



GenEd1091



Week 2 The Axial Age

GenEd1091: Classical Chinese Philosophy and Political Theory



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Student Introduction



Name Game

1. Write down your name on a sticker and place it on the board/table.
2. The TF will count down from 3.
3. When you hear “go,” grab a sticker from the board
4. and return it to the person whose name is on it.
5. Raise your hand after you have returned the sticker.

Course Logistics:



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Participation & Discussion: 25%

- a. Attendance and Discussion: **15%**
 - i. Showing up on time for the section: 8/10
 - ii. Making constructive and thoughtful comments on reading materials: 10/10
 - iii. Participating in section discussions with less insightful comments: 9/10
 - iv. Making thoughtful comments but being too active and dominating the conversation: 9/10
- b. End-of-Section Reflection on Ed: **10%**
 - i. Write and post one-paragraph reflection on Ed at the end of each section (Reflection question will be distributed in section time)
 - ii. **!!Paste your reflection URL under the Assignment tab!!**
 - iii. Insightful reflection: 2/2
 - iv. Less insightful reflection: 1/2
 - v. No reflection: 0/2
- c. Make-up Quiz: To compensate for missed participation, you need to complete a quiz containing 10 multiple-choice questions. You must schedule an appointment with your TFs to take the quiz on paper within 10 days of the day you missed your section. For example, if you miss week 3's section on a Wednesday, you must complete the quiz by the Friday of the following week. Please note, you also need to submit the reflection post for the missed section within 10 days.



Course Logistics:



1. Three Mini-Exams: 10% each

- a. Mainly factual questions based on the text.
- b. You should be able to get 100% if you close read the texts.

2. Paper (5-6 pages): 20%

- a. Formal draft: 5% (graded on completion)
- b. Final submission: 15%
- c. “Graded on completion” means that you get full credit if you demonstrate reasonable effort in completing the assignment. The goal of these graded-on-completion assignments is to provide you with timely feedback from your TF, which will help strengthen your paper and final project. In particular, for the first paper assignment, you will receive a completion grade, a mock letter grade and comments on your draft. You will then have more than a week to revise and refine your draft before submitting it for the official letter grade of the paper. In addition, we will also provide writing samples to guide you through the writing process.

3. Final Project: 25%

- a. In-person Presentation: 5% (in a format of a poster session)
- b. Final submission: 20%



Course Logistics:



Awards:

- a. Best paper award for the paper (details will be announced later)
- b. Final Project publication on course gallery



Course Policy Quiz:



- a. Remember to complete the course policy quiz
- b. Maximum 2 attempts (count the highest one)



Core Argument

- Modernity narratives frame history as a break between tradition and modernity.
- They shape how we interpret the past as 'pre-modern' or 'precursors' to modernity.



Euro-American Narratives

- Medieval era seen as traditional, dominated by religion and aristocracy.
- Antiquity had seeds of rationality and democracy.
- Non-Western societies depicted as stuck in tradition until Western impact.



Non-Western Adaptations

- Scholars sought indigenous modernity examples.
- Tang–Song transition as start of Chinese modernity.
- Chinese history reframed as ancient–medieval–modern.



Takeaways

- Modernity Moments: Perceived breaks from tradition.
- Belatedness: Feelings of decline after modernity moments.
- Cycles of renewal → new 'modernities'.
- Modernity narratives are not unique to Europe.
- Comparative study de-naturalizes Eurocentric frameworks.
- Opens space for new historical questions.



The Axial Age Thesis

- Karl Jaspers (800–200 BCE): breakthrough era of reflection & critical thought.
- Produced Confucianism, Buddhism, prophetic Judaism, Greek philosophy.
- Themes: transcendence, 'world-rejection', rise of universal ethics.



India: Key Beliefs

- Vedic: Ritual sacrifice, cosmic hierarchy, priestly authority.
- Upanishads: Moksha (liberation), samsara (rebirth), karma (cause & effect), ascetic search for truth.
- Jainism: Radical non-violence (ahimsa), strict renunciation, all beings have souls.
- Buddhism: Four Noble Truths, suffering caused by desire, nirvana as release, monasticism.



Greece: Key Beliefs

- Polis: Politics run by citizens without divine sanction; beginnings of democracy and rhetoric.
- Religion: Anthropomorphic gods, no priestly caste.
- Philosophy: Rational inquiry into the cosmos; Plato's idea of transcendent perfection and immortal soul; Aristotle's practical ethics.



China: Key Beliefs

- Confucianism: Secular, rational, ritual-focused; emphasis on moral self-cultivation, social harmony, and ethical governance (Mandate of Heaven).
- Daoism (alongside): Offers a naturalist perspective.
- Outlook: Accommodation with the world rather than its transformation; though critics argue Confucianism also imposed moral duties on rulers.



Raise of an aristocratic system

- Early Zhou: Knowledge monopolized by aristocracy
- Collapse of Zhou weakened monopoly
- Knowledge spread to wider regions
- Enabled *shi* class to emerge

Shi: lower nobility, trained in six arts, educated through private learning, education, training

- Corruption of aristocracy opened opportunities
- Private academies & teaching spread, Confucius pioneered private teaching



Social Impact

- Scholars transcended state loyalties
- Rise of meritocratic ethos
- Literature, political theory, culture flourished
- Recognized as part of Axial Age
- Foundations for Chinese civilization

Post a reflection on Ed




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Please paste your reflection URL from Ed Discussion into the submission box.

PROMPT:

NOTE: next week's prompt will be different.

Option 1: Creative Axial Age Meme

Since no readings are assigned for this week, you have the option to create a meme 😊 using an image  sourced from the internet, one you have generated yourself, or an image produced through AI. This meme should relate to some concepts of the "**Axial Age**". This is your chance to show your creativity! Please:

1. Cite the source of your image. 
2. Challenge yourself to come up with an original perspective. 
3. Write a 100-word explanation of your meme. 

Option 2: General Reflection

Choose one theme related to the "Axial Age" that you find interesting. Write a thoughtful reflection on that. Word limit: 100–150 words.

Post it on Ed Discussion under “Sections” - “Week 2 Axial Age Reflection” - YOUR SECTION