

## Confucius and Family Relationships in Ancient China

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**Confucius** is the Latin name for the Chinese philosopher Kung Fu-tze, who lived from 551 B.C. to 479 B.C. The philosophy we know as **Confucianism** comes from his speeches and writings and those of his followers. The main ideas of this great thinker are found in nine works called the **"Four Books"** and **"Five Classics."** 



**KEY WORDS:** Confucius, Confucianism, Four Books, Five Classics



### What is Confucianism?

Confucianism is an ethical system that deals with human behaviour and conduct. It is not a religion. During his lifetime, Confucius experienced growing disorder in Chinese society as the imperial government lost power. This chaos led Confucius to develop a system of ideal human relationships based on happiness, respect for elders and family unity. Confucius concentrated on how people behaved toward each other.

These human relationships formed the basis of society, government and justice.

Confucius believed that people naturally desire to live with other people in a society. It is only in a society that people can reach their full potential. Therefore, it is important for people to behave properly in society.

# **Ancient China Learning Series**

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Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden

604-662-3207 ext 205, education@vancouverchinesegarden.com

www.vancouverchinesegarden.com





### The Five Basic Relationships

Confucius believed that if people learned their particular roles and practiced them correctly, there would be order in the family, community and government. Each person was to strive to be polite, honest, hardworking, respectful and wise. A father was supposed to be a "good father", loving his family and providing for them. A ruler or emperor was obliged to be like a father to his subjects. Within the family and in society, people had to learn a complex set of rules which governed how to behave and showed them how to fit in society.

Confucius devised five principal relationships in which most people are involved. These relationships were (1) ruler and subject; (2) father and son; (3) elder brother and younger brother; (4) husband and wife; and (5) friend and friend. All, but the last, involve the authority of one person over another. Power and the right to rule belong to superiors over subordinates; that is, to older people

over younger people, to men over women.

Each person had to give **obedience and respect to "superiors"**; the subject to his

ruler, the wife to her husband, the son to his

parents, and the younger brother to the older

brother. **The "superior," however, owed lov- ing responsibility to the "inferior".** 

Confucius placed great importance on the family. Family life was seen as a training ground for life in society. It is at home that the child learned to deal with problems that would be faced later in life and the family was responsible for educating the child to be a good member of society. Confucius emphasized the importance of education, which aimed to turn people into good family members, responsible members of society, and good subjects of the emperor.

#### **KEY THOUGHTS:**

Must strive to be polite, honest, hardworking, respectful and wise

All people needed to learn a complex set of rules and to understand where they fit in

Obedience and respect to "superiors"

In return,
"Superior"
owed loving
responsibility to
inferior

Family life is training ground for life in society

Importance of education



## Marriage

An ideal marriage was arranged by two families with Confucian principles guiding the process:

"...she shall be of a family of a high standard of moral conduct and shall not be a daughter of a disloyal house, of a disorderly house, of a house with more than one generation of criminals or of a leprous house, nor be taken if the mother is dead and the daughter is old." Chapter IV, The Ethics of Confucius - The Familu

A bride moved into her new husband's family home, giving up ties with her own and becoming a daughter to her husband's mother. If her husband died, she was required to care for her parents-in-law and children. The idea of a widow remarrying was considered very improper; starving to death was considered less evil.

The goal of marriage rested in the hope that the new family would continue the family line of the man's clan by producing sons.

Daughters were often viewed as unwanted burdens because they would not be available to help care for their aged parents. Arranging a reputable marriage for a daughter required a dowry, goods and money which the bride took with her to her husband's family. Poor families were sometimes forced to sell daughters as servants, prostitutes, or second wives to save the family. In the worst of times, baby girls were sometimes left to die.



The sacred duty to have baby boys was a reason for men to have more than one wife. Wives and concubines and their children would live in the same household; the children would be ranked according to seniority. The children of second wives or concubines would recognize the first wife as their mother and would call their biological mother "aunt." The wives and concubines would refer to each other as "sisters."

**MARRIAGE FUN FACTS:** In Confucian society, marriage was considered to be a very formal affair between two families. Traditionally, it began with a ritual consisting of three letters:

- 1. The request letter was sent from the groom's family to the bride's family.
- 2. A gift letter accompanied the gifts of the groom's family to the bride's family shortly before the wedding.
- 3. The wedding letter was given on the day of the wedding, officially accepting the bride into the groom's family.

Once the bride arrived to the groom's home, an elaborate wedding ceremony would take place making them an officially married couple.



### Women in the Family

"The observance of propriety commences with careful attention to the relations between husband and wife." Chapter IV. The Ethics of Confucius - The Family

Girls and women were seen as weak, yielding and submissive, while boys and men were seen as stronger, active and dominant. Early Confucianism taught that certain virtues were appropriate to women: humility, subservience, obedience, cleanliness, and industry. Women had to behave respectfully,

put others first and themselves last, never mention their own good deeds or deny there own faults, endure insults and put up with mistreatment. Women went to bed late, got up early, never put off work morning or night, never refused to do domestic work and finished everything neatly and carefully. They had to serve their husbands with appropriate manner, rarely made jokes or laughed and kept themselves clean and pure.

**THINK ABOUT IT:** Are the key virtues of humility, subservience, obedience, cleanliness and industry still important for boys and girls today?

### Today

For 2,000 years Confucianism was the official philosophy of China. The only way a person could achieve an important position in the government or in society was by having a good knowledge of this philosophy. Confucianists believed that China was the only civilized community in the world and they looked down on the beliefs and cultures of other people. This attitude made it difficult for China to change its way of life when it was exposed to other cutures.

The early twentieth century saw China begin to give way to changes in the family and women's roles in society. Resolutions were adopted calling for equal rights for women, freedom for daughters to choose their own marriage partners, new rights for the inheritance of family property and the right to



divorce.

Today, Confucian values are still strong and China can still be seen as driven by the Confucian ethics to respect the elders and preserve the family unit. Other publications in the series:

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