

## Confucius: A Life

The most influential philosopher in Chinese history, and maybe in the world, was a man we call in English, Confucius. For all his influence, we actually know very little about him. We know that he was born in 551 BCE. We know his family name was Kong. (Kong Fuzi, which means “Master Kong” in Chinese, is where we get the English name “Confucius.”) We know that his family were low-ranking nobles. During his life he tried many times to become an advisor to one of the many local rulers in China. We don’t know if he ever did become an advisor. But we do know that he spent most of his life working as a tutor for young men of powerful families. And we know he died in 479 BCE. But apart from these basic facts, our knowledge of Confucius is very small.

The way historians have learned about Confucius is by studying his teachings. His teachings have been preserved in a book called *The Analects* (“discussions and conversations”). But there are two problems with *The Analects* as a source. First, the teachings of Confucius were passed down as an oral tradition, and only written down long after Confucius died. Second, the teachings in *The Analects* don’t always agree. Despite these problems, there is a lot we can learn about Confucius from *The Analects*. Let’s look at these:

### Relationships

Confucius taught that we as people have obligations to those above and below us socially. The relationships are unequal and hierarchical. For example, the first relationship is between ruler and subject. The subject has an obligation to respect and obey the ruler; and the ruler has the obligation to provide protection and good government. Confucius taught that there are five pairs of relationships:

- ruler and subject
- father and son

- elder brother and younger brother
- husband and wife
- friend and friend according to age

### ***Ren and Li***

At the core of Confucianism is the idea of morality. The morality of Confucianism is best described through the two concepts of *ren* (kindness) and *li* (rites).

*Ren*: Confucius believed humans were all naturally good. But they could be led astray. But focusing on one's *ren* would ensure that the good always rises to the top.

*Li*: *Ren* was expressed in the physical world through *li*. *Li* means not only following basic customs, but also knowing one's place in society.



## Primary Source Analysis

Using what you have learned about Confucius and his teachings, complete the following exercise. Read each of the quotes from *The Analects*. Then determine if they refer primarily to **Relationships**, *Li*, or *Ren*. Write your answer in the column next to the quote.

<i>The Analects</i>	Relationships, <i>Li</i> , or <i>Ren</i>
"Let there be a careful attention to perform the funeral rites to parents, and let them be followed when long gone with the ceremonies of sacrifice;—then the virtue of the people will resume its proper excellence."	
"If a man withdraws his mind from the love of beauty, and applies it as sincerely to the love of the virtuous; if, in serving his parents, he can exert his utmost strength; if, in serving his prince, he can devote his life; if, in his intercourse with his friends, his words are sincere:—although men say that he has not learned, I will certainly say that he has."	
"The superior man bends his attention to what is radical. That being established, all practical courses naturally grow up. Filial piety and fraternal submission,—are they not the root of all benevolent actions?"	

