

## Confucianism and Democracy

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**Office Hours:** 3-5pm on Fridays and by appointments

### Course Description

According to conventional wisdom, Confucianism is a hierarchical tradition that fits the current authoritarian regime in China. In this seminar, we take a closer look at this popular perception. Throughout the course, we will be reflecting on four related questions. First, is there such a thing that can be called “democracy” or “Confucianism”? Second, what is the exact relationship between Confucianism and democracy/autocracy? Third, what does it take to make a Confucian democracy/autocracy work well? Lastly, should China be democratic, autocratic, or something else? Why? Students will be encouraged to come up with their own responses to these questions by examining the ancient sources (e.g., Confucius’s *Analects*) and the contemporary debates among Confucian scholars.

More broadly speaking, this course is not about China, Confucianism, or democracy per se. By investigating familiar concepts such as democracy in an unfamiliar cultural context, students will be compelled to consider more broadly how we come to settle on seemingly self-evident political ideals, how we tend to justify them, and whether or not our justifications are valid and compelling. To those ends, this course serves as an intellectual catalyst.

### Learning Objectives

#### Content

1. The basic tenets of Confucian moral and political philosophy
2. Different relationships between Confucianism and democracy and their underlying arguments
3. Some basic understanding of culture and ideology in contemporary China

#### Skills

1. Learning to dissect arguments, identify their key premises, and examine their logic
2. Learning to defend existing positions or construct counter-arguments
3. Learning to distinguish different concerns and approaches to Confucian and Western political philosophy

## Course Materials

The only required text in this class is *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction* (2014) written by Daniel K. Gardner and published by Oxford University Press. All other readings will be provided electronically.

## Course Assignments, Requirements, and Grading

Since this is a text-based (i.e., reading heavy) seminar-style course, students are expected to finish the assigned readings with patience and care before each class. This means that students need to come to the seminar with questions and be well-prepared for philosophical engagements with a spirit of respect and charity. The effort you put into preparing readings will be reflected in the quality of your class participation.

The reason why I emphasize a careful and patient reading of the texts is that they contain unfamiliar ideas. You may find some of them surprising, some interesting, some stimulating, and some disagreeable and distasteful. However, to let these ideas facilitate your intellectual growth, you must take them seriously first by reading the texts carefully. Aside from offering some fundamentals to get your feet wet, I will not give you any authoritative interpretations of these texts. You are both free to wander in the land of Confucian political thought and encouraged to argue for your own views on these texts.

Texting, browsing, emailing, etc., during class distracts you and others, and so I respectfully ask that all laptops, phones, and other electronic devices be disconnected from the Internet during class. We are likely to retain more of the information covered in class if we take handwritten notes, so I encourage bringing a notebook and pen.

## Your final grade will be calculated based on the following factors:

1. *Three argumentative essays (25% each, 75% overall)*
  - a. 1500-2000 words, 12pt, one-inch margins, Palatino Linotype
  - b. The topics are up to you but each essay must take on at least two thinkers or scholars on a singular issue. For example, you could write an essay on Mencius's and Xunzi's different views of human nature. Or you could evaluate two arguments for or against the possibility of Confucian democracy.
2. *Weekly Reading Reports (25%)*
  - a. After finishing each week's readings, you should prepare a reading report of 300 words in the format of a mini essay. A mere list of bullet points is insufficient. It should reflect your initial reactions to the reading, questions, and the topics you would like to discuss in class. This is to ensure that you always have something to contribute each class.
  - b. Bring a HARD COPY of your report to every class

- c. I will collect them randomly **five times** throughout the course. I grade them based on your effort and completion, which will be marked by an S for satisfactory. However, if you get **two** OUTSTANDING grades from me, which indicates that your discussion note contains real insights and understanding of the text, your second essay (not your overall grade) will be bumped up for half a letter grade, e.g., B+ to A-.
  - d. Your grade for this section will be calculated based on the following distribution:
    - 5 S's=A
    - 4 S's=B
    - 3 S's=C
    - 2 S's and below=F
3. *Exceptional class participation will be considered when I calculate your final grades. In other words, consider our daily class time an opportunity for you to earn extra credits.*

### **All class-related activities are covered by the Honor Code\***

\* If there are any factors that might hinder your success in this course, please see the following statement. Also, please talk to me immediately and I will do whatever I can to make class materials more accessible. All information will remain confidential according to university policy.

- *The University of Virginia strives to provide accessibility to all students. If you require an accommodation to fully access this course, please contact the Student Disability Access Center (SDAC) at (434) 243-5180 or [sdac@virginia.edu](mailto:sdac@virginia.edu). If you are unsure if you might benefit from an accommodation, or to learn more about their services, you may contact the SDAC at the number above or by visiting their website at [www.sdac.studenthealth.virginia.edu](http://www.sdac.studenthealth.virginia.edu).*

## CLASS SCHEDULE

### **Section I: The Basics**

As our starting point, this section introduces us to some basic concepts we will use throughout the course. The first week will look into democracy as a complex and perhaps internally unstable political ideal. From the second week to the fifth week, our study will center on parsing out key principles in Confucianism, especially its ethical and political aspirations. The sixth week will have a broad overview of the cultural and political spheres in contemporary China. The overall purpose of this section is to equip us with

some basic knowledge and analytic tools to evaluate existing debates on Confucian democracy.

1. Introduction: What is democracy?

- David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Stanford University Press, 2006), chaps. 9-10

2. Confucius

- Wing-tsit Chan, ed., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 1963), chap. 2.
- Daniel K. Gardner, *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford University Press, 2014), chaps. 1-2

3. Mencius

- Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, chap. 2.
- Gardner, *Confucianism*, chap. 3

4. Xunzi

- Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, chap. 6.
- Gardner, *Confucianism*, chap. 4.

5. Great Learning: The (Neo-)Confucian moral and political program

- Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, chap. 4.
- Gardner, *Confucianism*, chaps. 4-5.
- **Essay #1 Due at the end of the class**

6. Culture and Ideology in Contemporary China

- Jiwei Ci, 2014, *Moral China in the Age of Reform* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), chap. 8
- Jennifer Pan and Yiqing Xu, 2018, "China's Ideological Spectrum," *Journal of Politics*

**Section II: The (im)possibility of Confucian democracy**

The section aims to help us better grasp the complexities on the possibility or impossibility of Confucian democracy. As you can see from the schedule, there is a great variety of approaches to this issue. Each school has its own presumptions, which are not easily defensible. Our task in this section is three-fold: 1) to identify each school's key arguments, 2) to test the validity of their logic, and 3) to interrogate the soundness of their presumptions.

7. The Communitarian/Pragmatist School

- David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, "A Pragmatist Understanding of Confucian Democracy," in *Confucianism for the Modern World*, ed. Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 124–60.
- Sor-hoon Tan, "Why Equality and Which Inequalities?: A Modern Confucian Approach to Democracy," *Philosophy East and West* 66, no. 2 (2016): 488–514.

8. The Meritocratic School

- Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Paperback (Princeton University Press, 2016), chap. 2.
- Tongdong Bai, "A Confucian Version of Hybrid Regime: How Does It Work, and Why Is It Superior?," in *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 545–87.

9. The Nationalist School

- Qing Jiang, *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future*, ed. Daniel A. Bell and Ruiping Fan, trans. Edmund Ryden (Princeton University Press, 2013), chap. 1.
- Ruiping Fan, "Confucian Meritocracy for Contemporary China," in *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 89–115.

10. The Perfectionist School

- Stephen C. Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy* (Polity, 2012), chap. 3.
- Joseph Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (Princeton University Press, 2014), chap. 4.

11. The Democratic School

- Sungmoon Kim, "A Pluralist Reconstruction of Confucian Democracy," *Dao* 11, no. 3 (2012): 315–36.
- Sungmoon Kim, "To Become a Confucian Democratic Citizen: Against Meritocratic Elitism," *British Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 03 (2013): 579–99.
- Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism*, pp. 199-204 (the section on "The Politics of Confucian Political Perfectionism")
- **Essay #2 Due at the end of the class**

### Section III: Other issues in Confucian political theory

The final section dive into some crucial issues that are implicated but not necessarily stated in the debates on Confucian democracy. How are we going to deal with the traditional Confucian patriarchy? How are we going to distribute wealth and resources in a Confucian society that has been saturated by industrial and capitalist norms? Is the language of rights a necessary or suitable framework for Confucians to protect their self-interests? Finally, to end this course, we must hold us accountable to the most challenging question: for China to move forward in the future, do we really need Confucianism, a seemingly outdated tradition? Or, put differently, is Confucianism still valuable to the ethical flourishing of the Chinese people in our time?

#### 12. Gender Equality

- Terry Tak-ling Woo, "Discourses on Women from the Classical Period to the Song: An Integrated Approach," in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Philosophy and Gender*, ed. Ann A. Pang-White (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 37–68.
- George Wrisley and Samantha Wrisley, "Beyond Sexism: The Need for an Intersectional Approach to Confucianism," in *Feminist Encounters with Confucius* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2016), 66–94.

#### 13. Distributive Justice

- Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times*, chap. 7.
- Sungmoon Kim, *Confucian Democracy in East Asia: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), chap. 6.

#### 14. Rights

- Stephen C. Angle and Marina Svensson, eds., *The Chinese Human Rights Reader* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), chaps. 2&3.
- Stephen Angle, "Human Rights in Chinese Tradition," unpublished paper.

#### 15. Epilogue: Confucianism and Today's China

- Jiwei Ci, 2014, *Moral China in the Age of Reform* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), chaps. 9-10
- **Essay #3 Due at the end of the final examination (TBA)**