The Teachings of Confucius and Laozi

ABOUT THE READING Confucius lived from 551 to 479 BC. He was one of the most important teachers of ancient China. We know little about the ancient Chinese teacher Laozi. He also probably lived during the 500s or 400s BC. The ideas and sayings of both men gave citizens and their leaders different examples of how they should behave.

VOCABULARY

rank position

principles rules of behavior

obscurity being unknown

forsakes abandons; leaves behind

tribulations misery; suffering

As you read think about how the writings of these two teachers are similar and different.

Confucius

These excerpts are from a collection of the teachings of Confucius called the Analects.

Followers probably collected the sayings of Confucius into a book a hundred or so years after the "Master," or great teacher, died.

The Master said: "Riches and **rank** are what every man [wants]; yet if the only way to [get] them goes against his **principles**, he should desist from such a pursuit. Poverty and **obscurity** are what every man hates; yet if the only escape from them goes against his principles, he should accept his lot. If a gentleman **forsakes** humanity, how can he make a name for himself? Never for a moment does a gentleman part from humanity; he clings to it through trials, he clings to it through **tribulations**."

You should avoid gaining money and position if it means you must ignore your principles.

The Master said: "I have never seen a man who truly loved goodness and hated evil. Whoever truly loves goodness would put nothing above it; whoever truly hates evil would practice goodness in such a way that no evil could enter him. Has anyone ever [given] all his strength to goodness just for one day? No one ever has, and yet it is not for want of

Confucius believes that it takes only a little bit of strength to do good things and that everyone should have that much strength.

Source: The Analects of Confucius, *pp. 15–16, translation by Simon Leys, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.*

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strength—there may be people who do not have even the small amount of strength it takes, but I have never seen any."

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. In your own words, describe what Confucius says everyone wants and everyone hates.

2. Do you agree with Confucius that everyone has the strength to be good? Why or why not?

Laozi

This excerpt is from the book The Way and Its Power. *Some people believe that Laozi was not the only writer of this collection.*

On True Happiness. Is there such a thing as true happiness, or is there not? . . . What should I do and what should I believe? What should I avoid and what should I follow? What should I accept and what should I reject? What should I love and what should I hate? What the world [thinks important] are wealth, rank, a long life and goodness. What people enjoy are good health, **rich** food, fine clothing, beauty and music. What they hate are poverty, a low position, dying young, and ugly disease . . . Such attendance to the externals is indeed foolish. The rich **hustle and bustle** and **hoard** up wealth which they cannot use. Their method of attending to external comforts is superficial . . .

Source: *pp. 247–248 of* The Wisdom of Laotse, *translated by Lin Yutang, New York: The Modern Library, 1948, renewed 1976.*

VOCABULARY

rich heavy

hustle and bustle hurry about

hoard store and hide

drive push

It is silly to care so much about material goods. What is inside you is more important.

Laozi believes that rich people who pay attention to their comforts are not paying attention to what is inside them.

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As to what the world does and the way people seek happiness now, I do not know if such happiness be real happiness or unhappiness. I watch the world rushing about with the crowd to seek happiness, and see [that] something seems to **drive** them along. Yet they all say they are happy . . . It has been said, "Perfect happiness is the absence of (the striving for) happiness."

When people are truly happy, they do not have to rush about looking for happiness or doing things to make themselves happy.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What four things does Laozi say that the world thinks are important?

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2. Name the four things that Laozi says people hate.

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MAKE A COMPARISON

1. Choose one belief by Confucius and one belief by Laozi. Do you agree or disagree with each belief? Explain why.

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2. In your own words, compare what Confucius says about money with what Laozi says about money.

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