

World Humanities

Background: Chinese Civilization

THE MASTER SAID, *“If the government seeks to rule by decree, and to maintain order by the use of punishment, the people will seek to evade punishment and have no sense of shame. But if the government leads by virtue and governs through the rules of propriety, the people will feel shame and seek to correct their mistakes.”*

That statement is from the *Analects*, a collection of remarks attributed to the Chinese philosopher Confucius that were gathered together by his disciples and published after his death in the fifth century B.C.E. Confucius lived at a time when Chinese society was in a state of increasing disarray. The political principles that had governed society since the founding of the Zhou dynasty six centuries earlier were widely ignored, and squabbling principalities scuffled for primacy as the power of the Zhou court steadily declined. The common people groaned under the weight of an oppressive manorial¹ system that left them at the mercy of their aristocratic lords.

In the midst of this turmoil, Confucius traveled the length of the kingdom observing events and seeking employment as a political counselor. In the process, he attracted a number of disciples, to whom he expounded a set of ideas that in later years served as the guiding principles for the Chinese Empire. Some of his ideas are strikingly modern in their thrust. Among them is the revolutionary proposition that government depends on the will of the people.

On the other hand, the principles that Confucius sought to instill into his society had, in his view, all been previously established many centuries in the past—during an alleged “golden age” at the dawn of Chinese history. In that sense, Confucius was a profoundly conservative thinker, seeking to preserve elements in

¹ Similar to a feudal system, based on aristocratic control

Chinese history that had been neglected by his contemporaries. The dichotomy² between tradition and change was thus a key component in Confucian philosophy that would be reflected in many ways over the course of the next 2,500 years.

The civilization that produced Confucius had originated more than fifteen hundred years earlier along the two great river systems of East Asia, the Yellow and the Yangtze. This vibrant new civilization, which we know today as ancient China, expanded gradually into neighboring areas. By the third century B.C.E., it had emerged as a great empire, as well as the dominant cultural and political force in the region.

Like Sumer, Harappa, and Egypt, the civilization of ancient China began as a collection of autonomous villages cultivating food crops along a major river system. Improvements in agricultural techniques led to a food surplus and the growth of an urban civilization characterized by more complex political and social institutions, as well as new forms of artistic and intellectual creativity. Like its counterparts elsewhere, ancient China faced the challenge posed by the appearance of pastoral peoples on its borders. Unlike Harappa, Sumer, and Egypt, however, ancient China was able to surmount that challenge, and many of its institutions and cultural values survived intact down to the beginning of the twentieth century. For that reason, Chinese civilization is sometimes described as the oldest continuous civilization on earth

² a division into two especially mutually exclusive or contradictory groups or entities <the *dichotomy* between theory and practice. Websters.