

The Path of the Sage

A Timeline of Confucius and the
Evolution of the Analects

"At fifteen my heart was set on learning; at thirty I stood firm; at forty I had no doubts; at fifty I knew the mandate of heaven; at sixty my ear was compliant; at seventy I could follow my heart's desire without overstepping the bounds." — Analects 2.4



The Context | The Decline of the Zhou (c. 770 – 551 BCE)



- The Era:
The Spring and Autumn Period. A time of moral collapse, constant warfare, and social turmoil.
- The Crisis:
“Rivers of blood and fields of corpses.” The ruling powers were corrupt, and the ‘Mandate of Heaven’ was being questioned.
- The Philosophy: The need for *Zhengming* (Rectification of Names). Rulers were not acting like rulers; fathers not like fathers. The world demanded order.

“At Fifteen, I Set My Heart on Learning” (551 – 530 BCE)

- 551 BCE: Born Kong Qiu in the state of Zou (near Lu).
 - Background: Noble Shang ancestry, but raised in poverty by his mother after his father's death.
 - Education: Mastered the *Six Arts*: Rites, Music, Archery, Charioteering, Calligraphy, Mathematics.
 - Philosophy: A “Transmitter” of the Old Ways. He sought to revive the culture of the Western Zhou and the wisdom of the Duke of Zhou.
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“At Thirty, I Stood Firm” (521 – 517 BCE)



The Junzi (君子):

Redefined from “Ruler’s Son” to “Exemplary Person.” Nobility is determined by character, not blood.

Key Virtues:

**Ren* (Benevolence): Humaneness and goodness.

**Yi* (Righteousness): The moral disposition to do what is right.

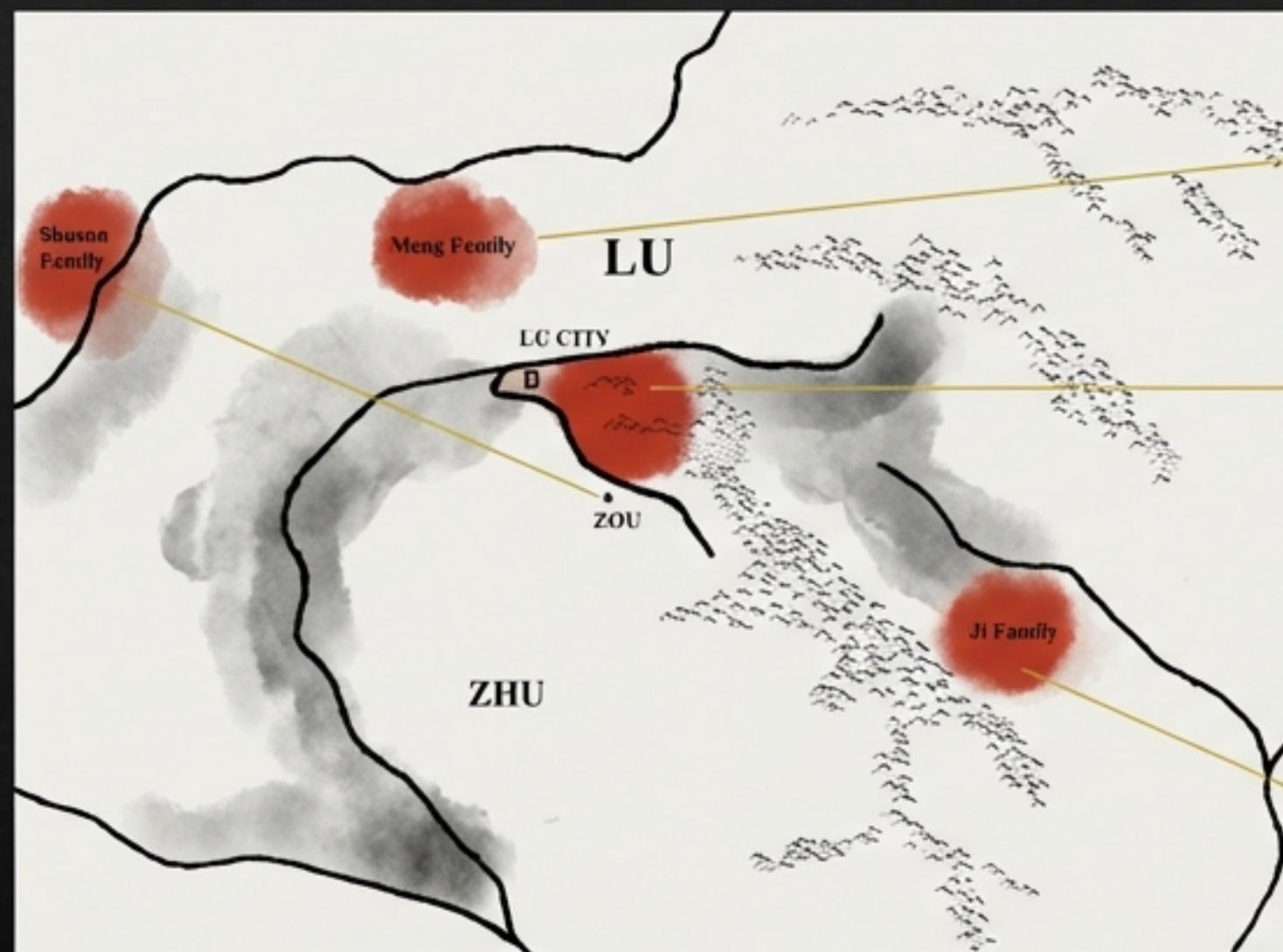


The School:

Broken the aristocratic monopoly on education. He accepted ‘a bundle of dried meat’ as payment, refusing no one with a desire to learn.



“At Forty, I Had No Doubts” (510 – 500 BCE)



Political Ascent: Rose to “Director of Corrections” in Lu.

The Mission: Attempted to dismantle the fortified cities of the three warlord families (Ji, Meng, Shu) to restore the legitimate authority of the Duke.

Philosophy in Action: *Li* (Ritual Propriety). Ritual is not just ceremony; it is the psychological tool to curb desires and internalize social harmony.

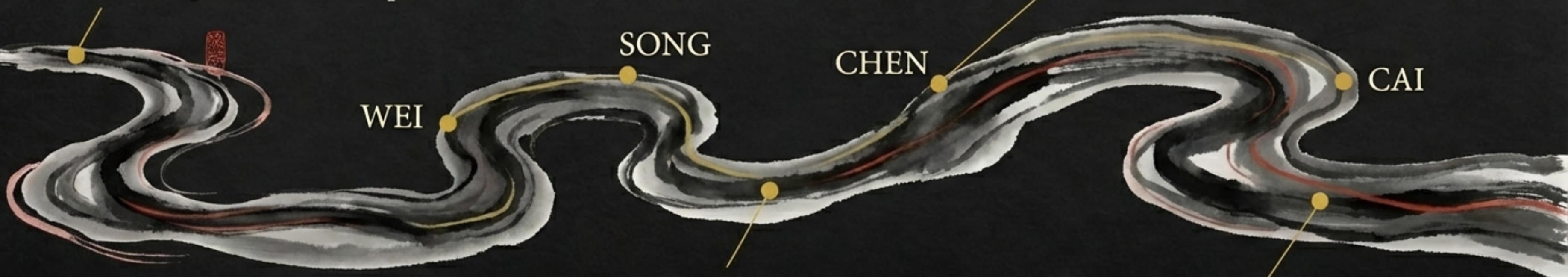
Quote: ‘If a man is not *Ren*, what can he do with *Li*?’



“At Fifty, I Knew the Mandate of Heaven” (497 – 484 BCE)

The Turning Point (497 BCE):

Disillusioned by the Duke of Lu’s acceptance of dancing girls and horses from Qi, Confucius departs.



The Exile: 14 years of wandering. He sought a ruler to implement the *but found only rejection, sieges, and mockery.*



The Insight: *Tianming* (Mandate of Heaven). He realized that while political success is external (Fate), moral rectitude is internal and within one’s control.

“At Sixty, My Ear Was Compliant” (484 – 480 BCE)

in Cormorant Garamond



The Return (484 BCE):

Invited back to Lu by Ran Qiu. He returns as an elder teacher, not an official.

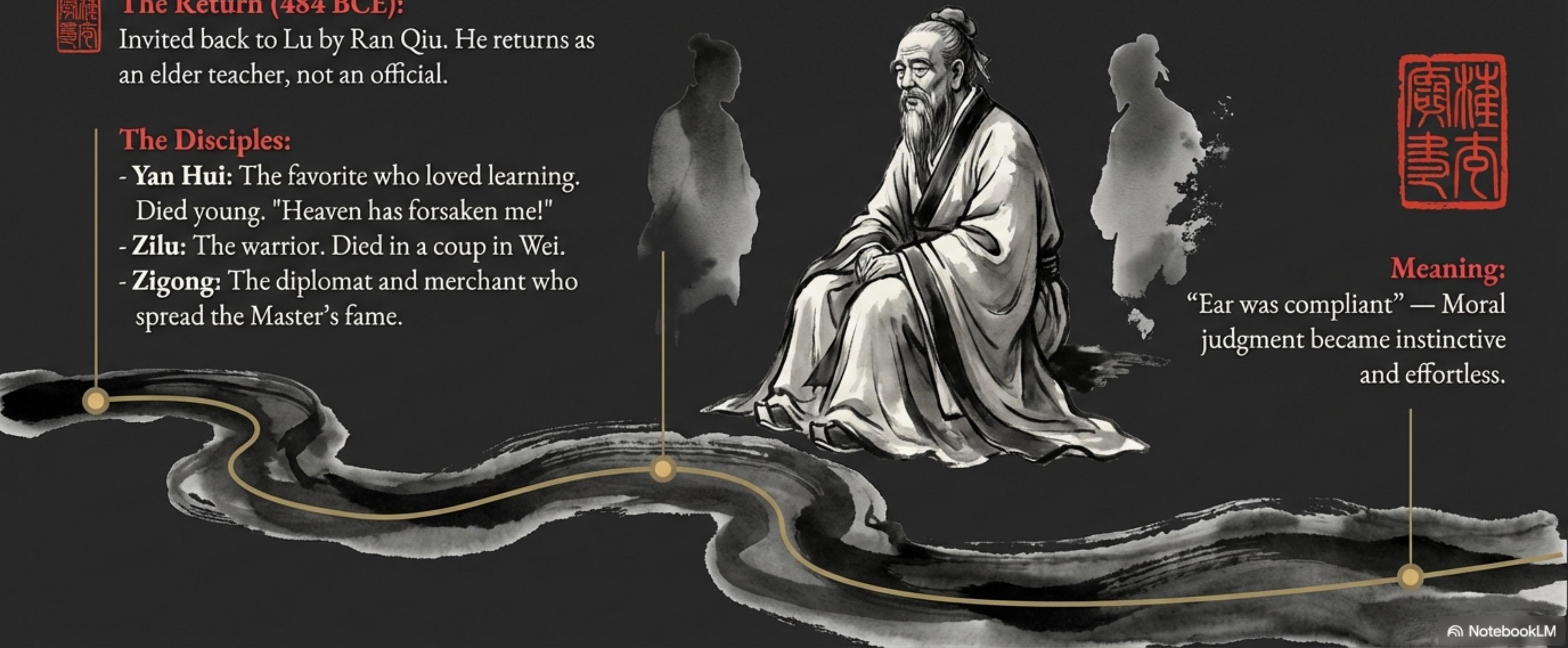
The Disciples:

- **Yan Hui:** The favorite who loved learning. Died young. "Heaven has forsaken me!"
- **Zilu:** The warrior. Died in a coup in Wei.
- **Zigong:** The diplomat and merchant who spread the Master's fame.



Meaning:

“Ear was compliant” — Moral judgment became instinctive and effortless.



"At Seventy, I Followed My Heart's Desire" (479 BCE) in Rice Paper White (#F0F0EE)

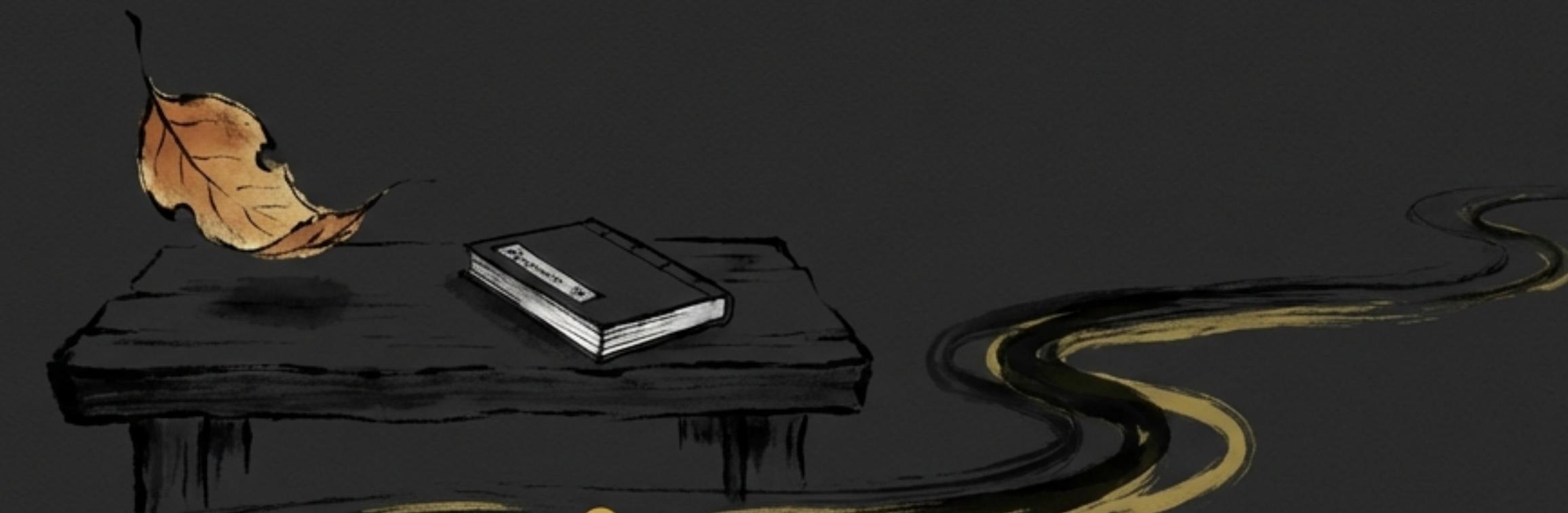


The Literary Legacy:

Editing the Classics: *Book of Songs*, *Book of Documents*, *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

Xiao (Filial Piety):

Cemented as “the root of a person.”



Death (479 BCE):

Died believing he had failed to restore order to the world.

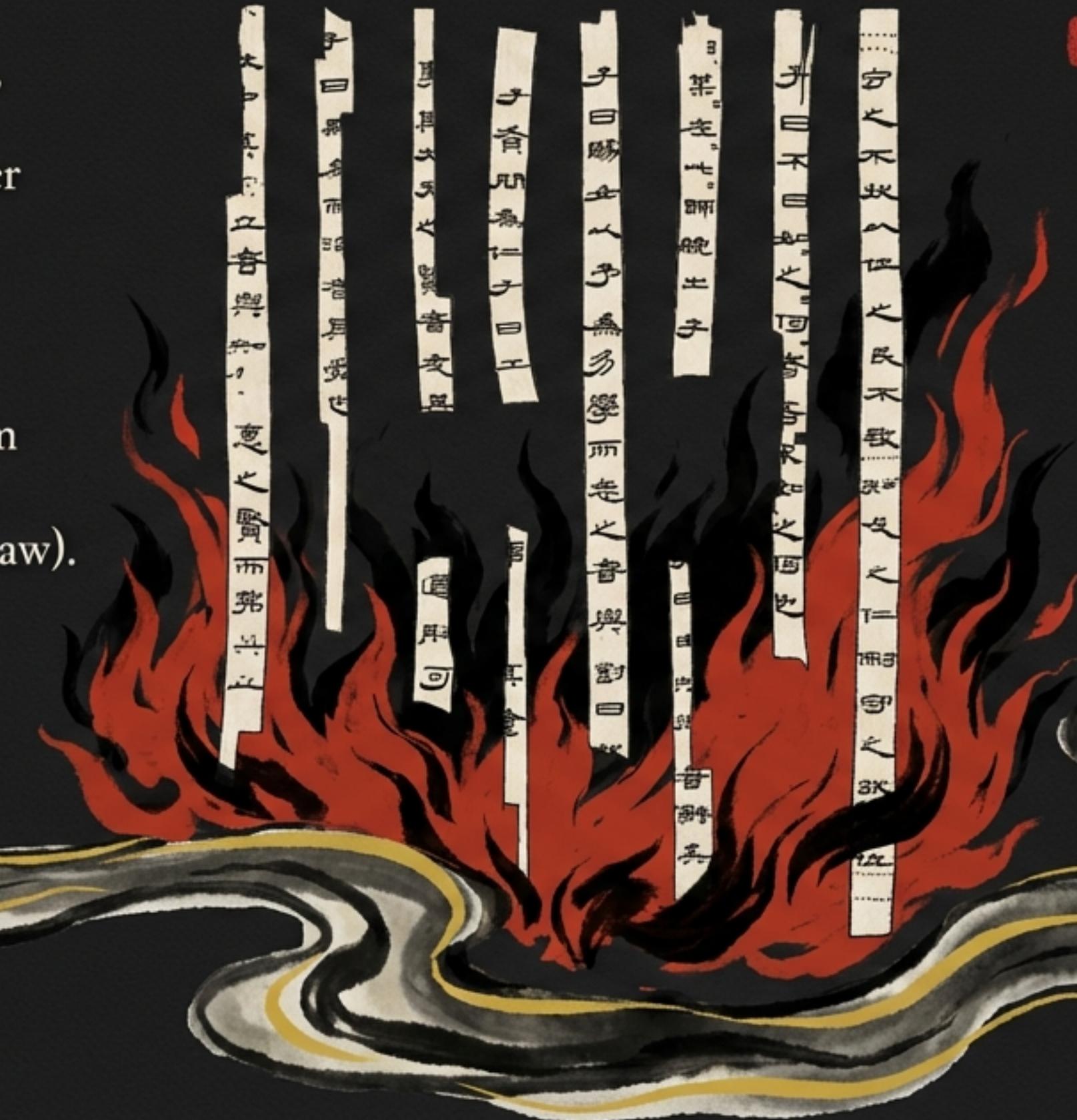
Quote:

“The days and months are rushing by; no extra years will be allotted to me.”

Legacy Part I | From Bamboo Strips to Forbidden Text (479 – 206 BCE)

- **The Analects (Lunyu):**
“Collated Conversations.”
Compiled by disciples over
centuries, not written by
Confucius.
- **Warring States Context:**
Competition with Mohism
(Universal Love), Daoism
(Nature), and Legalism (Law).

- **The Crisis (221 BCE):**
The Qin Dynasty.
The “Burning of Books and
Burying of Scholars.”
Texts survived only by being
hidden in walls and
memorized by scholars.



Legacy Part II | The Han Synthesis & State Orthodoxy (206 BCE – 220 CE)

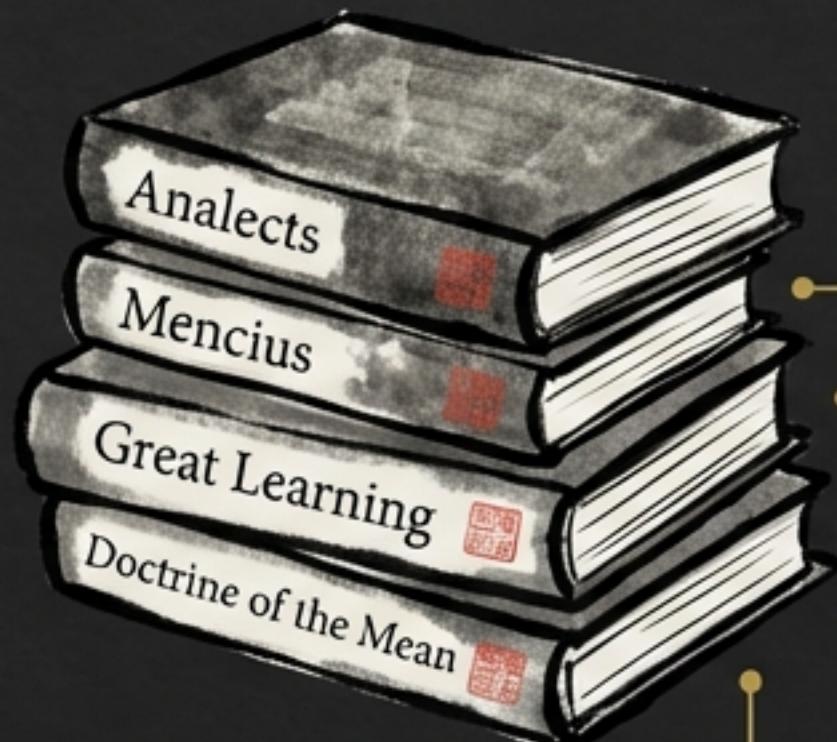


State Ideology: Emperor Wu of Han establishes Confucianism as the official state creed.

The Five Classics: Poetry, Documents, Rites, Changes (*I Ching*), Spring and Autumn Annals.

Governance: The transition from “Rule by Force” to “Rule by Virtue.” The Analects becomes required reading for the educated elite.

Legacy Part III | The Four Books & Neo-Confucianism (960 – 1905 CE)

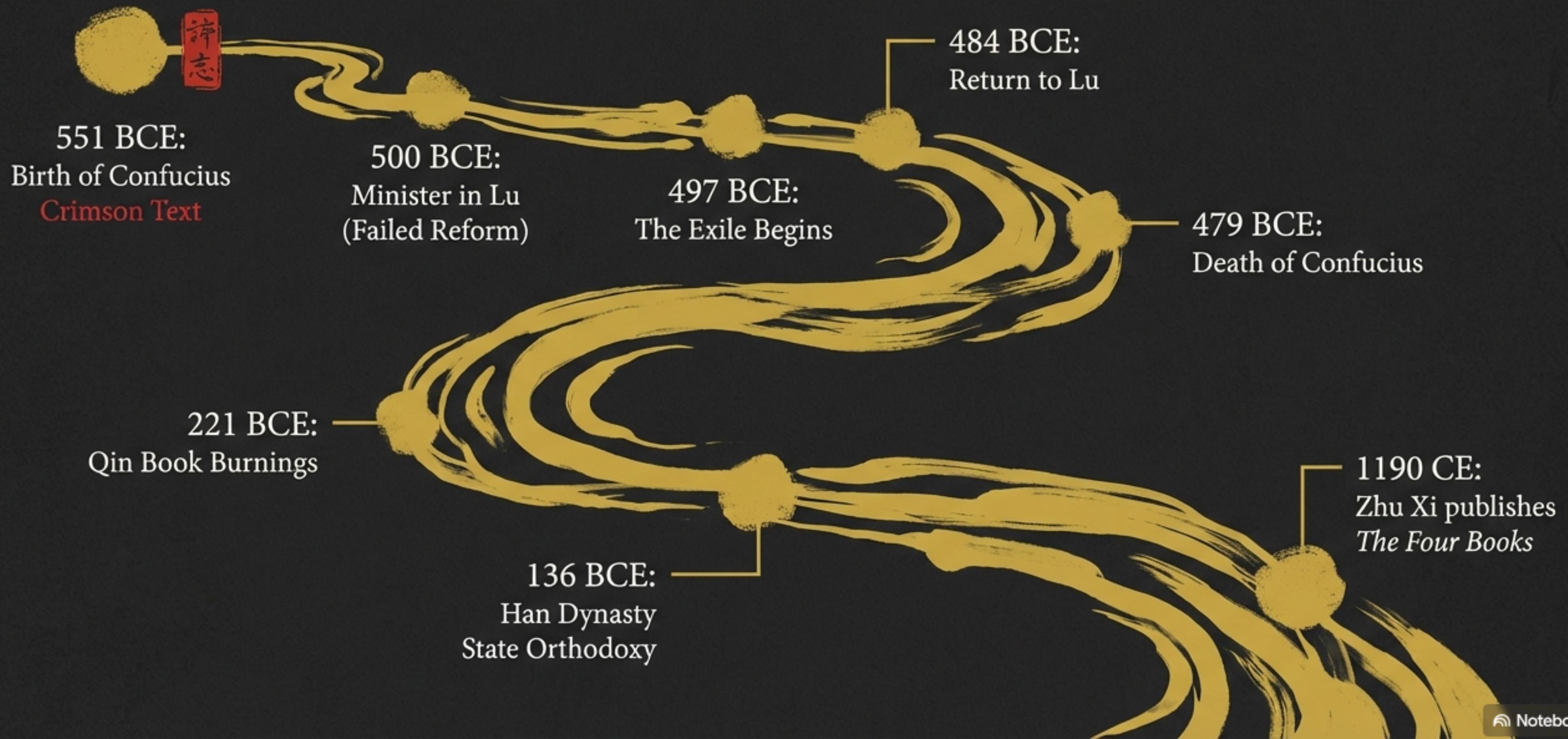


Zhu Xi (1130–1200 CE): The Neo-Confucian reformer who restructured the canon.

The Civil Service Exams: The ‘Four Books’ became the core curriculum for 700 years. Access to government power required memorizing these texts.

Philosophy: A shift toward metaphysical cultivation and the “Investigation of Things.”

Timeline Summary: The Flow of the Way



Key Philosophical Concepts

仁

Benevolence / Humaneness.
The ultimate virtue.

君子

The Exemplary Person.
Nobility of character, not birth.

天

Heaven. The moral order
of the cosmos.

禮

Ritual / Propriety.
The social grammar that binds
society.

孝

Filial Piety.
The root of virtue.

正名

Rectification of Names.
Aligning action with title.

Conclusion | The Uncrowned King



- **The Paradox:** He died considering himself a failure, a “homeless dog” wandering between states.
- **The Legacy:** He became the *Suwang* (“Uncrowned King”). He governed the minds of East Asia for two millennia.
- **Final Thought:** “The Teacher of Ten Thousand Generations.” Political order begins with the cultivation of the self.

Sources & Further Reading

- The Analects of Confucius (Trans. Robert Eno, 2015).
- Confucius's political philosophy of governing the country (Quyet Thi Nguyen, XLinguae, 2023).
- Confucius's sayings entombed: on two Han dynasty bamboo Lunyu manuscripts (Paul van Els).
- Confucius (Mark Csikszentmihalyi, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).
- Confucian Education: A new look at an old tradition (Wong, 2017).
- Who is the “Superior Man”? (Timothy J. Womack, Georgia Southern Commons).

