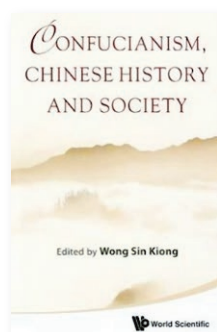


# Confucius evolving



In *Confucianism, Chinese History and Society*, the contributors strive to convey a balanced understanding of the Chinese tradition of Confucius as it evolved over the last 2500 years, from ancient times to contemporary application, from the classics into practice, and all within a single book. Edited by Wong Sin Kiong, Associate Professor of Chinese Studies at the National University of Singapore, this collection of essays aims to distinguish the presentation of the subject matter from previous works on the topic that have taken a more historical approach. The essays contained in this collection were originally delivered at the memorial lectures in 1995 for Professor Wu Teh Yao, political scientist, specialist in Confucianism and drafter of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As the title indicates, the volume comprises mainly of three parts: Confucianism, Chinese history, and Chinese society, which also lucidly summarize the major research fields of Professor Wu.

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## Confucianism

The first part opens up with Tu Wei-Ming's essay 'A Confucian Perspective on Human Rights' in which the author first discusses the cultural background of the original conception of human rights and then seeks to explore the relationship of contemporary human rights doctrine to Confucian teachings, in particular the concepts of the in-dividual in relation to community, state, and society. In those societies shaped by Confucianism in Asia, Confucian traditions can be a spiritual source for nation building, social stability, and cultural identity. At the same time, Enlightenment values, including human rights, "have become domesticated as an integral part of their own cultural heritage" (p. 18). Tu does not view this critical issue as merely Asian values versus modern Western values (p. 5-6), but addresses certain Confucian perceptions, such as human self-development and the unity of Heaven and humanity, to suggest that a Confucian perspective on human rights is worth exploring since it can play an important role in transforming 'human rights' into an universal language of humanity.

Confucius Temple, Beijing, China. Image reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of Flickr.

In the next chapter, 'Nationalism and Confucianism', Wang Gungwu takes Confucian ideas on nation building to examine the origin of nationalism in China, its development in the twentieth century under different conditions, its contributions to modernization, and the difference it has made to the Chinese culture and society. Admittedly, the last century has witnessed a consequential contradiction between nationalism and Confucianism in China. Now that nationalism has returned in China and Confucianism has become respectable again, Wang believes that this historical discrepancy will be solved because the word 'revolution' has now been replaced by 'patriotism' (p. 40), an euphemism of 'nationalism'. Noticing this transformation, Wang insists that state or official Confucianism, which supported imperial China in the past, will never be restored, but personal and social Confucianism remains pervasive and re-emerging as a positive force in efforts in building something akin to a modern civil society in China, including the new perception and definition of nationalism.

As the last chapter of part one, 'Did Confucianism Hinder the Development of Science in China?', Ho Peng Yoke's essay concentrates on the central question: "Was Confucianism the stumbling block that prevented China from a scientific revolution in traditional China?" (p. 49) Ho first refutes the conventional criticism of scholars on Confucius that his attitude and way of thinking hindered the development of science in China. The author further notes that even later Confucians such as Mencius, Dong Zhongshu, and Zhu Xi should not be blamed since they all did not oppose science and their writings covered topics ranging from calendar astronomy, geography,

to medicine. For Ho, Confucianism should not be regarded as a hindrance to the advance of science in ancient China, thus he calls for a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of Confucianism, because Confucianism "is not science, nor were its objectives science, but it is also clear that its principles are not anti-science" (p. 63).

## History

Part two of the collection, consisting of two chapters by Liu Ts'un-Yan and Chin Ling-Yeong respectively, is devoted to selected episodes in the Chinese history with emphasis on early contacts between China and the world. In 'East Meets West: The Impact on China and Her Response', Liu traces the three major historical periods of Europeans from the West, meeting the Chinese in the East: Marco Polo in the thirteenth century, Matteo Ricci in the sixteenth century, and James Legge in the second half of the nineteenth century. Another essay of this part by Chin, 'Zheng He: Navigator, Discoverer, and Diplomat', focuses on the legendary sailorman Zheng He and his seven large scale expeditions to the Indian Ocean and eastern Africa between 1405 and 1433. These two essays are expected to support the main theme of part one that the comprehension of Confucianism in the modern era requires both studies of the tradition itself and the awareness of constant contacts and interactions of China and the West in a more broad sense. We know that prominent figures such as Matteo Ricci and Zheng He had not only played important roles in the history of Sino-Western communications but also inspired crucial developments in the ideological history of both China and the West. But what are the historical significance of these personalities? Are there any linkages between these events and the changing perspectives of and on Confucianism? Readers may expect more direct and definite answers from the authors.

## Modern society

The later thematic chapters in part three contain some excellent analyses of an extremely wide range of topics from translingual practice in contemporary Chinese cultures, cultural plurality and comparative literature in China, scientific understandings of pedagogical studies, children and childhood in traditional China, to cultural characteristics of major Chinese metropolitan cities. Readers may wonder that most of the essays do not mention Confucianism or provide any reference to Confucian tradition at all. Contributed by scholars on languages, literature, history, and pedagogy, these essays seem at the first sight indeed a bit random and incoherent to each other. On the other hand, in this way the authors also mutely reiterate the point Wang Gungwu makes that the China today is no longer monotonous as in the dynastic era in which state or official Confucianism was the political and cultural orthodoxy (p. 39-41). In fact, the modern Chinese society is not only shaped by its history and tradition, but at the same time it is also subjected to considerable influence of the West.

In this splendid volume, the authors take the challenge to analyze certain aspects of the Confucian tradition and to deepen the apprehension of Confucianism and its significance to the Chinese history and contemporary social settings. Given this goal of the collection, however, it would be helpful and convenient for the readers if the scope of the essays could be organized into a more comprehensive order and if the coherence between each chapters could be stated more explicitly. Indeed, in recent years Confucian teachings have been regaining ground both in and outside China as the subject of academic discourse and as an expression of Chinese cultural identity, resulting in a rapidly growing body of scholarship on Confucian relevance to modern China/East Asia. Those who want to acquire a more in-depth insight into the topic may turn to works such as *Confucianism and Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) edited by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Ti Weiming, *Confucianism for the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) edited by Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong, Daniel A. Bell's *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in A Changing Society* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), as well as the very recently published *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) by Jiang Qing.

In short, this book will definitely appeal to both scholars of Chinese philosophy and readers generally interested in Confucianism and its relevance to contemporary Chinese society. The authors have succeeded in popularizing the Confucian ideas by interpreting them in profound and scholastic ways. For its glimpse of Confucian ideas and for its rethinking of issues related to Confucianism, Chinese history, and Chinese society, *Confucianism, Chinese History and Society* will also be a useful handbook for historians and students of cultural studies.

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