Eminent teacher, philosopher and political theorist, and founder of its feudal system of education, Confucius is one of Ancient China's most famous figures, a man whose practical experience and deep thinking on the subject have left their mark on educational development in his own country and elsewhere. Revered in Antiquity as the 'Supreme Sage' and the 'Model for Ten Thousand Generations', Confucius now enjoys universal acclaim; his remarkable and lasting contribution to teaching and education has ensured him a place in their history, as well as in the history of culture, both in China and beyond. The influence of his pedagogy remains perceptible today. Recent years have seen a renewal of interest in Confucius, and his philosophy, in particular, has become the object of renewed assessment.

Biographical note

Confucius (551–479 B.C.), whose patronymic was Qiu and given name Zhongni, was born at Qui in the principality of Lu (today's Qufu in Shandong Province), to which his forebears, aristocrats from the principality of Song, had fled for political reasons and where their fortunes had gradually declined. His own father, a minor official, died when Confucius was still a child, leaving the family in poverty. Initially employed in a low-grade post with responsibility for livestock and granaries, he rose through the administrative hierarchy to become – at about the age of 40 – Prefect (Zai) and Director of Public Works (Sicong) in the city of Zhongdu, and then Minister of Security and Justice (Sikon) for the principality of Lu. Later, he travelled with his disciples in Wei, Cao, Song, Zheng, Chen, Cai and other parts of the country, unsuccessfully expounding his political opinions and moral precepts. He returned to Lu at the end of his life, and spent his final years writing and teaching.

Confucius took lifelong delight in learning as well as teaching, and lived to see his reputation as an accomplished polymath spread far and wide. Before his time, under the Zhou Dynasty, schooling took place within government offices and was dispensed by public officials; general education, the prerogative of the nobility, was denied to the common people, and there was no such thing as a full-time teaching
profession. Young aristocrats received a civil and military education based on the 'six arts': rites, music, archery, chariot-driving, calligraphy and mathematics. The end of the so-called Spring and Autumn Period, with which Confucius' life coincided, was marked by violent upheavals as Chinese society based on slave-ownership was transformed into a feudal society; the political and economic underpinning of 'education for and by the administration' was collapsing and culture was acquiring a more popular base. In breaking the aristocratic monopoly of learning and setting up a private academy that was accessible to rich and poor alike, Confucius was moving with his times. 'My teaching', he declared, 'is open to everyone, without distinction.' He was in his thirties when he first accepted disciples; he took in 3,000 in all, seventy-two of whom progressed to complete mastery of the 'six arts'. In scope, enrolment and quality of teaching, the school of Confucius was unique for its age; both during and after its founder's lifetime and posthumously, it exerted a considerable influence in the political, economic, cultural, ethical and moral spheres. Confucius devoted his energies to this undertaking for almost half a century, and his efforts were interrupted only by illness and death at the age of 72. In the course of this half century, Confucius, not content to give excellent training to a large number of students, constantly distilled his own teaching experience, thus working out his own educational doctrine.

Who should be educated?

The teacher's first task is to identify his audience. In this connection, Confucius stated that his lessons were destined for all men, without exception (Analects, Wei Ling Gong). His pupils came from the lowest as well as the highest levels of society, and access to education was thereby considerably broadened. Opening more widely the doors of learning, he hastened the development of general education in Ancient China, thus contributing both to political reform and to the dissemination of culture and, at the same time, revealing the humanist character of Confucian teaching, which was to have an unquestionable influence on the private schools and academies of feudal society. This approach also helped to create the conditions whereby the emergent land-owning class could accede to the authority conferred by learning and produce talented men from its midst.

Role and objectives of education

Starting from the political principle that virtue was a prerequisite of government, and the psychological observation that 'by nature, men are much alike; their practices set them apart' (Analects, Yang Huo), Confucius demonstrated that education plays a fundamental role in the development of society and of individuals alike. Not only does it offer a means of ensuring the supremacy of virtue; it can also alter human nature and improve it in qualitative terms. By raising individual moral standards, it renders society in its entirety more virtuous: the kingdom is well administered, orderly and law-abiding to the extent that all within it follow the path of righteousness. Although it may be an exaggeration to state that the supremacy of