



Background Information on Confucianism

Directions: The following information will help your group create a character collage on Confucianism. Each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Confucianism is a belief system based on the teachings of Kong Fu Zi (called Confucius by Europeans), who lived in China from 551 to 479 B.C. Confucius lived when the Zhou empire, which had provided peace and stability for centuries, was weakening. With no central authority in control, war between provincial lords increased and poverty and crime rose. This violence and moral decay troubled Confucius. Confucius urged people to uphold the great traditions and customs of the past, so society could again be well ordered. To return to the past, he suggested a code of conduct based on strict moral ideas.

The Confucian code of conduct stressed virtues (good actions), or *li*, such as respect, loyalty, honesty, hard work, politeness, and generosity. It also established five basic relationships that created a hierarchical (ordered) society: (1) ruler and subject, (2) parent and child, (3) husband and wife, (4) elder sibling (brother or sister) and younger sibling, and (5) friend and friend. In each relationship, individuals had responsibilities and duties toward one another. The fifth relationship was the only one in which the persons were considered equals and had equal responsibility to respect and aid each other in times of difficulty. By contrast, in the first four relationships, one person was viewed as superior and worthy of respect and obedience. In turn, this superior person was expected to set a good example of moral behavior. According to Confucius, evil rulers were responsible for evil actions of their subjects. Similarly, a father was responsible for his children's good or bad behavior.



- What problems was Confucius concerned about?
- What behaviors did the Confucian code of conduct stress?
- What were the responsibilities of individuals in each of the five basic relationships?

Because the family was the basic unit of Chinese society, Confucius emphasized family relationships. He stressed *filial piety*, or repaying the kindness of one's parents, elders, and family ancestors. A child was supposed to be absolutely loyal to and obedient and respectful of his or her parents. In return, parents were obligated to provide for the child and raise him or her with proper manners and respect for others. Younger siblings were supposed to respect and obey their older siblings; older siblings were expected to be responsible and model good behavior. In addition, a wife was supposed to love and obey her husband absolutely, and the husband, in turn, was obliged to provide for and be good to his wife. Confucianism perceived women as inferior—as a child, a girl was supposed to obey her father; as a wife, a woman was supposed to obey her husband; and when she was old and her children were grown, a mother was supposed to obey her sons.