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Chinese society today has turned fairly religious with Protestant Christianity and Confucianism experiencing the most growth in recent decades. As these two traditions interact more and more, the tension and rivalry between them intensifies. Dr. Yao looks at the roles that each plays in today's China along with the place of the so-called New Confucian Movement. As the current Confucian revival represents an attempt to regain Confucian dominance in Chinese society, what is the response of Christianity?

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A ChinaSource interview with Fenggang Yang conducted by G. Wright Doyle

Professor Fenggang Yang provides insightful answers to questions about Confucianism. His comments address topics such as the groups of people among whom Confucianism is growing, the influence of New Confucianists from overseas on Chinese society and thought, and concrete signs that Confucianism is growing in China.

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Lit-sen Chang with G. Wright Doyle

Chang provides a Christian understanding of the nature of Confucianism, its classics, and the basic teachings of Confucius. This is followed by a critique of Confucianism from a biblical standpoint using classical theological categories (God, creation, man, sin and salvation, and eschatology) to frame his comments. He also discusses a key component of traditional Confucianism, ancestor worship.

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The author takes his readers on a walk through a Chinese megacity to help us "see" how Confucianism is influencing modern Chinese society; he goes on to discuss some of its influences in key areas of Chinese culture. Is Confucianism today the same as it was historically? What is its relationship with politics? What does it have to do with the Chinese identity? The article discusses these and other relevant questions.

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Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ by Ralph R. Covell

Covell traces the history of the gospel in China from the Nestorians up to about 1980 and ways in which foreign missionaries, and then Chinese Christians, tried to express the gospel in terms which were, or were not, readily accessible to the people they hoped to reach.

Confronting Confucian Understandings of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation—A Systematic Theological Analysis of the Basic Problems in the Confucian-Christian Dialogue by Paulos Huang

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Editorial

Perspectives on Confucianism

By G. Wright Doyle, Guest Editor

As guest editor for this issue of *ChinaSource Quarterly*, I am very pleased that we are able to offer a number of articles from different perspectives that will help us understand the role of “Confucianism”—broadly defined—in China today, how Christians have tried to relate to this dominant strain of Chinese society and culture in the past, and how they might do so productively in the future.

First, we need to realize that there are, and always have been, several kinds of “Confucianism,” which some scholars would rather term “Ruism.” Despite broad agreement on some essential themes, “Confucianists” (“Ruists”) have always differed among themselves on rather important questions. Likewise, Christians have never been unified in their approaches to Confucianism but have exhibited varying attitudes of accommodation and rejection toward it.

These two sorts of variety will be evident in the articles featured in this issue. We shall see brief snapshots of Confucianism from different angles and will encounter several types of Christian approach, both in the past and today.

What, then, is “Confucianism” (or “Ruism”)? Is it the teachings of Confucius alone? Hardly ever does it appear in this pristine version; almost always, Mencius’s writings and two other classics come under the umbrella of essential Confucianism. In the early centuries after Confucius, competing schools of thought vied for supremacy in society and in official recognition. Eventually, the emphasis upon human nature as basically good became the “orthodox” position, up until very recently. Actually, the Chinese term for this broad school of thought is *rujia* (the “scholarly tradition”), while “Confucius” is the Latinized name given by the Jesuits to Kongzi, Master Kong.

This tradition has always emphasized “the person and human relationships in this world,” and thus “personal well-being, family harmony, social solidarity, political unity, and universal peace.” The family stands at the center, but the state was strongly endorsed, especially the ruler. Obedience to authority at all levels received primary emphasis. Confucianism has always been thoroughly humanistic, stressing human action and focused totally on this world.

During the Chinese Middle Ages, however, Buddhism and Daoism, which had made inroads into the previous monopoly of Confucianism, injected it with new ideas, and what had been basically an ethical philosophy developed into a highly complex worldview, complete with a sophisticated cosmology, ontology and psychology, creating what came to be known as Neo-Confucianism.

To confuse matters more, in the twentieth century, Western ideas entered the scene producing “New Confucianism,” which is designed to adapt a venerable creed to modern movements and concepts, including globalization, science and democracy (in some forms). This New Confucianism has continued to evolve as men of outstanding intellect, many of them living in Taiwan and North America, seek to make it a faith for the twenty-first century. In China, meanwhile, a woman named Yu Dan has captured the media spotlight with her modernized renderings of the *Analects* of Confucius and the writings of the Daoist philosopher, Zhuangzi. There is more to this increasingly complex picture, as our articles will show.

In general, Christians have tended to favor either the approach of Matteo Ricci, the Jesuit missionary who sought to make as much contact as possible with the reigning Confucian school of the sixteenth century, or the approach of his Franciscan and Dominican critics, who viewed ceremonies in honor of ancestors and Confucius as idolatrous. The late Ralph Covell, whose *Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ* is reviewed here, favored Ricci’s strategy while the critique by Lit-sen Chang (Zhang Lisheng) in this issue represents the more conservative stance. Paulos Huang’s masterful comparison of Confucian and Christian doctrines of salvation, while making fundamental differences clear, seems to steer a middle course.

Professor Fenggang Yang, interviewed in this issue, believes that “the Chinese Christian church has become an institutional base for passing on transformed Confucian values to younger generations.” Chinese Christians usually identify the core Confucian value, *ren* (benevolence), with *agape* love. Likewise, they assume that the filial piety, *xiao*, which is the prime virtue in Confucianism, is about the same as the honor which the Bible commands children to give parents. Other traditional Chinese virtues, often connected with Confucianism, are seen to be consistent with the Bible. Therefore, they do not “intend to replace Confucianism with Christianity, but to revitalize Confucianism with Christianity.” Going further, while they hold to orthodox Christian beliefs, they hope to use ancient Chinese philosophies to make Christianity more acceptable to Chinese, who usually see it as a Western religion.

In the opinion of many outside observers, the most obvious, albeit unconscious, penetration of Confucian modes of thinking shows up in the Chinese Protestant pulpit! With a growing number of exceptions, Chinese Christian discourse hardly ever strays from a man-centered, moralistic and performance-oriented heritage that stresses what we must do for God rather than what he has done for us in Christ. The second obvious connection shows up in the focus among Chinese Christians upon “success” and “wellbeing” in this life as the emphasis in prayer and in testimonies rather than forgiveness of sin or the promise of eternal life.



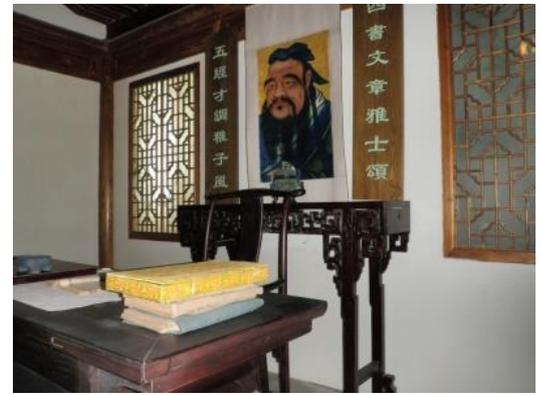
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Contemporary Confucian Revival and Its Interactions with Christianity in China¹

By Kevin Yao

One of the most significant consequences of China's remarkable reform and liberalization of social life since the 1980s is a massive revival of religion. All the religious traditions existing prior to the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) have been making a comeback and once again have become the shaping forces in the spiritual life of Chinese people. It is so much so that Chinese society today has turned fairly religious. Among all the religious traditions, Protestant Christianity and Confucianism have experienced the most spectacular growth in the recent decades.



Graeme Eyre, via Wikimedia Commons

Protestantism has been recognized almost unanimously as the fastest growing religious community since the 1980s. Today China has one of the largest Protestant communities in the world. The Confucian story is equally impressive. Under almost a half-century of iconoclastic attack and communist suppression, Confucianism seemed doomed, and its demise appeared irreversible in the late 1970s. Surprisingly, since the 1990s, this ancient tradition has been resurrected, and its revival has gained momentum. Extravagant rituals are staged to commemorate Confucius' birthday; the Confucian scriptures are reprinted and circulated; efforts are made to instill Confucian values into the minds of younger generations, and so on. As these two traditions inevitably interact more with each other, the tension and rivalry between them intensifies.

This amazing development in mainland China has recently attracted considerable international attention, thanks to two recent events: the symposium "Christian Faith and 21st Century China," held in August of 2012 at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and its sequel on "Christian Faith and Ideological Trends in Contemporary China," held in August of 2013 at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.

Cosponsored by the Forum of Chinese Theology and several Christian institutions based in the West, these two events brought a group of Confucian scholars face to face with a group of Christian scholars for dialogue. Among a wide spectrum of topics covered by these symposiums, the Christian-Confucian dialogue stood out as one of the highlights. Indeed, Christian-Confucian dialogue may no longer be a new thing in China, but this is perhaps the first time for such a high level conversation to be carried out on an international stage. These events have given us a rare opportunity to get a glimpse of the characteristics of the so-called New Confucian Movement in modern-day China and its ongoing interaction with Christianity in China.

Features of Contemporary Confucian Revival in Mainland China

In the long history of Confucianism in China, decline and renewal are nothing new, but this fresh wave of Confucian revival comes against a unique social backdrop and exhibits a number of new features, which were demonstrated clearly in the recent symposiums.

First, more than just an intellectual renaissance, the current Confucian revival represents an attempt to regain Confucian dominance in Chinese culture and society. For thousands of years, Confucianism had been the backbone of classical Chinese civilization and social order. However, as its political and institutional foundation and support collapsed, it suffered a tremendous decline of influence and lost its mainstream status under the onslaught of Westernization and secularization in China during the twentieth century.

After several decades of remarkable economic growth in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, China's transformation from a Third World country, eager to copy the West, to one of the global economic superpowers with newfound self-confidence is nearly completed. Consequently, nationalist sentiment has been on the rise across the country. A growing number of social elites in China are calling for the exploration of a distinctively Chinese path of modernization and the forging of a unique national identity. This momentous turn of the tide has certainly created a favorable condition for cultural nostalgia and the resurrection of such native traditions as Confucianism.

As generations of young Chinese intellectuals, educated mostly in the post-Cultural Revolution era, began to rediscover Confucianism and other indigenous traditions, some of them had their own conversion experience. They formed the core group of the so-called New Confucian Movement in contemporary China. As one Confucian attendee at the Oxford symposium pointed out, these New Confucians are not just scholars or researchers but also believers and practitioners of Confucianism. Shaped by the Confucian worldview, they have political, cultural and social agendas and do not hide their ambition to put Confucianism back in the center of Chinese civilization in the twenty-first century. In this sense, these contemporary Confucian intellectuals are none other than the champions and missionaries of a Confucian cause.

Second, these Confucian intellectuals may be genuine advocates for a Confucian revival, but they are definitely not the only stakeholders and players in the current campaign to promote traditional values. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), confronted with the chronic credibility crisis of Marxism, has ironically found it convenient to manipulate Confucianism for its own advantage. By recasting itself as the champion of China's national traditions, the CCP apparently hopes to regain some spiritual legitimacy and shore up the ideological foundation for its rule. In fact, both local and central CCP authorities have brazenly

sponsored all kinds of events and projects to promote Confucianism and other traditional religions. On the other hand, the CCP does have a bottom line: traditional values cannot be promoted at the expense of the mainstream status of Marxism and communist rule. There is a group of “official” intellectuals who favor Confucian tradition but carefully toe the party’s line.

In sharp contrast, the New Confucian intellectuals represent a grassroots movement to rehabilitate the ancient tradition. Largely based in universities and research institutes, they are Confucians in belief as well as in practice. In other words, they are independent ideologically and organizationally. Passionately arguing that China’s future lies only in Confucianism, they can be very critical of Marxism, the CCP and its policies.

Both the New Confucians and the CCP know they have certain shared goals and interests. They can collaborate to a certain extent, but the tension between them remains. The CCP never hesitates to keep the grassroots movement marginalized. As far as the Confucian participants at the recent symposiums are concerned, they all belong to the grassroots movement.

Third, while Chinese society is at a crossroads and various ideologies and religions vie for influence in shaping the nation’s future path, New Confucianism puts forward not only its spiritual and cultural vision but also political and social blueprints. It may be inaccurate to say that New Confucians simply call for a return to a bygone tradition and the good old days. At least some of them are open to Western philosophy, market economy and democracy, and they do not agree on everything among themselves. They all do share one single vision for the Chinese culture: Confucianism needs to be restored to its mainstream status as before while all other religions should be content with secondary and supplementary roles. This common vision was articulated powerfully by some of the Confucian speakers at the symposiums.

However, in comparison with Christianity and other religions, the critical weakness of contemporary Confucianism is still its lack of institutional base and organizational structure. Remaining largely a “diffused” tradition, as depicted by eminent sociologist C. K. Yang, Confucianism will still have a hard time translating itself from an intellectual elitist movement to an organized mass spiritual movement.²

The Dynamics of the Current Interactions between Confucianism and Christianity

Ironically, the recent Confucian revival was partially stimulated by the dramatic rise of Christianity in mainland China. In the race to fill the spiritual void left by the Cultural Revolution and to shape the Chinese culture in the twenty-first century, Protestantism emerged as an early winner with the highest growth rate among all the major religious traditions. This result paradoxically turned the Christian tradition into a sort of common enemy for all other traditions, including Confucianism. Fearing a cultural “outsider” like Christianity would steal China’s soul, the new generation of Confucians felt it was their destiny to defend the nation’s heritage and thus started their campaign with a strong sense of crisis and urgency.

Like their predecessors in modern times, these New Confucian intellectuals may appreciate some elements of Christian tradition but would categorically reject the tradition intrinsically as a Western cultural import alien to Chinese civilization. Citing the unfortunate historical ties between Christianity and Western colonialism, they charge that Christianity as a Western religion served as a running dog [i.e., abject slave, Ed.] of Western imperialism and cultural invasion in the past, and that today it once again becomes a threat to Chinese cultural tradition and national identity. Unfortunately, the popularity of Samuel Huntington’s theory of “Clash of Civilizations” in China serves to reinforce Christianity’s Western image and to vindicate the Confucian argument for a rivalry between the Chinese Confucian civilization and the Judeo-Christian civilization.³ For these New Confucians, the aggressive Christian proselytizing campaigns and such moves as constructing a large church building in Qufu, Confucius’ birthplace, are highly provocative and offensive and deserve the strongest response.

Of course, these New Confucian scholars are fully aware of past and current Christian efforts to reach out to the Confucian tradition and to indigenize Christian teachings in the Chinese context. In their minds, the outcomes of these efforts are at least dubious and worthless. Even worse, they see all Christian accommodations to Confucianism as just part of a cunning missionary scheme to eventually marginalize Confucianism and conquer China spiritually. This kind of skeptical and antagonistic mentality and rhetoric still shapes Confucian responses in today’s dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity. When a group of Christian intellectuals issued a statement entitled “The Relationship between Christianity and Chinese Culture—Our Attitudes” in the 2012 symposium, a leading Confucian scholar immediately declared the document “arrogant” and “unacceptable.”

Overall, contemporary Christian responses to Confucianism tend to be defensive. From the 1980s to 1990s, the church in China was overwhelmingly preoccupied with church growth. It was not until recent decades that an increasing number of Christian intellectuals and church leaders began to turn to the issue of Christian-Confucian relations. Understandably, the Christian responses are still far from fully developed. In thinking through how to relate to the native traditions, frankly, the Chinese church today has not even surpassed its Nestorian and Jesuit predecessors, and it still has a long way to go before a credible theology of religion and effective apologetic strategy are at its disposal. This situation was once again proved by the absence of eloquent and well-thought out Christian responses to the Confucian challenges at these symposiums. In my assessment, the Christian statement mentioned above offers hope. It is the first time we can see a fresh attempt to conceptualize the Christian-Confucian relation from the perspective of world religion versus ethnic culture.

In China, the long history of Christian-Confucian interactions has been marked by episodes of hard feelings and conflict as well as good will and harmony. Starting from the early 1980s, a new chapter has been unfolding in this history. Without denying the

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Confucian Comeback

An Interview with Fenggang Yang

Professor Fenggang Yang, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University, Indiana. His research focuses on religious change in China and immigrant religions in the United States. He is the author of Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule (2012), Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities (1999) and the coeditor of six books. He was elected President of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in 2013. In this interview, Professor Yang explains why he believes Confucianism in various forms is already a major presence in today's China.



[Xinhua/Fan Changguo](#)

ChinaSource: What are the concrete signs that Confucianism is growing in China?

Professor Yang: We need to think of multiple layers, starting from the grass-roots, bottom up, such as elementary schools up through high school—I'm only talking about the better organized schools. Private Confucian schools (*si shu*) have become a kind of movement. They try to be independent from the state system; though their legality is ambiguous, they are growing in number. There are also weekend schools and camps, which are many. Then, at the university level, there are many institutes or academies of *guoxue* (national learning) funded by the government. In addition, in society at large, there are regional, national and international associations of Confucianism.

There are also different movements, such as the Han Fu movement, that promotes the wearing of traditional Han dynasty dress. Confucius birthday commemorations, while not officially organized, are organized by the people—not the government—and are taking place all over China with increasing frequency.

The state has given definite signals that it supports Confucianism. For example, President Xi visited Qufu, Shangdong and met with leaders of the Confucianism institute there. He said that he wanted to read two books on Confucianism; this was reported as big news in the official media. The Communist Party is engaging in various efforts to raise the profile of Confucius. Lectures on Confucianism, for instance, have now become common, not only in universities but also party schools in each province, municipality and county. (Party schools are run for members who are in line for promotion.)

We should also take note of symbols. More statues of Confucius are being erected on university campuses, and more temples to Confucius are being restored in cities across the nation. They are open to the public and offer lectures on Confucianism and other public events.

CS: There is a long-standing debate about whether Confucianism is a religion. Can you comment on this?

PY: Confucianism has a religious dimension or religious elements. This has been recognized after many able expositions by new Confucians in modern times. On the other hand, many scholars recognize that the religious dimension of Confucianism is thin and weak. Overall, Confucianism offers little articulation about supernatural beings and life beyond death, lacks a clearly defined doctrine of beliefs and lacks an organization of clergy and believers. In real life, to meet their personal spiritual needs, many Confucians have to resort to Buddhism, Daoism or folk religion.

CS: What do you make of the strange appearance of a statue of Confucius at Tiananmen Square, and then its sudden disappearance?

PY: This shows the uncertainty among top officials about the place of Confucius in the Chinese ideological system. We have to remember, also, that there are contending forces, some pro and some con, which are fighting this out. One camp put the statue there and another removed it.

Even among those in positions of power who think they can use Confucianism, we find different approaches: some want to use it as a source of secular ethics only while others would like to make Confucianism the religion of China. The secular and religious versions of Confucianism strongly disagree with each other.

You will also see among academic scholars that some advocate promoting Confucianism as a religion or one of the state-recognized religions [along with Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism—Ed.]. Others strongly reject this idea of a religious Confucianism. I have been working closely with Chen Ming, a supporter of making Confucianism an officially recognized religion. He is more liberal in his orientation in the sense that he is less political and more interested in culture. Scholars like Jiang Qing are more political in their advocacy. Chen Ming and I share some views. We agree that Confucianism is more like a civil religion. I would like to move the discussion in this direction, but he treats it as a first step only on the way to its becoming accepted as a real religion.

This is a burgeoning movement; much has happened in the last few years. Former President Hu Jintao tried to make it work but

was hesitant; however, the new leadership seems to be bold on many fronts, including this one.

CS: Among what groups of people is Confucianism growing?

PY: Among academics and the government, as we have seen. Others in society at large are also involved. Some retired teachers promote the Confucian elementary and secondary schools of which I spoke earlier. Surprisingly, Buddhists also promote these schools. Their purpose is to grow Buddhism, but it's more appealing to use popularized Confucian classics (like the *Three Character Classic* and the *Disciples Codes*) as a means to attract people to their temples. They will say, "We are building a Confucian community to change the morality of the whole town." They do this by introducing classical text recitation practices as well as various sorts of social service ministries. Monks have seen this as an opportunity to expand their exposure and influence. Some sectarian groups, like *Yi Guan Dao*, *Xuanyuanjiao* and *Tian Di Jiao*, also use public readings of Confucian classics to legitimize their presence in China.

CS: What influence do the New Confucianists overseas (in Taiwan and North America) have on Chinese society and thought?

PY: They play a very important role. Harvard professor Tu Weiming is now in Beijing where he has an institute of advanced study of humanities at Peking University funded by the government. He has been very active. He also has other honorary appointments in Hangzhou and elsewhere; he gives frequent interviews and lectures.

Scholars in Taiwan play even bigger roles. The movement to read Confucian classics really is promoted by a scholar from Taiwan, Zhang Qiaogui. He first gave some lectures in China to show how beneficial it is for children to recite Confucian classics, then he was invited for lecture tours and finally, classes were organized. Students of New Confucianism scholars formerly in Taiwan (Mou, Tang) visit China frequently attending conferences, giving lectures and teaching courses.

The scholars living overseas play important but also complicated roles. Their version of Confucianism is unique. Tu Weiming has lived in the United States for so long that he knows the strengths of the Western system of universal values such as freedom, democracy and so on. In addition to them, he would say that we also need Confucian values as a contribution to modern life. Those who have lived in Taiwan have lived in a democratic system and thus see Confucianism as important in daily life there, but they are reluctant to make it the state ideology or religion.

The driving force for making Confucianism the state ideology or religion is really in China. I call these individuals "Confucian fundamentalists"; the others are not fundamentalists.

Some scholars are more knowledgeable about Western philosophy but think that Confucianism is the most worthwhile system of values. Even strong advocates of making Confucianism the state religion have spent years studying Western theology and philosophy and believe these are not useful for China. "China should be China," they say.

CS: Have any empirical studies shown any change in behavior among young people who have received a classical Confucian education?

PY: The man from Taiwan uses pop psychology articles and presents them as scientific evidence for their value in moral formation; however, the movements have been too recent to see any real empirical research on them.

CS: What aspects of the Confucian tradition (that is, Confucius' *Analects*? Mencius? Neo-Confucianism? Other documents?) are being emphasized and promoted today by New Confucianists? By the government? Others?

PY: There is a wide variety, depending upon the different persons involved. They are all doing things simultaneously and are not at all unified. They fight furiously among themselves. For example, some argue for Confucian constitutionalism while others maintain that constitutionalism is not a Chinese tradition; they don't want democracy because they think it's bad for China. What they have in common is an emphasis upon social harmony, but what does that mean? No public protests? Crack downs on corruption? There is no agreement.

CS: How did the 1989 Tiananmen incident change the attitude of Confucianists towards the question of the nature of man as good (Confucius, Mencius) or evil (Sunzi)?

PY: First of all, some young people turned to Confucianism after 1989 just as many have turned to Christianity since then. They all realized that Communist ideology had failed and they began to explore alternatives. Secondly, philosophical debate is not that common among the Confucianists. Some of them even reject the category of philosophy as a Western notion, insisting instead on the holistic nature of the Confucian system. Finally, they don't get to the philosophical level of discussion. The discussions are really driven by nationalism. There have been some good debates in universities on practical matters, such as, how the law should respect family relations. Confucius said that a son should hide his father's crimes and a father his son's crimes while modern legal theory would require him to tell the truth about his father or his son. Which way is better? Of course, we need to understand that this is a kind of reaction to the Cultural Revolution when the family was destroyed in the name of Communism, and family members turned family members into the Party for their presumed "crimes." However, the new debate is also related to the current fight against the corruption of crony capitalism. All these discussions are more related to daily practice.

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A Chinese Christian Critique of Confucianism

By Lit-sen Chang with G. Wright Doyle

Lit-sen Chang (Zhang Lisheng) was born in Wuxi, China in 1904. For the first fifty years of his life, he rejected Christianity and believed in Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism before finally committing himself to Zen Buddhism. A brilliant legal scholar, he served in the government of the Republic of China during World War II and then founded Jiangnan University in order to “extinguish” Christianity. Then, while living in Indonesia, he was dramatically converted to Christ. Immediately, he began an intensive study of the Bible and commenced teaching comparative religions at various Christian schools. After graduating from Gordon Theological Seminary (now Gordon-Conwell), he was invited to remain as a lecturer in missions. His book, *Asia’s Religions: Christianity’s Momentous Encounter with Paganism*, was probably written in the 1960s. It was published by China Horizon through P&R Publishing in 1999.

This substantial volume first discusses differing approaches to world religions and then examines Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Zen, Hinduism and Islam, all from a Christian point of view. In each case, Chang offers a “Christian understanding” of the religion, then a “Christian critique.”



Portrait lovingly painted by Jean Anne Chang

Christian Understanding of Confucianism

I. The Nature of Confucianism

Is Confucianism a religion? This question has been debated hotly for quite a while. After surveying arguments pro and con, Chang concludes that Confucianism is not a religion, because Confucius himself did not claim to be a prophet or teacher of ultimate truths; he confessed that he did not know about such things, and that he had not measured up to his own standards of ethical perfection.

“Confucius teaches only attainment, but provides no atonement. As he himself confessed, his own attainment was a tragic failure. Not only was he not sure or enlightened about the ‘truth’ and ‘life’ but he also did not know about the ‘way’ (*tao*) to heaven.” Chang acknowledges religious elements in Confucianism such as a belief in the necessity of faith; a sense of “Heavenly Mission” (or mandate of heaven); the existence and power of divine beings; the use of sacrifice; prayer; and vows. Nevertheless, “Confucianism exists as a religion not because it has any sound theological argument, but simply because of its practice” (39).

In fact, Chang avers that “there is only one true religion—Christianity; all other religions are false. . . . A True religion must have two basic factors: the *religio objectiva* (God and His revelation), and the *religio subjectiva* (the fear of the Lord). From these two factors we conclude that Confucianism is not a true religion” (39).

Confucius himself believed not in the biblical Father in heaven, but heaven. His religion was therefore only a “rudimentary primitive monotheism” (40). The later Neo-Confucian shift to belief in the Ultimate (*tai ji*) or the Ultimateless (*wu ji*) means that “they have no redeemer, and no way of salvation” (40). Likewise, the subjective aspect of Confucianism focuses not on the fear of a transcendent God but on the ordinances of heaven. One should reverence devils and gods but keep a distance from them. Its ethical teachings center on *ren* (*jen*; benevolence to man), not on the fear of God. Confucianism is, therefore, a “system of humanism, rather than a true religion” (40).

II. The Classics of Confucianism

The Five Classics. Chang briefly describes the five canonical classics of Confucianism: *Canon of History*; *Canon of Poetry or Odes*; *Canon of Changes (I Ching; I Jing)*; *Record of Rites*; and *Annals of Spring and Autumn*. He pays most attention to the *I Jing* which he believes “underlies almost all Chinese philosophy,” and which “denies the existence of God, [and] . . . eternity or the ultimate reality; there is no being, only becoming (change or *I*). Therefore, there is no absolute and no truth” (41-42). Commenting on the *Record of Rites*, Chang notes that in his role as a compiler and editor Confucius “winnowed away some materials of high spiritual value” and could thus be classified with the liberal or modernist theologians of our time (42).

The Four Books. These consist of *The Book of Great Learning*; *The Doctrine of the Mean*; *The Analects of Confucius* and *The Works of Mencius*. The last of these he calls “an exposition of Confucius’ teachings with their relevance to social and political issues” (43).

III. The Basic Teachings of Confucius

Chang states that Confucius’ “teaching has been the most potent single factor in shaping the life and character of the entire Chinese people and has been accepted by Chinese people as having the stamp of absolute truth and finality. For twenty-five centuries, Confucius has been the life guide of the Chinese [people]; his teachings touched every corner of human activity and permeated all phases of life” (43-44). Before summarizing this worldview, he asserts that it is “centered on man, not on God. . . . Confucianism is a mere system of humanism or a system of personal and social ethics” (44).

The concise outline of Confucian doctrines which follows includes its teachings on man, the family, society and government. I

found this most helpful. “Man’s original nature is good. . . . All men are educable to be a saint or a sage” (44). Society is built upon the ideal man, who is indispensable for an ideal society and government. Of course, the family, as the basic unit of society, holds preeminence in this ethical system. Love within the family will extend outward to all mankind and thus must hold first place in our hearts.

The ideal man seeks to build the ideal society which is “a kingdom of the righteousness of man, not the kingdom of God” (45). Its moral character will flow from the example of virtuous men, not laws. The five cardinal virtues—*ren* (benevolence), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (rules of propriety or decorum), *zhi* (wisdom) and *xin* (fidelity or faithfulness)—guide the efforts of each person to develop into a mature citizen. This person fulfills his proper role in each of the five key relationships (ruler-subject; father-son; husband-wife; elder brother-younger brother; friend-friend).

The ideal government will be presided over by a ruler who embodies these virtues. An evil sovereign is answerable to the people and may be overthrown if they decide that the Mandate of Heaven has been withdrawn from him. The final goal of such government will be a return to the Golden Age in which true righteousness and peace prevail.

Christian Criticism of Confucianism

Now Chang turns to an evaluation of Confucianism from the standpoint of the Bible. He frames most of his critique within classical theological categories.

God (theology proper)

Confucius, as Chang has noted, downplayed or disregarded previous “spiritual” elements in Chinese thought, and turned the focus from a Supreme Ruler (*Shangdi*) to Heaven, which was mostly conceived of as an “abstract concept, not a person” (50). “As a result, there came spiritual degeneration” (50). Gradually, people began to worship their ancestors so that “the tide of ancestor worship began to grow into an overpowering swell” (50).

In the Song and Ming dynasties, Neo-Confucianism developed the earlier idea of the unity of heaven and man into a sophisticated pantheism in which “One is All, All is One,” and every man possesses the Supreme Ultimate. “They deify themselves and, in fact, deny the personal God, and became naturalists or ‘practical atheists’” (50).

Creation

Confucius would not discuss the question of ultimate origins. Zhu Xi, the great twelfth-century Neo-Confucian thinker, “advanced the view that the universe and all things were composed of two principles, *li* and *ch’i* [*qi*]. These two are co-eternal, infinite, distinct, and formed the groundwork of creation” (51). Consequently, Chinese intellectuals turned toward “naturalism, materialism, or agnosticism, and the living and almighty God was expelled and had no relation with the lives of the Chinese people, though they are not aware of this serious fact!” (51).

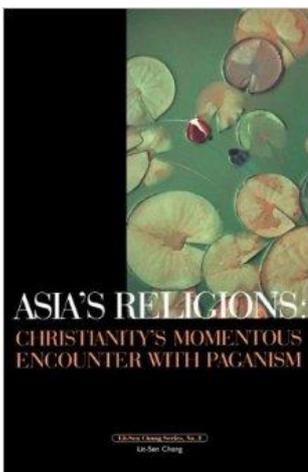
Man (anthropology)

Orthodox Confucianism teaches that man’s nature was originally good but becomes degenerate because of ignorance and a “clouded” mind which it tries to “clear” by self-cultivation, which Chang classifies as “self-righteousness.” According to the Bible, however, no one is righteous, and all are born in sin which no amount of self-discipline can overcome. True manhood can only be restored by turning back to God and becoming “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) through regeneration.

Sin and salvation

“Like other non-Christian religions, Confucianism teaches nothing about original sin, redemption, forgiveness, atonement, and sanctification.” That is because, throughout Chinese history, “the great ‘sages’ taught the Chinese people that there is no original sin and that only acts of conscious volition are considered to be sin. Man is as able to desist from sin as to commit sin, so it was urged that man can stamp it out by sincerity (*ch’eng*) or devotion to do good” (53).

Chang tells us that he used to be a follower of Wang Yangming, who believed in the “unity of knowledge and practice of righteousness,” but found that he could not attain to this unity by self-effort. As a Christian, he accepted the biblical teaching that we are saved by God’s grace alone, through the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross in our place which we receive through faith, not works.



Ancestor worship

Turning now to a key component of traditional Confucianism, Chang discusses ancestor worship. Chang acknowledges the dilemma this has posed for missionaries and Chinese Christians, for “the Bible teaches filial piety but condemns idol worship—including ancestor worship” (54). To solve this problem, he goes to great lengths to demonstrate from Confucian writings that “the true meaning of filial piety is not ancestor worship” (55). He concludes that “there is no necessary logical relation between filial piety and ancestor worship . . . ‘Filial piety . . . only commences with the respect of parents. It should be culminated in the fear of the Lord, our Father in heaven. Therefore, faith in God is not in contradiction with but is rather the ultimate fulfillment of true filial piety in its fullest sense’” (55).

Last things (eschatology)

As most people know, “Confucius was concerned primarily with man’s earthly career here and

View from the Wall

Confucianism in Modern Chinese Society

By Peregrine de Vigo

First, allow me to define some boundaries. I am taking *Chinese society* to mean that of contemporary, mainland, urban China, particularly areas that are predominantly Han and not counting islands or regions that for the last 100 years have largely operated under a different authority. Throughout the article I will replace the terms for Confucianism and its cognates with the word Rú (儒, like Ruism and Ruism).¹ There is not space here to argue for these parameters, but they need to be stated up front.



Tricia Bolle

In considering this topic, a few questions come to mind that seem directly relevant. First, a person's pre-understanding of what is meant when we say "Ruism" is particularly significant. When we look for manifestations of Ruism in Chinese society, what exactly are we looking for? Is it a philosophy? Is it a religion? Both of these? Neither? Is it an individual's or whole society's way of life?

Secondly, the history of Ruism is complex, particularly the last 100 years, so a person's knowledge of its background is particularly important. How much of this complex history is understood by a general reader? The multiformity of Ruism throughout its long history has been highlighted in recent scholarship and must be taken into consideration. Is it as uniform and unified as many writers present it? How sufficient and useful are the generalizations so often used today?

While there is not space here to address all of these and many other questions, I hope they will help the reader see our subject in a new light as I sketch its influence in modern Chinese society. So, put on your walking shoes and journey with me through a Chinese megacity, and we will allow the environment to instruct us.

The first thing we pass is an elderly man with a long brush, drawing characters with water on sidewalk tiles. A few people gather to watch and comment on his skill. As school gets out, a grandpa rides by on a bike with his granddaughter riding behind him, wearing a small red scarf indicating her status as a model student. A black Audi sedan with black-and-white license plates blows through a red light. No one seems to notice.

We leave the street and enter a brightly lit bookstore. Young people are scattered about reading the most recently translated *Harry Potter* novel or searching for the one book that will propel them from high school to Harvard or at least help them through the *gāokāo* (national college entrance exam) and enter Beijing University. Middle-aged adults browse books on traveling abroad and popular magazines on the housing market or the best face-mask for air pollution.

Back on the street, we pass by a small musical instrument shop. Melodies from a piano and a violin drift out the windows as young students practice. A *gǔqín*, a stringed instrument from classical times and frequently associated with Ruist self-cultivation, hangs on the wall.

As we turn down a narrow alley, children from lower-income families run back and forth, dodging puddles. They chant some rhymes learned that day in school, one about a lamb that belonged to *Mǎliyà* (Chinese for Mary) and one about a star that twinkles (no, not the one over Bethlehem).

Men and women stream from the subway exit in black "Western" suits, listening to music on their iPhones with knock-off Dr. Dre Beats. A large sign in red characters encourages everyone to "study Lei Feng."

As we reflect on this hypothetical walk through "Chinatown" looking for Ruism, the question that rises like a phoenix from the dust is, "Where is it?" By all appearances it no longer exists, but if we dig a little deeper and look beneath the surface with a little bit of background knowledge, a new phenomenon emerges. While it may not entirely reflect "the days of old," Ruism has taken on new forms of existence, and that is what I would like to unpack for you.

Most Notable: Filial Piety

When people think of Ruism, filial piety is probably one of the first things to come to mind, and remnants can still be seen in most Chinese families. Starting at a very early age, there is a strong informal education in which children learn that their highest responsibility and obligation is to care for their parents' welfare, particularly in old age. However, there is a general lack of true understanding regarding the meaning of filial piety as described in Ruist texts, so that little regard is taken for the children's concerns or desires.

In Academics

In academic circles there is a movement to reclaim some of the Ruist social and cultural norms that were lost through the May Fourth movement and the Cultural Revolution. One prominent stream of this movement is called *guóxué*, or National Studies, which has become a complete degree program at some schools with BA, MA and PhD opportunities. Promoters of this move-

ment advocate the importance of the study of Ruist traditional literature (the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics*, or *sishūwǔjīng*), emphasize moral education as the primary subject that should be studied from kindergarten through high school, and have published educational curriculum for these lower levels of learning. However, it has yet to catch on in most schools for several reasons. Perhaps primarily, the content of this kind of curriculum has not become a part of the university entrance examination and so is considered by most Chinese to be useless because it has no expedient significance. Secondly, there continues to be a general attitude among many Chinese that these ideas are part of China's past that may have influenced society but have no real significance for modern-day Chinese society. There is certainly a small minority that clings to elements of traditional China, but the great majority of Chinese view traditional Chinese thought, including Ruism, as archaic, too difficult to understand, and not relevant to life.

Another aspect of the academic expression is the role and question of Ruism as a philosophy. The question of whether China has philosophy has been around for a long time, and goes at least as far back as Hegel.² While some aspects of Ruism may not seem similar to contemporary philosophizing in Anglo-European philosophy departments, it has much in common with ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, talking about a "way of life" that places ethical and social demands on the individual. It is important for the uninitiated to understand that Ruist thought is as complex and diverse as anything that can be found in Anglo-European thought. While most people who have studied "Western history" or even "world history" taught in Anglo-European schools have heard of Master Kǒng (Confucius), Master Mèng (Mencius), and Lǎozǐ, this reduction is the equivalent to summarizing European philosophy by talking about Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. I'm sure Hegel would protest.

In Social Behavior

Another aspect of Ruism in Chinese society that has changed is the roles of men and women. It is now possible to broaden formerly patriarchal expressions to apply to men and women, for example, to read *zǐ* (子) as sons *and daughters* who ought to respect their *fù mu* (父 母), father *and mother*.³

On a more plebian level, the loss of a framework for appropriate social behavior and morality has left people groping for support, and some have rediscovered such a framework in the classical writings of Ruism. While "Christianity Fever" may be better known to readers of this article, an upsurge of "Confucius Fever" has simultaneously occurred. Yú Dān (于丹), a professor at Beijing Normal University, gave a series of TV lectures and later published a book on *The Analects*, first in Chinese (2006) and later in English (2009), titled *Confucius from the Heart*. Joseph Adler of Kenyon College describes it as "Wonton Soup for the [Chinese] Soul; that is, a comforting, non-challenging collection of bland moral clichés, carefully avoiding any political implications that might encourage dissent."⁴ If it is any indication of social impact and interest, according to Adler, the book sold three million copies in the first four months.

In Politics

We also ought to ask where we see Ruism in modern Chinese politics. A significant amount of Ruist thought centered upon political governance and often challenged corruption and abuse of authoritarian power. I doubt it would surprise anyone that its influence is hardly seen anywhere today. While it was the dominant political ideology for nearly 2,000 years, the multiple reforms and revolutions of the last 100 years have all but eliminated many of the most obvious expressions of this aspect of Ruism. The strange, brief appearance of a statue of Master Kǒng in Tiananmen Square in 2011 caught the interest of many China watchers. What does it mean that it was set up, and what do we make of its midnight disappearance four months later? It is widely speculated that such phenomena are the government's attempt at various propaganda maneuvers. It is worthwhile to put a little extra thought into the motivations behind these activities and to examine the depth of the expression. How much does this reflect Ruist transformative influence in the government, and how much of it is a superficial nod in a politically expedient direction?⁵

The Christian Response

Lastly, how should Christians respond to the increased interest in Ruism as a source for spiritual support? Yao Xinzhong, director of the China Institute and professor of religion at Kings College, London, writes, "Confucianism has survived the impact of Western culture and communist revolution and is being revived as a motive force for modernization . . . so that 'Confucianism is in no way a religion of the past, but rather a living, *contemporary spiritual power* that influences people directly or indirectly."⁶ We need to ask a few questions before taking this statement at face value. In what way has Ruism survived? How is it now manifested in the lives of Chinese people compared to 100 or 1,000 years ago? What is meant by Ruism as a religion, and how exactly does this "spiritual power" manifest itself?

In what seems to be an effort to reverse the impact of "Western" religion (usually an indirect way of saying Christianity, if it is not stated outright), some Ruist scholars, like Yao, are now talking about "transcendent aspects" of Ruism. Insisting that it is not a religion (*zōngjiào* 宗教), they call it a "religious humanism" and a philosophy with a religious nature (*zōngjiàoxìng* 宗教性). A spiritual equivalent is required to rebuff the popularity of Christianity and combat what some scholars continue to see as "Western invasions" and "Westernization," which include a smorgasbord of categories, including clothing, social norms, spiritual resources, political governance and so on. This may reflect the current political atmosphere, but I believe other, more significant, factors are at play. Along with the development of things like National Studies and China's growing international presence, for the last 100 years there has been a deep re-examination of identity among many Chinese. What does it mean to be Chinese? How much of the past should be held onto, and what defines "us" as a people? Given the strong cultural sense of "group identity," this form of ethnic *angst* is heightened.

[Continued on page 16](#)

Peoples of China

The New Confucianists: Contemporary Confucian Scholars

By He Tianyi

As the other articles in this issue show, the revival of Confucianism in China comes from a variety of sources including scholars resident in mainland China, Taiwan and overseas. Here is a brief introduction to some of the major players.

Jiang Qing

Jiang Qing was born in October 1953, in Jiangsu Province and grew up in Guiyang, Guizhou Province. His career was relatively straightforward. From 1978 through 1982, he studied law at Southwest University of Political Science and Law. From 1982 to 1988, he taught at the same university and in 1988 transferred to the Shenzhen Administration Institute where he worked until he took early retirement in 2001.

Returning to his childhood home, he established a Confucian academy (*shuyuan*) in remote Guiyang following the model of similar academies in the Song and Ming dynasties. As Daniel Bell writes, "The aim is to educate a community of friends and scholars in the Confucian classics and to plant the seeds of political Confucianism."* At the academy, Confucian classics are read in the morning, discussions of them follow in the afternoon, and in the evening the residents sing together. Jiang is a leader in the movement to have children read the Confucian classics aloud in school.

Jiang wears traditional Ming style clothing and greets visitors with clasped hands rather than a handshake. His published works are many and quite influential. They include *An Introduction to the Gongyang School of Political Confucianism*, in which he calls for balancing the tradition that merely emphasizes self-cultivation. He believes that the current political system is unstable since it does not rest upon the will of the people and, heavily influenced by the late-Qing scholar Kang Youwei, advocates a mildly authoritative government based on three equal houses of parliament. Among those who call for the establishment of Confucianism as the state religion, he is very prominent. Perhaps surprisingly, he has written a life of Christ. In his view, Christianity and other religions would have a role to play in a society in which Confucianism was recognized as paramount, as in dynastic times.

Gan Yang

Born in 1952 in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, Gan Yang was sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. In 1982, he earned a bachelor's degree from Heilongjiang University; in 1985 he graduated from the Institute of Foreign Philosophy of Peking University with a master of philosophy degree in Western philosophy. He is concurrently the Dean of Liberal Arts College, Director of General Education, Department of Philosophy of Zhongshan University and is a doctoral tutor in foreign philosophy. He also adjunct professor at Chongqing University. His major works include books on both Chinese and Western political philosophy, and he advocates a "rereading of the West" along with "a new understanding of China." He has guided a group of young scholars of Chinese to commit to a new understanding of the works of the West, including an in-depth study of Western thought and history and the history of the United States Constitution. Gan has become the author of some of China's most influential academic books today. A proponent also of a new understanding of China, he calls for a review of Chinese history and culture from the context of the history of Chinese civilization and not simply according to Western concepts.

Chen Lai

Born in Beijing in 1952, Chen Lai is dean of Tsinghua University Studies Institute, professor of Philosophy at Tsinghua University, a doctoral tutor, deputy director of the academic committee and a famous historian of philosophy. He holds master's and doctoral degrees in philosophy from Peking University. In 2012, he was appointed librarian of the Central Research Institute of Culture. Chen Lai has been a visiting professor at Harvard University and various universities in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan. His field of academic research includes the history of Chinese philosophy, the main research directions in Confucian philosophy, and modern Confucian philosophy. Chen and Tu Weiming, of Harvard University, talk about how Chinese culture can bring benefits to the whole world.

Yu Dan

Yu Dan, the now-famous woman who has shared her understandings of Confucius and Zhuangzi (or Master Zhuang) on television, is a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Beijing. She was a delegate to the 18th CCP Congress and is a noted contemporary cultural scholar. A professor at Beijing Normal University, she also serves as associate dean of arts and media as well as dean of the Institute for Cultural Innovation and Communication. Her lectures spread traditional culture widely into the popular mainstream and her books are runaway bestsellers both in China and elsewhere. She hopes to activate the classical perception of life in the spirit of the fundamental characteristics of the Chinese nation. She believes China's cultural heritage has broad implications for the cultural and educational life of the entire world.

Fang Dongmei

Fang Dongmei (1899-1977) sought to promote the spiritual values of Chinese culture as an academic subject. Coming from a



Peregrine de Vigo

Confucian family, Fang said that he is a Daoist by temperament with Buddhism as his religious faith. Educated in the West, he posits original Confucianism, original Daoism, Mahayana Buddhism and Confucianism as the four traditional Chinese philosophies. After serving in various universities in China before and during World War II, Fang joined the faculty of Nanjing University's Philosophy department. His thought passed through various stages, the last of which was a focus on the implementation of the Confucian view of life in the presence of modern materialism.

Du Weiming (Tu Weiming)

Du Weiming was born in 1940 in Kunming, China and grew up in Taiwan where he studied at Tunghai University. He is a major representative of the modern New Confucian school of thought. A senior research fellow at Harvard University's Asia Center, Du also serves as dean of the Peking University Institute of Advanced Studies in Humanities. He is vice president of the International Confucian Association and an honorary fellow of the International Institute of Philosophy (on behalf of China). In 1968 he earned a doctorate in history from Harvard University in East Asian linguistics. He taught at Princeton University and the University of California, Berkeley before becoming a professor of Chinese history and philosophy and religious studies at Harvard.

In his earlier years, Du Weiming focused on the interpretation of the Confucian tradition. From 1978 to the 1980s, the emphasis of his concern was the elucidation of the Confucian tradition of inner experience and the modern vitality of Confucianism. Since 1990, he has endeavored to expand the field of "cultural China," and to promote a "dialogue of civilizations," of "world ethics" and of related topics.

Cheng Zhongying

Professor Cheng Zhongying graduated from National Taiwan University in 1955, received a master's degree in philosophy in 1958 from the University of Washington and a PhD in philosophy from Harvard University in 1963. Dr. Cheng is a Chinese-American scholar who is considered to be one of the representatives of "the third generation of New Confucianism." Both a world renowned philosopher and management philosopher, Cheng is a professor of philosophy at the University of Hawaii.

Liu Shuxian: Pseudonym: Yin [Yan]

Liu was born in Shanghai in 1934. He received bachelor's and master's degrees in philosophy from National Taiwan University and a PhD in philosophy from Southern Illinois University. He specializes in the history of Western philosophy, cultural philosophy and Neo-Confucianism.

Liu Shuxian was influenced by Tang Chun Mou, Xu Fuguan and other contemporary New Confucianists; however, he did not consider himself a Neo-Confucianist. He said: "The important thing is not a noun but the essence of traditional Confucianism, which is Confucius and Mencius." He advocates maintaining the ideals of Confucius while trying to expound them in a modern sense, believing that Chinese traditional culture does not apply to many aspects of today's reality and is hindered by trying to hold onto its weak points, thus impeding progress.

He believes that the central essence of Confucianism is "inherent benevolence, cordial evidence." He interprets Confucius' "benevolence" as universal compassion. Benevolence is a creative, energetic and constantly pioneering spirit of power. Mr. Liu believes that the Confucian philosophy of life and mood is open, differing from a closed mind. It has been the core of Chinese culture for millennia. In order to illustrate the value of using modern ways of enriching Confucianism, Liu borrowed Western philosophy's categories of "transcendence" and "immanence" to analyze the Confucian category of "heaven."

Yu Yingshi

Born in 1930 in Tianjin, Yu first studied under the famous Confucianist, Qian Mu, in Hong Kong, then at Harvard where he received his PhD. Formerly at the University of Michigan, then Harvard, Yale and New Asia College, he is currently a professor at Princeton, as well as a member of the Academia Sinica in Taiwan. The author of dozens of books in Chinese and English, Yu believes that Confucianism is a living tradition with great potential as a critique of modern politics and society. He has received numerous distinguished awards for his scholarship and contributions to the study of the humanities.

Thomas In-sing Leung 梁燕城

Thomas Leung, born in Hong Kong in 1951, holds a master's degree in philosophy from the Chinese University of Hong Kong and a PhD from the University of Hawaii. He served as senior lecturer at the Hong Kong Baptist University before moving to Canada where he now lives. He is a commentator and talk show host for Chinese programming over Canadian radio station AM 1470. The author of more than twenty books in Chinese and English in which he explores Chinese philosophy and Christianity, he lectures worldwide and is an adjunct professor at a number of universities in China. He is the founder and president of Culture Regeneration Research Society (CRRS) and editor-in-chief of Cultural China (an academic quarterly). He seeks to promote greater mutual understanding between intellectuals in China and the West, a clearer understanding of Christianity among Chinese intellectuals, leadership development, and caring for the poor.

*Daniel Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society*, Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 188-89.

He Tianyi is a research assistant for Global China Center.

Book Reviews: The Christian Faith in Chinese Culture

Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ by Ralph R. Covell

and

Confronting Confucian Understandings of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation—A Systematic Theological Analysis of the Basic Problems in the Confucian-Christian dialogue

by Paulos Huang

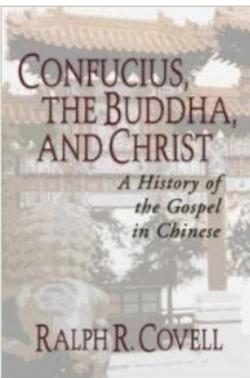
Reviewed by G. Wright Doyle

Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ by Ralph R. Covell. Wipf & Stock, 2004 (reprint, original publication date, 1986), 304 pp. ISBN-10: 1592445330; ISBN-13: 978-1592445332; paperback, \$26.10 at amazon.com.



[Les Whittle](#)

In this book, Covell tried to analyze outstanding attempts to “bring the Christian faith and Chinese culture together,” and the focus “is on the shape and nature of the message that has been preached in China—the gospel in Chinese. It is an intellectual history, a history of Christian ideas in Chinese garb” (xiv-xv). He also includes a discussion of the “‘paramessage,’ those symbolic signals of gospel messengers that spoke more loudly than their words” (xv).



Beginning with the assumption (in 1986) that the presentation of the gospel in China had “failed,” Covell asks for the reason, and whether missionaries “were insensitive to the Chinese context, unwilling to search for the key that would open the Chinese mind and heart?” (4).

He begins with a brief description of the Chinese “mind” which he finds to be originally, and to this day, religious, with concepts of heaven, the will of heaven, the moral meaning of life and of the universe, sacrifice and ancestor worship. Of course, the “superior” men saw religious rites as secular in meaning and purpose, useful for promoting social harmony and self-cultivation, but the masses fully believed in the spirit world behind the ceremonies. Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism not only co-existed peacefully but interpenetrated each other so that it would be hard for the average person to define precisely which tradition he followed. The various religious “strands have been worked into an interfaith collage that has swallowed up their original roots and identity”(14).

At the same time, Chinese have always been basically humanists, seeking harmonious relationships at home, work and in society. “They have always placed primary emphasis on human interests and human relationships” (10). With the five cardinal virtues in the five key relationships as their guide, the Chinese “have always been a highly moral people” (11).

Of prime importance for the history of Christianity in China has been the assumption that fundamental loyalty must be given to the emperor as the Son of Heaven. The greatest offence is not theoretical heresy but any questioning of the supreme governmental authority.

Against that background, and in that context, Covell traces the history of the gospel in China, from the Nestorians up to about 1980. Major themes include ways in which foreign missionaries and then Chinese Christians of various types tried to express the gospel in terms and through forms which were, or were not, readily accessible to the people they hoped to reach.

He hesitates to fault the Nestorians since the reasons for their failure are impossible to discern with clarity. The Jesuits receive praise for coming as learners and in weakness, with no political power behind them, for seeking to adapt the gospel to Confucian ideas and rituals as much as possible, and for being willing to pay the price for their commitment. While he admires the heroic efforts of the early Protestant missionaries, he finds their connection with the opium trade, and with Western power in general, to be an almost fatal one with repercussions down to the present. He even dares to criticize Robert Morrison’s fateful decision to work for the East India Company, something which I think we ought to consider seriously.

Some Protestant missionaries, followed by some more liberal Chinese Protestants, tried to accommodate the Christian message to Confucian concepts and even rituals, an effort which Covell admires. He laments the lost opportunity that resulted from missionaries’ refusal to nurture the proto- or quasi-Christian notions of the Taiping rulers. Two chapters on Buddhism and Christianity provide rich food for thought.

In the twentieth century, Covell sees two trends: the “gospel of Confucian activism,” represented by those who sought to reform society, through revolution if necessary; and the “Daoist” gospel of pietism, expressed by fundamentalist and evangelical Chinese leaders who sought individual salvation, without (Covell claims) regard for changing society. The dramatic changes which have taken place since the communist revolution in 1949 are also traced with balance and overall fairness, though perhaps with slightly more sympathy for the Three Self Patriotic Movement and its supporters.

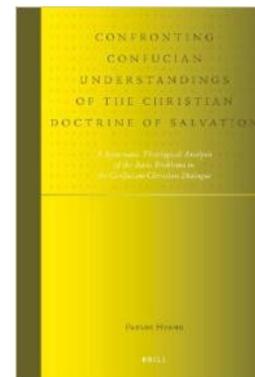
Covell’s well-researched, clearly-written and comprehensive volume has become a sort of classic, one which everyone wishing to communicate Christianity among the Chinese should read and ponder. At certain points I did think that he veered a bit too far in the direction of accommodation and that his judgments of those who opposed such moves seemed to be a little harsh. Lack of biblical support weakens the case for the positions of which he approves. On the other hand, I fully endorse his conclusion that reliance on Western political power and connections has vitiated foreign Christians’ work in China, even up to the present. I applaud his strong advocacy of greater humility, a learner’s attitude, de-linking from any outside money, political power or protection, and patient endurance by foreign Christians living in China.

Confronting Confucian Understandings of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation—A Systematic Theological Analysis of the Basic Problems in the Confucian-Christian dialogue by Paulos Huang. Edita Prima Oy, Helsinki, Finland, 2006, 352 pages. ISBN 952-92-0895-2. (In 2009, the revised English version was republished by E. J. Brill and the Chinese version in Beijing by *Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe*.)

Confronting Confucian Understandings of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation will now be required reading for anyone seeking to understand why Chinese intellectuals have accepted, rejected, or modified the Christian message since the time of Matteo Ricci. Paulos Huang has given us a fine, clearly-organized study with a great deal of thought-provoking findings and suggestions.

As the author points out at the very beginning, Confucian-Christian dialogue is crucial in today's China, where personal and national regeneration are being sought with increasing intensity by intellectuals who still greatly value the Confucian tradition in Chinese culture.

Huang's aim is to explain how different types of Confucianists have understood, and responded to, the Christian doctrine of salvation. He chose to focus on this one doctrine because it is the main "bone of contention" between Christianity and Confucianism. "The notion of a God who saves and, indeed, the entire soteriology of Christianity, is one of the main differences between Christianity and Confucianism. The whole idea of 'salvation' is unknown in Confucianism but is essential in Christianity" (17). This doctrine also impinges upon other major concepts, such as the nature of God and of man (ontology), the way(s) of knowing truth (epistemology), the role of virtuous conduct (ethics) and our final destiny (eschatology).



After explaining the main features of Christian soteriology, Huang moves into the heart of the book, which is a careful analysis of three aspects of the doctrine of salvation: the nature of the Savior (God, Christ); the nature and status of humanity; and the means of salvation. He then gives a nuanced presentation of five different Confucian responses to each aspect of the Christian doctrine: Ancient Confucianism (Confucius, Mencius); Neo-Confucianism; Cultural-Nationalist Confucianism; Modern (including "Boston") Confucianism; and Modern Christian Confucianism.

He finds a wide gap between Ancient Confucianism and later Confucianism, though there is a persistent core throughout. Since Neo-Confucianism, the influence of Buddhism and Daoism has produced an impersonal ontology and a pervasive monism that cannot accept fundamental tenets of Christianity, such as the Creator-creature distinction and the fallenness of human nature.

At the end of his study, Huang observes that there are still substantial problems in any dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity. At root, there is a "hidden difference" between the two. The difference between the Chinese and the Christian systems of ethics, not only because Christianity holds human nature to be corrupted but also because traditional Chinese culture has no concept of a sovereign God.

There are four related obstacles. (1) "Theological perspective: the monistic unity between Heaven and humanity" that Confucianists believe in cannot be reconciled with the Christian Creator-creature distinction. Huang thinks that a proper understanding of the image of God in man as relational, rather than substantial, may help to bridge this gap.

(2) "Spiritual perspective: Christianity as spiritual opium" based on an Enlightenment skepticism that considers belief in God to be unreasonable, even irrational. Huang sees a growing willingness among Chinese intellectuals to realize that this type of rationalism is based on weak premises and does not produce individual or cultural regeneration.

(3) "The Political perspective: Christianity as an element of political turmoil. Cultural Nationalists have asserted that Christianity is the tool of Western imperialism to invade China." If Chinese intellectuals can be convinced that Christians believe in obeying earthly rulers and do not aim to subvert the state, this objection may be dropped.

(4) "The Ethical perspective: the Christian concept of God as conflicting with Confucian ethics. Christians take God as central to their faith, and secular things are meaningful only in the sense that they are related to the divine. Confucians, however, lay much emphasis on this—worldliness and human ethics." Here Huang is quite hopeful, for Christian ethical norms are in some ways quite similar to Confucian standards and do not suffer from some of the oppressive tendencies of traditional Confucian morality.

Finally, the author finds that there are five good reasons why Chinese intellectuals have accepted Christianity: the enthusiasm of Chinese Christian believers; the attractive personalities of many Western missionaries; the respect for, and use of, Confucian classics by many missionaries in their presentation of the Christian message; the dialogical approach that has replaced a more confrontational stance of earlier years; and the employment of natural reasoning by missionaries and Chinese converts, which appeals to the rationalistic bent of Confucianism.

This reviewer had only a few questions about Huang's argument, such as whether *Shang Di* is really to be "assimilated" to the God of the Bible and whether the Thomistic "proofs" for the existence of God are that useful. Otherwise, this book is a superb study of a crucial subject.

G. Wright Doyle, PhD., is the founder and director of China Institute (www.chinainst.org) and director of Global China Center (www.globalchinacenter.org.) He is the author of *Reaching Chinese Worldwide*, co-author of *China: Ancient Culture, Modern Society*, editor/translator of *Wise Man from the East: Lit-sen Chang (Zhang Lisheng)*, and English editor of the *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*.

Resource Corner

Resources for Learning More about Confucianism and Christianity



Joann Pittman

Translations

Ames, Roger T., and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*. New York: Ballantine Books, a division of Random House Publishing Company, 1999. Chinese text and English translation with some commentary. Also available in Kindle version.

Chan, Wit-sen, *A Source book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963. Translations of key texts with introductions and some commentary.

*Huang, Chichung, *The Analects of Confucius: A Literal Translation with an Introduction and Notes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. Possibly the best translation of the *Analects*.

Ivanhoe, Philip, and Bryan W. Van Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2001.

Legge, James, *The Chinese Classics, with a translation, critical and exegetical notes, prolegomena, and copious indexes*. Volumes I & II, containing the *Analects*, *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *The Works of Mencius*. Reprinted from the last Oxford edition by Southern Materials Center, Inc., Taipei, Taiwan, 1985. Separate volumes are available in several print and digital versions. The translation is a bit free and outdated but still valuable, especially with the Chinese text in large characters, introduction and commentary.

Confucius

*Chen, Jingpan, *Confucius as a Teacher: Philosophy of Confucius with Special Reference to Its Educational Implications*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1990. A marvelous treatment of Confucius' teaching as well as its relation to the other classics of Confucianism, both before and after Confucius.

Chin, Anping, *Confucius: A Life of Thought and Politics*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008. Meticulously researched account of Confucius' life, thought and legacy. See a review at <http://www.globalchinacenter.org/analysis/chinese-history-culture/confucius-our-contemporary.php>.

Confucius and Confucianism

H.G. Creel, *Confucius and the Chinese Way*. New York: Harper Torchbook, 1960. A standard treatment.

Bell, Daniel A., *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008. See the review at www.globalchinacenter.org.

Doyle, G. Wright and Peter Yu, *China: Ancient Culture, Modern Society*. New York: Strategic Book Publishing, 2009. Chapters 17, 18, 27.

Goldin, Paul. R, *Confucianism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, Ancient Philosophies series, 2011. An extremely helpful, brief introduction to the entire tradition from Confucius to the present.

Confucianism and Christianity

*Chang, Lit-sen, *Asia's Religions: Christianity's Momentous Encounter with Paganism*. China Horizon, distributed by P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1999. Chapters 2 and 3. See the summary of Chang's treatment of Confucianism in this issue of *ChinaSource*.

_____, *Wise Man from the East: Lit-sen Chang (Zhang Lisheng): Critique of Indigenous Theology; Critique of Humanism*. Edited and translated by G. Wright Doyle; *Critique of Humanism* translated by Samuel Ling. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, an imprint of Wipf & Stock, 2013. Chapter 6. See the introduction to this book at <http://www.globalchinacenter.org/analysis/christianity-in-china/critique-of-indigenous-chinese-theology.php>

Ching, Julia, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study*. New York: Harper and Row, 1977. A wide-ranging introduction from a Roman Catholic point of view.

Covell, Ralph, *Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ: A History of the Gospel in Chinese*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986. See the review in this issue of *ChinaSource*.

Doyle, G. Wright, *Reaching Chinese Worldwide*. North Carolina: LightMessages, 2013. Discusses "points of contact" between various aspects of Chinese culture (including Confucianism) and Christianity and how Christians might use these as an invitation to dialogue.

*Hancock, Christopher, *Christianity and Confucianism: Traditions in Dialogue*. Forthcoming.

*Huang, Paulos, *Confronting the Confucian Understandings of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation: A systematic theological analysis of the basic problems in the Confucian-Christian dialogue*. Leiden: Brill, 2009. A masterful treatment of the similarities and differences between the two views of salvation. See the review in this issue of *ChinaSource*.

Poceski, Mario, *Introducing Chinese Religions*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Includes an appendix, glossary, bibliography and

index. See a review at <http://www.globalchinacenter.org/analysis/christianity-in-china/the-religious-context-of-chinese-christianity-1.php>

Ruokanen, Miikka and Paulos Huang, editors, *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. See a review at <http://www.globalchinacenter.org/analysis/christianity-in-china/book-review-christianity-and-chinese-culture-confucianism.php>.

Wen, Haiming, "Confucius: Cultural Sage, Philosopher and Religious Figure," *China Today*, February, 2011, 70-72. See a review at <http://www.globalchinacenter.org/analysis/christianity-in-china/confucianism-and-christianity-looming-confrontation.php>.

Yang, Fenggang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation and Adhesive Identities*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.

Yao, Xinzong, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study of Jen and Agape*. Brighton, England: Sussex Academic Press (distributed in the United States by International Specialized Book Services, Inc., Portland, Oregon), 1997. A very detailed, careful and helpful comparison of these two traditions' teaching on the heart of ethics. Bottom line: despite similarities, Confucianism is essentially humanistic while Christianity is theistic.

* Especially recommended

A Chinese Christian Critique of Confucianism Continued from page 8

now . . . ; the whole system of his teachings was centered in the realm of the things temporal and not of the things eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). Confucianism, therefore, lacks any teaching on individual resurrection, judgment, eternal life, a new heaven and a new earth. There is no hope beyond the grave.

Chang concludes that "in the end, Confucianism is a form of humanism. Consequently, 'Salvation belongs unto the Lord' (Psalm 3:8), not to Confucius. . . . The Chinese people's efforts for national regeneration will be futile, unless they repent and go back to God, the fountain of living waters and our hope of glory" (57).

¹ For more on Lit-sen Chang, see *Wise Man from the East: Lit-sen Chang (Zhang Lisheng)*, edited by G. Wright Doyle.

² Lit-sen Chang, *Asia's Religions: Christianity's Momentous Encounter with Paganism*, p. 38. All quotations will be from this book and are referred to hereafter in the text only by page number in parentheses.

³ His son has told me that Chang ceased all ancestor worship activity the day after he became a Christian. Chang has written a separate book on this subject.

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Conclusion

So, what of Ruism? Is it dead? Far from it. Is it the leading force of the nation, guiding decisions from the top leaders down to the "man on the street"? Hardly. It occupies a fuzzy place in between. What we experience today is "post-"China—post-Ruist, post-Marxist, post-modern—but "post-" anything implies a focus on the past, emphasizing what once was but now is not. What does the future hold for Ruism and for China? I think it is safe to say it will not die out, but neither will it be able to reclaim the status it held for ages.

¹ Robert Eno coined this term in English to distinguish it from traditions in Chinese contexts (particularly in the 19th century) that "worship Master Kǒng." According to Eno, a better way of understanding the Rú tradition is to consider them as "skilled ritualists." This understanding opens up potential for broader interpretations of the term and allows for new developments and syntheses with other systems of thought, such as Daoism, Buddhism, or even Christianity. Though most scholars continue to use the Latinized form (Confucianism), probably because it is more familiar due to historical factors, a small number of scholars have picked up on Eno's term. For example, Lauren Pfister at Hong Kong Baptist University and Diane Obenchain at Calvin College regularly use some form of Rú, such as Rú scholar or Ruist in English contexts.

² As a side note, this has not always been the case. The Jesuits, who initiated the first in-depth intellectual discussions between Ruism and European ideas, found much that was comparable to everything they had studied in Christian, Greek and Roman philosophy.

³ However, it should also be noted that some scholars argue that women were not entirely excluded from all filial acts in older forms of Ruism. For example, in *The Lúnyǔ (The Analects)*, Master Kǒng says, "A person should always be aware of the age of his father and mother. It is both a cause for joy and for anxiety."

⁴ Joseph Adler, "Confucianism in China Today," Pearson Living Religions Forum talk, New York, April 14, 2011. Transcript online: <http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Writings/Confucianism%20Today.pdf>

⁵ A New York Times article from February 13, 2014 highlights the most recent instance of this kind of activity. "Mr. Xi said the party leadership was preparing a policy document 'to promote traditional values, implant new social mores and a cohesive national spirit, and enhance cultural soft power.'" While I have nothing in particular against traditional values and social mores, if they are thought of merely as a means to a different end the point has been missed entirely. http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/13/xi-touts-communist-party-as-defender-of-confucius-virtues/?_php=true&type=blogs&_php=true&type=blogs&r=1

⁶ Yao Xinzong, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study of Jen and Agape*. Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 1996, p. 19. Emphasis original.

Peregrine de Vigo has lived in central China for eight years and spent the last four studying Chinese philosophy. He will complete an MA in Chinese philosophy in June.



Professor Yang demonstrates convincingly that the influence of Confucianism continues to grow almost daily. For example, President Xi Jinping recently touted the Chinese Communist Party “as a defender of ancient virtues, epitomized by Confucius and his collected teachings, *The Analects*.” As Professor Kevin Yao points out, the sense of being threatened, which is felt by some very fundamentalist Confucians, could lead to serious conflict between Christianity and Confucianism. Meanwhile, most people in China, though not consciously calling themselves “Confucianists,” exhibit “Confucian” beliefs and behavior in their daily lives, as Peregrine de Vigo shows in his creative journey through “Chinatown.”

These articles are intended to whet your appetite; the materials featured in the [Resources](#) section will guide you further into a fascinating, complex and enormously important subject.

¹ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 44.

² Yang, 51.

³ Yang, 154.

⁴ NYTimes Sinosphere blog, February 13, 2014, [Xi Touts Communist Party as Defender of Confucius’s Virtues](#), by Chris Buckley

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Contemporary Confucian Revival and Its Interactions with Christianity in China Continued from page 4

existence of some sporadic, friendly, interactions and gestures of good will between these great traditions, I have to say that distrust, hostility and rivalry still make up the dominant tone in their ongoing encounters. Further complicated by the meddling of the secular Chinese political forces for its own political gain, a genuine intertraditional dialogue remains a dream. For the Chinese church, how to witness faithfully and effectively in a religiously pluralistic society is going to be a major challenge in the twenty-first century.

¹ Parts of this essay were presented on different occasions in Boston during September and October 2013.

² See C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1961), chapter xii.

³ See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

An expert on Christianity in China, Kevin Yao, Th.D., is Associate Professor of World Christianity and Asian Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Intercessory Notes

Please pray

1. That Chinese believers will be able to discern the truth taught in the Scriptures and not become confused with humanistic teaching.
2. For the Chinese church, as it seeks the manner of faithfully and effectively witnessing in a religiously pluralistic society now and in coming years and decades.
3. For Chinese scholars, leaders and pastors as they discern how to teach their people regarding the relationship between Christianity and Confucianism.
4. That the Chinese people will hear and understand the truth of the gospel, then put their faith in Jesus Christ.



Interview conducted by G. Wright Doyle.

Confucian Comeback Continued from page 6

CS: What recommendations do you have for Christians?

PY: We should be aware of different kinds of Confucianism in China and show our sympathy and empathy in social and cultural contexts. To engage those who are hostile to Christianity in debates is fine, to point out where they are wrong regarding historical facts and logical fallacies. But we should also work with those who are open-minded, stressing that the two are not in competition. We can be open-minded about integrating Confucianism and Christianity to benefit not only China but also other societies. We need a multi-dimensional approach.

At present, Confucianism is not a civil religion, but it could be. In that case, however, it has to take Christianity into consideration. Together, we can contribute to building a new civil religion which is not only for China but also for the larger world. Some Confucian fundamentalists treat Christianity as a competitor, but that is not necessary.