Han Dynasty

The Han [HAHN] dynasty succeeded the Qin in 206 BCE and ruled for more than 400 years, until 220 CE. The harsher policies of Shihuangdi were replaced, and Confucianism was introduced as the basis of government actions. Confucianism remained the basis of Chinese government until the early 1900s when the last dynasty, the Qing, was toppled.

Confucius was a philosopher and teacher who lived in China from 551 to 479 BCE. After his death, his sayings and activities were collected as the Analects of Confucius. The principle tenet of Confucianism is jen, pronounced “ren” and translated as “human-heartedness” or “sympathy.” Human-heartedness is a sensibility that relates every person to every other. Human-heartedness sets up certain relationships in society and requires that people treat others as they would wish to be treated themselves.

According to Confucius, there are five basic relationships:
- father to son
- elder brother to younger brother
- husband to wife
- ruler to subject
- friend to friend

Except for the relationship between friends, the relationships are unequal. In the first four relationships, the father, the elder brother, the husband, and the ruler are superior and are owed allegiance and obedience by the lower person. In turn, the superior person owes protection to the lower. These duties and responsibilities set up a system of right action that governs relationships.

Confucius saw the family as the basic unit of society and government as an extension of the family. It was within the family that a person learned right action. Filial piety, respect for one’s parents, was the most important virtue. A person who practiced right action in the family—honoring his or her elders, obeying them, and taking care of them—would transfer this sense of correct behavior to relationships outside the family.

Translated into the political realm, Confucianism meant that the ruler as the head of society (the family) was owed allegiance, but that those he governed were due good government in return. Confucius maintained that when all family relationships are in order, including those between husband and wife and parents and children, then there will be order in society.

The students of Confucius called him “Master” and came to study with him to hear the wise things he said. The Analects record some of the advice he gave his students:

IV.18 The Master said, “In serving your father and mother, you ought to dissuade them from doing wrong in the gentlest way. If you see your advice being ignored, you should not become disobedient but remain reverent.”

XV.24: Tzu-kung asked, “Is there a single word which can be a guide to conduct throughout one’s life?” The Master said, “It is perhaps the word shu [reciprocity]. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.”

Teaching Idea

One way to introduce the “Han Dynasty” section is to ask students what they know about Confucius. Students in Core Knowledge schools should have studied Confucius in Grade 2. Explain that it was during the dynasties that they are going to study that Confucianism was put into practice and became the guide for the way government was run as well as how society was organized.

Teaching Idea

If you have taught Section II, “Europe in the Middle Ages,” on pp. 101–127, use the Han as an opportunity to review what was happening in Europe at this time. Create a brief time line on the board with students, listing events in China with their dates and events in Europe in the same centuries, or use a graphic organizer in the form of a chart to show simultaneous events. Begin with the Huns.

Teaching Idea

Get a copy of the Analects of Confucius from a local library and select a few of the simpler and clearer episodes to share with children. The Analects contain many stories about what Confucius said to his disciples and much wisdom on how one ought to behave in life. By listening to excerpts from the Analects, students will also get a sense of Confucius as a “master” who was consulted, followed, and emulated by his admiring students. (See More Resources.)
XIII.6. The Master said, “If a man is correct in his own person, then there will be obedience without orders being given; but if he is not correct in his own person, there will not be obedience, even though orders are given.”

XV.21 The Master said, “What a gentleman seeks, he seeks within himself; what a small man seeks, he seeks in others.”

XVII.2. The Master said, “Men are close to one another by nature. They diverge as the result of repeated practice.”

VII.1. The Master said, “I transmit but do not innovate; I am truthful in what I say and devoted to antiquity.”

After Confucius died, schools were established to teach Confucianism. During some of the later dynasties, Confucian ideas became even more important in China. The emperors decided that people who had studied Confucius would make the most honest and reliable government officials, so they required aspiring officials to pass an exam on the Analects and other key Confucian texts.

While Confucianism had a tremendous impact on the development of all aspects of Chinese life for 2,000 years—familial, societal, political, and economic—it was attacked by Chinese reformers after the downfall of the last emperor in the early 1900s. Confucianism was seen as a conservative force in Chinese life that kept China from modernizing. Today, Confucius is again venerated as a great teacher in China. Confucian teachings remain quite influential in other Asian societies, most notably Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and Singapore.

Trade

During the Han dynasty, China began to participate in the international trade network. Over the centuries, China imported a variety of goods—foods such as grapes and figs from the Mediterranean, woolen cloth from northern Europe, furs from Central Asia, ivory from Africa, and cotton cloth from India. China’s major export was silk.

Silk Road

By 1000 BCE, the Chinese were making silk thread from the cocoons spun by silkworms. The silkworms were raised on the leaves of mulberry trees that were grown for this purpose. Women workers first made silk thread from the cocoons and then spun the thread into cloth, which was dyed and made into robes. The secrets of silk production were for many years a closely guarded trade secret.

Silk became such an important export that the trade route along which silk merchants traveled became known as the Silk Road. The Silk Road was really a network of roads and paths. It stretched from eastern China to Syria in the Middle East and from there linked to routes to the Mediterranean, and in the 500s CE, to Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul). Caravans of camels carried silk and other valuable goods west along the road. It was along this route that Chinese knowledge of papermaking reached the West, but the Chinese kept the secret of silk-making for themselves for many centuries.

Invention of Paper

The Chinese invented paper in 105 CE. They learned how to create it from mashed plant fiber, such as bamboo and tree bark, or pulped rags.