



## On the Ideals of a "Saint" in Confucius' Era and Teachings

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**Abstract:** The term *sheng* 圣/聖 (sacred) in ancient China leading up to Confucius' era has greatly influenced Confucius' ideas on the ideals of a "saint." This concept evolved from a basic idea related to "sound" to a deeper concept connected to divine knowledge and benevolence. Drawing from its meaning, Confucius viewed saints as individuals with exceptional moral standards who benefited the common people. He considered saints rare and sacred figures, even beyond his own attainments. This paper traces the historical evolution of the concept of *sheng* 圣/聖 from its origins in ancient China to the era of Confucius and explores Confucius' perspective on *shengren* 圣人 (saint) and their significance.

**Keywords:** Confucius, saint, ancient China, virtues

This article explores the evolving understanding of the term *sheng* 圣 (sacred) from its origins in ancient China, leading up to the times of Confucius. Additionally, it explores Confucius' perspective on the concept of a *shengren* 圣人 (saint), unravelling the layers of meaning and moral significance associated with this kind of revered figure in Confucian early teachings.

### **Evolution of the Concept of sheng before Confucius**

Confucius (551 - 479 BC), an illustrious figure in ancient China, emerged as a philosopher and teacher within the Spring and Autumn Period (770-481 BC). This epoch, nestled within the broader literary expanse of the Pre-Qin era (spanning the time predating the inception of the Qin Dynasty in 221 BC), profoundly influenced Confucius' intellectual framework. His insights into sacredness and sainthood not only mirrored the philosophical spirit of his era but also played a vital role in shaping it.

In the realm of Pre-Qin philology, the character *sheng* for "sacred" is recognized to have two variants: 聖 and 圣, both pronounced as *sheng*. These variants share a similar meaning of "sacred" and were used interchangeably.

First, an in-depth examination of the first variant, *sheng* 聖, becomes essential to grasp the concept. Three distinct viewpoints converge to provide insights into the interpretation of this character, collectively offering a historical perspective on the evolution of its meaning.

Guo Moruo 郭沫若, an important Chinese historian and archaeologist, sought to grasp the original meaning of this first variation of *sheng* 聖 by interpreting its usage in the Shang Dynasty (1600 - 1046 BC). He proved that the character *sheng* 聖 in its most primitive form, as found in oracle bone inscriptions<sup>1</sup>, was initially composed in its earliest forms only of the words *er* 耳 (ear) and *kou* 口 (mouth). As his research progressed, he unveiled that during the Shang Dynasty, the words *ting* 听 (listen), *sheng* 声 (sound), and *sheng* 聖 (sacred) all consisted of the elements *er* 耳 and *kou* 口, respectively. (GUO 1982, 89)

This suggests that in its earliest stages, the words "listen," "sound," and "sacred" all followed a semantic structure that conveyed the idea that something is first heard by the ear and then spoken from the mouth. Thus, the character *sheng* 聖 represented the process of sound entering through the ear and coming out through the mouth.

Gu Jiegang 顾颉刚, a pioneer in ancient Chinese history and historiography, affirmed this interpretation and explained it as the "emotional response to hearing a sound." (GU 1979, 80-81) In this context, *sheng* 聖 would, therefore, represent the process of sound being heard through the ear and articulated through the mouth, conveying, by extension, the meaning of intelligence or cognition.

Further investigating its development, Li Xiaoding 李孝定, a well-known expert on oracle bone inscriptions, elucidates that over time, *sheng* 聖 expanded its connotations beyond mere intelligence in the realm of knowledge to emphasize the keenness of the sensory organ of hearing, particularly when one listens with devotion, attention, and pleasure. This emphasis led *sheng* 聖 to its extended meaning of *tong* 通, which expressed "connectedness," "going through," "communicating," or "comprehending." In this form, *sheng* 聖 represented the active act of listening with the intention of speaking, acquiring knowledge with the purpose of using it creatively, ultimately culminating in its most significant interpretation in ancient China: "to be enlightened." (LI 2010, 2100)

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<sup>1</sup> Inscriptions on animal bones or plastrons of turtles widely used during that period.

This interpretation aligns with the explanation of the character *sheng* 聖 as found in the latter Eastern Han Dynasty (25 - 220 AD) work *Shuowen jiezi* 说文解字, a classic Chinese dictionary and one of the earliest known comprehensive works on Chinese characters written by Xu Shen 许慎 (58 - 148 AD). A preeminent scholar of his time, Xu Shen, also defined *sheng* 聖 as *tong* 通. (XU 1978, 250) Following this line of thought, according to Li, *sheng* 聖 early on represented "acute auditory perception," then it evolved and took on the meaning of "connectedness." Therefore, beyond its primary meaning of "intelligence," the character also expanded a profound layer of significance, embodying the notion of being enlightened, a state of mind that arises after achieving the *tong* 通 realm of connection.

Building upon the insights from these interpretations, Xu Zhongshu 徐中舒, a prominent historian and paleographer, emphasizes that *sheng* 聖 was closely associated with the concept of *jingtong* 精通 and denoted a high level of proficiency in understanding that is attained only through the practical application of "sacred" knowledge. (XU 1989, 1287) In this context, the concept of "sacredness" embodied in the word *sheng* 聖 takes on its complete meaning since *tong* 通 also includes the meaning of "communication with the divine" as it relates to ancient religious practices. Japanese scholar Shirakawa Shizuka 白川静 suggests that *sheng* 聖 was closely linked to ancient sacrificial activities. (BAI 2014, 12) He interprets the *kou* 口 part of the character as a vessel used for sacrifices, following the line of reasoning that involves *tongshen* 通神 (connection/communication with the divine).

However, Xu Zhongshu also notes that *er* 耳 (ear) has the functions of perceiving and knowing sound while *kou* 口 (mouth) inherently has the function of producing sound. *Tong* 通 (connectedness) represented the entire process of perception/reception of sound and one's reaction to it, from the *er* 耳 (ear) to the *kou* 口 (mouth). (XU 1989, 1287) This perspective underscores that the character *sheng* 聖 symbolizes the process of hearing, understanding, rethinking, and reusing the sound from above in a creative earthly way, a thorough grasp of the knowledge after individuals had formulated their own ideas based on their personal use of what they had heard. In essence, it highlighted the cognitive dimension of acquiring knowledge by listening (learning) and applying (speaking) what has been learned.

Due to the limited available evidence from oracle bone inscriptions, it may be challenging to delve deeper into the precise process of how *sheng* 聖 evolved to embody the full meaning of *tong* 通 (connectedness) or *tongshen* 通神 (connection/communication with the divine). However, it is evident that, at various points in its development, *sheng* 聖 refers to a particular human attribute: the exceptional virtue of the ability to discern facts and phenomena and respond accordingly.

Therefore, from a philological perspective on the character *sheng* 聖, the different viewpoints represent different stages of its development. In the first stage, *sheng* 聖 denoted a very common sensory capability, essentially the ability to hear sounds if they were present. In the second stage, *sheng* 聖 represented the capacity to make judgments about the sounds one heard, recognizing what or who was producing the sound by logical reasoning and value judgments about it. In the final stage, *sheng* 聖 took a broader significance, coming to mean the interactions with the sound and the responses it elicited, reflecting a deeper level of thought regarding the moral and intellectual aspects of the auditory experience.

Deeper into the matter, a look into the second variation of the word "sacred" in ancient China takes us to the character *sheng* 圣, used interchangeably with *sheng* 聖. This version of the concept originated from the combination of *you* 又 (hand) and *tu* 土 (earth) in oracle bone inscriptions, as it remains unchanged to this day.

Some scholars, like Yu Shengwu 于省吾, suggest that in ancient texts, the word *ken* 垦, which meant "reclaim" or "cultivate" the land, was occasionally written as *sheng* 圣. (YU 2010, 41) Therefore, in that context, he interprets *sheng* 圣 as having meaning "the common people" or "ordinary farmers who cultivate the land." In this view, *sheng* 圣 was associated with the common labourers working on the land.

However, Professor Yan Baoping 阎保平 has a different, more suitable interpretation. He explains that while there are indeed records of *sheng* 圣 (sacred) related to daily life in some oracle bone inscriptions, they primarily pertain to the affairs of the most powerful political leaders of the time and are unrelated to land reclamation and labour. In his view, the upper part of the character represented by *you* 又 takes on a higher, sacred meaning, while the lower part represented by *tu* 土 signified ordinary agricultural life. He argues that this form of *sheng* 圣 emphasized distinctions such as *shangxia youbie* 上下有别 (distinction between

the superior and inferior) and *shenren* youbie 神人有别 (the distinction between the divine and human), adding depth to the interpretation of the concept. (YAN 2007, 90-94)

The function of the character *sheng* 圣 to distinguish between the "high" and the "low" is intriguing. Drawing a parallel with the mythological tale of the Shang Dynasty's founding by a mysterious bird's descent from heaven,<sup>2</sup> the character *sheng* 圣 implied the meaning of a "great initiator," a political, sacred figure higher and greater than ordinary people. (ZHOU 2002, 547-548)

Later on, up to Confucius' time (6th - 5th century BC) and persisting through the Warring States Period (475 - 221 BC), the characteristics represented by the word "sacred" evolved to denote individuals who possessed divine-given high moral attributes. Whether formed from *er* 耳 and *kou* 口 (ear and mouth) or *you* 又 and *tu* 土 (hand and land), the word "sacred," over the course of its historical development, evolved to symbolize individuals with the extraordinary ability to creatively apply their acquired knowledge.

Over time, "sacred" or "sacredness" evolved to mean the application of divine knowledge in earthly matters becoming the central characteristic of a person to whom the adjective *sheng* (in its both forms) was attributed.

### **Confucius on the Concept of a "Saint"**

The concept of the *shengren* 圣人, which combines the Chinese words for "sacred" and "person", is often translated as "saint" (though sometimes as "sage" in the Western academic context), held great significance across diverse schools of thought during the Pre-Qin period in ancient China.

Long before Confucius, the term was widely employed in ancient texts that he compiled and edited for posterity, some of which are quoted below in this article. During the compilation and arrangement of these books, the ideas embedded in those ancient texts significantly influenced him and his ideals of the concept of *sheng* 圣/聖 (sacred) and, ultimately, what it meant to be a *shengren* 圣人 (saint).

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<sup>2</sup> Text in chinese: 天命玄鸟，降而生商。

For example, in the ancient book *Guoyu* 国语 (known in the West as Discourses of the States),<sup>3</sup> it is noted that "during the ancient era, there was a clear separation between spirits and humans"<sup>4</sup>. (XU 2002, 512) Aiming to overcome this separation, spiritual leaders known as *xi* 覡 (for men) and *wu* 巫 (for women) manifested the essence of *sheng* 圣, a quality of sacredness. (XU 2002, 513) In this role, they served as intermediaries between human and spirits, connecting them, foreseeing the future, and offering guidance in human affairs.

The same concept is evident in the classic *Shangshu* 尚书 (Book of Documents),<sup>5</sup> also known to be one of the texts Confucius himself worked on. However, a nuanced and slightly different use of the concept becomes apparent when encountered in this book. Zheng Xuan 郑玄 (127 - 200 AD), a canonized scholar of the classics, added a note to the book, stating that throughout these documents, *sheng* 圣 was a virtue embodied by those who were "able to communicate in all matters", pointing out an important aspect of the concept.<sup>6</sup> (KONG 2021, 454) In this book, the concept transitioned from the notion of a spiritual leader, a prevailing concept in the Shang Dynasty and one that persisted during Confucius' era, to an individual capable of comprehending a myriad of matters — both spiritual and earthly. It was a virtue to master knowledge that extends beyond the ordinary. This implies that *sheng* 圣 could be manifested in the world not only by spiritual leaders but also by political figures or anyone assuming a role of social influence through moral cultivation.

Having consulted these chapters both as a reference and as part of his personal literary compilation work, Confucius was influenced by the diverse applications of the concept. Although the term *sheng* 圣 appears in The Book of Documents, the term *shengren* 圣人 (saint) is notably absent. To grasp this idea, we must turn elsewhere: the *Shijing* 诗经, the Classic of Poetry,<sup>7</sup> where the term is found twice.

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<sup>3</sup> A collection of speeches attributed to rulers and other influential figures from Confucius' times in the Spring and Autumn period (770 - 481 BC).

<sup>4</sup> Text in chinese: 古者民神不杂.

<sup>5</sup> A compilation of consultations, instructions, announcements, declarations and commands traditionally believed to date back to the end of Shang Dynasty (1600 - 1046 BC) and the Western Zhou Dynasty (1050 - 771 BC).

<sup>6</sup> Text in chinese: 于事无不通谓之圣.

<sup>7</sup> The Classic of Poetry is the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry, with over 300 poems dating from the 11th to 7th centuries BC and compiled by Confucius himself.

In the poem *Sang rou* 桑柔 (Gentle Mulberry Tree), we find the lines: "Consider such shengren, his views and words resonate to a hundred *li*; Consider that foolish man, engulfed in frenzy, reveling in reckless joy".<sup>8</sup>(Li 1999, 1187) It is evident here that the *shengren* 圣人 perceives and discusses matters with a long-term perspective, while the foolish person only sees the present, unaware of impending calamities, and instead revels in reckless joy. In this context, the term *shengren* 圣人 primally refers to individuals who are intelligent, wise, and possess foresight, differing somewhat from the saints of later times, serving as the starting point for Confucius' ideas on the concept.

In another poem, *Qiao yan* 巧言 (Skillful Words), we read: "Grand and spacious is the ancestral temple, orchestrated by the Sovereign. Wisely arranged are the great plans, determined by the *shengren*".<sup>9</sup>(LI 1999, 757) The term "great plans" in this context refers to the art of governing the country, as pointed out by Zheng Xuan 郑玄. (LI 1999, 757) Here, the term *shengren* 圣人 pertains to individuals capable of formulating rituals and laws to govern, thereby emphasizing their political wisdom and competence.

The concept of the "saint" was used before Confucius, assimilated by him, and it became a subject of discussion among Confucian scholars throughout history, each offering their unique perspectives on the ideal characteristics that defined a saint. Given its significance, it's valuable to explore Confucius' own views on this concept.

We should bear in mind that Confucius himself did not directly provide a definition for the term *shengren* 圣人(saint). We can only construct an image of how Confucius perceived a saint through his discussions with his disciples, as recorded in the Lunyu 论语 (commonly known in the West as Analects of Confucius), written and compiled by Confucianists after Confucius' death. In the dialogues related to the concept, two distinct ideas in Confucius' eyes become quite evident.

First, Confucius envisioned a saint as possessing a well-rounded combination of both inner and outer qualities, an ideal character characterized by the highest moral standards and exceptional achievements, representing the epitome of *daode zhishan*, *renlun jiaohua* 道德至善, 人伦教化 (moral excellence and ethical guidance). (CHANG 2007, 37-40) The second

<sup>8</sup> Text in chinese: 维此圣人，瞻言万里。维彼愚人，覆狂以喜。

<sup>9</sup> Text in chinese: 奕奕寝庙，君子作之。秩秩大猷，圣人莫之。

idea is rooted in the belief that saints are no longer among them, and Confucius did not consider himself one.

For Confucius, a saint was the supreme ideal character. Based on literary records, we can infer the kind of saintly figure he had in mind from two topics he often discussed: *junzi* 君子 (noble person) and *ren* 仁 (benevolence or humaneness).

Regarding the role that the *junzi* 君子 had to imitate as a standard, Confucius stated:

There are three things the *junzi* stands in awe. He stands in awe of the ordinances of Heaven, he stands in awe of great moral figures, he stands in awe of the words of *shengren* (saints). The small man does not know the ordinances of Heaven and consequently does not stand in awe of them. He is disrespectful to great moral figures while scoffing at the words of the *shengren* (saints)<sup>10</sup>. (YANG 1980, 177)

The Confucian tradition revolves around the concept of a *junzi* 君子 (the noble person), which refers to individuals with high moral character and often holds political leadership roles. However, becoming a *junzi* 君子 is no easy work. Confucius believed that a *junzi* 君子 should not only revere heavenly principles and great moral figures (such as parents, elders, and morally wise people) but should also hold in reverence the words of the saints. In Confucius' view, saints possess a certain elevated and mystical quality, even higher in status than a noble person. So, it is advised to his disciples that a person in pursuit of moral superiority should conduct themselves in accordance with the standards set by saints *shengren* 圣人, not by other *junzi* 君子. And that is because Confucius believed that the ideal character of a saint transcended mere moral impeccability.

To better grasp the elevated status that Confucius attributed to saints, we can also observe his emphasis on the realm of *ren* 仁 (benevolence or humaneness) in his teachings:

Zi Gong said: "What would you say of a person who generously donates to help the people and benefits many? Would you call them practitioners of *ren*?" Confucius responded: "Why limit it to *ren*? We can call them *shengren* (saints)! Even Yao and Shun fell short of this.

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<sup>10</sup> Text in chinese: 孔子曰：君子有三畏：畏天命，畏大人，畏圣人之言。小人不知天命而不畏也，狎大人侮圣人之言。

Now, the person acting upon *ren* establishes themselves and the others; enlarge themselves and the others. Being able to understand others by what is high in ourselves - this may be called the practice of *ren*".<sup>11</sup>(YANG 1980, 65)

Among scholars, it is widely recognized that *ren* 仁 is the highest virtue in Confucian philosophy. Throughout the entire Analects, the term is mentioned in fifty-nine chapters, with a total of one hundred and nine occurrences. (LI X 2009, 9) *Ren* 仁 is the paramount moral category in Confucianism, influencing various aspects of human relationships, including ideals like *ren'ai* 仁爱 (benevolent love) and *renzheng* 仁政 (benevolent governance).

However, Confucius believed that if someone could truly be generous to the people and benefit the masses, their moral character would transcend that of a mere *ren* 仁 practitioner and reach the level of a *shengren* 圣人, a saint. In this case, being a saint would be the ultimate achievement for the practices of *ren* 仁.

From this perspective, the status of a saint is even more significant than that of a virtuous person or even a *junzi* 君子, considered by its benevolence and humaneness. It is noted by Confucius that once knowing what *ren* 仁 is, the next obligation of anyone would be to revere and follow saints because that is the essence of *ren* 仁.(YANG 1980, 4-5) This is to say that once a person grasps what it means to be morally outstanding, they should not consider that their ultimate goal. Instead, they should strive for an even greater, more sacred role.

He also outlines a path to achieve this higher, more sacred role by actively pursuing the greater good for the most significant number of people. Individuals should continuously strive to expand their ethical horizons and contribute to the well-being of the broader community, thereby transcending personal moral excellence in favour of the welfare of society as a whole. The virtues Confucius associated with a saint, namely "generously benefiting the people by being able to assist the masses" and "cultivating oneself to bring peace to the people," are examples of this idea.<sup>12</sup> (YANG 1980, 159)

<sup>11</sup> Text in chinese: 子贡曰：如有博施于民而能济众，如何？可谓仁乎？子曰：何事于仁，必也圣乎！尧舜其犹病诸！夫仁者，己欲立而立人，己欲达而达人。能进取譬，可谓仁之方也已。

<sup>12</sup> Text in chinese: 博施于民而能济众 and 修己以安百姓。

These are the external expressions that Confucius discussed in the *Analects* when addressing the requirements for one to be considered a saint. This means that a saint not only is knowledgeable but also puts his knowledge into action. Under the leadership of a saint, the common people will find peace and happiness. This manifestation is the essence of a saint: a person with both moral character and significant accomplishments for the people.

According to Confucius, only individuals who are qualified to bring peace and security to the common people through their own skills in conduct and governance can be called saints. Others have the duty to revere and follow them. Therefore, it can be seen that Confucius ascribed an extremely lofty meaning to the concept of saints. Even a great person who lives his life based on *ren* 仁 (benevolence or humaneness) is not sufficient to reach the level of a saint.

In Confucius' teachings, *ren* 仁 is the prerequisite for *sheng* 圣. While improving one's own cultivation of the self, if one can also stabilize the lives of the common people and provide assistance and relief to the world, then one can reach the level of a saint. *Sainthood* is a higher state than benevolence or humaneness and represents the pinnacle of political sovereignty, with vast achievements and widespread moral influence. It is the embodiment of complete moral and practical perfection. (CHEN 2012, 3) Consequently, saints are embodiments of wisdom, and their authority lies in their capacity for social work, which is the foundation for their "sacredness".

Finally, simplifying Confucius' ideas on "saints," Shen Shunfu 沈顺福 points out that Confucius' concept of a *shengren* 圣人 has three characteristics: they "uphold benevolence and justice," "generously bestow aid to assist others" and are, by rule, "divine and sacred, therefore seldom seen." (SHEN 2014, 105)

Confucius believed that true saints remain rarely to encounter or difficult to find. To illustrate this point, even well-known personalities like Yao 尧 and Shun 舜, foundational figures in Chinese cultural and historical traditions symbolizing the ideal rulers who governed with virtue, benevolence, and wisdom, were viewed by Confucius as not having fully met the standards necessary to achieve sainthood, as discussed previously in his conversation with Zi Gong.

Moreover, Confucius did not consider himself a saint and believed that he had not even fully achieved the realm of *ren* 仁. In his words: "The saints and the benevolents, how

dare I rank myself with them? That I strive to become such without satiety, and teach others without weariness - this much can be said of me".<sup>13</sup>(YANG 1980, 76) He taught that it was no longer possible to meet a saint in person since they existed only in the distant ancient past. (YANG 1980, 73) Even when evaluating himself, all he had achieved was an unwavering commitment to learning and tirelessly teaching others.

Confucius' hesitation to describe himself (or anyone else) as a saint underscores the profound significance he ascribed to the concept in his teachings, philosophy, and literary works. It's worth noting, however, that when Confucius passed away, in addition to his disciples, many officials, neighbours, and people from other states attended his funeral. It is recorded that the occasion was the first time when Confucius was called a *shengren* 圣人, a saint, by those present. (SUN 2012, 227)

His ideals of what it meant to be a saint were greatly shaped by what the word had evolved to become in his time. His humility in refraining from self-designation as a saint reflects the high moral and ethical standards he upheld. It serves as a testament to the veneration he had for the sacredness associated with the idea of sainthood.

## Conclusion

The evolution of the concept of *sheng* 圣, originating from a notion tied to "sound" and gradually transforming into an adjective describing someone "connected to the divine", culminated in its application to figures like Confucius. This represents a paramount theme deserving thorough exploration within Chinese literary history. Since this multifaceted concept encapsulates profound layers of meaning and moral significance, it becomes an essential subject for in-depth analysis and understanding in the context of Chinese culture and philosophy.

The use of the term before Confucius, especially in texts and books that he helped compile and edit himself, demonstrates the influence of the notions of *sheng* 圣 and *shengren* 圣人 on him. It signifies not only a virtue of those who were able to connect the spiritual world with the people but also a characteristic manifested by individuals who held political power to influence the lives of people.

<sup>13</sup> Text in chinese: 子曰：若圣与仁，则吾岂敢？抑为之不厌，诲人不倦，则可谓云尔矣。

For Confucius, the *shengren* 圣人 concept extends far beyond mere possession of exceptional knowledge or exclusive access to the divine realm; rather, it designates an individual endowed not only with profound wisdom but also with the remarkable ability to serve and uplift the common people while creatively applying their acquired knowledge to earthly matters. This prestigious title, which Confucius rarely bestows, resonates throughout his body of work, underscoring its significance and rarity within his teachings.

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