

The wisest man leads way

Confucius was a man of many talents - philosopher, teacher, politician, and zither player, writes **Sarah Brennan**

Illustration: Pearl Law

Who was the wisest man in China? I bet you're thinking Confucius! But exactly who was this extraordinary man who so deeply influenced thought, education and government in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam for more than 2,000 years?

Confucius (or Kong Fuzi, meaning Master Kong) was born in 551 BCE near Qufu in the ancient state of Lu, where Shandong (山東) province lies today.

His father was a respected district commander who died when Confucius was just three years old. Although they were poor, his mother made sure that he received an excellent education.

Confucius married at the age of 19 and had one son and two daughters. At first, he worked in menial jobs, as a shepherd, cowherd, clerk and bookkeeper. But after his mother died in 527 BCE, he began his lifelong career as a teacher of "disciples" who paid him for guidance in the principles of good behaviour and government.

Confucius believed that the goal of education was to teach how to live with integrity.

His main concepts were:

- *Ren* or "human kindness", embodied in the famous Silver Rule of Confucianism: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you"
- *Li* or "the rites" which were guidelines for the proper conduct of gentlemen; and
- *De* or "virtue", which combined *Ren* and *Li*.

He also championed family loyalty, ancestor worship, and respect for elders by their children and for husbands by their wives. He insisted that his thoughts were not original, and simply reflected the ideals of ancient China.

At this time in China, the feudal power structure was breaking down



Fun facts

- Confucius was born in the Year of the Dog
- One of his teachers was Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism
- As a child, Confucius loved temple rituals so much that he used to hold make-believe ceremonies
- When teaching, he would break into song, play the zither, and dance with his followers

and crime was widespread. In Lu, powerful families were challenging the Duke's authority. Confucius was deeply troubled by this.

At the age of 52, he was appointed a chief magistrate, and a year later, the Minister of Crime. The result was a massive drop in crime.

The Duke's jealous neighbour, the Duke of Qi, cunningly sent the Duke 100 fine horses and 80 beautiful dancing girls, which distracted him so much that he neglected his duties, and Confucius resigned in disgust in 496 BCE.

Confucius went into exile for 14 years, travelling around China with his disciples.

He finally returned to Lu, spending the last years of his life studying the Chinese classics. But he never put his teaching principles into writing; that was left to his disciples, who collected them in the *Analects of Confucius*, which include

all his famous sayings. One of the most inspiring is: "These five things constitute perfect virtue: gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness and kindness".

Confucius died in 479 BCE. By the first Han Dynasty, two centuries later, his ideas had become the foundation of state ideology. By the 1700s, his teachings were influencing the Age of

Enlightenment in Europe. And today he is considered one of China's most influential teachers and its greatest moral philosopher.

Sarah Brennan is the author of the best-selling Chinese Calendar Tales and Dirty Story series. Check out www.sarah-brennan.com/

say it

respected (adj) 受尊敬的	concept (n) 概念	embodied (v) 體現
reflected (v) 反影	cunningly (adv) 狡猾地	ideology (n) 觀念