

From the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd. Ed. (2003), Vol. 4, pp. 95-99.

CONFUCIANISM AND NEO-CONFUCIANISM

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The term “Confucianism” was originally coined by 16th century Jesuits missionaries to China as a neologism for the venerable, all-encompassing tradition rooted in Chinese culture and philosophical-religious thought that is variously referred to in the Chinese language as *rujia* (School of the *Literati*), *rujiao* (Traditions of the *Literati*), *rujue* (Teachings of the *Literati*) or simply as *ru* (*literati*). While the vision and ideas of CONFUCIUS* and his followers such as MENCIOUS (MENGZI)* and Xunzi (Hsün-tzu) played a key role in animating and enriching the *ru* tradition, the *ru* tradition itself *predated* Confucius. The efforts of MATTEO RICCI* and his Jesuit companions to canonize Confucius as the “founder” of Confucianism had more to do with missiological exigencies than being an accurate description of the *ru* movement in its socio-historical setting. In the absence of an appropriate term, the term “Confucianism” is used as a convenient label for the Chinese cultural-philosophical tradition shaped by Confucius and his followers beginning from the period of the Warring States (481-221 B.C.) and leading up to the Song dynasty (A.D. 960-1279).

The term “Neo-Confucianism” is often used to refer to the developments in Confucian thought from the Song dynasty to the collapse of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). It has been similarly criticized for its misleading portrayal of a unified and normative movement, overgeneralizing the reality of a diverse plurality of vibrant, competing schools of thought in China during the period from that included *Daoxue* (School of the Way), *Lixue* (School of Principle), and *Xinxue* (School of the Mind), to name a few. These schools regarded Confucius as their inspiration and his teachings as a common cultural-philosophical heritage, but developed his ideas in innovative ways that he would never have recognized. The problem is compounded by the fact that the Chinese themselves never saw fit to coin a single term to describe the diversity of competing schools.

Canonical Texts. One major characteristic of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism is the absence of any creeds or official dogmas. The traditional Confucian corpus is identified with the Five Classics (*Wujing*) that Confucius supposedly edited: Book of Poetry (*Shijing*), Book of History (*Shujing*), Book of Rites (*Liji*), Book of Changes (*Yijing*) and the Spring and Autumn Annals (*Chunqiu*). A sixth Classic, the Book of Music (*Yuejing*) is no longer extant. Although *Zhu Xi* (*Chuhsi*), the great Neo-Confucian philosopher formulated a canonical list of the Four Books (*Sishu*) – *Lunyu* (Confucian Analects), *Mengzi* (Mencius), *Daxue* (“Great Learning”) and *Zhongyong* (“Doctrine of the Mean”) for use in the Chinese civil service examinations from 1313 to 1905, there was no official orthodoxy or revealed dogmas on how these Four Books or the Five Classics were to be interpreted and appropriated. This paved the way for the emergence of diverse creative and novel interpretations, all claiming to be faithful to the teachings of the First Teacher himself.

Existential Quest. The point of convergence of various schools within Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism is the existential-religious questions of the ultimate values that shape human living: “What does it mean to be human as opposed to barbarians or animals?” “What makes life worth living as humans?” “What are the ideals and virtues that are needed to inspire everyone from

emperor to peasant to participate in the creation and maintenance of a harmonious and civilized society as opposed to chaos and destruction?” “Where are these ideals and virtues to be found?”

The responses to these questions that Confucius and his successors formulated reveal a dynamic, relational understanding of “knowing” in Chinese thinking that is not concerned with discovering the truth via abstract, essentialist conceptualizations of the natural world. Instead, “knowing” for Confucius and his followers is about knowing how to be adept in one’s relations with others, how to make use of the possibilities arising from these relations, and how to trust in the validity of these relations as the cornerstone for familial and social harmony. Hence, knowing how to be a ruler or a parent is not knowing the proper behavioral qualities that define an ideal-type ruler or parent, but knowing how to relate genuinely to one’s subjects or one’s children, fulfill one’s responsibilities toward them, and in turn to earn their respect, deference and their trust.

All schools of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism never begin their quest for authentic human living *ex nihilo*, but rely on innovative, contextualized appropriations of ancient folk traditions and the traditions of the Former Kings (*Xianwang*) – the legendary sage-kings Yao, Shun and Yu, and the first three rulers of the Zhou dynasty, Wen, Wu and Zhou Gong (the Duke of Zhou) – to provide answers as to what is appropriate in each age. Confucians and Neo-Confucians have been adept at adding interpretive layers of meaning to the classic terminology rather than creating entirely new systems of thought in their existential quest for meaningfulness in human living.

Achieving the Fullness of Being Human. It is important to recognize the interrelationality and intersubjectivity of the Confucian and Neo-Confucian quest that seeks to realize the fullness of *renxing* (*jen-hsing*, “human nature”). The ideal Confucian is always and everywhere one among many, to be fully human in relation to others within the wider world of humanity, and seeking the ultimate, existential values within human living. Confucius called this existential quest the highest virtue of *ren* (*jen*, “human-ness”). Not to seek *ren* (“human-ness”) is tantamount to a denial of the fullness of one’s humanity in relation to others. Various schools of Neo-Confucianism would propose different methodological approaches and call it by different names (e.g., “principle” or *li*), but the quest remains the same.

Human Nature. While Confucius himself never spoke much about human nature (*renxing*, *jen-hsing*), it became a major contentious point between MENCIUS (MENGZI)* and Xunzi (Hsün-tzu), the two major Confucian philosophers representing the idealist and rationalist wings of Confucianism during the period of the Warring States (481-221 B.C.). Mencius argued that “original human nature” (*benxing*) at one’s birth is good but incipient and underdeveloped. At birth, the *benxing* comprises the four virtuous tendencies of commiseration, shame, deference and preference that are incipient, underdeveloped and fragile. With proper education and self-cultivation, these tendencies could mature and blossom into the four cardinal virtues of “human-ness” (*ren*), appropriateness (*yi*), propriety (*li*) and wisdom (*zhi*) in a fully developed human nature (*renxing*). Xunzi rejected Mencius’ position, insisting that the inherent human tendency is toward evil, and goodness can only be imposed externally through education and disciplined self-cultivation. Although Mencius and Xunzi had diametrically opposite understandings of human nature, they converged in agreement on the need for proper education and personal self-cultivation. While

Xunzi's position found a receptive response during the Han Dynasty, his interpretation was marginalized and eventually supplanted by Mencius' idealist understanding, which became the authoritative interpretation accepted by the various Neo-Confucian schools.

Five Constants (*Wu chang*). The Confucian existential quest for meaningfulness is not limited to the human-self, but is contextualized in a unity of the cosmological, social, familial and individual dimensions of human living. Confucius and his followers called this the Way of Heaven and its Mandate (*Tianming*) for virtuous living. The classical Confucian paradigm for virtuous living is the proper self-cultivation of the "Five Constants" (*Wu chang*) – *ren* (*jen*, "human-ness"), *yi* (*i*, "appropriateness"), *li* (propriety), *zhi* (*chih*, "wisdom in thought and action"), and *xin* (*hsin*, "keeping to one's word"). Merely knowing these virtues in an intellectual, theoretical sense is not enough. Each school within Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism insists on the need for ~~o~~actual personal self-cultivation of the "Five Constants," each proposing different approaches to this quest.

Five Relations (*Wu lun*). Another classical Confucian paradigm is the Five Relations (*Wu lun*), which defines the five foundational relations of a Confucian society: parent-child, ruler-subject, husband-wife, elder-younger sibling, and friend-friend. The first four relations are hierarchical relations, while the fifth is a relation of equals. Within the Confucian conception of society, there are no strangers in society, the basic relation is at least friend-to-friend. The Five Relations reveals that the hierarchical ordering of familial relations is the principal foundation upon which complex, interlocking human relations in the Chinese society are constructed. Before a person is able to do great things in society, that person must first be a proper spouse, parent, child, sibling or friend to another.

Filiality and Ancestor Veneration. For Confucians and Neo-Confucians, the proper relational ordering of society as a human macrocosm takes the family as its inspiration and starting point. Society is ordered and harmony is promoted based at all levels based on *filiality*, the source of order and harmony within a family. Ritually, filiality is expressed through ancestor veneration offered by son to father, by scholar-gentry to Confucius as ancestor *par excellence*, and by emperor to his ancestors and to *Tian* (Heaven) for the well-being of the nation. Because filiality together with its public ritual expression of ancestor veneration became the glue that held religion, culture and society together in imperial China, the attempts by some missionaries in the 17th and 18th centuries to prohibit Chinese Catholic converts from participating in ancestor veneration were viewed as attacks on filiality and on the very cohesion of Chinese culture and society. This triggered the CHINESE RITES' CONTROVERSY* that lasted more than three centuries.

Emergence of Neo-Confucian Schools. After centuries of competing intellectually and spiritually with DAOISM* and BUDDHISM,* Confucian scholars in the Song Dynasty initiated a process of reinterpreting traditional Confucian classical texts to formulate new answers that responded to the challenges brought by Daoism and Buddhism. This process gave rise to new innovative schools of thought. This revival and revitalization of Confucianism started with the writings of the Northern Song scholars Zhou Dunyi (Chou Tun-i, 1017-1073), Shao Yong (Shao Yung, 1011-1077), Zhang Zai (Chang Tsai, 1020-1077), and the brothers Cheng Hao (Ch'eng Hao, 1032-1085) and Cheng Yi (Ch'eng I, 1033-1077).

Early Neo-Confucian Developments. While overtly condemning BUDDHISM* and DAOISM,* these scholars were busy combining metaphysical elements borrowed from those two religions with traditional themes from Confucian classics such as the Analects, the Mencius, the Book of Changes, the Book of Rituals. In doing so, the Neo-Confucians did not view their actions as distorting and betraying their predecessors' vision. On the contrary, the innovations were adopted to justify and strengthen the Confucian vision of life that was under threat from its two main rivals. Nevertheless, what emerged from the ruminations of these scholars was a novel and innovative metaphysical framework for Confucianism that was designed to counter the attractiveness of rival Daoist and Buddhist metaphysical systems. Zhou Dunyi (Chou Tun-i) and Shao Yong (Shao Yung) had reinterpreted Daoist metaphysical diagrams to offer an nascent metaphysical cosmology for Confucianism. Zhang Zai (Chang Tsai) proposed a materialist understanding of *qi* (*chi*, "energy") as the building block of everything (i.e., spirit, matter and energy) in the universe. The two brothers Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi formulated the theory of "principle" (*li*) as the universal and primordial potentiality from which all living things are ordered.

Zhu Xi and the School of Principle. It was the great Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi (Chuxi, 1130-1200) who synthesized the efforts of these five Neo-Confucian scholars into a coherent metaphysical framework that later became the foundational tenets of his rationalist School of Principle (*Lixue*). The starting point for Zhu Xi is "principle" (*li*) as predictable and observable patterns of potentialities in the world upon which *qi* (energy) crystallizes and forms all living things. There was one universal and primordial *li* (principle) that is *objectively descriptive* (i.e., it describes *why* things are) and *morally prescriptive* (it prescribes *what* can be done to these things). Adapting the Mencian assertion that "original human nature" (*benxing*) is wholly good, Zhu Xi claimed that *li* (principle) is wholly good, and evil arises not from *li* (principle) but turgid *qi* (bad energy), which can be clarified through disciplined self-cultivation. The purpose of education is to acquire knowledge of the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of *li* (principle) through the "investigation of all things" (*ge wu*). He insisted on the necessity of investigating all things, arguing that if one merely investigate one thing, there is no basis for differentiating particularity from universality within the *li* (principle) that constitutes that one thing.

Wang Yangming and the School of the Mind. Wang Yangming (1472-1529), the idealist Neo-Confucian scholar of the Ming dynasty who synthesized the principal teachings of the School of the Mind (*Xinxue*), rejected the rationalist approach of Zhu Xi. He propounded a doctrine of the "unity of knowledge and action" (*zhi xing he yi*) based on the notion that principle (*li*) is found wholly within the mind (*xin*), because the mind is the repository of the innate knowledge of all goodness (*liangzhi*). To investigate these moral principles is to "rectify the mind" (*chengyi*). Thus, for Wang Yangming, the "investigation of things for attaining knowledge" (*ge wu zhi zhi*) is unnecessary, all that is needed is a contemplative and introspective "rectification of the mind" (*chengyi*).

See also: BUDDHISM-CHINA; CHINESE PHILOSOPHY; CHINESE RELIGIONS; CHINESE RITES' CONTROVERSY; CONFUCIUS (KONG FUZI); DAOISM (TAOISM); and MENCIUS (MENGZI)

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