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Bringing the Historical Confucius to Life - by Alan Riding

ARIS — Confucius' teachings remain enormously influential in China and beyond, yet little is known in the West about the man himself beyond his famous sayings, or analects.

Now the Musée Guimet in Paris, renowned for its fine collection of Asian art, has set out to bridge this gap between East and West by devoting an exhibition to this central pillar of Asian thought. Even so, it is no easy task to translate the teacher's life into an art show when only his words from the 6th century B.C. survive.

What Confucius actually looked like of course remains a mystery. The traditional representation of him as a bearded man wearing a gown and a ceremonial hat is based on the imagination of artists working 1,500 to 2,000 years after his death. This show includes a 1691 red ink print of a stone engraving dated 1118 and three silk screen paintings, two portraying him with disciples, made during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644).

Of his life, more is known. Kung-tzu or Kung-fu-tzu — Westernized as Confucius — was born in 551 B.C. in Chufu, in what is today eastern Shandong province.

By all accounts, he was a man devoted to learning — in his words, "for the sake of the self" — as well as to teaching, with emphasis on self-improvement and moral rectitude. Eager to preserve and perpetuate ancient learning, he set out to master the six arts: ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and arithmetic. But he also felt a calling for public service, initially establishing a system of examinations to prepare young nobles for responsible leadership and later serving as a magistrate, a public works official and finally as justice minister in the Lu kingdom.

In the eyes of scholars, the most reliable sources of information are the records of Confucius' own conversations, transcribed in 20 "books" by his closest followers after his death at 73.

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One of Confucius' principal legacies was the notion of the enlightened civil servant, a concept that centuries later would spawn the system of all-powerful mandarins. On display are two sandstone statues of sixth-century dignitaries; ceramic figures of civil servants; a large silk-screen portrait of "the Venerable Qi Jiguang," a celebrated 16th-century military strategist; and ceremonial robes of descendants of Confucius (all on loan from the Provincial Museum of Shandong in Jinan).

But while Confucianism has a strong following in South Korea, Japan, Singapore and Vietnam as well as in China and Taiwan, it has had its ups and downs in its homeland, not least early in the 20th century when it was blamed for China's backwardness, and during the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960's and early 1970's when it again came under attack. Since 1989, however, it has been embraced afresh by Beijing as an authentically Chinese answer to Western political culture.