

Arguing about Knowledge in Ancient China

1. Course Description

This is an introduction to Chinese philosophy from the 6th century to 221 BC, with a special focus on theories of knowledge and the arguments employed in these. This period was well-known for its various schools that held different thoughts and ideas, competing freely with each other, the so-called “contention of a hundred schools”.

More specifically, philosophical issues concerning the source of knowledge, criteria and justification for knowledge, the process of getting knowledge, kinds of knowledge (such as knowing that vs. knowing how), and skepticism were discussed among these schools. Interestingly, they differed substantially in their views and argued with one another.

This course will provide an opportunity to read some old texts by the schools of Daoism, Confucianism, and Mohism. We will try to understand their views, as well the arguments advanced for these. Furthermore, we will discuss possible reasons that led to such differences. Throughout the course, we take a comparative stance, and refer to the western literature where relevant. And also, we will give an overview of the development of these classical ideas in later periods of Chinese history.

2. Preliminary Plan

The course is organized in 5 lectures:

Lecture 1: Daoism. The notion of knowledge, knowing how versus knowing that, skeptical arguments, higher-order epistemic reasoning

Reading: selected passages from

Zhuangzi, Inner Chapters, “The Adjustment of Controversies” (内篇, 齐物论)

Zhuangzi, Inner Chapters, “Nourishing the Lord of Life” (内篇, 养生主)

Zhuangzi, Outer chapters, “Knowledge Rambling in the North” (外篇, 知北游)

Lecture 2: Confucianism. Xunzi on the importance of knowing, and the process of getting knowledge

Reading: selected passages from

Xunzi, “Encouraging Learning” (荀子, 劝学)

Xunzi, “Removing Blinders” (荀子, 解蔽)

Lecture 3: Confucianism. Xunzi on correcting names, the relation between names and reality

Reading: selected passages from
Xunzi, "Rectification of Names" (荀子, 正名)

Lecture 4: Mohism. Mozi on the sources of knowledge, criteria for knowledge, the relation between names and reality

Reading: selected passages from
Mozi, Book 10: Canon I and Exposition of Canon I (墨子, 经上, 经说上)
Mozi, Book 10: Canon II and Exposition of Canon II (墨子, 经下, 经说下)

Lecture 5: Mohism. Logical reasoning and inference

Reading: selected passages from
Mozi, Book 11: Minor Illustrations (墨子, 小取)

3. Teacher

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4. References

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Chad Hansen, 1983, *Language and Logic in Ancient China*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press
Christoph Harbsmeier, 1998, "Language and Logic," in *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 7, Joseph Needham, ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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