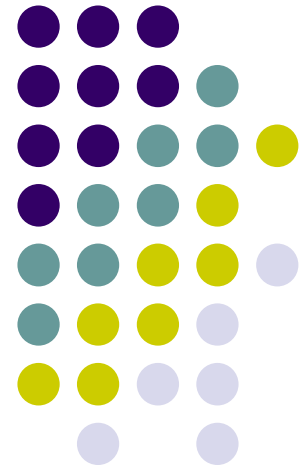
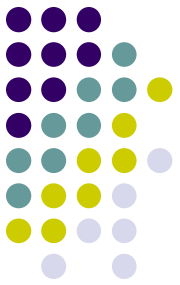


Session 7 Religious Ethics

Religious foundation of Confucianism:

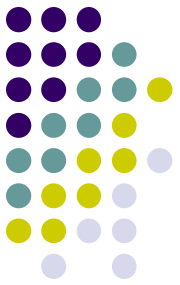
Confucianism as a System of Religion





Confucianism as a Religious Tradition

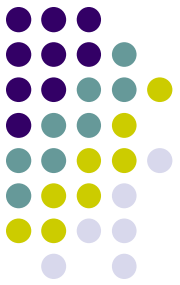
- Through the different names of Confucianism in China: rujia, rujiao, ruxue, Kongjiao, Lijiao,
- we know that Confucianism have some essential characteristics that serve to set it apart from other traditions: it is an ethical system but with strong religious foundation



Religious Aspects of *Rujiao*

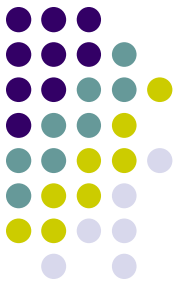
- As Confucianism was promoted to be the state ideology, the relevance and worship of Confucius became part of state religious activities.
- Confucius was given the title of Perfect Sage and Ancient Teacher;
- Religious ceremonies were performed on his birthday and other festivals, and sacrifices were offered to his spiritual tablet in temples dedicated to Confucius.





Kongjiao and Lijiao=Confucianism

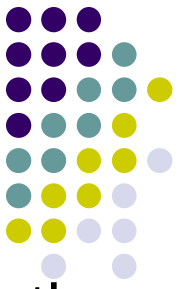
- Kongjiao (the cult of Confucius) emphasizes that the teaching and figure of Confucius are central to the tradition, and recognizes that Confucianism as a distinctive school, a glorious tradition and an orthodox doctrine was promoted, explored, transmitted and interpreted by Confucius,
- Li jiao (the ritual religion) reveals overemphasis of Confucianism on *Li*, the rules of propriety, the rites, rituals and ceremony.



Religious Foundation

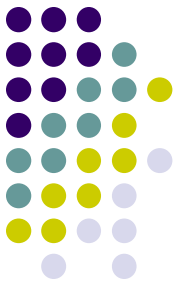
- Confucianism: Ethical Religion or Religious ethics?
- Religious Foundation of Confucian Ethics
 - 1. Rites, rituals or propriety (li) provides ethics with religious disciplines or norms
 - 2. Belief in Heaven or the Will of Heaven provides morality with a religious sanction and justification
 - 3. Aspiration for sagehood provides ethics with an ultimate goal to which moral efforts are inspired and sustained.
 - 4. Beliefs in spiritual powers and ancestor worship provide an educational context for Confucian self-cultivation
 - 5. Religious practices such as meditation are necessary for Confucian virtues (sincerity, respectfulness)

From ethical discourse to religion

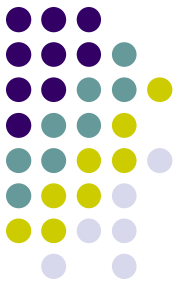


- Confucians are to transmit the best of ethical culture as the resource for building a better world now and in future.
- This is believed to be the mission from Heaven.
- To build a better world, Confucians focused on this life rather than the next one, and engaged in ethical discourses on many aspects of human life.
- These discourses explore the deep causes of social and personal problems.
- These causes cannot be fully understood as human matters. They are rooted in a metaphysical interpretation of the universe, and are therefore religious.

Religious Ethics



- The centre of Confucian ethical discourse is on the relationships between **Heaven** (the Ultimate Reality) and **humans**, between **ordinary people** and the **sage**, and between **beliefs** and practices.
- The Confucian emphasis on rules of conduct (ritual, li), self-cultivation, sincerity, benevolent relations, reverence of the history is both moral and religious.
- A modern Confucian discourse may no longer reply on rituals or ancestor worship, it is still sufficiently religious if it is underlain by maintaining harmonious relationship between **humans and Heaven** (the universe), between the **secular and the sacred**, and between the **contemporary and the ancient**.



2. Confucius on Religious Matters

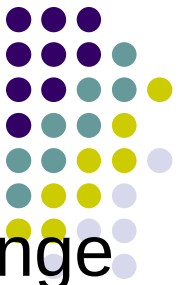
- Confucius oriented traditional culture from supernaturally religious to a religio-ethical direction
- The religious and the ethical are often combined implicitly in his teachings. It is not easy to determine whether he was religious or non-religious.
- Some people conclude he was not religious because he avoided talking about such topics as: ‘Prodigies, magical powers, disorders and spirits’ (7-21).
- However, this fact can be interpreted from different points of view, too.

How to interpret?



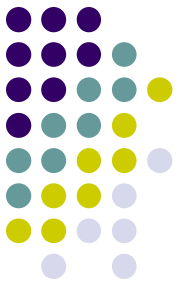
- Confucius indeed held such beliefs but he did not want to say about them?
- He believed them but did not talk about them so that his students/audience could reflect on these spiritual matters themselves?
- He did not believe them and did not want his students to learn about them from him?
- He was too intelligent to be manipulated by common supernatural beliefs at that time?
 - mythology and pantheistic beliefs and practices at that time were politically manipulated to such an extent that some intelligent people preferred not to discuss them.

Spirits



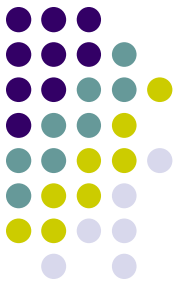
- His saying concerning spirits also poses a challenge to our interpretation.
- When asked what wisdom was, Confucius replied that working for the benefits of the people, 'respecting the spirits, but keep them at a distance' (6: 21).
- **Different interpretations:**
 - (1) Religious: there are spirits, and humans must respect them;
 - (2) Non-religious: there are spirits but we must keep them at a distance. Instead we should focus on human matters

Ethical orientation



- Efforts were made to educate people and politicians, rather than to please gods.
- Being asked about death and spirits, Confucius replied that if we were not yet able to understand life and to serve humans, how could we understand death and serve spirits? (11: 12).
- Ethics is placed before religion? Ethics as the path to the solution of religious concerns?
- Religion is pushed back as background rather than as foundation?

Ethico-religious

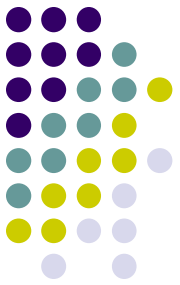


- Confucius was primarily concerned with social/political problems and intended to find solutions for them.
- Social/political problems were caused by family disorder and undisciplined individuals; To solve these problems he emphasised on education, self-cultivation, and ritual/rites
- Despite this focus, his talking about moral issues is clearly conditioned on certain religious beliefs.
- His understanding of religious practices is for ethical purposes
- His teaching is ethico-religious, or is moralising religious faiths and practices.

3. Rites or Rituals and Sacrifices

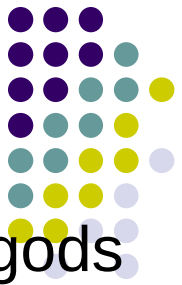


- It is more important to be sincere and reverent in rituals and sacrifices for the spirits than rituals themselves:
 - Surely when one says 'The rites, the rites', it is not enough merely to mean presents of jade and silk. Surely when one says 'Music, music', it is not enough merely to mean bells and drums (17:11).
- He interpreted the word 'sacrifice' to mean the word being 'present': 'one should sacrifice to the spirits as if these spirits were present'. (3: 12)
- This illustrates how Confucius thought of religious sacrifices and gives us a clue to why he said 'Unless I take part in a sacrifice, it is as if I did not sacrifice' (3:12).



Ethical end of religious rites (1)

- More important is to gain moral experience in religious beliefs
- Thus his requirement that serving the dead as if they were alive should not be understood only literally, but more as an ethical training.
- Zengzi (506?-? BCE), a young disciple of Confucius, interpreted this as: `When proper respect towards the dead is shown at the end of their life and continued after they are far away, the virtues of the people will have reached their highest point. (1: 9)
- **Thus, religious rites serve as the means to facilitate an ethical end**



Ethical end of religious rites (2)

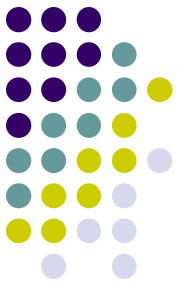
- Is the purpose of religious rituals merely to please the gods or spirits of the dead?
- Are they intended only to educate the living and make their virtues flourishing?
- **Confucius obviously combined these two into one.**
- Rituals are primarily for harmony: 'Of the things brought about by the rites, harmony is the most valuable' (1:12)
- This harmony is ethical: ritual performance benefits people and society, and purifies the participants' heart and strengthens people's virtues.
- But it is also religious: it is required by rites, referring to the harmony between humans and gods.

Xunzi on the roots of Ritual



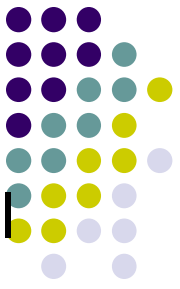
- The ethical view of ritual was furthered by Xunzi (313?-238? BCE):
 - ‘Ritual principles have three roots. **Heaven and Earth** are the roots of life. **Forebears** are the root of kinship. **Lords** and teachers are the root of order...
 - ‘Were there no Heaven no Earth, how could there be life? Were there no forebears, where humans could come from? Were there no lords and no teachers, how could there be order?’
 - ‘Thus ritual serve Heaven above and Earth below, pay honour to one’s forbears, and exalt rulers and teachers, for these are the three roots of ritual principles’ (19.4)

Xunzi on the value of the *Ritual*



- Xunzi sees rituals as having a deep value of cosmic significance in themselves:
 - ‘*The Rituals* contains the model for social distinctions and the **categories used for guiding rules and ordering norms**.
 - ‘When learning is perfected in the *Rituals*, it has come to its terminus. Surely this may be called the culmination of the Way and its Power ’ (1:8).
- By ritual Xunzi affirms that side of Confucius which has been expressed as seeing ‘**the secular as sacred**’.
 - ‘The relationships between lord and minister, father and son, older and younger brothers, husband and wife, begin as they end and end they begin, share with Heaven and Earth the same organizing principles, and endure in the same form through all eternity. Thus this may be described as the ‘Great Foundation’ (9:18)

4. Tian (Heaven)



- One of Confucius's key concepts that outline his ethical religion is tian or Heaven.
- The original Chinese word is both personal and impersonal.
 - Sky
 - Above a man; top on the man
 - Great man, the great ancestor
- Confucius believed that his mission to transmit ancient culture was from Heaven (9: 5)
- He also took Tian as natural: 'What does Heaven ever say? Yet there are the four seasons going round and there are the hundred things coming into being. What does Heaven ever say?' (17:19)



Heaven, Deva and God

- Heaven retained enough of a sense of individuality to be used, later, to translate the Indian term *deva* in Buddhism
 - Indian *devas* were similar to Greek or Roman gods.
- **Most Confucius' sayings concerning Heaven clearly point to this direction**
- When his favourite disciple, Yan Hui, died, Confucius is said to have exclaimed 'Heaven is destroying me!'
- He speaks of knowing the will or Mandate of Heaven (2:4).
- Confucius believed that his virtues had been endowed by Heaven (7: 23).



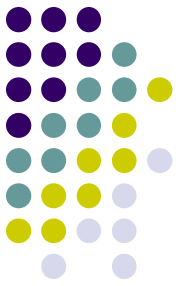
Heaven in Confucius

- He believed a person of virtue or gentleman should stand in awe of the Mandate of Heaven, the Great Men and the words of the sages (16: 8).
- He insisted that if anyone offended against Heaven, there was nowhere he could turn to in his prayer (3: 13).
- He implicitly indicated that humans may be able to cheat on others, but it would not be possible for them to cheat Heaven (9: 12).
- He believed Heaven is his final destiny: 'There is no one who understands me'. His student asked why. He said 'I do not complain against Heaven, nor do I blame humans. In my studies, I start from below and get through to what is up above. ²¹If I am understood at all, it is, perhaps, by Heaven'. (14: 35)

Heaven and Humans



- **Earlier:** any dynasty was bestowed by Heaven, it would surely collapse upon the withdraw of the Mandate of Heaven
- **Later:** correlative cosmology or ‘theology’.
- Humans were made by Heaven; Heaven was the great ancestor of human beings
- Human body and mind were created in the form of Heaven: yin-yang, the five elements, sun and moon, sunny and rainy...
- People would be blessed by Heaven if they follow its will, and punished if they violate the will of Heaven.
 - Heaven responds to deficiencies in the human world by sending warning calamities, such as floods or droughts



Heaven and Chinese Politics

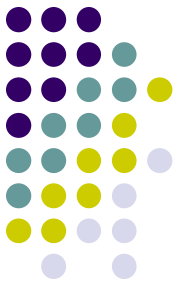
- The understanding of Heaven and the Will of Heaven had a fundamental influence on Chinese politics and history. Replacement of dynasties is always believed to be enabled by the will of Heaven.
- 'My God'='My Heaven' (Tian ah!)
- Even today, people still use such proverbs as 'tian nu ren yuan', the wrath of Heaven and the anger of humans, to express the widespread indignation and discontent,
- 'tian wu jue ren zhi lu' to express the idea that there is always a way out of the dire situation and this way out is provided by Heaven.

5. Knowing Heaven = sagehood



- The importance of Heaven in determining human fortune or misfortune makes it important for humans to understand the will of Heaven
- Those who know Heaven or the will of Heaven are considered have reached the highest possible realm.
- This is said to be sagehood.
- The sage is not only an ideal personality but also the perfection of the whole universe. He is the bridge between humans and Heaven.

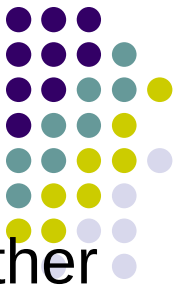
The Sage as political and moral paragons



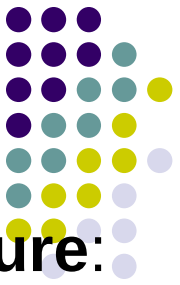
- The sage provides another element as the religious foundation for ethics, or is the joint point of religion and ethics.
- *Sheng ren*, holy person, is mostly translated as the 'sagely man' or 'sage'.
- Yet mere wisdom or knowledge is not all for a 'sage'.
- He is a combination of perfect wisdom, perfect virtue and perfect kingship
- To Confucians humans are profoundly indebted to early sage-kings like Yao, Shun and Yu, who were regarded as culture heroes or even divinities in popular religion.



Possibility of sagehood



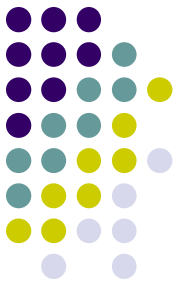
- For Confucius the sage was so high that he claimed neither to be a sage himself nor even to meet a sage.
 - “How dare I claim to be a sage or even a benevolent man?’ (7:34) ‘I have no hope of meeting a sage’ (7:26). The sage is reserved for ancient legendary kings (6:30).
- After Confucius the path to the sage was simplified: every human, through learning and other moral efforts, engaging constant self-cultivation, can become a sage or sage-king like:
 - Mencius: All men are capable of becoming a [the perfect sage] Yao or Shun (6B:2).
 - Xunzi/Hsun Tzu: any man you meet on the road can become a Yu (a Great Cultural Hero) (Chapter 23)



Mencius on the Sage

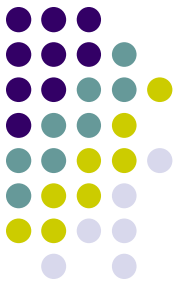
- Mencius believed **sage and humans are equal in nature**:
‘The sage and I are of the same kind’ (6A:7) but the sage stands at the top of human development: ‘The compasses and carpenter’s square are the culmination of square and circles; **the sage is the culmination of humanity**’ (4A:2)
- “‘Though one of their kind, He stands far above the crowd’. Ever since man came into this world, there has never been one greater than Confucius’ (2A:2).
- Such a sage would appear one only every five hundred years: from the Duke of Zhou (1046 BCE) to Confucius (551-479 BCE).
- **The sage is to regenerate culture and society**. In this sense, everybody can become a sage, but in reality very few can reach this stage in their moral cultivation.

Xunzi on Sages



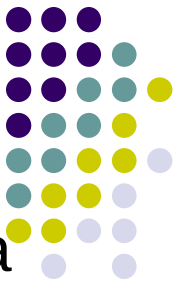
- Xunzi believes that humans are born with an evil nature. Thus, how to overcome evil within and achieve sagehood becomes even more important.
- He believed, evil as human nature is, humans has the ability and willing to learn and practise what has been taught by the sages. By this their bad nature can be transformed into virtuous.
- **The question: how the sage became a sage if he was too originally bad by nature?**

The Sage = divinity



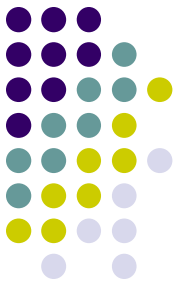
- On the other hand, Sage is also mystified:
 - `Being great, to be transformed by it is called `sageliness'. And being sagely, to be unfathomable is called `the transcendental'. (Mencius, 7B: 25)
- The Doctrine of Mean:
 - 'Oh, how great is the divine Way of the Sage. Overflowing and illimitable, it gives birth and life to all creatures.'
- To become a sage is to be one with Heaven and Earth:
 - The sage is able to help the transformation of the universe: assists the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth, and so with Heaven and Earth forms a Triad or Trinity.
- Heaven produces things, Earth nourishes them and the sage³⁰ completes them.

Confucian and Taoist/Buddhist Sages



- The divinity of the Confucian sage naturally cultivates a religious belief that the sage is the saviour and deliverer for humans.
- They were also applied to immortals/gods/buddhas in Taoism and Buddhism.
- Both Laozi/Lau Tzu, the founder of Taoism and the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, were addressed as the sages, using the exact term as that used by Confucians.
- Neo-Taoism regarded Confucius higher than Laozi but Ge Hong 葛洪 (284-364) believed sages are lower than Immortals, and Confucius would have been hopeless at specialised skills such as walking a tightrope.

Sages in Neo-Confucianism



- With the rise of Neo-Confucianism the sage dominated ethical and religious fields again.
- Pursuit of sagehood was regarded as an ideal suffused with religious expectations.
- To become a sage is likened as becoming a Buddha or an Immortal.
- To be a sage, one must study the classics, but reading classics does not warrant one's sagehood.
- Influenced by Buddhist meditation, Confucians made use of practices of mental discipline such as 'quiet sitting', *jingzuo*.