

# An introduction to Confucianism

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## Confucianism, Confucius and Confucian classics

About 2,500 years ago, a man was born to a once aristocratic family in a small state called Lu in East China. During his lifetime, the man endeavoured to work ‘towards a goal the realisation of which he knows to be hopeless’ (*Lunyu*, 14: 38), carrying forward the old tradition in a chaotic environment and opening up a new horizon in a dark age. By the time he died at the age of seventy-three, his teachings had spread throughout the state and beyond. His disciples and students compared him to the sun and moon, while his rivals considered him a man ‘who does not work with his arms and legs and who does not know how to distinguish between different kinds of grain’ (*Lunyu*, 18: 7). But there was one thing that neither side knew: that Chinese culture, and to some extent, East Asian culture, would be forever linked with his name, and that the tradition he loved and transmitted would rank with the greatest in the world. This tradition is known in the West as ‘Confucianism’.

### ‘Confucianism’ and *ru*

The origin of the English word ‘Confucianism’ may be traced back to the Jesuits of the sixteenth century:

Until Nicholas Trigault published his version of Ricci’s journals in 1615, there was hardly any knowledge of, not to say debate about, Confucianism . . . The Jesuits were virtually the first Europeans to discover Confucius and Confucianism, ‘the sect of the literati’ as they not inaccurately called it . . . The Jesuits, representatives of European values and intellectual methods, attempted . . . to understand Chinese



intellectual life in terms of systems, and transmuted the tradition of the Ju or Chinese ‘scholars’ into an ‘-ism’, Confucianism.

(Rule, 1986: 2, 195)

Since then ‘Confucianism’ or its equivalents in other European languages has been taken in the West as a proper name for the East Asian tradition with Confucius as its fountainhead. In fact, what is meant by ‘Confucianism’ is more a tradition generally rooted in Chinese culture and nurtured by Confucius and Confucians rather than a new religion created, or a new value system initiated, by Confucius himself alone. It is true that as a distinctive ‘school’ Confucianism began with Confucius. It was Confucius who explored deeply and elaborated extensively on the basic principles of what was to become Confucianism, and it was Confucius and his disciples who succeeded in transmitting and transforming their ancient culture. But it would go too far to suggest that Confucianism was ‘created’ solely by Confucius and Confucianism was sustained exclusively by the faith in Confucius. In this sense, the word ‘Confucianism’ is a misnomer for the tradition that is normally referred to as *ru jia*, *ru jiao*, *ru xue* or simply as *ru* in China and other East Asian countries. Confucius played a key role in the development of the tradition which had originated long before his time. He is usually regarded as a ‘sage–teacher’ for the people or as the Sage for Confucians, but seldom as the Saviour, and never as the Lord. Confucius functioned as ‘the founder’ of the Confucian tradition in a way quite different from the founders of other religious traditions.

#### RU AND THE RU TRADITION

*Ru jia*, *ru jiao* or *ru xue* may be translated roughly as ‘the doctrine, or tradition, of scholars’. To understand the nature of this doctrine or tradition, we have first to explore its root in *ru*. A prominent scholar of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), Liu Xin (?–23 CE), located the formation of *ru* as a profession in the early years of the Zhou Dynasty (1100?–256 BCE) and asserted that *ru* was characteristic of its devotion to the ‘six classics’ (the *Book of Poetry*, the *Book of History*, the *Book of Rites*, the *Book of Music*, the *Book of Changes*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*), and that as a social group and a distinctive school, *ru* emphasised the virtues of humaneness (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*), followed the ancient sage–kings, and took Confucius as their master (*Hanshu*, 1997: 1728). However, the identification of *ru* with Confucian

scholars was not recognised until a much later time, when Confucianism had been recognised as a prominent school with its scholars engaging with the classics and the Way of ancient Sages. What then is the original meaning of the *ru*?

Among ancient texts, the character *ru* first occurs in the *Analects*, where Confucius taught his disciples to be a *ru* of virtuous gentlemen (*junzi ru*), and not a morally deficient man or a vulgar *ru* (*xiaoren ru*) (*Lunyu*, 6: 13). Some scholars, both Chinese and Western, argue that although groups of men professionally skilled in ceremonial practice existed prior to Confucius' time, the character *ru* post-dated Confucius' time and was in fact coined as a name for the followers of Confucius (Eno, 1993: 192). While we cannot engage in this debate, suffice it now to say that there is no reason for us to disregard what is implied by the reference to the two kinds of *ru* in the *Analects*, and we have grounds for believing that as a profession or distinctive group in society, *ru* must have predated the time of Confucius.

As mentioned above, Liu Xin gave a clear explanation to the origin of *ru*. He traced the origin of *ru* to a government office (*situ zhi guan*, Ministry of Education) whose function was to 'assist the ruler to follow the way of the yin–yang and to enlighten [the people] by education' (*zhu renjun, shun yinyang, ming jiaohua*, in *Hanshu*, 1998: 1728). There seem to have been few debates concerning the meaning of *ru* before the twentieth century, and people generally accepted Liu Xin's explanation. Following the introduction of a western scientific methodology at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, Chinese scholars started to rethink the character *ru* and reassess its meanings and connotations. A group of scholars followed Liu Xin to confirm that *ru* was indeed from a government office. Zhang Binglin (1869–1936), for example, argued that all the schools which came into being during the period of Spring and Autumn (771–476 BCE) and the period of Warring States (475–221 BCE) originated from the imperial offices (*wang guan*) of the Zhou Dynasty. In his article *Yuan Ru* ('Exploring the Origin of *Ru*'), Zhang pointed out that in ancient times *ru* was a general term with a range of references, and that there were three kinds of *ru* in the Zhou Dynasty: *ru* as a distinguished title for intellectuals or gentlemen who were equipped with skills and expertise in one or more areas of social life (*shu shi*); *ru* as a classification for those who were professionals in the six arts (rites, music, archery, carriage driving, history and mathematics); and *ru* as an official title for those

who assisted the ruler to follow the way of yin–yang and to enlighten the people by education. Zhang believed that the three kinds of *ru* were later disregarded and *ru* as a general term became a specific name for those who taught and transmitted the Confucian classics (Zhang, 1909: 56).

Other modern scholars such as Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Hu Shi (1891–1962) disagreed with Liu and Zhang with regard to the origin of *ru*. For them, *ru* did not originate in a government office of the Zhou Dynasty. Based on the records that Confucius usually wore a special cap (*zhangfu zhi guan*), Hu Shi claimed that *ru* referred to the adherents (*yimin*) of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600–c. 1100 BCE) who because of their expertise in religious rituals were employed as priests by the Zhou Dynasty. When the Western Zhou Dynasty (1100?–770 BCE) declined shortly before the time of Confucius, these professionals lost their privilege and social status, and became a group of people who lived on their knowledge and skills in rituals and ceremonies (Hu, 1953: vol. 4). In his *Yuan Ru Mo (On the Origins of the Ru and Moists)* Fung Yulan argued against this assumption that wearing the Shang cap did not mean that these people were adherents of the Shang. Fung further separated *ru* and *rujia*, the former being a professional group who lived on education and performing rituals, the latter being a distinctive school established in the Spring and Autumn period (Chen, 1996: 334).

Most of the debates were concentrated on the immediate predecessors of *ru* that later tradition knew as Confucian scholars. Whether or not it was associated with a government office, the members of *ru* were certainly associated with learning and education. But what was their original profession? Recently, a number of Chinese scholars have returned to the question. Some conclude that as a profession *ru* refers originally to dancers and musicians in religious ceremonies of the Shang Dynasty when the worship of spirits and gods dominated the life of the people. A *ru* would perform various dances and play music as imprecation for a good harvest and as offerings to gods or ancestors, and would lead ceremonies for the coming of rain during the seasons of drought. To fulfil their duties *ru* had to study not only the rituals proper, but also other relevant subjects such as astronomy/astrology to predict rain or drought. The character *ru* (儒) is said to come from the character *xu* (需). *Xu* was composed of two parts, ‘cloud’ (雨) above sky (而) (Yan, 1995: 50), which reveals the relation of *ru* to ritual dance in rain-praying. In the oracle bone inscriptions, *xu* was rendered as a man who is in a shower (𠄎),

suggesting a ritual ablution before a *ru* went about his responsibilities. In chapter 38 ‘The Conducts of Scholars’ of the *Book of Rites*, we can see the importance of bathing for a Confucian scholar: ‘The scholar keeps his person free from stain, and continually bathes (and refreshes) his virtue’ (Legge, 1968, vol. 27: 407).

Other etymological connections also suggest that *ru* were related to ritual dance, music and religious ceremonies. The character *ru* shares the same root with those for ‘weaklings’ and ‘cowards’, indicating that the members of *ru* were characterised by their softness, suppleness and flexibility. Probably for this reason, Xu Shen (58?–147?), the first Chinese philologist, defined it as such: ‘*Ru* means “soft.” It is the title for [Confucian] scholars (*shu shi*) who educated the people with the six arts’ (*Shuowen Jiezi Zhu*, 1981: 366). Therefore, a *ru* was gentle and yielding rather than competitive and commanding, in contrast to a warrior who was known for his vigour in war and competition. As a master of music and dance, a *ru* was clearly aware of his own refinement and manners, and believed his own worth to reside in his cultivated and noble etiquette; it was this which served to distinguish the *ru* from common people, such as farmers, craftsmen and merchants.

To summarise and assess what has been presented above, we may hypothesise that the different explanations of the origins of *ru* might actually refer to the different periods in the evolution of the groups of men who were called *ru*. The *ru* went through a number of stages before the time of Confucius. Firstly, *ru* referred to dancers and musicians in religious rituals, who were characterised by their softness and flexibility. At this stage, *ru* was a special group in society whose members were roughly equivalent to what we mean by shamans, magicians and sorcerers. Secondly, *ru* were masters of rituals and ceremonies, who performed, or assisted the performance of, various rituals. At this stage, *ru* referred to professionals expert in religious rituals, rites and ceremonies. Thirdly, ritual masters became teachers in official education. To be able to look after rituals, *ru* must have mastered history, poetry, music, astrology, archery and mathematics which were closely related to rituals in ancient times. As experts in these areas they exercised responsibility for training young dancers, musicians and performers, and for teaching on rituals and ritual-related subjects, which earned them the title of *shi* (師): ‘Masters/Teachers’, although they were still employed as professional priests or assistants at official or non-official ceremonies.

Along with the decline of cultic practices and the rise of rationalism during the Spring and Autumn period, a large number of *ru* departed from the officially assigned profession, and entered various areas of social life. The *ru* became distinctive for their skills in state rituals and in official and private education. The character *ru* was also gradually extended to become a specific term for those who had skills of ritual, history, poetry, music, mathematics and archery, and who lived off their knowledge of all kinds of ceremonies and of many other subjects (Chen, 1996: 350). Among the teachers of these disciplines Confucius stood out as an outstanding *ru* of his time, and opened up a new course by developing and transforming the *ru* tradition. By the time of the Warring States period, Confucius had been recognised as the highest figure in the *ru* tradition, as indicated by Han Fei (280?–233 BCE), a leading Legalist philosopher and a well-known critic of Confucianism, ‘In the present age, the celebrities for learning are the literati [*ru*] and the Mohists. The highest figure of the Literati was K’ung Ch’iu [Kong Qiu]; the highest figure of the Mohists was Mo Ti’ (Liao, 1960, vol. 2: 298). Not long after that, the tradition of *ru* was totally identified with the doctrines clarified, elaborated and propagated by Confucius, and ‘the rituals of the *ru*’ and ‘the Way of Confucius’ became interchangeable in a collection of the Former Han Dynasty (*Huainanzi Yizhu*, 1990: 501). One way or another, Confucius’ transmission and interpretation of the ancient culture and his practices of education played a major part in shaping and reshaping the *ru* tradition. The process involved in this transformation must be taken into account when we discuss the relationship between Confucius and *ru*. Therefore, whatever method one may employ in tracing the origin of Confucianism, one must take into account both the cultural heritage on which Confucius worked and the transformation Confucius made to the *ru* tradition. In this sense it is misleading to simply ‘characterize Confucius and his followers through their role as masters of dance’ (Eno, 1990: 2–3). As we have pointed out above, by the time of Confucius, the *ru* had fundamentally changed their social and cultural functions, and therefore, should not be treated in the same way as the earlier masters of dance and music.

#### CONFUCIUS

‘Confucius’ is a Latinised form of the Chinese name Kong Fuzi, Master Kong, which is in turn a reverent title for Kong Qiu or Kong Zhongni

(551–479 BCE). Confucius was born and lived in the Spring and Autumn period of the Zhou Dynasty. The Zhou Dynasty was established on the system of feudalism: under the central government the empire was divided into many feudal states, either headed by the members of the royal house or awarded to those who had rendered outstanding service to the state. There were about 124 states shortly before Confucius' birth and around 70 during his life. Initially the system worked well. The princes and dukes of the states took the king as the 'Son of Heaven' and as their chief commander. When the grasp of Zhou Kings over the states weakened, however, the administrative system began to collapse. The heads of individual states ignored the command and order from the central government, and competed with one another for a bigger share of land and property. This led to military conflict between states and power struggles within a state. The old order of social life was being destroyed and a new one was advancing, while the people were left in endless suffering and misery, husband being torn from wife, and wife being forced to leave husband; the rich enjoying their luxury, while the poor had nothing to rely on (Legge, 1992, vol. 4: 117, 320, 423, 424).

Many thinkers explored the cause of chaos and disorder, and expanded upon their ways of solving the problems. Some became pioneers of different schools, and Confucius was one of them, probably the most famous one of his time. He believed that chaos and disorder developed from the misuse and abuse of ritual/propriety (*li*) and music (*yue*). He described these as a situation of *li huai yue beng* – 'the decay of ritual/propriety (*li*) and the collapse of music'. Unable to endure this state of affairs, Confucius embarked upon a life-long enterprise to restore the value of rituals and to propagate the rules of propriety. For him chaos and disorder could not be corrected under a bad government, in which neither ruler nor minister acted in accordance with the true values of their roles. To establish a righteous government, the ruler and his ministers must act according to what was established in ancient rites, because what made a government good was the power of moral virtues rather than the power of cruel and punitive laws. Moral virtues could produce trust and faith in the people, while punitive measures might stop wrongdoing only for a moment. A ruler 'who governs the state through his virtue is like the pole star which stays put while the other stars revolve around it' (*Lunyu*, 2: 1). An efficient way to secure 'governing by virtue' was to perform rituals and play music correctly, which would enable performers to remain in a state

of sincerity and loyalty and to set up good examples for the common people so that they knew what was right and what was wrong. In this sense, Confucian Learning, performing rituals and playing music were not merely a matter of ceremonies. Either at a personal level or at a social level, ‘flourishing comes from [learning of] poetry; establishing results from [properly performing] ritual; and completing is to be achieved by means of music’ (*Lunyu*, 8: 8). In order to set up guidelines for good family and social life, Confucius reinterpreted the meaning and methods of learning and education of the *ru* tradition, and believed that the promotion of the tradition had great leverage on improving the quality of social life, was the key to overcoming present problems, and would lead the people to a refined and redefined world of goodness and harmony. As his objective was the restoration of social and moral excellence, and the cultivation of purity within the heart of individuals, so that society and humanity at large could function harmoniously, Confucius took on the task of reforming the government through revitalising the ancient ways which was believed to have been established at the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty and carried out effectively and efficiently during the first half of the dynasty: ‘The Zhou is resplendent in culture, having before it the example of the two previous dynasties. I am for the Zhou’ (*Lunyu*, 3: 14).

The political ambition and moral strength with which Confucius strove to realise his ideal came in part from his ancestral background and aristocratic origins. Confucius is believed to have been a descendant of the royal house of the Shang Dynasty and his family lived in the state of Song until his grandfather was forced to move to the state of Lu. His father died when Confucius was three years old and it was his mother who raised him and had him properly educated. The passing away of his father led to the further decline of the family, and Confucius once described himself as ‘being of humble station when young so that I was able to handle many menial things’ (*Lunyu*, 9: 6). The humbleness of his living conditions and the nobility of his ancestry were probably two main factors which encouraged him to learn. The road to the final achievement was long but gradual, as we find in his poetic self-description which records that he set his heart firmly on learning at the age of fifteen, and by thirty he had achieved some success; ten years later, he had reached a higher step, when he was no longer perplexed with world affairs; at fifty, he believed that he had understood the Mandate of Heaven; at sixty his ears were docile, and at seventy, he had reached the peak of human

transformation so that he could do everything following his own heart's desire without transgressing the norm (*Lunyu*, 2: 4).

In his public career, however, the progress was much less obvious. He was a private educator and a well-known master for most of his life. Although Confucius was keen to transform government, he himself seemed to be more interested in practising virtues at home than in holding office. When asked why he was not involved in government, Confucius replied, 'What does the *Book of History* say? "Simply by being a good son and friendly to his brothers, a man can exert an influence upon government." In so doing a man is, in fact, taking part in government. How can there be any question of his having actively to "take part in government?"' (*Lunyu*, 2: 21). Confucius held office for only a few years, the first significant post assigned to him being that of magistrate of the district Zhongdu when he was nearly fifty-one years old (501 BCE). Due to the success of his administration in this district, he was promoted to Minister for Construction (500 BCE) and the Chief Justice, possibly even serving as acting Prime Minister for a short period (499 BCE). Seeing that he was unable to turn his doctrines into practice, Confucius left his home state of Lu for other states in 497 BCE, hoping that his words would be heeded, his politics carried out and his ideal realised in other parts of the world. For thirteen years (497–484 BCE), he and a group of his disciples travelled from one state to another, frequently encountering failure and despair. However, he never lost his faith in the Way of Heaven (*tian*) and his mission in the world. Confucius believed that Heaven is the Ultimate, the source of faith from which he drew his optimism and wisdom in dealing with human affairs.

When Confucius realised that the situation was hopeless and when the political climate in the state of Lu changed, he returned home, devoting the rest of his life to teaching disciples and editing ancient classics, in the expectation that the disciples would carry on his work and pass his teachings on to later generations. Confucius died in the fourth month of 479 BCE, and it was said that Duke Ai of Lu (r. 494–467 BCE) came to pay his condolences: 'Alas! Heaven has no mercy on me, and has not spared me the Grand Old Man, leaving me unprotected and in deep regret. Alas! Father Ni (Confucius' name)! Great is my sorrow!' (Lin, 1994: 153; Legge, 1992, vol. 5: 846). A few hundred years later, when Sima Qian (145?–86? BCE), the greatest Chinese historian, wrote a biography of Confucius, he concluded with the following paragraph:



When I read the works of Confucius, I try to see the man himself. In Lu I visited his temple and saw his carriage, clothes and sacrificial vessels. Scholars go regularly to study ceremony there, and I found it hard to tear myself away. The world has known innumerable princes and worthies who enjoyed fame and honour in their days but were forgotten after death, while Confucius, a commoner, has been looked up to by scholars for ten generations and more. From the emperor, princes and barons downwards, all in China who study the Six Arts take the master as their final authority. Well is he called the Supreme Sage!

(*Shiji*, 1997: 1947; Yang & Yang, 1974: 27)

It is commonly agreed that as a distinctive school Confucianism took shape in the hands of Confucius and he was responsible for the formation of the basics of Confucianism. His commanding personality and profundity of knowledge attracted many followers and he himself became the centre of gravity and the embodiment of Confucian virtues. His understanding of the world and religious matters led the Confucian tradition to the direction of rationalism and humanism, which characterises Confucian practices, either secular or religious. He deliberated on many important concepts, which laid down the very foundation for Confucian doctrines. He virtually instituted a pedagogic tradition which transcended the class distinctions. And he painted a picture of the gentleman/virtuous man (*junzi*) as an attainable ideal. All these become the backbone of the Confucian Way, illustrating how a Confucian follower should behave, how he should lead his life and what he must do for an ideal society. It is believed that following this Way, a Confucian will be able not only to manifest the Principle of Heaven and Earth, but also to continually ‘make’ the Principle out of his own practices.

With all his contributions clearly recognised, however, there is no agreed evaluation of Confucius and his works, and opinions on him among western scholars vary dramatically. For example, in his history of philosophy, Hegel looked down upon Confucius as merely a moral educationalist and his teachings as a collection of moral proverbs, which represents the primitive stage of the progression of the Absolute Spirit. For Karl Jaspers, the image is different. Confucius is said to be one of the FOUR ‘paradigmatic individuals – It would be difficult to find a fifth of equal historical stature’ – who ‘by being what they were did more than other men to determine the history of man. Their influence extended through two millennia down to our own day’ (Jaspers, 1962: 6). As

regard to his contribution to religion, Herbert Fingarette emphasises the sacredness of his secular teaching, while Julia Ching would rather consider him ‘a seminal thinker’ (Ching, 1993: 52).

The main concern of Confucius was with humans and with the fundamental principles of humanity. Confucius believed that these principles were the root of social relationships, the foundation of the stability, peace and prosperity of the state, the family and individuals. He developed his ethics around two central theses; that goodness can be taught and learned, and that society can only be in harmony and at peace under the guidance of wisdom. He further developed a system of concepts to expound the central theses. Of these concepts four became the underlying ideas of the Confucian tradition, namely, the Way (*dao*), ritual/propriety (*li*), humaneness (*ren*) and virtue (*de*), and later the backbone of the ideological structure of a Confucian state. Devoting himself wholeheartedly to solving human problems, Confucius propagated the value of education, virtue and self-cultivation. On the one hand Confucius kept a distance from religious matters such as serving ‘spirits and ghosts’, and would rather talk about this life than the life after (*Lunyu*, 11: 12); on the other hand, he held a deep faith in Heaven and destiny (*ming*), and preserved religious ritual strictly. Although he believed in his mission that was endowed by Heaven, he never saw himself as the leader or founder of a religious tradition; what he did was merely to transmit the ancient culture, which in his mind was the model for the present and the guarantee for the future. However, in the transmission he ‘innovated’ the old tradition, as asserted by Schwarts that ‘in his focus on the concept of *jen* [humaneness] Confucius is an innovator rather than a transmitter’ (Schwartz, 1985: 76). According to Fung Yu-lan, ‘in transmitting, he originated something new’ (Fung, 1961: 41), while in the words of Jaspers, ‘in the philosophy of Confucius, the new expressed itself in the form of the old’ (Jaspers, 1962: 54).

#### CONFUCIANISM AS A ‘FAMILY’ (JIA)

It was said that Confucius had three thousand students, among whom 72 were intimate disciples – the number of his disciples varying in different books, for example, 70 in *Mengzi* 2A:3, 77 in *Shiji*, 76 in *Kongzi Jiayu*, and 72 in *Hou Hanshu*, and the number of 72 becoming widely accepted probably under the influence of the Five Elements School’s numerological configuration of the perfect number 360 divided by 5. After

three years' mourning (in one case six years') for their master, these disciples and students went to different areas, either engaging in administration of a state, or setting up schools to teach the principles of the *ru* tradition. Confucius was recognised as the symbol of the *ru*, and the *ru* gradually became a specific term for those who followed Confucius to interpret, and teach, the classics, and who engaged themselves in administration, education and the preservation of ancient rituals and music. The multidimensional themes raised in Confucius' conversations and the rich resources of his teaching made it possible for the members of the *ru* to develop different understandings and interpretations of Confucius and his philosophy. The differences in the methods of learning and practice led to a variety of sections within the broad category of the *ru*. According to Han Fei, during this period there were eight prominent sections of the *ru* (Watson, 1970: 119). Although these sections developed Confucian doctrines in manifestly different directions, all of them considered themselves faithful followers of Confucius, devoted to studying, editing and interpreting the classics as well as producing a considerable amount of new literature in the *ru* tradition, and thus receiving recognition as distinguished scholars (*ru*) on the ancient classics. All these sections together were known as *ru jia*, one of the *bai jia* (a hundred schools).

*Jia* means a structure of family home, being extended to refer to a group of people who are devoted to the same ideal and who form among themselves relationships which are like those of a large family. By *ru jia* it is meant the school or tradition of *literati* or scholars who have committed themselves to the tradition of the *ru*. As a school, *ru jia* sought to make the Way of ancient sage-kings prevail again in the present world. The Way of the ancients was understood as multidimensional in its contents, including the vision of harmony, the rules of propriety, the values of rituals and rites, virtues and methods of a benevolent government. All these were believed to have been well illustrated in the classics that *ru* scholars held Confucius to have edited and interpreted. *Ru jia* propagated the study and learning of these classics to correct disorder and to transform the society, and strove to bring order to the state and peace to the world. Like many other schools, the *ru* transmitted these teachings and principles through forging a seemingly unbroken chain of master-disciples. Its practices were characterised by untiring study of, and instruction on ancient writings, and by performing rituals and playing music properly under the guidance of masters.

CONFUCIANISM AS A CULT (JIAO)

For a long time after the death of Confucius, Confucianism remained only one of many schools. Although its teaching was considered prominent and its followers were numerous, it did not enjoy any privilege throughout the Warring States period. On the contrary, it was frequently mocked and attacked by the followers of other schools, as it had been during the lifetime of Confucius. In the eyes of its rivals, Confucianism did not provide adequate answers to the problems of life, nor did it show any advantage over other schools. In a passage from a Daoist work, the *Book of Zhuang Zi*, Confucianism is treated the same as other schools, having its strong and weak points: ‘The various skills of the hundred schools [*bai jia*] all have their strong points, and at times each may be of use. But none is wholly sufficient, none is universal’ (Watson, 1964: 364).

The First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE) relied on Legalism (*fa jia*) to unify and govern the empire. As Legalism was one of the chief rivals of Confucianism, Confucianism was humiliated and suffered from suppression and persecution. With a gradual recovery in the first few decades of the Former Han Dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE), Confucianism became a dominant school and an orthodox ideology during the reign of Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE). Closely related to the religious sacrifices of the state, Confucianism was given another name, *jiao*, and later became one of the three *jiaos*, Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. In *Shiji* or the *Records of the Historian ru* and *jiao* are first linked together. However, the meaning here is perhaps no more than the teaching of the *ru* (*Shiji*, 1997: 3184; Watson, 1961, vol. 2: 455.) One of the early references to Confucianism as a religious doctrine is made in the *History of the Jin Dynasty* (*Jinshu*, 1997: 1). When Kang Youwei of the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) launched a reform movement to transform the Confucian tradition into a state religion, he confected the story that Confucius created the *ru jiao*, the religion or religious doctrine of *literati*.

The original form of ‘*jiao*’ (𡗗) is a pictograph, consisting of ‘a hand holding a stick (扌)’ and ‘beating (𠂔) a child (子)’. The later form of the character (教) consists of ‘teaching (educating, 攴)’ and ‘filial piety (孝)’, meaning that a child is rigorously brought into a filial relation. This meaning was broadened to include the doctrines that a group of people endeavoured to transmit and spread. A *jiao* also implies a system of observance of rituals, disciplines of behaviour and faith in the teachings of the founders of a tradition, which are regarded as three of the most

important factors in maintaining the unity and transmission of a *jiao*. Therefore, what is meant by *ru jiao* is the cult of the learned or cultured, the continuous tradition of the scholars who followed Confucius to take part in the interpretation and application of the doctrines explored in the classics, and who emphasised the importance and significance of rituals and ceremonies for the realisation of their ideal. As Confucianism was promoted to be the state ideology, the reverence and worship of Confucius became part of state religious activities. Confucius was given the title of Perfect Sage and Ancient Teacher; religious ceremonies were performed on his birthday and other festivals, and sacrifices were offered to his spiritual tablet in temples dedicated to Confucius. Along with the rising of Confucius' status and with the dogmatic application of his teachings, two more names were invented to refer to Confucianism. *Kong jiao* ('the cult of Confucius') emphasises that the teaching and figure of Confucius are central to the tradition, and recognises that Confucianism as a distinctive school, a glorious tradition and an orthodox doctrine was promoted, explored, transmitted and interpreted by Confucius, while *li Jiao* ('the ritual religion') reveals the overemphasis of Confucianism on *li*, the rules of propriety, the rites, rituals and ceremonies.

#### CONFUCIANISM AS A FORM OF LEARNING (*XUE*)

One of the features that serves to distinguish Confucianism from many other traditions is its commitment to the study and transmission of ancient classics. Confucius is said to be the great editor and commentator of the classics, and his reputation as the sage is based on the fact that he embodies ancient culture. Following him, each generation of Confucian masters and scholars made a contribution to learning, and the doctrines of Confucianism were gradually enriched and extended in numerous writings, treatises and discussions. The Confucian tradition has gathered around its classics an unparalleled abundance of annotations and commentaries. As the tradition of *literati*, Confucianism is steeped in the spirit of scholarship. Confucianism is thus known by the name *ru xue*, meaning the learning of scholars, and the term is first used in the *Records of History* (*Shiji*, 1997: 3118). It is agreed that Confucianism has been able to outlive its status as state religion, and has survived persecution, suppression and revolution, because it is sustained not by its social and religious privilege, but by its unflagging efforts to further learning. It is also contended that Confucian temples may be demolished, devotion to

its sages abolished and Confucian followers may be stripped of their social privileges, but Confucianism can still survive and thrive as long as learning is permitted, and the classic texts are available. For this reason, most modern East Asian intellectuals prefer to name Confucianism as *ru xue* rather than *ru jia* or *ru jiao*, in recognition of the fact that the life and spirit of Confucianism lies in its learning.

It is generally recognised that either as a school of thought or as the state orthodoxy, the vitality of Confucianism can be generated through learning and education, and renewed in practising what has been learnt. Confucian Learning differs significantly from what we mean today by 'learning'. For a Confucian, Learning is first of all a process of reading, understanding and deliberating, but it is more than a purely academic subject. Confucian Learning is the study of the Way of Heaven both in the inner self and in external practices. The only purpose of learning is the promotion of virtuous action and the cultivation of a moral character, as Confucius made it clear that 'A person of virtue studies the Way in order to love people' (*Lunyu*, 17: 4). Confucian Learning is also closely related to human nature and destiny. Learning is to transform one's self and retain what is virtuous. It is in this sense that Mengzi, the second sage in the Confucian tradition, understood the way of learning to be nothing other than 'going after the lost heart' (*Mengzi*, 6A: 11).

As a particular kind of learning, the Confucian tradition is known for three characteristics (1) that its members are mostly learned people or civilised intellectuals in a broad sense, which reveals that in Confucian Learning preference is always given to the virtuous way of life (2) that they commit themselves to expanding upon, and interpreting, the classics, which indicates that the value of Confucianism lies in a continuous process of transmitting and furthering the ancient tradition; and (3) that they endeavour to carry out, politically and ethically, collectively and individually, the principles embodied in the classics, which implies that the intention and goal of Confucian Learning is to transform the world in the world.

### **Ethics, politics and religion in the Confucian tradition**

The seven-dimension theory of religion put forward by Ninian Smart has become a useful tool for scholars in Religious Studies to explore the richness and depth of a particular tradition. Smart believes that although it is difficult to define a religion, we can examine it usefully

in its different aspects or dimensions, such as the practical and ritual dimension, the experiential and emotional dimension, the narrative or mystic dimension, the doctrinal and political dimension, the ethical and legal dimension, the social and institutional dimension, and the material dimension (Smart, 1989: 12–21).

‘Confucianism’ literally means the tradition and doctrine of *literati* scholars. In fact, it is more than the values of a group of people. It contains a socio-political programme, an ethical system, and a religious tradition. It functions as an underlying ideology and a guiding principle permeating the way of life in China and informing the cultures of many other East Asian countries.

Confucian doctrines are primarily explored and illustrated in the Confucian classics, and are also enriched, transformed and extended at the hands of many generations of Confucian masters and students. The interpretation of Confucian principles changes with the times, and we can therefore observe a number of distinct phases or stages in the process of Confucian evolution. Confucianism was the dominant school of thought and orthodox ideology for the most part of two thousand years, exercising both dogmatic and dynamic functions. It was dogmatic in maintaining and strengthening its dominance, but it was also flexible enough to adapt to different environments and situations, shaping and reshaping itself constantly and synthesising new ideas from other schools. It is essentially a Chinese tradition, primarily reflecting the Chinese attitude towards life and the world, although of course it has spread also to other East Asian nations, flourishing in both a distinctively Korean and Japanese form.

Any adequate understanding of Confucianism, past and present, will depend upon a thorough examination of all its dimensions, phases and forms as well as the interplay between it and its social environment. Each of these dimensions is in itself a miniature of the whole tradition, embodying the fundamental principles of Confucianism and at the same time reflecting other dimensions in its own distinctive way. Can we single out from the many dimensions the one which is more important than the others and by which Confucianism may be defined? Many modern scholars and students in Confucian Studies have attempted to answer this question, yet Confucianism demonstrates an ability to cross the boundaries of the traditionally defined subjects in the West, therefore the variety of its presentations has made it almost impossible to be clearly

defined. Even so, some of them still argued that Confucianism must have some essential characteristics that serve to set it apart from other traditions and to preserve its distinctiveness, and that it should be possible to define Confucianism in its relation either to ethics, politics or religion.

AN ETHICAL SYSTEM?

Morality has been characteristic of Confucian theory and practice. It was on the foundation of Confucianism that various codes of moral life, rules of propriety, patterns of behaviour and guidelines for social and daily life were produced and enhanced. Confucianism underlined, and perhaps to a smaller extent continues to underline, the basic structure of society and community, to orient the life of the people and to define their moral standards and ethical ideal in most parts of East Asia.

Considering the central position of morality in Confucianism and the significance of Confucian ethics for society, some Western scholars have concluded that the moral dimension is so essential for Confucianism that Confucianism itself can be defined as a form of ethics. A number of prominent scholars hold this position. For them, 'Confucianism . . . was essentially a system of ethics' (Needham, 1970: 24-5); 'What is called in the West "Confucianism" is . . . the traditional view of life and code of manner of the Chinese gentry' (Zaehner, 1988: 370); and Confucianism should be viewed only as 'a set of behavioural patterns' (Tu *et al.*, 1992: 40).

As a moral tradition, Confucianism demonstrates many features in common with other moral systems in the world. For example, Confucian ethics emphasises that both inner motive and its external results must be taken into account when we evaluate a person or his/her conduct. In this sense, it is both deontological and consequentialistic. Confucius repeatedly taught that while it was important to observe ancient rituals strictly, it was even more important to have a sincere heart and a devoted spirit: 'For if a person lacks humaneness (*ren*) within, then what is the value of performing rituals? For if a person lacks humaneness within, what is the use of performing music?' (*Lunyu*, 3: 3). Confucius took a holistic view of a person and believed that if we looked at how a person acted, examined his motives and his tastes, then it would be impossible for the person to conceal his real character from us (*Lunyu*, 2: 10).

Confucian morality revolves around family relationships, especially around the relationships between parents and children, between elder and



younger brothers, and between husband and wife. In these relationships, the primary emphasis is put on fulfilling responsibilities to each other with a sincere and conscientious heart. However, Confucian ethics is not confined to the family. It takes family virtues as the cornerstone of social order and world peace. Its logic is that the family is the basic unit of the human community and that harmonious family relationships will inevitably lead to a harmonious society and a peaceful state: 'If only everyone loved his parents and treated his elders with deference, the Empire would be at peace' (*Mengzi*, 4A: 11). For those who are members of the ruling class, their virtues in family affairs are even more significant for the whole country: 'When a ruler feels profound affection for his parents, the common people will naturally become humane' (*Lunyu*, 8: 2).

In the light of such points, some modern philosophers believe that the way by which the Confucian moral system was established is similar to that of virtue ethics. Moral instruction and ethical persuasion employed by Confucius and Mengzi are even said to be able to 'provide a radical alternative to the Aristotelian and Thomistic paradigms most often involved' in the West (Nivison, 1996: 2). As a system of virtue ethics, Confucianism is said to point to a solution for social problems arising from the lack of virtues and from the lack of will to practise virtues. With respect to the lack of virtues, the Confucian solution is a sort of persuasion enforced by rules of ritual/propriety, while for so-called 'weakness of will' it follows the path of self-cultivation and education.

Even if we agree with all these arguments, the question still remains: are these arguments enough for Confucianism to be defined as a system of ethics? There is no question that Confucianism is oriented towards morality and that ethics is the central part of its theory and practice. But what is meant by 'morality' in Confucianism is in fact quite different from that defined in Western ethics. In this respect, Henri Maspero's comments are to the point:

The central problem of the Doctrine of *Literati* in all ages was one of ethics; and that is probably what has so often led to the judgement that Confucianism was above all a morality, which is far from accurate . . . It is indeed a matter of a very particular ethics, quite different from what we generally understand by this word, and that is probably why it is so often omitted from Western accounts of Confucianism. In reality, the problem is the effect which the good or bad acts of man (and especially the governmental acts of the sovereign, representing humanity) have

upon the orderly progress of natural phenomena (the progress of stars, eclipses, earthquakes, floods, etc.) and upon human affairs (the deaths of sovereigns, revolts, overthrow of dynasties, etc.).

(Maspero, 1981: 71)

Indeed, Confucian ethics are not only about what we mean by ‘moral issues’, but also about politics, religion, education, psychology and metaphysics. All these aspects are integral to Confucian ethics. As morality is integrated with religion and politics, moral virtues become essential both for governing and for religious activities. As religion and metaphysics are part of morality, religious ritual and practice are a way of moral improvement. Taking these into account, we have to say that since Confucianism contains a special kind of morality, and since Confucian ethics cover a much wider area than in the West, it would be misleading simply to define Confucianism as a moral system.

#### AN OFFICIAL ORTHODOXY?

As the tradition of *literati*, Confucianism is characterised by its deep involvement in politics, aspired to by its ambition to bring order and peace to the world. After Confucianism gained predominance over all other schools, Confucian ethics gradually became a universal yardstick for behaviour and ideas, an orthodoxy that oriented conduct, thought and relationship. The moral and political requirements of Confucianism were crystallised as ‘Three Guiding Principles’ (*san gang*) and ‘Five Constant Regulations’ (*wu chang*), on which Confucian states were established. Among the three principles maintained and propagated by Confucianism, the first and foremost one is the subordination of a subject or minister to his ruler, which is followed by that of a son to his father and of a wife to her husband. The Five Regulations are actually five Confucian virtues, humaneness (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), ritual/propriety (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*) and faithfulness (*xin*), which are believed to be as constant and unchanging as natural laws, remaining the same for all time and guiding/ordering all other virtues. These principles and regulations are taken as the essence of life and the bonds of society. In this way, Confucianism extended the boundaries of moral codes from individual matters to social and political areas, not only providing the state with an ideological format, but also equipping the authority with the standards to judge behaviour and thoughts.

To emphasise the function and value of Confucianism in shaping and reshaping society and politics, some scholars argue that Confucianism was none other than an official state orthodoxy. In posing the question ‘What was the Confucianism that concerned society at large in late imperial China?’, for example, Kwang-Ching Liu and his companions obviously have in mind the answer of ‘an official state orthodoxy’ (Liu, 1990: 1, 53–100).

Confucius was seriously concerned with political irregularities. In order to bring peace to states and to restore the brilliant Way of the ancients in his time, he paid great attention to the rules of propriety. One of his concerns was about the discrepancy between names and reality, between language and action, and between rights and duties:

If names be not correct (*zheng*), language could not be fluently used.  
If language be not fluently used, affairs could not be carried on to  
success . . . ritual/propriety (*li*) and music could not be flourishing  
. . . the punishments could not be properly made . . . then the people  
would not know how to behave. (Lunyu, 13: 3)

What Confucius tried to argue here is that if a ruler, a subject, a father and a son do not fulfil their duties, they abuse their titles and violate the names by which they are defined. For Confucius, this is the beginning of the collapse of ritual/propriety and music, and is one of the causes which bring about social disorder and political chaos.

Having given preeminence to the role of a ruler in restoring the Way of the ancients, Confucius seldom emphasised the one-way loyalty of the subject or minister to the ruler. Rather, he insisted that the relationship must be reciprocal: ‘The ruler should employ his subject–ministers according to the rule of propriety/ritual (*li*), while subject–ministers should serve their ruler with loyalty (*zhong*)’ (Lunyu, 3: 19). However, to serve the purpose of imperial government, this theory of ‘rectification of names’ was, especially in the latter part of history, extended and interpreted as a conservative bulwark for an authoritarian regime in which absolute subordination of subject–minister to ruler guaranteed an effective administration. In this way, Confucianism became more than a system of morality or a school of thought, and it was the core of the state orthodoxy that every person, every event and every affair must be in accordance with what was required from them.