

道不远人

Dao is not far away from man. (*Zhong Yong* 13)

PL216 Introduction to Chinese Philosophy

Seminar Leader

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Email

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Seminar Times

Fridays, 9 am–12:15 pm

Office Hours

By appointment only

Kant sagt: Philosophie ist im ganzen Orient nicht anzutreffen, die wenigen Araber ausgenommen, allein das sind auch schon Weise. Ihr Lehrer Konfuzius trägt in seinen Schriften nichts als moralische Lehren für die Fürsten vor... und führt Exempel der vorigen chinesischen Fürsten an... aber ein Begriff von Tugend und Sittlichkeit ist den Chinesen nie in den Kopf gekommen.

Course Description

In Kant's view, China—and the entire East—was a barren land for philosophy. This kind of misjudgments persist in our time and hinder many from appreciating Non-Western philosophies. This course will help participants break through these obstacles, stepping into the grand hall of Chinese philosophy to draw wisdom from its widths and depths. We will focus on the elements of pre-Han Chinese philosophy, a period often regarded as the classical era. Known as the Time of the Hundred Schools of Thought, this period exemplifies the remarkable diversity and intellectual vitality of Chinese philosophy.

This course aims to provide a broad overview of the philosophical landscape of pre-Han China, while at the same time delving into the theoretical frameworks and intellectual debates of three major schools: Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism. It will also explore contributions from other schools, including the School of Names, Legalism, and the Yangism. In the last two sessions, participants will be introduced to two major post-Han philosophical traditions: Chinese Buddhist philosophy and Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties, which can reveal the open boundaries and continuous intellectual reinvigoration of Chinese philosophy. The primary focus of this course, in terms of areas it covers, lies in ethics and political philosophy, followed by epistemology, philosophy of mind, and logic; metaphysics and philosophy of religion will also be touched upon throughout the discussions.

Chinese philosophy does not exist in isolation. Throughout the course, we will draw comparisons with other philosophical traditions, enriching our understanding of its universal philosophical concerns. Particular attention will be paid to topics such as Aristotelian virtue ethics vis-à-vis Confucian ethics, Stoic logic compared to Mohist logic, and Daoism alongside Sufism, etc. By situating Chinese philosophy in dialogue with global traditions, participants will gain a more expansive and inclusive perspective on philosophy as a shared intellectual heritage of humanity.

Course Readings

All required readings will be available in a Course Reader (in print), which will be distributed in the library. All recommended readings will be available via **Google Classroom**. Knowledge of Classical Chinese is neither required nor assumed in this course.

* Textbook (required):

- Karyn Lai. *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

* Sourcebook:

- Antonio S. Cua (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Bryan W. Van Norden, Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 3rd edition, Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2023.
- Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (eds.) *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600*, vol. 1, 2nd edition., New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Fung Yu-lan. *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, 2 Volumes, Princeton University Press, 1952-1953.
- Chan Wing-Tsit. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton University Press, 1963.
- Edward Slingerland (trans.), *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2003.
- Bryan W. Van Norden (trans.) *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2008.
- Chris Fraser (ed. and trans.) *The Essential Mozi: Ethical, Political, and Dialectical Writings*, Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Chris Fraser (trans.), *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings, A New Translation*. Oxford University Press, 2024.
- Chen Guying. *The Philosophy of Life: A New Reading of the Zhuangzi*, Leiden: Brill, 2016.
- Scott Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian: A Study and Complete Translation*, NY: East Asian Program, Cornell University, 2012.
- Stephen Angle and Justin Tiwald. *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity, 2017.
- Youru Wang and Sandra A. Wawrytko (eds.) *Dao Companion to Chinese Buddhist Philosophy*, Springer, 2018.

* Recommended Readings (abridged):

- Angus. C. Graham. *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*, La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co, 1988.
- Tao Jiang, *Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy in Early China: Contestation of Humaneness, Justice, and Personal Freedom*, Oxford University Press, 2024
- Roger T. Ames, *Human Becomings Theorizing Persons for Confucian Role Ethics*, New York: Suny Press, 2021.
- Sungmoon Kim, *Theorizing Confucian Virtue Politics: The Political Philosophy of Mencius and Xunzi*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Sun Zhongyuan, *The Mojing: Origins and Development of Mohist Logic*, Leiden: Brill, 2024.
- Chris Fraser, “Moism and self-interest.” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 35 (3):437-454.
- Bradford Jean-Hyuk Kim, “‘Benefit to the World’ and ‘Heaven’s Intent’: The Prospective and Retrospective Aspects of the Mohist Criterion for Rightness,” *Dao*, 23: 251–264, 2024.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation. Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement. If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan. Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, one absence from a once-per-week course should not affect the participation grade or require documentation. More than two unexcused absences (that is an absence from a once-per-week session of 180 minutes) in a semester will significantly affect the participation grade for the course. Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Required Texts

Generally, there will be some compulsory (underlined in Course Schedule) and some recommended readings for each session. These are mainly selected contributions by representative authors on Chinese philosophy. All students are responsible for preparing all the required readings in advance of each week (with the exception of the first session). In addition to the printed course reader, a digital reader will be provided at the beginning of the semester via **Google Classroom**. However, all texts should be physically printed at best, and be available for reference during our course time. The recommended readings, also uploaded to our Google Classroom, are not mandatory, but highly encouraged.

Assessment

Participation

Students should arrive to each class on time and prepared. Being prepared means

- (1) having completed the assigned reading,
- (2) bringing to class a non-electronic copy of the assigned reading, and
- (3) being ready to initiate and to contribute to discussion.

Engagement in class discussion should be regular as well as productive; quantity alone will not favorably affect the participation grade.

Class Presentations

Every student is expected to present on one text as per a sign-up sheet online. Each presentation of about 15 minutes will examine key passages of their choice, ideally using either presentation slides or a handout for the class. You are encouraged to write your midterm or final paper on the text that you presented on. In this manner, your essay can expand on the insights and questions that arose from your class contribution and the discussion that follows your readings.

Writing Assignments

There will be two principal assignments over the course of the term: **a midterm essay of 2000 words due at 23:59 on Oct 26**, and **a final essay of 3000 words due at 23:59 on Dec 7 for graduating students** and 23:59 on **Dec 19** for other students. All essays are to be **submitted as a Google document electronically via Google Classroom**. All sources must be quoted to avoid plagiarism. **ChatGPT or other AI tools may not be used under any circumstances.**

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Class participation: 25%

Presentation: 20%

Midterm essay (2000 words): 25%

Final essay (3000 words): 30%

Course Schedule

Introduction to Chinese Philosophy

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READING
1 / Sept 5, 2025	<p>Introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Diverse components of Chinese philosophy Sima Tan's classification ♦ Historical division ♦ Language, text, and the scholarly tradition 	<p>(1) <u>Lai 2017, Ch.1</u></p> <p>(2) Norden, <i>Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto</i>, Chapter 1, pp.1-18</p>
2 / Sept 12, 2025	<p>Confucianism I: Fundamentals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Confucius and his spiritual autobiography (<i>Analects</i> 2.4) ♦ The rise of Confucianism Zisi Xunzi Mengzi ♦ Core concepts <i>ren</i> 仁 <i>yi</i> 義 <i>li</i> 禮 <i>xin</i> 心 	<p>(1) <u>Lai 2017, Ch.2</u></p> <p>(2) Graham 1988, Ch.1.1, pp.9-32</p> <p>(🎵) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Classical Chinese Philosophy Episodes 7 Uncrowned King: Kongzi (Confucius) and the <i>Analects</i></p>
3 / Sept 19, 2025	<p>Confucianism II: Ethics and moral philosophy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Role ethics or virtue ethics? The relational self ♦ Moral sprout: Human Nature and Cultivation ♦ Case study: <i>The Upright Gong Mutual Concealment Between Relatives (Analects 13.18)</i> cf. Plato's <i>Euthyphro</i> 3e-5d <i>Mencius</i> 7A35 <i>xiao</i> 孝 (filial piety) 	<p>(1) <u>Lai 2017, Ch.3</u></p> <p>(2) Ames 2021, Ch.2</p> <p>(🎵) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episodes 9 Family Values: Confucian Role Ethics</p> <p>(🎵) <i>This is the Way</i> Podcast Episode 13: Family Before State</p>

4 / Sept 26, 2025	Confucianism III: Dispute with the School of Legalism <ul style="list-style-type: none">♦ Origin of the State♦ Method of Rule Discipline and punishment♦ Universal Bureaucratic State as the Sole Agent of Justice in <i>Han Fei Zi</i>	(1) <u>Lai 2017, Ch.9</u> (2) Graham 1988, Ch.2.1, pp.111-116. (3) Tao 2022, Ch.4.1-3, pp.232-266. (🎵🎵) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episode 19 The Kingly Way: Confucian Political Philosophy
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5 / Oct 3, 2025

No Class
(German Unity Day)

6 / Oct 10, 2025	Mohism I <ul style="list-style-type: none">♦ “Either Yangist or Mohist” (<i>Mengzi</i> 6.14)♦ The Ten Doctrines♦ Against Offensive War (<i>Feigong</i> 非攻)♦ Inclusive care practices (<i>Jianai</i> 兼愛)♦ The centralization and bureaucratization of the state	(1) <u>Lai 2017, Ch. 4 & Ch.6</u> (pp.144-162) (2) Fraser 2020, <i>Essential Mozi</i> , Introduction.
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7 / Oct 17, 2025	Mohism II: Mohist Ethics <ul style="list-style-type: none">♦ The unifying principle of morality♦ Utilitarianism or consequentialism?♦ Heaven (<i>tian</i> 天) as source of morality	(1) <u>Robins 2012, “Mohist Care”</u> (2) Kim 2024, “‘Benefit to the World’ and ‘Heaven’s Intent’: The Prospective and Retrospective Aspects of the Mohist Criterion for Rightness” (🎵🎵) <i>This is the Way</i> Podcast Episode 6: Partiality and Justice
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8 / Oct 20-26, 2025

FALL BREAK



Sunday Oct 26, 2025

Midterm Paper Due

9 / Oct 31, 2025	Mohism III: Mohist Epistemology and Logic	(1) Graham 1978, <i>Later Mohist Logic</i> I.1.2, pp.25-43
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ The emergence and formation of Mohist logic ♦ The four objects of knowledge ♦ Mohist logic vis-à-vis Stoic logic 	<p>(2) Sun 2024, <i>The Mojing: Origins and Development of Mohist Logic</i>, Ch.5</p> <p>(3) Loy 2013, “Justification and Debate: Thoughts on Moist Moral Epistemology.”</p>
10 Nov 07, 2025 /	Daosim I: Daodejing	(1) Lai 2017, Ch.5
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ What is Dao? <i>Dao</i> 道 <i>De</i> 德 ♦ The Daoist metaphysics 	<p>(2) Schwarz 1998, <i>The Thought of the Tao-te-ching</i></p> <p>(3) Zheng 2022, <i>The Metaphysics of Philosophical Daoism</i>, Ch.5</p> <p>(🎵🎵) This is the Way Podcast Episode 11: Nonaction</p>
11 /Nov 14, 2025	Daoism II: Zhuangzi	(1) Lai 2017, Ch.8
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ The philosophical double-vision The Monkey Trainer The Butcher ♦ Skepticism, perspectivism, relativism, etc. Kun and Peng The Happy Fish The Butterfly Dream 	<p>(2) Fraser 2024, <i>Zhuangzi: Ways of Wandering the Way</i>, Ch.2</p> <p>(3) Wong 2024, “Zhuangzi on not following the leader.”</p> <p>(🎵🎵) This is the Way Podcast Episode 1: Daoist Detachment Episode 4: Daoist Persuasion Episode 12: Zhuangzi on Play</p>
12 /Nov 21, 2025	Daoism III: Text	(1) Graham 1989, II.3 and III.1
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Authorship in Early China ♦ The composition, variation, and transmission of texts Unearthed text from Mawangdui The Bamboo Texts of Guodian 	<p>(2) Zhang 2018, <i>Authorship and Text-Making in Early China</i>, Ch.1.</p> <p>(🎵🎵) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episode 6 Franklin Perkins on Excavated Texts</p>
13 /Nov 28, 2025	Yangism & The School of Names	(1) Lai 2017, Ch.6 (pp.130-143) & Graham 1989, II.3 and III.1
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Human nature self-interest (為我) hedonism ♦ The White Horse Dialogue (白馬非馬) 	<p>(2) Hansen 1976, “Mass Nouns and ‘A White Horse Is Not a Horse.’”</p>

language and logic
arbitrary objects

(3) Indraccolo 2017, “The “white horse is not horse” debate.”

14 /Dec 5, 2025

Introduction to Chinese Buddhist Philosophy

(1) Lai 2017, Ch.11

♦ **The Chinese Buddhist Schools**

Kusha
the Pure Land
the San Lun
Tian Tai
Hua Yan
Chan

(2) Fung 1952, Vol.II, Ch.9
(3) Wang & Wawrytko 2018,
“Introduction: Chinese Buddhist
Philosophy and Its “Other””

♦ **Nāgārjuna's contribution**

Sunday Dec 07,
2025

Final Paper Due for graduating students

15 /Dec 12, 2025

Introduction to Neoconfucianism

(1) Angle & Tiwald 2017, Ch.1-2

♦ **Cheng–Zhu school**

li 理
qi 氣
ti 體
yong 用

(2) Tiwald 2018, “Zhu Xi's
critique of Buddhism : selfishness,
salvation, and self-cultivation.”

♦ **Wang Yang Ming**
Genuine knowledge
Mental action

(3) Lederman 2023, “Conceptions
of Genuine Knowledge in Wang
Yangming.” & Lederman 2024,
“Précis and Response to
Comments from Liu, Wilson, and
Angle”

ESSAY DEADLINES

Midterm Paper (2000 words) by Oct 26, 2025, 23:59 CET

Final Paper (3000 words) by Dec 7, 2025, 23:59 CET for graduating students

& Dec 19, 2025, 23:59 CET for everyone else