

Illustrated Version

Ancient Chinese Wisdom

ANCIENT CHINESE WHO LEFT THEIR MARKS ON HISTORY

ZHANG CIYUN

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Written by Zhang Ciyun

Illustrated by Shi Ruikang

Managing Editor: Xu Ling

Executive Editor: Jin Yu

Graphic Designer: Hu Feng

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Introduction

To understand a country is to understand its people. And to understand China, you have to look at its history, a huge and daunting topic. Thousands of years, dynasty after dynasty, hundreds of emperors and politicians ... In this series, we will take you on a tour through the long history of China to discover the movers and shakers — from ancient emperors who may just be legend to the men and women who penned poems thousands of years ago that are still recited by children today, from the Buddhist monk who provided the inspiration to the epic novel “Journey to the West” to the persons who shaped China’s modern education system. Written by Zhang Ciyun, the founding Editor-in-Chief of *Shanghai Daily*, this series recalls the life story of 88 important figures, who left their personal marks in philosophy, art and literature, religion, science and technology and political movements.

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老子 (Lǎo Zǐ circa 580–470 BC)

A legendary philosopher

Lao Zi's surname was Li and his given name was Er. Lao Zi is an honorific title. It is widely acknowledged that Lao Zi is one of the most revered philosophers in Chinese history. There are numerous legends about his birth, career, teaching and philosophical ideas.

According to one popular legend, Lao Zi was conceived when his mother saw a star falling into her lap and he stayed in the womb for 80 years. When he was born, he was already a grown man with gray beard and long earlobes, a symbol of good fortune and longevity.

He once kept the royal court archives for Zhou Dynasty (c. 11th century-256 BC). But he later resigned and went westward to propagate his ideas and philosophy.

One day while riding an ox he approached the Hangu Pass and was stopped by Yinxi, a sentinel who manned the pass. As a faithful follower of Lao Zi's philosophy, the officer immediately recognized the great master.

But, in order to ask Lao Zi to teach him something of his philosophy, the officer demanded the old man produce an official permit to leave the country.

Lao Zi had no document, so he agreed to write a 5,000-word essay about his philosophy in exchange for passage to the West. That essay turned out to be the famous “Daodejing” (also “Tao Te Ching”), or the “Book of Virtue.”

Today scholars worldwide are still debating whether the book

was actually written by Lao Zi or compiled by his students and disciples.

However, they all agree that the book reflects Lao Zi's thinking.

In the book, Lao Zi used the concept of Dao (Tao) to explain all changes in the universe. Dao, also translated as "Way" or "Great Integrity," is deemed the mysterious source or ideal of all existences.

He also put forward many dialectical ideas such as "Dao gives rise to one, one gives rise to two, two gives rise to three and three gives rise to all other things." He said in "Daodejing": "Great talents mature slowly, great sounds are silent. Great forms look shapeless, transcendent squareness has no corners."

Other famous quotations of Lao Zi include: "All things under Heaven came from something which in turn came from nothing," "By the side of misery lies happiness, and beneath the happiness lurks the misery" and "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

One day, a man came to see Lao Zi and asked for his secret of longevity. Lao Zi, then a nonagenarian, opened his mouth and asked: "Can you see any teeth there?" The man answered: "No, not a single tooth there." Lao Zi then asked: "Can you see my tongue there?" "Yes," the man answered.

"All the hard teeth are long gone, but the soft tongue remains. Don't you understand now?" Lao Zi smiled.

Today, Lao Zi's thinking still has a great influence in Chinese culture. Almost all young students can recite his famous words: "Dao that can be told is not the universal Dao; The name that can be named is not the universal name."



孔子 (Kǒng Zǐ 551–479 BC) The greatest thinker

Also known as Kong Zi or Kong Qiu in Chinese, the great thinker Confucius was born to a warrior's family during the late Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC). He lost his father when he was only three and lived in poverty with his mother who died when he was 17 years old.

When he was young, Confucius was a diligent student with a strong interest in a wide range of subjects. When visiting a temple, he would try to learn the art of moderating rituals. During the day, he would learn accounting and at night, he would practice playing musical instruments. When helping others herd sheep, he would ask to learn archery. Once, he even went to meet Lao Zi, the great philosopher, to ask for advice on conducting rituals.

When he was 30, he began to open schools and enrolled some 3,000 students. Among them, 72 were noted scholars who later helped to compile ancient books and put Confucius' thinking into the book titled *The Analects*.

He spent more than 10 years touring various states with his students and disciples to advocate his ideas on correct conduct and the best government. According to Confucius, the best government is one that rules through rites and people's natural morality, not through bribery and coercion.

He explained that if a ruler led his people by morality, he was like the North Star, which would be surrounded by countless other stars. But if he used administrative orders and severe punishment to constrain his people, he could probably force them to refrain

from committing crimes, but they would not understand that it's shameful to commit crimes. And only when they had acquired the "sense of shame" would they become good.

Confucius was also thought to be the editor and author of the Five Classics, namely, "Shi" (诗 Book of Songs), "Shu" (书 Book of History), "Li" (礼 Book of Rites), "Yi" (易 Book of Change) and "Chunqiu" (春秋 Spring and Autumn Annals). He also advocated familial loyalty, ancestor worship, respect of elders by their pious children and subjects' loyalty to their ruler.

As a result, Confucius' ideology was deemed as dominating force in the feudal society that lasted for more than 2,000 years in China. His thinking also became an important guiding ideology in many countries in East and Southeast Asia.

His famous quotations include:

"Study and review what you have learned every day, isn't it joyful? With friends coming from afar, isn't it delightful? One doesn't frown on other's misunderstanding, isn't he a respectable man?"

"To acknowledge one's fault and be willing to change it is the greatest virtue."

"If you know, to recognize that you know, If you don't know, to realize that you don't know: That is knowledge."

Once, Zi Gong, one of Confucius' disciples, asked the philosopher: "Is there any one word that can guide one throughout his life?" Confucius answered: "Maybe it's magnanimity! What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others."

That's perhaps one of the earliest versions of the Golden Rule.

