

# Socrates

By Vickie Chao



<sup>1</sup> Ancient Greece had many famous philosophers. Among them, Socrates is perhaps the most famous, but the least understood. The reason for that is because Socrates never wrote anything down. After he died in 399 B.C., many of his supporters (such as Plato, Aristotle, and Xenophon) tried to preserve his memory, so they wrote books about him. In their work, they liked to portray him doing what he was known best for -- making conversation. They published his dialogues and kept his ideas floating. But since those sources were not first-hand and were often conflicting, it is impossible to tell if they truly reflected Socrates' views.



<sup>2</sup> Socrates was born in Athens on June 4, 470 B.C. At the time of his birth, his home country, the Athenian Empire, was at the peak of its power. But that was about to change. In 431 B.C., Sparta invaded Athens and held the city under siege. The two sides were at a standoff for nearly thirty years. By the time the so-called Peloponnesian War was finally over in 404 B.C., Athens had lost most of its population, its prized navy, and much of its wealth. The defeat destroyed Athens completely. Never again could it rise up and reclaim its glory!

<sup>3</sup> As a person who had seen both the good and the bad days of Athens, Socrates told his fellow citizens to think and question everything around them. For example, he would ask what the true meaning of justice was. He would wonder what the true meaning of wisdom was. Often times, he would throw out a question and let people answer it. When they responded, he would then ask more questions and press them to think deeper. As the dialogue continued, those who called themselves knowledgeable would suddenly find themselves not as wise. The discovery made many second-guess their beliefs. It also made many uncomfortable and even angry.

<sup>4</sup> To the Athenians, Socrates was a controversial figure. On one extreme, there was Plato who openly praised the man. On the other extreme, there was Aristophanes who clearly disliked him. In 423 B.C., Aristophanes wrote a play called *The Clouds*. In it, he mocked Socrates and labeled him as a Sophist. (A Sophist in the fifth century B.C. meant a person who taught others, in exchange for fees, how to speak and what arguments to make during public debates. The notion carried a negative undertone.)

<sup>5</sup> The plot of *The Clouds* began with Strepsiades lamenting about his son's gambling addiction and growing debts. Strepsiades loved his son, Pheidippides, dearly. He hated to see him spending all his time betting on horse races. He tried to reason with him several times. But nothing he said made any difference. One day, after another sleepless night, Strepsiades came to Socrates' school, the Phrontisterion or "Thinkery." He wanted to learn how he could talk his way out of paying debts. Socrates took the old man in and