

# Foundations of Chinese Intellectual History

Fall 2024

Chinese civilization is the world's oldest continuous culture, dating from at least the mid-second millennium BCE. For over two thousand years, the warp that bound the civilization together was its ongoing engagement with its own history and the deep sense of cultural identity that emerged as a result. Many of the foundational elements of Chinese civilization stem from an extraordinary period of social, political, and intellectual upheaval during the fifth to third centuries BCE. Much like the Classical period in ancient Greece, China's so-called Warring States period saw the formulation and codification of fundamental notions of ethics, religion, social organization, and statecraft, notions that would become perennial issues in Chinese thought for the next 2,400 years. This brief course will introduce several of the most important strands of Chinese thought to emerge during this era and conclude with a discussion of how one of them, Confucianism, went on to become the normative social and political ideology for the Chinese state.

## Topics and Format

Based on writings attributed to Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Han Feizi, and others, we will explore contending ideas regarding the nature of the person and its relationship with society and the natural world. Some of the topics to be considered are

- How to live in dangerous times
- Is human nature inherently good? What constitutes an ethical life? Can human nature be perfected?
- What is the relationship between humans and the natural world? Is the cosmos "moral"?
- What is the source of political authority?
- How should society and the state be organized? And for whose benefit? Is there an ethical dimension to leadership?

The course comprises five lectures, which can be attended either in sequence *or* as stand-alone presentations, enabling attendees to pick and choose the topics they are most interested in.

The Structure of the Chinese Past

Early Confucianism: Human Nature Perfected

"A Weak People Means a Strong State": A Chinese *Realpolitik*

The Mysterious Female: Immanence and Transcendence in the Daoist Tradition

The Formation of the Confucian State

## Classroom Materials

Download the classroom materials by clicking on this link: <https://github.com/mcummingsny/Chinese-Intellectual-History>

## About the Instructor

Mark Cummings holds degrees in East Asian (MA, 1976) and religious studies (MA, 1978; MPhil, 1980) from Yale University and has taught courses in the religious traditions of South and East Asia at Hunter College in New York and Brown University. In 1982 he was hired by Macmillan Publishing Company to serve as the in-house editor and project manager for Asian philosophies and religions in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (16 vols., 1987), leading to a professional career in reference and educational publishing. Since then, he has served, variously, as development editor for multivolume reference works at Oxford University Press, editor in chief of the *Encyclopedia Americana*, and vice president and publisher of the reference division at Scholastic Library Publishing.