

Philosophy, Religion, and Literature in Medieval China

Prof. Luke Bender

Course Description:

The disciplines of Philosophy, Religion, and Literature are the products of a particular, and relatively recent, history. Before they were invented, and in cultures wherein different sorts of categories developed, texts and traditions sometimes straddled their divides, exploring problems and possibilities that do not fit neatly into the disciplinary categories through which we think today. This class will consider one such premodern world: that of late-antique and early-medieval China. It is a world of thought and literature radically different from our own, one wherein many possibilities remained open that have since closed down.

In the texts that survive to us from this period of China's history, it is largely impossible to draw clear distinctions between philosophy, religion, and literature: philosophical and religious argumentation is often carried out in highly literary forms, and texts that would become central to the Chinese literary tradition are deeply enmeshed in philosophical and religious debates. There are, moreover, no clear boundaries in this period between different religious traditions or philosophical schools: the tendencies we now refer to as Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism were all in conversation with one another as intellectuals sought to make sense of a mysterious cosmos and the equally mysterious powers of the human mind.

This course will trace these conversations across various genres of medieval Chinese writing, introducing students to the origins of the Chinese philosophical, literary, and religious traditions. No previous knowledge of Chinese, of Chinese history, or of the Chinese tradition is required.

Prerequisites:

None. All readings are in English; no background knowledge is required.

Course Objectives:

This course aims to introduce students to the world of thought in traditional China. By the end of the semester, students should understand the early sources of China's major intellectual, religious, and literary traditions, and they should understand the basic directions in which those traditions developed through the fifth century.

The course is not, however, designed only or even primarily for students for whom China is a long-standing interest. Instead, it aims to explore the philosophical, religious, and literary worlds of late antique and medieval China partly because of the dramatic ways they diverge from our familiar modern assumptions. Understanding these ideas and these texts, therefore, both requires and trains an ability to recognize the limitations and false fixities of our own intellectual worlds, and hopes to provoke questions that may allow us to expand them.

Readings:

Readings will generally be less than 100 pages per week. Most of the texts we will read, however, will be unlike what we are used to nowadays, and will therefore require close attention. All readings will be posted in pdf form on the course website.

Students who have a background in literary Chinese and want to do some of the readings in the original should consult the instructor. Graduate students studying premodern China will read the texts in the original language, though they too should of course consult the translations provided.

Writing:

For undergraduate students, this class will require two papers. The first will be a paper of 5 to 6 pages, on topics to be distributed by the instructor (if you want to write on another topic, please consult me first). The final paper will be 8 to 10 pages in length, and should engage with at least two different texts that we have read over the course of the semester. These papers will be due Thursday, February 27th and May 5th, both at 5:30pm.

Besides these two essays, students will be asked to submit a brief (one- or two-paragraph) entry on the course website's "Discussions" tab once every week. I will explain the content of these postings in detail in the first class. Please try to alternate posting your own response to the text and posting a response to other students' posts. Initial entries should be posted by 5pm on the day before class; responses to those entries should be posted by 11am on the day of class. Note that extra posts, if substantial, will be given extra credit.

Graduate students should write one seminar paper of at least 18 pages in length. Please discuss the topic of your paper with the instructor before spring break.

Criteria for Evaluation:

class participation: 20%

weekly writing: 25%

midterm paper: 20%

final paper: 35%

Statement to Students on their Academic Integrity

None of the writing undergraduates will be asked to do for this course will require research beyond the texts we read in class, and there is thus no need to consult materials beyond those mentioned on the syllabus. If you do consult extraneous texts, however, and you find their ideas or words useful for your written assignments, you *must* cite them appropriately. You may not under any circumstances present anyone else's work, words, or ideas as your own. Please be sure to review Yale's Academic Integrity Policy (<http://yalecollege.yale.edu/new-students/class-2019/academic-information/intro-undergrad-education/academic-honesty>) and the resources for understanding and avoiding plagiarism available at the Center for Teaching and Learning (<http://ctl.yale.edu/writing/using-sources>). If you are ever unsure as to whether a particular situation does or does not constitute plagiarism, please consult the instructor first.

Schedule of Readings

Tuesday, January 14: Course Introduction

The Dark

Thursday, January 16: The Old Master

- Laozi, *Daode jing*, selections
- Han Feizi, “Understanding Laozi,” selections

Tuesday, January 21: Early Interpretations of Laozi

- Heshang Gong [“Lord Upon the River”] Commentary to the *Laozi*, selections
- Wang Bi, “Laozi’s Subtle Meanings: A Rough Account”

Thursday, January 23: Introduction to Obscure Learning

- Wang Bi’s Commentary to the *Laozi*, selections

Roaming at Ease

Tuesday, January 28: Great and Small

- *Zhuangzi*, selections
- Guo Xiang’s Commentary to the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 1

Thursday, January 30: Equality

- Guo Xiang’s Commentary to the *Zhuangzi*, further selections
- Zhi Dun, Fragment criticizing Guo Xiang

Text and Cosmos

Tuesday, February 4: The *Classic of Change*

- “Qian” from the *Yijing*
- “The Commentary on Attached Verbalizations” (*Xici zhuan*)

Thursday, February 6: “Obscure Learning” Commentaries on the *Yijing*

- Wang Bi, “General Remarks on the *Change*,” selections
- Han Bo, Commentary to “The Commentary on Attached Verbalizations,” selections

The Sage and the Worthy

Tuesday, February 11: The Other Master

- *The Analects of Confucius (Lunyu)*, selections
- Huang Kan, Preface to *Subcommentary on The Analects*

Thursday, February 13: The Master, Done Dark

- Huang Kan, *Subcommentary on The Analects*, selections

The Recluse

Tuesday, February 18: Hiding Away

- Huangfu Mi, *Biographies of Lofty Men*, selections
- Tao Qian (Tao Yuanming), “Biography of Master Five Willows” and “Peach Blossom Spring”

Thursday, February 20: The Hidden Personality

- Tao Qian, Selections from his Poetry

Interlude: Mystery in Story Form

Thursday, February 25: Strange Tales

- Gan Bao, *In Search of the Spirits*, selections

Thursday, February 27: *No Class*

Longevity and Immortality

Tuesday, March 3: Longevity

- Xi Kang, “Discourse on Nurturing Life”
- Response by Xiang Xiu

Tuesday, March 5: Immortality

- Ge Hong, *Inner Chapters of The Master Who Embraces Simplicity (Baopuzi)*, selections
- Ge Hong, *Traditions of Divine Transcendents*, selections

Daoist Revelation

Tuesday, March 24: Immortal Betrothals

- Yang Xi, *Declarations of the Perfected*, selections

Thursday, March 26: Techniques of Immortality

- Yang Xi, *The Upper Scripture of Purple Texts Inscribed by the Spirits*

Buddhist Awakening

Tuesday, March 31: Emptiness

- *The Diamond Sutra*

Thursday, April 2: Chinese Understandings of Emptiness

- Sengzhao, *Essays of Sengzhao*, selections

Expedient Teachings

Tuesday, April 7: Is Anything Ultimate?

- *The Lotus Sutra*, selections

Thursday, April 9: A Dark Defense of Buddhism

- Zong Bing, "Discourse to Clarify Buddhism"

How Real is the Real World?

Tuesday, April 14: Paradises Envisioned

- Sūtra of Contemplation of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life
- Huiyuan, "Preface to the Poems Written by Lushan's Monks on Roaming at Mt. Stonegate"

Thursday, April 16: Going without Going

- Sun Chuo, "Rhapsody on Roaming to Mt. Tiantai"
- Zong Bing, "Preface to Paintings of Mountains and Waters"

Bringing It All Together

Tuesday, April 21: Transcending Divisions

- Xie Lingyun, "Debating the Truth with Various Monks"

Thursday, April 23: Disillusion and Illusion

- Xie Lingyun, Selections of his Poetry