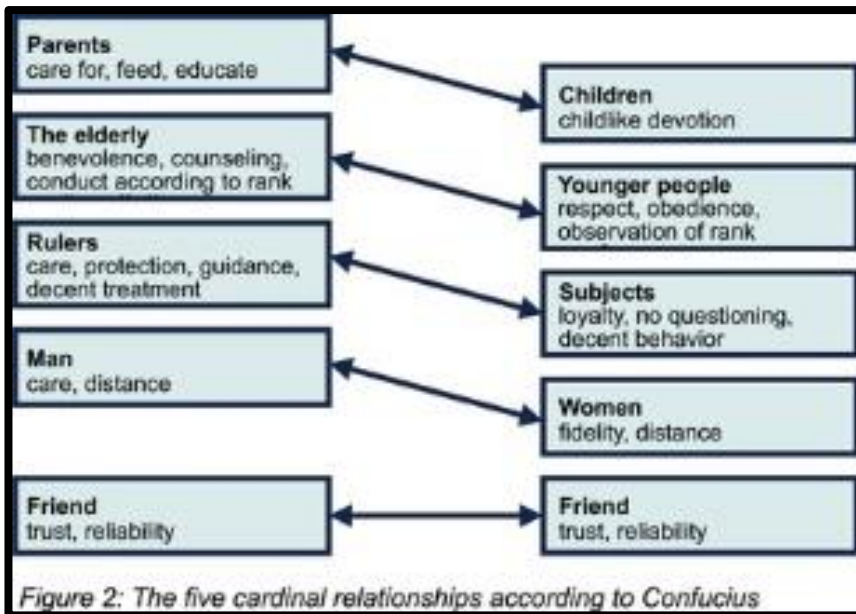


CONFUCIANISM

Confucianism is a system of beliefs based on the teachings of Kong Fuzi (called Confucius by Europeans), a man who lived in China from 551 to 479 BCE. Confucius was born into a family of low-ranking nobles. After completing his education, he worked as an accountant for the ruling Zhou (pronounced JOE) dynasty. As the Zhou Empire weakened and various Chinese states began battling for power, Confucius became sad. He recalled the virtues of past rulers who had maintained a peaceful and stable society. Gradually he gathered followers and taught them what he believed was the proper way to live. After his death, Confucius' followers compiled many of his sayings into a book called Analects, or "Selected Sayings," which became the most important source of his teachings.

Confucianism is a philosophy that defines proper conduct for people and governments. According to Confucius, people are naturally good and should concentrate on improving their behavior and doing what they know is right. He called this proper behavior, li (pronounced LEE). Confucius believed that if everyone followed li, society would be ordered and peaceful.



He taught that a harmonious society had to be built upon Five Key Relationships: 1) ruler and subject, 2) parent and child, 3) husband (man) and wife (woman), 4) older person to younger person, and 5) friend and friend. The first four were hierarchical relationships in which one person is viewed as the superior and worthy of respect and obedience. In turn, this superior person is expected to be benevolent and to set a good example of moral behavior. The fifth relationship is the only one in which the persons are considered equal. In addition to each person behaving properly, Confucius believed that for society to be strong, rulers must be models of virtue.

Few rulers during Confucius' time accepted his ideas. However, long after his death, his teachings spread throughout China. Beginning with the Han dynasty, which ruled from 206 BCE to 220 CE, Confucianism became the official state belief system. Because of their emphasis on loyalty, Confucian teachings allowed the Han government to have more stable leadership. Under Han emperors and later rulers, governments officials were chosen based on their education in Confucian teachings and performance on examinations intended to reveal who were "worthy Confucian" individuals. Successful candidates served as officials all across China.

NEO-CONFUCIANISM

China was ready for something new. In the centuries of disorder and division that followed the collapse of the Han, Indian Buddhism competed with a resurgent religious Taoism for predominance. The foreign tradition brought with it a metaphysical (bigger picture, more about cosmogony) outlook mostly unknown in China, and as the Chinese came to understand and appreciate these doctrines Buddhism became a magnet for the best minds and most profound spirits.

Confucianism as a conventional social morality or a form of learning associated with government service was commonly regarded as a complement to the more profound and spiritual Buddhism. But its approach to self-cultivation through good habits and self-discipline seemed boring in comparison with an enlightenment to be achieved through the inner discipline of meditation provided by Buddhism.

Buddhism reached a creative and flourishing peak during the 7th through 13th centuries. And the Chinese government encouraged a reaction to the "foreign" religion and a creative revitalization of the stagnant Confucianism. Of most lasting importance was the intellectual and spiritual reshaping of Confucianism.

This renewed or "neo" Confucian vision equals the compass and scope of Buddhism. It was affected, however, not by borrowing, but by a creative reinterpretation of the traditional Confucian core to meet new spiritual expectations. It answers the Buddhist focus on the transcendent. Human interpersonal relationships and concern for society and government are inseparably united with the path to ultimate personal fulfillment.