

5th or 6th century**CONFUCIANISM ARRIVES IN JAPAN**

Confucianism played a leading role in the attempt of Japanese rulers to centralize power in the sixth and seventh centuries and has continued to exert considerable influence on Japanese scholarship, political life, and social relations into the modern period.

LOCALE: Japan

CATEGORIES: Cultural and intellectual history; philosophy; religion

KEY FIGURES

Shōtoku Taishi (574-622), imperial prince, regent to the empress Suiko

Wani (fl. late fourth-early fifth century), Korean Confucian scholar

SUMMARY OF EVENT

The system of thought known as Confucianism in the West developed in China between 1000 and 250 B.C.E. and was introduced to Japan from Korea in the fifth or sixth century C.E., most likely in 404. The philosopher Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.) combined earlier traditions with his own innovations and interpretations to create a system of thought.

The essence of the teachings of Confucius is that there are natural forces underpinning all social relationships, including those between rulers and subjects. He taught that leaders were bound to rule by moral example, and if they did not, their countries would fall into ruin. He also put forward the idea that people should cultivate themselves by studying classical virtues as well as music and traditional rituals. The *Lunyu* (late sixth-early fifth centuries B.C.E.; *The Analects*, 1861), a collection of the philosopher's sayings compiled by his disciples, is the most direct expression of Confucian philosophy. In addition, Confucius is said to have written or edited a number of other important works such as *Yijing* (eighth to third century B.C.E.; English translation, 1876; also known as *Book of Changes*, 1986), *Shujing* (compiled after first century B.C.E.; English translation in *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. 5, Parts 1 and 2, 1872; commonly known as *Classic of History*), *Shijing* (compiled fifth century B.C.E.; *The Book of Songs*, 1937), and *Chunqiu* (fifth century B.C.E.; *The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen*, 1872; commonly known as *Spring and Autumn Annals*). The works, along with several other volumes put together by the disciples of Confucius such as the *Xiaojing* (fifth cen-

tury B.C.E.; *The Classic of Filial Piety*, 1899) and *Liji* (compiled fifth century B.C.E.; *The Liki*, 1885; commonly known as *Classic of Rituals*), became the canon that came to serve as the foundation of intellectual life across most of Asia.

During the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.), Confucian thought became the dominant philosophical force in Chinese political life. Careful study of the Confucian classics was necessary to pursue a career in the civil service. During this period, the culture of China was widely considered to be more advanced than those of its neighbors, and Chinese thought and administrative practices were held in high regard.

During the fourth century C.E., Confucian thought spread to the Korean peninsula, where it gained considerable influence among the ruling class. Tradition states that Wani, a Confucian scholar, traveled from the Korean kingdom of Paekche to Japan in the early fifth century; one likely date accepted by most scholars is 404. Wani brought with him *The Analects* of Confucius and other important texts. According to the chronicles *Kojiki* (712 C.E.; *Records of Ancient Matters*, 1883) and the *Nihon shoki* (compiled 720 C.E.; *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*, 1896; best known as *Nihon shoki*), Wani became an influential administrator at the court of the Yamato emperor. The books that he brought with him, however, came to have an even greater influence. They played a leading role in the diffusion of the Chinese writing system in Japan, thereby making the country literate, and they also brought a new direction to the political life of the Japanese archipelago.

The power of the imperial family at the Yamato court was limited, and influential regional clans presented an obstacle to truly centralized rule. In the sixth and seventh centuries, there was an attempt to centralize power, and Confucianism proved to be an effective tool in this struggle. In the mid-sixth century, the Soga family, a powerful regional clan, attempted to institute Buddhism, another philosophical and religious system that came to Japan from the continent, sparking a serious conflict with two other clans, the Nakatomi and Mononobe, who had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. After a bout of fierce fighting, the Soga emerged victorious. Through their power at court, the prestige of Buddhism, and strategic marriages within the imperial family, the Soga came to hold sway over the court. Therefore, it was to their advantage to press for a stronger central government.



Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.). (Hulton|Archive by Getty Images)

In 604, Shōtoku Taishi, a member of the Soga family and the regent for the empress Suiko (r. 593-628), promulgated the Seventeen Article Constitution, designed to increase the power of the central court. Shōtoku Taishi was a devout Buddhist, and although there are many references to that faith in the document, the work's political content is obviously Confucian in character. The document enforces the idea that loyalty to one's lord and one's father, a fundamental part of Confucian ethics, is to be valued above all else. The work also stresses the idea that Japan's leaders are bound to provide just rule, another concept that can be considered a cornerstone of Confucian ideology. The presence of Confucian ideas in the Seventeen Article Constitution shows just how great a role the Chinese system of thought had come to play in Japanese political and ethical philosophy in the few centuries after Confucianism was introduced from Korea.

Within a few centuries of the introduction of Confucianism to Japan, the Chinese ideological system had become an important part of almost all aspects of Japanese political life.

SIGNIFICANCE

The impact on Japanese culture of the introduction of Confucian thought in the sixth century was as great, if not greater, than the changes brought on by contact with Western ideas in the nineteenth. Aside from its tremendous influence on Japanese politics and institutional history, Confucianism shaped Japanese social relations and such fundamentally important ideas as the concept of gender roles. Confucianism shares with Buddhism and Shintō, the native faith, a dominant role in shaping the Japanese cultural tradition.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the ideas of the ancient Chinese philosopher came to hold sway over Japanese intellectual life in the form of neo-Confucianism. During these two centuries, a series of military leaders were trying to bring the fragmented political landscape under some type of central control. However, even before neo-Confucianism became the new intellectual orthodoxy, Confucian rhetoric had played a large role in the house laws and edicts of the various regional lords of the Warring States period (1467-1615). In addition, *bushidō*, the philosophy of the warrior class, with its emphasis on loyalty and moderation in personal conduct, bears the unmistakable mark of Confucian influence.

During the Tokugawa period (1603-1867), the influence of Confucian ideas was not limited to the political life of the nation. The Confucian texts were widely read, and many members of both the upper and lower classes used the texts to learn to read. This resulted in Confucian concepts being ingrained in the thought of all classes. Some modern-day scholars have even argued that Confucian ideas inculcated in the merchant class something akin to what German sociologist Max Weber termed the Protestant work ethic. The presence of these values in Japanese economic life has been used to explain the tremendous economic growth that the nation experienced after 1868, the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912). In addition, some scholars have identified aspects of Confucian ideology that have continued to influence Japanese business relationships and organization in the post-World War II period.

Finally, Confucian ideology underlay the system of imperial government that developed after the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate. The bond of loyalty that was expected to exist between citizens, soldiers, and the emperor was most often defined in Confucian terms. Important documents such as the "Imperial Rescript on Education" and the "Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors" were masterworks of Confucian rhetoric.