

Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy

Instructor: Taojie Wang (taojie_wang@brown.edu)

Course Meetings: MWF: 1-1:50

Office Hours: Sign up in Google doc (link on Canvas)

Course Description

China in the classical period (722-221 BCE) was a cauldron for much philosophical innovation and sophistication. In this course, we will explore some of the major schools of philosophical thought in this time, with a focus on the ethical thought but also touching on epistemology and metaphysics. In particular, we will work through the debates between the Confucian, the Mohist, the Daoist, and the Legalist. We will read classical texts such as the *Analects*, *Mengzi*, *Xunzi*, *Mozi*, *Zhuangzi*, *Daodejing*, *Hanfeizi*, supplemented by secondary scholarships. Our primary goal in the course is to work out collaboratively the philosophical views of these philosophers, while also helping you develop the ability to engage productively and critically with ancient texts under-represented in the current philosophical canon. The questions we will ask include: What is the good person? What is the good life? What are ritual (礼), *jen* (仁), filial piety (孝) and how are they related to morality? Is the human nature inherently good or evil?

Course Goals

This course will proceed in a conversational manner. This means that *your* questions, confusions, perspectives, insights, and reflections upon the texts will be the starting point of our conversations. This should help us with the three general goals of this class:

The first is for us to closely read the texts and see how the texts from this tradition may (or may not) help with the questions that **we** care about today. In order to do this, we first need to try our best to understand the texts – what are the claims made in the texts? What could be the reason(s) for a particular remark or remarks? Why does the author care about this issue?

The second of these goals is for us to put ourselves in conversation with the texts. This is the point where we start to reflect on the questions we care about in relation to the texts. We will often find ourselves in need of refining, developing the questions we initially had, and often also in need of challenging the beliefs and assumptions that we hold dear and thought unquestionable.

The third of these goal is, on the basis of the first two, to develop an ability for us to take a step back and reflect on our ways of approaching the texts and the relevant philosophical issues. Is the way we approach the texts and the questions helpful for answering *your* questions and puzzles about texts as well as our topic? Does our conversation help *you* learn things, even though it hasn't answered your question yet?

Course Materials

Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy. Ed. Ivanhoe and Van Norden, Hackett, 3rd ed. 2023 (9781647921088). \$27.00-\$36.00. (It is important to get this edition of the book, as we will use the particular translation of the texts in this book).

Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy. Van Norden, Hackett, 2011 (9781603844680). \$15.95-\$20.00.

All other readings will be made available online.

Learning Activities and Assessments

Response Piece

Starting from week 2, for each class, you are required to write either one response piece to the required reading (choose one if there's more than one required reading) or a response to one of your classmates' response piece. A response piece should be between 150-200 words, submitted through Canvas under the Discussion post section. Response pieces are meant to highlight what stands out from the text for you – e.g., Is there a particular point the text makes that provokes your thoughts? Are you not sure what exactly a piece of text says, feeling like you could use some help to get clearer about it? Or perhaps you find a certain bit of text helpful, in one way or another?

If you are writing a response to one of your colleagues' response piece, you are likely to do something slightly different. Perhaps you find a point your colleague makes appealing, or that you share the question(s) they have, in which case, you can support them by saying your reasons for finding their point appealing, and saying why you think the question(s) they ask matter. Or perhaps you have an answer to a question they asked, in which case, we could all appreciate your help! On the other hand, if you find yourself in disagreement with a point your colleague makes, it'd also be worth laying your point out there – this is often a great starting point for a productive conversation!

(You can have 3 unexcused misses on response piece submission throughout the whole semester without incurring any penalty on this part of your grade. After that, if you need to miss a submission, please email me and we can discuss ways for you to make up for it.)

Papers

You will be required to write three papers throughout the semester:

- Paper 1: 800 words
- Paper 2: 1000 words
- Paper 3: 1200 words

For each of the papers, you will be given a set of prompts from which you will choose one to answer. If you get an A- or above on the previous paper, you can choose a topic we've covered in class yourself to write on. In addition, before assigning Paper 1, there will be a class session dedicated to providing you with instructions on writing a philosophy paper.

Contribution to Conversation

The classroom conversation will make for a significant part of our collaborative learning experience. This means that we need to direct it at questions and thoughts on the texts that interest us the most, and make progress on them. For each class, I'll start us off with a brief outline of the main issues of the text, and then I (or the moderator, see below) will present some questions for us. These questions will be collected from your response piece for that class. We will start with one question, and then move forward as our conversation goes on. We'll work on asking thoughtful questions, listening carefully to each other's ideas,

expressing confusion, asking for or introducing clarifications, making objections, offering examples, calling attention to details, calling attention to the big picture, and so on. We'll also pay attention to meta-conversational issues – trying to figure out what we want in conversation and how to achieve it. Civility and respect will be absolutely essential. (I invite you to meet with me if you have any questions about what good conversations look like, to develop strategies for contributing to them, and to discuss any concerns or accommodations. I'm very open to a variety of approaches to contributing to discussion, so please reach out to discuss your ideas or just share them with the group!)

Additionally, each of you will have the opportunity to sign up to be the moderator of a particular class starting from week 4 (the week starting from Feb. 4). This is an opportunity for you to see how a philosophical conversation makes progress and to learn the skills to shape the direction of a conversation from another perspective. This opportunity is completely voluntary – not doing it will not have an impact on your grade, but those who volunteer will get one extra credit for their Contribution to Conversation grade.

Grades Breakdown

Grades will be based on classroom participation, response pieces, and the three papers. Here's the weight each of these carries:

Classroom participation: 10% (moderator volunteers get one extra credit)

Response piece ((graded complete/incomplete)): 20%

Paper 1: 15%

Paper 2: 25%

Paper 3: 30%

*Note: you are not allowed to use any AI tools for any of these written assignments.

Time Commitment:

Over the whole term (prior to the Reading Period), you can expect to spend 2.5 hours per week in class meetings and 9 hours per week completing these tasks: 1) reading the assigned texts, 2) reading through your colleagues' response pieces, and 3) writing your own response piece. There will also be three papers on which you can expect to spend around 50 hours in total.

Attendance Policies

It is expected that you will be present at all course meetings. Please contact me if you cannot make it to class; students may have up to three such excused absences with no effect on the contributions to the participation grade. If you will need to miss more than three classes, please contact me and we can work out alternative arrangements for contributing to our collective work and class conversation.

Diversity, Accessibility, and Accommodation

Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me early in the term if you may require accommodations or modification of any of course procedures. You may speak with me after class, during office hours, or by appointment. If you need accommodations around online learning or in classroom accommodations, please be sure to reach out to Student Accessibility Services (SAS) for their assistance (sas@brown.edu, 401-863-9588). Undergraduates in need of short-term academic advice or support can contact an academic dean in the College by emailing college@brown.edu. Graduate students may contact one of the deans in the Graduate School by emailing graduate_school@brown.edu.

Reading Schedule and Important Dates

Week 1 Introduction, Historical Context, and Philosophical Methodology

Wednesday

- Introduction, no required reading.
- (Optional) Chapter 1&2, in *The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us About the Good Life*.
- Complete the Welcome Survey.

Friday

- *Analects*, Book 1, (RCCP 3-7)
- Chapter 1, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*.
- “Introduction,” in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*.

Week 2 Confucianism: the *Analects*

Monday

- *Analects*, Book 2-7, (RCCP 7-24).
- (Optional) “Introduction,” in *Dao Companion to the Analects*, Olberding.

Wednesday

- *Analects*, Book 8-14, (RCCP 24-44).

Friday

- *Analects*, Book 15-20, (RCCP 44-54).
- Chapter 2, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*.

Week 3 Confucianism: some general interpretive questions

Monday

- “Cultivating the Self in Concert with Others,” Wong.

Wednesday

- “Nameless Virtues and Restrained Speech in the Analects,” Cline.

Friday

- “Confucius in the Analects,” Liu.

Week 4 Is Confucianism a Virtue Ethics or Exemplarism?

Monday

- “Why Confucius’ Ethics is a Virtue Ethics,” Sim.

Wednesday

- “Dream of the Duke of Zhou,” Olberding.
- (Optional) “The Analects and Moral Theory,” Angle.

Friday

- Writing Workshop before the first paper is assigned.
- Paper 1 assigned.

Week 5 The notion of 礼 (Li/ritual) in the *Analects*

Monday

- No class, long weekend.

Wednesday

- “Li in the Analects,” Lai.

Friday

- “Ritual and Rightness in the Analects,” Sarkissian.
- Paper 1 due.

Week 6 Confucian Ethics and Care Ethics

Monday

- “The Confucian Concept of Jen and the Feminist Ethics of Care,” Li.

Wednesday

- “Do Confucians Really Care? A Defense of the Distinctiveness of Care Ethics,” Star.

Friday

- “Why Care? A Feminist Re-appropriation of Confucian Xiao 孝,” Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee.

Week 7 Rival to Confucianism: Mozi

Monday

- *Mozi*, 11, 16, (RCCP: 65-80).

Wednesday

- *Mozi*, 25, 31, 35, (RCCP, 80-90, 94-104, 110-111).

Friday

- “On the Argument for Jian’Ai,” Loy.
- (Optional) “Universalism vs. Love with Distinctions: An Ancient Debate Revived,” Wong.
- (Optional) “Danger of Sound: Mozi’s Criticism of Ritual Music,” Park.

Week 8 Confucianism back: Mengzi

Monday

- *Mengzi* 1-3, (RCCP: 117-137).

Wednesday

- *Mengzi* 4-7, (RCCP: 137-157).

Friday

- “Human Nature and Moral Sprouts: Mencius on the Pollyanna Problem,” Kim.

Week 9

Monday

- “Moral Connoisseurship in the Mengzi,” Hutton.

Wednesday

- *Daodejing*, selections (RCCP 163-203).
- Paper 2 assigned.

Friday

- “Wuwei in the Laozi,” Slingerland.

Spring Break

Week 10

Monday

- *Zhuangzi*, 1-7 (the *Inner Chapters*), (RCCP 224-256).
- (Optional) “Competing Interpretations on the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*,” Van Norden.

Wednesday

- *Zhuangzi*, 8, 9, 10, 14, 17, 19, 20, 22 (selected *Outer Chapters*), (on Canvas).
- Paper 2 due.

Friday

- “Skepticism and Value in the Zhuangzi,” Fraser.
- (Optional) “Following the Way of Heaven,” Kidd.

Week 11 Interpretative topics on Zhuangzi

Monday

- “Daoist Criticisms of Confucian Sacrificial Rights,” Moeller.

Wednesday

- “The Limitations of Ritual Propriety,” Fraser.

Friday

- “Concepts of the Body in the Zhuangzi,” Sommer.

Week 12 Confucianism back again: Xunzi

Monday

- *Xunzi*, 1, 2, 19, 20, 22, 23, (RCCP: 269-280, 298-317).
- (Optional) *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Xunzi*, Hutton.

Wednesday

- “Ritual in the Xunzi,” Sung.
- (Optional) “Li and Tian in the Xunzi,” Tan.

Friday

- *Xunzi*, 23.
- “Mencius and Xunzi on Xing,” Sung.

Week 13 Legalism: Hanfeizi

Monday

- *Hanfeizi*, 5, 6, 7, 12, (RCCP: 323-340).

Wednesday

- *Hanfeizi*, 27, 29, 40, 43, 47, 49, 50 (RCCP: 340-371).

Friday

- “Being Worthy of Persuasion: Political Communication in the Han Feizi,” DeLapp.
- Paper 3 assigned (due on May 9th 11:59pm).