



Benjamin A. Elman, John B. Duncan, and Herman Ooms, eds., *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam*

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NOWADAYS IT IS RARE to find a fat, attractive, well-produced book crammed with useful information for \$24.95. It is even rarer to find such a book that is well written and accessible, especially when the contents derive from conferences. But in this case it is precisely what you get: 16 well informed and well written articles by 15 authors, plus a useful introduction and an extensive bibliography. It is the sort of book that you will keep coming back to, according to need or interest, and be glad you have it sitting on your shelf, rather than one you will plough through, serially, from cover to cover.

The contents are described as the result of an attempt “to rethink in historical terms the contemporary resurgence of public interest in Confucianism in the light of social, economic, and political changes in East and Southeast Asia.” This rethinking, according to the Preface, focuses on “the role of Confucian civilisation in Asia since 1200” and “the usual narrative of Confucian China and the ‘Little Chinas’ of Japan and Korea and Vietnam before 1900.” The main thrust of the papers is to emphasize the heterogeneity of the beliefs, practices, and institutions that have fallen under the Confucian label, their intellectually and politically contested nature, and the ways in which they have been adapted to differing circumstances in each country. Uniformity and conformity to a narrow set of ideas and values certainly are not the dominant impressions the readers comes away with.

Every project has its limits, even big ones such as this, and the above quotations give some indication of what they are. First, and most obviously, it is a rethink of Confucianism by historians. So although the point of departure for the exercise was contemporary public interest in Confucianism, we must not be too disappointed if few of the authors have much to say directly about contemporary developments. (The main exceptions are John Duncan, Benjamin Elman, James Palais, and K. T. Taylor.) Sometimes we have to make the connections ourselves. One of the general conclusions to be drawn from the collection, clearly, is that because the Confucian heritage is

so multifaceted its influence today is likely to be much more varied and subtle than is normally assumed. Ezra Pound once declared (*Guide to Kulchur*, Ch. 8) regarding the Church of Rome, “This much I believe to be also true: there is more civilization lying around unused in the crannies, zenanas, interstices of that dusty and baroque fabric than in all the other institutions of the occident.” Substitute “orient” for “occident” and you have a pretty accurate comment about Confucianism.

Second, since the focus is on the period 1200 to 1900 we cannot expect much discussion of earlier developments, and therefore to complain about the lack of treatment of the late Spring and Autumn and Warring States Period (500–221 BCE) would be perverse. Nonetheless, intellectually, the corporate decision to ignore the early period is surprising. In many ways the early period is more modern, closer to the present, than the period starting 1200. In my experience, anyway, this is a common response of students taking courses on ancient China: almost invariably they find the period surprisingly familiar, its intellectual, social, and political preoccupations easy to understand. And if (primarily Western) students find it easy to relate ancient Chinese schools of thought—including “Confucianism”—to contemporary experience, then maybe East Asian intellectuals and politicians also find it easy, even if not always for the same sorts of reasons. It is useful to recall, for example, that Confucius and many other intellectuals in the multi-state system of pre-Qin China attached great importance to personal freedom and political choice, which in their time were the result, not of a multi-party political system, but rather the opportunity (and responsibility) to chose in which state they would live. As the “Collection of Sayings” in the Fourth Century BCE Confucian texts found at Guodian in 1993 states, “The ruler/subject relationship...is one of choice.”

Where individual authors do bring ancient China into their discussion it is illuminating. Alexander Woodside, for example, in his excellent study “Historical Agendas of Vietnamese Confucianism,” suggests that Vietnamese intellectuals from the fifteenth century on found the political division and intellectual climate of pre-imperial China more relevant to their own concerns than did intellectuals elsewhere in East Asia. “The Vietnamese elite never felt the same need as the Chinese upper class for a metaphysical counterattraction to Buddhism that would restore their confidence in homegrown philosophical thought. In addition, they remained impressed by the various Vietnamese polities’ seeming environmental similarities to the small political units of the multistate Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods...” (117–18). Benjamin Elman, in his paper “‘Confucianism’ in ‘Neo-Confucianism’ in Chinese History,” explains some of the contemporary East Asian interest in Confucianism by referring to Jia Yi’s (201–169 BCE) famous essay “The Faults of Qin,” in which the Han scholar argued that the Qin empire collapsed as quickly as it did because its rulers were preoccupied with state power and conquest, and failed to consider the wellbeing of their people. In Jia Yi’s words, Qin “failed to rule with humanity and righteousness and to realise that the power to attack and the power to retain what one has thereby won are not the same.” The “faults of socialism,” Elman suggests, are analogous to the

“faults of Qin,” and members of East Asian elites have liked to see their historical mission in terms not unlike those used by Jia Yi in relation to the early Han rulers: replacing a harsh and ruthless authoritarian regime with strong, effective government that has the people’s welfare at heart, building a society that is prosperous, harmonious, and, above all, moral.

But let’s not grumble about a perceived neglect of ancient China when the collection has so much else to offer. In the Preface, the editors boast that this is the first time in English that Confucianism has been looked at “in such a sustained light” and “in terms of its complex role in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam,” as well as numerous disciplinary perspectives. They are right to feel pleased with the outcome, for the range of topics is wide indeed and the scholarship impressive. Readers unfamiliar with the history of any one or more of the countries covered will find that the papers on offer here will enable them rapidly to reduce the scope of their ignorance. I know I did. Want to know more about competition for influence and power by scholars in Song China, the range of opinions regarding human nature in Tokugawa Japan, gender and language politics in Choson Korea, or Confucian narratives in premodern and modern Vietnam? Or how about Confucianism as a tool for political legitimation in Vietnam, its struggle find a role in South Korean economic development, or Confucian attitudes towards footbinding in late imperial China? Perhaps you are more interested in the ways Confucian ritual varied in each country? It is all there.

One curious aspect of the collection is that the contributors have been segregated by sex, with all the articles by women in a section called “Sociocultural Variations: Medicine, Gender, and Ritual” and those by men in two other sections called “Pre-modern Appropriations” and “Modern Reappropriations.” It seems safe to conclude that this was fortuitous rather than an editorial affirmation of the Confucian principle that men and women should maintain a respectable distance, though it does imply a gendered division of academic labor. Fortunately, in any case, the reader does not have to work or worry about the rules of decorum and it is able to interact with all these informative, stimulating scholars indiscriminately.

Aat Vervoorn
The Australian National University