

## **Language, Reality, and Politics in Early China**

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### **Themes and Goals**

This unit provides a study of language and political power in early China. Through the examination of the Confucian theory on the “rectification of names” (*zhengming*) and its interpretations, the unit offers students an opportunity to explore the relationship between discursive acts and expressions of political power.

The unit can be used in courses on Chinese history and culture to examine Chinese political discourse. It can also be used to offer a comparative perspective to a global history or “great books” class that explores the semiotic and ideological processes acting on and through language. The unit is particularly compatible with courses that explore how discursive regimes restrict the freedom of individuals, entangling them in a web of disciplinary power relations. For example, in fascist Italy, the Soviet Union under Stalin, and Nazi Germany, language control and standardization were considered essential to the regimes' ideological projects and totalitarian aspirations.

The unit encourages students to approach in a critical way the study of Chinese (and also American/European) history, culture, and politics. Students will learn that language is not simply an instrument to *report* something nor is it a mere tool used for the communication of information. More specifically, the material in this unit encourages students to think critically about the *character* of language. Students will learn to be more sensitive to the inclusive or exclusive character of language, and will be encouraged to analyze the reasons behind these processes. Students should come away with a sense

that there are multiple layers of interpretation to political language. Political language is a perfect example of *how* words can be an instrument of control and manipulation, because words can be used to distort the significance of a certain thing or event in the service of specific interests, and in order to achieve a pre-determined result.

The primary goal of this unit is to explore themes of language, reality and power through Confucian philosophy. The unit also includes supplemental readings from Daoist and Buddhist texts that address these same themes and offer a comparative perspective within the Chinese canon. The student activities encourage students to analyze Confucian texts comparatively with other Chinese texts, and also alongside contemporary Western cultural examples found in politics, painting and film.

### **Audience and Uses**

The unit is suitable for inclusion in a variety of courses, including but not limited to:

- Pre-modern Chinese history
- Modern Chinese History
- Introduction to China or East Asia
- World History
- Great Books
- Introduction to Asian Religions
- Comparative Philosophy
- Comparative Political Science
- Media and Communication in Cross-cultural Perspective

The unit is divided into four parts:

- (1) Confucianism
- (2) Daoism (optional)
- (3) Buddhism (optional)
- (4) Student activities

The sections on Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism include an introduction for the instructor, student readings, and suggested further reading for the instructor. These three sections are followed by student activities that look at the theoretical issues raised by these Chinese philosophical texts both in a Chinese historical and cultural context and comparatively with examples taken from contemporary Western art and media.

If the instructor decides to focus *only* on Confucianism, two class meetings should be sufficient for this unit. During the first meeting the instructor presents and analyzes the material. The second meeting consists of student activities. The instructor may include a third class meeting to discuss Daoism and Buddhism as alternative Chinese philosophical discourses, or he/she may decide to introduce a Western philosophical comparative perspective.

## Confucianism

### Instructor's Introduction: Confucianism

In China, language has always played a crucial role in the construction of a claimed reality. According to Confucian doctrine<sup>1</sup>, a precise relationship exists between the idea of “correctness” (正 *zheng*), as expressed in the theory of “rectification of names” (正名 *zhengming*), and the art of governing the state (政 *zheng*).

Confucian philosophers argued that names and language embodied norms and had a performative function. By simply speaking or writing the words, an action, a title, a ritual, or an object became a reality. Thus language set the standard for how ruler and subject should act. In Confucius's words: “To govern means to rectify names. If you lead the people by being rectified yourself, who will not be rectified?” A ruler able to “rectify names,” could set a clear example for his subjects to follow. When the ruler's behavior was in line with the standards defined by his words, the ruler was thought to literally embody codes of proper social behavior. Conversely, when the behavior of either ruler or ruled was out of line with the idealized standards ascribed to their social position, the prerogatives that normally attended that position no longer held. A king whose rule strayed from the idealized standards was no longer a proper “king,” and could be legitimately overthrown and replaced. Confucian rhetoric propounded a vertically structured social and ethical hierarchy, and the “rectification of names” played a crucial role in mediating the movement between written ideal and social practice.

### Student Readings: Confucianism

The vast scholarship on the “rectification of names” (*zhengming*) tends to focus mainly on Confucius, and specifically on *The Analects* (*Lunyu*). For this unit, the instructor can assign the following passages from the *Analects*:

- Book III, Chapter I
- Book III, Chapter II
- Book VI, Chapter XXIV
- Book XII, Chapter XI, Lines 1-3
- Book XII, Chapter XVII
- Book XIII, Chapter III, Lines 1-7
- Book XVI, Chapter XIV
- Book XVIII, Chapters III, IV, and V, Lines 1-2

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<sup>1</sup> Confucius, known in Chinese as *Kongfuzi* lived between 551-479 BCE. During this time, China was divided into several small competitive states that employed itinerant intellectuals as political, economic, and military advisors. Various philosophical schools of thought developed as a result. Confucianism, with its emphasis on restoring order, peace, and prosperity, has been one of the most influential and enduring philosophies born during this chaotic time.

The English translation by James LEGGE is available online at:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext02/cnfcs10.txt>

and

<http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/gutbook/lookup?num=3330>

The original Chinese version of this material is available on line at:

<http://www.confucius.org/schinese/langz.htm>

If the instructor wants to limit this unit to a one-hour class, ask students to analyze only the three following excerpts (all taken from the Legge translation available online):

Excerpt 1:

1. Tsze-Lu [Zilu] said, “The ruler of Wei has been waiting for you, in order with you to administer the government. What will you consider the first thing to be done?”

2. The Master replied, “What is necessary is to rectify names [*zhengming*].”

5. If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs [of the State] cannot be carried on to success.

From *The Analects*, Book XIII, Chapter III, Lines 1, 2, 5

Excerpt 2:

1. The Duke Ching [Qing], of Ch'i [Qi], asked Confucius about government [政 *zheng*].

2. Confucius replied, “There is government, when the prince is prince, and the minister is minister; when the father is father, and the son is son [*jun jun, chen chen, fu fu, zi zi*. 君君 , 臣臣 , 父父 , 子子]”

From *The Analects*, Book XII, Chapter XI, Lines 1-2

Excerpt 3:

Chi K'ang [Ji Kangzi] asked Confucius about government [政 *zheng*].

Confucius replied, “To govern means to rectify [*zhengzhe, zhengye* 政者 , 正也]. If you lead on the people with correctness, who will dare not to be correct?”

From *The Analects*, Book XII, Chapter XVII

Depending on how much time is available, the instructor can also expand on these concepts, using DONG Zhongshu (179?-104? B.C.E.), particularly, his analysis of the relation between names, truth, and human nature found in:

DONG Zhongshu, “An In-Depth Examination of Names and Designations,” translation adapted by Sarah QUEEN from Wing-tsit CHAN, in Wm Theodore DE BARY, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, 302-305. See, in particular, the passage starting in the middle of the text’s first paragraph:

“If you desire to discover the true and the false, nothing compares to making use of names. Names reveal the true and the false as a measuring line reveals crooked and straight. Investigate names and actualities, observe whether they depart from or coincide with one another; then there will be no mutual deception concerning the disposition of what is true and what is false.”

#### Further Reading for the Instructor: Confucianism

- \*\*\* Most important
- \*\* Recommended
- \* Optional

\*\*\* For further reading from *The Analects*, the instructor can choose one of the following English translations:

For an in-depth analysis of *The Analects*, see James LEGGE, *The Chinese Classics*, first published in 1861, reprinted in 1892 and 1960 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960). More widely available is James LEGGE, *The Analects of Confucius, the Great Learning, Doctrine of the Mean* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1971).

Even though the phrasing of the translation is archaic, Legge’s work offers an extensive and excellent commentary, benefiting from an intense dialogue (in the footnotes) with many different Chinese commentators. Legge’s full translation has been accepted for a long time as the definitive, standard English version, but it is important to remember that Legge follows more the Neo-Confucianists’ commentaries of the Song dynasty in his interpretation.

As an alternative to Legge, the instructor can choose to use one of the following translations:

- WALEY, Arthur, trans. *The Analects by Confucius*. New York: Vintage, 1989, reissue edition.

Waley’s interpretation tends more toward the Han commentaries. His introduction and the footnotes help to contextualize the different passages, and understand the social and political background of *The Analects*. Waley also offers

brief essays defining critical terms in Chinese thought that the students will find in *The Analects*.

- LAU, D.C., trans. *Confucius: The Analects by Confucius*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1998.

Lau's translation falls somewhere in the middle, between the Han and the Song commentaries. It represents an attempt to consider *The Analects* as an organic whole and interpret the sayings as they stand, demonstrating their relevance both for Chinese philosophical thought and the present day world. In the introduction, the instructor can find useful information regarding the life and teachings of Confucius. The three appendices contain more information regarding various events in the life of Confucius, his disciples, and the composition of *The Analects*.

\*\*For an analysis of the Confucian idea of *zhengming* see also:

MAKEHAM, John. *Name and Actuality in Early Chinese Thought*. Albany: State University of New York, 1994, 39-47.

Makeham argues that Confucius considered names as "social and political catalyts." Names could be used to describe the reality but they also had, and more significantly so, a prescriptive function. By using the correct names, the ruler had the possibility to prescribe sociopolitical distinctions, and therefore to promote correct thought and behavior.

FINGARETTE, Herbert. *Confucius: the Secular as Sacred*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1972.

Fingarette sees Confucius as the guide to a moral philosophy that recognizes the performative function of language and its ambiguous interdependence on social conventions.

BOODBERG, Peter, "The Semasiology of Some Primary Confucian Concepts," *Philosophy East and West* 2 (1953): 317-32, reprinted in Alvin P. COHEN, ed. *Selected Works of Peter A. Boodberg*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979, 26-40.

Useful introduction to fundamental Confucian concepts, with an analysis of the rectification of names.

\*For more on *zhengming* see:

QUEEN, Sarah A., Patrick HANAN, and Denis TWITCHETT, eds. *From Chronicle to Canon: The Hermeneutics of the Spring and Autumn Annals according to Tung Chung-shi* (Cambridge Studies in Chinese History, Literature and Institutions). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, especially the passage 17.1 of "The Springs and Autumns of Lu (*Lüshi chunqiu*)."

DEFOORT, Carine, "Ruling the World with Words: The Idea of *zhengming* in the *Shizi*," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, 7.3. (2001), 217-42.

KNOBLOCK, John, trans. *Xunzi. A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, 3 vols. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988-1994, especially Xunzi, XXII, 1-2, 275-276.

\*To introduce a comparative perspective with Greek rhetorical practices, see:

LU, Xing. *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third century B.C.E.: A Comparison with Classical Greek Rhetoric*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998.

This book offers a complete cross-cultural analysis comparing classical Chinese and classical Greek rhetorical practices. The author corrects many of the common assumptions regarding ancient Chinese rhetoric, such as the false notion that Chinese rhetoric was inherently illogical and non-persuasive. For further research purposes, the book also presents a thorough analysis of many early Chinese rhetoricians and rhetorical approaches and compares them to Sophistry and Aristotelean theories of rhetoric. Particularly significant for this unit is the author's emphasis on the fact that the correspondence between names and things was also a concern of the Greek philosophers. LU Xing's conclusion is that both Chinese and Greek philosophers were aware of the impact and power of names but they used different approaches and reached different conclusions (pp. 127-153).

## Daoism

### Instructor's Introduction: Daoism

While Confucian philosophers believe in the human possibility to engineer reality, understand it, name it, and therefore control it, Daoists think that such endeavors are the major source of human frustration, since they create an increasing gap between humans and nature. According to Daoism, man's only concern should be to fit into the great pattern of nature, not man made society. The *Dao De Jing* (The Classic of the Way and Its Power/Virtue), attributed to Laozi, is the premier Daoist text and was composed between the late sixth and the late fourth centuries B.C.E. This text sets forth a series of maxims that outline a perspective on reality very different from that of the Confucian canon.

Confucius used the word 道 *Dao*, literally "Road" or "Way" to describe his ideal social system, but the Daoists gave it a metaphysical interpretation and defined *Dao* as the great pattern of nature. The "Way" is a discourse, and not a constant "name." The process of "naming" confines people's imagination and their possibility to understand the universe. Naming is like giving a label: after naming we tend to think of something's nature under that label, and this is contrary to the *Dao*. This is the reason why Laozi affirms: "The one who knows (or is centered) does not speak, the one who speaks does not know" (ch.56). Therefore *Dao* is founded on a nameless, formless "Non-being": "it cannot be heard," "cannot be seen," and "cannot be spoken."

The person who can transcend mundane human distinctions and become one with the *Dao* is “beyond all harm” and achieves “tranquility in the midst of strife.” Merging with the *Dao*, he derives from it his individual 德 *De* or mystical “power.” *De* later came to have the moralistic meaning of “virtue.” Another important concept that helps to understand the Daoist concept of the relation between naming and politics is 無為 *Wuwei* (usually translated as “inaction” or “non-action,” meaning, more accurately, something like “act naturally,” “effortless action”). This is the key to merging with the Way of nature: “doing nothing,” which does not mean complete inaction, but rather doing what is natural. “Do nothing and nothing will be not done” — that is everything will be achieved of its own accord. The favorite metaphor of Daoists is water, which though softest of all things, wears away hardest. If left to itself, the universe proceeds smoothly according to its own intrinsic harmonies. Man’s efforts to change or improve nature — also by naming and classifying reality — only destroy these harmonies and produce chaos.

Due to the difficulty posed by the seemingly cryptic style of the *Dao De Jing*, it is important to remind students that this is a work of universal scope that comments on politics, statecraft, cosmology, aesthetics, and ethics. In the Daoist worldview, each particular element has to be defined both in relation to our personal experience and to the cosmos. Thus names are relative. The instructor can help students understand this concept by using very simple and concrete examples that explain the absence of an absolute (and “true”) power of definition. For example, pointing at a table or a chair in the classroom, the instructor can show the fallacy of any attempt to classify and identify exactly a specific object. One has to take into consideration the variations due both to the different languages that one can use to define its name (e.g. *tavolo* in Italian, *zhuozi* in Chinese, etc.), and also to the different emphasis that one culture or group of people can put on its characteristics in terms of its color, dimensions, material, etc.

### Student Readings: Daoism

For this unit, the instructor can ask the students to analyze the opening of the *Dao De Jing*, which emphasizes the relativism in the definition of the relation between name and things:

“The Way (*Dao*) that can be spoken of is not the constant Way;  
The name that can be named is not the constant name.  
The nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth;  
The named is the mother of all things.”

“From the Daodejing,” translated by Irene BLOOM, in Wm Theodore DE BARY, et al, ed. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, pp. 79-80.

There are many other alternative translations of the *Dao De Jing*. Red Pine (Bill PORTER), for example offers the following translation of the same passage:

“The way that becomes a way  
is not the Immortal Way  
the name that becomes a name  
is not the Immortal Name  
the maiden of Heaven and Earth has no name  
the mother of all things has a name”

From PORTER, Bill, trans. *Lao-Tzu's Taoteching: with Selected Commentaries of the Past 2000 Years*. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1997, p. 2.

Other chapters of the *Dao De Jing* that might be used for this unit are: 21, 29, 37, 56, 57, 62, 76, 79 and 81.

#### Further Reading for the Instructor: Daoism

\*\*\*AMES, Roger T. and David L. HALL, trans. *Dao De Jing, A Philosophical Translation*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2003.

In their new translation, Roger T. AMES and David L. HALL approach the *Dao De Jing* as pragmatists, supplementing their elegant and “self-consciously interpretive” translation with a glossary and historical and philosophical introductions. Each of the eighty-one brief chapters is followed by clear, thought-provoking commentary exploring the layers of meaning in the text.

\*\*\*For a comparative analysis of the Confucian and Daoist position on “names and things” see:

HALL, David L. and Roger T. AMES. *Thinking Through Confucius*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987, 156-168.

HANSEN, Chad. *Language and Logic in Ancient China*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1983, 72-79.

HANSEN, Chad. *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, 60-71.

### **Buddhism**

#### Instructor's Introduction: Buddhism

For this unit, the instructor should focus on Buddhism's claim of “interdependent origination,” or a chain of causation in which nothing is absolute or unconditional,

everything is constituted by many different component parts, and therefore nothing is permanent. “Name-form” and “non-knowledge” are two of the twelve primary causes in the chain of existence.

Wisdom and compassion are two key concepts in Buddhism. The highest wisdom is recognizing that in reality, all phenomena are incomplete, impermanent, and do not constitute a fixed entity. True wisdom is reached when we experience and understand truth and reality with compassion.

The final aim of Buddhist practice is *nirvana* (extinction), which indicates the annihilation of craving (which is the original cause of suffering) and the liberation from subsequent rebirths. The concept of *nirvana* is another example of the Buddhist relation between name-reality and knowledge. When a person reaches *nirvana*, Buddhism denies that he exists; denies that he does not exist; denies that he both exists and does not exist, and denies that he neither exists nor does not exist. This principle is called the “fourfold negation” and helps to explain how Buddhist philosophy considers reality. Just as we cannot affirm the reality of *nirvana* we cannot deny it.

#### Student Readings: Buddhism

Asvaghosa, *Buddhacarita* (Life of the Buddha), in Henry Clarke WARREN, trans. *Buddhism in Translations* (Vol. 3 of the Harvard Oriental Series). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1896, especially pp. 38-82. Available online at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/bits/index.htm>

Another translation of the whole text of *Buddhacarita* is available on line at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/sbe49/sbe4902.htm>

In particular, the following passage positions “name and form” within a larger framework of the illusory nature of our consciousness of the objective reality of things, beings, selves:

“Then The Blessed One, during the first watch of the night, thought over Dependent Origination both forward and back:--

On ignorance depends karma;  
On karma depends consciousness;  
On consciousness depend name and form;  
On name and form depend the six organs of sense;  
On the six organs of sense depends contact;  
On contact depends sensation;  
On sensation depends desire;  
On desire depends attachment;  
On attachment depends existence;  
On existence depends birth;

On birth depend old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair.

Thus does this entire aggregation of misery arise. But on the complete fading out and cessation of ignorance ceases karma; on the cessation of karma ceases consciousness; on the cessation of consciousness cease name and form; on the cessation of name and form cease the six organs of sense; on the cessation of the six organs of sense ceases contact; on the cessation of contact ceases sensation; on the cessation of sensation ceases desire; on the cessation of desire ceases attachment; on the cessation of attachment ceases existence; on the cessation of existence ceases birth; on the cessation of birth cease old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair. Thus does this entire aggregation of misery cease.”

From Asvaghosa, *Buddhacarita* (Life of the Buddha), in Henry Clarke WARREN, trans. *Buddhism in Translations* (Vol. 3 of the Harvard Oriental Series). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1896, p. 84.

Alternatively (or additionally), the following passage from the *Larger Pragñâ-pâramitâ-hridaya-sûtra* also addresses the Buddhist conception of “name and form”:

“Form is emptiness, and emptiness indeed is form. Emptiness is not different from form, form is not different from emptiness. What is form that is emptiness, what is emptiness that is form. Thus perception, name, conception, and knowledge also are emptiness. Thus, O Sâriputra, all things have the character of emptiness, they have no beginning, no end, they are faultless and not faultless, they are not imperfect and not perfect. Therefore, O Sâriputra, here in this emptiness there is no form, no perception, no name, no concept, no knowledge. No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. No form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and objects.”

From *The Larger Pragñâ-pâramitâ-hridaya-sûtra*, in E.B. COWELL, F. Max MÜLLER, and J. TAKAKUSU, trans. *Buddhist Mahâyâna Texts* (Vol. 49 of the Sacred Books of the East Series). Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1894, pp. 147-8. Available online at:

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/sbe49/sbe4930.htm>

### **Student Activities**

Select one or more activity from those listed below. The following activities are offered as suggestions.

1. Divide the class into three groups and assign to each group one of the excerpts from *The Analects*. Ask each group to explain and comment on the assigned text.

If you have reframed the material relevant to Confucianism in a comparative light in class, do the same exercise assigning to the first group of students the Confucian

passages, to the second group the Daoist passage(s), and to the third group the Buddhist passage. Ask the first group to defend the Confucian conception of harmony between names and things, the second group to defend the Daoist conception of relativism, and the third group to defend the Buddhist position based on the assumption that language has a power that shapes and transforms human lives and the world.

2. Ask the students to discuss the relation between “name and thing” in the West, especially when one considers mainstream media and the framing of a specific kind of political discourse. For this exercise, the instructor might select some articles from different newspapers that address the same topic, for example environmental policy, or the impact of globalization.

3. Show René Magritte’s painting *The Treachery of Images*. Ask the students to analyze this painting for a few minutes, and think about the following questions:

- What are the issues that René Magritte is raising with the painting *The Treachery of Images*, and why do you think that he chose this title?
- How can you relate the issue/s that Magritte is addressing to your own experience? Give some examples.

Background for the instructor:

*The Treachery of Images* (1929) is dominated by the visual two-dimensional representation of a pipe, accompanied by a contradictory text below it: “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe.*” The statement “This is not a pipe” should indicate to the students the rejection of preconceived logical explanations: this is *not* a real pipe, in fact it is an image of a pipe, it is the drawing of something that in English is verbally expressed by the letters p-i-p-e. We have the tendency to confuse the image with the reality it represents (i.e. the sign with the referent) and to see the word as the unambiguous sign of a real thing.

4. After listening to the students’ reactions to the painting by René Magritte, ask them to analyze the following text by the philosopher and commentator on the *Dao De Jing* WANG Bi (A.D. 226-249):

“The Image is what brings out concept; language is what clarifies the Image. Nothing can equal Image in giving the fullness of concept; nothing can equal language in giving the fullness of Image. Language was born of the Image, thus we seek in language in order to observe the Image. Image was born of concept, thus we seek in Image in order to observe the concept. Concept is fully given in image; Image is overt in language.”

From “Elucidation of the Images,” *Classic of Changes*, in Stephen OWEN, ed. and trans. *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*. New York: W.W. Norton & C., 1996, pp. 63-64.

5. Show some selected clips from *Wag the Dog* (directed by Barry LEVINSON, 1997, 97 minutes) and invite the students to discuss the relation between the so-called “reality” and “fictionalized reality” in the political arena.

6. You may also use *The Matrix* (directed by Andy and Larry WACHOWSKI, 1999, 136 minutes). In this case, it would be better to use the DVD and in particular, show some of the following scenes: 4 (The Question), 5 (They're coming for you), 6 (Unable to speak), 12 (The real world), 23 (Glitch in the matrix), 27 (Matters of belief), 36 (He is the one).

Discussion Questions:

- Consider the interplay between “perception” and “reality.”
- Paraphrasing *The Matrix*, is “our day in, day out real”?
- Or, as *The Matrix* metaphorically suggests is the world a hoax, an elaborate deception spun by all-powerful machines of artificial intelligence that control us?