

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-08036-1 - Confucianism and Modern China: The Lewis Fry Memorial Lectures, 1933–34, Delivered at Bristol University

Reginald F. Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

BEFORE I BEGIN TO ADDRESS YOU on the subject of Confucianism and Modern China, I am going to make a confession which, in a lecturer who presumably hopes to carry his audience with him, is perhaps as unprecedented as it is rash. I am vividly conscious of the fact that the subject which I have chosen bristles with controversial material, and it is my painful duty to give you a solemn warning against too ready an acceptance of much that I am going to say. Whatever you may think of this warning, which almost amounts to an admission of my own unworthiness to address you from this platform, it will at least show you that I am no politician. I am dismally cognisant of my own liability to err.

I must also warn you that had this been a Chinese instead of an English University I should have had to face a storm of protest before I had uttered a single word. The mere title of my lectures would of itself have been sufficient to arouse a lively spirit of antagonism in a large section of my audience. I should have been told that however prominent may have been the part that Confucianism has played in the China of the past, it has no significance for the forward-gazing

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-08036-1 - Confucianism and Modern China: The Lewis Fry Memorial Lectures, 1933–34, Delivered at Bristol University

Reginald F. Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 CONFUCIANISM AND MODERN CHINA

China of to-day ; that it has nothing of value to transmit to the China of to-morrow ; and that to link “ Confucianism ” with “ Modern China ” is therefore an undeserved honour for Confucianism and an insult to Modern China.

These are views which I do not share ; nevertheless they have been accepted, to a large extent, by those whose influence is dominant in Chinese academic circles at the present time, and they account for the humble position now held by Confucianism in the educational system through which the life and thought and character of the Chinese people are being remoulded to-day.

In these lectures I will endeavour to justify the faith that is in me and to explain the grounds on which I base my belief that Confucianism is still a living force among the Chinese people and has a message of great value for the China of the present and future.

I have been warned that in my discussion of this subject I must not take a general knowledge of the Confucian system for granted, and that even a Bristol audience will expect me to give some kind of an answer to the question “ What is Confucianism ? ”

I say “ even a Bristol audience,” for I look on Bristol as a city of “ Merchant Venturers ” in the best sense of the term, a city of world-wide interests not exclusively identified with trade and commerce, a city that has devoted itself to adventurous research not only in material things but also in things of the spirit. And if

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-08036-1 - Confucianism and Modern China: The Lewis Fry Memorial Lectures, 1933–34, Delivered at Bristol University

Reginald F. Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

II

this has been true of the Bristol of past centuries, how much more likely is it to be true of the Bristol which is now assuming an honourable place among the flourishing centres of English academic life ?

If then I must attempt an answer to the question “ What is Confucianism ? ” I have too much respect for my Bristol audience to offer it a definition of the nutshell variety. I might produce the packed nutshell, and we might open it together with the most scrupulous care, but the spirit of Confucianism would have flown.

Nor will I ask you to be satisfied with any definition, however elaborate, drawn from the Confucian researches of Western Orientalists. If it be true, as we are so often told, that only a Christian can understand and interpret Christianity, surely it is no less true that it takes a Confucian to understand and interpret Confucianism. This might be regarded as a truism were it not that many Western students of things Chinese seem to have overlooked it. We cannot appreciate the beauty of a cathedral window by looking at it from the outside. Similarly, if we wish to form an adequate idea of Confucianism we must make an effort to look at it from within, and to approximate as closely as possible to the standpoint of those who are themselves among the loyal guardians of the great Confucian heritage.¹

I cannot think of a better method of approach to that standpoint than by telling you of a little episode which took place about twenty-five years ago and which led to the drawing-up of a carefully-selected list of some of the leading principles of Confucian ethics together

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-08036-1 - Confucianism and Modern China: The Lewis Fry Memorial Lectures, 1933–34, Delivered at Bristol University

Reginald F. Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

12 CONFUCIANISM AND MODERN CHINA

with a running commentary by its compiler. That compiler was and is one of the greatest living Confucian scholars in China, one who by his great learning, and still more by reason of his fine character, has a better claim than any man I know to the honourable title of *chün-tzū*—the Confucian equivalent of a scholar and a gentleman.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-08036-1 - Confucianism and Modern China: The Lewis Fry Memorial Lectures, 1933–34, Delivered at Bristol University

Reginald F. Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER II

FOURTEEN CONFUCIAN TEXTS

THERE IS IN the Dutch island of Java a very large and flourishing population of Chinese colonists. They are emigrants and the descendants of emigrants from the southern provinces of China. About the year 1908 the leading members of this Chinese community had become seriously concerned about the educational welfare of their children, who, they feared, were in grave danger, owing to their alien environment, of losing touch with the cultural traditions of their ancestral home. After lengthy deliberations on the subject they founded a Confucian Society which had for its main object the direction and supervision of the education of young Chinese colonists. Early in 1909 this Society, which soon became a very active and influential one, sent to China a deputation, headed by the chairman of the local Chinese Chamber of Commerce, for the purpose of consulting one of the leading scholars of the day on the best method of achieving the objects they had in view. The person to whom they applied was not only a rising Government official of unblemished reputation, but also a poet, an artist, an advocate of constitutional reform, and one of the most distinguished Confucian scholars in the Empire. His

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-08036-1 - Confucianism and Modern China: The Lewis Fry Memorial Lectures, 1933–34, Delivered at Bristol University

Reginald F. Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

14 CONFUCIANISM AND MODERN CHINA

name, which recent political developments have made familiar to students of Far Eastern politics, was Chêng Hsiao-hsü, now prime-minister of Manchuria.¹

From this able and accomplished native of the province of Fuhkien they obtained more than encouragement and good advice. He provided them with a little book or pamphlet of his own compilation and composition, to serve as a summary of Confucian ethics. Its name—*K'ung Chiao Hsin Pien*—may be translated “New Handbook of Confucian Teaching.”² It consists of fourteen short passages or texts from the Confucian canon, each of which is accompanied by a brief commentary and explanation primarily intended for the guidance of school-teachers. All but one of the texts is taken from that famous repository of orthodox Confucian teaching known as the *Lun Yü*—usually rendered in English as “The Confucian Analects” or as “The Sayings of Confucius.” The remaining one—and characteristically it takes precedence of all the others—is from the *Hsiao Ching* or “Classic of Filial Piety.”

The fourteen selected texts would hardly occupy, if strung together, more than two or three quarto pages. I propose to give you my own translations of these texts together with explanatory observations, some of which will be based on the running commentary of Chêng Hsiao-hsü himself.

It is perhaps unnecessary to warn you that the fourteen texts must not be regarded as the Confucian equivalent of a creed, or as an adequate presentation of Confucian thought. Much is omitted that a European,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-08036-1 - Confucianism and Modern China: The Lewis Fry Memorial Lectures, 1933–34, Delivered at Bristol University

Reginald F. Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

FOURTEEN CONFUCIAN TEXTS 15

versed in Confucian lore, would certainly have included ; and it includes some texts that he would have omitted as of secondary importance. Nevertheless it may be said that this little anthology embodies sound Confucian teaching as far as it goes, and is regarded as applicable to the ethical and educational needs of the present day. The texts, as I have said, were deliberately chosen by a highly competent Chinese authority as suitable nourishment for the minds of young Chinese whose parents wished their education to be conducted on strict Confucian lines and yet adapted to the needs of the modern environment in which they would have to spend their lives. So whatever you may think of the anthology, you will at least have the satisfaction of knowing that it contains nothing that is not unadulterated Confucianism as it is understood by a scholar who combined loyalty to Confucius with a modern outlook, and who did not allow his reverence for the past to blind him to the practical needs of a generation which, both in China and elsewhere, is brought into unavoidable contact with a non-Chinese environment.

Chêng Hsiao-hsü's little book was immediately accepted by the Chinese schools of Java, and it also received a warm welcome from large numbers of public and private schools in China. It is now seldom or never seen in Government schools, because the anti-Confucian educational policy of recent revolutionary Governments in China has deprived the Confucian classics of their place of honour in the Chinese educational system ; but it is known and valued in countless

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-08036-1 - Confucianism and Modern China: The Lewis Fry Memorial Lectures, 1933–34, Delivered at Bristol University

Reginald F. Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

16 CONFUCIANISM AND MODERN CHINA

private families in which the name of Confucius is still held in greater honour than that of the official Sage of Republican China—Sun Yat-sen. The latest edition of it was published a few months ago. As Chêng Hsiao-hsü states in a postscript to this edition, it was published at my own request in order that it might be used as a text-book by European students of Chinese in the University of London.

The first of the texts—that from the *Classic of Filial Piety*—consists of an utterance attributed to Confucius, and it is introduced by the hallowed and time-honoured phrase *Chih Shêng Hsien Shih K'ung Tzū Yüeh*—“The Supreme Sage and Teacher, our Master K'ung, spoke thus.” Most of the subsequent texts are similarly introduced by the shorter formula “the Master said.” In my translation of the texts this introductory phrase will be omitted.

I. *It is in accordance with the nature of things that of all beings on earth Man is the noblest.*³

This text may be compared with the more striking words of Goethe—“Man is the first speech that Nature holds with God.”

In his commentary on the text, Chêng Hsiao-hsü points out that the *shêng-jên* or Sage is only a man among other men. Confucius himself, though a Sage and a pre-eminent one, belongs to the same order of being as the simplest and least advanced of mankind; and the ordinary man may, by strenuous endeavour, render himself worthy of his status as the potential equal of the Sage. This is no “modernism” but is strictly orthodox Confucian teaching.⁴

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-08036-1 - Confucianism and Modern China: The Lewis Fry Memorial Lectures, 1933–34, Delivered at Bristol University

Reginald F. Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

FOURTEEN CONFUCIAN TEXTS

17

Man's nature, the commentator continues, is such that he is capable of leading the good life. If he falls into evil ways it is not through any defect in the nature with which he came into the world ; it is because he has failed to recognise or to exercise the privileges and potentialities which were his in virtue of his manhood, and because he has *shih ch'i pên hsing*—"lost his own nature." The true follower of Confucius, says Chêng Hsiao-hsü, has a clear knowledge of his own honourable status with its rights and responsibilities, and is therefore able to bear the world's insults and injuries with equanimity. It is only the "small man" (*hsiao jên*) who, having an ignoble view of his own nature, sinks under misfortune or ill-treatment. Moreover, the true Confucian puts no faith in the alleged promises or threats of divine beings. "Foreign religions" (*wai chiao*) try to frighten "small men" out of evil-doing, and induce ignorant people to worship supernatural beings in the hope of attaining heaven or avoiding hell. This, he says, is grievous error.

I should explain that Christianity is nowhere specifically mentioned in Chêng Hsiao-hsü's booklet, the general tendency of which is in no way anti-Christian. Nevertheless the view that man must follow virtue for its own sake and not through fear of punishment or hope of reward in another world, is so characteristic of Confucian teaching that we can hardly complain of the explicit rejection of what were assumed to be the contrary teachings of "foreign religions." It is probable that under the head of "foreign religions" Chêng Hsiao-hsü included not

Bc

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-08036-1 - Confucianism and Modern China: The Lewis Fry Memorial Lectures, 1933–34, Delivered at Bristol University

Reginald F. Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

18 CONFUCIANISM AND MODERN CHINA

only Christianity but also Buddhism ; for in the so-called “ Pure Land ” school of Buddhism the doctrine of salvation by faith is just as prominent as it is in Christianity. There are no pictures of heaven or purgatory, or of divine saviours, to be found in Confucian books or on the walls of Confucian temples. To find these we must visit Taoist or Buddhist temples or consult the popular tracts which the priests and monks of those cults distribute among the unlettered multitude.

The Dean of St. Paul’s tells us in his great work on Plotinus that “ the notion that virtue is hereafter rewarded by pleasure and comfort, while vice is chastised by torments, is repugnant to the later Platonism. Plotinus says severely that if any man desires from a virtuous life anything beyond itself, it is not a virtuous life that he desires.”⁵ It is interesting to note that while Plotinus and the Alexandrian School were teaching this doctrine in the third century of our era, doctors of the Confucian School were teaching it simultaneously in China, where, indeed, it had been familiar for centuries.⁶

II. *When you meet with men of noble character, try to emulate them ; when you meet with inferior men, look inward and examine yourself.*⁷

This seems to require little comment. Chêng Hsiao-hsü points out that unless we strive to equal those whose moral superiority we recognise, we shall be in danger of falling to the level of those who are our moral inferiors. The true follower of Confucius, he says, is