

Introduction

Be they pro-Japanese or anti-Japanese, be attentive to everything in their words, deeds, public and private lives. Do not forget the words [from the Confucian Classic, the *Zuozhuan Commentary of the Spring and Autumn Annals*]: “If he is not of our race, then he will of necessity be of a different heart.”

Alleged entry referring to Chinese and Manchus in the service handbook of a Japanese official working in the office of Zhang Jinghui, Prime Minister of Manchukuo, 1935–45 (Fogel and Yamamuro 2007: 11)

The cover of this book represents a modern Confucian paradise: the state of Manchukuo (1932–1945). Established by Japan in occupied Northeastern China in the interbellum, it was billed as the apex of both East Asian Confucian tradition and industrial high modernity. The population, made up of Chinese, Koreans, Manchus, Mongolians, and Japanese, lived happily together in this multi-ethnic and multicultural state. Trans-Asian Confucian principles of benevolence and righteousness reigned under a “Kingly Way” of morally virtuous governance led by a paternal sovereign, the Manchu Emperor Pu Yi, aided by his good friend and kingly brother the Japanese Emperor Hirohito. Nations lived happily together, ethnicities united in the nation, tradition and modernity perfectly harmonized through a conservative and indigenous trans-Asian ethic of Confucianism, striving toward the material welfare that only high modernity could offer. This was the Confucian dream.¹

Of course, it was a lie. Manchukuo was a regime where strict rules of racial discrimination and subjugation, covering everything from bus seats to wages, created a pyramid-like hierarchy, with ethnic Japanese at the top, followed by Manchus and Koreans, and at the bottom the vast majority of Chinese. Life for most of the Chinese majority in this Confucian paradise was at best hard and at worst hellish. They were regularly sacrificed in the thousands, through wages mandated at starvation levels, through lethal forced labor projects, and even occasionally, as in the famous Unit 731, as guinea pigs in biological warfare experiments. Manchukuo is probably one of the most negative examples of

2 Introduction

Confucianism in over 2000 years of history. It is certainly not representative of Confucian history nor of modern Japanese history, nor of the long history of Japanese Confucianism. Nonetheless, it is one real example of a Confucian history.

Most pertinently, however, it is an attractively counterintuitive example. Common imaginations of Confucianism all over the world perceive it as exclusively “premodern,” “traditional,” “harmonious,” and “Chinese.” The Manchukuo example overturns all these stereotypes. Here is Confucianism as the ideology of Japanese occupation in China, in a rhetorical package advancing modernism and modernity, manifested in the midst of bitter guerilla war, all set in the fulcrum of the creation of what historian Prasenjit Duara has described as a new kind of postcolonial modernity which would inform later Cold War norms across the region (Duara 2003).

Confucianism in history has played a much more diverse and active role than most people imagine. It has been a key element in modern history, as well as premodern history, employed to advance liberalism and socialism as well as conservatism and fascism, right up into the late twentieth century. It has been applied and practiced both domestically within states and across state boundaries in international relations, on the individual level, as well as on the social. It has been used on many occasions throughout history both to advance the interests of Chinese states and by outsiders to attack, conquer, and colonize those states. In history, there is no single Confucianism. There are multiple Confucianisms, manifested in different places and times.

This book studies multiple manifestations of Confucianism that occurred in Japan and/or under the auspices of Japanese control through the entire history of organized Japanese states. Confucianism has been present in Japan since the beginnings of the first large-scale, organized Japanese (*ritsuryō*) state in the middle of the first millennium CE. It was crucially influential both in the formation of that state and thereafter on multiple aspects of Japanese history through many different periods. Confucianism even played a key facilitating role in Japan’s early modernization and Westernization (as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 of this book), as well as in its drift toward fascism (Chapter 6). This book attempts to provide a history which, although centered on Japan, may provide new ways of looking at Confucianism across East Asia.

One key to that new outlook is to think about the links between premodern and modern history. Most writing on Confucianism simply ignores the influence of modern history. Scholarship on contemporary Confucianism, although usually acknowledging history, concentrates overwhelmingly on continuity at the expense of analyzing change and

rupture. Major changes in Confucianism, however, were almost always interlinked with major points of rupture in broader socio-economic history. This is why the major change in East Asian history, the transition to modernity, should be a major element in the history of Confucianism, just as it is in any other facet of global history. The effects of modernity and modernization on religious tradition have been well documented globally (Asad 1993; Casanova 1994). Modernity universally transforms religion, and it usually does that in specific universal ways: religious tradition is individualized, religious organizations are differentiated from and sometimes disengaged from larger social institutions, religion is harnessed to nationalist objectives, religious practice and thinking are constrained into limited realms of life.

This book aims to bring out the significance of that transformation in the history of Confucianism and demonstrate its links with many similar moments of transformation in both premodern and contemporary history. Key here is the history of the early modern period, where in Japan, Confucianism reached its apex of social penetration and cultural and political influence. In this book, I argue that the history of Confucianism in Japan, particularly in the early modern period, but also through modernity right up until the present, offers up new formulations for thinking about the sociology of Confucianism which challenge former understandings of how Confucianism affects society, culture, and politics across East Asia. This book presents highly influential manifestations of Confucianism in early modern and modern history which allow Confucianism to be characterized in terms which for some might be challenging. For instance:

- Confucianism as religion: the manifestation of Confucianism in Japan was primarily religious, in the sense that its capacity to affect politics, culture, education, and other spheres relied on its schemes of religious practice. Throughout the study presented in this book, the more religiously Confucianism was manifested, the greater its wider social impact, including on politics. In this respect, what in Chapter 3 I call the “Confucian public sphere” of late early modern Japan was effected and supported primarily by aspects of Confucian culture which we would today characterize as religious and/or educational (Chapters 1–7).
- Confucianism as subversive politics: This book argues that Confucianism was most popular in Japan when politically critical. Creativity in early modern and modern Confucianism was often the product of political tension between Confucianism’s religiosity, on the one hand, and the political order, on the other. The more critical Confucian religiosity was perceived to be, the more successful its

4 Introduction

cultural integration and impact on politics (as argued in Chapters 1 and 2 particularly, but also throughout the book). This challenges the common image of Confucianism as inherently politically conservative.

- Confucianism as science: Confucian culture consistently facilitated technical innovation. In the Japanese history argued in this book, Confucianism fed science, including Western science. Confucianism's central role in the private learning spheres of early modern Japanese society directly impacted scientific thought, effecting what I call an "intellectual revolution" comparable to (and interlinked with) the "industrious revolution" in early modern agricultural society described by economic historian Hayami Akira (Chapters 2 and 4).
- Confucianism as ultra-individualism: Confucianism encouraged an at times rampant individualism. As in the case of the "industrious revolution," the Confucian "intellectual revolution" was driven in part by a new extreme individualism which was linked to Neo-Confucianism's development of what Kurozumi Makoto has criticized as a harsh ethic of "unlimited individual responsibility" (Chapter 3).
- Confucianism as relativism: Socially effective manifestations of Confucianism in Japanese history were usually highly relativized rather than doctrinaire in nature. Through most of the history studied in this book, the more culturally relativized and politically diversified the manifestation of Confucianism, the deeper its cultural integration and political impact (Chapters 1–5, but particularly Chapters 2 and 3). This argument challenges the historical applicability and significance of doctrinally centered explanations of Confucianism.
- Confucianism as liberalism: Confucianism was the primary conceptual framework through which liberalism was culturally reproduced in East Asia (Chapter 5). This was facilitated in part by the parallel roles of Confucian and Christian forms of humanist universalism in the politics of both traditions.
- Confucianism as fascism: Representing Confucianism as "philosophy" was a modern invention designed to facilitate an ultra-nationalist employment of the Confucian tradition which was later also adopted by fascists, both in 1930s Japan and throughout post-World War II Asia (Chapter 6).

This book thus presents a Confucianism which is (at key historical junctures) politically subversive, deeply religious, relativistic, and individualistic. These are not typical images of Confucianism. Nor are they attributes that are manifested in all the Confucianisms studied in this book. Notably, however, they are attributes that at times led to particularly deep social and cultural integration and political impact. They are manifestations of Confucianism that were very historically influential, particularly in the transition to modernity. They are also representations

which I hope might provide grist for the mill of wider thinking about Confucianism, including in debates on Confucianism's position in contemporary East Asia.

What is Confucianism?

Confucianism is a constellation of ways of thinking, writing, behaving, and practicing brought together and theorized as a single unified tradition closely associated with the imperial state during the Chinese Han dynasty (206BCE–220CE). The word Confucianism today is also commonly used to refer to the intellectual and religious factions active *before* the Han dynasty, identified with the Chinese word “*ru*” and with certain historic personages including Confucius. Han dynasty political thinkers used traces of writings associated with these earlier factions to manufacture a larger, more cohesive textual apparatus and ideology which became Confucianism. Confucianism was then posited post ipso facto as a historical tradition, especially in the official histories of the Han dynasty, the *Books of Han*, edited by Ban Gu (32–92CE). To some extent, Confucianism as it emerged in the common era can thus be seen as the ideological construction of Han officials like Ban Gu (Kojima 2013: 22–4). Its roots then were projected back into the “distant past.” The origination of the tradition, although utilizing older textual transmissions, thus began with the launch of a commentarial tradition in the Han. This commentarial tradition continued to transform and take on new manifestations through the course of the rest of history. It is this dense, constantly developing, and changing commentarial tradition, not simply the classic texts, which provides most of the doctrinal basis for Confucianism. This is one reason why Confucianism is in a constant state of historical change.

The “practice” of Confucianism, as we will see later, depended on historical context. It could be a mix of various elements that we today might describe using adjectives including religious, political, literary, artistic, educational, scientific, medical, and many others. So Confucianism is/was a religion in some manifestations, a political science in others, a literary practice or medical tradition in others. Most often it was a constellation of several of those and more. The nature of that constellation differed depending on the particular historic moment and society within which Confucianism manifested.

Importantly, for both Confucius himself (as represented as a “person” in texts like *Confucius Analects*) and for most people who engaged what we now call Confucianism up until around the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), Confucius, although regarded as a very important teacher and editor, was not considered the originator of the sacred, nor the provider

6 Introduction

of an idealized, heavenly ordained political order. Confucius was no Jesus or Buddha embodying other-worldly perfection, nor was he like Muhammad (and many Jewish and Christian kings before and after him) seen as an ideal ruler bringing an ordained political order to the earth. After all, Confucius was famously ineffective as a political advisor and, unlike Muhammad, never himself ruled. The Confucian tradition, however, did include reference to a golden age when Heaven's mandate had ruled on earth. This age, however, was seen as predating Confucius by several centuries and was associated rather with "Ancient Sage Kings" like Yao and Shun, who were purported to have ruled "a long time ago" – in the *Star Wars* mytho-historical sense of that phrase.

This vision of Confucianism focusing on the claimed historical sages of antiquity became less influential after the rise of so-called Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism is the name given in English to more religiously inclined forms of Confucianism which began to emerge in the Tang dynasty (618–907) and were systematized in the Song dynasty (960–1279) by a number of major figures, notably Zhu Xi (1130–1200). For this reason, in Japanese and Chinese one dominant stream of Neo-Confucianism is called "Song Learning" or "Zhu Xi Learning." Neo-Confucianism emerged both in reaction to and under the influence of Chan (Zen) Buddhism. Under Buddhist influence, new understandings of classic Confucian and Daoist texts and ideas generated a systematized cosmology linking individual practice with a metaphysical conception of the cosmos and ethical and political understandings of the importance of social structures like the family, country, and empire. This integrated system, Neo-Confucianism, became the basis of most forms of Confucianism which emerged thereafter, and indeed most understandings of Confucianism advanced today. It emerged out of a religious milieu and functioned for centuries as what was undeniably a form of individually centered (albeit socially engaged) religious practice (Yang 1967: 255–93). This tradition, both through its parallels with Buddhism (and the myth of the person Buddha) and through its emphasis on individual transformation, also further facilitated an ongoing elevation of Confucius (the alleged person) as an object of devotion and emulation.

Historical research into premodern Asia reveals a pluralist constellation of parameters constituting Confucianism in each different historical period and place. Confucianism is therefore best analyzed over the longue durée utilizing the plurality that its history possesses. This is an approach to the study of tradition that borrows much from contemporary trends in writing on religious history, which have been heavily affected by cultural and religious anthropology over the past decades, and which are broadly accepted in history, religious studies, and Asian studies disciplinary

settings. Historians of Christianity, for instance, usually refer to their field these days as the History of World Christianities. They seek to help us understand the multiplicities and complexities in the history of the interaction between Christianity and different parts of the world (Gilley and Stanley 2006). Contemporary historians of Christianity, Islam, and other religions often integrate the social and cultural history of affected areas with the histories of religious practice, and in postcolonial settings often also link these with the political histories of empire and modern colonialism to better understand how a religious tradition operated in a particular, concrete historical setting. This approach allows the diversity of history to show, and it also provides a model for studying links between belief and practice, text and action.

This basic outlook informs this book's method of defining what can or cannot be considered a Confucian action, statement, or person. Employing a very basic methodology long favored by many in the fields of history, anthropology, and religious studies, this book calls phenomena Confucian simply if they were regarded as such by people in their own historical contexts. People are regarded as "Confucians" if they were identified by themselves and/or others around them in terms which match the way Confucianism is used as a conceptual category today.² Texts or actions are considered Confucian if they were presented in their own time and space so as to be widely regarded as primarily Confucian. For Japan, this way of defining Confucianism is particularly handy because the beginnings of the history of Confucianism in Japan fell during the Chinese Tang dynasty, in a period of sectarian conflict where "Three schools" – Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism – critiqued each other, thereby providing an (at the time) innovatively clear set of indigenous self-delineations between these three traditions. As will be discussed in Chapter 1, in Japan the "Three schools" soon became Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shinto. So unlike Chinese history, in Japanese history we have an indigenously delineated scheme of self-identification of traditions right from the very beginnings of Japanese Confucianism.

Of course, in line with this methodology, actions and statements can be considered Confucian even when not made by a Confucian, as long as the statement or action was clearly meant to be identified in Confucian terms in the historical context of articulation or was commonly associated with Confucian practices in that time and place. So when Emperor Hirohito made a Neo-Confucian reference in announcing Japan's surrender in 1945, this does not make him a Neo-Confucian, but it certainly indicated that in this particular case he was deliberately employing Confucianism in the sense that he clearly wanted educated Asians (including Japanese) to read his comments through an inter-textual allusion which could be

understood by them as part of the trans-Asian Confucian tradition. This manner of “defining” Confucianism is simple and historical. Ultimately the historical agents themselves judge what is Confucian (or not) in relation to the norms of their own times and societies, and that is what then also facilitates (and enforces) the presentation of a diversity of plural Confucianisms in this book.

Regarding Confucianism in religious terms is particularly useful when attempting comparative analysis of Confucianism with the other traditions which shared its geographic and cultural spaces in East Asia. Through most of the history of Confucianism, and through its entire history in Japan, East Asian historical actors on the ground have perceived Confucianism in comparison with and in relation to Buddhism. In later (post-sixteenth-century) history, such actors also often compared Confucianism with Christianity. Modern scholars routinely study Buddhism and Christianity as religions. For instance, Buddhism in the history of Tang China or Christianity in the history of Ming China are both studied as “religions.” Both Tang Buddhism and Ming Christianity critically impacted the history of Confucianism in Japan (as will be discussed in Chapters 1 and 2). Local historical actors on the ground clearly identified Confucianism in parallel with the concepts “Buddhism” and “Christianity” (Xu 1855; NKBT 71; NST 28; NST 35; Ōkuwa 2006; Paramore 2009). This means that if we, on the one hand, accept the characterizations of these traditions as “religion,” but refuse to accept the characterization of Confucianism as a religion, then we are buying into an inherently ahistorical set of comparative concepts. Since nearly everyone regards Buddhism and Christianity as religions, we have little choice but to regard Confucianism as a religion, at the very least when considering it in comparison.

This way of defining Confucianism stands in contrast to other methods. The most common competing ways to define Confucianism today are either to equate it with Chinese culture or to define it exclusively as political philosophy. These two ways of framing Confucianism are both related to the modernist construction of Confucianism as representative of a timeless Chinese culture. The practice of equating Confucianism with Chinese culture has a long history. Under the influence of Jesuit and other Western writings from China through the seventeenth century, a very specific image of China emerged in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe describing Chinese political society in relation to a manufactured vision of Confucianism. At first, this image was regarded very positively. “Confucianism,” as the reification of an essentialized Chinese culture, became the basis of Voltaire and other enlightenment figures’ idolization of China (Jensen 1997; Marchand 2009: 21–2).

After a century or two of the European intelligentsia fawning over and idealizing this “Confucian culture,” however, there came a counter-reaction in the late eighteenth century. That counter-reaction coincided with the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the second great wave of European maritime imperialism. Now from Kant to Hegel, everything Confucian was backward and that was the explanation for everything wrong about China (Schwab 1984; Marchand 2009: 22). Together with attitudes like anti-Semitism, this anti-Siniticism, with Confucianism as its primary content and referent, became a major part of the construction of the intellectual self-conception of modern Western Europe during its nineteenth-century period of global high imperialism (Marchand 2009: 21–8; Nirenberg 2013). The prevalence of anti-Siniticism in late nineteenth-century European thinking both informed and was bolstered by Western states’ utilization of anti-Chinese cultural arguments in the construction of the unequal treaties through which they subjugated semi-colonial China. The lynchpin in this Western disparagement of Chinese culture was a vision of Confucianism which portrayed it as underpinning an inherently backward society.

This was the context within which the Westernizing, modernizing Japanese Meiji state post-1868 chose to airbrush Confucian influence out of the first official modern histories of Japan it commissioned. This was done partly for local political reasons: because, as will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, the Tokugawa state overthrown by the Meiji Restoration had been so closely associated with Confucianism toward the end (Makabe 2007). Mainly, however, it was to make sure the new Japan was as clearly differentiated as possible from free-fall China and the negative imagery of Confucianism through which the West justified its semi-colonization. This was particularly the case through the late 1800s as Japan’s attempts to revise the unequal treaties were argued in relation to the nineteenth-century Western concept of “Civilization,” of which China and Confucian values were held up by the Western powers and Western thought as the Asian antithesis (Kuo 2013). Meiji Japanese leaders correctly judged it in Japan’s best interests not to be perceived by the Western powers in relation to a Confucianism that had become the West’s marker of Chinese culture’s backwardness. This was the Confucian image from which the Meiji state did everything it could to distance Japan.³

Looking at Confucianism outside of China thus opens up issues of global history and politics far beyond the scope of general religious history, linking into larger narratives of culture upon which the creation of the modern world order relied. This book looks to engage those larger issues through presenting a history of Confucianism in Japan with three

main methodological aims: firstly, broaden our vision of Confucianism and make it historical by defining Confucianism in the pluralist terms favored by the voices of history; secondly, counter doctrine-centered approaches to Confucianism (notably those claiming it as “philosophy”) by broadening the fields of action investigated to religion and culture in general; thirdly, counter nationalist (both Sinocentric and anti-Sinitic) renderings of Confucianism by demonstrating the cultural plurality of its various manifestations. Delivering this latter prong involves questioning at every turn Japanese nationalist readings of Confucianism, readings often wrapped up in a long history of Sinophobia related to both nineteenth-century European biases and Japan’s own nativist history of anti-Chinese nationalism. However, it also requires awareness of how deeply the study of Confucianism in general is colored by often unconscious Sinocentric outlooks.

Confucianism today

Such a problematization of the history of the study of Confucianism also looks to speak to scholarship on new manifestations of Confucianism currently rising in East Asia. Although usually considered part of East Asia’s “traditions,” and therefore the past, Confucianism is on the rise in China today. Sociologists and political scientists are charting dynamic increases in the numbers of Chinese carrying out Confucian religious practice, identifying with Confucian doctrines and teachers, and seeing Confucianism as a solution to problems in society and politics. Researchers have also described the important role of the contemporary Chinese state and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in encouraging this rise in Confucianism, by using Confucianism in political ideology and state ritual, and identifying Confucianism overtly and symbolically with the Chinese nation and its culture (Callahan 2012, 2015; Sun 2013).

Most agree, however, that the resurgence of Confucianism in China is not simply a function of this state interest, but rather also has elements resembling a social movement. Kang Xiaoguang has recently argued that the resurgence of Confucianism in early twenty-first-century China should be seen as a “cultural nationalist movement” related to China’s current stage of socio-economic development. Kang employs the theories of Samuel Huntington to argue that traditional culture, relatively strong at the beginning of a nation’s trajectory of economic modernization and Westernization, will wane as that nation begins to become more economically independent and assertive in its “successful” emergence from the modernization process. In other words, according to Kang, “the rise of China as a great power” is a determining factor in feeding a rise in cultural