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The first thing I would like to tell my students is that we must keep in mind cultural differences; the Chinese tradition is very different from the Western or the Islamic one.

The Chinese word *jing*, usually translated as scriptures or classics, is more equivalent to the latter than the former. Those ideas which are very important in the West, such as transcendent God, the Creator, permanent soul, the other world, and so on, are lacking in the Chinese tradition. So the *jing* does not derive from God or heaven, and therefore is not so "sacred" as in the Western or Islamic traditions. According to the prominent modern historian Lü Simian, *jing* originally means the classics used in the ancient education system, which are actually the literature of the political documents, poems, divination books, books for rites, and so on; they are human-made instead of being said or transmitted by God.

Confucius used these classics, which used to be taught only to the nobles, as materials to express his own views on society, politics, morality, religion, etc. In this sense he declared, "I transmit, I invent nothing." As recorded by the great historian Sim Qian, Confucius also said, "It will be better to express my thought through concrete things than to convey it in empty words." In other words, Confucius used "scriptures" as *modus vivendi* instead of authentic source of

absolute truth. What Confucius spoke to his disciples (*ji*, i.e., “records”) and the commentaries by Confucius and his disciples (*zhuan* and *shuo*) were therefore regarded as more important than the classics themselves. For instance, the *Records of the Rites*, the collection of commentaries on the rites by Confucius and his disciples, was more widely read and considered more important than the “scripture” of the rites.

The commentaries of the *Book of Changes* are philosophically and religiously much more important than *jing*, which are actually no more than the oracle’s messages; later both the “ten commentaries” and the text of the *Book* itself became “scriptures” collectively. So in the Confucian tradition commentaries and “scriptures” are more often than not indistinguishable. For instance, Confucius’s *Analects* originally was not regarded as “scriptures,” but from the Former Han dynasty it became one of the most important “scriptures.” And in late imperial China, thanks to the Neo-Confucian master Zhu Xi, a new corpus of scriptures, i.e., the Four Books, replaced the Five Classics to become the real “scriptures” for more than 700 years. This is also the case with the Taoist tradition; new “scriptures” were continuously invented, often attributed to ancient *xian* (immortals). In the Chinese Buddhist tradition, even the recorded sayings of Huineng, an illiterate Zenmonk in the Tang dynasty, were titled “scripture” alongside all the sutras assumed to come from the Buddha himself.

Although the scriptures in Confucianism and other Chinese religions, unlike the Bible or the Koran, were not regarded as the only authentic source of absolute truth or for salvation, with the rise of the literati elites and accordingly the establishment of the “scriptures” learning, in addition to the worship of written words — which may be traced back to the shamanistic tradition about 3,000 years ago — toward the end of the Former Han, emphasis was gradually transferred from the “secret meaning and great principles” transmitted by Confucius to the ancient “scriptures” themselves. In the view of those Han Confucians, the Six Classics were not just historical documents — this view is exactly what Confucius held — but sacred words transmitted from ancient sage kings and therefore must be interpreted strictly literally. They consolidated their political and sociocultural dominance through the monopoly of “signifying scriptures.” Hence, scriptures (*jing*) were equivalent to civilization or culture (*wen*) for almost 2,000 years.

This tradition made the literati elites assume so much prestige and power for such a long time that even after China's successive defeats in the encounters with the West after the Opium War, they still regarded the British and other Western people as "barbarians," despite the fact that they knew well that the West was more advanced than China in wealth, power, science, and technology. The reason is that in their view the West was lacking in "civilization" (*wen*), which is epitomized in the Confucian scriptures (
jing
). Nevertheless, the ancient Chinese sage kings were not gods or demigods after all. As Mencius said, they are "simply the first to discover what is common in our minds." So the learned scholar-officials were not able to have a complete monopoly of the practices of signifying the scriptures. With the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Song dynasty a new approach emerged, which focused on getting the way by, in, and for oneself (
zide
) instead of the literal interpretation of the scriptures. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there appeared in China tense economic and social changes; more and more economic opportunities and easier social mobility were available for the common people; hence they got to attain more power in the discourses on the scriptures. At the same time the literate elites became less orthodox and more "liberal" in sociocultural matters, as witnessed in their attitude toward scriptures. Cao Duan, a Neo-Confucian scholar in the early Ming, even said that the Four Books are no more than the "rubbish left over from the sages' mind-and-heart," even though he still considered them to be the "carriers of the way."

Moreover, the Confucian tradition has a hierarchical system of scriptures. Zigong, Confucius's disciple, once said, "Our Master's views on culture can be gathered, but it is not possible to hear his views on the nature of things and on the Way of Heaven." Among the Five or Six Classics, the *Poems*, *Documents*, and *Rites* — which are about cultural things — were taught to all students, but the *Changes* and *Annals of Spring and Autumn* were regarded to be on "the nature of things and the Way of Heaven" and therefore only to be taught to a small number of select students. In the Neo-Confucian era the Four Books were considered basic scriptures for all students, but the Five Classics were reserved only for those of higher level. From the sixteenth century on, with the increase of literate population, some "scriptures" other than Confucian were used to teach the lower classes. One example is the
Taoist Treatise on Response and Retribution
(
Taishang ganying pian
), which may have occupied the first place of all publications in late imperial China. It combines Confucian morality with the popular Taoist teaching that "curses and blessings do not come through gates but human beings invite their arrivals." In this perspective the idea of "three-teachings-in-one [i.e., Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism]" came into being, as was characteristic of late imperial China. So the engagements with the "scriptures" became more diverse and complicated.

Last but not least, it must be noted that there is plenty of room in the Chinese religious tradition for interpretation and reinterpretation of the scriptures, Confucian as well as Taoist. For instance, the *Dode jing* (*Tao te ching*) has two totally different traditions of commentaries, one from the perspective of Neo-Taoist metaphysics and the other from that of religious Taoist mysticism. Almost all influential Confucian schools have their own system of commentaries on the scriptures, especially on the *Book of Changes*, which even has quite a number of Taoist commentaries. In summary, different groups of people have quite different ways in their engagement of the "scriptures"; this dynamism ran throughout Chinese history. It is still the case today, as can be seen from the fact that groups of people with different sociopolitical interests engage in the Confucian "scriptures" totally differently, for democracy, authoritarianism, or "new left" ideas.