

“Confucius and Sons” in America

Summary: Confucian teaching and interpretation largely became based on four key texts called The Four Books: Analects, Book of Mencius, Great Learning, and Doctrine of the Mean. East Asian immigrant communities in the United States differ in the way they view Confucian teachings: Some deem the teachings irrelevant for scientific society and democratic governance, while others uphold the teachings as an integral component of their cultural traditions.

The Scholarly Tradition first emerged in China as a powerful cultural force enjoying imperial patronage during the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). For the next thousand years, Confucian learning focused on what were known as the Five Classics, a set of works said to have been written or edited by Confucius. The Five Classics are: *Classic of Poetry*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Rites*, *I Ching (Book of Changes)*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*. The *Analects*, *Book of Mencius*, *Great Learning*, and *Doctrine of the Mean* only became the central texts for the tradition much later, when the Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi (1130-1200 CE) grouped them together as the so-called Four Books. In Zhu Xi’s opinion, the frequent references in these works to humaneness, human nature, virtue, and sincerity provided more fruitful resources for self-cultivation than did the more elliptical passages and verses found in the Five Classics. Zhu Xi’s ideas gained the status of orthodoxy in 1313 CE, when the imperial house designated the Four Books as the basis of China’s civil service examinations. For the next six centuries, Neo-Confucian interpretations of these texts would play a leading role in shaping the religious, philosophical, and political discourse of China. Neo-Confucian influence would also spread to Korea by the end of the 14th century and to Japan within another 200 years.

As the technological and military superiority of European powers became increasingly evident during the 19th century, the Neo-Confucian worldview began to lose its preeminence in East Asia. By 1871, the Korean royal house had become convinced that a radically new approach to education was needed, and therefore closed most of the country’s Confucian academies. Members of the Meiji Six Society in Japan also called for the replacement of the Confucian educational system with more practical, empirically-based studies. In China, a series of unsuccessful attempts to modernize the bureaucratic and industrial infrastructures culminated in 1905 in the total dismantling of the traditional examination system. A decade later, Chen Duxiu, Lu Xun, and other intellectuals called for the renunciation of any allegiance to Confucian doctrines. “Confucius and Sons,” they exclaimed, must be replaced by “Mr. Democracy” and

“Mr. Science.” Such iconoclastic rhetoric continued throughout East Asia, especially in mainland China, until recently. As a result, during the past century very few contemporary Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, or Vietnamese identified themselves as Confucians – a trend that has only recently begun to reverse.

The view that the Scholarly Tradition is ill-suited for modern life has also traditionally held sway among most East Asian immigrants who have come to the United States. The vast majority of East Asians who journeyed to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were impoverished laborers with no hopes of participating in the literary and political circles of their homeland. Hence, they were much more likely to spend their spare time worshipping before Buddhist or Daoist images than studying Confucian classics. Their descendants, unable to read classical Chinese, have had even less exposure to formal Confucian education. East Asian immigrants who have arrived since 1965 have also typically had mixed feelings about the applicability of Confucian values in the American setting. “Confucius and Sons,” according to many, have no place in this land so devoted to “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy.”

Not all Americans of East Asian descent, however, have regarded the Scholarly Tradition as irrelevant. For some, such as the members of the Confucius Center in Chicago, Illinois and the Confucius Church in Stockton, California, Scholarly values and symbols serve as important reminders of their cultural heritage. In addition to holding celebrations for the Chinese New Year and other holidays, both associations sponsor classes to teach young people classical Chinese through reading excerpts from the Four Books. They also own cemeteries to which biannual outings are organized so that people may visit the graves of their recent ancestors. In the Confucian tradition, veneration of ancestors is the logical expression of gratitude for the cumulative efforts that have made one’s life and accomplishments possible. Maintaining the grave site, providing offerings, and bowing before the grave memorial is just one small gesture to attempt to repay one’s predecessors for the gift of civilized life. Continuing this practice in the United States both symbolizes and ensures that one’s East Asian cultural lineage transcends not only time, but also geographical boundaries.