

Confucianism as a World Religion

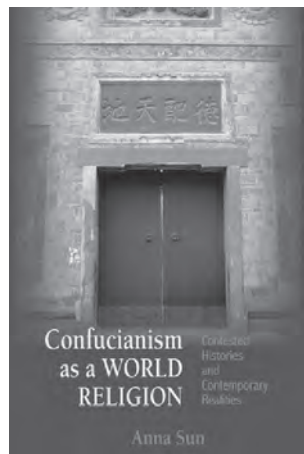
Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities

BY ANNA SUN

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Reviewed by Robert André LaFleur



Is Confucianism a religion? In one way or another, this question has been asked for as long as Westerners have tried to make sense of China—from the earliest translations done by the Jesuits half a millennium ago right up until the present. It can even be argued quite persuasively that thinkers from China and its East Asian neighbors have asked a similar kind of question almost since Confucius's *Analects* began to be distributed in the centuries after the sage's death. The broader matter that should interest everyone teaching and researching East Asia is "What do we mean by 'religion'?"

That question drives Anna Sun's fine book about the role of Confucianism in a global world. Sun examines Confucianism as religious practice and world doctrine in several distinctive ways and from multiple angles. A sociologist by training, Sun's emphasis on the dynamics of institutional growth in the study of religion—and especially the now-established academic field of religious studies—shows a distinctive blending of social analysis and historical research that serves her purposes well. In particular, she focuses on the growth of "world religion" as a concept. Before the late nineteenth century, the idea of global doctrines was a matter of interest for a relatively small group of thinkers, from Ibn Khaldun and Giambattista Vico to Immanuel Kant and Max Weber. In no case, however, did anything like a groundswell for comparative study of "world religions" appear.

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That changed in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when a newfound globalism could be seen in everything from university programs and academic chairs to the internationalization of national identity in the form of world expositions and the Olympic Games. Indeed, the 1893 Chicago World's Fair—the Colombian Exposition—was the scene for a dramatic intellectual gathering, the Parliament of World Religions, where a number of key intellectuals, from Max Müller to James Legge, established a fully fledged discipline based on comparative methods.

The almost-inevitable downside of the process was the conflation of belief or practice with a kind of national or global identity. Thus, "Hinduism," "Daoism," and "Confucianism" came to occupy a shared intellectual space with "Christianity," "Judaism," and "Islam." This was as intriguing as it was problematic for these thinkers, and both the benefits and stark

negatives have followed the field of religious studies to this day. Sun traces the historical threads that led to assumptions of Confucianism as a world religion; she also shows in detail just where the distinctions and nuances lie in contemporary Confucian practice and why they are often problematic in social science survey research.

So what does it mean to be "Confucian" in China today? Sun is appropriately critical of social science research methods that seem unable to pinpoint what "religion" means in context. It begins with self-identification. Ask a Lutheran in Minnesota if she identifies as a "Christian" and there will be immediate understanding of the question itself and, in most cases, a readily apparent answer. Nothing like this happens if (as is common practice in social science research, even today) one asks someone in China if she identifies as "Confucian." The problem is not one of doctrine or contemporary secularism in China. The problem is that the question doesn't even make sense to the vast majority of people in China.

The greatest strength of Sun's book is the way it explains why even the question—"Do you identify as a Confucian?"—doesn't make sense in the context of living, breathing people in China, many of whom are actively engaged in activities that outsiders readily call "Confucian." Sun patiently makes a point once made by C. K. Yang that what Westerners often call "religion" is "diffused" in China rather than "institutional." The problem with a great deal of social science research is that it fails to comprehend that the very nature of "Confucian" practice is daily, routine, and familial. The very concept of "becoming" Confucian or "joining" Confucianism is just short of preposterous.

As Sun makes clear, we need to return our focus to everyday practice—ritual in the home and beyond, etiquette, social interactions, and hierarchical exchanges—if we are going to understand what is distinctive and lasting about Confucian practice. This kind of realization has had a large influence on the study of religion, with a new emphasis on the distinctiveness, even uniqueness, within religious practice rather than studying mere commonalities between traditions. As Sun notes, her response is to emphasize the uniqueness of Confucianism as a *socialized project*—social actions leading to a contested, negotiated, and profoundly constructed Confucianism.

Sun too examines three widely varying positions with regard to Confucian practice in today's China. All three of them interact in a rapidly changing contemporary world. First, and perhaps most commonly, many people in China feel that Confucianism is not a religion. By far, the vast majority of practitioners just *do* Confucian activities without thinking about them in the larger context of doctrine or belief. A second position held in China is that Confucianism *is* a religion, but that this is a distinctly negative thing. Those who hold such a position maintain a long and critical tradition of skepticism toward Confucian thought, equating it with anti-modern tendencies that harmed China in its interactions with both Asian neighbors and the West over the past centuries.

A third position is much newer, and as intriguing as it is baffling for those of us who have been studying China for decades. Here, Confucianism *is* a religion, and it is a distinctly positive matter. This latter perspective can easily be interpreted by outsiders as a kind of "democratic" push that might conflict with a centralized political structure. Sun cautions us that we should be careful of our assumptions and shows that—in many but certainly not all cases—an assertion of Confucianism as a religion can have strongly authoritarian and statist tendencies.

Sun's *Confucianism as a World Religion* is not only a strongly researched and beautifully nuanced work of social and historical analysis, but also a genuinely useful tool for teachers and scholars seeking to articulate the place of a Confucian ritual framework and doctrine that have influenced Chinese life for twenty-five centuries—and just as powerfully today as in

the past. I have chosen Sun's book as one of the texts in my advanced college seminar about Confucius and social theory, and it would be an appropriate text for modern Chinese sociology, politics, history, anthropology, religion, or other courses.

While it is not a "textbook" or an "overview," it engages its subject well and contextualizes the "Confucianism question" in ways that students will find useful. High school instructors will likely gain more from their own reading of the book, which can be distilled into classroom lessons, rather than assigning the book as a whole in a curriculum that would almost always emphasize breadth over its level of depth. The college or high school teacher who can articulate Confucian practice from the perspective of *doing* rather than "converting" or "believing" will accomplish a great deal, and the success of Sun's book for teachers lies in this. ■

ROBERT ANDRÉ LaFLEUR is an Anthropologist and Historian who focuses on the intersection of text and culture in Chinese life. His publications include *China: Global Studies* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2003) and a substantially revised second edition in 2010. He received his PhD from the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought and is Professor of History and Anthropology at Beloit College.

Pot Shards

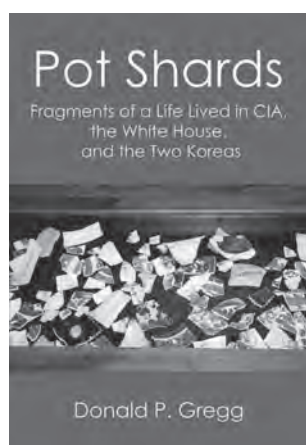
Fragments of a Life Lived in CIA, the White House, and the Two Koreas

By DONALD P. GREGG

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Reviewed by Michael J. Seth



Donald Gregg had a remarkably long career spanning almost six decades, most of it connected with Asia. He served as a CIA officer in Japan, Việt Nam, and Burma, and was the CIA station chief in Seoul from 1973 to 1975. From 1989 to 1993, he was the US ambassador to South Korea. After retiring from government service, he headed the Korea Society in New York and made six trips to North Korea to promote better relations with that country. In between, he served on the National Security Council. During these many years, he witnessed and played a part in so many

key developments that his biography becomes intertwined with the history of US-Asian relations since the 1950s.

Gregg's memoirs are therefore a good read for the many insights they provide into America's involvement in Asia, especially the two Koreas, as well as for the insights into US intelligence operations and foreign policy-making. The book consists of thirty-one short chapters, easily accessible to undergraduate students and possibly advanced high students, although it does assume some background knowledge on recent Asian and American history. It is written, as the title suggests, in a rather episodic fashion rather than a smooth-flowing narrative, but this also means that readers can skip to the sections of greatest interest to them without getting too lost.

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