

Confucius

Biography / Overview

Author: Confucius (Kong Qiu, 孔子)

Birthplace: State of Lu (modern-day Qufu, Shandong Province, China)

Education: Studied the Chinese classics, primarily under his mother's encouragement and various tutors.

Career Highlights: Served as a government official in Lu, rising through several roles before focusing on teaching and philosophy.

Major Intellectual Pursuits: Developed a comprehensive ethical and political philosophy emphasizing moral character, ritual propriety, and social harmony.

Confucius was born into a family of low-ranking nobles on September 28, 551 BCE. Despite the death of his father and childhood poverty, Confucius received a robust education in the Zhou *liù yì* (Six Arts). He became known for his expertise in rituals and classical learning, which led to his appointment to government posts in Lu, including town governor and Minister of Crime. During this period, Confucius worked to dismantle the aristocratic authority of the Three Huan in favor of the Duke of Lu.

Throughout his teachings, Confucius emphasized deference to a just central authority both in the state and family. After observing societal injustices, he dedicated himself to teaching and philosophical inquiry, attracting a large group of disciples and shaping the intellectual tradition of China.

The teachings of Confucius became widespread under the Han dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE), remaining at the center of Chinese political and social life until the Xinhai Revolution in 1911. Confucius's followers Mencius and Xunzi elaborated on his philosophy throughout the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE. Confucius's works were first translated by Italian Jesuits in the 16th century but had already directly influenced East and South Asian society for millennia.

Confucius's writings were mass-printed beginning in the 11th-century Song dynasty, being widely distributed in private and public libraries.

Bibliography / Primary Sources

List of Major Works and Key Sources:

The Analects (Lunyu, 论语)

Original Language Edition: Compiled by disciples and later followers, with the first substantial editions dating from the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE).

The Five Classics (Wujing, 五经)

Book of Odes (Shijing, 诗经)

Book of Documents (Shujing, 书经)

Book of Changes (Yijing, 易经)

Book of Rites (Liji, 礼记)

Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu, 春秋)

Note: Confucius is traditionally credited with editing or commenting on these texts, especially the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

The Four Books (Sishu, 四书)

Analects (Lunyu, 论语)

Mencius (Mengzi, 孟子)

Great Learning (Daxue, 大学)

Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong, 中庸)

Note: The Four Books were compiled and promoted by Neo-Confucian scholars, especially Zhu Xi (1130–1200), as foundational Confucian texts.

Birth Date / Death Date

Born: September 28, 551 BCE (State of Lu, modern Shandong Province)

Died: 479 BCE

Notable / Best-Known For

Founder of Confucianism: Established a philosophy that shaped Chinese civilization and East Asian cultures for millennia.

Emphasis on Moral Character: Advocated for personal virtue, filial piety, and the cultivation of the “gentleman” (junzi).

Influence on Education and Government: His teachings became the foundation of the Chinese civil service examination system and imperial governance.

Global Philosophical Impact: Recognized as one of the world's most influential thinkers, with his ideas influencing moral philosophy and governance worldwide.

Famous Quotes

“Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself.” – Analects 12.2

“To study and not think is futile. To think and not study is dangerous.” – Analects 2.15

“The gentleman is calm and at ease; the petty man is anxious and worried.” – Analects 7.37

Major Works / Textual Contents

The Analects (Lunyu, 论语)

Collection of sayings and ideas attributed to Confucius and his disciples.

Covers topics such as ethics, governance, education, and personal conduct.

Five Classics (Wujing, 五经)

Book of Odes: Poetry and songs.

Book of Documents: Historical records and speeches.

Book of Changes: Divination and cosmology.

Book of Rites: Rituals and ceremonies.

Spring and Autumn Annals: Historical chronicle of Lu, with moral commentary.

Four Books (Sishu, 四书)

Analects: Core sayings of Confucius.

Mencius: Teachings of Confucius's disciple Mencius.

Great Learning: Guide to self-cultivation and governance.

Doctrine of the Mean: Philosophical exploration of harmony and moderation.

Influences / Intellectual Context

Zhou dynasty rituals: Confucius sought to revive and reinterpret the rituals and values of the early Zhou dynasty.

Earlier Chinese Classics: Influenced by the content and moral lessons of the Five Classics, which he edited or commented on.

Later Neo-Confucianism: His thought was reinterpreted and systematized by scholars like Zhu Xi, who integrated Confucianism with metaphysical concepts such as li (principle) and qi (vital force).

Legacy and Modern Significance

Confucius's philosophy has profoundly influenced Chinese and East Asian societies, shaping education, government, and social norms for over two millennia. His emphasis on moral cultivation, filial piety, and social harmony remains central to Chinese culture.

In the West, Confucius is recognized as a foundational figure in the history of philosophy, with his ideas contributing to debates on ethics, governance, and human nature. His legacy continues to be reinterpreted, critiqued, and applied in academic, political, and cultural contexts worldwide.

Modern Moments / Impact on the 21st Century

Confucius Institutes (2004–present)

Establishment: The Chinese government has established Confucius Institutes in universities and institutions worldwide to promote Chinese language and culture.

Impact: Empirical studies show that each Confucius Institute increases the number of foreign students on Chinese government scholarships by 1.3%, though there is a substitution effect reducing the total number of foreign students, especially non-degree students. This has improved the composition of foreign students in China, with notable effects in main source countries.

Example: As of 2023, there are hundreds of Confucius Institutes globally, with a significant presence in Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

Confucian Canon Project (2014–present)

Description: The Editorial and Research Center of Confucian Canon at Peking University has systematically compiled and organized influential Confucian classics from China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

Achievement: By 2023, 510 Chinese Confucian works have been compiled into 282 volumes, with contributions from more than 400 scholars at nearly 100 institutions worldwide.

Example: The project's "Essence" series includes foundational texts and representative literature, making Confucian classics more accessible for research and education.

Annual Commemorations of Confucius's Birthday (ongoing)

Description: On September 28 each year, ceremonies take place at Confucius temples across China and in overseas Chinese communities.

Example: At Beijing's 14th-century Confucius Temple and Imperial College Museum, a grand ceremony features traditional music, ritual dances, and speeches by educators and students. The ceremony has been held at this location for over a decade, drawing participants from schools and universities.

Digital Editions and Scholarly Resources (ongoing)

Description: The Analects and other Confucian texts are available in public domain digital editions on platforms like Project Gutenberg and the Chinese Text Project.

Example: The Analects is listed as core reading in philosophy and Asian studies courses at universities worldwide, with digital editions freely accessible for academic use.

Academic Recognition (ongoing)

Description: Confucius's works remain foundational in global academic curricula.

Example: Major universities, such as Harvard, Oxford, and Peking University, include Confucian texts in their syllabi for courses on philosophy, history, and Asian studies.

Suggested Reading and Resources

A. Secondary Literature (Scholarship)

Van Norden, Bryan. *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

Schwartz, Benjamin. *The World of Thought in Ancient China*. Harvard University Press, 1985.

Slingerland, Edward. *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Hackett Publishing, 2003.

Gardner, Daniel K. *The Four Books: The Basic Teachings of the Later Confucian Tradition*. Hackett Publishing, 2007.

Yao, Xinzhong. *An Introduction to Confucianism*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

B. Archival or Online Sources

Chinese Text Project: Comprehensive digital library of Chinese classical texts, including the Analects and Five Classics – <http://ctext.org>

Project Gutenberg: Free digital editions of Confucian texts in translation – <http://gutenberg.org>

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – Confucius: Scholarly overview of Confucius's life and thought – <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius>