

THE LIFE, LABOURS AND DOCTRINES OF CONFUCIUS



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IN order to obtain a clear notion of our subject, it is desirable to explain who Confucius was, and the condition of the social life amid which he lived.

If the reader will look at the map, he will be surprised to see that the China of those days was practically confined to the valley of the Hwang Ho, (which means "Yellow-River"), taken in its broadest sense. I mean that the river which is commonly spoken of as "China's Sorrow" has at different periods entered the sea through channels both north and south of its present course ; has, in fact, taken temporary possession of other river valleys and channels. The China of Confucius' time was, then, confined to the tract of country east of the Great Bend, where the river leaves Tartary for good ; and was enclosed or bounded north and south by the most outerly of those streams which have at any time been connected with the Yellow River system.

We know very little of China previous to Confucius' time (sixth century before Christ), but what little we do know was sifted for us and transmitted by Confucius. We may sum it up in a few words. The written character in an antique form had certainly existed for several thousand years, but it is quite uncertain how many : the best authorities say 3,000, that is 5,000 from now. Very recent discoveries in Babylonia have revealed to us original Sumerian cuneiform records on a wholesale scale, written in clay, and dating at least 5,000 years back ; but there are no such original ancient records in China, nor is there any trace of the Chinese ever having written in clay, still less of there being any connection between Chinese and those western hieroglyphs which preceded cuneiform. Several dynasties had existed, and the rulers of these had shifted their capitals from time to time according to the vagaries of the Yellow River. One of their chief cares was to deal with the havoc wrought or threatened by the floods which resulted from these fluvial irregularities. But although the earliest Chinese literature reaches -back 4,000 years, the older records are so brief