The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Fall 2026

Classical Chinese Philosophy

HUMA 4801

3 Credits

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Office Hours: Mondays 14:00 - 15:00 (Room 2349 – Main Academic Building)

Course Description

This course introduces the major thinkers, texts, and debates of early Chinese philosophy, from the *Analects* and *Mozi* to *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, *Xunzi*, and *Han Feizi*. We examine how these texts were formed, how their ideas developed, and how they have been interpreted, adapted, used and sometimes misused in modern contexts. Through close reading and contextual analysis, students learn to identify philosophical arguments, evaluate their implications, and avoid common anachronisms—especially those found in social media, popular culture, wellness discourse, and AI-generated content.

Weekly lectures provide historical and conceptual grounding, while Monday seminars centre on student-led presentations and collaborative discussion. Students apply classical ideas to contemporary issues, reflect on their relevance and limits, and develop skills in interpretation, communication, and critical engagement. The course offers a rigorous and accessible introduction to one of the world's most influential philosophical traditions and its complex modern afterlives.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

ILO1 Identify and describe major thinkers, texts, and conceptual traditions of early Chinese philosophy, including their historical contexts and development. (Knowledge of Traditions and Texts)

ILO2 Interpret passages from early Chinese philosophical texts with attention to textual formation, historical context, and the avoidance of anachronistic readings. (Textual Interpretation and Contextual Awareness)

ILO3 Analyse and evaluate philosophical arguments found in early Chinese texts, demonstrating clarity, coherence, and conceptual precision. (Philosophical Analysis and Argumentation)

ILO4 Apply classical ideas to contemporary issues and contexts, and critically assess how early Chinese concepts are adapted, simplified, or transformed in modern cultural settings. (Contemporary Application and Critical Reflection)

ILO5 Present philosophical ideas clearly and effectively, facilitate informed discussion, and engage constructively with peers in seminar dialogue. (Communication and Discussion Skills)

ILO6 Develop individual reflections on classical texts that integrate personal insight, textual evidence, and critical evaluation of the idea's relevance and limitations. (Independent Reflection and Evidence-Based Reasoning)

Assessment and Grading

This course will be assessed using criterion-referencing and grades will not be assigned using a curve. Detailed rubrics for each assignment are provided below, outlining the criteria used for evaluation.

Assessments:

Assessment Task	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)	Due date
Weekly Mini-Quizzes (x10)	25%	23/09/2026 – 25/11/2026*
Presentations	30%	28/09/2026 – 30/12/2026*
Reflective Essay	30%	Two weeks after the respective student's presentation*
Seminar Participation	15%	28/09/2026 – 30/12/2026*

* Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be released within two weeks of the due date.

Assessment Details

- **Weekly Mini-Quizzes (25%)**
  A short quiz will be administered at the beginning of each lecture (i.e., **each Wednesday**). These quizzes assess students' ongoing engagement with the course and ensure steady preparation for seminars. Each quiz will consist of multiple-choice questions and short identifications based on the previous week's lecture, assigned readings, and key passages discussed in the seminar.
  Quizzes are conducted through Canvas and will take approximately 10–15 minutes. The average score across all quizzes will constitute the final quiz grade. Unexcused absences will receive a score of zero.

- **Presentation (30%) — 15 minutes**
  Depending on enrollment, presentations will be given either individually or in small groups. Each presentation addresses the thinker or text covered in the previous Wednesday lecture and takes place during Monday seminars.
  The presentation is designed to demonstrate your ability to interpret classical philosophical material, communicate ideas clearly, apply concepts to contemporary contexts, and foster informed, focused, and collaborative discussion. It is both an analytical and a dialogical task. Each presentation must include:
  1. **Contextualization**: Present one passage related to your assigned theme within the context of the overall text.
  2. **Interpretation**: Explain the passage and what it means to you in your own words.
  3. **Application**: Apply the idea to a contemporary issue, context, or example.
  4. **Discussion Facilitation**: Prepare two discussion questions and guide 5 minutes of seminar discussion.
  5. **References** to <u>at least</u> one work of modern scholarship that supports your arguments.

  Students are expected to keep strictly within the allotted presentation time (**<u>max. 15 minutes, including Q&A of 5 minutes!</u>**). Staying within the time limit is part of the assessment, as it demonstrates:
  - fairness to other groups
  - the ability to structure arguments clearly
  - effective prioritization of key points
  - professional communication skills

- **Reflective Essay (30%) — 800-1000 words**
  The reflective essay is an individual assignment based on the same thinker or text that you have presented on. It is not a summary of the presentation; it is your personal reflection on the philosophical idea and its relevance today.
  Within the essay, students will
  1. Discuss one interesting/puzzling/challenging aspect of the chosen text
  2. Apply it to a contemporary situation
  3. Explain what insights or perspectives it offers
  4. Incorporate the presentation feedback provided by their peers
  5. Support with textual evidence (**refer to at least two works of modern scholarship**).

  The essay must be submitted **within 2 weeks after the date of the respective presentation!**
  The word limit of **max. 1000 includes foot- or endnotes but excludes the bibliography**.
  Deviations of more than 10% will result in the reduction of a full grade; **less than 700 and more than 1200 words will not be accepted**.
  You are free to choose your own spelling (either UK or US) and citation style (e.g., Chicago, APA, AAA, etc.; either in-text, footnote, or endnote). However, be sure to use only one spelling and one citation style consistently throughout the entire essay!

- **Seminar Participation (15%)**
  Seminar participation evaluates your engagement with Monday discussions. It reflects your preparation, the quality of your contributions, and your collaboration with peers.
  Participation is assessed based on active, thoughtful engagement with the discussion initiated by presentation groups. This includes responding to presenters' questions, offering relevant observations, asking clarifying or challenging questions, and contributing constructively to the collective analysis of the week's text.

Mapping of Course ILOs to Assessment Tasks

Assessed Task	Mapped ILOs	Explanation
Weekly Mini-Quizzes	ILO1, ILO2	Quizzes assess recognition of major thinkers, concepts, and traditions (ILO1), and accurate interpretation of passages with attention to context and textual formation (ILO2).
Presentation	ILO2, ILO3, ILO4, ILO5, ILO6	Presentations require contextualized interpretation of passages (ILO2), clear philosophical analysis and argumentation (ILO3), contemporary application of classical ideas (ILO4), and effective communication and discussion facilitation (ILO5).
Reflective Essay	ILO2, ILO3, ILO4, ILO6	Essays demonstrate contextual interpretation (ILO2), analytical reasoning (ILO3), contemporary application and critical evaluation (ILO4), and independent reflection supported by textual evidence (ILO6).
Seminar Participation	ILO2, ILO3, ILO4, ILO5	Participation demonstrates contextual understanding (ILO2), analytical engagement with arguments (ILO3), responsiveness to contemporary applications raised in seminar (ILO4), and constructive, thoughtful dialogue (ILO5).

Grading Rubrics

Final Grade Descriptors:

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A	Excellent Performance	Work in this range demonstrates consistently outstanding achievement across all components of the course. Students show a deep and accurate understanding of early Chinese philosophical texts, interpret passages with nuance and contextual awareness, and engage critically with ideas both in historical and contemporary settings. Their communication (whether in presentations, essays, or seminar discussions) is clear, well-structured, and intellectually mature. They contribute meaningfully to seminar dialogue and demonstrate independence of thought, strong analytical skills, and sustained engagement throughout the semester.
B	Good Performance	Work in this range demonstrates solid and reliable achievement. Students show a clear understanding of major thinkers and concepts, though interpretation may occasionally lack depth or precision. Their analyses are generally coherent and well supported, and they participate constructively in seminar discussions. Presentations and written work are competent and well organized, though they may not consistently reach the level of insight or sophistication characteristic of A-range work. Overall, students in this range demonstrate good engagement and understanding, with some areas of unevenness.
C	Satisfactory Performance	Work in this range demonstrates adequate but limited achievement. Students show a basic grasp of the material but may struggle with contextual interpretation, analytical clarity, or sustained engagement. Presentations and essays may rely too heavily on description or paraphrase, with contemporary applications that are underdeveloped or loosely connected. Seminar participation is present but inconsistent. While students meet the minimum requirements of the course, their work lacks the depth, precision, or coherence expected at higher levels.
D	Marginal Pass	Work in this range demonstrates minimal achievement and significant gaps in understanding. Students show limited familiarity with key texts and concepts, and their interpretations often lack accuracy or clarity. Analytical work is superficial or unfocused, and seminar participation is infrequent or unprepared. Presentations and essays may be poorly structured, insufficiently supported, or disconnected from the assigned material. Overall performance indicates difficulty meeting course expectations.
F	Fail	Work in this range demonstrates failure to meet the basic requirements of the course. Students show little or no understanding of the material, and their written or oral work is incomplete, inaccurate, or missing. There is minimal engagement with lectures, readings, or seminar discussions. Frequent absences, missed assessments, or failure to submit required work result in a failing grade.

Presentation Rubric

Grade	Contextualization & Interpretation	Philosophical Analysis	Contemporary Application	Discussion Facilitation	Communication & Timing
Weighting	**20%**	**20%**	**20%**	**20%**	**20%**
A	Contextualizes the selected passage within the overall text with accuracy, nuance, and strong awareness of historical and textual context (ILO2).	Explains the passage in the group's own words and analyzes its philosophical significance with clarity, coherence, and conceptual precision (ILO3).	Applies the idea to a specific contemporary issue or example with thoughtful reasoning and critical awareness of adaptation or simplification (ILO4).	Prepares focused, generative questions and guides inclusive, informed, and collaborative discussion for the required period (ILO5).	Delivery is clear, well organized, engaging, and stays within the time limit while allowing meaningful Q&A (ILO5).
B	Provides clear and mostly accurate contextualization, though some historical or textual nuance may be underdeveloped.	Explains the passage clearly and offers coherent analysis, though conceptual precision may be uneven.	Presents a relevant application with some critical awareness of how the classical idea changes in modern use.	Uses suitable questions and facilitates discussion competently, though interaction may be somewhat limited.	Delivery is clear and organized, with minor issues in pacing, balance, or time management.
C	Provides generally accurate but basic context, with limited attention to the passage's place in the larger text.	Explains the passage adequately but relies heavily on description or paraphrase, with limited analysis.	Application is relevant but generic, with limited critical reflection on context or transformation.	Questions are serviceable and facilitation occurs, but discussion is brief, uneven, or weakly connected to the passage.	Delivery is understandable but uneven in structure, pacing, or coordination.
D	Contextualization is unclear, incomplete, or partly inaccurate.	Analysis is superficial, confused, or poorly connected to the passage.	Application is vague, weakly reasoned, or loosely related to the classical idea.	Questions are weak or facilitation is ineffective, with little sustained seminar engagement.	Delivery lacks clarity, organization, or control of time.
F	Fails to contextualize the passage or substantially misrepresents the text.	Provides no meaningful philosophical analysis or gives an inaccurate account.	No relevant contemporary application, or application is unrelated or incorrect.	No usable discussion questions or no meaningful facilitation.	Presentation is incoherent, incomplete, or does not meet task requirements.

Reflective Essay Rubric

Grade	Interpretation & Context	Engagement with Text	Contemporary Application	Reflection, Insight & Evaluation	Writing Quality
Weighting	**20%**	**20%**	**20%**	**25%**	**15%**
A	Accurately interprets the selected idea or passage with nuanced attention to textual formation, historical context, and the risks of anachronistic reading (ILO2).	Uses well-chosen textual evidence precisely and explains why the passage is interesting, puzzling, or challenging (ILO2, ILO3).	Applies the idea to a specific contemporary situation with careful reasoning and critical awareness of simplification, appropriation, or transformation (ILO4).	Develops original, evidence-based reflection that evaluates both the relevance and limits of the classical idea today (ILO6).	Clear, polished, well-structured prose with a coherent line of thought and effective use of the 600–800 word limit (ILO6).
B	Interprets the selected material clearly and mostly accurately, with reasonable contextual awareness but some missed nuance.	Uses relevant textual evidence and explains the chosen aspect adequately, though analysis may be less precise or sustained.	Provides a clear and relevant contemporary application with some critical awareness of adaptation or simplification.	Offers thoughtful reflection supported by evidence, though evaluation of relevance and limits may be uneven.	Clear and organized writing with minor issues in flow, precision, or concision.
C	Gives a generally accurate but basic interpretation with limited contextual depth or some anachronistic assumptions.	Includes textual evidence, but explanation is superficial, loosely connected, or unevenly developed.	Application is relevant but generic, with limited critical assessment of how the classical idea changes in modern use.	Reflection is present but mostly descriptive, with limited support or only partial evaluation of relevance and limitations.	Generally understandable writing, but structure, focus, or word economy is uneven.
D	Interpretation is unclear, partial, or partly inaccurate, with minimal attention to context.	Textual evidence is weak, poorly explained, or not clearly related to the chosen issue.	Application is vague, poorly reasoned, or only loosely connected to the classical idea.	Reflection is minimal, unsupported, or lacks meaningful evaluation of relevance and limits.	Writing lacks clarity, coherence, or effective organization.
F	Misinterprets the material or shows little understanding of the selected idea or passage.	Provides no meaningful textual evidence or uses evidence inaccurately.	No relevant contemporary application, or application is inaccurate or unrelated.	No substantive reflection or evidence-based evaluation.	Disorganized, unclear, incomplete, or substantially outside requirements.

Seminar Participation Rubric

Grade	Preparation & Textual Understanding	Contribution Quality	Engagement with Presenters & Peers	Constructive Dialogue
Weighting	**30%**	**35%**	**20%**	**15%**
A	Shows strong preparation, accurate understanding of readings, and awareness of textual and historical context (ILO1, ILO2).	Offers thoughtful, specific contributions that clarify concepts, analyze arguments, and connect ideas to contemporary applications when appropriate (ILO3, ILO4).	Responds meaningfully to presenters' questions and peers' comments; asks focused clarifying or challenging questions (ILO5).	Listens actively, builds on others' ideas, and helps sustain respectful, informed seminar dialogue (ILO5).
B	Shows solid preparation and generally accurate understanding of readings and lecture themes.	Makes relevant and constructive contributions, though analysis or application may be less developed.	Participates consistently and responds to presenters or peers in ways that support discussion.	Generally listens and collaborates respectfully, with some effort to build on others' ideas.
C	Shows adequate familiarity with readings but has gaps in textual or contextual understanding.	Contributions are basic, descriptive, or uneven, with limited analytical development.	Participates occasionally but responds only briefly or weakly to presenters and peers.	Listens but rarely builds on others' points or helps sustain discussion.
D	Shows minimal preparation or limited familiarity with readings.	Contributions are vague, off-topic, infrequent, or unsupported.	Rarely responds to presenters or peers in a meaningful way.	Limited constructive engagement with the seminar dialogue.
F	Shows no evidence of preparation or engagement with readings.	Makes no meaningful contributions to seminar discussion.	Absent, silent, or disengaged from presenters' and peers' contributions.	Does not participate constructively in seminar dialogue.

Course AI Policy

Students may consult generative AI tools for brainstorming, clarification, or exploring background information, but **AI may not generate any part of the work submitted for assessment**. All quizzes, presentations, essays, and seminar contributions must be written and prepared entirely in the student's own words and reflect their own interpretive and analytical effort.

Any use of AI for preliminary thinking must be **acknowledged briefly** at the end of the assignment. Using AI to produce ideas, arguments, or prose that is then submitted as one's own work constitutes a breach of academic integrity.

Late Submission Policy

Unless an extension has been approved in advance, late submissions for written assignments will incur a penalty of one full letter grade (e.g., A → B, B → C) for each calendar day past the deadline. Submissions more than three calendar days late will receive a grade of F. Extensions may be granted only for documented medical, family, or emergency circumstances. Requests should be submitted before the deadline whenever possible. Extensions are not granted for workload conflicts, travel, or foreseeable technical issues.

Group presentations cannot be rescheduled except in cases of documented emergency. Students who miss their scheduled presentation without approved justification will receive an F for the individual component.

Communication and Feedback

Students may contact the instructor via email for questions related to course content, assignments, or seminar preparation. Email responses are typically provided within 2 working days. For more complex questions, students may be asked to attend office hours for discussion.

Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be communicated via Canvas within two weeks (10 working days) of submission. Feedback on assignments will highlight strengths and areas for improvement, with the aim of supporting students' continued development in the course. Students who have further questions about the feedback, including marks, should consult the instructor within five working days after the feedback is received.

Required Texts and Materials

There is no required textbook for this course. All assigned passages from early Chinese philosophical texts will be provided through Canvas, along with selected excerpts from secondary scholarship for background reading.

The following **recommended readers** offer helpful introductions and reliable contextual framing. They are *not required* for successful completion of the course, but students may find them useful for presentations, essays, and deeper exploration:

- **Ivanhoe & Van Norden (eds.),** ***Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*** — A clear, accessible anthology with reliable translations and contextual introductions.
- **Wing-Tsit Chan,** ***A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*** — comprehensive coverage beyond Ivanhoe & Van Norden; outdated but still useful if approached with caution.

A longer optional reading list will be available on Canvas for students who wish to explore further.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to Academic Integrity | HKUST – Academic Registry for the University's definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.

Additional Resources

Students may find the following online resources helpful for further study and for deepening their understanding of early Chinese philosophy. These resources are optional and intended to support independent exploration.

- **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP)** High-quality, peer-reviewed articles on major thinkers and traditions. https://plato.stanford.edu/
- **Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP)** Accessible introductions to key concepts, schools, and figures. https://iep.utm.edu/
- **Chinese Text Project (ctext)** Open-access digital editions of classical Chinese texts with translations and tools for textual comparison. https://ctext.org/ (perfect to look for passages and rough translations, but do not cite from the website in your essays; always refer to a proper publication!)

These resources are not required for the course but may be useful for students wishing to explore topics in greater depth or prepare for essays and presentations.

Course Schedule

Wed 02/09/2026 – Mon 21/09/2026 **Introductory Lecture Series** (no seminars/presentations)

02/09: Course Introduction, Expectations, and the Big Questions of the Course

07/09: Myth, Ritual, and the Social Foundations of Early Chinese Thought

09/09: Warring States History: Crisis, Debate, and the Rise of "Philosophy"

14/09: Text Formation and the Invention of Traditions: From Ancient Editors to Modern Media

16/09: How One Passage Was Read Across History: A Full Case Study in Interpretation

21/09: Translation as Interpretation: How Culture and Terminology Shape Meaning

Wed 23/09/2026 – Mon 23/11/2026 **Text Specific Lectures (Wednesdays) & Seminars (Mondays)**

Each Wednesday introduces one classical text or thinker. Each following Monday seminar focuses on close reading and student presentations based on short classical passages:

23/09 & 28/09: *Analects*

30/09 & 05/10: *Mozi*

07/10 & 12/10: *Laozi*

14/10 & 19/10: [19/10 is a public holiday, the preceding lecture will be replaced an activity (tbd)]

21/10 & 26/10: *Mengzi*

28/10 & 02/11: *Zhuangzi*

04/11 & 09/11: *Xunzi*

11/11 & 16/11: *Han Feizi*

18/11 & 23/11: "Syncretist texts" (*Guanzi*, *Lüshi Chunqiu*, *Huainanzi*)

Wed 25/11/2026 – Mon 30/11/2026

TBD (potential overflow presentations, depending on student enrolment)