

TEACHING CONFUCIANISM

EDITED BY JEFFREY L. RICHEY

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Reviewed by Thomas P. Dolan

While any scholar or teacher of Chinese culture and philosophy is familiar with the classic works of literature of two millennia ago (*Yijing*, *The Analects* of Confucius, the *Art of War* and many others), these are often presented to students without the contexts in which they were developed. Doing so is like trying to explain Christianity to someone without reference to Judaism or the Roman occupation of Judea, or like trying to explain Socialism without referring to Marx or Lenin. Jeffrey Richey's *Teaching Confucianism* offers us the opportunity to provide the proper setting for discussions of Confucian beliefs, ethics, and behavior through a collection of teaching commentaries suitable for a variety of audiences.

Richey and John Berthong begin by separating the study of Confucianism into six "epochs," from the time of Confucius up to the twentieth century. Over time, Confucian ideas have been applied to different situations for different purposes, and the essays in this text reflect those differences.

Mark Csikszentmihalyi's "The Social and Religious Context of Early Confucian Practice" fleshes out the beginner's exposure to the rituals addressed in *Analects*. By giving a more detailed explanation of the imagery used in some of the classic works mentioned in post-Confucian writings, this essay explains that the disciples of Confucius would have been familiar with such works as the *Classic of Odes* (*Book of Odes*) and *Records of Ritual*. This essay would be most applicable to an upper-division university course.

For use at the secondary level (high school), Keith Knapp's "Learning Confucianism through Filial Sons, Loyal Retainers, and Chaste Wives" gives the background and resources to explain how iconic figures were used to teach proper behavior in China. Much as heroic figures such as King Arthur and St. George (or even historical figures like George Washington, who "could not tell a lie") have been used in relatively recent times, Knapp uses the story of Guo Ju's intent to sacrifice his son so that Guo's mother could live. This essay could also be used in lesson planning for a lower-division university course.

Joseph Adler's "Divination and Sacrifice in Song Neo-Confucianism" provides a detailed explanation of ritual practices in the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), while describing some of the roots of these practices that go back millennia. This essay, which emphasizes the importance of Zhu Xi (1130–1200 CE), also addresses the importance of the Five Classics (the *Yijing*, the *Shujing*, the *Shijing*, the *Chunqiu*, and the *Li*). This essay is best suited for a university-level course.

In Aaron Stalnaker's "The Mencius-Xunzi Debate in Early Confucian Ethics" the author examines differing interpretations of how to achieve the goal of a return to Confucius' ideal of a government ruled by "virtuous leaders." However, the disagreement between Mencius and Xunzi is one that we see in politics today; i.e., it is a dispute over human

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nature. While Mencius believed in the goodness of human nature, Xunzi saw humans as inherently flawed and operating in their own self-interest. While written at a scholarly level, the writing style of this essay is appropriate both for upper-level high school courses in politics or philosophy or for university courses.

Long after the time of Confucius and his adherents, and after Zhu Xi had progressed in the development of Neo-Confucianism, came what Richey and Berthong describe as the Reactive Period (1644–1911). Robert Foster opens his essay “Understanding the Ethical Universe of Neo-Confucianism” by describing how Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century fought against neo-Confucianism, seeing it as a philosophy that bound China to the past. Foster provides a detailed explanation of the development of Neo-Confucianism as a critique or alternative to classic Confucian thought and practice, and while thoroughly documented, this essay would not be useful below the level of university coursework.

In his “Problematizing Contemporary Confucianism in East Asia,” Yiu-ming Fung also addresses the May Fourth Movement of 1919, as Foster does, and how Chinese intellectuals blamed Confucian thought and practice for China’s inability to take part in the modern world. Fung explains how this rejection of Neo-Confucianism moderated by the second half of the twentieth century, and that some Chinese scholars returned to Confucian metaphysics. These new scholars distinguished their study of “contemporary Neo-Confucianism” (also called New Confucianism) from the “Neo-Confucianism of the Song-Ming Dynasties.” Fung explains that Neo-Confucianism, in both its older and newer forms, is inherently different from Western philosophical thought. While contemporary Western thought is built upon the scientific tradition, a full understanding of Confucian thought is rooted more in a metaphysical or “transcendental realm.”

Fung’s discussion of how contemporary Confucianism is interpreted to permit individual success (he states that “inner sageliness”

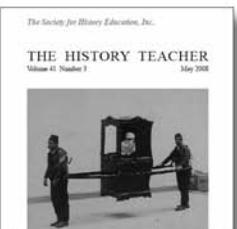

can lead to “outer kingliness”) explains the economic success of many Asian nations. This discussion would make this essay useful for a university-level course in international business.


The last two essays in this book, “Reenchanting Confucius: A Western-Trained Philosopher Teaches the *Analects*” by John Furlong and “Teaching Confucianism in Christian Contexts” by Judith Berling, provide sound introductions for faculty at either the high school or university level who have not had any training in Asian philosophy or political theory. Furlong points out the need to examine the *Analects* as a work of its time and its place, and how Western (American) students might easily dismiss it as simply “a bunch of rules.” American students, in particular, tend to idealize ancient Asian philosophy as the key to special insight and without the proper context, the *Analects* (or the *Yi-jing*, or any other such work) lacks deep meaning.

Berling points out the need for Western Christians to understand the philosophies that underlie Asian traditions and beliefs, especially as the world becomes more globalized and the likelihood of contact between themselves and Asians increases. She addresses how an understanding of Confucius as a human and a teacher can ease Christian concerns about Confucianism as a religion. Berling writes from the viewpoint of a teacher, and her essay would be particularly useful for any Western educator involved in either Asian studies or study-abroad programs in Asia.

Collectively, the essays in *Teaching Confucianism* offer educators a range of both practical course guidance and scholarly research. ■

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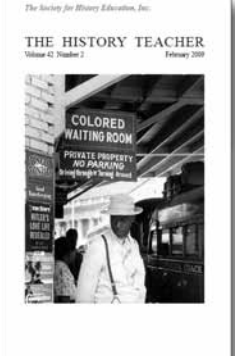
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