

## East Asia Study Unit

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### Module Two: The Basics in Traditional East Asia LESSON FOUR: CHINA, CONFUCIANISM, AND EAST ASIA

**GRADE:** 9-12

**TIME:** One to two class periods with discussion.

**GOALS:**

1. Get students to understand the important role of Chinese ideas and institutions in East Asian societies.
2. Help students engage with major ideas of governance and social philosophy, especially Confucianism.
3. Have students critically weigh and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a Confucian society when compared to modern American society.

**MATERIALS/PREP:**

1. Blank paper for students to write on.

**INTRODUCTION:**

We tend to think that “East Asia” is a geographic term used to describe the peoples and states in the easternmost part of the Asian continent. It is, of course. But “East Asia” also signifies a part of the world that was heavily influenced by Chinese institutions. In other words, it isn’t just a geographic region, but a cultural region as well. Certain ideas about society, government, foreign relations, and more spread from China to Korea, Japan, and northern Vietnam, linking them all as part of East Asia (even though, geographically, Vietnam is often thought of as Southeast Asia). This lesson introduces some of those major ideas, focusing in particular on Confucianism.

**BACKGROUND:**

As one of the world’s oldest civilizations, China has a long intellectual tradition worthy of study. Americans may be more familiar with the ideas of the ancient Greeks and Romans, but the Chinese developed social and governmental institutions that made it the envy of Europeans in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. We can only introduce a few key figures and ideas in this short lesson, but there is much more out there for those willing to explore.

Some of China’s most basic ideas about government are attributed to the Duke of Zhou (sounds like “Joe”), who lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E. His brother the king had toppled the previous dynasty, but it was the Duke who supposedly developed the philosophy to justify the Zhou dynasty. He taught that rulers needed to be benevolent, listen to their advisors, and govern wisely. Those who did so would rule with the approval of Heaven, but those who abused power would lose Heaven’s approval and be replaced. This, he claimed, was why the Zhou had been able to legitimately overthrow the previous dynasty – its ruler had lost Heaven’s approval (the “mandate of Heaven”), and Heaven had bestowed it instead on the Zhou.

Confucius was one of the world’s great thinkers and theorists. Born in 551 B.C.E. in the small state of Lu, he came from a low-ranking aristocratic family and may have briefly held government office. But he is best remembered as a teacher who spent years

wandering north China, teaching his disciples and seeking a position as an advisor to a king so that he could put his carefully refined principles of government into practice. Although widely respected, he never did secure an official position and thought of himself as a failure in that regard. He also did not leave behind writings of his own; much of what we know about Confucius' teachings comes from what his students recorded in a book known as the *Analects*. Later students of Confucianism, including very important thinkers such as Mencius and Zhu Xi, built upon Confucius' teachings to expand Chinese thought and take it in new directions.

### **FIVE KEY IDEAS:**

Here again, Chinese thought contains much more than just these five ideas, but these five important concepts are presented here as an introduction.

1. Balance: This is perhaps best symbolized in the yin-yang, two opposing parts that make up a circle. Sometimes drawn with "eyes," I have had students refer to the two parts of the circle as "tadpoles chasing each other." The symbol can be found today in many forms, including the center of the S. Korean flag. Each half of the symbol – the yin and the yang – represents an opposite but complementary force from nature.

YANG = masculine, sun, fire, day, positive, rational

YIN = feminine, moon, water, night, negative, emotional

- Although they are in opposition, both qualities are essential for health and proper balance, which is why they occupy the same circle in the yin-yang symbol. Too much of one quality or the other was thought to be bad and a cause of trouble. This thinking influenced even medical practice, for according to traditional Chinese medicine both men and women need to have the proper amount of each quality in order to stay healthy.
2. Notions of Order: Chinese thinkers and writers came to place great value on order. This was in part because of how they viewed their own history. Chinese thought of their history as a cyclical series of dynasties – when the dynasties were strong, order was maintained and the people prospered. But when the dynasties were weak or collapsed, disorder led to warfare, destruction of crops, etc., and the people suffered.
  3. Heaven: heaven came to be seen as an impersonal force that gave its approval (or disapproval) to earthly rulers. This idea was most clearly articulated in the notion of the Mandate of Heaven, attributed to the Duke of Zhou (referenced above). When a ruler was corrupt, or failed to listen to his advisors, or could not establish order, then Heaven would bestow its mandate on another. Therefore, if someone succeeded in overthrowing a ruler, that was proof that he held the mandate of heaven. In the Confucian view, the ruler could best rule by example. In other words, if the ruler was just, generous, and benevolent, then his subjects would be too.
  4. Ritual and Propriety: Confucius emphasized the importance of performing rituals and doing things the proper way. These were, in his estimation, the mark of the true gentleman. Most important was observing filial piety (respect for one's parents). Because of this attention to performing rituals properly, claiming that

someone had used the wrong tool, or not mourned his/her parents long enough, etc., was often seen as a serious charge and a personal attack.

5. The Five Relationships: in keeping with notions of order and propriety, Chinese society was (at least from an American perspective) very hierarchical. Confucius did not teach that all people were equal, but rather that everyone had his or her place. All human relationships fell into one of five categories: Ruler – subject, Parent – child, Husband – wife, Older brother – young brother, Friend – friend.

In each case, the first partner (superior) should guide the second (subordinate), and the second should heed the first. In other words, the ruler leads his subjects and the subjects should follow the ruler. But the superior is not free to abuse or take advantage of the subordinate; just as with the mandate of heaven, the superior must be benevolent and look out for the best interests of the subordinate.

#### **ACTIVITIES:**

1. Discussion: Introduce and discuss each of the five ideas above. Some of them (such as yin-yang) will be easily appreciated by students. Others, such as the hierarchical order of Confucianism, may challenge some of the students' deeply held beliefs about the equality of all people. You might note the advantages of the Chinese approach, such as 1) emphasizes the two-way nature of the relationship, including that the superior must treat the subordinate well, and 2) emphasizes that the ruler must be good to set a proper example for his subjects. What do they think about the emphasis on everyone having his/her "place" rather than everyone being equal? It might make it hard for someone from a disadvantaged background to achieve great things in the world. But some have claimed that the Confucian hierarchical approach, in which individuals were willing to follow orders and sacrifice individuality, helped the East Asian economies recover and prosper so quickly in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
2. Application: Have students use these ideas to evaluate our own government in Confucian terms. Do our leaders set a good example for ordinary citizens to follow? Are there any signs of Heaven's displeasure (for example, Hurricane Katrina might have been interpreted by ancient Confucians as a sign of Heaven's disapproval of the government)? Are there examples of improper performance of certain rituals causing major problems for politicians in our society?