

BOOK REVIEW

Kenneth J. HAMMOND and Jeffrey L. RICHEY, eds., *The Sage Returns: Confucian Revival in Contemporary China*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015. 226 pages. Cloth ISBN: 9781438454917. 85.00 USD; Paper ISBN: 9781438454924. 29.95 USD.

After decades of being attacked and suppressed, Confucianism has enjoyed a robust revival in China since the 1980s. By all accounts, the results are spectacular. Rather than a relic of feudalism and a stumbling block to Chinese modernity, as it was once derided by cultural iconoclasts, Confucianism is now seen as an indispensable cultural force that has successfully integrated China into global capitalism. Rather than a socio-political system that exploits women, peasants, and the poor, as the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution once claimed, Confucianism is now considered the wellspring of cultural authenticity that anchors China's rise in the 21st century. After a long silence, Confucius is again the sage who offers advice and wisdom to people in transition.

This miraculous “return of the sage” has been the subject of many fascinating studies over the last two decades. Thanks to scholars such as Thomas Metzger, John Makeham, Daniel A. Bell, Stephen Angle, and Sébastien Billioud, we now know that this Confucian revival began with overseas Chinese philosophers known as the “New Confucians” (*xin rujia*) and expanded onto the mainland in the 1990s as China was integrated into the global market. We also know that contemporary Confucianism takes many forms, ranging from cultural nationalism and investment strategy to social protests and self-improvement. But what remains unclear is how broadly and deeply the Confucian revival has impacted Chinese society, especially the young generations who grew up in the last few decades when China was experiencing rapid economic growth. In particular, we do not know to what degree the Confucian revival has been facilitated by popular culture and mass media, and to what extent it is linked to consumerism, high-speed internet, and the proliferation of electronic devices.

In many respects, *The Sage Returns: Confucian Revival in Contemporary China* deepens our understanding of Confucianism in the recent past and present by highlighting its profound impact on Chinese society, especially the youth. On the surface, this volume appears to follow the conventional interpretation of contemporary Confucianism that focuses on its philosophical and political ramifications. The seven chapters—written by Anthony DeBlasi, Robert W. Foster, Robert L. Moore, Julia K. Murray, Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, and the two editors, Kenneth J. Hammond and Jeffrey L. Richey—are thematically divided into three sections, emphasizing contemporary Confucianism's link to intellectual life (part one), the state (part two), and political culture (part three). Despite the first impression this division may give, readers will quickly discover that a more fruitful way to read the chapters is not to think of them as a reiteration of the philosophical

and political ramifications of contemporary Confucianism, but rather to treat them as a means to expand the scope of inquiry, starting from what is familiar and extending to what is not as well known.

This goal of expanding the scope of inquiry is clearly shown in the first two chapters. In chapter one, Robert W. Foster compares the uses of Confucianism in Meiji Japan and twentieth-century China. In this comparison, Foster points out that Confucianism is perceived in the two countries as a stabilizing force, giving the rulers the legitimacy to rule and the elites the moral authority to command. At the same time, Confucianism is also a force for resistance empowering the poor and the powerless to press for change in government and society. In today's PRC, Foster predicts, this contestation between the rulers' Confucianism and popular Confucianism is going to intensify as China becomes a leading player in the global economy. In chapter two, Jennifer Oldstone-Moore examines how Confucianism has been understood in modern China from the perspective of science and scientism. She suggests that the modern understanding of Confucianism has developed in three stages: first, it was demonized based on the universal assumptions of science and scientism; second, it was reformulated to serve the goal of modernization; and third, it is being used to assert Chinese authenticity in an age of science and technology (42).

Together, the first two chapters provide the broad historical context of contemporary Confucianism. They show that no matter whether it is orchestrated by the state or developed from the grassroots, contemporary Confucianism is undeniably part of the discourse of East Asian modernity. The "gaze of the West" (as Jennifer Oldstone-Moore aptly puts it) looms large in the Confucian revival to strengthen the nation and to assert the uniqueness of East Asia (58). As such, contemporary Confucianism must be fashionable in the sense that the old Confucian ideas must fit the reality of the nation-state, the market economy, and the global circulation of capital, labor, and products. Although not explicitly stated, in explaining the historical context of contemporary Confucianism, these two authors draw inspiration from the discussion of East Asian capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s, when scholars in the United States and East Asia looked for insights into economic development. Like the scholars of the 1970s and 1980s, Foster and Oldstone-Moore see Confucianism as a stabilizing force providing an orderly and peaceful environment for economic production. Like them, the two authors consider Confucianism as a means to achieve capitalistic modernity. In short, rather than a true Confucian revival, the two authors regard contemporary Confucianism as a transformation of the sage into a "prophet of capitalism"—a point that Arif Dirlik first raised in his influential "Confucius in the Borderlands" article in 1995.

With this in mind, chapters three and four can be read as a discussion of how to sell "Confucius, the capitalist prophet" in a capitalist China. In chapter three, Anthony DeBlasi introduces a method for analyzing the complex mechanism behind "selling Confucius." For him, presenting Confucius in contemporary China is by no means an easy task. It involves many forms of negotiation in the government, the academy, the market, and popular culture. In fact, DeBlasi sees negotiation as the *modus operandi* that connects the political, cultural, and commercial fields,

making them a holistic totality. Similarly, negotiation is the basis of contemporary Chinese political discourse, as Kenneth J. Hammond demonstrates in chapter four. In that chapter, Hammond compares two groups of political theorists: the New Leftists (such as Wang Hui and Gan Yang) who support the ideas and ideals of socialism and communism, and the “left” Confucians (such as Jiang Qing) who advocate a Confucian form of governance as an alternative to the communist party-state system. Despite their differences, Hammond asserts, these two groups share a common set of values that promotes a just and equitable society.

As a pair, chapters three and four provide a nuanced picture of contemporary Confucianism. Instead of a philosophical movement or a state-orchestrated campaign as suggested in other writings, the two chapters show that contemporary Confucianism is a catchall for a wide range of activities in China that operate, according to DeBlasi, on three axes: (1) government-market, (2) academic-reading public, and (3) China-world (70). As such, contemporary Confucianism is a reflection of exactly what today’s China looks like, namely a party state managing a robust economy in a globalized world.

Although the last three chapters are separated into two different sections, it is more useful to read them together as studies of the impact of contemporary Confucianism on Chinese society. Thanks to the three authors (Jeffrey L. Richey, Robert L. Moore, and Julia K. Murray), we now know that contemporary Confucianism is not merely an academic discussion confined to the ivory tower or a political slogan to help “stabilize China” (*weiwen*) in a volatile world. Instead, it is a constant presence among netizens (chapter five), middle school and university students (chapter six), and television and movie watchers (chapter seven), so much so that “Confucius, the capitalist sage” has become part of the everyday life of ordinary Chinese people. They see him on their mobile phones and television sets; they also meet him in cinemas, classrooms, and theme parks. This ubiquitous presence of Confucius makes him a marketable icon to young generations, ranging from selling “neo-third worldism” (chapter five) to national identity and cultural heritage (chapters six and seven).

One may question the authenticity of today’s image of Confucius. But as Julia K. Murray observes, contemporary Confucianism gives young Chinese a mode of thinking that helps them to face the complexity and unpredictability of everyday life (185-186). Therefore, even though contemporary Confucianism is a result of “the gaze of the West,” it is also an antidote to global capitalism in which the world is intricately connected for production, exchange, and profit making. And it is this message that makes *The Sage Returns* a ground-breaking work, because it turns our attention from studying the Confucian revival *per se* to pondering its significance in our times and our world. It shows that the significance of contemporary Confucianism lies not just in reviving Confucian doctrine and the Confucian canon, but also in countering the alienation and exploitation of global capitalism.

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