This course is designed to give students a thorough introduction to early (pre 221 BCE) Chinese thought, its contemporary implications, and the role of religion in human well-being. Important themes to be discussed include the ideal of wu-wei or “effortless action,” the paradox of how one can consciously try not to try, mindfulness techniques and self-cultivation, models of the self and society, rationality versus emotions, trust and human cooperation, and the structure and impact of different spiritual and political ideals.

This period of Chinese history witnessed the formation of all of the major indigenous schools of Chinese thought (Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism and Legalism), which in turn had an impact on the development of East Asian cultural history that is still felt today. We will also explore parallels with Western philosophical and religious traditions, the relevance of early Chinese thought for contemporary debates in ethics, moral education, and political philosophy, and the manner in which early Chinese models of the self anticipate recent developments in the evolutionary and cognitive sciences.

This course provides a full university semester’s worth of material broken into two parts. Each part of the course will last 5 weeks with a week-long break in between. For each part, there will be four weeks worth of new material. The fifth week will be reserved for review and completion of the final exam.

Part 2 builds upon Part 1 by exploring late Warring States thinkers such as the Confucian Mencius, the Daoist Zhuangzi, and the return to externalism in the form of Xunzi—who believed Mencius betrayed the original Confucian vision—and his former student Hanfeizi, a “Legalist” thinker who helped lay the foundations for the autocratic system that unified the Warring States into China’s first empire. We will conclude with some reflections on what it means to study religious thought, and the thought of other cultures, in a modern, globalized world. Part 2 can be taken as a stand-alone course, but will be more comprehensible and rewarding with the background provided in Part 1.

See also:

Chinese Thought: Ancient Wisdom Meets Modern Science - Part 1
Duration

The MOOC will run for 4 weeks, covering one full module for each of the first three weeks, a 4th week for Conclusion video and review, and a 5th week for the taking of the final exam. Each of the first three modules consists of 8-10 short (approx. 15-20 minutes) videos.

Estimated Student Time Commitment per Week

Each of the first three weeks will include approximately 2.5 hours of video content. Students can be expected to spend 4-6 hours per week watching the videos, taking the quizzes, completing the class reading (30-50 pages a week) and participating in the online discussions.

What Will You Learn From This Course?

Students will gain a comprehensive introduction to early Chinese thought and strategies for engaging with alternative cultural models of ethical training, models of the self, and self-other relations. You will learn about the role of religious worldviews in orienting human beings in a space of meaning and values, as well as what it means to study human thought and human cultural history in an empirically-grounded manner. Close readings of English translations of early Chinese texts will help you to parse and interpret philosophical argumentation, assumptions and logic, and you will gain experience working through ethical dilemmas. You will learn how to approach historical materials in a responsible manner, gleaning contemporary insights without oversimplification or inaccurate appropriation. Looking at early Chinese thought through the lens of modern science will also give you an understanding of the basics of human cognition and evolutionary theory. You will learn how the “paradox of wu-wei”—the tension of how one can consciously try not to try—played a central role in driving the development of early Chinese thought, and how it is still relevant to us today. Students will come away with a knowledge of:

- later developments in Confucianism and Daoism
- Legalism and the origins of the imperial Chinese state
- how to analyze philosophical and religious arguments and debates
- alternative models of ethics, the self, and the individual-society relationship
- the universality and contemporary relevance of basic ethical dilemmas
- the power of spontaneity, and the tensions involved in attaining it
- religion or spirituality and the role of meaning in human well-being
Readings

The primary recommended text for the class is:


Hackett Publishing Company has agreed to provide a sample chapter (Confucius’ *Analects*, our first reading from the text), as well as a discount for students who wish to purchase the paperback; the ebook version is also quite affordable.

For each Module where we are recommending chapters from *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, we will also provide edition/translation-neutral passage or chapter references, so students can use their own translations, and where possible we will recommend adequate open-source translations. However, students should be aware that translations from classical Chinese vary *wildly* in quality, so we strongly recommend that they acquire the Hackett edition.

In addition, recommended readings will include some posted pdfs (open source). For most modules we’ll also refer students to supplementary readings from a secondary source that covers much of the same material as the MOOC:


This book provides more detail for students who want to delve more deeply into the class material. Crown/Random House has provided a sample free of charge on the class site.

Students are also referred to my Facebook Page (www.facebook.com/slingerland3), which includes links to newspaper articles, on-line and radio interviews, magazine columns, etc. relevant to course themes. On the course site we will also provide semester-appropriate links to Facebook pages set up by students, which are another good source of links to relevant material and venues for discussion of course material.

Assessments

There will be four (3) weekly multiple-choice quizzes, one at the end of each module, testing the student’s knowledge of that particular module. No make-ups or rescheduling of the quizzes will be allowed. There will also be a multiple-choice final exam. The final grade will be calculated as follows:

- 3 quizzes @ 20 points each: 60%
- Final Exam: 40%
- Self-Check Questions (ungraded)
Students who choose to receive a Verified Certificate of Achievement are required to achieve a minimum overall grade of 60%.

**Course Schedule**

**Module 5: Cultivating the Moral Sprouts with Mencius**

Mencius revives the thought of Confucius with a twist: cultivation and refinement are important, but only because they represent the natural development of tendencies already inside us. A great moral psychologist, Mencius argued that we all possess the sprouts of proper moral behavior, and need to cultivate them like a patient farmer. From a contemporary perspective, his model of moral education looks both psychologically sophisticated and prescient.

**VIDEO LESSONS**

- *Part II Introduction Video*
- *Part I, Lecture 1.1*: Nuts and Bolts (if not previously watched)

  *Intro video*: Cultivating the Moral Sprouts
  *Lecture 1*: Mencius and the New World of Late-Warring States Thought
  *Lecture 2*: Mencius and Gaozi: Where Do You “Get” Rightness?
  *Lecture 3*: Human Nature is “Good”: Mencius and the Moral Sprouts
  *Lecture 4*: Evidence for the Sprouts: Mencian
  *Lecture 5*: Evidence for the Sprouts: Modern Scientific

  Mid-week Announcement: Hot/Interesting Discussion Threads

  *Lecture 6*: Emotion vs. Reason: Mencian Sentimentalism
  *Lecture 7*: “Extension”: The Importance of Moral Imagination
  *Lecture 8*: Mencian Gradualism and Internalism: The Wisdom of the Body
  *Lecture 9*: The Paradox of Wu-wei in the *Mencius*

  Bonus Material: Full interview with Prof. Kiley Hamlin (UBC)
  Concluding Video: Module 1 Q&A with Prof. Slingerland

**READINGS**

Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy, the *Mengzi*

*Mengzi*, passages:

1:A:1, 1:A:3, 1:A:7, 1:B:5, 1:B:6, 1:B:8
2:A:2, 2:A:6, 2:B:13
4:A:10, 4:A:11, 4:A:15, 4:A:17, 4:A:27, 4:B:2, 4:B:6, 4:B:8, 4:B:11, 4:B:18,
Alternative open source translations:

*Recommended*

Robert Eno’s translation, available on his website: 
http://www.iub.edu/~g380/Readings.html

Charles Muller: http://www.acmuller.net/con-dao/mencius.html

There is also:

James Legge, on ctext.org: http://ctext.org/mengzi

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Supplementary: *Trying Not to Try*,
Chapter 5, “Try, But Not Too Hard: Cultivating the Sprouts”

ASSESSMENTS

Quiz #1

**Module 6: Zhuangzi’s Celebration of the “Weeds” of Humanity**

Suspicious of any fixed, explicit system of morality, the Daoist Zhuangzi advocated freeing the mind of all doctrines and value judgments, “fasting the mind,” so that our innate Heavenly tendencies can be activated. He believed that the only way to move through the world properly was to get beyond linguistic distinctions and logical thought in order to perceive and engage with reality directly. Zhuangzi has much to teach us about the power of the unconscious and the importance of embodied skills.

VIDEO LESSONS

*Intro video: Zhuangzi and the Spirituality of the Mundane
Lecture 1: Zhuangzi and the Zhuangzi
Lecture 2: Fallenness: Getting Rid of the Human Essence
Lecture 3: Undergrowth in the Head: The Problem of Fixed Ideas
Lecture 4: Qi and the Fasting of the Mind*
Mid-week Announcement: Hot/Interesting Discussion Threads

Lecture 5: Guided by the Spirit: Skill Stories in the Zhuangzi
Lecture 6: Zhuangzi and the Embodied Mind
Lecture 7: Drunk on Heaven: In the World But Not of It
Lecture 8: The Paradox of Wu-wei in the Zhuangzi

Bonus Material: Full interview with Prof. Evan Thompson (UBC)
Concluding Video: Module 2 Q&A with Prof. Slingerland

READINGS

Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy, the Zhuangzi

Zhuangzi, Chapters 1 – 7, 12 – 14, 17 – 20, 22, 23, 24, 26, 32

Alternative open source translations:

Recommended

Robert Eno’s translation, available on his website:
http://www.iub.edu/~g380/Readings.html

There is also:

James Legge on ctext.org:  http://ctext.org/zhuangzi

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Supplementary: Trying Not to Try,
Chapter 6, “Forget About It: Going With the Flow”

ASSESSMENTS

Quiz #2
Module 7: Return to Externalism: Xunzi and Legalism

Xunzi marks in many ways a return to the original vision of Confucius, where spiritual and moral perfection is seen as the product of a long process of training and self-cultivation. He was also one of the earliest naturalist or atheistic philosophers in world history, presenting a functionalist view of religion that anticipates in many ways the views of modern scholars. We’ll also discuss the “Legalist” school associated with Xunzi’s disciple, Han Feizi, and how it can be seen as growing out of, but significantly differing from, Xunzi’s views. This will also involve students in a consideration of broader theoretical issues concerning the rule of law versus norms-based theories of human sociality. We will also review the great debate between Mencius and Xunzi concerning human nature, see how it maps onto perennial debates between liberals and conservatism, and discuss how it may reflect basic tensions in human inborn dispositions.

VIDEO LESSONS

Intro video: The Value of Institutions
Lecture 1: Xunzi and the return to externalism
Lecture 2: Xunzi on the mind and free will
Lecture 3: Xunzi on the Origins of Confucian Culture
Lecture 4: Building Cold into Hot: Xunzian Wu-wei
Lecture 5: Heavenly and Human: The World’s First Functional Theory of Religion

Mid-week Announcement: Hot/Interesting Discussion Threads

Lecture 6: A Perennial Debate: Xunzi vs. Mencius / Conservatism and Liberalism
Lecture 7: Han Feizi and Legalism
Lecture 8: Standards, Methods and The Power of Position
Lecture 9: Institutional Wu-wei: Institutionalism à la Machiavelli

Bonus Material: Full interview with Prof. Joseph Henrich (UBC)
Concluding Video: Module 3 Q&A with Prof. Slingerland

READINGS

Lectures 1-4:
Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy, the Xunzi

Xunzi, Chapters 1, 2, 5, 9, 17, 19 – 23.

Alternative open source translations: Unfortunately, none.

Lectures 5-7:
Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy, the Hanfeizi
Hanfeizi, Chapters 5 – 8, 12, 43, 49, 50.

Alternative open source translations: Unfortunately, none.

ASSESSMENTS

Quiz #3

Module 8: Comparative Thought and the Globalized World

The final module consists of a single, longer concluding video, with the bulk of the week dedicated to review and preparation for the final exam. In the concluding video, we will consider the benefits of studying both ancient philosophy and the thought of other cultures, and how the kind of intercultural understanding that results is essential for anyone living in our contemporary globalized world.

VIDEO LESSONS

Concluding video: Why Study Religion in a Secular World? What Can We Learn from Early Chinese Religion?

Bonus Material: Full Interview with Prof. Mark Csikszentmihalyi on “Confucianism in the Han Dynasty”
Prof. Slingerland, Comprehensive Q&A video

READINGS

Supplementary: Trying Not to Try,
