

# **Confucianism in Modern American Life**

A paper presented at  
The International Conference on Comparing China and the West  
Beijing University  
July, 2013

Sam Crane  
Department of Political Science  
Williams College  
Williamstown, MA 01267  
[scrane@williams.edu](mailto:scrane@williams.edu)

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## Confucianism in Modern American Life

Confucianism is not catching on in the United States. By that I mean the central concepts and concerns of Confucianism are not circulating beyond a relatively small circle of academic specialists. This, at least, is my general impression, as someone who attempts to expand the American engagement with Confucian ideas<sup>1</sup>. My question, then, is: why? Why hasn't Confucianism gained a wider audience in contemporary America? I will explore this question in three ways. First, I will consider why we might expect Confucianism to gain cultural influence in the United States; that is, why we should question its lack of intellectual prominence. Second, I will briefly examine the issue of translation and assert that this is not a significant obstacle to the understanding of Confucianism in the United States. Finally, I will examine the political context of contemporary America and argue that for Confucianism to be more comfortably adopted by more Americans it must be framed in terms consistent with liberalism, here understood as a political-cultural orientation that deeply permeates so much of contemporary American thinking and life.

### *The Sparseness of Confucianism in American*

In 2010, Robert Neville published an article with the title: "The Short Happy Life of Boston Confucianism."<sup>2</sup> It recapitulates some of the arguments he put forth in his earlier book,

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Crane, *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Dao: Ancient Chinese Thought in Modern American Life* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Neville, "The Short Happy Life of Boston Confucianism," in Wonsuk Chang and Leah Kalmanson, eds., *Confucianism in Context: Classic Philosophy and Contemporary Issues, East Asia and Beyond* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), pp. 145-173.

*Boston Confucianism*<sup>3</sup>. But there are additional reflections on the possibilities for Confucianism as a world philosophy; that is, how Confucianism might be actively employed as a guide for life outside of East Asia, including in the United States (and not just in Boston). Neville clearly believes, as do other comparative philosophers, that “Confucianism” can be taken from its original pre-modern Chinese cultural context and meaningfully applied to human circumstances in other times and places<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, he considers himself a Confucian, conscientiously keeping in mind Confucian ideals as he lives his daily life. He is an active embodiment of the transposition of Confucianism from a Chinese to an American context.

But notice the title of that 2010 article: it refers to a “short happy” life. That seems elegiac. He writes that the life of “Boston Confucianism” is not only short and happy (148), but also “temporary and ironic” (149). He does not elaborate on why he uses these terms specifically, but his chapter provides some hints for this description. In thinking about how American experience might reciprocally shape the broader historical Confucian tradition, Neville expects to see translated Confucian texts circulating beyond academia:

*...to the extent Confucianism flourishes in new forms in the West, there will be people identifying with it, living according to its primary texts and programs, and speaking for it, who are not serious scholars. Only a few Confucians in East Asia are serious scholars – ordinary Confucians there imbibe the philosophy with their culture. But in the West until very recently, the few and only people who had any connection with Confucianism at all were the diaspora East Asians and the serious scholars. Like any religious philosophy, Confucianism looks far better when represented only by its learned leaders. But from now on, Confucianism will be represented sometimes by people such as myself who have no pretense at Sinological scholarship and who read the texts in translation. The price of vigorous success is popularization, in this case by some who are Westerners. (169).*

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Cummings Neville, *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen C. Angle makes this case: “I think it is unquestionable that Confucian teachings have a kind of universal aspiration, potentially applicable to anyone.” Stephen C. Angle, “American Confucianism: Between Tradition and Universal Values,” unpublished manuscript, prepared for 2013 AAS Conference, p. 8. Cited with permission.

We can sense the irony here: a self-identified Confucian who is not a Sinologist. But we can also discern a reason for the “short” and “temporary” qualities of Boston (or should we say: “American”) Confucianism. Although Neville himself does not state this explicitly in the 2010 article, it would seem that the expansion of Confucianism beyond the academy, its popularization outside the realm of “serious scholars,” is just not happening. What had started as a humorous observation about the concentration of academics in the Boston area interested in Confucianism in 1991 has not, twenty-two years later, developed into a broader socio-cultural phenomenon<sup>5</sup>. Thus the apparent brevity of the Boston Confucian moment.

It could be argued that twenty-two years is hardly long enough to bring about a significant cultural transformation. But, of course, Confucianism has been present and available for much longer to Americans who have an interest in learning about it. “Serious scholars” have been translating and interpreting and arguing about Confucianism in English since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the turn of the twentieth century, James Legge’s translations were certainly read in the United States, and academia was starting to institutionalize the study of Confucianism, at least within the emerging field of comparative religion<sup>6</sup>. Even more significantly at that time, the presentation of Confucian ideas and images to a wider range of American readers was boosted by the poetry and translations of Ezra Pound.

The Confucian career of Pound is strange yet influential. In a rather sympathetic treatment of Pound’s engagement with the Chinese classics, Feng Lan argues:

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<sup>5</sup> In a recent personal communication with me, Cummings observes that Confucianism is not nearly as widespread in the United States as either Buddhism or Daoism.

<sup>6</sup> Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 74-75.

*In the twentieth century few have done more than Pound to bring Confucius to English readers. His rendering of the first three of the Confucian Four Books remains one of the major Confucian translations in English available in university libraries all over America and consistently attracts readers.*<sup>7</sup>

What is strange is that Pound's initial translations were not based on Chinese sources. He first worked from French renditions of Chinese texts, then relied on English translations, and only later came to develop some capacity for reading Chinese himself. His translations were, as Feng makes abundantly clear, riddled with misreadings and blatant errors. Yet for all of the problems, various sinologically-informed critics suggest that Pound was able to capture something of the sense of Chinese texts<sup>8</sup>. Feng goes on to suggest that, even with obvious linguistic failures, Pound's struggle to find in Confucianism answers to the disorienting turbulence of early twentieth century Euro-American modernity has a certain enduring value, speaking, as it does, to the continuing uncertainties wrought by modernization and post-modernization, not only in the West but globally<sup>9</sup>.

It is not my purpose here to defend Pound's understanding of Confucianism. Rather, what is notable is what did *not* happen in his wake. If Feng is correct in arguing that Pound was, in a sense, opening a Confucian door, we might then ask: why didn't more Americans walk through it by the mid-twentieth century? It is not hard to imagine, given Pound's literary

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<sup>7</sup> Feng Lan, *Ezra Pound and Confucianism: Remaking Humanism in the Face of Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> In analyzing Pound's poetry translations, Wai-lim Yip writes: "One can easily excommunicate Pound from the Forbidden City of Chinese studies, but it seems clear that in his dealing with *Cathay*, even when he is given only the barest details, he is able to get into the central consciousness of the original author by what we may perhaps call a kind of clairvoyance." Wai-lim Yip, *Ezra Pound's Cathay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 88.

<sup>9</sup>"Pound was one of the very few Western writers in the first half of the twentieth century to praise Confucianism, openly and whole-heartedly, as an inspiring and compelling belief system. Obtaining from Confucianism a set of well-formulated concepts about human nature, Pound was able to provide the development of Western humanism with a strong ethical grounding as well as a powerful spiritual vision." Feng, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

prominence, other American intellectuals being inspired by his eloquence, and, then, doing competent translations to advance the project of bringing Confucianism to bear on problems of American life. But Pound did not stir a significant and widespread popularization of Confucian thought<sup>10</sup>. His political peculiarities likely undermined his role as an exemplar. It's fairly safe to say: an apparently traitorous, expatriate schizophrenic is not the best medium for conveying a demanding moral theory into the United States in the 1950s. But we cannot explain the meager impact of Confucianism at that time simply in terms of Pound's disrepute.

Larger political-economic forces were working against Confucianism in the U.S. in the post-World War II period. China, a reference point for anyone interested in thinking about the possibilities of Confucianism, was riven by civil war, on the verge of revolutionary modernization driven by a most un-Confucian Communist Party. The homeland of Confucianism was resolutely rejecting the teachings of The Master. Indeed, Confucianism had been rigorously criticized as an obstacle to modernization by an influential stream of Chinese intellectual life since at least the May 4<sup>th</sup> movement. Had an American gone to China in 1950 or 1960 or 1970 and asked if Confucianism was relevant to modern concerns, the overwhelming response there would have been: "no."

Moreover, the material circumstances of US economic and political power vitiated the significance of Chinese thought for Americans. The US was the global hegemon, the core of the world-economy and the frontrunner in military might. Those hard power advantages engendered, in the minds of many of its citizens, a certain cultural and ideological self-satisfaction. It was the "American Century." What need was there to look elsewhere for philosophical revelation? Indeed, instead of an open-minded appreciation of diverse worldly

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<sup>10</sup> Angle, writing in 2013, remarks that: "If one ventures beyond academic study, though, signs of the import of Confucianism are few and far between." *op. cit.*, p. 16.

sources of human knowledge, an “arrogance of power” narrowed the national focus. Thus, even as the academic study of China and Confucianism deepened and expanded, there was little serious interest in American society at large for a philosophy discredited in its birthplace.

But that was then, and this is now. Changes have occurred in both the ideational and material realms that, together, would seem to very much enhance the possibilities for an American Confucianism.

Intellectually, there is a much greater range and sophistication of scholarship on all facets of ancient China now than, say, in Pound’s day. Numerous translations of Confucian texts are available and intense debate occurs on the meaning and significance of specific philosophical questions. Never before have Americans had so readily available to them such an array of excellent resources necessary for gaining a good understanding of Confucianism.

Take, for example, the notion of “Confucian role ethics” as articulated of late by Roger Ames, building upon the work of Henry Rosemont and others<sup>11</sup>. Ames sets out to “appreciate” – as in both “understand” and “increase the value of” – Confucianism as a global philosophical force. He has every expectation that, as Chinese economic and political power grows, Chinese cultural products, Confucianism included, will flow around the world, shaping and combining with ideas and practices virtually anywhere. The vocabulary his book offers directly engages with key concerns of Western philosophy. It is, in a sense, a prolegomenon to an American (as well as other sorts of) Confucianism, constructed from a life-long scholarly focus on various facets of ancient Chinese thought. One might disagree with this or that aspect of Ames’ project,

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<sup>11</sup> Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011). I mention Rosemont in particular here because Ames, in his Preface, notes the importance of one of Rosemont’s articles as an stimulus for his book: Henry Rosemont Jr., “Rights-bearing Individuals and Role-bearing Persons,” in Mary I. Bockover, ed., *Rules, Rituals, and Responsibility: Essays Dedicated to Herbert Fingarette* (LaSalle IL: Open Court: 1991). For a wide-ranging discussion of this and other aspects of Rosemont’s work see: Marthe Chandler and Ronnie Littlejohn, eds., *Polishing the Chinese Mirror: Essays in Honor of Henry Rosemont, Jr.* (New York: Global Scholarly Publications: 2008).

but it reflects the extent to which the entire intellectual field of China studies has expanded and matured in the past several decades<sup>12</sup>.

In a somewhat more conversational and literary manner, some of Ames's ideas are echoed in Gish Jen's new book, *Tiger Writing: Art, Culture, and the Interdependent Self*<sup>13</sup>. Although her style and language are quite different than Ames's, her concept of the "interdependent self," which she sees as foundational to Chinese experience, resonates with Rosemont's "role-bearing persons." She does not foreground "Confucianism" when she describes the cultural pattern of interdependence. She tends to see this as a more diffuse Chinese or Asian psychology, which implicitly raises the question of how we might distinguish "Confucian" from "Chinese" culture. Where does one end and the other begin? But this is not Jen's concern. She is interested in how Asian-inflected interdependence operates in conjunction with Western assumptions about the independent self. These two tendencies are not confined to specific cultural or ethnic geographies: "...you don't have to be Asian to be interdependent..." (144). Indeed, as a second generation Chinese-American novelist, Jen understands how each defines her own experience. They are complementary: "We need both the interdependent and the independent self." (158). However, in one passage she hints that independence might be more consistent with the socio-cultural dynamics of modernity:

*For all of these and other possible refinements of the picture, though, the general truth still holds: there is a quickstep involving modernity, linearity, individualism, the isolated, the particular, and the extraordinary for which the hopskip of Western art, complete with its emphasis on art for art's sake and also on genius – on a conception of art as proceeding from a sacred spark within – is, as we shall see, but a natural variation. And there is a quickstep, too, involving tradition, cyclicity, interdependence, the holistic, the general, and the quotidian, with which the hopskip of Eastern art, complete with its*

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Nylan's review of Ames's book in *Journal of Chinese Studies* (no. 54; January 2012; pp. 305-313) offers very specific points of criticism that demonstrate the depth and sophistication of English-language scholarly debate in China studies now.

<sup>13</sup> Gish Jen, *Tiger Writing: Art, Culture, and the Interdependent Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).



*emphasis on moral utility, and also on mastery – on artistry as a thing tied to study and practice – twines equally nicely. (76)*

Perhaps she does not mean to suggest here that interdependence – and by implication Confucianism – might fade as the political economy of modernization, and post-modernization, incentivize, socially as well as economically, the construction and reproduction of independent selves. It is something to think about. And Ames might disagree. The larger point, however, when we bring Jen into conversation with Ames is, again, the sheer availability of Confucian concepts for contemporary American readers. These two books draw upon research from a wide variety of academic disciplines: philosophy; history; psychology; anthropology; literature; art; among others. They demonstrate the wealth and diversity of Confucian ideas now current in English. We have come a long way since Pound's day.

Materially, too, the world has changed in a direction more supportive of the global extension of Confucianism. To describe the international diffusion of economic dynamism is to repeat a well-worn cliché: US hegemony is waning; Chinese power is rising. From this observation follows, in a fairly widespread if often unattributed acceptance of Gramsci's notion of "hegemony," the expectation that China will become a more prominent producer and definer of global cultural flows<sup>14</sup>. Economic development is not the sole determinant of cultural influence, but it is an important producer thereof. Much has been written in recent years on the possibilities of Chinese "soft power." I have argued elsewhere that it is unlikely that

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<sup>14</sup> The Gramscian notion of "hegemony" as applied to international politics is well described by Robert Cox: "In Gramsci's historical materialism...ideas and material conditions are always bound together, mutually influencing on another, and not reducible one to the other. Ideas have to be understood in relation to material circumstances." Robert Cox, "Gramsci, hegemony, and international relations: and essay in methods," in Cox and Sinclair, eds., *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.p. 131-132.

Confucianism will serve the instrumental soft power purposes of PRC foreign policy<sup>15</sup>.

However, even if Confucianism does not rise to the level of transforming American preferences in foreign policy, the greater presence of Confucianism in a materially more prosperous and powerful China could well provide reassurance to nascent American Confucians.

It would seem, then, that we are now in a moment of great potential for a more conspicuous expression of Confucianism in America. The concepts and ideas are readily available. The material conditions are auspicious. But it does not seem to be happening: Confucianism is not catching on in the US. This brings a *chengyu* to mind: 万事俱备，只欠东风 – “everything is ready, all that is needed is the east wind.” There are various arguments for what critical element (“the east wind”) is missing in this situation. But as I will now contend, translation is not one of them.

### ***The Translatability of Confucianism***

The central problem of translation, any translation, is that language can never capture the fullness of human perception and experience. Walter Benjamin engages with this problem in his introduction to a translation of the poems of Baudelaire<sup>16</sup>. What is it that makes a poem a poem? It is obviously composed of words. But a good poem, a moving poem, is one that conjures feeling and meaning greater than the literal definitions of the words on the page. Thus he describes the difficulty faced by all translators:

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<sup>15</sup> Sam Crane, “Confucianism as Soft Power,” unpublished manuscript, February 2010; presented to the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, March 2010. Text available at: [http://uselesstree.typepad.com/useless\\_tree/2011/09/why-confucianism-will-not-provide-soft-power-to-the-prc.html](http://uselesstree.typepad.com/useless_tree/2011/09/why-confucianism-will-not-provide-soft-power-to-the-prc.html)

<sup>16</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Translator’s Task,” (trans. Steven Rendall), *TTR: traduction, terminologie, redaction*, 10, no. 2 (1997), pp. 151-165.

*What does a poem “say,” then? What does it communicate? Very little, to a person who understands it. Neither message nor statement is essential to it. However, a translation that seeks to translate something can transmit nothing other than a message – that is something inessential.* (151)

The significance of a work of art (and, I would argue, philosophy as well) is not simply derived from its linguistic components. Words have certain meanings, but great works stir something else, a more abstract and ineffable recognition, an inexpressible connection, an illumination. This is something more than simply a “message.” And to translate that is to capture something other than the words on the page.

This applies as well to texts like the *Analects* and *Mencius*. The allusive qualities of these works raise certain translation challenges. There is much that is unspoken, unwritten. Some of this is due to the ambiguous qualities of classical Chinese and the aesthetic sensibilities of ancient times. The authors assume the reader is familiar with a broader cultural field that is alluded to only in the most indirect and figurative language. The reader must intuit. Surplus meaning, that which is outside the text, also includes knowledge embodied in direct, personal experience of the actions advocated by the texts<sup>17</sup>. In other words(!), you have to live the text in order to apprehend the text. This would imply that to translate Confucianism, with any hope of capturing its significance, the translator would have to live by its ideals; for example: carrying out familial and social duties, with an awareness of established best cultural practices, in a conscious effort to cultivate greater humaneness in oneself and the world.

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<sup>17</sup> Leigh Kathryn Jenco makes this point in her explication of the exegetical methods of Wang Yangming and Kang Youwei: “Their hermeneutic approaches suggest that merely reading and translating these texts may not be enough to understand them, because such techniques cannot capture in words what is meant to be exemplary, action-oriented, and impressionistic.” Leigh Kathryn Jenco, “What Does Heaven Ever Say? A Methods-centered Approach to Cross-cultural Engagement,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 101, no.4 (November 2007), p751.

With all that is involved, in terms of both intuition and experience, translation would appear to be next to impossible. But Benjamin doesn't think so. Paradoxically, he argues that profound texts demand translation:

*Translation is properly essential to certain works: this does not mean that their translation is essential for themselves, but rather that a specific significance inherent in the original texts expresses itself in their translatability. (153)*

A text like the *Analects*, Benjamin is suggesting, has import greater than its Chinese language forms. It expresses a much broader, transcultural (universal?) human experience that, while couched in a specifically Chinese context, can be meaningful for people in vastly different times and places. Indeed, by this argument, the full significance of the *Analects* can only be realized when it is expressed in other languages.

Benjamin offers his concept of “pure language” as a kind of spiritual connection of all people. He does not posit it as an actual language, a merging of all extent languages into a singular linguistic system. It is not a super-Esperanto. Rather, it implies a meta-linguistic human capacity for intercultural understanding.

*All suprahistorical kinship of languages consists rather in the fact that in each of them as a whole, one and the same thing is intended; this cannot be attained by any one of them alone, however, but only the totality of their mutually complementary intensions: pure language. Whereas all the particular elements of different languages – words, sentences, structures – are mutually exclusive, these languages complement each other in their intensions. (156)*

At its most general, the intention of pure language is interconnection: persons strive to relate to one another; we are social beings. There are, of course, more specific intentions for particular pieces of text or moments of speech, and these more focused intentions also provide a

basis for translation<sup>18</sup>. At a practical level (which is not what concerns Benjamin) we daily find solutions; pragmatic translation is ubiquitous. More profound and mysterious expressions – Benjamin seems to want to call them “spiritual” – at first sight may appear to be resistant to literal translation. Some words simply do not have a match in other languages; some works of art appear to be too deeply immersed in a particular cultural context. But it is precisely here where Benjamin believes that the intention of interconnection, the purpose of conveying an esoteric yet beautiful feeling or idea, brings us into the realm of pure language. While we may be able to create such an expression in one language, it can only be fully revealed in the “mutually complementary intensions” of many (all?) languages.

Let’s take a brief example, one concept from the *Analects*: *ren* - 仁 . This idea is of central significance to the text, and on Benjamin’s understanding therefore also beyond the text. It is translated variously as: “authoritative conduct” (Ames and Rosemont), “Good” (Slingerland), “benevolence” (Lau), “humaneness” (Watson), and “humanity” (Hinton)<sup>19</sup>. We needn’t make a final decision that any one of these is superior to the others but, rather, accept that there is a semantic field suggested by the original term that encompasses all of these words. One of the good things about the depth and range of work in contemporary scholarly translation is the availability of multiple definitional possibilities. In the midst of these informed differences, we get the idea.

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<sup>18</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah develops Grice’s notion of intention in translation in: “Thick Translation,” *Callaloo* 16.4 (1993), pp. 808-819.

<sup>19</sup> Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine, 1998); Edward Slingerland, trans., *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003); D.C. Lau, trans., *Confucius: The Analects*, (New York: Penguin, 1979); Burton Watson, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); David Hinton, trans., *The Analects: Confucius* (Washington: Counterpoint Press, 1998).

Throughout the *Analects* it becomes clear that the intention behind this term, and arguably behind the text as a whole, is to bring a mindful focus on the practice of ethical reciprocity: we find what is good in ourselves by cultivating what is good in our relationships with others. As is commonly pointed out, this intention is inscribed in the brush strokes of *ren*, composed as it is of an element that suggests “person” and another that stands for “two”: personhood cannot be defined in isolation, it must be created reciprocally with others.

What is immediately apparent here is that the central notion, ethical reciprocity, is by no means peculiar to the Confucian tradition alone. It is manifest in other cultural contexts. Thus, to return to Benjamin, while *ren* is embedded in, and is expressive of, a uniquely Chinese experience, it also signifies a broader human sensibility, an aspiration for living a good life by helping others. Its significance is tied to a particular cultural-linguistic context, but is fully realized in its articulation in other languages.

Indeed, even in its own languages – for we must make a distinction between *ren* in a classical Chinese context and a modern Chinese context – the meaning of this term is far from settled<sup>20</sup>. In the *Analects*, Confucius is presented as pushing against definitional complacency. In various passages he resists his disciples’ efforts to adduce a clear exemplar of *ren*, maybe in an effort to preserve the trans-linguistic qualities of the concept. Something about *ren* cannot be captured in words; it is the outcome of conscientious practice; and that practice can take place in many different cultural contexts. A person can be *ren* even when living in a “barbarian” place. A single illustration of elusiveness of *ren* is *Analects* 6.30:

子貢曰：「如有博施於民而能濟眾，何如？可謂仁乎？」子曰：「何事於仁，必也聖乎！堯舜其猶病諸！夫仁者，己欲立而立人，己欲達而達人。能近取譬，可謂仁之方也已。」

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<sup>20</sup> Slingerland mentions that the meaning of *ren* evolves from the *Analects* to the *Mencius*, op. cit., p. 63.

Watson (46) translates this as:

*Zigong said, if someone could spread bounty abroad among the people and rescue the populace, how would that be? Could that be called humanness?*

*The Master said: Why bring humaneness into the discussion? If you must have a label, call the man a sage. Even Yao and Shun had trouble doing that much.*

*The humane person wants standing, and so he helps others to gain standing. He wants achievement, and so he helps others to achieve. To know how to proceed on the analogy of what is close at hand – that can be called the humane approach.*

We can see Confucius's hesitancy to accept a fixed standard of *ren*. He introduces another term – *sheng*/"sage" – that destabilizes the invocation of *ren*; and then he goes further and suggests that two exemplary "sages", Yao and Shun, might not have lived up to the ideal of *ren*. It's not completely clear what the relationship between *ren* and *sheng* is. Ames and Rosemont (110) translate the second stanza above as:

*The Master replied: "Why stop at authoritative conduct? This is certainly a sage (sheng 聖). Even a Yao or a Shun would find such a task daunting.*

This could imply that *sheng* is something more than *ren*; but, then again, the two leading examples of *sheng*, Yao and Shun, who might be reasonably associated with *ren* are somehow lacking. In the end, we are left with the original question: what is *ren*?

The last three lines of the passage turn us away from linguistic precision and toward embodied experience. Confucius tells us how to be *ren*, what we need to do to manifest *ren* in very immediate and specific circumstances. If we focus on helping those around us – and for Confucians that starts with family and friends – we realize *ren* in the world. Words matter for

Confucius but actions matter more<sup>21</sup>. How we linguistically translate what we are doing matters less than our actual behavior.

But we *are* translating a particular text here. Can we have confidence that we are getting the main idea? I believe we can, and that is primarily because we can assume that we know the intention behind the passage cited above. In everything we have learned about Confucius, it is clear that he was quite consciously trying to encourage people to live by the lights of ethical reciprocity. We also know that he believed that persons who live such lives have a transformative effect on their communities, regardless of their cultural context. And that brings us back to Benjamin (161):

*Just as fragments of a vessel, in order to be fitted together, must correspond to each other in the tiniest detail but need not resemble each other, so translation, instead of making itself resemble the meaning of the original, must lovingly, and in detail, fashion in its own language a counterpoint to the original's mode of intention, in order to make both of them recognizable as fragments of a vessel, as fragments of a greater language.*

Of course we have to get the words right, and doing that is difficult work. But perfect “resemblance” in translation is neither possible nor, for Benjamin, desirable. Whether we name *ren* “humaneness” or “authoritative conduct” matters less than entering into the conversation, listening to a variety of possibilities, and opening ourselves to the broader trans-linguistic significance of a meaningful text or work of art. Today, we have the resources to do just that. The hard philological tasks may never be complete, but those efforts have brought us to a place where our contemporary English translations of Confucianism have formed a sufficient “counterpoint to the original’s mode of intention” that they can be accepted as fragments of the

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<sup>21</sup> An objection could be raised here on the grounds that *zhengming* – the “rectification of names – (*Analects* 13.3) asserts a certain importance in getting words right. But even here words are in the service of assessing actions. We should certainly match words to actions, but, more importantly, our actions should be appropriate to the ethical requirements of our immediate circumstances. To apply Benjamin to *zhengming*: words are simply a medium through which we recognize that our actions are expressions of the “pure language” of Confucianism.



larger vessel of “Confucianism” writ large. American Confucianism is a part of the greater language that is Confucianism.

### *Confucian Accommodation to American Liberalism*

So, why, then, is Confucianism not yet catching on more widely in the United States?

It could be that insufficient time has passed since the ideational and material conditions began to transform in a manner more supportive of an American Confucianism. We might date a turning point at roughly 1990, just as Boston Confucianism was first emerging. By then, China’s economic rise was well under way and had encountered and moved past its first great crisis in 1989. Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 “southern tour” put the country on a high-growth trajectory that it has maintained, with some difficult patches, ever since. At the same time, the political regime became more tolerant of intellectual discourse on Confucianism, which has subsequently expanded remarkably<sup>22</sup>. The 1990s, then, was the start of an efflorescence of Confucian thought in China and that should increase the prospects for the international dissemination of Confucianism.

What is curious, though, is the insubstantial presence of Confucianism in America compared to other Chinese philosophies and religions, most notably Daoism and Buddhism<sup>23</sup>. These steams of thought have flowed into American consciousness independent of the vicissitudes of Chinese history. American Buddhism has multiple sources, it is fed by ideas and practitioners in Japan and India and Southeast Asia. But its Chinese variants are present in the United States and becoming culturally common. A few decades ago it may have been rather

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<sup>22</sup> John Makeham, *Lost Soul: “Confucianism” in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse*, (Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> For a brief discussion of Buddhism in this regard see: Angle, “American Confucianism,” op. cit., pp. 11-13

exotic to identify as an “American Buddhist;” today it is less so. Daoism, too, is well represented in American culture. We might question whether the “Tao of Pooh” is the best expression of the nuances of Daoist thought, but we can hardly deny that it has wider circulation in America than any comparable Confucian popular cultural product.

Thus, the relatively low profile of Confucianism in America may have less to do with time than with circumstances particular to it. Politics and history loom large in this sense. The legacy of its rejection in China, and its image as a “feudal” outlook unsuited to the political-economic and socio-cultural dynamics of modernity, continue to obstruct its absorption into contemporary America. Confucianism still bears connotations of “patriarchal,” “obedience to authority,” and “deference to hierarchy,” values that are at odds with the cultural liberalism that permeates American society. By contrast, both Buddhism and Daoism have been framed in ways more congenial to US liberalism, even if they are not, in and of themselves, forms of liberalism: they have each been adopted by counter-cultural movements that embrace their anti-materialism and promise for personal liberation or detachment. Although Confucianism, too, disdains selfish material gain, its long association with centralized political power and authoritarian pre-modern social practices make it much less amenable for those looking for liberating alternatives to the American status quo.

This historical burden that Confucianism bears is, to a certain degree, philosophically unfair. The Confucian tradition, especially its pre-Qin expressions, cannot be reduced to its post-Qin use as a state ideology. As is suggested above, in the work of Neville and Ames and Rosemont and others, there is much in Confucianism that can be meaningfully applied to contemporary American contexts. But, unfortunately, the retrogressive historical associations remain an obstacle. Furthermore, it is likely unhelpful, for the purposes of enhancing the

attractiveness of Confucianism in the US, that the PRC government now has chosen to name its overseas language program the “Confucius Institutes.” By creating a connection between the image of Confucius and the authoritarian practices of the PRC state, “Confucius Institutes” reproduce, in the minds of some Americans, a nexus of bureaucratic power and social conservatism that is simply uninviting.

If it is true that Confucianism faces historically specific difficulties in expanding more widely in American society, what, then, is to be done?

Quite simply, to be more conducive to Americans Confucianism must be framed in terms that do not fundamentally contradict the liberalism that permeates US society and culture. To return to the Gramscian notion of hegemony for a moment, John Agnew describes how contemporary global capitalism (whether we name it “modern” or “postmodern”) gives rise to the social practices of “marketplace society:”

*...from mass consumption and living through commodities, to hierarchies of class hidden behind a cultural rhetoric of entrepreneurship and equal opportunity, to limiting the delivery of what elsewhere are thought of as public goods and sponsoring an essentially privatized vision of life.<sup>24</sup>*

It is that last element – an “essentially privatized vision of life” – that shapes how Confucianism circulates in America. The possessive individualism of US society is not simply a free-floating set of ideas. It is grounded in the social reproduction of capital. Thus, to gain wide popular appeal, ideas and images, including philosophies and religions, must flow with the political-economic tide that channels the liberal mainstream. It is quite difficult to produce and maintain a counter-culture that is at odds with liberalism. Notice what has happened to old-line institutional Christianity in the US in recent decades: conservatives bemoan its decline<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> John Agnew, *Hegemony: The New Shape of Global Power* (Temple University Press, 2005), p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Randall Balmer, “Breaking Faith,” *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, April 29, 2012, p. 13:

Counter-cultural movements and ideas are certainly possible, but they are difficult to sustain against claims of individual autonomy and rights and freedom. Rosemont may be correct empirically: we *are* role-bearing persons. But the economy and society and culture of the US undergirds the notion of rights-bearing individuals much more powerfully.

The good news, however, for those of us interested in expanding the circulation of Confucian ideas in America, is that it is possible to present Confucianism in a manner compatible with liberalism. A notable recent example is Stephen Angle's book: *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy*<sup>26</sup>. In explicating the thought of twentieth century Confucian thinker Mou Zongsan (1909-1995), Angle demonstrates how a modern Confucian political theory can be both distinct from but accommodating to liberalism. Mou does not commence from the standard liberal assumption of fully formed individual autonomy. Rather, he embraces the Confucian notion of the "social conception of the self" (58). We are, all of us, embedded in familial and social relationships and the roles we bear in those relationships determine right action. But Mou also recognizes that the realms of personal virtue and public politics must be separated. We cannot rely on the Confucian expectation that a uniquely virtuous "sage" will necessarily provide the most effective and just political leadership. Thus, Mou develops a concept of "self-restriction," which would limit a leader's assertion of his own personal ethical judgments in the realm of politics:

*Ethical reasoning "restricts" itself in order to more fully realize itself, and thereby allows for an independent realm of political value to exist. (28)*

This is not an abandonment of Confucian politics but, rather, a recognition that an overly authoritarian and centralized political system, which rests on a small elite of self-proclaimed

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/29/books/review/bad-religion-by-ross-douthat.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy: Toward Progressive Confucianism* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2012)

moral exemplars, can ultimately destroy the possibility of realizing Confucian virtue – *ren* – in society at large. Mou’s central concern is the propagation of Confucianism in a modern political context.

More specifically, advancement of the ethical project of *ren*, for Mou, requires “external political structures” (29) that protect “rights to exercise agency” (30). Confucianism, various modern commentators have noted, requires that persons conscientiously consider how their personal obligations to others are manifest in particular situations. What is required for me, today, to serve my family well is different than what is required for the person sitting next to me here as I write. Indeed, the correct action to serve my family well will vary for me from circumstance to circumstance. It could even be the case, as Mencius (5A.2) tells us, that filiality could, in some specific cases, entail disobeying a certain parental command. Realizing *ren* is a complex and fluid process. And it can only be carried out effectively if individuals have sufficient personal freedom to judge for themselves what their obligations to others are and how they should best be carried out. Thus, as Mou suggests, an external political structure that insulates individuals from tyrannical abuses of power is required for progress toward *ren*.

Angle’s reading of Mou leads to the conclusion that: “...a Confucian polity should not be authoritarian”(52). The argument here is complex, drawing on Neo-Confucian concepts and making a distinction between “the people” (*min*) and “all people” (*ren*), but it is consistent with other commentators, such as Tu Wei-ming, whom Angle quotes as follows:

*Confucian personality ideals – the authentic person, the worthy, or the sage – can be realized more fully in the liberal-democratic society than either the traditional imperial dictatorship or a modern authoritarian regime. (Angle, 53).*

Much could be said about that statement but I want to put it aside and return to the main point: the framing of Confucianism offered by Mou, by way of Angle, is one that Americans

could find acceptable. It is a Confucianism that presumes a certain realm of personal freedom, protected by constitutional limits on state power, in pursuit of individual moral cultivation and public community betterment. It must be remembered that Mou, himself, is not a liberal. He is working at the intersection of Confucianism and liberalism (Angle, 24). Indeed, aspects of his political thought might be rejected by many American liberals, most notably his relatively greater tolerance of political inequality (55). His views on this point are somewhat reminiscent of John Stuart Mill's openness to unequal voting rights, giving more participatory power to those better educated, a view that is widely discredited in the US now. But, whatever the particular differences, the larger significance of Mou's "progressive Confucianism" is that it engages with and is sensible to the central political concerns of American liberalism and is thus a more promising candidate for wider circulation in the contemporary US than some other interpretations of Confucian thought.

However, Mou's approach is only one of several. Angle provides a *tour d'horizon* of current expressions of Confucianism in China. He identifies eight (10-17). Not all of these are as disposed to adaptation in an American context as is "Progressive Confucianism." The stream of thought that Angle refers to as "Institutional Confucianism," and particularly the work of thinker Jiang Qing, appears to be especially ill-suited to international dissemination. If Americans come to understand "Confucianism" solely in the terms that Jiang describes, they will likely reject it as irrelevant to their own circumstances.

Jiang's project is fundamentally China-centered, a kind of nationalist reclamation of tradition<sup>27</sup>. His primary concern is the "challenge of Westernization," the threat that

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<sup>27</sup> Jiang's political ideas are presented, along with those of some of his critics, in: Jiang Qing, *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's past can shape its political future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013)

modernization (he largely conflates Westernization and modernization) poses to a uniquely Chinese presence in the world. He writes:

*A glance over China's current world of thought shows that Chinese people have already lost their ability to think independently about political questions. In other words, Chinese people are no longer able to use patterns of thought inherent in their own culture – Chinese culture – to think about China's current political development. (27)*

It is a curious passage. Historically, it would seem that, with the passing of Maoist totalitarianism and the emergence of “rights consciousness” and the individualization of society, Chinese people are at last gaining precisely the “ability to think independently about political questions”.<sup>28</sup> But Jiang's concern is that this new-found political capacity is not “Chinese” enough for him. He desires more of a distinct difference between “Chinese” and “Western” forms of modernity – or, perhaps, as Angle suggests in critique, a rejection of modernity altogether<sup>29</sup>. And it is to that particular political task that he recruits Confucianism.

What Jiang sees in Confucianism is a comprehensive answer to moral shortcomings of contemporary China, a transcendent moral metaphysics that can be used to structure social and political life. That is a tall order. He believes that Confucianism should be institutionalized into something like a state religion, perhaps analogous to the Anglican church, to create a common moral code that will lend meaning and order to the chaotic recent changes in China's economy, society and culture<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, as his most recent book describes in detail, he seeks to reformulate basic political concepts – legitimacy, sovereignty, representation – in terms that he believes are more consistent with traditional Confucianism. He is calling for a kind of

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<sup>28</sup> Merle Goldman, *From Comrade to Citizen: The Struggle for Political Rights in China* (Harvard U. Press, 2007); Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge U. Press, 2006); Yunxiang Yu, *The Individualization of Chinese Society* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Angel, “American Confucianism,” op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> A rather scathing rejection of this idea is: Huang Qing, “Confucianism will never be a religion,” *China Daily*, January 6, 2006, p. 4.

Confucian constitutionalism, one rooted in what he understands to be enduring principles of political morality. Unlike Mou Zongsan, he seeks a fusion of Confucian morality and politics, relying upon sage-like figures, both intellectuals and descendants of Confucius himself, to play central political roles. His proposal of a tri-cameral legislature foresees a House of *Ru* (Confucian successors), a House of the Nation (intellectuals who would gain office by examination) and a House of the People (a directly elected lower house). This structure aligns with Jiang's tripartite notion of traditional Chinese political legitimacy, drawing from heaven (*tian*), earth (*di*) and man (*ren*). It is, ultimately, a relatively centralized and authoritarian political structure: two parts restrictive elitism to one part electoral democracy.

Even the briefest sketch of Jiang's thinking reveals the unsuitability of this form of "Confucianism" to an American context. Quite to the contrary of Mou Zhongsan's explicit effort to engage with modern liberalism, Jiang identifies it as fundamentally opposed to Confucianism. There seems to be little common ground for accommodation and synthesis. In a thoughtful introduction to *A Confucian Constitutional Order*, Daniel Bell suggests that Jiang "has much in common with his liberal critics" (22), but that might be a bit optimistic. Bell also notes that Jiang is seeking "an absolute moral truth" (22), and that absolutism makes Jiang's rendition of Confucianism deeply problematic for an American application. In questioning whether these ideas are fitting for contemporary China, Bai Tongdong hits upon the key problem:

*...it is impossible for a people to adopt one moral metaphysics anymore in a fundamentally pluralistic world unless we resort to sheer oppression.*<sup>31</sup>

The desire for a singular quasi-religious moral code, one that would be enforced across a vast and diverse population, leads ineluctably to coercion. We see a similar dynamic with

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<sup>31</sup> Bai Tongdong, "An Old Mandate for a New State: On Jiang Qing's Political Confucianism," in Jiang, op. cit., p. 113.



cultural conservatives in the US: in opposing abortion and gay marriage and other social practices on moral grounds, they struggle to construct legal restrictions, ultimately backed up by punitive sanctions. They abhor liberalism for its provision of personal space, beyond the reach of the state, in which individuals can negotiate complex moral issues on their own. Of course, liberals do accept state-enforced limits on personal behavior (Mill's "harm principle" comes to mind here), but they afford a much wider latitude for conscientious individual ethical decision-making. In a sense, American liberalism asserts a kind of "self-restriction," in the manner of Mou Zongsan. But where Mou sees personal ethical reasoning as restricting itself from entering the political realm, American liberals work to restrict the political realm from imposing itself into personal ethics. By contrast, there is much less restriction, in either direction, in Jiang's thinking.

The crux of Bai's critique is his recognition of diversity. If this is a disqualifying condition for enacting Jiang's version of Confucianism in a contemporary Chinese context, how much more the case when we turn to the possibilities for American Confucianism. A Confucianism that is a moral crusade to unite the nation around a Chinese neo-traditional authoritarianism is destined to go nowhere in the US.

To be fair to Jiang, his concern is China and what it should be culturally and politically. He is not speaking to the question of American Confucianism. It is ironic, however, that he seems not to have much faith in the attractive power of Confucian ideas. Although it is true that modernity has rendered impossible many traditional Confucian practices, the basic moral theory of socially embedded, role-bearing persons working to live good lives based on their attentive cultivation of relationships with others has enduring value. It just can't be forced on Americans, nor on contemporary Chinese for that matter.

In summary, then, Confucianism is slow in catching on in America because of its continuing association with anti-liberal ideas. It can still conjure up authoritarian and absolutist connotations, which run counter to the presumptions of personal independence and autonomy that are rooted in American political economy and culture.

However, Confucianism could circulate more widely in the United States if it is framed in more inclusive terms. Social and cultural diversity (though still within a context of global capitalism) are simply facts of life in the US and China and most everywhere in the world. An interpretation of Confucianism that does not demand preeminence as a moral metaphysics, but can tolerate a range of other beliefs and practices, and is not politicized into a particular nationalist project, could very well be attractive to Americans. Indeed, it has already been attractive to Boston Confucians and others, though mostly still at the level of “serious scholars.”

Searching for a singularly authentic Confucianism, in the manner of Jiang Qing, will probably fail. Cultural hybridity is what globalization inexorably creates and, therefore, an openness to creative interplay of various traditions and ideas, of “East” and “West,” in the manner of Gish Jen, is more likely to keep Confucianism alive and vital in the world. Confucius himself was confident, when he went out among the “barbarians,” that he did not have to pressure or force anyone to see the virtue of his philosophical life. He could have an effect by simply being and living there:

子欲居九夷。或曰：「陋，如之何！」子曰：「君子居之，何陋之有？」

*The Master wanted to go and live amongst the nine clans of the Eastern Yi Barbarians. Someone said to him, “What would you about their crudeness?”*

*The Master replied, “Were an exemplary person ( junzi 君子) to live among them, what crudeness could there be?” (Ames and Rosemont)*

Perhaps there is hope for American Confucianism yet.