Confucianism
· Philosophy of Change ·

(Phil 408W-01 / 608-01)

In the Analects, Confucius says that he will not give the same advice to everyone. It must always be adapted to the current state of affairs. What if we could sketch out all possible states of affairs? Then we could know what advice to give in every case, and also what the basic nature of change is. The Confucian commentaries on the Book of Changes aim to impart such knowledge. Loved by Leibniz and disdained by Hegel, the Book itself is not a text at all, but a set of sixty-four geometrical figures—bare representations of possibility—that acquire meaning only when explained in commentaries. Generally neglected by Western philosophers, these commentaries build Confucianism into a thoroughgoing philosophy of change without betraying its traditional concern for simplicity of expression.

This course will not presuppose any background in Chinese philosophy. We will begin each class with an hour or two spent on a close reading of the commentary on the Book of Changes composed by the Song-dynasty philosopher Cheng Yi. This commentary will give us ample opportunity to discuss the major concepts at play in traditional Chinese philosophy—such as yin, yang, qi, principle (li 理), and nature (xing 性)—as we study its method for evaluating change. After a break, we will hear and discuss student presentations on the contemporary philosophical study of the Book of Changes, both in Western philosophers like François Jullien and Chinese philosophers like Chung-Ying Cheng.

Spring, 2016 · Monday, 12:00-2:40
Michael Harrington