An introduction to Confucius

Little is known about the early years of Kong Qiu (孔丘), who became known in the West as Confucius. Sima Qian (司马迁), China’s first historian, wrote a biography of Confucius around 91 B.C.E.—450 years after his death. Based on that, it is believed that Confucius was born in 551 B.C.E. His father died when he was a young boy, and it appears that Confucius grew up in poverty. Somehow, though, he managed to become educated.

Confucius became both a scholar and an activist. He loved music, poetry, archery, and good company and was enthusiastic about learning. He believed that people should follow strict rules when honoring their ancestors, at ceremonies, and when interacting with each other. This aspect of Confucius may seem a little strange compared to the informality of modern life. But modern life, too, has its ceremonies. We shake hands when we meet strangers, wait until everyone is seated at the table before we begin to eat, and see someone to the door when she or he is leaving.

The state of Lu (鲁), where Confucius is believed to have been born, was invaded twenty-one times between 722 and 481 B.C.E., an indication of the enormous political turmoil during his lifetime. Confucius wished to bring order and harmony to society. In a time of political uncertainty and civil violence, Confucius looked to China’s past for guidance. He felt that some rulers of the past maintained harmony in the community because their own lives were in order. He tried for years to gain appointment to a government post from which he could influence rulers, but he met with little success. He traveled extensively through China’s provinces, often barely able to eke out a living. He believed fervently in his mission to restore cultural integrity in a China that lacked unity. Because of his strong beliefs, he attracted followers from many walks of life. Though Confucius was disappointed by his inability to have an impact during his lifetime, his thoughts on the right way to conduct oneself lived on through his disciples, who became teachers, and their disciples, who, in turn, passed them onto students. His disciples and their successors collected his sayings and preserved them for posterity in the Lunyu (《论语》), the Analects of Confucius. The anecdotes and memories evolved into the philosophy of Confucianism.