my strength gives out.” The student, in other words, was complaining that the Master’s Way was too difficult. Confucius rebuked him saying, “Someone whose strength gives out collapses along the road. In your case, you set limits beforehand.” Confucius had little sympathy for whiners. [Yan Hui](#) 顏回, Confucius’

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best student, also saw the Way as a great challenge, though in the best sense of the word:

The more I look up at [the Way] the higher it appears. The more I dig into it the harder it becomes. I see it before me. Suddenly it is behind me. The Master is skilled at leading someone on step by step. He broadens me with culture and brings me back to what is essential via ceremonial forms. I cannot give up even if I wanted to to so. Having done all I can, however, [the Way] seems to soar clear above me, and I have no means to go after it however much I may want to pursue it.

Moral excellence, in other words, was an elusive goal. There was always room for improvement. Pursuit of the Way was well worth the great effort involved, for this pursuit is what makes life truly human and worthwhile. “One who hears of the Way in the morning,” said Confucius, “can die content in the evening.”

Being a human-centered Way, there was no other-worldly reward for following it. Pursuit of the Way, difficult though it may be, was its own reward. There was no heaven after death or a better life to be reborn into for those who followed the Master’s Way. For Confucius, constant self-improvement through one’s own effort was so worthwhile that a person would naturally want to do it. After death, who knows? Who can know? There is so much to learn during life that we should focus our attention on what is within our power to change.

Let us consider the major steps along Confucius’ Way. For him, the Way was *rooted in the family.* The Way grew from the foundation of the interaction between children, parents, siblings and other relatives. It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the family in Confucius’ teaching, or in Chinese culture generally, past or present. “The superior person devotes his efforts to the roots,” said one of Confucius’ followers, “for once the roots are established, the Way will grow therefrom. Being a good son and an obedient young man is the root of one’s character.”

For Confucius, one acquired moral perfection through interaction with others, not through private meditation, a hermit’s life, or other solitary pursuits. The bond between infant and child was a person’s first interaction with others. The family was the first and most important arena in which a person begins to develop his or her potential. It was here that one would first experience the range of basic emotions and learn the most basic lessons of life. The term *xiao* 孝 refers to proper family relations,

the very important complex of values and customs referred to by the awkward phrase ‘filial piety,’ which involved the obedience of young people to their parents, kind and generous care of aged parents, prolonged and heartfelt mourning after their deaths, and reverence for earlier ancestors in the male line. Filial piety sometimes is thought of as a repressive and unnatural system, and it

certainly produced some bizarre phenomena in later centuries, but in the view of it that Confucius helped to shape, it was a life-enhancing expression of natural emotions.⁽⁷⁾

Filial piety--genuine, heartfelt respect, care, and obedience toward parents and, by extension, ancestors--was the most basic Confucian moral value. Here is a useful visual metaphor for [*xiao as the root of Confucius' Way.*](#)

As Confucianism took on a more authoritarian character from Han times onward, so, too, did filial piety. Moralists placed increasing emphasis on duty, sacrifice and obligation. Strange tales of self-sacrificing filial sons and daughters served as edifying examples for the young. [#Twenty-four such tales#](#) became especially famous and influential--read through at least one or two of them [*here.*](#) From the Han dynasty onward, filial piety became written into Chinese laws (you would not even want to think about the penalty for killing a parent!). The rigid way that later generations of Chinese interpreted filial piety would probably have shocked Confucius. For him, filial piety was as much a joy as a duty. In response to a follower's assertion that one year of mourning for deceased parents (instead of the customary three) would be sufficient, the Master said, "How unfeeling he is. A child ceases to be nursed by his parents only when he is three years old. . . . Was he not given three years' love by his parents?" Who would not want to do all one could for his or her parents?

Within the family, a child first bonds with parents. He or she then begins to interact with siblings and other immediate family members. Later, the child learns to interact more extensively with distant relatives. In this context, the child would learn such values as responsibility and deference through lived experience, and these values would become almost second nature. Extrapolating from these family relations, a young person would begin to interact with neighbors and the local community. S/he would continue to extend this network of personal relations and through it achieve ever greater personal growth and moral development. At the same time, the interaction with others should ideally help them to grow and develop as well. Those who have achieved a high degree of moral excellence should serve in government, which would enhance the harmony of society as a whole. For Confucius, the ideal human community was bound together in a firm but flexible network of interpersonal relationships. *That which regulates these relationships and makes them possible* is called *li* 禮. In Confucius' ideal society, *li* governs every aspect of interpersonal relations, including government. Because *li* derives from relationships within the family, an ideal society is like a family writ large. *Li*, in other words, is the *means* by which the root value of filial piety grows and develops into a fully-developed plant (i.e., a morally superior person)--to use a [*botanical metaphor.*](#)

The word *li* is difficult to translate into English because it encompasses such a wide range of phenomena. *Li* includes ritualized conduct of all types, from routine daily greetings to major ceremonies such as marriages and funerals. The term also includes written and unwritten social and behavioral norms. Depending on the context, it might

be translated with such words as rites, rituals, ceremony, propriety, decorum, courtesy, social norms, rules of conduct, et cetera. Because of the lack of a good English equivalent, we use the Chinese term when referring to *li* in a general way.

Notice one thing all of the possible translations listed above have in common: they all indicate something external and visible. We can see ceremonies, acts of courtesy, or behavior based on social norms. We can participate directly in these things in our daily life. *Li*, then, is the concrete, external embodiment of social and moral values. To say that *li* is primarily external, however, is not to say that it is unconnected with internal feelings, attitudes and thoughts. On the contrary, *li* is the primary means of learning and internalizing proper feelings, attitudes and thoughts by enacting them in bodily performance.

Let us consider a specific example of *li* to clarify this point: rites for the veneration of ancestors ([*simple illustration*](#)). Imagine a young child being brought before the tablets bearing the names of his ancestors going back hundreds of years. Family members tell him to keep quiet while his parents and older siblings perform a ritual of veneration in front of the tablets. At first, the young child finds little meaning in this activity. He passively watches others and does not understand what they are doing. As he grows, parents and others explain the significance of the rites and the child participates more actively. Ancestral and other rites help socialize the child and bind the family together. The rites encourage an attitude of reverence. They convey a sense of continuity. They teach lessons about filial piety and death. Because boys/men and girls/women will have different roles to play in such rites, they also reinforce gender-based roles. Ancestral rites may engender feelings of responsibility as the child nears adulthood. If he succeeds in passing the civil service exams (discussed in a later chapter), for example, he can face his ancestors with pride. He knows that when he dies, future generations will keep his memory alive and venerate his accomplishments. *Li*, in other words, promotes personal moral development and social harmony. Notice that there is an important *educational and socializing function* associated with *li*.

Another aspect of *li* is its function of providing a way of expressing powerful feelings and emotions. All humans experience love, joy, grief, lust, anger, and the like. If expressed inappropriately, such feelings can harm both individual and society. Embodied in proper external forms (*li*), however, this emotional energy can enhance the beauty and poignancy of life while simultaneously contributing to individual growth and social harmony. *Li*, if properly designed, should aid all people in realizing their fullest potential [*within the matrix of society.*](#) To summarize, *li* includes the following aspects:

- the means for interacting harmoniously with others;
- the primary means of personal moral development;
- a means of education and socialization;
- (as we shall see) the primary means of effective governing.

Experience has shown that it is Confucius' conception of *li*, more than any other idea, that is most difficult for students to understand. At first glance this might seem strange, since all societies have ritualized conduct embodying most of the functions listed above. The difficulty seems to come not from understanding any particular part of *li*, but from understanding its broader role in Confucius' conception of personal development and in creating an ideal society. In present-day U.S. society, ritualized conduct is far less important than in Confucius' world-view. In many "Western" forms of social thinking, the individual exists apart from society, and it is *law*, not ritualized conduct, which is the primary means of integrating the individual with society to achieve overall harmony. For Confucius, however, *li*, not law, should be the determinant of our every action. "Do not look but in accord with *li*; do not listen but in accord with *li*; do not move but in accord with *li*," he told his followers. Even in present-day, China, Taiwan and other parts of East Asia, it is hard to exaggerate the importance of ritualized conduct in the functioning of society. It is the importance, centrality, and pervasiveness of *li* in Confucian thinking that many students from the United States find difficult to comprehend.

Li, at least for Confucius, was a human creation. We would expect him to think this way, considering his human-centered conception of the Way. *Li* should be in harmony with the workings of nature, he would have said, but humans create *li*, in part to transcend the baser aspects of the natural world. Returning to the idea of *siwen*, it was the cultural achievements of Yao, Shun, Yu, and the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties that Confucius admired. For example, Confucius found music attributed to Yao, which he once had the opportunity to hear, so moving that he forgot to eat. The music of Yao, and all such other cultural achievements, were *li*. On a broad scale, these *li* served to civilize humans and advance culture. Although *li* appear rigid and although one first learns *li* by rote, Confucius *did not* conceive of *li* or society in general as static and unchanging.

We can understand the dynamic aspect of Confucius' ideas by examining the **ideal process of a person's development**. Remember that this process never takes place in isolation; it is always interwoven with the rest of society. In the early stages of one's development, the goal is simply to learn large portions of the inherited cultural tradition (*siwen*) by rote. Memorizing poems and songs, performing ceremonies repeatedly until the body and mind have memorized all the steps, and following the course of study set out by a teacher are examples of the learning that would take place at this initial stage. This initial stage may take a long time, for there is much to learn.

After memorizing the external forms of culture, one gradually inquires more deeply into it. The interest slowly shifts from *what* to *why*. One starts to understand the spirit of those poems lodged in the brain through earlier memorization and the reason for bowing deeply to one's opponent at the start of an archery contest. At this second stage, a person shifts to a more active form of intellectual inquiry. Confucius expected his students to pursue learning actively:

I will not teach someone who is not driven to frustration by their own lack of mastery. I will not teach someone who is not bothered by his inability clearly to put into words what he knows. If I show someone one corner of a square and he does not find the other three on his own, I do not repeat the lesson.

As the years go by, one gradually moves from this second stage of active learning into a third stage of creative application. Confucius well understood that the world is constantly changing. One does not study the past simply to reproduce an exact copy of it in all its particulars in the present. While we should work to continue the best of past traditions, modifications will also inevitably be necessary. It was the gradual modification and improvement of past cultural accomplishments, thought Confucius, that led to the glory of the early Zhou.

A person who has thoroughly mastered both the external forms of the cultural tradition and the principles underlying those forms might then modify them. Because *li* exist to foster personal development and social harmony, we should modify them should the resulting change better enable *li* to function as intended. Only advanced persons, however, have the ability properly to make such modifications. Mastery of the first two stages would confer on someone the *authority* to *author* his or her own version of the cultural tradition. Many would probably die before reaching this third stage, but it should be everyone's goal.

>>Pause now to [*test your understanding*](#) of the previous few paragraphs.<<

This process may be easier to understand if we consider any endeavor that requires a high degree of skill and training. A great painter, for example, would have started with the most simple form of rote imitation, drawing lines, practicing basic shading techniques, learning the rudiments of perspective, and so forth. Gradually, as skill in the basics improves, the aspiring painter imitates more complex models. Farther along s/he probes the underlying principles of painting in different styles. After time spent at this stage, the painter is able to draw on the accomplishments and techniques of previous artists, perhaps combining different styles or even coming up with something entirely unique. At this last stage, the painter makes his or her unique mark on the cultural tradition and becomes a model for others to study. This same, process, of course, applies to mastery of a sport, a body of complex knowledge, and many other things.

There are several terms that Confucius and later Confucians used to indicate differing [*degrees of personal accomplishment.*](#) Here we examine only a few. The word *de* 德 may be translated as “moral potency” or “**moral authority**” as a technical term in Confucius’ thought. Moral authority is something that one possesses to a greater or lesser degree, based on the process of personal development described above. Remember that culture and morality are thoroughly intertwined in Confucius’ thought. Most people have little or no moral authority. These are the masses of “**inferior people**” (literally, the “small people,” *xiaoren* 小人). This lack of moral authority is not inherent or

inborn--all people have the potential to become great, thought Confucius.⁽⁸⁾ Those with a high degree of moral authority are “**superior people**” (*junzi* 君子). A superior person would be at an advanced level of the second stage of personal development and beginning to move into the third. Superior people are *models* for others to emulate, and their very presence in society makes it better. Recall the importance of modeling in the process of personal and social advancement. And how would a model person express his/her moral/cultural excellence? That’s right, through *li*.

Those who have made major contributions to the cultural tradition, that is, those who are the creators of *siwen*, are “**sages**” (*shengren* 聖人). A sage is the ultimate person. The sage’s moral authority would be so profound as to be god-like. A sage would possess the power of Heaven. Confucius denied that he was a sage or that he had ever encountered one. Achieving sagehood took on the fervor of a religious crusade for many later Confucians, and many lamented their inability to reach such lofty heights of personal development. Despite Confucius’ own denials, later generations of Chinese intellectuals usually regarded him as a sage. In fact, the phrase “the sage” in a classical Chinese document would be a reference to Confucius unless otherwise specified. Many Chinese intellectuals regarded Confucius as the last in a line of sages that stretched back into the mythical past.

There is one final term, *ren* 仁 (“authoritative humanity”).⁽⁹⁾ This term gives students in introductory courses much grief, and scholars of Confucianism have grappled with it at length as well. *Ren* was an extremely important concept for Confucius, but we need not worry about its fine points in this course. Simply put, “authoritative humanity” is the state of having a sufficiently high degree of moral authority that one becomes a model for others and positively influences their development.

Confucius based his conception of **ideal government** on *li* and the idea of a cultural tradition (*siwen*) that embodies ideal moral principles. At different times in the past, thought Confucius, good government prevailed and people lived in a state of harmony. The reason for this situation was that the ruler was a sage, or at least a superior person. “The moral authority of the superior person,” he said, “is like the wind; that of the inferior person is like the grass.” In other words, a superior person at the top of society will have a beneficial effect on all those below, just as the wind bends the grass in its own direction. Moral authority flowed from the top down in Confucian thinking, so the person of the emperor and his moral state was terribly important: “If government were to derive from moral authority, the people would follow the ruler just as the many stars take their place in the heavens around the stationary pole star.” In other words, a single well-placed superior person or sage would turn all of society around for the better.

How would this superior person-as-king make his moral authority manifest? You can probably make a good guess by now: [*through ritualized behavior \(li\)*](#). The key to good government, in other words, was good *li*: “If one can govern a state by carrying out *li* and showing deference, what troubles will he have in public life? If he is unable to

rule by carrying out *li* and showing deference, what good are *li* to him?” Unrealistic as it may sound to many in today’s world, good government for Confucius was mainly a matter of [*returning to the correct li.*](#) Were a ruler to make his moral authority manifest in this way, it would transform society into a big, harmonious family. We will examine other aspects of the intersection of government and ritual in a later chapter in the context of Chinese political theory and the roles of the emperor. ([*Test your ability*](#) to explain the classical Confucian view of good government.)

The [*family analogy*](#) was an integral part of Confucius’ conception of government. The ruler should look after his subjects with the same benevolence, concern and authority as parents looking after their children. The purpose of government, said Confucius, was improving the welfare of society as a whole. The classical Confucian conception of government bears some resemblance to modern-day socialism. It bears little or no resemblance most forms of democracy. The best term to describe Confucian government is probably “paternalism.” The ruler should be like a father to his people. He should make decisions for their benefit and instruct them in how to live their lives. His superior moral authority authorizes him to fulfill this role. Rulers lacking this superior moral authority, for example those who taxed the people heavily for their personal gain, were the objects of Confucius’ criticism. They were not acting as rulers properly should. We will see this ruler-as-father metaphor again in the context of studying classical Chinese political theory and in the context of Confucianism in the Song dynasty.

Confucianism was never able to provide a workable procedure for dealing with rulers lacking in moral virtue. The ideal Confucian response to such a ruler would be for his ministers to [remonstrate](#) with him fearlessly in the hope that he would see the wrong in his actions and correct them. But remonstrance was not binding on the ruler, and few rulers tolerated significant criticism of their actions by underlings. Although [*courageous remonstrance*](#) was a common theme in Confucian-inspired Chinese art, in real life, it was an exceedingly rare practice.

The Importance of Music

One final point about personal moral cultivation, *li*, and governing is the tremendous [*importance of music*](#) in Confucius’ thought. Music, both instrumental and vocal (including sung poems), assisted greatly in harmonizing one’s self with the good moral values inherent in the cosmic order. The study and performance of music, therefore, was a major part of Confucius’ program of self cultivation, and music was also an important part of *li* at all levels. However, not just any music would work. Indeed, some forms of music would be positively harmful, bringing out improper sensations in the performers and/or listeners. In Confucius’ day, the states of Zheng and Wei were infamous for modern, licentious music played for entertainment of the listener. As you might expect, Confucius championed certain archaic forms of music, which he regarded as having been passed down from the ancient sage kings.

Confucius and later Chinese moralists acknowledged the power of music to transform people and societies. Properly, selected played and properly listened to, music was morally uplifting. But all too often, music had the opposite effect. The problem, of course, is that music can be enjoyable, and it can suggest other activities that might be enjoyable, if not always morally upright. Shane McCausland points out that the two states of Zheng and Wei had become notorious for their alleged cultural degeneracy by the end of the Zhou era:

In the classical period, the names of these two states were even bywords for vulgar and degenerate arts in general, and classical texts are peppered with scornful references to their music. The thinker Xunzi complained that 'seductive looks and the songs of Zheng and Wei cause the heart to grow licentious'. The *Book of Music* (*Yue ji*) says that 'the tones of Zhen and Wei are tones in a world of chaos and compare to the dilatory ways of the people'. In the same book, a pupil of the sage Confucius, Zixia, remarks: 'Zheng tones are of a mind that tends towards doting excess and licentiousness . . . Those of Wei are of a mind rushed and vexed.' (Shane McCausland, *First Masterpiece of Chinese Painting: The Admonitions Scroll* [New York: George Braziller, 2003], p. 45.)

Here is an interesting example of a visual image portraying the power of music to disrupt ideal society. According to McCausland:

Belief in the power of music to precipitate virtue or debauchery and hence transform or cause dissipation in society, underlay the official recasting of 'ancient' instruments It also left its mark in the cultural record in other ways, and example being the celebrated painting attributed to the Song artist Gu Hongzhong entitled **The Night Revels of Han Xizai.** . . . This picture-scroll is said to be a record of the nightly entertainment and vice that took place at the house of Han Xizai, a prominent statesman and adviser to the emperor, made by a painter sent as a spy. In four pictorial movements the painting clearly illustrates how musical entertainment could be the prelude to more amorous pursuits. This is hinted at from the start, where, lying among the ruffled blankets of the bedchamber, we see the head and neck of a stringed instrument. (McCausland, *The Admonitions Scroll*, p.47.)

Music remained an integral component of official *li* throughout all the dynasties, and music became an essential element in the formal education of Chinese elites until the twentieth century. At the same time, however, Chinese elites typically remained suspicious of the disruptive power of popular music. Entertainment was generally regarded as a base occupation, and laws until the 18th century permitted members of "music households" to engage in prostitution legally owing to their lowly status. Music was integrally associated with both the loftiest realms of society and the lowest.

Classical Confucian views of music influenced other parts of East Asia such as Korea and Japan. Here, for example, is a statement by a prominent Japanese official of the twelfth century: "It is a custom of China to watch dance and listen to music to learn whether the country is well administered or in disarray. There is a dance called *shirabyōshi* [白拍子] in our society. Its music is in the key of *shō* among the five keys; this key indicates the ruin of the country." (Quoted in Janet R. Goodwin, *Selling Songs and Smiles: The Sex Trade in Heian and Kamakura Japan* [Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007], p. 130.) We examine formal court music in more detail in a later chapter. For more on *shirabyōshi* in medieval Japan, take HIST 480.

Read the *Analects*

Before moving on to Mencius, spend some time studying the following excerpts from the *Analects*. As you read them, keep in mind the above material on Confucius' life and teachings. If you want to read the whole thing, [#here is one English translation#](#), or [#another edition.#](#)

Topic: Study and Self Improvement

The Master said, "The young should practice filial piety when at home and deference to their elders when they go out. They should behave with prudence and never fail to put their words into action. Treat everyone you meet with kindness and seek out people of accomplished virtue with which to interact. After putting these things into practice, should a person have time and energy left over, it should be spent studying books."

Zi Xia said, "If someone seeks wisdom with the same drive that most seek sexual pleasure, exhausts himself in serving his parents, offers himself up in the service of his ruler, and is always truthful in interacting with friends, although it can be said that he lacks formal [book] learning, I would certainly call him learned."

The Master said, "When I encounter a wise person, I am encouraged to become similarly wise. When I encounter an unwise person, I reflect on myself [to see if I, too, have similar undesirable traits]."

The Master Said, "When in the presence of two others, they are both my teacher. I select the one who is my [moral] superior and imitate his goodness. I select the one with undesirable qualities and strive to avoid them."

The Master said, "To make a mistake and fail to correct it is truly to make a mistake."

Zi Xia said, "When the inferior person makes a mistake, he always tries to cover it up."

Zi Gong said, “When the superior person errs, it is like an eclipse of the sun and moon. The error is there for all the world to see. By striving without hesitation to correct the error, he wins the admiration of everyone.”

The Master said, “You! [a person’s name] I’ll let you in on something. For someone to realize just what it is that he knows and just what it is that he does not know is true knowledge.”

The Master Said, “One must study single-mindedly, as if fearful of losing something that is getting farther and farther away.”

The Master said, “I will not teach those not driven to frustration by their own lack of mastery. I will not teach someone who is not bothered by his inability clearly to put into words what he knows. If I show someone one corner of a square and he does not find the other three on his own, I do not repeat the lesson.”

The Master said, “There is nothing I can do for someone who does not struggle to solve vexing problems, saying ‘How shall I do it? How shall I do it?’”

The Master said, “To study [by rote] without thinking is to be in darkness. To think without disciplined study is dangerous.”

The Master said, “I once went all day without food and stayed up all night and contemplated. It was of no benefit. It would have been better to have spent the time studying.”

Ran Qiu said, “It’s not that your way is without appeal. It’s just that my strength is insufficient [to follow it].” The Master said, “One whose strength is insufficient collapses in the middle of the street. You set limits on yourself beforehand.”

The Master said, “Even as powerful a force as the three armies can be defeated by removing its leader. But the determined will of a single person can never be defeated.”

The Master said, “The basic natures (*benxing*) of all people are similar [at birth], but become increasingly diverse through socialization.”

The Master said, “The ancients studied to improve themselves. People of today study to be recognized by others.”

Topic: The Superior Person

The Master said, “The superior person seeks [understanding, direction, responsibility, etc.] within himself, whereas the inferior person seeks it in others.”

“When one’s inner substance is stronger than his outer refinement, he appears rustic and unsophisticated. When the outer refinement is stronger than inner substance, one is but a petty scribe. The superior person is one whose inner substance and outer refinement are properly balanced.”

The Master said, “If the superior person studies widely and then incorporates the knowledge thus obtained into concrete form via *li*, he will never stray from the proper Way.”

The Master said, “To fail to know destiny is to not be a superior person. To fail to know *li* is to be unable to take one’s [proper] stand [in society]. To fail to listen to others’ words is to not know other people.”

The Master said, “When the superior person is of high rank, he is never arrogant. In study he is not rigid. He values loyalty and trustworthiness and will not befriend those inferior to himself. Should he err, he corrects the mistake without fear.”

The Master said, “The superior person seeks not to eat his fill nor to live in a secure dwelling. He promptly performs his duty and is circumspect in his speech. He seeks out those who follow the Way to correct himself and is a lover of learning.”

The Master said, “Someone who [claims to be] in pursuit of the Way and is [nevertheless] ashamed of coarse food and poor clothing is not worth talking with.”

The Master said, “There is joy to be found in simple food, a drink of water, and a bent arm for a pillow. Fame and fortune improperly acquired mean as much to me as the clouds floating overhead.”

The Master said, “The superior person does not favor others simply because of their clever words, nor does he reject others simply because of their lack of eloquence.”

The Master said, “The superior person gets along well with others even while disagreeing with them. The inferior person rubs people the wrong way even while seeming to be in agreement.”

The Master said, “There are three things of which the superior person should be wary. When young, because the vital force in the blood is unsettled, he must be on guard against sexual passion. When mature, because the vital force in the blood is at its strongest, he must guard against conflict with others. When he reaches old age, because the vital force in the blood has weakened, he must be on guard against a craving for material possessions.”

Topic: Moral Authority (*De*), Authoritative Humanity (*Ren*) & Associated Virtues

The Master said, “Those with moral authority are not recluses. They inevitably interact with the people around them.”

Zi You asked about filial piety. The Master said, “These days it seems that people regard filial piety as simply providing one’s parents with food. But even dogs and horses are provided with food. If true reverence is lacking, what is the difference?”

The Master said, “Never fail to know the age of your parents. On the one hand it is cause for joy; on the other it is cause for alarm.”

Ye Gong said to Confucius, “In my village there is a man who is so upright that he testified against his father when the latter stole a sheep.” Confucius said, “The upright people of my village are entirely different. A father would cover up [such matters] for the sake of his son, and a son would do so for the sake of his father. This is what it means to be upright.”

The Master said, “San [Ceng Zi]! There is a single thread running through my Way.” Ceng Zi replied, “Indeed,” and the Master left the room. A student asked, “What did he mean?” Ceng Zi said, “The Master’s Way consists in doing one’s best (*zhong*) and using one’s self as a measure by which to know others (*shu*).”

Zi Gong asked, “Is there one word by which one can properly live his entire life?” The Master answered, “I suppose it would be *shu* [using one’s self as a measure by which to know others]. Do not do unto others what you would not want them to do unto you.”

The Master said, “Authoritative humanity (*ren*) is unlikely to be found among glib talkers with ingratiating faces.”

The Master said, “A simple, plain-talking person with an iron will and strong determination is close to authoritative humanity.”

The Master said, “Fortune and fame is what everyone desires, but if their acquisition means abandoning the Way, stick with the Way and forget [fortune and fame]. Poverty and low status are what all people seek to avoid, but if such avoidance means abandoning the Way, stick with the Way and seek not to avoid [poverty and low status]. How is a [so-called] ‘superior person’ who abandons authoritative humanity worthy of the name? The superior person no more abandons authoritative humanity than he abandons food and drink. No matter how frenzied and chaotic the situation may be, the superior person never departs from authoritative humanity. No matter how dangerous a crisis may be, he never departs from authoritative humanity.”

Zi Gong asked, “If one were able to benefit the common people on a vast scale and save the masses, what do you think? Could he be described as an authoritative person?” The Master answered, “Why stop at ‘authoritative’? Such a person is certainly a sage. Even Yao and Shun were probably not able to do this much. The authoritative person establishes himself out of a desire to establish others. He wants to make progress to help others progress. The way to enact authoritative humanity is to make one’s self a model for others.”

Zi Zhang asked Confucius about authoritative humanity. Confucius said, “Authoritative humanity is the ability to put five things into practice throughout the world.” “What are these?” [Zi Zhang] asked. The Master replied, “Circumspection, generosity, trustworthiness, diligence, and wisdom. With circumspection there will be no scorn. Generosity will benefit the common people. Trustworthiness will make people reliable. Diligence will lead to great accomplishments, and wisdom will make people worth employing [as ministers of state].”

Topic: Government

The Master said, “If governing derives from moral authority, the people would follow the ruler just as the many stars take their place in the heavens around the stationary pole star.”

The Master said, “By governing through orders and guiding them with punishments, the people will simply find ways to get around the law and will have no sense of shame. By governing through moral authority and guiding them with *li*, the common people will have a proper sense of shame and will reform themselves.”

[The high minister] Li Kangzi asked Confucius about government: “What do you think about promoting those who follow the Way by killing those who act contrary to the Way?” Confucius replied: “In governing, what possible use is there for killing? If you yourself desire what is good, the people will be good. The moral authority of the superior person is the wind. The virtue of the inferior person is the grass. If the grass is blown by this wind it will certainly bend.”

Li Kangzi asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, “*Zheng* (governing) is *zheng* (rectification). If you take the lead by rectifying yourself, then who would not be rectified?”

The Master said, “If the ruler’s self is rectified, then he will govern without giving orders. If his self is not rectified, though he gives orders, they will not be obeyed.”

Duke Ai of Lu asked, “What should I do to make the common people follow me?” Confucius answered, “If you raise up the straight and place them in positions above

[those whose minds are] crooked, the common people will follow you. If you raise up the crooked and place them above the straight, the common people will not follow.”

Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about governing, and Confucius replied, “Let the ruler be the ruler, let ministers be ministers, let fathers be fathers, and sons be sons.” The Duke said, “Exactly! Indeed if the ruler does not [perform the work] of the ruler, the ministers do not [perform the work of] ministers, fathers do not [perform the work of] fathers, and sons do not [perform the work of] sons, then even though food may be abundant, how could I eat it?”

Topic: Confucius the Person

The Master Said, “When I was fifteen, I set my mind on learning. When I was thirty, I took my stand. When I was forty, I had no doubts. When I was fifty, I understood that which the cosmos had decreed. When I was sixty, I was able to understand everything I heard. When I was seventy, I was able to do as my heart desired without transgressing the bounds of what is right.”

Ye Gong asked Zi Lu to explain what sort of a person Confucius is, but Zi Lu was at a loss for words. Later, the Master said, “Why didn’t you just tell him that I am someone who forgets to eat when driven to distraction trying to solve a problem and who is so full of joy that he forgets his troubles and pays no attention to the onset of old age.”

There was a fire in the stables. Upon returning from court Confucius asked, “Was anyone hurt?” He did not ask about the horses.

The Master did not discuss strange manifestations, unusual feats of strength, disorder, or the spirits. [Note: the book title *Censored by Confucius*, sometimes used in this course, is a loose translation of the underlined portion of this passage.]

Li Lu asked about serving the spirits. The Master said, “You do not even know how to serve people, how could you possibly serve the spirits? [Li] then said, “May I venture to ask about death?” [The Master] said, “You do not even understand life, how could you possibly understand death?”

The flowers of the cherry tree,
How they wave about!
It’s not that I do not think of you,
But your home is so far away.

The Master commented as follows on the poem: “He did not really think of her. If he had, there is no such thing as being far away.”

Mencius & Xunzi Add to Confucius' Ideas

Mencius (Mengzi 孟子, 371 BCE - 289 BCE ?), “Master Meng,” lived about a hundred years after Confucius and is the only other Chinese commonly known by a Latinized name. He lived during the Warring States period of the Zhou dynasty, a time when Chinese society and government were undergoing major transformations. Mencius’ time was also one of extensive philosophical disputation. In his day, many schools of thought (the “Hundred Schools” in Chinese) competed to win the favor of the new emerging rulers of China’s states. [*Mencius*](#) claimed to dislike argumentation. Nevertheless, he said that he had to argue to combat what he called the many absurd doctrines that were adversely influencing society. At the time, it was common for rulers to invite philosophers to their states and support them in what today we might call think tanks (mainly because of the increased competition between states at the end of the Zhou era). Mencius was one of these traveling philosophers who visited different states. ([#image of Mencius#](#))

Though only a hundred years separated them, the intellectual worlds of Confucius and Mencius were quite different. Confucius taught traditional, uncontroversial values. During his lifetime, few disputed his ideas, even though many considered his obsession with ancient lore oddly eccentric. In Mencius’ time, on the other hand, advocates of different views defended their positions and attacked those of others in a critical, disputatious intellectual environment. Many philosophers of this time constructed sophisticated arguments. Gongsun Long (b. 330 BCE?), for example, is famous for arguing that “a white horse is not a horse” ([#small part of it#](#)). The specific content of these philosophical arguments had also changed from Confucius’ time. **Human nature** (*xing* 性), for example, became a major issue in Mencius’ day (Confucius apparently took the nature of human nature for granted). As for philosophical argumentation, Confucius would have considered the logic-chopping of Gongsun Long’s white horse argument a waste of time and energy.

Mencius was a follower of Confucius, and many of his ideas were identical with or similar to those of the Master. Because he lived in a different intellectual environment, however, Mencius also addressed topics that Confucius did not. Here we examine **three of Mencius’ major contributions** to the Confucian tradition:

- his theory of human nature;
- his advocacy of righteous rebellion against evil rulers;
- his stress on the importance of motives.
- There was much more to Mencius’ thought, of course, but we must pass it by in an introductory course such as this. >>But if you would like to read the entire *Book of Mencius*--or just sample a few passages--[#click here#](#) [#or here.#](#)<<

Mencius was a vigorous advocate of the view that human nature was inherently good and always stayed good in all people. He often argued by analogy and example.

Source URL: <http://www.personal.psu.edu/faculty/g/j/gjs4/textbooks/PM-China/ch3.htm>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/phil101/#3.1.4>

Mencius' most famous argument for the goodness of human nature employed the image of a [child about to fall into a well](#):

Mencius said, "All human beings have a mind that cannot bear to see the suffering of others. . . . When I say that all human beings have a mind that cannot bear to see the suffering of others, what I mean can be illustrated as follows: When people see a child about to fall into a well, they all feel alarm and commiseration. This [feeling of alarm and commiseration] derives not in order to gain the friendship of the child's parents, not to incur the praise of neighbors and friends, nor out of fear for their reputation [should they fail to rescue the child]."

Think of the instant you might see this child, and the rush of adrenaline and feeling of alarm it would invoke. These sensations would arise before any "rational" thoughts of calculation (e.g., "If I save this child its parents will be in my debt, therefore I want to save it."). These sensations were vivid proof for Mencius that human nature is good deep down.

Mencius did not deny the existence of evil. For him, evil was acting contrary to one's nature. In the contentious society of his day, he thought, the moral environment had grown so bad that it constantly encouraged people to act in "unnatural" ways. Frequent acts of evil becloud the inborn good nature. Moral training, therefore, was the process of rediscovering the good nature within ourselves.

Mencius tended to argue in emotional terms. He clearly wanted to believe that people were all good deep down inside (albeit sometimes *very* deep down inside). Mencius' major opponent from within the Confucian tradition was **Xunzi**, whose views on Heaven we have already seen. [*Xunzi*](#) lived slightly later than Mencius, at the very end of the Zhou period. Mencius argued with his heart; Xunzi argued with his intellect. Regarding human nature, Xunzi said:

Human nature is evil; goodness is the result of conscious activity. The nature of humans is such that they are born with a fondness for profit. If they indulge this fondness, it will lead to wrangling and strife, and all sense of courtesy and humility will disappear. He is born with feelings of envy and hate, and if he indulges these, they will lead him into violence and crime, and all sense of loyalty and good faith will disappear. Humans are born with the desires of the eyes and ears, with a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds. If they indulge these, they will lead to license and wantonness, and all ritual principles and correct forms will be lost. Hence, anyone who follows his nature and indulges his emotions will inevitably become involved in wrangling and strife, will violate the forms and rules of society, and will end as a criminal. Therefore, people must first be transformed by the instruction of a teacher and guided by ritual principles, and only then will they be able to observe the dictates of courtesy and humility, obey the forms and

rules of society, and achieve order. It is obvious from this, then, that human nature is evil, and that human goodness is the result of conscious activity.⁽¹⁰⁾

The Chinese term for “conscious activity” here is *wei* 偽, which more literally means something like “contrived action.” *Wei*, in other words, was action different from what a person would normally incline to do. The point of *wei* would be to train someone not to act in accordance with his or her evil nature but in accordance with the more sensible norms of civilized society. (To read a few more passages from Xunzi, [#click here.#](#))

For Mencius, human nature was good, but life’s adverse experiences could cover over that good nature. For Xunzi, human nature was evil, but *it could be modified in the direction of goodness by strict discipline and training*. In a later chapter we will see that the first part of Xunzi’s view of human nature was the starting point for another important school of thought: Legalism. Xunzi’s ideas also contributed to the rigid and strict character of Han dynasty Confucianism (later chapter).

Returning to Mencius, his second major contribution was advocacy of the overthrow of evil rulers. The term “king,” said Mencius, implies a certain degree of moral excellence. An evil ruler, therefore, was not really a king, so overthrowing him was not regicide or disloyalty. Recall that the last king of the Shang dynasty--with his lake of wine, forest of meat, cannibalism, et cetera--was regarded as the epitome of an evil ruler in later dynasties. This king’s name was Zhou. Do not be confused--his name has nothing to do with the Zhou dynasty. Also recall that Jie was the last, allegedly evil ruler of the Xia dynasty who also created of lake of wine and a forest of meat. With this information in mind, read the following conversation of Mencius:

King Xuan of Qi asked, ‘Is it true that Tang banished Jie and King Wu marched against [King] Zhou?’

‘It is so recorded,’ answered Mencius.

‘Is [regicide](#) permissible?’

‘A man who mutilates benevolence is a mutilator, while one who cripples rightness is a crippler. He who is both a mutilator and a crippler is an “outcast.” I have indeed heard of the punishment of the “outcast Zhou,” but I have not heard of any regicide.’⁽¹¹⁾

This advocacy of righteous rebellion to overthrow evil rulers was bothersome to emperors of later dynasties, some of whom ordered the above passage censored in all copies of the *Mencius* (the book containing Mencius’ conversations). Even more so than did Confucius, Mencius stressed the notion that proper government is that which benefits the common people.

Finally, Mencius consistently rejected a moral philosophy based on results. For him, a person's motivation was what mattered. The best specific example of Mencius' stress on the importance of motives is the idea of *profit* (*li* 利--but not the *li* 禮 meaning rites, cultural forms, etc., which we studied earlier). Mencius was highly suspicious of anything done with the goal of profit in mind. The first conversation in *Mencius* makes the point loud and clear:

Mencius went to see King Hui of Liang. 'Sir,' said the King. 'you have come all this distance, thinking nothing of a thousand miles. You must surely have some way of profiting my state?'

'Your Majesty,' answered Mencius. 'What is the point of mentioning the word "profit"? All that matters is that there should be benevolence and rightness. If Your Majesty says, "How can I profit my state?" and the Counselors say, "How can I profit my family?" and the Gentlemen and Commoners say, "How can I profit my person?" then those above and those below will be trying to profit at the expense of one another and the state will be imperiled. When regicide is committed in a state of ten thousand chariots, it is certain to be by a vassal with a thousand chariots, and when it is committed in a state of a thousand chariots, it is certain to be by a vassal with a hundred chariots. A share of a thousand in ten thousand or a hundred in a thousand is by no means insignificant, yet if profit is put before rightness, there is no satisfaction short of total usurpation. No benevolent person ever abandons his parents, and no dutiful person ever puts his prince last. Perhaps you will now endorse what I have said, "All that matters is that there should be benevolence and rightness. What is the point of mentioning the word 'profit'?"⁽¹²⁾

Although many interpreters of Chinese or East Asian history have exaggerated this point, it was common in later dynasties for Confucians to be suspicious of those engaged in commerce, since its explicit goal was usually profit. To say that someone possessed "the mind of a merchant" was no compliment in Confucian circles. This attitude, of course, was an important legacy of Mencius' teachings.

Notes

1. John E. Wills, Jr., *Mountain of Fame: Portraits in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 16.
2. Ibid., p. 18.
3. Ibid.
4. Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 42.
5. Roger T. Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study in Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), p. 6, with minor modification. Do not worry about the exact meaning of the term “Way” in this passage. We examine that matter below.
6. Ibid., p. 5.
7. Wills, *Mountain of Fame*, p. 27.
8. Readers sometimes ask if “all people” here meant women as well as men. Confucius did not talk about gender roles, but it is probable that in his mind, “people” often meant “males” for all practical purposes. On the other hand, there is nothing in Confucius’ thought that depends on gender, and it is therefore perfectly reasonable for us today to regard “all people” in early Confucian thought as meaning *both* males and females. Later generations of Confucians, from the Han dynasty onward, did make explicit distinctions based on gender.
9. My translation of *ren* as “authoritative humanity,” as well as several substantive points in these paragraphs, follows David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).
10. Based on Watson, trans., *Basic Writings*, “Hsün Tsu,” p. 157, with minor modification.
11. Based on D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 68, with minor modification.
12. Ibid., p. 49, with minor modification.