



Provisional Syllabus:
**HUMA 5301: The *Zhuangzi* and Its Multimedia Reception in
China and Beyond
Fall 2025**

Class: W 03:00 – 05:50 PM
Classroom: TBD
Office Hours: W 01:30 – 02:30 PM or by appointment

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The Daoist classic *Zhuangzi*, a collection of cryptic sayings and short anecdotes attributed to the mysterious Master Zhuang Zhou (trad. 369-286 BCE), has deeply influenced the cultural life in East Asia. Considered to be one of the most important texts throughout Chinese history, it triggered a wide range of discourses on the nature of the universe and good living while informing diverse practices such as calligraphy, landscape painting, poetry, drama, Daoist ritual, Zen Buddhism, sitting meditation, or politics, amongst others. In this course, we engage in both the Daoist classic's multifaceted content and its diverse reception over the last two millennia. In the first half, we read the *Zhuangzi* as a primary source focusing on its short philosophical vignettes on the possibility and limits of knowledge and language, its humorous anecdotes that celebrate deformed and useless bodies, its youthful invectives against Confucians, as well as its powerful calls to live a creative and independent life as a recluse. We do so in order to understand why the text might have exuded such an incessant relevance for a wide range of audiences in East Asia and beyond. In the second half, we will encounter concrete responses to the *Zhuangzi* in form of commentaries, paintings, plays, performances, and comic books that exemplify the scripture's far-ranging cultural impact. Hence, this course will provide you with both a focused, yet multifaceted avenue to the cultural history of East Asia and a personal experience of the life-changing appeal and topicality the text effected on a vast amount of people during its existence.

COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES:

On successful completion of the proposed course, students will be able to:	
1.	Design a smaller research project on their own
2.	Implement their classical Chinese reading skills in their research
3.	Analyze and navigate traditional commentaries and popular cultural products
4.	Summarize, analyze, and evaluate secondary literature on the <i>Zhuangzi</i> , reception history and reader response theory
5.	Develop research presentations for their peers
6.	Assess both textual and visual materials

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING:

- 1) You are expected to do the assigned readings for each class in advance of the relevant meeting. A quick glance at the class schedule will alert you to the place of each reading in the week's agenda. Since this is a course with a significant amount of discussion, the class will depend heavily on your preparation and participation. Thus, it is of major importance that you **attend** all class sessions and **contribute actively** to class discussions. Attendance and Participation are each worth 20 % of the final grade.
- 2) Beginning by Wednesday, September 17, you will need to post one short reading response per week on the course website that consists of a 50-word summary including a short observation and a question relevant to the reading and your interests. You will have to post your response prior to the relevant session (i.e. Wednesdays by noon). You may find a writing guideline for the short reading responses on the course website, as well. You will receive full credit for each reading response only if you display intellectual engagement and thoughtfulness in your responses. **Please bring your questions with you to every class.** I will count a response as a missed assignment if it is late, rashly written, or does not display any knowledge of the assigned readings. SKIMMING OF MATERIALS WON'T SUFFICE!!!!!! The reading responses comprise 10% of the final grade.
- 3) There will be two creative assignments throughout the semester. The first one will be due on before **October 22**, and the second one before **November 26**. I want you to generate two writings in genre: a compact expression and a short (visual) narrative. More information regarding these assignments may be found below. Each creative assignment comprises 5 % of the final grade.
- 4) You will be invited to carry out a small **research project** in form of a 20+ page paper on a topic of your choice relating to the *Zhuangzi* and its reception history that will be due **December 17**. This is an opportunity for you to pursue a topic emerging during the course of our inquiries and that more importantly interests YOU. The final paper comprises 40 % of the final grade.

WRITING GUIDELINES

There are two types of writing in this course, a long analytical essay (a genre in itself) and two shorter "in genre" essays. Below I describe some of the excellences associated with these types of writing.

An **analytical essay** requires an *argument* that *develops* into a *thesis* of demonstrated *significance*. "Argument" means that the thesis should not simply be described as an object in a still life, but should be presented as if it were a controversial point. Possible opposing points of view should be at least implicitly anticipated, and the writer should present reasonable arguments supporting her position. "Develops" refers to the way the thesis

should progress (similar to the way that a convincing argument builds in good oral communication.) “Thesis” differs from “topic.” An essay should never simply be a treatment of an assigned topic. Rather it should develop a thesis within the scope of the assigned topic. A writer is usually better off taking a little liberty with the topic than restricting herself to an unoriginal exposition. Finally, “significance” means that the writer should explain why the thesis might be interesting or important. This does not mean that you have to say “Asian religions are much cooler than Scientology,” but rather that you should look carefully at the issues at stake in your thesis and explain what the reader might take away from your essay.

Writing “in genre” requires that the writer first understands the conventions of the genre. This includes the formal characteristics (e.g., rhyme, structure, level of formality), the range of content, and the style of the available examples. Since the examples were written within a (religious) tradition, the writer has to choose whether to assume the voice of a person with that worldview (in which case adopting a pseudonym might be useful) or try to translate the genre into her own worldview. In either case, the object of these assignments is to encourage the writer to use imagination to express herself within the limitations dictated by the conventions of the particular genre. “Imagination” means creatively occupying the space of others, but also imagining having different values and writing to express them. The “limitations” of genre restrict the writer's options, but, as with every set of conventions, also make subtle variations more significant because they are implicitly in dialogue with other examples of the genre.

If at any time you don’t understand what is expected, PLEASE DON’T HESITATE TO ASK.

Evaluation criteria are as follows:

An “A” paper or exam is clearly written and well organized, and most importantly, contains a thoughtful, original and analytical central argument supported by illustrations and evidence drawn from course materials. It demonstrates that the student has grappled with the issues raised in the course, synthesized the readings and discussions, and formulated a compelling, independent argument. An “A” paper is polished and grammatically fluid; an “A” blue-book exam may be less polished due to time constraints but shows evidence of clear preparation and forethought.

A typical “B” paper is a solid work that demonstrates that the student has a good grasp of the course materials. This type of paper provides a mastery of ideas and concepts covered in the readings and discussions, but with little evidence of independent thought or synthesis. Other “B” papers do give evidence of independent thought but do not present an argument clearly or convincingly.

A typical “C” paper provides a less thorough or accurate summary of course materials, or a less thorough defense of an argument. A paper that receives a grade less than “C”

typically does not respond adequately to the assignment, is marred by frequent errors, unclear writing, poor organization, evidence of hasty composition, or some combinations of these problems.

The “hidden” grading scale utilized in this class is as follows:

Class attendance:

This is an in-person class. Therefore, when your health allows, you are expected to be present and engaged in class. At the same time, each community member has an individual responsibility to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Following public health guidance is part of living in an honorable community. The following recommendations should guide your decision about coming to class:

- Self-isolation is the recommended course of action for anyone experiencing flu-like symptoms, whether due to possible coronavirus or to other illnesses. Please stay at home if you feel sick, and contact the Health and Counseling Center (HCC) or your healthcare provider to discuss. This is especially important if you think you may have an infectious disease.
- You should not attend class if you have tested positive for COVID-19 in the last 10 days, or if you have received notification or advice from the college or a health professional (including HCC staff) to quarantine or self-isolate.
- The CDC suggests that people with the following symptoms may have COVID: fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, diarrhea. As always, please consult a medical professional (members of the HCC or otherwise) if you have any questions about your health or health safety.
- If you suspect or know you have been exposed to a case of COVID-19, contact the HCC right away to discuss your next steps. [For more information, visit the CDC's webpage on isolation and quarantine.](#)

If you need to miss a class, or series of classes, due to illness, self-isolation, and/or quarantine, you are responsible for emailing me to let me know as soon as possible. You are also responsible for coordinating with me to complete work that you might miss due to absences.

Students who have been approved for attendance-related accommodations (or other accommodations) through Disability & Accessibility Resources (DAR) should contact me individually to determine a plan for implementation. Students who do not have formal accommodations in place but are interested in seeking disability accommodations should contact (DAR) at dar@reed.edu.

Special needs

I will make every effort to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. Please notify me as soon as possible at the beginning of the semester of any special accommodations needed.

Religious observances

Please notify me in advance if you need to miss class or reschedule assignments due to participation in religious holidays.

Late work/academic misconduct

Late work will be accepted only by prior arrangement or documented emergency situations. If you have schedule conflicts, please contact me right away. I am willing to adjust deadlines if students inform me at least 48h in advance. Any student not making prior arrangement will automatically be given a failing grade on the missed assignment. Academic misconduct, including plagiarism and sexual harassment, will not be tolerated. If instances of academic misconduct are detected, action will be taken in accordance with university policies.

Expression and Debasement

Talking about religion is tricky at a university, but that should not mean that it must become a taboo subject. Reed College has very specific language about what kind of speech should be avoided in this context. Following this policy, students should avoid expressions that clearly derogate and debase a student or students in the class on the basis of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability. At the same time, it is important to note that students should also tolerate opinions about the historical or contemporary consequences of religious or political positions when expressed in a way that is not derogatory towards others. Students uncomfortable with either of these policies should not take this course.

GenAI Policy

Generally, it is allowed to use GenAI in this class as long as you mark and mention in your assignments whenever you have used and consulted GenAI during the research process. However, you may not use any text generated by GenAI. In other words, all your writings need to be produced solely by you.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Richard John Lynn tr. *Zhuangzi: A New Translation of the Sayings of Master Zhuang as Interpreted by Guo Xiang*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Introduction to the *Zhuangzi* and Reception History

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| W Sep 3 | Readings: Mair, <i>Wandering on the Way</i> , xi-xvi and xxxi-xiv, Mair, “The <i>Zhuangzi</i> and Its Impact,” and Meulenbeld, “Daoism,” 233-49 |
| W Sep 10 | Readings: Zürn, “Reception History and Early Chinese Classics” and Lynn, <i>Zhuangzi</i> , chapters 1-3 and 33

Optional Reading: Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 18-45 |
| W Sep 17 | Readings: Lynn, <i>Zhuangzi</i> , chapters 4-11 |

The *Huainanzi* as a Han Reception of the *Zhuangzi*

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| W Sep 24 | Readings: Major et al., <i>The Huainanzi</i> , chap. 1, 2, and 7, and Lynn, <i>Zhuangzi</i> , chapters 12-18 |
| W Oct 1 | NO CLASS – HOLIDAY |

The *Zhuangzi* and Han Rhapsodies

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| W Oct 8 | Readings: Jia Yi, “The Poetic Exposition on the Owl,” Zhang Heng, “The Bones of Chuang Tzu,” Ban Gu, “Rhapsody on Communicating with the Hidden,” and Lynn, <i>Zhuangzi</i> , chapters 19-24 |
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The *Huainanzi* as a Han Reception of the *Zhuangzi*

W Oct 15	Readings: Lynn, <i>Zhuangzi</i> , revisit selected stories and read chapters 25-27 and Chapman, “From Webbed Toes to Amputated Feet”
W Oct 22	Readings: Lynn, <i>Zhuangzi</i> , revisit selected stories and read chapters 28-32
W Oct 29	NO CLASS – HOLIDAY

The *Zhuangzi* and Poetry from the Wei-Jin to the Early Tang

W Nov 5	Readings: Selections of Poems, TBD
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The *Zhuangzi* and Tang Poetry

W Nov 12	Readings: Selections of Owen, <i>The Poetry of Du Fu</i> , Ashmore, <i>How to Read Chinese Poetry</i> , 195, and Zürn, “Receptions of the <i>Zhuangzi</i> in the Work of Du Fu”
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The *Zhuangzi* and Later Poetry

W Nov 19	Readings: TBD, Research Projects of the Students I
W Nov 26	Readings: TBD, Research Projects of the Students II

Primary Sources in Chinese:

- Fang Yong 方勇 ed. *Zhuangzi zuanyao* 莊子纂要. Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2012.
- Fang Yong 方勇 ed. *Zhuangzi xueshi* 莊子學史. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2008.
- Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 ed. *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋. In *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成, vol. 3. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1954.
- Xiong Tieji 熊鐵基 et al. ed. *Zhongguo Zhuangxue shi* 中國莊學史. Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 2003.
- Yan Lingfeng 嚴靈峯 ed. *Wuqiu beizhai Zhuangzi jicheng xubian* 無求齋莊子集成續編. 42 vols. Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1974.
- Yan Lingfeng 嚴靈峯 ed. *Wuqiu beizhai Zhuangzi jicheng chubian* 無求齋莊子集成初編. 30 vols. Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1972.

Secondary Sources for the Course:

- Allan, Sarah. *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.
- Chai, David. "On Pillowing One's Skull: Zhuangzi and Heidegger on Death," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 11.3 (2016): 483-500.
- Chong, Kim-chong. *Zhuangzi's Critique of the Confucians: Blinded by the Human*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016.
- Chong, Kim-chong. "The Concept of Zhen 真 in the Zhuangzi," *Philosophy East and West* 61.2 (2011): 324-46.
- Chong, Kim-chong. "Zhuangzi and the Nature of Metaphor," *Philosophy East and West* 56.3 (2006): 370-391.
- Coutinho, Steve. *Zhuangzi and Early Chinese Philosophy: Vagueness, Transformation and Paradox*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004.
- Coyle, Daniel. "On the Zhenren," in *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*. Edited by Roger Ames. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998, pp. 197-210.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mark and Michael Nylan. "Constructing Lineages and Inventing Traditions through Exemplary Figures in Early China," *T'oung pao* 89 (2003): 1-41.
- de Reu, Wim. "How to Throw a Pot: The Centrality of the Potter's Wheel in the Zhuangzi," *Asian Philosophy* 20.1 (2010): 43-66.
- Fleming, William. "The Tao of Kibiyōshi: Santō Kyōden's Zhuang-zi: The Licensed Edition," *International Journal of Comic Art* 9.1 (2007): 79-118.

- Galvany, Albert. "Discussing Usefulness: Trees as Metaphor in the *Zhuangzi*," *Monumenta Serica: Journal of Oriental Studies* 57 (2009): 71-97.
- Galvany, Albert. "Distorting the Role of Seriousness: Laughter, Death, and Friendship in the *Zhuangzi*," *Dao* 8 (2008): 49-59.
- Girardot, Norman. *Myth and Meaning in early Daoism: The Theme of Chaos (Hun-Tun)*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.
- Graham, A. C. *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*. La Salle: Open Court, 1989.
- Graham, A. C. *Chuang-Tzû: The Seven Inner Chapters and Other Writings from the Book Chuang-tzû*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981.
- Idema, Wilt. *The Resurrected Skeleton: From Zhuangzi to Lu Xun*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Jauss, Hans Robert. "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Translated by Timothi Bahti. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp. 18-45.
- Klein, Esther. "Were there 'Inner Chapters' in the Warring States? A New Examination of Evidence about the *Zhuangzi*," *T'oung Pao* 96 (2011): 299-369.
- Kohn, Livia. *Zhuangzi: Text and Context*. St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2014.
- Lau, D. C., trans. *Lao Tzu*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1963.
- Liu An, *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China*. Translated and edited by John S. Major, Sarah A. Queen, Andrew Seth Meyer, and Harold D. Roth. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Le Blanc, Charles. *Huai-Nan Tzu: Philosophical Synthesis in Early Han Thought*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1985.
- Lynn, Richard John tr. *Zhuangzi: A New Translation of the Sayings of Master Zhuang as Interpreted by Guo Xiang*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022.
- Mair, Victor H. tr. *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998.
- Meulenbeld, Mark. "Daoism," in *Introduction to World Religions: Communities and Cultures*. Edited by Jacob Neusner. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010, pp. 233-249.
- Meulenbeld, Mark. "From 'Withered Wood' to 'Dead Ashes: Burning Bodies, Metamorphosis, and the Ritual Production of Power,'" *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 19 (2010): 217-266.
- Moeller, Hans-Georg. "Paradoxes of Health and Power in the *Zhuangzi*," in *New Visions of the Zhuangzi*. Edited by Livia Kohn. St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2015, pp. 70-81.

- Moeller, Hans-Georg. *Daoism Explained: From the Dream of the Butterfly to the Fishnet Allegory*. La Salle: Open Court, 2004.
- Nivison, David. "The Classical Philosophical Writings," In *Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* Edited by Michael Loewe and Edward Shaughnessy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 745-759.
- Porat, Roy. "Layers of Ineffability in the *Zhuangzi*: Why Language Should Not Be Trusted," in *New Visions of the Zhuangzi*. Edited by Livia Kohn. St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2015, pp. 119-133.
- Saso, Michael. "The *Chuang-tzu nei-p'ian*: A Taoist Meditation," in *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*. Edited by Victor Mair. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1983, pp. 140-57.
- Slingerland, Edward G. trans. *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2003.
- Smith, Kidder "Sima Tan and the Invention of Daoism, 'Legalism,' 'et cetera,'" *Journal of Asian Studies* 62.1 (2003): 129-56.
- Stalnaker, Aaron. "Mastery, Authority, and Hierarchy in the "Inner Chapters" of the *Zhuangzi*," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 95.3 (2012): 255-83.
- Tsai Chih Chung. *Zhuangzi Speaks: The Music of Nature*. Translated by Brian Bruya. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Tzara, Tristan. "Dada Manifesto 1918," in *Dadas on Art: Tzara, Arp, Duchamp and Others*. Edited by Lucy R. Lippard. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2007, pp. 13-20.
- Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, *Zhongguo yishu jingshen* 中國藝術精神. Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1974.
- Yang, Rur-bin. "From 'Merging the Body with the Mind' to 'Wandering in Unitary Qi 氣,'" in *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*. Edited by Scott Cook. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003, pp. 88-127.
- Zürn, Tobias Benedikt. "Overgrown Courtyards and Tilled Fields: Image-Based Debates on Governance and Body Politics in the *Mengzi*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Huainanzi*," *Early China* 41 (2018): 297-332.
- Zürn, Tobias Benedikt, "Reception History and Early Chinese Classics," *Religions* 13.12 (2022): <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121224>
- Zufferey, Nicolas. "On the *Ru* and Confucius," in *The Analects*, Simon Leys trans. and Michael Nylan ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2014, 129-140.