

Syllabus: RELS 317 – Confucianism: a tradition that shaped China and East Asia

Western Kentucky University
by Dr. Kai Liang

“Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous.”

– Confucius’ *Analects*-chapt. Weizheng

The instructor reserves the right to modify this syllabus as needed. Updates will be notified to students.

Instructor Information

- **Instructor:** Kai Liang, Ph.D
- **Office:** HCIC 2051
- **Office Hours:** 2:30-4:00 pm, Tue
- **Email:** kai.liang@wku.edu
- **Class Times:**

Course Overview

Confucianism has shaped Chinese and East Asian cultures, societies, and governance for over 2,500 years, making it the most enduring intellectual tradition in Chinese history. This course traces its development from Confucius’ time to the present, exploring how Confucianism defines Chinese civilization. Over time, Confucianism laid the foundation for imperial governance, education, and ethics, and they continue to influence modern discussions on morality and leadership. This course begins by examining Confucius’ philosophy through *The Analects*, analyzing his teachings on self-cultivation, ritual propriety, and governance. We will also explore how later thinkers such as Mencius, Xunzi, Zhu Xi, Neo-Confucians, and Wang Yangming expanded and reinterpreted his ideas in response to changing political and social conditions. The latter half of the course investigates Confucianism’s role as state orthodoxy, its decline during the 19th and 20th centuries, and its resurgence in modern China. From Confucian academies to its influence in contemporary governance and global discourse, we will analyze how this tradition continues to evolve. Students will engage in critical readings of primary texts, evaluating their historical significance and relevance today. By articulating insights and debating interpretations, students will not only deepen their understanding of Confucianism but also contribute to its ongoing intellectual legacy, recognizing its impact on both history and contemporary Chinese and East Asian societies.

This course satisfies the Colonnade/Connections/Systems requirement.

Course Objectives

- Trace Historical Evolution – Explore the origins and development of Confucian thought from its classical roots to contemporary perspectives.
- Engage with Classical Texts – Read and interpret Confucian writings to understand their historical and contemporary significance.
- Examine Core Principles – Analyze key concepts such as virtue (*ren*), ritual propriety (*li*), filial piety (*xiao*), and self-cultivation, and their ethical significance.
- Assess Cultural Influence – Investigate Confucianism’s role in shaping societal structures across China and East Asia.
- Explore Confucianism’s Global Relevance – Discuss its influence on governance, education, gender roles, and environmental ethics today.
- Develop Analytical Skills – Critically evaluate Confucianism, compare it with global intellectual traditions, and apply it to modern issues.
- Apply Knowledge Practically – Use case studies and modern examples to examine how Confucian principles and practices function in governance, ethics, and cross-cultural interactions.

Learning Outcomes

By completing this course, students will:

1. Recognize key figures, texts, and philosophical shifts in Confucianism.
2. Explain fundamental Confucian concepts and their societal impact.
3. Evaluate Confucianism’s historical and cultural significance in China and East Asia.
4. Compare Confucianism with other philosophical traditions, such as Daoism, Buddhism, and some Western philosophies.
5. Apply Confucian ideas to contemporary debates on ethics, politics, education, gender, and sustainability.

Required Texts

- Gardner, D. (2007). *The four books: The basic teachings of the later Confucian tradition*. Hackett.
- Rainey, L. D. (2010). *Confucius and Confucianism: The essentials*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Recommended Texts

- Ivanhoe, P. (2013). *Confucian reflections: Ancient wisdom for modern times*. Routledge.
- Confucius. (1999). *The Analects of Confucius: A philosophical translation* (R. T. Ames & H. Rosemont, Jr., Trans.). Ballantine Books.

Note: The WKU Library offers an eBook edition of Gardner available for up to three users at a time, and an eBook edition of Ivanhoe with unlimited access.

Course Schedule Plan

Week	Topics	Readings
Week 1	Introduction to Confucianism: Chinese Dynasties	Ames & Rosemont, Intro: <i>The Analects of Confucius: A philosophical translation</i> Gardner, Intro
Week 2	Key works & concepts: Heaven & the Five Classics	Herrlee Creel, "The Decree of Heaven" from <i>The Birth of China</i> , 367-380
Week 3	Confucius' life and his time	Gardner, Intro & "Great Learning"
Week 4	The Analects part 1	Gardner, "Analects" #1-45
Week 5	The Analects part 2	Gardner, "Analects" #46-111
Week 6	The Analects part 3	Ames & Rosemont, <i>The Analects of Confucius: A philosophical translation</i>
Week 7	Schools of Thought, Daoism, & Mozi	Selections from the <i>Daodejing</i> Rainey ch.5 "Opponents" Rainey ch.4 "Mozi"
Week 8	The Debate on Human Nature: Mencius & Xunzi	Gardner, "Mencius" #1-17; Rainey, Ch. 6 "Mencius" Gardner, "Mencius" #18-35; Rainey • Selections from the <i>Xunzi</i> Chapter 1: Encouraging Learning Chapter 9: Regulations of the King Chapter 23: Human Nature is Evil • Selections from the <i>Hanfeizi</i> Chapter 49: The Five Vermin
Week 9	Fall Break	
Week 10	Tang & Song Dynasties	Gardner, "Maintaining Perfect Balance"; Rainey, Ch. 11 "Neo-Confucianism" Arthur Wright, "Buddhism and Chinese Culture: Phases of Interaction," <i>The Journal of Asian Studies</i> , vol. 17, no. 1, 1957: 17-42.

Week	Topics	Readings
Week 11	Yuan & Ming Dynasties	Ivanhoe, Ch. 6 “Attentiveness”; Rainey, Ch. 12 “Modernity” Wang Yangming, “Questions on the Great Learning,” “The Identification of Mind and Principle,” and “The Unity of Knowing and Acting”
Week 12	Qing Dynasty & Republican Era	Harris, Ch. 1 “Moral Truth”; Rainey, Ch. 13 “Issues” • Lu Xun, “Kung I-chi (Kong Yiji)” • Liang Qichao, “The Renovation of the People” • Chen Duxiu, “The Way of Confucius and Modern Life”
Week 13	Confucianism in Modern China and East Asia	Modernization, Cultural Revolution, and the Revival of Confucianism after 1990s
Week 14	Review & Final Thoughts	Review Readings

China’s Dynasty name (dates)	Important Confucian historical figures (Fill out the rest by yourself)
Shang 1500-1045 BC Zhou (Chou) 1045 – 256 BC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Western Zhou 1045-771 BC Eastern Zhou Spring and Autumn 770-479 BC Warring States 480-256 BC 	Confucius 551-479 BC Mozi 480-390 BC Mencius 4th c. BC Zhuangzi 4 th c. BC Xunzi 310-219 Hanfeizi 280-233BC
Qin 221BC-206 BC Han 206 BC – 220 AD	Sima Qian
Period of Division 220-580 Sui 581-617 Tang 618-907	
Song (Sung) 906-1279 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Northern Song 960-1126 Southern Song 1127-1276 Yuan 1234-1368	Wang Anshi Neo-Confucians Zhu Xi

Ming 1368-1644	Wang Yangming
Ming (cont.) Qing 1644-1911	
Republic of China 1912-1949 People's Republic of China 1949-present	

Grading Criteria

Your final grade will be determined by the following components:

- Topic Quizzes (60%)**
 - A total of 7 quizzes, each containing multiple-choice questions.
 - Questions are based on assigned readings and lecture content.
 - The lowest quiz score will be dropped.
- Written Participation (20%)**
 - Bi-weekly Written Discussions (WDs) designed to engage with course material.
 - WDs are due every Friday by 2 PM.
- Colonnade Assignment (20%)**
 - A three-page, single-spaced paper responding to Colonnade prompts.
 - Must be submitted before class in Week 12.

Extra Credit Opportunities

- **Writing (5%):** Submit a 400-word book review on a relevant library book for additional credit.
- **Cultural Events (5%):** Earn extra credit by attending and participating in Academic/cultural/TBA events or activities.

Course Policies

- **Attendance:** **Regular attendance is required.** Absences may impact your participation grade.
- **Classroom Conduct:** Respectful engagement is expected at all times. Disruptive behavior may negatively impact your grade.
- **Late Submissions:** No makeup of quizzes or WDs will be allowed. Delayed submissions due to unexpected reasons must be approved by the instructor. The Colonnade assignment has a strict deadline.
- **Plagiarism:** Submitting plagiarized work or AI-generated contents will result in a zero for the assignment and may lead to disciplinary action.

Additional Resources

- Accommodations: **Student Accessibility Resource Center**
 - Free tutoring and academic support: **The Learning Center (TLC)**
 - Feedback on writing assignments: **Writing Center**
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