



# The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us About the Good Life

By Michael Puett, Christine Gross-Loh

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For the first time an award-winning Harvard professor shares his wildly popular course on classical Chinese philosophy, showing you how these ancient ideas can guide you on the path to a good life today.

Why is a course on ancient Chinese philosophers one of the most popular at Harvard?

It's because the course challenges all our modern assumptions about what it takes to flourish. This is why Professor Michael Puett says to his students, "The encounter with these ideas will change your life." As one of them told his collaborator, author Christine Gross-Loh, "You can open yourself up to possibilities you never imagined were even possible."

These astonishing teachings emerged two thousand years ago through the work of a succession of Chinese scholars exploring how humans can improve themselves and their society. And what are these counterintuitive ideas? Good relationships come not from being sincere and authentic, but from the rituals we perform within them. Influence comes not from wielding power but from holding back. Excellence comes from what we choose to do, not our natural abilities. A good life emerges not from planning it out, but through training ourselves to respond well to small moments. Transformation comes not from looking within for a true self, but from creating conditions that produce new possibilities.

In other words, *The Path* upends everything we are told about how to lead a good life. Above all, unlike most books on the subject, its most radical idea is that there is no path to follow in the first place—just a journey we create anew at every moment by seeing and doing things differently.

Sometimes voices from the past can offer possibilities for thinking afresh about the future.

A note from the publisher:

To read relevant passages from the original works of Chinese philosophy, see our

free ebook *Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Xunzi: Selected Passages*, available on Kindle, Nook, and the iBook Store and at Books.SimonandSchuster.com.

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### Editorial Review

Review

**\*\*New York Times and International Bestseller\*\***

"I read *The Path* in one sitting and have been talking about it to *everyone*. It's brilliant, mesmerizing, profound—and deeply contrarian. It stands conventional wisdom on its head and points the way to a life of genuine fulfillment and meaning." (Amy Chua, Yale Law professor and author of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* and *The Triple Package*)

"A remarkable combination of self-help guide and iconoclastic take on ancient Chinese wisdom... The authors superbly succeed at highlighting ancient Chinese philosophy's tools for achieving its vision of a flourishing life... Confucius famously declared in the *Analects*, "I transmit, but do not innovate." Puett and Gross-Loh deftly do both." (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*)

"This is a book that turns the notion of help—and the self, for that matter—on its head. Puett and Gross-Loh bring seemingly esoteric concepts down to Earth, where we can see them more clearly. The result is a philosophy book grounded in the here and now, and brimming with nuggets of insight. No fortune-cookie this, *The Path* serves up a buffet of meaty life lessons. I found myself reading and re-reading sections, letting the wisdom steep like a good cup of tea." (Eric Weiner, author of *The Geography of Bliss* and *The Geography of Genius*)

"Puett's dynamism translates well from his classroom theater onto the page, and his provocative, radical re-envisioning of everyday living through Chinese philosophy opens wide the 'possibilities for thinking afresh about ourselves and about our future.' His text presents creative alternatives to the stale 'confines of our narrative.' With philosophical consideration, our methods of interacting and coexisting may, as the author promises, have the power to better our lives and our relationships. With its . . . spirited, convincing vision, revolutionary new insights can be gleaned from this book on how to approach life's multifarious situations with both heart and head." (*Kirkus Reviews*)

"This book is a revelation, a practical way through a fractured, distracting world. I thought I knew these philosophers—and I was wrong. Rigorous, concise, deeply informed, *The Path* retires our facile shorthand about ideas 'from the East' and presents a powerful intellectual case to engage, to care, and to remember." (Evan Osnos, National Book Award-winning author of *Age of Ambition*)

"Offers interesting alternatives to some of our modern ideas of self and society . . . worth the cover price." (*Financial Times (UK)*)

"*The Path* will not only change your life--it will change the way you see history and the world. From its wondrously fresh take on Confucius to its quietly profound read of just what it is the great sages have to say to us, this book exemplifies all that can come of the radical openness of Chinese philosophy. Read it and be transformed." (Gish Jen, author of *Tiger Writing* and *The Love Wife*)

"If you're looking to get out of a rut, or rise above the doom and gloom of our present global situation, Puett's channeled knowledge from the Chinese masters will be a wake-up call. We sometimes forget that our problems are as old as civilization, and maybe the answers have always been hidden in plain sight."

*(Publishers Weekly (Staff Pick))*

"This book opens the mind. . . . These thoughts echo in my life, even if the origins were unknown to me. . . . Puett and his co-author have performed a service for all of us. They have succeeded in their project. Their accessible, conversational style introduces anyone with interest to what Chinese sages suggested about giving meaning to our days. Even more impressive, they inspire interest." *(Frank Wu, The Huffington Post)*

"A very accessible and inspiring piece of work. . . . Anyone willing to put the work in might find that this book really can change your life." *(The Sentinel (UK))*

"The book is full of ancient wisdom and insights that can help you rethink the choices you make every day so that they lead to greater happiness and fulfillment." *(Business Insider)*

"*The Path* illuminates a little-known spiritual and intellectual landscape: the rich body of Chinese thought that, starting more than two millennia ago, charted new approaches to living a meaningful life. But Puett goes a lot further, creatively applying this ancient thought to the dilemmas of modern life. The result is a fresh recipe for harnessing our natural energies and emotions to strengthen social connection and build islands of order amid the chaos that sometimes surrounds us." (Robert Wright, author of *The Language of God*)

"Puett's book encourages us to chuck away our stiff, encrusted western notions, and to adopt a more fluid, less didactic approach to life. *The Path* is not your classic self-help book, and not just because it dismantles the self. It doesn't serve up an easy set of how-to activities. . . . You are also advised that any changes you make will be slow, incremental, the result of constant daily work. . . . To talk to Puett is to view our western tradition through an entirely different lens." *(The Sunday Times (UK))*

"Offers a contrarian view to pop psychology... [and] cultivates a meaningful life. The teachings in *The Path* offer ways to work with what you have." *(Chicago Tribune)*

"*The Path* looks at the teachings of ancient Chinese philosophers and explains how we can apply these largely forgotten teachings to our everyday lives. Granted, it sounds like a tough read. It sounds specialist and niche and intimidating. It sounds all of those things. But it is none of those things. It's a big ask in under 200 pages. But there's something wonderfully simple and refreshing about the ideas. There is a simplicity to this book: all we have is ourselves, let's try and make things better." *(Marisa Bate, The Pool (UK))*

"Puett's course has become the most popular on campus, even with those studying other subjects, and that's because he talks about how to have a good life. Using ancient Chinese philosophy challenges all our modern assumptions about what it takes to flourish in life." *(Sarah Montague, Today programme (UK))*

"This beautifully written book is a must-read. . . . *The Path* has tremendous riches to offer young people (and not so young people) precisely because it begins with a challenge to Western notions of the Self. . . . This slender little book carried a very big punch." *(Scattering Blossoms, Fallen Leaves (blog))*

"*The Path* is, in a word, brilliant! I would encourage everyone to get a copy of this book! Great discussion will come from reading it, and you may find yourself looking to delve deeper into some of the writings of these wise teachers from the past. *The Path* will be joining a select group of books on my shelf which I reread every year." *(Book Tardis (blog))*

"[*The Path* is] 1) a disrupting challenge to almost any rigid worldview and 2) a brief overview of Chinese

philosophy. . . . The authors repeatedly point out that these philosophies are not just abstract 'big question' type approaches; they are intended for use and exploration thru the daily nitty-gritty of real life. . . . Though in some cases, you'll have to go deeper into these 'paths' to figure out how, this book is a good place to start." (*Dwarf + Giant (blog)*)

#### About the Author

Michael Puett is the Walter C. Klein Professor of Chinese History in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations and Chair of the Committee on the Study of Religion at Harvard University. He is the recipient of a Harvard College Professorship for excellence in undergraduate teaching and is a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Science.

Christine Gross-Loh is a journalist and author. Her writing has appeared in publications including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Guardian*. She has a PhD from Harvard University in East Asian history.

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The Path

## Foreword

### Christine Gross-Loh

On a crisp, sunny morning in the fall of 2013, I sat in on a course at Harvard University on Chinese philosophy. I was there to write an article for the Atlantic on why an undergraduate class on such an arcane subject had become the third most popular on campus, after the predictable choices of introductory economics and computer science.

Professor Michael Puett, a tall, energetic man in his late forties, stood on the stage at Sanders Theatre speaking animatedly to over seven hundred students. His famously engaging lectures are done without any notes or slides—fifty minutes of pure talk every time. Students aren't assigned any readings except the translated words of the philosophers themselves: Confucius's Analects, the Dao de jing, the writings of Mencius. They are not assumed to have any prior knowledge of or interest in Chinese history or philosophy; they merely need to be open and willing to engage with these ancient texts. The course is well known for the bold promise the professor makes every year on the first day of class: "If you take the ideas in these texts seriously, they will change your life."

I'd completed a PhD in East Asian history at Harvard and, when I was a graduate student, taught undergraduates about Chinese philosophy. This material was not new to me. But as I listened to Michael that day and during the weeks that followed, I saw him bring these ideas to life in a way that I had never experienced before. He asked his students to not only grapple with the ideas of the thinkers but also to allow the ideas to challenge some of their fundamental assumptions about themselves and the world they are living in.

Michael speaks on Chinese philosophy at other universities and organizations throughout the world. After each talk, people invariably come up to him, eager to know how these ideas can apply to their own lives and real issues: their relationships, their careers, their family struggles. They realize that these principles present a fresh perspective on what it means to live a good and meaningful life; a perspective that stands at odds with so much of what they have assumed to be true.

It is a perspective that has affected many for the better. Michael's students have shared with me stories of how their lives were transformed by these ideas. Some have told me that they have changed the way they look at their relationships, now recognizing that the smallest actions have a ripple effect on themselves and everyone around them. As one student explained, "Professor Puett opened the door to a different way of interacting with the world around me, of processing my feelings, of establishing with myself, and with others, a sense of calm that I hadn't felt before."

These successful young people, positioned to become future leaders in whatever career they might pursue, told me how these ideas changed their approach to major life decisions and their own trajectory. Whether they decided to go into finance or anthropology, law or medicine, these ideas equipped them with different tools and a different worldview than those with which they had been raised, opening a new window onto the purpose of life and its infinite possibilities. One student told me, "It's very easy to have the mind-set that you're building toward some ultimate goal and climbing a ladder to some dream end—whether that's a certain position or a certain place in life. But this message really is powerful: that by living your life differently, you can open yourself up to possibilities you never imagined were even possible."

And it isn't just the philosophical texts that shape these students. Michael himself is an inspiration. He is known for his kindness, humility, and dedication to helping his students flourish: traits that come directly out of his decades of immersion in Chinese thought. "He completely embodies these teachings," one student said.

What is it about these philosophies that has such an impact on those who study them? None of these ideas is about "embracing yourself," "finding yourself," or following a set of instructions to reach a clear goal. In fact, they are the very antithesis of that sort of thinking. They are not specific, prescriptive, or grand. Rather, they are about changing from the ground up in unpredictable, unimaginable ways. One student explained how liberating it was to recognize that what we think is ingrained and inherent really isn't so: "You can adopt new habits and literally change the way you take in the world, react to it, and interact with other people. I learned that you can wield that power of habit, or 'ritual,' to achieve things that you never thought were possible, given who you thought you are."

We have long looked at Chinese thought through the wrong lens, tending to see it as inextricable from a "traditional" world and therefore considering it irrelevant to our contemporary lives. But as these students can attest, the teachings of the ancient Chinese philosophers force us to question many of the beliefs we take for granted. Their ideas on how people approach the world—how they relate to others, make decisions, deal with life's ups and downs, attempt to influence others, choose to conduct their lives—are just as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago. In fact, they are more relevant than ever.

Michael and I realized that these ideas can speak to all of us, and that's how this book came into being. On the pages that follow, we will show how the teachings of these Chinese philosophers can offer possibilities for thinking afresh about ourselves and about our future.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Shirley Daniels:**

Here thing why this kind of The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us About the Good Life are different and reliable to be yours. First of all looking at a book is good but it really depends in the content from it which is the content is as tasty as food or not. The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us



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