

## **Annotated Lecture: Chinese Philosophy**

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**Cover slide: The Temple of Heaven**

**Slides 2 to 4: Chinese mythology**

Chinese ritual life had no greater icon than the Temple of Heaven. The Emperor, regarded as the Son of Heaven, conducted rituals at the altar every year to pray for a good harvest. In a symbolic way, the Emperor showed that even he was not beyond the practice of ritual. He too practiced li and xiao. By invoking his ancestors — all the Emperors that have preceded him — he acknowledged that his rule is but a continuation of a long history, and that in order to be a good “Son” he must continue their legacy. Hence, he executed the rituals to perfection, cautious that any mistake could mean a bad omen.

**Slide 5: Zhongguo**

Zhongguo or the Middle Country is the “Chinese name” for China. It reflects not only how they saw their geography, but how they saw the world. Bordered in the north, south, east, and west, Chinese civilization grew independently for the most part. It was not as open to foreign invasion as the Indians or Mesopotamians were. Chinese culture developed such a distinct character that future invaders such as the Mongolians and Manchurians failed to annihilate Chinese culture, instead it was the other way around — the Mongolians and Manchurians became Chinese.

**Slides 6 to 8: First agricultural settlements in China**

Chinese history begins in the Yellow River plain and these are some of the sample cultures in the area. These slides emphasize the role of the Yellow River in the development of Chinese civilization. Read more on pages 58 to 59 of our text.

**Slides 9 to 12: The Shang**

For a more thorough discussion, read pages 59 to 61 of our text. What’s interesting to note is that the Shang is the first historically established dynasty in China, with actual written artifacts and a complex social hierarchy as evidenced by its material remains. But what stands out is their worship of a deity, Shang Di. Ironically, it is this concept of a higher power that the Duke of Zhou would use to discredit the King of Shang, and justify his take over of the dynasty. We would eventually call this idea the Mandate of Heaven (tianming).

**Slides 13 to 15: The Zhou and the Ethos of Chinese philosophy**

For more on the Zhou (pronounced ‘Joe’), read pages 61 to 63 of our text. The Zhou period can be divided into two, the Western and the Eastern. The Western Zhou was a period of prominence and wealth, as discussed in the text. However, the Zhou had a feudal form of government, where local lords

held dominion over their domains while pledging allegiance to the king. This arrangement did not last long.

Towards the end of the Western Zhou, King Yu fell into incompetent and negligent ways. A little too obsessed with his concubines, he mismanaged the affairs of state and eventually lost the Mandate of Heaven. He was discredited among the local lords. Once, when the capital was under attack, King Yu called for reinforcements but none of them arrived. Eventually, his reign came to a tragic end and in his place was put his infant son.

Thus the period of the Eastern Zhou was period of chaos and instability throughout the land. Feudal lords were literally left to their own devices. And by 475BCE, the states fell into all out war against each other. States consumed other states. It was a chaotic time for the average person; your harvest is done one day, and trampled on by horses from the neighboring state the next day.

It was in this ethos of chaos and instability that philosophers such as Confucius and Lao Zi emerged. It is no surprise therefore that among the different philosophies of its time, the Chinese philosophies were the most concerned with governance and statecraft. They did not speculate much about the nature of divine beings or how one can attain salvation. They were more pragmatic, and sought practical answers to how society can be put back in order.

#### **Slides 16 to 23: Confucius and Lao Zi**

For more on the two Masters and their ideas, read up on the excerpts from the Analects and the Tao Te Ching.

#### **Slide 24: Calvin and Hobbes on Daoism**

Interesting strips here. I am surprised with something I noticed about the second cartoon just this year: I see it as a conversation between a Confucian and a Daoist. Now you tell me.

#### **Slide 25: The Yin Yang**

Take it away, Jason Mraz. His song sums up all you need to know, really.

#### **Slide 26: My four summary questions**

There is always a danger in presenting a philosophy in a “neat” and “clear” way. It’s not possible. Philosophy is a discipline of the mind. What may be neat and clear to me may be chaotic and incomprehensible to another. Insight is in the mind of the thinker.

Nonetheless, my approach is based on the following: (1) I relate the various concepts you have read in the text book and the primary concepts and weave them into a complete whole, (2) I relay some practical insights for our modern times, and (3) I connect everything with the ethos we’ve established and see how these philosophies respond to the problems of social chaos. In this sense, I hope to present something meaningful and useful.

## Slide 27 to 28: Confucianism

Commenting on the chaos and decay he observed during the period of the Eastern Zhou, Confucius concluded that man has lost his Way. He wanted to bring the land back to the glory days of the Western Zhou, but this was impossible since China was slowly transitioning from a land of many small states into few large ones. In the process, li (ritual) had lost its meaning and significance in daily life. Political schemes and territorial conquests were the norm. The emperor was only a ruler by name; rituals and titles had no significance. It was all a fight to the finish where only the fittest survived (and eventually the survivor will be the state of Qin — but that's for another time).

Confucius argued that if only the rulers ruled with integrity and the people obeyed with dutiful obedience, then everything would fall into place. This is the foundation of his notion of xiao which he would then use to explain that the state, ideally, should be run like a family. After all, man is a social being for Confucius. There is not a moment when we exist outside of society; the moment we are born into this Earth, we are the child to a parent. This is definitely a step farther from Ibn Khaldun who simply said that we required social organization. Confucius argues that we have no choice.

This leads us to the concept of the junzi. There are many translations of the term. Literally meaning, “Son of the Lord”, it has come to mean exemplary person, perfect gentleman and even, Noble Man. Suffice to say, junzi was at the core of Confucius’ teachings; majority of the Analects discusses how this ideal man should behave. It is because of this concept that Confucius often has the reputation of being stern, strict, and dispassionate. To many who study the teachings of Confucius for the first time, they see in him a difficult taskmaster who has set an impossible standard.

However, the concept must be understood in the original context from which it comes. The junzi, more than anything else, is Confucius’ ideal of how a man of title, position, and authority must act. This is a commentary on the leaders of his time, imploring them to be men of true humaneness (ren), filial piety (xiao), and ritual propriety (li). Confucius gives this away in 12.19 where he teaches:

“If you govern effectively,” Confucius replied, “what need is there for killing? If you want to be truly adept, the people will also be adept. The excellence of the exemplary person (junzi) is the wind, while that of the petty person is the grass. As the wind blows, the grass is sure to bend.”

Thus, the junzi leads by the pure moral force of his example. In 4.5, Confucius further sets the standard:

“Wealth and honor are what people want, but if they are the consequence of deviating from the way (dao), I would have no part in them. Poverty and disgrace are what people deplore, but if they are consequence of staying on the way, I would not avoid them. Wherein do the exemplary persons (junzi) who would abandon their humaneness (ren) warrant that name? Exemplary persons do not take leave of their humaneness even for the space of a meal. When they are troubled, they certainly turn to it, as they do in facing difficulties.”

Nonetheless, as characteristic of any teacher, Confucius implored his own students to be junzi in their own ways. He taught them to aspire to be the best persons they can be and not surrender to selfish and short-sighted impulses. In 4.7,

“The Master said, “When you meet persons of exceptional character think to stand shoulder to shoulder with them; meeting persons of little character, look inward and examine yourself.”

Indeed, the junzi was an incredibly high ideal but not an impossible one. Confucius was setting the record straight and reiterating the values that the political man (read: everyone) must have.

### **Slide 29 to 30: Daoism**

Daoism is the yin to Confucianism’s yang. If Confucius argued that man has lost his Way and thus has to adhere to ritual to find it, the Daoists argue that the Way is beyond our understanding or comprehension. Knowledge, a treasure to Confucians, actually makes it difficult for us to understand the Way, and that only when we yield and allow things to happen will we truly follow the Way.

Huh? Okay.

Daoism’s puzzling formulation makes more sense when we remember that like Confucius, Lao Zi (if he indeed existed) was also looking at the Eastern Zhou. He saw the same struggle, chaos, and strife that pervaded the times. However, he took a different approach. He saw conflict as something unnatural. Wealth, power, and territory were all unnatural things. None of us were born with it. And yet throughout our lives we crave it. Then we fight for it.

And when there are people with wealth, we create people without. When there are people who know more, we create people who know none. The powerful begets the powerless. The virtuous begets the corrupt. The filial creates the rebel. The humane creates the inhumane. This is the way of the world. One creates the other.

Hence, in looking at the different lords in the Eastern Zhou, Lao Zi saw rulers who exerted too much of their will and their egos into governing. They wanted more; the people were left with none. They fattened themselves with food; the people had nothing to eat. People rose up in anger; the government created more laws. With more laws, there are more criminals. With more criminals, there must be a bigger army. With an army, there must be a rebellion. And so on and so forth. It never ends.

What Lao Zi tries to do is to stop this cycle before it even begins. He implores us to look within and realize that everything we ever really need, we already have. This is our inner nature or *puh*. There is power in being simple, Lao Zi says, and so we don’t really need much. Chapter 57 of the Tao Te Ching ends,

I take no action and the people are transformed of themselves; I prefer stillness and the people are rectified of themselves; I am not meddlesome and the people prosper of

themselves; I am free from desire and the people of themselves become simple like the uncarved block.

Thus a leader with no greed for the property of others will have more for others, a leader that relies less of punishments and harsh rulings won't provoke equally loud reactions from his people, and a leader who trusts in the ability of his people will see a kingdom that prospers on its own. Nonetheless, note that ruler serves as a virtuous example to all. In this sense, Confucianism and Daoism don't have much difference. Leaders must lead by example; good and humane leaders create a society that is equally good and humane. Regard Chapter 49,

The sage has no mind of his own.  
He takes as his own the mind of the people.

Those who are good I treat as good.  
Those who are not good I also treat as good.  
In so doing I gain in goodness.  
Those who are of good faith I have faith in.  
Those who are lacking in good faith I also have faith in.  
In so doing I gain in good faith.

The sage in his attempt to distract the mind of the empire seeks urgently to muddle it.  
The people all have something to occupy their eyes and ears, and the sage treats them all like children.

A leader therefore should think nothing for himself and just have the people's interests at heart. He must be like a father to them, and show them goodness and faith no matter what. He must leave them to become like the uncarved block, and trust in their ability to fulfill themselves.

Hence, the case has often been that with emperors who tended towards Daoism, China experienced great leaps in the arts, culture and science. Daoism inspired the creativity within the people, a perfect supplement to the social responsibility that Confucianism taught.

### **Slide 31: The Chinese Axial Age**

This slide summarizes everything we have learned from the presentation thus far. I round up everything by reintroducing the Axial Age and illustrating how these two philosophies of China were indeed born during this unique age. And to further demonstrate the idea behind the Axial Age, Chinese philosophy did not end with Confucius and Lao Zi.

Thinkers such as Mencius developed the importance of education in Confucian thought. Xun Zi, another prominent Confucian, would take a different approach and begin with an assumption that all men are evil and can only be straightened through education and li. His ideas would lead to the school of Legalism which would eventually underpin the rule of Qin Shih Huangdi, the first emperor of China and — ironically — prosecute the Confucians to near extinction.

For Daoism, we have the popular Zhuangzi who is most known for The Butterfly Dream. His thoughts would later inspire the most popular Buddhist sect in Japan, Zen (Chan). Then there is the hyper-popular Sun Tzu and his military treatise The Art of War that has been translated and adapted into many languages and contexts.

All these major thinkers emerged during the Warring States period, a span of time that would eventually end with the rise of China's first empire, the Qin.

Chinese philosophy, thought, and religion don't end there of course. It is not until the entrance of Buddhism in the first century of the common era that a cohesive religious system would emerge for majority of the Chinese population. Buddhism would eventually present something more grounded — not in ritual or in the abstract dao — but in the human experience of suffering and salvation.

**Slide 32: Some closing words from Yu Dan**

I'll leave the interpretation up to you.