

Confucian Temples

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Confucian temples are places to worship Confucius, his students, and other Confucian thinkers. But they also served as arenas for Chinese rulers throughout history to express to their subjects the value of culture and education. Many of these temples in China, no longer active for worship, have become bastions of China's complex culture. Qufu Temple, in Shandong Province, is the oldest and most iconic.

The teachings of Confucius have shaped Chinese thought and values throughout history; Confucian temples in China are primarily places to worship the philosopher and his disciples. But many Confucian temples today have become valuable repositories of Chinese culture in the form of museums and educational facilities. The Qufu 曲阜 Confucian temple in Shandong Province, for instance, is now the most popular tourist destination in China after the Forbidden City.

The History of Qufu

Confucian temples are located all over China, but the temple at Qufu, is the largest and best preserved. Qufu was built in 478 BCE, the year after the death of Confucius, on the site where Confucius's house stood. The king of



Roof eaves at the Temple of Confucius in Beijing, now the Municipal Museum. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

Luguo 鲁国 (kingdom of Lu), Luaigong 鲁哀公, who had often asked Confucius for advice, was grief stricken he died. He ordered Confucius's three-room house consecrated as a temple to store the great philosopher's bequests, such as clothes, hats, musical instrument, and books. Thus the three sections became the embryonic form of the Confucian temple.

The original dwelling of Confucius was removed from the Qufu site when the temple was enlarged in the seventh century CE, and the temple was expanded again during the Song dynasty (960–1279) into three sections with some four hundred rooms. Fire and vandals destroyed Qufu in 1210. After more renovations and rebuilding—and nearly three hundred years—a lightning-sparked fire in 1499 destroyed the temple complex once again.

“Imperial” Qufu

Visitors to Qufu today are sure to remark on the how much the temple complex resembles the Forbidden City, and not surprisingly. Because the most dramatic transformation of Qufu was begun in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) during the reign of Emperor Hongzhi (明孝宗, 1487–1505), shortly after the construction of the Forbidden City, the two sites share many features of imperial-style architecture and general configuration. The project took about five years to finish.

Hongzhi ordered that the Qufu temple be built in imitation of the Beijing imperial palace, and includes nine courtyards arranged symmetrically along the more than 1,000 meter-long central axis. The temple contains a pavilion, an altar, two wing rooms, two halls, three ancestral

Entrance of the Temple of Confucius in Beijing, currently the Municipal Museum. Confucian temples served as arenas for Chinese rulers throughout history to express to their subjects the value of culture and education. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.





First entrance gate to the Temple of Confucius, Qinghai. Drawn by T. Allom. Engraved by J. Tingle. In 153 CE the Huandi emperor designated the Confucian temple at Qufu as a temple of the state; from then on the ruler of every dynasty always repaired a dilapidated temple after it was ruined by war or by natural disaster. BEINECKE RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY, YALE UNIVERSITY.

halls, five palaces, seventeen kiosks with steles (carved or inscribed stone slabs or pillars used for commemorative purposes), and fifty-four memorial gateways. The temple has 104 buildings in all, consisting of 466 rooms, and covers 9.6 hectares.

Some of the rooms devoted to Confucius include: Dachengdian 大成殿 (Hall of Great Achievements), where a statue of Confucius is located; Shengjidian 圣迹殿 (Hall of Memories of the Sage), where Confucius's life story is exhibited; and Qindian 寝殿 (Confucius's Bedroom), where Confucius's wife is worshiped. There is also a library named Kuiwenge 奎文阁, meaning "the best literary talent."

Confucius's famous students and other famous Confucian thinkers also have their place of honor in the two

wing rooms standing to the east and west of the main palace. Although Confucian temples in other places are smaller than Qufu, they are similar in arrangement and pattern.

“Governmental” Temples

In 153 CE the Huandi 桓帝 emperor (132–168) of the Han dynasty 东朝 (206 BCE–220 CE) ordered an official to oversee the installation of a stone memorial inside the temple at Qufu and to designate it as a temple of the state; this was the beginning of the “governmental” Confucian temple. From then on the ruler of every dynasty always repaired a dilapidated temple after it was ruined by war

or by natural calamity. Thus Confucian temples became destinations for emperors and imperial officials wanting to remind their subjects that moral development of the individual is crucial to the establishment of a state governed by moral rather than coercive laws.

In 539 CE statues of Confucius and his ten famous students were sculpted in the Qufu temple; this was the beginning of the tradition of setting statues in Confucian temples. Not long after the Tang dynasty 唐朝 (618–907 CE) was founded, Emperor Li Shimin 李世民 ordered the building of a Confucian temple in every province and county of China. Temples were also constructed at Guozijian 国子监 (national colleges), the highest educational institutions during China's three final dynasties.

Destruction and Decay

Because of war and natural calamity, Confucian temples built before the Song dynasty no longer exist: Qufu was not the only "victim" of destruction and decay. Only those built during the Ming dynasty 明朝 (1368–1644) and Qing dynasty 清朝 (1644–1912) remain, and established the pattern of the Qufu Confucian temple today.

In 1724 the Qufu Confucian temple again burned again. The Emperor Yongzheng (雍正, 1722–1735) of the Qing dynasty ordered it rebuilt according to the established Ming pattern. The project took six years. The main architecture of the Qufu Confucian temple today is the legacy of that rebuilding.

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1977), in November 1966, as many as six thousand artifacts from Qufu were destroyed by two hundred students enlisted by the Red Guard. They also opened Confucius's tomb, in the town north of Qufu in a cemetery where 100,000 descendants of Confucius are said to be buried,

but found no human remains. In the 1980s public worship at Qufu was reinstated, and in 2004 the government organized an official worship ceremony at Qufu, the first since 1948. The Chinese Communist Party, in a gesture perceived to propagandize and expand awareness of traditional Chinese culture, organized an international day of worship centered at Qufu in 2005, with services held simultaneously all over China and in countries abroad; local Chinese officials who organized ceremonies and parades in their cities and town welcomed the additional tourist attention.

Future Roles

The temple at Qufu was designated in 1994 as a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site, a status ensuring that the temple will remain a strong symbol of China's past culture, a boon to its tourist industry, and, perhaps, in light of China's new interest in reviving Confucian thought, a place to inspire a new generation of Chinese.

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