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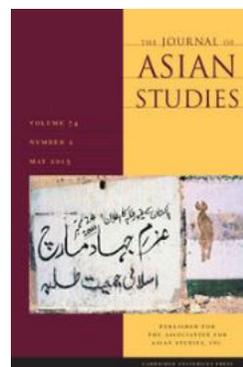
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“Civil Religion” and Confucianism: Japan’s Past, China’s Present, and the Current Boom in Scholarship on Confucianism

KIRI PARAMORE

This article employs the history of Confucianism in modern Japan to critique current scholarship on the resurgence of Confucianism in contemporary China. It argues that current scholarship employs modernist formulations of Confucianism that originated in Japan’s twentieth-century confrontation with Republican China, without understanding the inherent nationalist applications of these formulations. Current scholarly approaches to Confucianism trace a history through Japanese-influenced U.S. scholars of the mid-twentieth century like Robert Bellah to Japanese imperialist and Chinese Republican nationalist scholarship of the early twentieth century. This scholarship employed new individualistic and modernist visions of religion and philosophy to isolate fields of “Confucian values” or “Confucian philosophy” apart from the realities of social practice and tradition, transforming Confucianism into a purely intellectualized “empty box” ripe to be filled with cultural nationalist content. This article contends that current scholarship, by continuing this modernist approach, may unwittingly facilitate similar nationalist exploitations of Confucianism.

Considering the achievements of our long national history, the fate of the world some centuries from now may well be to see our nation assimilate and refine even Western culture. I firmly believe this is our nation’s great aspiration and indeed its manifest destiny.

– Hatoyama Ichirō, Minister for Education and Culture, January 27, 1934, at the inauguration of the Association for the Propagation of Japanese Confucianism (Nihon Jukyō Sen’yōkai 1934, 15)

Americans have, from the beginning, been aware of the responsibility and the significance our republican experiment has for the whole world.

– Robert Bellah, in “Civil Religion in America” ([1967] 2005, 53)

Robert Bellah’s passing, coming as it does in the midst of a new boom in writing on the politics of Confucianism, is cause to reflect on how meta-theories on the place of religion in political society have been treated, and are being treated, in Asian studies scholarship. The volume and impact of Bellah’s work was monumental, but one theory that he rather quickly distanced himself from in the 1970s and 80s appears to currently be experiencing

a resurgence—at least in commentaries on Confucianism. “Civil religion” was an idea Bellah came up with to try and make sense of his own country, America, during a particularly challenging episode of its history in the late 1960s. In one of his last interviews, ironically enough conducted by Anna Sun and Fenggang Yang, authors of recent volumes on Confucianism, Bellah admitted to being pressed into writing the article where this concept first occurred, of being uncomfortable with it from the start, and being particularly uncomfortable with how it was later used by others (Yang and Sun 2014, 6). But even in the original 1967 article in *Daedalus* that launched the idea, Bellah already expressed an awareness of the dangers of the concept: “It has often been used and is being used today as a cloak for petty interests and ugly passions” (Bellah [1967] 2005, 55). His articulation of the idea of “civil religion,” like much of his work, was originally historical rather than normative. For him, civil religion was simply part of the historical and ongoing basis of American politics, a part that needed careful attention if it were not to be exploited by the “ugly passions” that he saw at work there. A faint hint of the ideology of American exceptionalism can be discerned in Bellah’s article, but this only makes it even less likely that he would have originally conceived this model being applied to other places. He was not advocating it as a panacea to be used in other countries. In fact, conversely, by framing his article as a gentle condemnation of America’s war in Vietnam, he seems to have been warning against the imposition of American models in other lands.

Strange then to see Bellah’s idea of civil religion now being held up by a whole new generation of social science scholars as a normative concept, and one that should be applied to other societies—notably China. The resurrection of Bellah’s idea of civil religion in new normative clothes is actually part of a larger trend visible across humanities and social science scholarship of resurrecting a number of old meta-theories of culture and religion to try to understand the explosion in religiosity that is accompanying China and its satellite states’ juggernaut ride into high capitalism. While works by Fenggang Yang and Anna Sun themselves have employed the ghost of Bellah to imagine Confucianism as a “hopeful” civil religion for China, other scholars like Jiang Qing and Chen Weigang have resurrected Max Weber, or at least sociological models very reminiscent of Weber, to construct similarly idealistic imaginings of a Confucian-inspired polity in China or “Greater China” (W. Chen 2014; Jiang 2012; Sun 2013; Yang and Tamney 2012).

The current wave of scholarly writing on Confucianism is thus representative of more than just a reaction to the resurgence of Confucianism in East Asia and a growing interest in Chinese tradition. It also marks the resurrection of a range of old social science meta-theories, and their employment once again to try to understand the still sticky relationship between religious tradition and modernity. Like the Confucian tradition itself in some interpretations, these meta-theory-based approaches look backwards into the past for academic inspiration. In this article I would like to argue against this trend and suggest that scholars might try to use newer, more historically aware academic paradigms, particularly from the disciplines of social history and religious anthropology, in their endeavors to understand the complex dynamics of Confucianism in East Asia today. As I will expand upon below, the problem with meta-narratives and meta-theories on Confucianism is that they tend to ultimately always relate Confucianism to abstracted “Confucian values,” which in turn usually simply mean doctrinally based ideas rather than social practices. In order to think about new ways to approach

Confucianism during this boom, I agree with Anna Sun (2013, 32–76) that it is essential to seriously examine the history of the study of Confucianism in the modern world. Such a historical approach needs to engage European visions of Confucianism (as Sun does), but also modern Japanese academic visions of Confucianism, which were so influential in the twentieth century (including in Europe and China, and especially in the United States). Even more importantly, such a historical approach must include an awareness of the history of Confucianism in modern Japan’s experience of high capitalism and empire, an experience that offers obvious parallels to many things occurring in China today.

CONFUCIANISM, CULTURE, AND MODERNITY

Three problems have consistently confronted modern academic attempts to understand Confucianism in universal or global terms: (1) its deep political valency and consequent close association with states; (2) its traditionally culture-specific identification with China; and (3) its positionality beyond any single clear modern academic category like religion, philosophy, or politics.

The strong political valency of Confucianism through most of East Asian history has led Western academic writing to refer to it most often in political terms, often as a marker of a particular culture of politics to which certain values are attributed. Recent writing by international relations scholars like David Kang and Yuan-Kang Wang follows this trend in using Confucianism as a cultural key to understanding an “other” form of politics to which particular characteristics of either “harmony” or “violence” are attached (Kang 2010; Wang 2011).¹ The works of political philosophers Jiang Qing, Ruiping Fan, Joseph Chan, and Daniel Bell, although more idealistic and less historical, do something similar (Chan 2014; Fan and Yu 2011; Jiang 2012). Although their value judgments might be very different, these contemporary scholars follow a long tradition of representing Confucianism as marker of the Chinese cultural other. From Hegel through Marx to Weber, Confucianism was famously used to mark a particular interaction between religion and state, associated in its most famous Marxian garb with Asian despotism. This was all part of a complex positioning of Confucianism in a teleological world view that associated close interactions between religion, state, ethnos, and culture with a “premodern” condition.

In this sense, Confucianism and the Chinese were found to be “problematic” in a similar way to Judaism and the Jews. Marx’s “Jewish Question” revolved around the problem that Jewish religious faith, community organization, and structure were too closely intertwined (Marx 1968, 36–45). This was seen to both originate from and define Jewish culture and Jewishness itself. So too Confucianism was both characteristic of and defining of the despotic nature of Chinese society. It was the close ritualistic connection between state and society obfuscating the individual that made it premodern, and that was precisely the reason why Confucianism could not be classified as a modern form of philosophy, religion, or anything else. This problem is reminiscent of the problem inherent in modern conceptions of religion identified by Talal Asad. According to Asad

¹For critical discussion of this trend in international relations scholarship, see Callahan (2012).

(1993, 45), “the only legitimate space allowed to Christianity [and by implication thus any other religion] in post-Enlightenment society, [is] the right to individual *belief*. . . .” Whereas Asad himself italicizes “belief” in this sentence, one could just as well italicize “individual.” It was certainly the individual-centered nature of a religion that defined its modern nature for Marx, and thus precluded Judaism and Confucianism from being modern.² This is obviously a problem for anyone wanting to look at “Confucianism as a world religion,” or indeed anyone wanting to look at Confucianism globally at all.

Scholars specializing in the study of Confucianism, as well as advocates of Confucianism over the past fifty years (and, significantly, these two groups often overlap in the U.S. and Chinese contexts) have tried to get around these problems by identifying Confucianism with successful (in terms of the materialist values of modernity) societies: notably Japan, and since the 1980s the “mini-dragons” of South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. These societies are Confucian and materially successful in modernity, therefore Confucianism is compatible with modernity—or so the argument implies (Tu 1996). With the “rise of China,” China itself can be added to this list. Related to this, some of the same scholars have also argued for the modernity of Confucianism on an intellectual basis. They suggest that the doctrinal content of Confucianism is particularly suited to liberal democracy and capitalism. This, in broad-stroke terms, was the approach of Wm. Theodore de Bary, Tu Wei-ming, and others during the 1980s and 90s (Cohen 1985; de Bary 1983, 2013; Tu 1996). Robert Bellah’s *Tokugawa Religion* (1985) could also be read broadly along these Weberian contours.

This approach, through its focus on ideas as values, can also be perceived as an attempt to present Confucianism in modernized paradigms, facilitating Confucianism being discussed within the rubric of “philosophy,” or at least within the broader German field codifier of *weltanschauung*. In this way, these twentieth-century attempts to reconceptualize the academic contextualization of Confucianism share similarities with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attempts to “modernize” Buddhism. The modernization of that tradition through reconstruction had at its core a “reclassification” whereby the tradition was neatly redeployed in an adjusted definition of the Western categories of either “philosophy” or “religion” (Sueki 2004). Contemporary versions of this are Daniel Bell’s discussion of Confucianism as philosophy, or Tu Wei-ming’s attempt to create a “religio-philosophic” category for Confucianism. Importantly, even the simple approach that argues that Confucianism is a form of modernity also tends to focus on “Confucian values” rather than ritual or practice, thereby reconstructing Confucianism primarily in doctrinal or doctrinally derived, ideas-based, or philosophical terms.

In this way, the last century’s responses to the problems of Confucianism’s political character, Chinese cultural roots, and lack of conformism to modern academic categories have all actually reinforced the relationship of each of these problems with each other.

CIVIL RELIGION VS. NATIONAL RELIGION: JAPANESE HISTORY AND U.S. NORMS

Anna Sun’s *Confucianism as a World Religion* (2013), by adding a sociological perspective to the traditional ideas-based approach, attempts to open out a new vista on

²For Asad on the modern and premodern in Western definitions of religion, see Asad (1993, 234–35).

some of these problems. Sun wants to analyze the reality of Confucianism in China today: a vibrant religious movement, part of a general religious revival sweeping across greater China. This attempt to focus on the sociality of the movement positions Sun's study as clearly post-Asad. No longer is Confucianism as a non-Western religion simply a premodern throwback from which only the ideas are worth salvaging. Moreover, Sun goes beyond a sociological survey by framing her study in relation to a range of broader and very interesting scholarly and political issues: (1) the history of the identification of Confucianism in the modern Western academy as a “world religion,” (2) the recent debate in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Chinese state scholarly institutions over the definition of Confucianism, and (3) consideration of what political or social role Confucianism may come to play in relation to the Chinese state in the coming years. Sun thereby tries to combine a sociological approach and focus on contemporary society with an awareness of history and engagement with textual scholarship.

Despite the groundbreaking nature of this approach, Sun ultimately fails to get a sociological analysis of Confucianism off the ground. Although the book's first three chapters on disciplinary history and debates on discourse are fascinating, the second part where the sociological analysis is attempted often reads as not much more than lists of statistics, and the questions in her sociological research, by focusing almost exclusively on individuals and individual experiences and perceptions of things like “conversion” and “faith,” actually fall right back into the idea of an individualized modern religion about which Asad and others have warned. The failure of Sun's particular sociological approach drives her to fall back on Bellah's theory in order to make a conclusion. Sun thus concludes her book with the rather ambiguous final sentence: “The future of the revival of Confucianism no doubt holds for us anxiety, but also great hope” (Sun 2013, 183). This anxiety refers to negative nationalism. In the final chapter, Sun has a subsection titled “The Politics of Confucian Nationalism,” which she concludes by stating that “there is a remote possibility that the state might try to mold Confucianism into a form of ‘State Confucianism,’ like ‘State Shinto’ in Japan” (178). Anxiety, then, is elicited by the idea of state religion, which is in turn identified through the analogy of Japanese State Shinto. What the “hope” in the book's final sentence refers to is her own idiosyncratic rendering of Bellah's idea of civil religion as “religious collective conscience without association with a specific religion, and civil religion as the political conscience of a democratic, republican society” (180). Sun seems to see Confucianism functioning in China as a civil religion within a plurality of religious traditions (182–83). So what the final pages of the book say is something like: we might be anxious about Confucianism in China becoming a state religion like the dreaded State Shinto, but ultimately it is more likely we can be hopeful that Confucianism will continue to exist, as it does now, as one element within a religious plurality that serves as a civil religion for China, that is, a plurality that, following Bellah, serves as the “religion of the republic.”

Applying a historical lens and a trans-Asian outlook to this conclusion, however, raises significant problems. It is vital here to recall that the only example Sun gives of the negative possibility of “state religion” is Japanese State Shinto. However, the deployment of religion in supporting the modern Japanese state, and particularly the increasingly fascist state of the 1930s and 40s, was certainly not limited to State Shinto. As recent research has reiterated, State Shinto was only one of a “plurality” of religious pillars that came to support nativism, ultra-nationalism, the autocratic emperor system, and ultimately

fascism in Japan (Faure 1993; Kraemer 2011; Victoria 1997). Once we understand fascism or ultra-nationalism as forces that arise from within grassroots society, not simply imposed from above as ideology—as most experts on this phenomenon now agree—then the role of religion in supporting ultra-nationalism has to be seen on a broader plane than simply looking at state structures (Yoshimi 1987). Various sects of Buddhism old and new, new religions, Catholicism—they were all in on the ultra-nationalist project in mid-twentieth-century Japan, as was Confucianism. So if one wishes to compare the utilization of Confucianism in China today with the usage of a religion in mid-twentieth-century Japan, then the religion to compare should not be Shinto, but the very same religion: Confucianism.

Although State Shinto is often referred to in relation to Japanese imperialist ideology, the primary ideological form underlying nationalist and imperialist education in schools and the army was the ostensibly secularist ideology of “national morality.” One could even describe State Shinto as just one part of the plural civil religious construction that was “national morality.” The prime academic advocate and ideologue of the national morality movement was Inoue Tetsujirō (1855–1944). Inoue, the author of *Kokumin dōtoku gairon* (A general discussion of national morality, 1912) and professor of Eastern Philosophy at the University of Tokyo had also authored *Chokugo engi* (1890), the official state commentary on the key ideological document of Meiji Japan, the Imperial Rescript on Education. *Chokugo engi* was issued to schools together with the Rescript and played a key role in laying the basis for the ultra-nationalist reaction to the Rescript, including attacks on liberals and Christians (Paramore 2009, 141–53). Inoue repeatedly emphasized the nonreligious nature of national morality, partly because it emerged in competition to ideas of using Christianity as the basis of the teaching of morals in schools. In works like *A general discussion of national morality*, Inoue emphasizes the Shinto aspects of morality, thereby, through the well-known trope of asserting State Shinto as nonreligious, identifying national morality with secularism (Breen and Teeuwen 2010).

Inoue not only used the secularist argument to advance one religious tradition—Shinto—he also used the same trope through the first two decades of the twentieth century to consistently argue for increased use of Confucianism in the national education and ideological construction of modern Japan. Inoue’s positive evaluation of the Confucian tradition in Japanese history, and his regard for its suitability for use in modern moral education, can be seen in the introductions to each volume of his monumental historical trilogy on Japanese Confucianism published between 1900 and 1905 (Inoue 1900, 1903, 1905). Through the first two decades of the twentieth century, Inoue actively lobbied for more Confucian content in national morality education, while at the same time authoring core national morality texts for teacher education (Inoue 1912). For instance, in a speech he gave as a public lecture for the Japan Philosophical Society (Tetsugakkai) in 1908, he argued:

It is good if we have something like Confucianism [in education] because the aim of Confucianism is pure morality in its broadest sense. Moreover, there is no impediment to teaching Confucianism in schools because [unlike Buddhism and Christianity] it does not contradict the natural sciences. (Inoue 1944, 806)

Liang Qichao (1873–1929) was also a regular attendee at this same Japan Philosophical Society between 1898 and 1908 when he resided in Tokyo. He had met Inoue Tetsujirō

there already in 1899, and two Liang translations of Inoue’s work had quickly followed (Fogel 2004, 183). Liang’s conception of *gongde* (public morality) has also been linked directly to Inoue’s conception of national morality (Fogel 2004, 207). So the constellations of ideology construction that would influence both the Chinese Republic and its People’s Republic can be linked historically to Japanese deployments of Confucianism in the construction of something resembling a civil religion.

Certainly as far as the Japanese case goes, Confucianism is widely recognized as having provided the primary basis for the curriculum of national morality, and Confucianism came to play an even greater role in Japanese imperial ideology through the 1930s as expansionist aggression increased and the country drifted towards fascism (Collcutt 1991; Nihon Jukyō Sen’yōkai 1934; Smith 1959).

The important lesson of the Japanese example is that the kind of nationalist ideology that ultimately supported fascism was in fact very much a deliberate construction by Inoue Tetsujirō and others of something not so dissimilar from civil religion as defined by Bellah. One could argue that Inoue wanted the civil religion, which they called national morality, to be based in, to borrow Sun’s words summarizing Bellah, a “religious collective conscience without association with a [single] specific religion, and civil religion as the political conscience” (Sun 2013, 180). This may indicate that Sun’s assumption, that admission of a plurality of religions in the state construction of ideology will ensure something “hopeful,” is perhaps itself a little too hopeful, if not naively ignorant of historical precedent.

After all, even moving away from Japan to Bellah’s argument made in the context of the American experience, does American historical reality actually back up Sun’s normative if not idealistic reading of civil religion’s historic role in American society? As noted earlier, Bellah himself associated American civil religion in historical reality with sometimes negative forms of U.S. nationalism that have facilitated terrible acts of international violence similar to those perpetrated by Japan under the regime of “national morality.”³ Bellah’s own reticence to use the term “civil religion” from around 1980 onwards is related to an awareness of this problematic (Yang and Sun 2014, 6). Sun’s attempt to adopt Bellah’s idealistic imagination of his own country through the conception of “civil religion” reminds me of Inoue Tetsujirō’s adoption of early twentieth-century German imperialist self-imaginings of “national morality.” Inoue’s huge assumption was that imperial Germany, in terms of the overall function of the relationship between state, nation, and religion, was an excellent model that should be emulated. I wonder if Sun is not making the same problematic assumption in her approach to the early twenty-first-century United States of America.

CULTURAL SPECIFICITY: CONFUCIANISM’S “WORLD”?

Ultimately, this brings us back to consideration of one of the unrealized promises inherent in Sun’s title—Confucianism’s global character as a “world religion.” Sun builds on

³Bellah refers particularly to the “anti-revolutionary” conflict which “we have come to stumble into”—in other words the Vietnam War—in a clearly condemnatory manner (Bellah [1967] 2005, 53).

the work of Girardot (2002) and others to eloquently elucidate the history behind the positioning of Confucianism as an element in Max Müller's academic pantheon of "world religions" in the late nineteenth century. But she never seriously engages the more obvious question of Confucianism's globalization—or, more pertinently, the striking lack thereof—in world history. In fact, Confucianism is unique among Müller's "world religions" in its historic incapacity over thousands of years to ever move far beyond the geographic region of its inception. Late Ming and early Qing anti-Christian writers sometimes wondered why it was that whereas Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity had all managed to spread across the globe, the much older Confucianism seems never to have appealed to anyone West of inner China. In fact, beyond the sometimes Chinese tributary states of Vietnam and Korea, Confucianism only ever spread to Japan. Japan is the only example of a country where Confucianism ever spread without some form of Chinese political dominion. Is it not worth considering why?

Is there something particular about Confucianism's interaction with the state and culture that has precluded it from spreading beyond the boundaries of Sinitic states? In most of its historical manifestations, Confucianism seems to have had a particularly systematized relationship with the state. Much Confucian ritual and practice also appear closely tied not only to state rite, but also to culturally Chinese custom. Even in the one case of Confucianism spreading further—Japan—it is noteworthy that many of the core ritual practices were ditched in that foreign context (McMullen 1996). Contemporary elite forms of Confucianism beyond the Sinosphere (for instance, so-called "Boston Confucianism") also choose to not integrate most of the apparatus of Confucian ritual into their practice—they restrict practice to self-cultivation (Neville 2000). In this sense, the criticism of Confucianism at the level of academic discourse as "premodern" in its integrated nature can be seen to also relate to real historical issues. But these real historical issues have not been investigated thoroughly, particularly not outside the Chinese case. To investigate them requires conceptualizing Confucianism beyond doctrine and ideas, and crucially beyond the *individualized* conception of faith and practice about which Asad warned.

Advocates of modern forms of Confucianism have actually done the opposite of this. Rather than engaging issues in the sociality of Confucianism, they have tended to sidestep historic and social problems by simply denying much of the religio-social apparatus of Confucianism, notably the sociality of its ritual schemes. Instead they have either overtly, or through their academic practice implicitly, repackaged Confucianism as a philosophy or thought system.

CONFUCIANISM AS PHILOSOPHY, CONFUCIANISM AS ETHICS, CONFUCIANISM AS VALUES

The most overt contemporary example of this is Daniel Bell, a philosopher who concentrates attention on the political applicability of Confucianism, especially in relation to the contemporary Chinese state where he lives and teaches. Bell is thus interested in the social implications and applicability of Confucianism, but Bell's Confucianism is overtly formulated as a philosophy; it is a Confucianism of ideas, or at most values (Jiang 2012). He does not study or include in his conception of Confucianism the ritual schemes of the tradition or the history or practice of their sociality. Tu Wei-ming,

although being institutionally positioned in Asian studies rather than philosophy, and being very sensitive to the religious implications of Confucianism, still defines it through individual-centered practice based on doctrinal (in his case Song neo-Confucian) norms rather than through observation of the practice of Confucianism in historic societies. His idea of “religio-philosophy” is thus primarily a philosophical paradigm that prescribes an individual religious or spiritual experience. If religious at all, it is pure religious modernity in the terms that Asad defined it.

This contemporary pigeon-holing of Confucianism within the intellectualized category of philosophy or thought actually traces a history back to early twentieth-century Asia. Many scholars who see their study of Confucianism as the study of “Asian philosophy,” “Chinese philosophy,” or “Oriental thought” are heavily influenced by conceptions of the history of Confucianism generated by Fung Yu-lan (1895–1990) in the context of the development of Chinese Republican ideology (Fung 1966). Scholars like Fung, however, rode in the wake of earlier Chinese scholars such as Liang Qichao (1873–1929) who were themselves crucially influenced by the repositioning of both Buddhism and Confucianism in relation to philosophy and religion in late nineteenth- early twentieth-century Japan.

Understanding modern approaches to the study of Confucianism, therefore, requires us to return to the earlier history of Japanese intellectual modernization and its relationship to developments in China and the West. This in turn brings us back again to our friend Inoue Tetsujirō. In 1890 Inoue became the first Japanese to be appointed full professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Tokyo. Since his 1882 appointment as an associate professor, Inoue’s main duty at the university had been to take charge of the teaching of “Eastern Philosophy.” The main academic contribution of his career is usually viewed in terms of his attempt in this post, especially during the late Meiji period, to integrate the teaching of East Asian thought, in particular Confucianism, into a Western academic framework, creating an intellectual history basis of the “national ethic” as “Japanese philosophy.” Inoue’s most enduring academic works today are thus not his shrill public writings like *A General Discussion of National Morality*, but rather his academic historical work published in the first years of the twentieth century, which established a field that it is politically correct in Japan today to call the “intellectual history of Japan,” but which until 1945, and in the writing of Inoue himself, was always referred to as “the history of Japanese philosophy.”⁴

The academic project of repackaging Japanese Confucianism as “philosophy,” however, was intimately linked to the public project of pushing national morality. As Western philosophical and scientific analysis came to dominate Japanese public debate, arguments centered around the idea of ethics in general, and “national ethics” in particular, became more reliant on definitions of the nature of philosophy and religion themselves. For conservative nationalists to argue that the Japanese national ethic was organic to Japan, and illustrated in “Japanese philosophy,” they needed to be able to define what philosophy was, and find a Japanese variety. A definition of “Japanese philosophy” was thus reliant on broader Meiji attempts to define the Western concept of

⁴Sitting at the core of this historical writing was his three-volume history of Confucianism in Japan: *The Philosophy of Japan’s Wang Yang-ming-ist School*, *The Philosophy of Japan’s Ancient Learning School*, and *The Philosophy of Japan’s Zhu Xi-ist School* (Inoue 1900, 1903, 1905).

“philosophy” itself. And the definition of what did or did not constitute “philosophy” was in turn related to the sticky question of what useful social role (if any) should be attributed to “religion.” This was not only one of the continuing intellectual questions of Meiji-period scholars, but as controversies like the brief suppression of Buddhism in the early 1870s demonstrated, one of the pressing political and social ones also. In the 1890s context, and particularly in Inoue’s construction of “Japanese philosophy,” this question became increasingly integrated into debates on national ideology and religion.

Both Inoue Tetsujirō and his publisher, friend and New Buddhism activist Inoue Enryō (1858–1919), were key figures in discussions of the 1890s and early 1900s that developed this definition of the place of Confucianism and Buddhism in “philosophy” through redefining the field itself (Snodgrass 2003). Inoue Tetsujirō’s exposition of Confucianism as moral philosophy in his publications between 1900 and 1905 was in content and method quite different from Enryō’s “integration” of “Buddhist philosophy” and “Western philosophy” from the late 1880s. But it rested on the same foundations. Those foundations basically emphasized the separation of the political and individual spheres, supported by the separation of the categories of philosophy and religion. Confucianism as “philosophy” was thus positioned within the modern pantheon of rational knowledge, with a particular role in affecting discussions on politics. But the religious community, ritual, or practice elements were removed. Most modern scholars of Confucianism over the past century, including in the West, whether they realize it or not, have followed this model.

It is important to be aware of the consequences of this socially decontextualized approach to religion, at least in the historical example we have from Japan. This redefinition of Confucianism not only allowed it to function within modern categories and interact with modern institutions like the state, but more importantly it allowed Inoue Tetsujirō to associate Confucian values as philosophy with pretty much whatever he wanted. Confucianism, isolated from any established religious institutions, set social base, or context, became to some extent an open box or empty category into which whatever imperatives of nationalist imperialism needed to be inserted could be. Such an “open-box” characteristic can be seen in many forms of modernized Confucianism. As no more than an intellectual system of values, divorced from social institutions and practice, theoretically any value or belief that could be related to the text could also be claimed for Confucianism. This in fact conforms to Talal Asad’s theories on the nature of individualized faith-based religion in post-Enlightenment society, which “render[s] any philosophy that performs such a function [individual belief providing consolation] into religion” (Asad 1993, 46). Indeed, Confucianism as a category became so pliable in mid-twentieth-century Japan that fascist war criminals even used Confucian values as part of their defense in the Tokyo Trials (Kiyose [1947] 1995, 38). “Confucian values,” once divorced from the history of social practice, could be, and are, interpreted to mean almost anything.

CONFUCIANISM AS RELIGION

Studying Confucianism as philosophy, then, is far from an innocent practice nor one without a past. It interacts deeply with the history of political modernity in East Asia. Philosophy as a peg is usually associated with ethnic or civilizational labels—Confucianism is

“Chinese philosophy” or “Asian philosophy,” part of “Eastern tradition,” or in the 1930s and 40s “Japanese empire.” In other words, labeling Confucianism as philosophy reinforces its cultural-specificity and its political valency, and of course obfuscates the sociality of its ritual systems and culturally embedded practice.

Many of the books in the current boom in Confucian studies, however, are beginning to take a different approach. For instance, Chen Yong’s *Confucianism as Religion* (2013), while not itself examining Confucianism as a religion, nonetheless provides an intellectual history that unmasks the politics inherent in the problematic of modern categorization. Anna Sun’s *Confucianism as a World Religion* (2013) represents a much larger-scale attempt to overcome problems in past scholarship. Ultimately, Sun fails to give Confucianism a global face, but she does attempt to station it methodologically in the sociality of religion, and notably in the sociological and anthropological academic milieu the study of religion currently enjoys. On the other hand, the difficulty she experiences using this approach to render a meaningful conclusion, and her ultimate regression to a political thesis based on a normative reading of Bellah, are cautionary.

Similarly, many of the articles in Yang and Tamney’s collection *Confucianism and Spiritual Traditions in Modern China and Beyond* (2012) are path-breaking in attempting to analyze the growth of contemporary Confucianism in social terms from the ground up. But even in this collection we are also confronted by some problematic value-based interpretations of the Confucian revival. For instance, Kang Xiaoguang argues in the opening essay of this volume that the resurgence in Confucianism should be seen as a “cultural nationalist movement,” which has emerged as a result of the particular stage of socioeconomic development in which China now finds itself. That all sounds fine, except that Kang, a professor in the School of Public Administration at Renmin University, the university traditionally responsible for the political training of senior CCP cadres, also makes a point of singing the praises of this rise in cultural nationalism that will “contribute to world peace and ultimately to China’s national interests” (Yang and Tamney 2012, 71). Kang follows the typical trend of optimistic nationalist exceptionalism by concluding that “China’s cultural nationalist movement may shape the fate of not only the Chinese nation but also the entire world” (72). National exceptionalism somehow seems to always engage “fate” and ultimately the “world.” These are, after all, the contours of the ideology of Protestant providence and manifest destiny that underlay the process of global modernization, and of which these readings of Confucianism still seem in awe (Stanley 1990).

Many works in the recent scholarly boom in Confucianism similarly use Weberian or other meta-theoretical approaches to locate Confucian values within political systems. They thereby dislocate Confucianism from any social or historical base, and follow the twentieth-century trend of reifying Confucianism as the *weltanschauung* of a particular culture—a reaction to and replacement of the positioning of Protestantism in Western high capitalism (Veer 2001). Notably, many recent books on Confucianism, including those by Sun, Yang, and Chen, unwittingly facilitate this kind of cultural reification by ignoring Confucianism outside the Chinese context. This is perhaps the greatest danger to be discerned in the current trend of scholarship on Confucianism: its refusal to seriously study Confucianism outside Chinese cultural settings. Although scholars probably do not intend a China-centric approach to lead to cultural reification, it ineluctably will. This is clear if we think about Christianity as a comparative referent. Scholarship on Christianity

that only talks about Christianity in a Western context inevitably (although often unwittingly) reinforces cultural visions of Christianity that were implicit in modern imperialism. Many of the problems faced by Christianity today, and over the last three centuries, have sprung from this unfortunate cultural habit of equating Christianity with Western European civilization. We must remember, however, that there was nothing innocent in the development of this habit through late medieval and early modern Europe, and particularly as part of the rise of modern capitalist imperialism in the nineteenth century. The politics of a culture pretending it owns a religious tradition are of course related to the ideas of cultural manifest destiny and providence discussed earlier and reflected in the quote from Hatoyama Ichirō that opens this essay. Much current scholarship can be seen to be digging the same trench for Confucianism.

On the other hand, despite this Sinocentricism in terms of content, the form in which much of this current scholarship on Confucianism is published does imbue some hope. The nature of the current discourse on Confucianism, in form if not content, is patently international in terms of the language it is published in, the publishers and distributors of the texts, and the scholarly discourse space it inhabits. This is perhaps the greatest difference between the revival of Confucianism in 1930s Japan and in contemporary China—the current Chinese revival sits in a globalized scholarly and analytic framework, it is being discussed rationally, and it is open. Whether that makes any difference to the outcome, we shall have to wait and see.

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