One day, the Chinese teacher and philosopher Confucius and his students were walking through the countryside. In the distance, they heard a woman crying. As they came around a bend in the road, they saw the woman kneeling at a grave. “Why are you crying?” they asked her. “Because,” she answered, “a tiger killed my husband’s father. Later, the tiger also killed my husband. Now, the tiger has killed my son as well.”

They then asked the woman, “Why do you stay in this place after these terrible things have happened?” The woman answered, “Because there are no cruel rulers here.” Confucius turned to his students and said, “Remember this. A cruel ruler is fiercer and more feared than a tiger.”

After the death of Confucius, people told many stories about him. Like the story of the woman and the tiger, most stories contained an important lesson.

Confucius, c. 551–479 B.C.
The Life of Confucius

Confucius was the most famous—and important—of the early Chinese thinkers. The Chinese called him Kong Fu Zi (kong foo dzih), or “Master Kong.” *Confucius* is the Latinized version of this name.

The Early Years Confucius was born in 551 B.C. to a noble but poor family of the North China Plain. He loved learning and was mostly self-taught. He hoped to advance to an important government office, but he never succeeded in that way. Instead, he decided to try teaching.

A Pioneer Teacher Many historians think that Confucius was China’s first professional teacher. Confucius charged students a fee to take classes. He taught the students his views of life and government. He was a dedicated teacher:

> “From the very poorest upward . . . none has ever come to me without receiving instruction. I instruct only a student who bursts with eagerness.”

—Confucius

Later in his life, Confucius searched for a ruler who would follow his teachings, but he could find no such ruler. He died in 479 B.C. at age 73. By the time of his death, he believed his life had been a failure. He had no way of knowing that his teachings would be followed for many centuries.

A Royal Welcome

A drawing shows Confucius meeting with leaders from various Chinese kingdoms. **Infer** In what ways does the artist suggest the importance of Confucius?

Identify Supporting Details

What detail in the paragraph at the left supports the idea that Confucius was an important Chinese thinker?

✓ Reading Check What kind of students did Confucius like to teach?
The Teachings of Confucius

Confucius did not claim to be an original thinker. He felt that his role was to pass on the forgotten teachings of wise people from an earlier age. In many of his teachings he tried to persuade rulers to reform. He also hoped to bring peace, stability, and prosperity to China’s kingdoms.

Confucianism Confucius himself never wrote down his teachings. Instead, his students gathered a collection of his sayings after his death. Together, these writings made up a system of beliefs and values, or a philosophy. That philosophy became known as Confucianism. Confucianism was one of several important philosophies of ancient China. Over time, it began to govern many aspects of life there.

Bringing Order to Society Confucius lived during a time of frequent warfare in China. Powerful rulers of several Chinese states, or kingdoms, fought one another for the control of land. They seemed more interested in gaining power than in ruling wisely. Confucius hoped to persuade these rulers to change their ways and bring peace and order to China.

The goal of Confucius was to bring order to society. He believed that if people could be taught to behave properly toward one another, order and peace would result. Society would prosper.
Respecting Others  Confucius said that people should know their place in the family and in society. They ought to respect the people above and below them and treat others justly. He described five human relationships: ruler and ruled; father and son; husband and wife; older brother and younger brother; and friend and friend. Then he explained how people should behave in each of these relationships. Confucius said that people in authority—princes or parents—must set good examples. For example, if a ruler was fair, his people would follow his example and treat one another fairly, too. Confucius summarized his ideas about relationships in a simple way. It is similar to what Christians and Jews call the Golden Rule: “Do not do to others what you would not want done to yourself.”

Religious Traditions  Although Confucianism is a philosophy, it has also functioned as a religion for many people. Like Hindus or Buddhists, those who practice Confucianism are part of a moral community. The teachings of Confucius helped guide many of the ancient Chinese in how to behave. But many ancient Chinese also practiced Confucianism alongside their existing religious traditions.

Ancient China was home to many kinds of religious beliefs and practices: the worship of ancestors, the honoring of gods, and the belief in spirits. Most Chinese believed that life should be lived in harmony with nature. Happiness came from living a balanced life. A religious philosophy known as Taoism (DOW iz um) supported these ideas. Taoism was based on the writings of Laozi (LOW dzuh), a Chinese thinker who lived in the 500s B.C. The Taoists loved nature, and they believed in leading simple and selfless lives.

At times, Taoism would rival Confucianism for popularity in China. But overall, the teachings of Confucius would remain the most widely studied of Chinese philosophies.

✓ Reading Check  Describe the religious traditions of ancient China.
The Influence of Confucius

The teachings of Confucius came to have a major effect on Chinese government. They became part of the basic training for members of the civil service. The civil service is the group of people who carry out the work of government.

A Merit System Before the ideas of Confucius took hold, government posts were generally given to the sons of powerful people. Afterward, any man could hold a government post based on merit—that is, on how qualified he was or how well he did his job. Candidates for government jobs had to pass official examinations. These exams were based on the teachings of Confucius.

Rising to High Positions The examination system did not open government jobs to everyone. Candidates still had to know how to read. This rule made it difficult for a poor man to enter the government. But it was not impossible. Many talented but poor young men learned to read and rose to high government positions.

Confucius would have been surprised at the influence he had on China. He did not consider himself particularly wise or good. But he left a lasting mark on Chinese life.

✓ Reading Check Why was it difficult for poor men to work in the civil service?

Section 2 Assessment

Key Terms
Review the key terms at the beginning of this section. Use each term in a sentence that explains its meaning.

Target Reading Skill
State the details that support the main idea on page 145.

Comprehension and Critical Thinking
1. (a) Recall How did Confucius become a teacher?
(b) Transfer Information Confucius would teach only those students who wanted to learn. How does his rule apply to your experience as a student?

2. (a) List What were the basic teachings of Confucius?
(b) Explain Why did Confucius think it was important to teach rulers how to behave?

3. (a) Describe How did the ideas of Confucius change the way civil servants were chosen in ancient China?
(b) Predict Confucius hoped to become a government worker, but he became a teacher instead. Do you think his influence on Chinese society would have been different if he had gotten his wish? Explain your answer.

Writing Activity
Suppose that you are a government official in a small state in northern China. One day, a wandering teacher named Confucius arrives. Write a journal entry that describes what Confucius says and how your ruler reacts to him.

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