

## Introduction

### Confucian studies East and West

If we were to characterize in one word the Chinese way of life for the last two thousand years, the word could be ‘Confucian’. No other individual in Chinese history has so deeply influenced the life and thought of his people, as a transmitter, teacher and creative interpreter of the ancient culture and literature and as a moulder of the Chinese mind and character.

(de Bary, *et al.*, 1960, vol. 1: 15)

At the end of the sixteenth century, an Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) arrived in China. Ricci soon realised that the first task for him should not be to win over a great number of people to conversion and baptism, but instead to try to secure a stable and respectable position for himself within Chinese society. So Ricci and his fellow missionaries strenuously attempted to integrate themselves into the community. The Jesuits saw a similarity between Christianity and Buddhism – both were religions from the West – and therefore they presented themselves as ‘Monks from the West’, shaving their heads and changing their clothes to Buddhist robes in order to win the support from the Chinese, just as they thought the Buddhists had done a thousand years before. However, it was not too long before the missionaries realised that the Buddhists were not so highly regarded as they had at first imagined. They discovered that in fact it was Confucian scholars who were the true social elite of Chinese society. Accordingly the Jesuits changed their habits once more, wearing Confucian clothes and growing their hair long. In this way they created a new image of ‘Scholars of the West’. Ricci continued with his Chinese studies, paying great attention to Confucian texts, and began to be regarded as a highly respected western scholar (*xi shi*). Rule says:

The decisive change from the dress and role of Buddhist monks to those of Confucian literati was accomplished in May 1595 when Ricci left Shao-chou for Nanking, but it had been in preparation for a considerable time . . . Matteo Ricci first discovered and then

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adapted himself to Confucianism in the course of his thirty-odd years  
in China. (Rule, 1986: 15, 26)

Ricci became friends with a number of Chinese scholars and officials who introduced him to the court. He and his fellow missionaries sent back hundreds of letters, travel reports, treatises and translations to Europe which made a major contribution to the introduction of Confucius and Confucianism to the West. Although there had been some knowledge of China and the Chinese, until Ricci and other Christian missionaries began their work, Confucianism had hardly been studied in Europe. The serious way in which the missionaries treated Confucian doctrines suggested that as Christianity was to the Europeans, so Confucianism was to the Chinese.

Ricci and his fellow missionaries clearly studied Confucian classics as part of their missionary strategy and their presentation of the Confucian tradition may indeed be taken as a 'Jesuit creation' (Rule, 1986). However, by introducing Confucianism to Europe, Ricci became one of the pioneers of Confucian Studies in the West. The Jesuit version of Confucianism played a key role in generating Sinophilism among the learned community in Europe and some Enlightenment thinkers and philosophers, such as Voltaire and François Quesnay in France, Leibniz and Christian Wolff in Germany, and Matthew Tindal in England thereby became fascinated by Confucian ethical and social doctrines. For some of them, the Confucian political blueprint that the state was ruled 'in accordance with moral and political maxims enshrined in the Confucian classics' appeared to provide an ideal prototype for a modern state (Dawson, 1964: 9). Since then, Christian missionaries and those influenced by Christian images of the eastern tradition have continuously played an important role in the introduction of Confucianism to the West and in promoting the interpretation of Confucian doctrine within a Christian or European framework. 'In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', according to Karl Jaspers, 'it was not rare for Protestant missionaries in China to be so overwhelmed by the profundity of Chinese thought that they would reverse their role and return to the West, so to speak, as "Chinese missionaries"' (Jaspers, 1962: 143–4). The twentieth century has seen a rise in the number of sinologists, philosophers, anthropologists and historians taking part in Confucian Studies. As a result, Confucian Studies has gradually become a discrete discipline and is now an established subject

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not only within the subject of Asian Studies but also in the areas of philosophy and religious studies.

Modern scholars from West and East introduce and examine the Confucian tradition from the standpoints both of insiders and of outsiders. More recent examples of preeminent scholars in the West who take their points of view roughly from within Confucianism but also critically examine the tradition include, to name but a few, Wing-tsit Chan (1901–94), Wm. T. de Bary, Tu Wei-ming, Cheng Chung-ying, Roger T. Ames and Rodney L. Taylor. These scholars have not only introduced Confucian Studies to western students and readers, but have also developed and enriched the Confucian tradition itself. In their hands, Confucianism is not merely treated as an old political ideology or a socio-economic system, but primarily as a religious or philosophic tradition, open both to the modern world and to the future. These scholars have striven to establish a strong link between the past and the present, a healthy interaction between the Chinese tradition and other great traditions in the world. Their influence on western students of China and Confucianism is enormous, and some of them have created a new image of Confucian masters. This can be seen from Sommer's testimony in relation to Wing-tsit Chan, a prominent translator and researcher of Confucian Learning, that 'some of us students secretly suspected that, in some mysterious way, Professor Chan *was* Chu Hsi [a great Neo-Confucian master]' (Sommer, 1995: ix).

Two main problems engage Confucian Studies in the West. The first problem is that after about 400 years of study and research, Confucianism in the West is still a subject which only involves a small group of scholars. This situation is due in part to highly scholarly Confucian works being less accessible to students pursuing general philosophical and religious studies. This problem is one of the major factors in the slow development and expansion of Confucian Studies in the West. The second problem arises from methodology and the ways in which Confucianism is introduced and studied. Confucianism has been presented variously in the hands of different scholars, which causes further confusion among readers. These two problems are both caused by, and also increase, the gap between Confucianism as it is perceived in the West and the Confucianism understood in the East. More and more scholars have realised the extent of these problems and have sought to solve them in one way or another. For example, in a book entitled *Thinking Through*

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*Confucius*, David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames attempt to return to the pre-suppositions that sustain the Confucian tradition through reinterpreting Confucius. They comment that

The primary defect of the majority of Confucius' interpreters – those writing from within the Anglo-European tradition as well as those on the Chinese side who appeal to Western philosophic categories – has been the failure to search out and articulate those distinctive presuppositions which have dominated the Chinese tradition.

(Hall & Ames, 1987: 1)

Much of East Asia was once under the influence of Confucianism, but this has waned, and Confucianism has clearly lost its dominant position there. Even so, despite all criticism, Confucianism still has an important role to play in East Asian philosophy, religion, politics, ethics and culture. Consequently, one of the major tasks facing all scholars of Confucian studies is how to communicate between traditional values and modern applications, between eastern and western Confucian scholarship.

**Stages of the Confucian evolution**

Confucianism is primarily a Chinese, or more precisely, East Asian, tradition. To understand Confucianism as a way of life or as a traditional system of values, we have to go to its homeland and find out how it came into being and how it was transformed. A popular method that is used in presenting the Chinese Confucian tradition is to divide its history into as many periods as there are Chinese dynasties. In this way Confucianism becomes part of a much more complicated history and the Confucian progress is mixed up with the general changes in political, social, economic, religious and cultural life. On many occasions Confucianism gained strength and positive influence from these changes, yet on other occasions it suffered from the breakdown of the social fabric and responded by becoming either more flexible or more dogmatic. Throughout the history of the Chinese dynasties, Confucianism changed and adapted itself to new political and social demands, and these changes and adaptations are as important as the teachings of the early Confucian masters.

It can be said in general that the advance of Confucian Learning was directly related to the replacement of one dynasty with another. The link between Confucianism and dynastic government was formally forged during the Former Han Dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE) when it was promoted as

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the state ideology. Since then, right up until the beginning of the twentieth century, Confucian scholar–officials were influential in laying down the basis for government, and the amount of influence exerted by Confucian scholars more or less depended on the patronage of those people who were in a position to implement the teachings. None the less it does not follow that Confucianism was always a shadow of political change. Much of the development of Confucian Learning was largely independent of imperial patronage and many of its schools remained outside the political milieu and presented a direct challenge to the establishment. Confucianism was not merely a passive tool of government. Rather, it functioned, to a considerable extent, as a watchdog for ruling activities, endeavouring to apply its principles to shaping and reshaping the political structure. There were doctrinal elements that sustained the development of Confucian schools and there were also spiritual reasons for Confucian masters to direct their learning away from the current actions and politics of those in power. In this sense de Bary is right when he points out that

It is probably to the Confucian ethos and Confucian scholarship that the Chinese dynastic state owed much of its stability and bureaucratic continuity . . . Yet the reverse was not equally true; Confucianism was less dependent on the state for survival than the state on it. Even though affected by the rise and fall of dynasties, Confucianism found ways to survive.  
 (de Bary, 1988: 110)

If Confucianism is not simply a shadow of dynastic change, then how should we present a historical perspective of it? When discussing the history of Chinese philosophy as a whole, Fung Yu-lan (1895–1990), one of the great Modern New Confucians, divided this history into two ages, the creative and the interpretative. He calls the creative age, from Confucius to the Prince of Huainan (d. 122 BCE), the Period of the Philosophers (*zi xue*); and names the interpretative age, from Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE) to Kang Youwei (1858–1927 CE), the Period of Classical Learning (*jing xue*) (Fung, 1953: 2). This two-part division reveals some essential characteristics of the development of the Confucian tradition. The creative period represents the initial formulation of the early teachings into a cohesive tradition while the interpretative period illustrates the expansion of the tradition in line with social and political developments that necessarily take place over the centuries. However, if we simply apply this two-fold pattern to the history of Confucianism, then

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our perspective would be seriously limited. By merely singling out the methodological features of Confucian Learning, this division under-emphasises the distinctive contributions made by distinguished masters and overlooks the multidimensionality of various Confucian schools. More importantly, this approach does not take sufficient account of the interplay between Confucianism and the many other traditions that also existed through its long history and development.

Focusing on the development of modern Confucianism, Mou Zongsan (1908–95), another modern New Confucian master, formulated a different pattern for the history of Confucianism, dividing it into three periods or ‘epochs’ (Fang & Li, 1996: 486–95). His disciples, among whom Tu Wei-ming presents a most persuasive argument, have developed this theory further. According to this three-period theory, Confucianism thus far has gone through three epochs. The first epoch from Confucius (551–479 BCE), Mengzi (371–289 BCE) and Xunzi (310?–211? BCE) to Dong Zhongshu represents the origin of Confucianism and the acceptance of the tradition as the mainstream ideology, which corresponds to the period from the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) to the end of the Later Han Dynasty (25–220 CE). The second epoch starts from the renaissance of Neo-Confucianism and its spread to other parts of East Asia and ends with the abolition of the dominance of Confucianism in China and East Asia, corresponding to the era from the Song Dynasty (960–1279) to the beginning of the twentieth century. The third epoch takes place in the twentieth century, beginning with the critical reflection on the tradition initiated in the May Fourth Movement (1919) and which is still an ongoing process. A significant feature of the third epoch is that modern Confucian scholars propagate and reinterpret Confucian doctrines in the light of Western traditions, in which Confucianism is being brought into the world and the world into Confucianism (Tu, 1993: 141–60; 1996a: 418). The primary question behind the three-epoch theory is whether or not Confucianism is able to develop so that it can become part of a global spirituality and culture. In search for answers to this question the emphasis must be on the Confucian expansion of its geographical area in relation to its self-transformation in response to external challenges. The three-epoch theory implies that the further development of Confucianism depends upon whether or not it can respond appropriately and successfully to industrialisation, modernisation, democracy and the ‘global village’. Commendable as the three-epoch theory is, it is nevertheless inadequate for us to use this theory to present

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the historical perspective of the Confucian tradition. As a highly abstract formula, the theory inevitably pays less attention to many significant parts or periods of Confucian evolution which have made important contributions to sustaining and innovating Confucian Learning. Therefore, if we use it as a paradigm for the history of Confucianism, it would be too general to reveal what characterises the Confucian tradition as a constantly growing and changing tradition. If using it to highlight Confucian history, we would overlook the fact that Confucianism draws its energy and vitality both from within and from the interaction between itself and many other traditions, and between the past and the present.

This introduction is not intended as a thorough study of Confucian history. We nevertheless need to present a brief account of how Confucianism evolved and how it was transformed. In our historical perspective, Confucianism has gone through five stages, or in other words, it has presented itself in five dimensions. In each of these stages or dimensions, Confucian doctrines gained new characteristics, the contents of Confucian practices were enriched and the range of Confucian teaching was widened.

*Confucianism in formation*

In this first stage, Confucianism acquires a ‘classical’ form. The classic presentation of Confucianism (*ruxue* or *rujia*) took shape during the so-called Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE). Confucius and his faithful followers made the first efforts to formulate a new philosophy based on the old tradition and propagated it as the path to peace and harmony. Much modification of, elaboration and clarification on classical Confucianism were added by brilliant scholars in the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), among whom Mengzi and Xunzi became preeminent in the later Confucian tradition, and due to their efforts Confucianism became one of the major schools with many different presentations.

*Confucianism in adaptation*

In the second stage, Confucianism is reformed and renewed in the interaction between Confucian schools and the schools of Legalism, Yin–Yang and the Five Elements, Moism and Daoism. Following the replacement of the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE) by the Han Dynasty, Confucianism recovered gradually from the setback under the Qin persecution and the Legalist discrimination. Having clearly realised that they were in an

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eclectic culture, Han Confucians started a long process of adapting their doctrines to the need of the empire. During the process of adaptation, classical Confucianism was transformed, elaborated and extended. A theological and metaphysical doctrine of interaction between Heaven and humans was established and consequently became the cornerstone of the revived Confucianism. There were two prominent schools of the time: the New Text and the Old Text Schools. Debates between them resulted in new interpretations of Confucius and the Confucian classics. This led to what is known as ‘Classical Learning’, or more accurately, ‘scholastic studies of the classics’ (*jing xue*). Attention focused on close interpretation of words and sentences in the classics and by the end of the Later Han Dynasty the extensive exegesis had nearly exhausted all the life energy of Confucian scholars. To counter this stagnation, scholars of the Wei–Jin Dynasties (220–420) adopted one of two courses. Some introduced Daoist philosophy into Confucianism while others adapted Confucian world-views to Daoist principles. In each way Daoism and Confucianism came together in what is known as Dark Learning or Mysterious Learning (*xuan xue*). This was to have a lasting influence upon the later development of Chinese thought.

*Confucianism in transformation*

In this stage, Confucianism responds to the challenges from Buddhism and Daoism by ‘creating’ a new form of Confucian Learning. Confucianism of the Song–Ming Dynasties (960–1279, 1368–1644) regained its authority over all aspects of social and religious life. Inspired by Buddhist philosophy and Daoist spirituality, Confucian scholars reformulated the Confucian view of the universe, society and the self on the one hand, and endeavoured to strip Confucian Learning of the elements they considered to be Buddhist–Daoist superstitions on the other. The result of their efforts was a comprehensive system of new Confucian Learning called *Dao Xue* (the Learning of the Way) or *Li Xue* (the Learning of the Principle/Reason), which as such is normally translated in the West as Neo-Confucianism.

*Confucianism in variation*

The fourth period sees Chinese Confucianism being introduced to other East Asian countries, and combined with local culture and tradition to acquire new forms of presentation. China is the homeland of

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Confucianism, but Confucianism is not confined to China. The history of Confucianism can be characterised as a process of radiation. From its origins in the north, it spread to the whole of China and then to other countries of East Asia. More recently it has spread to North America, Europe and the rest of the world. According to historical records, Confucian doctrines and institutions were introduced to Vietnam, Korea and Japan as early as the Former Han Dynasty. In the beginning, scholars in these countries simply replicated the Chinese system but gradually, eminent native scholars emerged who, taking the Chinese masters as their guides, reinterpreted the Confucian classics and commentaries in the light of their own understanding, experience and insight. In this way, they successfully recreated a new scholarship by introducing new forms and contents into Confucian Learning to satisfy the social and political needs of their own countries. Thus, Chinese Confucianism acquired additional manifestations, where the common sources of Confucian Learning and practices were transformed into different and yet related streams flowing into the twentieth century.

*Confucianism in renovation*

Confucianism is further transformed during this last period and develops in the light of other world philosophies, especially European philosophical tradition and Christian spirituality in the modern age. Prominent scholars of the twentieth century such as Xiong Shili (1885–1968), Liang Suming (1893–1988), Fung Yu-lan (1895–1990), Qian Mu (1895–1990), Tang Junyi (1909–78) and Mou Zongsan (1909–95), devoted the whole of their lives to the revival of Confucian values and the transformation of Confucian doctrines. Their contributions have rejuvenated Confucianism and constitute a significant part of ‘modern new Confucianism’ (*xiandai xin ruxue*).

While intending to give a brief but clear account of Confucian history, we recognise that it is not possible in this work to take full account of all the Confucian schools and sub-schools. Therefore we will have to single out the most influential masters and examine their contributions to the development of the Confucian tradition. In so doing, we will especially emphasise the epoch-making innovations and transformations achieved and highlight the crucial stages in its development, while leaving many great Confucians and their teachings unexamined, or less closely examined than they might otherwise deserve.

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**Methodological focuses**

Taking into account the long history and wide range of Confucian studies engaged in the East and the West, and the great contributions made by modern scholars during the last few decades, I will present Confucianism primarily as a philosophical and religious tradition, with a special focus on its intellectual creativity and its modern relevance. I intend summarily to highlight, and critically examine, what has been achieved both in the West and in the East. I will also pay special attention to what has been understood as ‘Confucianism’ with regard to its doctrines, schools, rituals, sacred places and terminology presented in history, while at the same time stressing the significance of the adaptations, transformations and ‘new thinking’ taking place in modern times.

One way to write an introductory book about Confucianism is to follow its historical development, beginning with the pre-Confucius age down to modern times. This is the basic structure of a few books of this kind, and James Legge (1815–97), Herrlee Creel, and more recently John Berthrong have done it in this way. While giving the reader a linear account of Confucian intellectualism, these scholars are less successful in their presentation of Confucianism as a philosophical and religious spirit penetrating all strata of society. In contrast to them, I will introduce Confucianism as a single tradition with many facets and as an ancient tradition with contemporary appeal. I hope to give the reader a multidimensional view of the Confucian tradition by investigating how Confucianism functioned in the past and how it is applied in the present.

To examine the Confucian tradition, we need to explore its original sources, not solely relying on second-hand materials available in the West. By original sources we mean two kinds of texts. Firstly, original texts in Chinese either in the form of ancient classics, annotations and commentaries or in modern deliberation and presentation. Secondly, interpretative books and articles in other languages, both highly specialist materials including translations and annotations, and theme studies and original research. These two kinds of material are equally important and cross-references between them will be made throughout the chapters. A select bibliography containing both categories is appended for further reference.

Whether or not Confucianism is religious is a question of debate, and this will be closely examined in chapter 1. Here, suffice it to say that