“It does not matter how slowly you go so long as you don’t stop” (Confucius).

Confucianism is a Chinese ethical and philosophical system developed from the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius. It was during the rule of the Han dynasty that
Confucianism became the official doctrine of the ruling state and Confucius was transformed from a model for scholars into the patron saint of the scholar-officials. For about twenty-four centuries, Confucian doctrines had been the theoretical basis for the unity and continuity of China and her culture.

Confucius (or Chhiu Khung) was born in 551 BCE in the town of Tsou, in the county of Ch’angping in the Shantung province of China. During his youth, Confucius was for a time a low-ranking official managing warehouses, but for the most part of his life he was a private teacher. The rulers of different states received him courteously and consulted him. Although Confucius became the founder of a school of thought, he did not himself compose any doctrinal works except one, i.e., Annals of the State of Lu. In Confucius’ opinion, heaven, earth and man were one unified and harmonious whole, preordained by heavenly principles. Everything on earth, including the status of human beings, was decided by Heaven. It was during the rule of the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) that Confucianism became the official doctrine of the ruling state.
Living in the ‘Spring and Autumn period’ (a time when feudal states fought against each other), he wanted to restore the world’s order. After much travelling around China to promote his ideas among rulers, he eventually became involved in teaching disciples. His philosophy emphasized personal and governmental morality, correctness of social relationships, justice and sincerity. He represented his teachings as lessons transmitted from antiquity.

It is pertinent to point out that having been born and reared in an aristocratic family, Confucius never questioned the nature of prevalent society, but fully supported it. In fact, he developed it by formulating theories on various aspects of the nature of man and of the outside world. Towards the end of the Spring and Autumn Period (722-481 BC), the slave-owning class declined; there was growing unrest which led to uprisings by the slaves. Big states conquered small states. By the beginning of the Warring States Period (480-221 BC), there was a more advanced mode of production—the feudal mode, giving rise to economic progress and a new social class—the feudal class,
emerged. Men of this emerging class took possession of 
land and naturally sought to gain political power at the 
expense of the slave-owning class. In the eyes of 
Confucius, such deeds were violations of the sacred Chou 
Rites and created social chaos. He talked about ‘return to 
the rites’, i.e., the Chou Rites. By this, he wanted to let the 
overthrown slave-owning aristocrats return to power.

Confucius belonged to the period of the Eastern Chou 
dynasty (771 BCE-265 BCE). The dominant political 
structure of the Chou dynasty was fiefdom. Most of the 
official posts were held together by slave-owning nobles by 
hereditary right; the fiefs were also hereditary. The land 
system was thus one of ownership by the slave-owning 
nobility. The land system that was in vogue in those times 
was known as ching tien. Together with this social 
structure, there arose an enormous and complex code of 
rites, known as Chou Rites. These rites governed the states, 
their rulers, their rights, duties and privileges, from the 
highest to the lowest in the hierarchy. These Chou Rites 
were regarded as unalterable principles like those that 
govern and regulate the movements of heavenly bodies.
Both the Spring and Autumn and Warring States were periods not only of tremendous turmoil, but were also ages of great cultural blossoming and the Hundred Schools of Thought. Members of the elite, the intelligentsia, the literati wrote and debated among themselves, travelled to many places to propagate their theories in order to get a hearing from the rulers of states and, if successful, to get employment. Confucius was one of those scholars. What made Confucianism so important in history was his inner conservatism, which always supported the status quo.

A book that contains his sayings and conversations is *Analects*. This was the joint production of some of his chief disciples, like the Buddhist *Tripitakas*. The *Analects* is regarded as the Confucian Bible. These teachings were compiled and amplified by others in two other treatises. One was *The Great Learning /The Higher Education (Tahsuch)*. This book constitutes the gateway through which beginners enter into the path of virtue. The other was the *Doctrine of the Mean/The Golden Mean (Chungyung)*. This treatise is important for understanding Confucian
philosophy. These were the Four Books which century after century every Chinese schoolboy had to recite.

In Confucius’ opinion, heaven, earth and man were one unified and harmonious whole, preordained by heavenly principles. Everything on earth, including the status of human beings, was decided by Heaven. As to the question how to govern a state and rule the people, he said that the essential requisite was to revive and adopt the principles and practices, laws and regulations of kings in ancient dynasties. He opposed the rising class of landowners and violently hated the slave uprisings. He devoted his whole attention to ‘restrain oneself and return to the Rites’. In fact, the rule of “rites” was a political idea of the Confucian school. It stressed absolute observance of the hierarchy, rituals and ceremonies under the slave system of the Western Chou Dynasty, strict distinction between the social position of the slave-owner and the slave and absolute obedience by the slave to the slave-owner.

Bai Shouyi and some other Chinese scholars hold that Confucianism was to some extent reformist in nature.
Confucius had proposed that good and talented people—irrespective of their social status-- should be appointed to official posts. Such a proposal was contrary to the prevailing practice of hereditary rule. In this Joseph Needham notices the germs of the bureaucratic system. However, the point is that even if it is theoretically accepted that social status is irrelevant here, any person aspiring for studies and administrative power must have the money and leisure to do so. So, in reality, only the members of the nobility could have access to it.

Confucius stressed the importance of benevolence and regarded it as the highest ideal of morality. Yet, according to him, benevolence meant different grades of love—more love for those who were close and less for those who were distant, more for the highly placed and less for the lowly. On the one hand, he emphasized that rites should be combined with benevolence. On the other, he held that benevolence should be practised within the strict boundary of rites, i.e., Chou rites. Bai Shouyi holds that while aspiring to be a statesman, he defended the interests of the slave-
owning nobles unable to break free of the shackles of the old order.

According to Confucius a ruler should cultivate self-discipline, should govern his subjects by his own example and should treat them with love and concern. His goal was to create men who carried themselves with grace, speak correctly and demonstrate integrity in all spheres.

‘Studying to become official’ was the main aim of Confucian learning. Those who studied had to sit for imperial examinations, and after passing those examinations they could get entry into imperial service. However, the whole process required decades of concentrated study of the classics of all periods. It is quite obvious that only those with leisure and money could afford to study. That implies that the overwhelming majority of the people of China were debarred from entering the gate to the long avenues of arduous learning. Chinese scholars throughout history spent most of their lives studying and re-studying Confucian classics. They also annotated and re-annotated those classics. All of them were proud of their heritage as the
highest culture in the world. Some among them had the wealth and leisure to study for years until they passed a series of Imperial examinations and became officials. These officials then utilized their administrative positions to amass wealth and power. They wrote the dynastic histories of the emperors or rulers, they interpreted philosophical meanings to the rulers and in this way acted as their political advisors. They acquired landed wealth, maintained the bureaucracy and ruled the people. They were known as the ‘scholar-gentry-officials’ who were tools of the rulers from one dynasty to another.

In Confucius’ writings there is a clear line of demarcation between the superior and the inferior, between the high and the low, between mental labour and physical labour. One of his students, Fan Chi asked his master about learning to grow grain, but the master said that he was not a farmer; asked about how to grow vegetables, he said he was not a market gardener. When Fan Chi went out Confucius said to some other students: ‘What a small man, poor Fan Chi!’
Later Confucians

While incorporating ideas and concepts from Confucius, later Confucians borrowed certain ideas from Buddhism and Taoism. Later Confucians or Neo-Confucians constructed Confucian academies to teach Confucian concepts. But it was a lot more spiritual and cosmologically in tune than classical Confucians.

The most important follower of Confucius was Mencius or Meng Kho/Meng Tzu (372-289 BC). Like Confucius, he also divided human beings into two main classes, the superior and the inferior; while the former was knowledgeable and wise, the latter was stupid, and this was also unalterable. However while Confucius himself did not explicitly focus on the subject of human nature, Mencius asserted the innate goodness of the individual, believing that it was because of the lack of a positive influence of society that one developed a bad moral character. He highlighted four ethical attributes, - benevolence, observance of rites, propriety and wisdom. A few quotations from Mencius are, -
“One who does not know the mandate of heaven cannot be a superior man. One who does not know the rites cannot stand up as a man.

“The superior man fears heaven, important people and the words of sages; the inferior man does not understand the mandate of heaven, is disrespectful towards important people and insults the words of sages.

“The superior man thinks of virtue; the inferior man thinks about the soil; the superior man is diligent in governing (the state); the inferior man exerts his physical strength. Those who work with their minds govern; those who work with their hands are governed.

“Women and inferior people are hard to nurture; they are hard to get along with; they get out of hand when befriended, and resent it when kept at a distance”.

Some ideas are quite clear from these statements. First, society is divided into classes—between the superior people and the inferior people. Second, it also shows the difference
between mental labour and physical labour that was particularly sharp in those times. This difference, incidentally, is one of the ‘three great differences’ which, in Marx’s opinion, emerged in course of the emergence of class society. Third, women were also treated as inferior people.

Later Confucians such as Tung Chung-shu (179-104 BC) formulated more codes of conduct for women. He formulated the “three cardinal guides” and the “five constant virtues”. The “three cardinal guides” mean that the sovereign guides the ministers, the father guides the sons and the husband guides the wife. That is to say, the sovereign, father and husband have the absolute power to rule, while the ministers, sons and wife should obey absolutely. The “five constant virtues” refer to the so-called five unchangeable principles, namely, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and sincerity—the moral principles which the Confucianists used to maintain and adjust the relations between the “three cardinal guides”. The rulers of China inherited the legacy of Confucius and formulated the “three obedience” and “four virtues”. The
obedience required that a woman must obey the father when young, obey the husband when married, and obey sons when widowed. The “four virtues” were: A woman should possess the feudal moral ethics: her speech should conform to the feudal ethical code: her clothing should suit feudal customs: and she should be able to do household chores and wait on parents-in-law, husband and sons.

At a much later period and in a different historical context, Mao Tse-tung wrote that the Chinese people had three ropes round their necks, but the women had four: political authority, clan authority, religious authority and the authority of the husband. These authorities embodied the whole feudal and patriarchal ideology and social system.

The philosophy and the value system propounded by Confucius and his followers became urgent after 1840 when China suffered humiliating defeats during the Opium war. The common people were enraged and tried to fight foreign powers back; the scholar-bureaucrats felt humiliated that the heaven-ordained Confucian world should be so bullied by the barbarians from afar. A new idea arose: Confucian
scholarship-knowledge was not enough; it had to be supplemented with Western science and technology. The imperial examination system was abolished in 1906, and modern schools on Western, especially American, patterns were introduced.