Chinese Philosophical Foundations and Literary Transformations
Core Curriculum: Texts & Ideas

New York University - Fall 2020
Tues & Thurs, 4:55-6:10
Office Hours: Fridays, 11:00-1:00
link: https://nyu.zoom.us/j/8936462201

Instructor: Todd Foley
twf218@nyu.edu

Course Description:

Is human nature good or evil? Do souls exist? How might we create and manage a better society? These questions may all be contained in one of a much different sort: Why do the classics of Chinese philosophy and literature matter, especially after the war, revolution, and cultural iconoclasm that have come with modernity? Our class will attempt to respond to this question by examining major texts from three general periods, spanning nearly the entirety of Chinese history. Beginning with several foundational works from antiquity, which will provide us with a grounding in the three major philosophical traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, we will then turn to some of the most important literary works from the Ming and Qing dynasties, including Journey to the West, The Peony Pavilion, and Dream of the Red Chamber. Finally, we will spend the last month of the semester examining literary and philosophical works from the twentieth century, including selections by Lu Xun, Mao Zedong, and the Nobel prize-winning writers Gao Xingjian and Mo Yan. As we move through the semester, we may structure
our examination through a series of questions: First of all, what general differences and similarities do we notice amongst the ancient classics themselves, and what ideas from them seem meaningful and relevant to us today? How do we see ideas from these texts appearing in much later cultural productions from different periods, and how does our understanding of the classics affect our understanding of these later works? To what extent do the later works we examine explicitly adopt or criticize certain ideas from antiquity, and to what extent might we see them engaged in some sort of implicit negotiation of these ideas? While clearly recognizing that foundational texts of the Chinese philosophical tradition do not offer some sort of unquestioned explanatory framework for all Chinese cultural production, over the course of the semester, we hope to have both traced various manifestations of these basic philosophical concepts throughout vastly different historical contexts, and to have questioned their permutations and perennial reoccurrence.

Texts:

One of the underlying themes of our course will be that of translation—not only of language, from classical Chinese to modern Chinese to English, but also of ideas, from one period or genre to another. Different translations of texts can illuminate different aspects of them and enable new, productive understandings. While all students are required to familiarize themselves with the translations assigned in class, they are also encouraged to read any other translations they like (for example, there are almost countless translations of the *Dao De Jing*). Students able to read Chinese are strongly encouraged to read the original texts.

The texts required for purchase are:

- *The Heart Sutra*, Trans. Red Pine (Counterpoint)
- *Dream of the Red Chamber* (abridged), by Tsao Hsueh-Chin, Trans. Chi-Chen Wang (Anchor)
Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio, by Pu Songling, Trans. John Minford (Penguin Classics)
The Field of Life and Death & Tales of Hulan River, by Xiao Hong, Trans. Howard Goldblatt (Cheng & Tsui)
Shifu, You’ll Do Anything for a Laugh, by Mo Yan, Trans. Howard Goldblatt. (Arcade)

*All other assigned readings will be posted on the course website. If students have trouble obtaining any of the required readings, they should contact me as soon as possible.

Requirements:

Attendance: Normally, students would be required to attend all lectures and recitation sections. Because of the challenges posed by different time zones in our remote learning format this semester, students may instead watch recordings of lectures, although they will miss out on any interactive features. Recitation attendance (online) is required; if a student’s circumstances make this difficult or impossible, the student should discuss this with their assigned TA to arrive at an appropriate solution. Recitation instructors will keep track of students’ regular engagement with the course, which is required in order to receive a passing grade.

Grades: 10% of the grade will be based on participation, including active involvement in discussion during recitation sections and the completion of short weekly assignments given by recitation instructors (posted to NYU Classes). 30% of the grade will be based on three short writing assignments (3-4 pages), which will be essay responses to questions distributed to students about one weeks before the due date, and submitted to recitation leaders by whatever method they specify. 30% of the grade will be based on a five-page midterm paper, and 30% will be based on five-page final paper. Instructions for the midterm and final will be distributed to students several days ahead of the due dates.

Recitations: Recitations are a crucial component of the course, and students are expected to actively engage in discussion. While recorded lectures may be watched after the fact (although it’s not ideal), the purpose of recitations is for students to exchange ideas amongst themselves and engage in a lively discussion led by their TA. Students will be responsible for short, weekly writing assignments according to their TA’s guidelines.

Recitation Instructors: Honey Watson (hbw230@nyu.edu) & Claire Yuanjun Song (ys2895@nyu.edu)

Schedule

Week 1:
Thurs., Sept. 3: Introduction
The Book of Changes (易经) (selections), translated by Wilhelm & Baynes

Week 2:
Tues., Sept. 8: The Book of Songs (诗经), translated by Arthur Waley
Thurs., Sept. 10: *The Songs of the South* (楚辞), translated by David Hawkes

Week 3:
Tues., Sept. 15: *The Analects* (论语), by Confucius, translated by Raymond Dawson


Week 4:


*Xunzi: Basic Writings* (荀子) (selections), translated by Burton Watson

Week 5:
Tues., Sept. 29: *The Dao De Jing* (道德经), by Laozi, translated by Moss Roberts


*First writing assignment due*

Week 6:
Tues., Oct. 6: *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings* (庄子), translated by Burton Watson

Thurs., Oct. 8: *Zhuangzi*, continued.

Week 7:

Thurs., Oct. 15: *The Diamond Sutra* (金刚经) (selections), translated by Red Pine

*Sutra of the Wise and Foolish* (贤愚经) (selections), translated by Stanley Frye

Fri., Oct. 16: Midterm papers due

Week 8:
Tues., Oct. 20: *Monkey* (abridged version of *Journey to the West* (西游记) by Wu Cheng’en, translated by Arthur Waley)


Week 9:
Tues., Oct. 27: *The Peony Pavilion* (牡丹亭) (Tang Xianzu), translated by Cyril Birch

*Second writing assignment due*

Week 10:
Tues., Nov. 3: *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦) (by Cao Xueqin; abridged version translated by Chi-Chen Wang)

Thurs., Nov. 5: *Dream of the Red Chamber*, continued.

Week 11:
Tues., Nov. 10: *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (聊斋志异) (selections), by Pu Songling, translated by John Minford

Thurs., Nov. 12: *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, continued.

Week 12:
Tues., Nov. 17: “New Year’s Sacrifice” (祝福), by Lu Xun 鲁迅, trans. Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang
   “Preface” from *Call to Arms* (呐喊), by Lu Xun

Thurs., Nov. 19: “The Field of Life and Death” (生死场), by Xiao Hong 萧红, translated by Howard Goldblatt

*Third writing assignment due*

Week 13:
Tues., Nov. 24: “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” (在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话), by Mao Zedong 毛泽东

Thurs., Nov. 26: **No Class – Thanksgiving Break**

Week 14:
Tues., Dec. 1: “The King of Trees” (树王), by Ah Cheng 阿城, translated by Bonnie S. MacDougall

Thurs., Dec. 3: *The Other Shore* (彼岸), by Gao Xingjian 高行健, translated by Gilbert C. Fong
Week 15:

Tues., Dec. 8: “Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream” (游园惊梦), by Pai Hsien-Yung 白先勇, translated by Pai Hsien-Yung and Patia Yasin

Thurs., Dec. 10: “Shifu, You’ll Do Anything for a Laugh” (师傅越来越幽默), by Mo Yan 莫言, translated by Howard Goldblatt

“Abandoned Child” (弃婴), by Mo Yan, translated by Howard Goldblatt

Tues., Dec. 15: Final papers due