

# Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism

Sishū Wūjīng 四书五经

**The Song dynasty scholar Zhu Xi streamlined Confucian education by compiling the Four Books: *Mencius*, *Analects*, *Great Learning*, and *Centrality and Commonality*. These texts influenced Chinese culture more than any other classics during the last six centuries of the dynastic period.**

**T**he great Song dynasty (960–1279) synthesizer of neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi (1130–1200 CE), standardized educational methods by compiling what came to be known as the “Four Books.” Before Zhu Xi, Confucian education had concentrated on the Five Classics: the books of *History*, *Poetry*, *Changes*, *Rites*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, supplemented by the *Mencius*, *Analects*, *Xunzi*, *Chunqiu fanlu* by Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE), and other texts such as the *Classic on Filial Piety* and *Ceremonies and Rites (Yili)*. Zhu Xi streamlined the educational process with the Four Books: *Mencius*, *Analects*, *Great Learning (Daxue)*, and *Centrality and Commonality (Zhongyong)*, often misinterpreted as the *Doctrine of the Mean*). The latter two were extracted from *Rites*.

Zhu Xi wrote commentaries on these four books, reinterpreting them in the light of his syncretic approach, and used them as the foundation of his social, moral, and political philosophy. His innovation had a lasting influence on Confucian education and Chinese bureaucracy in that the Four Books were the basis of China’s civil service examinations from 1313 to 1905, when the examinations were abolished. Zhu Xi, by emphasizing the Four Books, removed many

Daoist and Buddhist tendencies from neo-Confucianism. It is no exaggeration to state that the Four Books influenced Chinese culture more than any other classics during the last six hundred years of the dynastic period.

The *Mencius* describes the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Mencius and expands Confucius’s ideas, stressing the inner quality of the virtues and advocating humanitarian rulership. The *Analects* contains the teachings of Confucius and advocates moral self-cultivation and rulership based on virtue. The *Great Learning* explains the chain reaction that starts with the “investigation of things,” beginning a process of moral cultivation that regulates the family, brings order to the state, and ultimately creates peace on Earth. *Centrality and Commonality* is usually mistranslated as the *Doctrine of the Mean*, which incorrectly implies that the work is similar to the Greek philosopher Aristotle’s Golden Mean or the Buddha’s Middle Way. However, whereas Aristotle sought a balance between extremes, and the Buddha proposed a way to eliminate extremes, the Confucian concept of centrality is defined as the natural condition “before the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy come forth.”

**James D. SELLMANN**

## Further Reading

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