

What Is The Sacred Text Of Confucianism

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INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION OF A SACRED CANON

When people think of "scripture" in a world religion, they often picture a single, definitive book: the Bible for Christianity, the Quran for Islam, or the Torah for Judaism. It is natural, then, to ask, "What is the sacred text of Confucianism?" The answer, however, is not a single book but a rich and layered collection of ancient writings that have shaped East Asian civilization for over two millennia. Unlike the revealed texts of Abrahamic faiths, the sacred literature of Confucianism is a curated library of philosophy, history, ritual, poetry, and political thought. Understanding this canon is essential to understanding the moral, social, and political fabric of China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. This article will explore the core texts that make up the Confucian canon, focusing on the **Five Classics** and the **Four Books**, and explain why the **Analects (Lunyu)** is often considered the most accessible and influential of these sacred works.

THE CONCEPT OF "SACRED TEXT" IN CONFUCIANISM

Before diving into the specific texts, it is important to clarify what "sacred" means in a Confucian context. In Western traditions, sacred texts are often considered divinely revealed or inspired. Confucianism, founded by Master Kong (Confucius) in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, is a humanistic philosophy and ethical system. Its texts are not considered divine revelations in the same sense. Instead, they are considered **sacred because they preserve the wisdom of ancient sage-kings**, the teachings of Confucius, and the ethical principles necessary for personal cultivation and social harmony. The texts were regarded as authoritative guides for morality, governance, education, and ritual conduct. They were canonized over centuries, with different texts gaining prominence at different times. Therefore, the sacred text of Confucianism is a dynamic canon, not a single static volume.

THE FIVE CLASSICS (WUJING): THE ANCIENT FOUNDATION

The oldest and most authoritative layer of the Confucian canon is the **Five Classics (Wujing)**. These texts were believed to have been edited, compiled, or commented upon by Confucius himself, and they served as the core curriculum for scholars for over a thousand years. The Five Classics are:

1. The Book of Changes (Yijing)

Perhaps the most mysterious of the Five Classics, the **Yijing** is a divination manual that evolved into a philosophical text. It uses a system of 64 hexagrams to describe the patterns of change in the universe. Confucius himself is said to have loved the Yijing in his old age. It provides a metaphysical framework for understanding the cosmos and human destiny.

2. The Book of Documents (Shujing)

Also known as the **Shangshu**, this is a collection of speeches, announcements, and decrees attributed to ancient rulers like Yao, Shun, and Yu. It is a foundational text for the Confucian political ideal, extolling the virtue of rulers and the concept of the **Mandate of Heaven**.

3. The Book of Poetry (Shijing)

A anthology of 305 poems and songs dating from the 11th to the 7th centuries BCE. Confucius famously said that the **Shijing** could "stimulate the mind, observe the customs, teach social interaction, and express grievances." It was used to cultivate moral character and as a source of political commentary.

4. The Book of Rites (Liji)

This is a vast text describing the rituals, ceremonies, and social customs of the Zhou dynasty. It details everything from grand state ceremonies to everyday etiquette. For Confucians, **ritual (li)** was the key to social harmony and self-discipline. The Liji is essential for understanding Confucian thought on propriety and social order.

5. The Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu)

This is a historical chronicle of the state of Lu, Confucius's home state, covering events from 722 to 481 BCE. The text is terse and factual, but it was believed that Confucius used subtle word choice to praise and condemn historical figures, thereby conveying moral judgments. It is the least read of the

Five Classics today but was immensely important for political philosophy.

For centuries, mastery of these Five Classics was the mark of a learned gentleman in China. However, over time, a new set of texts emerged that would become even more central to the daily practice of Confucianism.

THE FOUR BOOKS (SISHU): THE CORE OF NEO-CONFUCIANISM

If you ask a modern scholar "What is the sacred text of Confucianism?" you are likely to be pointed to the **Four Books (Sishu)**. These texts were elevated to the highest status during the Song dynasty by the great Neo-Confucian philosopher **Zhu Xi (1130-1200 CE)**. He rearranged and commented on these texts, making them the foundation of the civil service examination system for nearly 700 years. The Four Books are:

1. The Great Learning (Daxue)

Originally a chapter from the Book of Rites, the **Daxue** is a short but profound text outlining the Confucian "program" for self-cultivation and world peace. It famously describes a step-by-step process: "The ancients who wished to illuminate the bright virtue in the world first ordered their states. To order their states, they first regulated their families. To regulate their families, they first cultivated their personal lives." This text is the blueprint for Confucian personal and political ethics.

2. The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong)

Also taken from the Book of Rites, the **Zhongyong** focuses on the concept of "central harmony." It teaches that proper balance and sincerity are the foundations of the cosmos and human nature. It is a deeply philosophical text that connects human virtue with the universal order.

3. The Analects (Lunyu)

This is, without a doubt, the most famous and widely read of all Confucian texts. The **Analects** is a collection of sayings, dialogues, and anecdotes of Confucius and his disciples, compiled by later generations. It is not a systematic treatise but a series of vignettes that reveal the Master's personality, wisdom, and concerns. It covers topics such as **humaneness (ren)**, ritual (**li**), filial piety (**xiao**), righteous government, and learning. For most people, the Analects is the primary introduction to Confucius's thought. When people search for "what is the sacred text of Confucianism," the Analects is often the first book that comes to mind.

4. The Mencius (Mengzi)

The **Mencius** is a book of dialogues and arguments by the philosopher Mencius (372-289 BCE), who is considered the "Second Sage" of Confucianism after Confucius himself. Mencius famously argued

that human nature is inherently good, and that the goal of self-cultivation is to nurture this innate goodness. His text is more discursive and argumentative than the Analects, and it contains powerful defenses of Confucian thought against rival schools like Mozi and Yang Zhu.

WHY THE ANALECTS ARE CENTRAL TO THE ANSWER

While the canon includes many works, the **Analects (Lunyu)** holds a special place. It is the most direct record of the Founder's teachings. Let us explore why it is so significant in answering "What is the sacred text of Confucianism?"

- **Personal and Accessible:** Unlike the cryptic Yijing or the dry Chunqiu, the Analects presents Confucius as a human being. We see him joking with students, getting frustrated, and showing deep emotion. It reads like a series of conversations, making it approachable for readers of all backgrounds.
- **Moral Guidance:** The Analects is a practical guide for daily life. It addresses relationships, leadership, learning, and self-improvement. Passages like "Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself" (the Confucian Golden Rule) are found here.
- **Historical Influence:** For centuries, every educated person in East Asia memorized large portions of the Analects. It shaped the language, values, and social norms of the entire region. It is the bedrock of Confucian education.

Thus, while the Five Classics are the ancient foundation, the **Four Books** became the functional core of the tradition, and within that, the **Analects** is the primary text. If you had to choose one book to represent the Confucian faith, most scholars would point to the Analects.

HOW THESE TEXTS FUNCTION AS SCRIPTURE

Even though they are not "revealed" in the Abrahamic sense, the Confucian texts function as scripture in several key ways:

1. **Authority:** They are considered ultimate authorities on morality, politics, and social order. Quotes from the **Analects** or the **Mencius** have been used for over 2000 years to settle arguments and justify policies.
 2. **Ritual Use:** For centuries, Confucian temples held sacrifices and rituals where these texts were recited. The texts themselves were treated with great reverence.
 3. **Commentary Tradition:** Like the Bible or Quran, the Confucian classics have generated an enormous body of commentary and interpretation. Thinkers have wrestled with the meaning of every phrase, creating a deep and complex intellectual tradition.
 4. **Moral Formation:** The ultimate purpose of reading these texts is not academic. It is to transform the reader. The goal is to internalize the values of **ren** (humaneness), **yi** (righteousness), and **li** (ritual propriety) and become a **junzi** (a morally exemplary person).
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It is important to note that the question "What is the sacred text of Confucianism?" has had different answers at different times. During the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), the Five Classics were preeminent. The Four Books were considered secondary at best. It was not until the Song dynasty revival of Confucianism (Neo-Confucianism) that the Four Books became the core curriculum. Zhu Xi argued that the Four Books were a more accessible and direct path to understanding the mind of Confucius and the ancient sages. His commentaries became the standard, and for 700 years,	THE EVOLUTION OF THE CANON: A LIVING TRADITION July 14, 2018. The canon of Confucianism has evolved over time. During the Han dynasty, scholars had to memorize the Four Books and Zhu Xi's interpretations. Thus, the canon is not static; it has been reinterpreted and reemphasized across history. CONCLUSION: A LIBRARY OF WISDOM To answer the question "What is the sacred text of Confucianism?" is to describe a rich and multifaceted library of wisdom
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