Asian Political Thought

MA course, 2 credits

Winter Semester
AY 2016/2017

Schedule: Thursdays 9-10.40
Office hours: Thursdays 11.00-13.00 or by appointment.

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Prerequisites: none.

Course description and objectives:

This course is a short introduction into the vast body of political thought originating in East, South and Southeast Asia. Defined in this way, Asian political thought has tapped the rich traditions associated with Confucian, Taoist, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim worldviews. However, it has also been an arena for debating and interpreting ideologies originating outside the region, such as nationalism, Marxism or liberalism. At the same time, Asian political thought itself has provided a rich source of inspiration to authors, thinkers and practitioners worldwide, especially those of the Age of Enlightenment and postmodernism.

This course is not confined to the ancient political theories before the times of intense exchanges. Neither is it confined to the study of ideas isolated from their interaction with political realities. In fact, the study of Asian political thought illuminates regional political realities. The backdrop of ideas popular at the time helps to more adequately understand the processes of state formation, regional power dynamics, nationalism, Communism and postcolonialism.

The course depicts Asian political thought in conversation with political theories popular in the West and tackling the universally relevant questions of self, society, power, politics, nation-state and modernity. The course is organised around these questions, addressed through several dimensions wherever possible: arguments and commentary, original sources to contemporary interpretations as well as theory and practice.

The course consists of two parts. The first part is focused on the pre-colonial political thought. The introductory lecture deliberates the suitable lens for studying Asian political thought, the premises under which it can be considered ‘philosophy’ and its relationship to the European-original political thought. The course then proceeds with the building block of political theories and the source of difference from Western political thinking – the perception of self. Going up the ladder of abstraction,
two further sessions debate the normative order of relationships among the selves, juxtaposing the view that hierarchy is a primordial characteristic of the human society and the position that hierarchy is contingent upon specific relationships rather than on inherent differences of individuals. The final two sessions tackle the concepts of power and rule.

The second part moves into the modern era and the terrain of international politics marked with Eurocentrism. It starts with a lecture on colonialism that forced the Asian and European traditions of conceptualising politics into an intense and continuing encounter. Later sections consider nation-building, Asian Communisms as one possible route in a postcolonial setting and Japan’s attempt at offering an alternative to Western modernity. Another session considers the contribution of postcolonialism literature by Asian authors in tackling the global hierarchies of race and gender. The concluding session returns to the question of how to engage in comparative political thought across traditions without reifying their boundaries.

**Learning outcomes:**

*Generic skills*: successful completion of the course should enhance the students’

- independent critical thinking ability;
- analytical thinking – the ability to discern, summarise, compare and debate complex theoretical arguments;
- academic writing skills.

*Course-specific learning outcomes*: by the end of the course, students are expected to have grasped:

- the richness and complexity of Asian political thought;
- its ties to religious traditions influential in Asia;
- its influence on major historical political developments in Asia;
- the reasons why Asian societies have been portrayed as hierarchic, collectivist and under despotic rule;
- the reasons why such portrayals have missed important aspects of political life;
- the main points of exchanges and debate with European-origin political ideas;
- the contemporary relevance of Asian-origin political ideas.

*Course-specific skills*: by the end of the course, students are expected to have gained:

- the ability to discuss and use the concepts learned;
- the ability to compare and engage in a dialogue within and between the bodies of thought analysed.

**Course format:**

The course combines lecturing and class discussions based on the prescribed readings. The sessions take place once a week – Thursdays 9-10.40. Apart from introductions and clarifications, the sessions are organised in a seminar form, with participants discussing the questions raised on the basis of the texts. Group work tasks and occasional succinct presentations can be assigned to facilitate discussions.
Students are encouraged to come for consultations during office hours or set up an appointment with the lecturer at another mutually suitable time to discuss any concerns regarding the course, especially (but not limited to) written and oral assignments.

Assessment:
Course assessment is based on class participation (40% of the overall mark) and written assignments (60% of the overall mark). Class participation entails a demonstrated grasp of the reading, engagement in seminar discussions and group work. On 2-3 occasions, general class discussions can be organised as role plays where students or groups of students will be responsible for arguing in the name of a prescribed strand of thought or author in a particular situation. Attendance is marked. Absences should be explained as unexcused absences affect the course mark. Please refer to the MA handbook for details.

The written assessment of the course is based on two 1,500 word position papers. They must abide with the CEU policy on plagiarism. The papers should offer a succinct exploration of a specific, clearly delineated issue and be by no means descriptive. A paper should bring together or work out the stances of different schools of political thought (that may include non-Asian bodies of ideas put in conversation with the Asian ones), authors or texts regarding some particular aspect. There are thus two possible approaches: either selecting a specific issue and considering how the stances from different theories would interpret and explain that issue or selecting a number of texts which analyse a particular issue and contrasting those perspectives. The papers will need to briefly identify the issue in the introduction, summarise the approaches and then consider their respective strengths and weaknesses, or their ability to explain certain elements of the issue. The discussion should be well-structured and signposted, elaborating the argument point by point (preferably thematically) and followed by clear conclusions summarising the findings.

Students can choose the topics for their papers but they have to be approved by the lecturer. Students will receive written feedback on their papers and are welcome to discuss their preparation and results during consultations. For help with structuring the argument, they are welcome to contact the Center for Academic Writing – no later than during the week before the deadline.

The papers should be submitted over the e-learning platform (http://ceulearning.ceu.hu):
- the first one by Monday February 22nd midnight;
- the second one by Thursday March 31st midnight.

Literature:
The lack of sources is a potential problem for this course. The core readings that students have to study for each session will be accessible on the e-learning site. Additional ones – for more in-depth study and assignments – may be added. Additions to the CEU library have been ordered. When facing issues locating additional sources, students should not hesitate to contact the lecturer for solutions.
General Sources:


Course Outline and the Reading List

January 14th

1. Introduction: setting the scene
An overview of the course syllabus and requirements

January 21st

2. Conceptualising Asian Political Thought

- What does ‘Asian Political Thought’ entail?
- What is its relationship to ‘philosophy’?
- In what sense can we speak of ‘Asian’ political thought? Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Confucian or Buddhist political thought?
- What are the uses and dangers of such classifications? What assumptions are they based on?
- How do we pursue Comparative Political Thought without reifying difference and without losing analytical rigour?
- Why should the study of ideas retain an awareness of the political practice?

Core readings

Please choose and study one of the following sets of texts:


Additional readings:


January 28th

3. (No-)Self and Other

- What is in common among Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian conceptions of self?
- What are the differences between these conceptions?
- What are the arguments underlying these conceptions?
• What understanding of human life and of social relationships do they imply?

Core readings:

Please choose and study one of the following sets:


Additional readings:


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4. Society: a hierarchical view

- What is in common between the Brahmanic and Confucian conceptions of society?
- What is the difference between the hierarchy implied by the concepts of *varnas* (castes) on the one hand and the filial piety on the other?
- What is the reasoning underlying such hierarchy?

Core readings:


**Additional readings:**


**February 11th**

5. **Society: a social contingency view**

- What is the relationship between the Buddhist and Daoist perspective of society?
- How is it related to the respective conceptions of self?
What is the relationship between the mundane hierarchies and the hierarchies of merit in Buddhist and Daoist perspective?

How conducive to change does that make each perspective?

Core readings:


Additional readings:


February 18th

6. Rites of power: accumulation and channelling

- Is the Hindu-Buddhist conception of power primarily concerned with gaining or exercise of power?
- How is power gained and exercised?
- Is ‘political’ power distinguishable from ‘religious’ power?
- What kind of political unit does such conception of power imply?

Core readings:


Additional readings:
February 25th

7. Colonial rupture: the ‘old’ and ‘new’ political ways

- Were pre-colonial political units ‘states’?
- What tensions exist between the pre-colonial and colonial conceptions of a political unit?
- How do they relate to political practice?
- What changes of political practice were needed in order to bring it in line with the new conceptions?
- Were the changes smooth and uncontested? Were they complete?

Core readings:

For this session we will try a role play – more detailed instructions will follow in a Moodle post. For it to work students should divide into four groups, each of which will do one (or one set of) the readings according to the role of either:

1. Siamese royal court in the 19th century

2. *British colonial administration of Burma in the 19th century*


3. *Japanese Meiji-era reformers*


4. *Academic advisers on colonialism and nationalism*


The first two groups will enact the British-Siamese negotiations on the Burma-Siam border in the later 19th century, demonstrating their respective diverging ideas about the state. The third and the fourth groups will discuss Japanese Meiji modernisation and the ideas about polity and the relationship between the rulers and the ruled that emerged. Every member of the group has to be prepared to play the role and speak on behalf on the group, therefore it is advisable for groups to meet before the seminar to clarify their position.

Additional readings:


February 27th

8. *Ideas, words and images across time and space*
Visit to Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts for a guided tour of the exhibition 'In Search of Prince Genji - Japan in Words and Images' by its curator

Guided tour starts at 10.00

Location: Andrássy út 103, 1062 Budapest (Bajza utca metro stop)

Attendance is mandatory as the tour is considered part of the course and CEU is covering the costs. In case you cannot attend, please inform the lecturer in advance.

Readings:


The 11th-century saga *Genji Monotogari* or 'The Tale of Genji' is a long (well over a 1,000 pages) and slow, though absorbing read. To appreciate the exhibition more fully, please read the succinct translator's introduction that is illuminating about the Japanese selves and the social and gender hierarchies they were living in the Heian period. It also feeds into the discussion on personal names, whereas the list of chapters might help you to navigate the exhibition.

The exhibition deals mostly with images used and proliferated by 'Genji' but the written and spoken text likewise plays with words that ground our understanding, as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing says in her introduction. Focus on words and their travel through time and space is a more fluid alternative to tracking certain notions popular in the public discourse to comparative philosophy which has to clarify and stabilise those notions before comparing them, thus denying them the possibility of change.

**March 3rd**

9. State and religious difference: struggling over borders

- What did the refashioning of Asia into a patchwork of bounded states mean for group identities?
- What were the two main stances regarding the relationship between religion and nationality in colonial India?
- How did this conflict shape the anti-colonial struggle? Has it been resolved?
- What do Bhargava and Chatterjee disagree on regarding Indian secularism?

**Readings:**

In this session, we will debate again – more detailed instructions will follow in a Moodle post. Students should divide into four groups, each of which will do one (set) of the readings according to the role of either position in two debates:

1.1. "Hindus and Muslims are one nation" (Gandhi)
1.2. "Hindus/Muslims are a nation by themselves" (Jinnah)
The two groups will work with the debate about the nature of independent India among various intellectuals in British India in the first half of the 20th century. To advocate a position championed by either Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1.1.) or Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1.2.), both Gujaratis but founders of respectively India and Pakistan, they will read these texts:


2.1. Toleration (Chatterjee)
2.2. Indian Secularism (Bhargava)

The second debate is contemporary, among living Indian about the nature of India's secularism and its differences from the Western state-church relationship model(s). These two groups will read:

**Bhargava, Rajeev, [2013?]. The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism.** Chaire de recherche du Canada sur l'Éducation et les rapports ethniques, Université de Montréal, pp. 1-42. Available at: [http://www.chereum.umontreal.ca/activites_pdf/session%202/Barghava_Distinctiveness.pdf](http://www.chereum.umontreal.ca/activites_pdf/session%202/Barghava_Distinctiveness.pdf) [Accessed 24-02-2016].


*Additional readings:*


March 10th

10. Local imports: nationalist Communisms or Communist nationalisms

- What changes did Marxism attain in Asian settings?
- Why did it become the ideology of anti-imperial struggles?
- Why did it split rather than united the Asian continent?

Core readings:


Additional readings:


March 17th

11. Whose modernity? Looking for a place in the world order

- What characteristics of Nishida’s philosophy are ‘Asian’?
- In what sense is it ‘modern’?
- Why did it serve the interests of Japanese nationalist government?
- Did the Japanese alternative of a world order challenge the principles of the imperialist world order?

Core readings:


Additional readings:


**March 24th**

**12. Deconstructing identity: postcolonialism, multiculturalism and transnationalism**

- What are the supra-state structures of hegemony?
- What social hierarchies do they underpin?
- How do these structures shape selves?
- How do they impact the representation of marginal groups?

**Core reading:**


**Additional readings:**


