

Comparison between Confucian and Western Philosophy

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There are some fundamental differences between eastern and western philosophy, but they have similar goals. The western-style philosophical system aims to find meaning and purpose in life, while the eastern philosophy strives to find truth in reality. These two systems also tend to be quite different from one another, which is why these distinctions are problematic. Westerners 'discovered' eastern philosophy in the 18th and 19th centuries, and tended to split it into western-style philosophy and eastern-style philosophy, and this division reflects that.

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Who was Confucius?

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- ▶ Original name **Kongqiu**, literary name **Zhongni**
- ▶ Born 551 BCE, Qufu, state of Lu [now in Shandong province, China]
- ▶ Died 479 BCE, Lu
- ▶ China's most famous teacher, philosopher, and political theorist
- ▶ Warrior father, Shu-liang He, served as a district steward in Lu, but already an old man when Confucius was born.
- ▶ Series of modest positions with the Jisun clan led to more important appointments in the Lu government, first as minister of works and then as minister of crime. He resigned and left after a power struggle that didn't go his way.
- ▶ After 14 years exile he ended up back in Lu as adviser to the Duke Ai of Lu (484 BCE)

Confucius, Chinese **Kongfuzi** or **K'ung-fu-tzu**, (born 551 BC, Ch'ü-fu, state of Lu—died 479, Lu), Ancient Chinese teacher, philosopher, and political theorist. Born into a poor family, he managed stables and worked as a bookkeeper while educating himself.

He served in government posts, eventually becoming minister of justice in Lu, but his policies attracted little interest. After a 12-year self-imposed exile during which his circle of students expanded, he returned to Lu at age 67 to teach and write.

Confucianism was not successfully spread by Confucius. Instead, the scholar Mencius, who was born more than a century after Confucius died, adapted his philosophy and preached in different states.

Confucianism before the emergence of Dong Zhongshu (c. 179–c. 104 BCE) was not particularly influential. Nonetheless, the gradual Confucianization of Han politics began soon after the founding of the dynasty.

By the reign of Wudi (the “Martial Emperor”; 141–87 BCE), who inherited the task of consolidating power in the central Han court, Confucianism was deeply entrenched in the central bureaucracy.

Although transformed over time, it is still the substance of learning, the source of values, and the social code of the Chinese. Its influence has also extended to other countries, particularly Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

Although often grouped with the major historical religions, Confucianism differs from them by not being an organized religion. Nonetheless, it spread to other East Asian countries under the influence of Chinese literate culture and has exerted a profound influence on spiritual and political life.

His teachings

- ▶ Known as the first teacher in China who wanted to make education broadly available
- ▶ Instrumental in establishing the art of teaching as a vocation.
- ▶ Also established ethical, moral, and social standards that formed the basis of a way of life known as Confucianism
- ▶ Mastery of 6 Arts: ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and arithmetic
- ▶ Saw education as process of constant self-improvement and its primary function was training of noblemen for public service
- ▶ Life and thoughts recorded in the *Lunyu* (*Analects*)

Confucius considered himself a transmitter for the values of earlier periods which he claimed had been abandoned in his time. Mastery of the six arts—ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and arithmetic—and familiarity with history and poetry enabled him to begin a brilliant teaching career in his thirties. Confucius saw education as a process of constant self-improvement and held that its primary function was the training of noblemen (*junzi*). He saw public service as the natural consequence of education and sought to revitalize Chinese social institutions, including the family, school, community, state, and kingdom. One of the deepest teachings of Confucius may have been the superiority of personal exemplification over explicit rules of behavior. His moral teachings emphasized self-cultivation, emulation of moral exemplars, and the attainment of skilled judgment rather than knowledge of rules. Confucian ethics may, therefore, be considered a type of virtue ethics. His teachings rarely rely on reasoned argument, and ethical ideals and methods are conveyed indirectly, through allusion, innuendo, and even tautology. His teachings require examination and context to be understood. His life and thoughts are recorded in the *Lunyu* (*Analects*) but only many years after his death

6 Major Philosophical Schools

- ▶ Confucianism - the only effective system of government necessitated prescribed relationships for each individual: a king must be virtuous in order to rule the state properly. To Confucius, the functions of government and social stratification were facts of life to be sustained by ethical values.
- ▶ Legalism - human nature was incorrigibly selfish; accordingly, the only way to preserve the social order was to impose discipline from above, and to see to a strict enforcement of laws.
- ▶ Taoism - The focus is on the individual within the natural realm, rather than the individual within society. Accordingly, the goal of life for each individual is seeking to adjust oneself and adapting to the rhythm of nature, to follow the Way (tao) of the universe, and to live in harmony.
- ▶ Mohism – aim to re-evaluate behaviour, not emotions or attitudes. His epistemology can be regarded as primitive materialist empiricism. He believed that human cognition ought to be based on one's perceptions – one's sensory experiences, such as sight and hearing – instead of imagination or internal logic, elements founded on the human capacity for abstraction.
- ▶ Naturalism - attempted to explain the universe in terms of basic forces in nature: the complementary agents of yin (dark, cold, wet, passive, contracting, negative) and yang (light, hot, dry, active, expanding, positive) and the Five Elements or Five Phases (water, fire, wood, metal, and earth).
- ▶ Names or Logicians - focused on definition and logic. It is said to have parallels with that of the Ancient Greek sophists or dialecticians.

Confucianism was not alone in this period, and Legalism was dominant at state level earlier. Taoists broadly retreated from active engagement in government and lacked influence on events while remaining a minority strand of thought. Other schools were neither as influential nor long-lasting

Thinking — Eastern (Chinese) vs. Western

Thought	Eastern (Chinese)	Western
Perception	Holistic	Focused
Priority	Society	The individual
Bad Behavior	Shame	Guilt
Goal	Harmony	Truth

<https://www.chinahighlights.com/>

This is a modern view which while over simplistic, nonetheless resonates with other deeper analysis

Timeline for early Greek and Chinese Philosophers

Greek Philosophers	Chinese Philosophers
	Before 475 BCE
Thales of Miletus (c. 624 – 546 BCE). Of the Milesian school. Believed that all was made of water.	Guan Zhong (died in 645 BCE)
Pythagoras of Samos (c. 580 – c. 500 BCE). Of the Ionian School. Believed the deepest reality to be composed of numbers, and that souls are immortal.	Confucius (traditionally 551–479 BCE) — founder of Confucianism
Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 535 – c. 475 BCE). Of the Ionians. Emphasized the mutability of the universe.	Sunzi (c. 544–c. 496 BCE) — military philosopher
Parmenides of Elea (c. 515 – 450 BCE). Of the Eleatics. Reflected on the concept of Being.	Laozi (probably 6th century BCE) — founder of Taoism
	475–230 BCE
Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (c. 500 – 428 BCE). Of the Ionians. Pluralist.	Mozi (c. 470–c. 390 BCE) — political and religious philosopher
Zeno of Elea (c. 490 – 430 BCE). Of the Eleatics. Known for his paradoxes.	Mencius (most accepted dates: 372–289 BCE; other possible dates: 385–303 BCE or 302 BCE) — political philosopher, social contract
Protagoras of Abdera (c. 481 – 420 BCE). Sophist. Early advocate of relativism.	Gongsun Longzi (fl. 300 BCE) — School of Names
Socrates of Athens (c. 470 – 399 BCE). Emphasized virtue ethics. In epistemology, understood dialectic to be central to the pursuit of truth.	Hui Shi (4th century BCE) — School of Names
Critias of Athens (c. 460 – 413 BCE). Atheist writer and politician.	Shang Yang (died 338 BCE) — Legalist bureaucrat
Democritus of Abdera (c. 450 – 370 BCE). Founding Atomist.	Shen Buhai (died 337 BCE) — Legalist bureaucrat
Antisthenes (c. 444 – 365 BCE). Founder of Cynicism. Pupil of Socrates.	Yang Zhu (370–319 BCE) — Usually classified as a Hedonist
Aristippus of Cyrene (c. 440 – 366 BCE). A Cyrenaic. Advocate of ethical hedonism.	Zhuang Zhou (Zhuangzi, c. 4th century BCE) — major Taoist philosopher
Xenophon (c. 427 – 355 BCE). Historian.	Xunzi (c. 310–237 BCE) — Confucianist, pessimistic about human nature
Plato (c. 427 – 347 BCE). Famed for view of the transcendental forms. Advocated polity governed by philosophers.	Zou Yan (305?–240? BCE) — School of Naturalists, Yin-Yang, Five Elements
Diogenes of Sinope (c. 404 – 323 BCE). Cynic.	Han Feizi (died 233 BCE) — totalistic legalism
Xenocrates (c. 396 – 314 BCE). Disciple of Plato.	
Aristotle (c. 384 – 322 BCE). A polymath whose works ranged across all philosophical fields.	

You can see here how the Greek and Chinese philosophers were operating in parallel. The political context might have contributed to the differences of emphasis – Greek civilisation comprised rival city states with little but a broadly common language to define the culture, while China was a much bigger and more populous area with larger rival states paying greater or lesser lip-service to a central imperial dynasty and much stronger common cultural identities.

Conclusions & Questions

- ▶ Inevitably a superficial “taster” of the area
- ▶ Buddhism also worthy of study
- ▶ Mistake to think that only “Western” philosophy contributed to current thinking
- ▶ Confucius like Jesus and Mohammed left no contemporary writings, but were later documented from handed down oral testimony
- ▶ Like Christianity in Rome, Confucianism became “adopted” as official state doctrine in China

To summarise a few thoughts – as per slide – now over to you.