Japanese and Chinese historians have been speaking of a Chinese Middle Ages for over a century now. They saw the entry of Buddhism into China as generating the kind of cultural self-reflection, reinterpretation of scriptural texts, and systematization of thought that preoccupied Western Europe after the spread of Christianity.

This class will look at perhaps the most systematic single work of medieval Confucian philosophy: the commentary on the Book of Changes composed by the Song-dynasty philosopher Cheng Yi.

Schools of Buddhism such as Yogācāra brought a sophisticated understanding of reality to China. Rocked back on their heels at first, the Confucians eventually responded by writing equally sophisticated commentaries on the poetic texts of their own tradition. The Book of Changes lends itself well to this approach, since it already provides a loosely systematic account of the structure of reality and its capacity for change.

Each week, we will examine Cheng Yi’s commentary on four related hexagrams. We will also hear presentations on secondary sources that define the Chinese Middle Ages, explore the meaning of the Book of Changes, and bring it into dialogue with contemporary Western philosophy.

Fall, 2019 • Tuesdays, 5:00-7:40
Michael Harrington

This is a course in medieval philosophy.