

# 5 minute guide

## to **CONFUCIANISM**

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The 5 Minute Guide to Confucianism

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## Introduction

Confucianism is an ethical and philosophical system developed from the early teachings of Confucius, a Chinese philosopher who lived from 551 to 479 B.C. He was a man who was deeply concerned about the troubled times he lived in. Confucius wrote, taught and lived to promote inner peace and peace throughout the world. His life served as a model of how everyone should live.

Cultures and countries strongly influenced by Confucianism include the Asian countries of mainland China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan and Vietnam as well as territories where Chinese people have settled throughout the world.

Worldwide, there are about six million people who today call themselves Confucianists. Most are of Asian descent.

## History

Confucius went from place to place to try to spread his political influence and ideas to many kings who ruled parts of China. He wanted to pass on how he thought successful societies would develop, how those in ruling positions should rule and how relationships need to be cultivated and maintained. In his attempt to spread his philosophy and to gain political power in establishing a new dynasty, he was expelled from states many times and eventually returned to his homeland to spend the last part of his life teaching. His teaching led to many disciples who would go on to spread Confucianism throughout China and to other parts of the world.

For more than two thousand years, Confucianism has been the dominant philosophical system in China. It influences all phases of Chinese life from poetry and history, to government and social life, and in ethics that forms daily living. It is the basis of their core educational standards and offers the form to respect learning and teachers.

A wide range of time and cultural events that represent a broad range of individuals reaffirm the goal of sage hood and the need to take moral actions. Maintaining the beliefs of Confucianism is a way of helping to meet this goal, both in historical times and in modern times.

## Growth

After Confucius died, his disciples (most not that well-known, but including better-known figures such as Mencius and XunZi) developed Confucianism into an ethical and political doctrine. To spread this message throughout the land, every ruler's confidence needed to be gained through reason and debate. Throughout China's history there were different rulers who opposed the influence of Confucianism. Books that advocated Confucius' teachings and principles were burned and scholars, who studied, practiced and taught his beliefs were killed. However, through all of this suppression, Confucianism survived.

Confucianism was granted the honor of "the official state philosophy". Now, studying the classics, (*Book of Changes, Book of Songs, Book of History, Book of Rites, and the Spring and Autumn Annals*) formed the basis of this "religion". These classics were written with the belief that humans can be taught a set of virtues and ethics to live humanely, to do what is right and to follow what is morally good.

These principles became the basis of a government examination system (which was later outlawed). They also serve as the core of education.

Temples were built throughout China. There were Emperors who favored other “religions” more than Confucianism, but the Neo-Confucians continued to support the ideas of Confucius and his early disciples. Other Asian countries like Korea and Japan adopted Confucianism as their state philosophies. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the earliest European arrivals in China, the Christian Jesuits, considered Confucianism to be an ethical system and one that fit well with Christianity. They learned the Chinese language and culture in hopes to spread Christianity by absorbing some of the Confucian traits. However, the Pope later was asked to intervene and not allow the Jesuits to solely influence the Confucianists.

In the 1960s, Confucianism was continually attacked during the Cultural Revolution in the People’s Republic of China. Seen as part of the old feudal system and a stumbling block to modernization by some, its influence remained strong.

The Confucianism influence continues today throughout the world. Some scholars attribute urbanization and economic success to the practice and belief system of Confucianism. Sociologists attribute the strong relationship theory of Confucianism to the intact family structures within these societies. Educational theorists acknowledge the role that Confucianism plays in demanding respect and value for education and teachers which leads to a very high success rate of students.

Modern movements such as New Confucianism seek to find new inspiration from the thought system of Confucius and his followers. The history of this “religion” continues to play a role in the political, cultural and social world of today.

## Denominations

There are no denominations within Confucianism. You either are a believer and a follower, or you are not. There is continual debate whether Confucianism is a philosophy or a religion.

## Traditions/Beliefs

The core of Confucianism is humanism in that the focus of spiritual concern is the family and the world. It believes that humans can be taught virtues and ethics to live humanely.

Traditionally, Confucius was thought to be the author of Five Classics which formed the basis of this religion. However, some historians believe that ancient sages (i.e. Chinese for the one who hears and magnifies) wrote these written records. They heard “Heaven’s Way”, and therefore offer this information to serve as a blueprint of how mankind should live.

The Five Classics include:

*Book of Changes* shows the universe in unity

*Book of Songs* reveals the poetic vision that poetry and music convey human feelings

*Book of History* records speeches of major figures and records important events based on responsibility and trust

*Book of Rites* describes society as a community of trust based on social responsibility and that four functional occupations are cooperative: farmer, scholar, artisan and merchant; Five relationships

(father/son, husband/wife, older brother/younger brother, friend/friend, ruler/subject are stressed

*Spring and Autumn Annals* reports key events to illustrate that this memory of the “old” is the best way to attain the new

There is reference to a Sixth Classic, a lost text on music.

Confucian ethics promotes the virtues of humaneness, justice, etiquette, knowledge and integrity.

Respect for elders and teachers is of the utmost importance.

Confucianism does not involve a belief in the supernatural or in a personal god.

Centuries after Confucius’ death, this philosophy became the official doctrine of the Chinese government.

After the last emperor was overthrown in 1911, China sought to modernize. With the advent of communism, Chinese dictators tried to stamp out Confucianism as a doctrine of the government. However, for various reasons, the strong roots of Confucianism remain and continue to impact society today.

## Worship

Confucianism has no priests and no creed for followers. There is no regular public worship nor is there a personal relationship with a god. There is no revealed word of God or sacred scriptures. However, there are the Five Classics (as mentioned above).

There are also a series of writings called the Four Books. Although these writings make up a collection of an earlier date, they were not put together until the beginning of Neo-Confucianism. These books reflect the basic teachings and supplement the Five Classics. The Four Books include *The Great Learning* (a short text that summarizes how to bring peace through the world through individual learning and moral cultivation) and the *Doctrine of the Mean* (also stressing the importance of individual learning but in the context of the universe). *The Confucian Analects* is a text that records the conversations and sayings of Confucius with his disciples. It is thought to be the most complete account of the founder of the Confucian tradition. The *Meng Tzu* consists of writings of Mencius, an early Confucian thinker. In this role, Mencius interprets Confucius and his teachings.

Most authors do not consider the Five Classics and the Four Books as scripture. These texts are referred to as literary or philosophical sources for the Confucian tradition. They contain the wisdom of the Way of Heaven to be used by others who want to learn how to become sages, too.

There is no organized church structure in Confucianism; however there are temples of worship. Heaven is recognized as a spiritual force that influences human affairs similar to the Western concept of Providence. When you die, your reward is peace and rest.

Temples are built and devoted to Confucius. Families have ancestral alters to honor the dead.

## Holy Days, Festivals and Rituals

### In Ancient Times

Rulers performed annual ceremonies to renew their reign's Mandate of Heaven. From proper clothing to ascending steps to the altar in the shape of Heaven, they would like candles to have the smoke rise to invite the "Supreme Lord" to take part in the ceremony. Incense, silk and jade were laid on the altar.

Animals were sacrificed. Musical flutes and gongs played while dancers performed. This ritual is outlined in the Book of Rites to ensure that human affairs were kept in harmony with the Will of Heaven.

Imperial ceremonies consisted of great, medium and small sacrifices as outlined in The Book of Rites.

### In Ancient Times and Today

Once a day, the offering hall is visited of the deceased parent. Regular devotions include reporting about the family to the deceased. Special offerings to ancestors are performed at each season of the year and on holidays.

The father in each home takes on the role of "priest" and helps study and pass on the five books to his family. The father makes sacrifices and reports the family matters to the shrines. Rituals honor the deceased family members.

The son is required to pay honor to his father, even after death. He is responsible for offering sacrifices to his father's spirit known as filial piety. Children show filial piety towards their mother.

Sacrifices are offered to statues of Confucius or to tablets with his name inscribed on them. This is to show respect and honor toward Confucius as the ancestor of the teachings and for his role as "Sage to All Generations".

Prayers modeled after the songs in the book of poetry are chanted; ritual dances and music are performed.

Fasting is a symbol of purification.

## Celebrations

Various rites of passage are celebrated to include "capping", a ritual that represents a boy's achievement of manhood by a ceremony in which the child changes his clothes for adult clothing. This usually takes place at the beginning of the teen years.

Childbirth, weddings and funerals all employ various Confucian teachings. A birth reinforces the importance of continuing the family line and the confirmation of sacrifice to the ancestors. Rituals associated with marriage emphasize the importance of the family line and the creation of a new life within the family, as well as the obligations between the newly joined couple. Funerals are seen as important rituals whereby people display their feelings for the lost relative. This ritual concerns what to

wear, how long to mourn, the preparation of the body for burial, the preparation of the ancestral tablet and the selection of the burial spot.

Lunar New Year, Mid-Autumn Festival and a variety of other events and holidays have certain Confucian values. They are not Confucian holidays.

Confucius' birthday is a Confucian holiday. This holiday is celebrated annually on September 28<sup>th</sup>, the actual recorded date of his birth. This date corresponds with Teacher's Day, the day on which all teachers are revered for their contributions to education and learning. There is nothing supernatural or miraculous implied with Confucius' birth. He is simply recognized as a great teacher. Education and respect for teachers is a fundamental Confucian belief.

## Timeline

551 B.C.	The mother of Confucius has a dream (before her son is born) that he will be "a king without a crown". Later, when he is born, heavenly music fills the air and a voice says, "Heaven has given you a holy child."
521 B.C.	Confucius founds a school and he begins to teach six arts: rituals, writing, music, archery, chariot driving, and mathematics. In his teaching, he emphasizes character.
479 B.C.	Confucius dies. His followers set out to change the world. Confucianism develops.
202 B.C.	Confucianism becomes a State Doctrine.
620 A.D.	Posthumously, Confucius is granted the title of Duke Ni
630 A.D.	The Emperor decrees that the Confucian temples will be established in every important town and city; government officials are required to make regular sacrifices in them; ritual dances and music, animal sacrifices by imperial officials, and prayers modeled after the songs in the Book of Poetry are chanted
960-1279 A.D.	Neo-Confucianism comes about with the adoption of Buddhist ideas that the universe is constantly changing; the goal is to reach the fulfillment of becoming a sage like Confucius himself
1300s-1400s A.D.	Confucianism spreads to other East Asian countries.
1516 A.D.	With the arrival of the Europeans come missionaries who are determined to spread Christianity throughout China; Jesuits begin to make Catholic converts.
1644 A.D.	The Dominicans and the Franciscans demand that the Chinese accept Christianity exclusively; this argument is presented to the Pope
Early 1700s A.D. .	The Pope rules against the Jesuits; Christianity does not move forward
1912 A.D.	The last dynasty falls; no one is left to carry out the ancient Confucian rites for the nation; the role of Confucianism is uncertain
1919 A.D.	May 4 Anti-Confucian Movement
1949 A.D	Nationalist China defeated by Communists; establishment of Communist China Today
1966-1976 A.D.	Cultural Revolution (Anti-Confucian)
Today	Confucianism speaks with wisdom and authority to the modern world; whether conducted as a religion or a philosophy. Confucianism retains its moral strength

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