

Confucianism



The two most significant thinkers in the Confucian tradition were Confucius (551-479 BC) and Mencius (372-289 BC).

When one of his disciples asked him if there was a moral principle that one could act on all day, every day, he said, "Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you."

He taught of the five key relationships: ruler to subject, parent to child, husband to wife, older brother to younger brother, friend to friend, and held that if both parties fulfilled their own roles in the relationship, harmony would result.

Confucius placed a strong emphasis on the value of education, which could raise capable ministers from lower-income students, and which could inculcate moral judgment.

As part of the emphasis on education, Confucius placed a major emphasis on the example set by rulers. If they wanted their subjects to be ethical, they had to be ethical as well.

Confucius' most renowned successor, Mencius, saw human nature as essentially good (this was implicit in Confucius' thinking). With human nature being good, people required only education and examples in order to behave morally.

Confucianists tended to be skeptical about the utility of harsh laws, and critical of harsh rulers. Mencius also emphasized the justice of executing unjust rulers, and encouraged rulers to be lenient towards their subjects by lowering taxes and avoiding severe penalties. Confucianism became associated with those who opposed a tyrannical government. This is one reason why 460 Confucian scholars were killed in the days of the first Chinese Emperor (of the Qin dynasty), who came to power utilizing Legalist, not Confucianist, methods. The next Chinese dynasty, the Han, that came to power rebelling against Legalist tactics, restored Confucianism to its revered status in Chinese society.

Confucianism is more a social philosophy than a religion. He avoided explicitly religious teachings. Asked by a pupil, Zilu, about serving spirits, he stated, "You are not yet able to serve men; how can you serve spirits?" When Zilu ventured to ask about death, the answer was: "While you do not know life, how can you [hope to] know about death?"