

Book Reviews

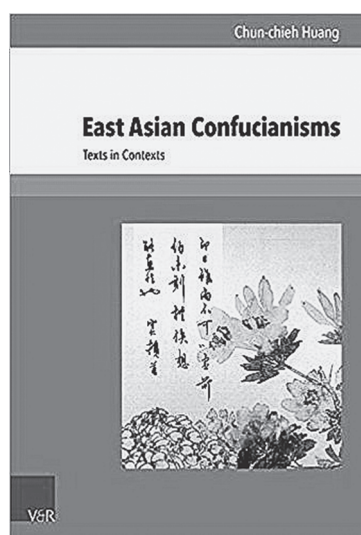
Review of *East Asian Confucianisms: Texts in Contexts*, by Chun-chieh Huang. Göttingen and Taipei: V&R unipress and National Taiwan University Press, 2015

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Among countless books on Confucianism throughout histories in China and Japan, this book stands out as unique and distinctive on at least three crucial counts.

To begin with, first, this book insists that what is usually taken as “Confucianism” is actually *many* “Confucianisms,” a plurality of varieties that yet composes a single family of culture-milieu that is Confucian, in which various peoples in this vast region of East Asia move, live, and have their being, cutting through all boundaries, racial, political, and historical. This book promotes such a novel cosmopolitan perspective seldom heard of before, to revolutionize our traditional staid impression that “Confucianism” is confined to China proper alone. Instead, we must regard Confucianism as cosmopolitan and all-inclusive of East Asia, this book instructs us.

In addition, secondly, this book is an important and indispensable book of information on fecund resources in Confucianism in vast East Asia, attended with critical *reflections* as clearly displayed in its first beginning “Part I New Perspectives on East Asian Confucianisms.” This book is not an easy, indifferent, and casual collection of materials on Confucianism that any amateur can get hold of. The book is the result of decades of careful sifting and painstaking refining of the firsthand resources that only a Confucian scholar can amass and understand, and such sifting and refining are what only the mature veteran Confucian scholar such as Dr. Huang is capable of doing.



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Finally, thirdly, this book is in English. It shows how the author is thoroughly bilingual, so rare among so many Confucian scholars who are usually conversant only in Chinese. This fact shows that the author has devoted much time to “Englishing” Confucianism to render intelligible the sheer foreign nature of “Confucianism” to the wide circle of readers who know no Chinese. The author’s *cosmopolitan* labors are completely unknown and thankless in the worldwide general reading public, non-Chinese outside China. I am myself one of overseas Chinese who are currently undergoing such labors and so I fully realize how valuable and indispensable such trans-cultural labors are.

Of course, this book is distinctive in more features than above indicated, but these crucial three--Confucianism as pluralistic, reflective, and cosmopolitan--are enough to demonstrate how important and indispensable this book is worldwide, beyond China and beyond Japan.

Now, nothing is perfect in this imperfect world, and this book is no exception, however good it is. But it is pointless, counterproductive, and unwise to tear up such a good book into scattered bits and pieces, all so senseless and irrational. The most reasonable to do here may well be, then, to mention five desiderata among many, somewhat as follows.

The first desideratum is why Confucianism is regarded as the major “orthodox” trend in China. The second is how special and distinct Confucianism is among so many isms inside China. The third is why Mencius is an official inheritor of Confucianism. The fourth is what Confucius as “timely sage” means. And the fifth and final desideratum is how many Confucianisms there are inside China. Now, these five desiderata will be mentioned and detailed one by one, as follows.

One: why Confucianism is regarded as “orthodox” in China: It is so obvious and yet so often unnoticed that “Confucianism as orthodox” is an amazing historic miracle in China. Confucianism is so high an ideal, personal and sociopolitical, that it is seldom actually practiced, and has constantly been manipulated by unconscionable tyrants into their brutal training rod to beat their people into obedience to dictatorship.

Confucianism is used as a thin coat to cover up dictatorial praxis of legalism that is no-nonsense ruler-centrism. And yet, quite surprisingly, legalism was not promoted as “orthodox” in all history of China. Why is legalism constantly practiced not regarded as orthodoxy? Why is, of all isms, Confucianism seldom practiced constantly applauded as “orthodox” in China? “Confucianism as orthodox” is itself a big enigma in China.

Two: how special and distinct Confucianism is among so many isms in China: The above enigma leads us directly to this question. What is it in Confucianism that is responsible to be taken as “orthodox”? What is so

special, peculiar, and distinctive of Confucianism that stands out of so many schools and sentiments in the history of China? The specific peculiarities of Confucianism have seldom objectively looked into among the cacophonies of empty praises of Confucianism.

Empty praises actually harm Confucianism more than helping it. We are sadly at a loss in the midst of piles after piles of descriptions of Confucianism, usually repetitive and emotional. We are quite at a loss as to *what* exactly Confucianism is, so precious and valuable, so worthy of adoration and assiduous praxis, however often we fail to reach it. In fact, we do not know what it is in Confucianism that is so valuable as to urge us to follow it at all.

Three: why Mencius is an official inheritor of Confucianism: Mencius was admired throughout Chinese history as the legendary “亞聖” and only he was called “Mencius” with “Confucius,” not “Meng Tzu.” No greater honor has been accorded in Chinese history than such to anyone, and Mencius is the only person in history to have received such honor.

A question naturally arises. Why is such the case with Mencius? *The Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸 begins by saying that 子思 the great disciple of Confucius conveyed the gist and essence of Confucianism to Mencius. But such saying seems to be showing Mencius famous than proving Mencius as legitimate inheritor of Confucius. Mencius quoted Confucius even less frequently than Chuang Tzu his contemporary who was not at all a follower of Confucius.

Mencius' sentiment is more heartfelt than Confucius, and rather Taoist, and homo-cosmic, more than objectively socio-ethical as Confucius was. Mencius did not seem to be particularly passionate about Confucius or passionately preaching Confucius in Mencius' days, either. No clear evidence, textual, historical, circumstantial, or in content of ideas or sentiment, or otherwise, seems to be forthcoming for regarding Mencius as particularly Confucian, much less sagely and legitimate inheritor of Sage Confucius at all.

Four: what Confucius as “timely sage” means: “Timely sage” is my private translation, but it seems to be totally inappropriate for Confucius. What is Confucius timely about? The original is simply “聖之時者 the timely sage” that is unintelligible however we take it. Does “time” indicate “at the time (what time?),” “seasonal,” “for all time,” or what? In fact, why is Confucius reverently characterized as “sage” at all? He was admired as a great and skillful teacher, but being a teacher is far from being a sage.

We remember that Confucius was unemployed for life, roaming around from place to place. Confucius was a “failure” for life, good for nothing. Why was he admired? For what was he admired? Whatever we see for which Confucius is famous, “time sage” seems to be the least apposite appellation

or characterization of Confucius. He was not time-ly, and he the lifelong failure was far from sage-ly.

Five: how many “Confucianisms” there are *inside* China: The book reminds the readers that Confucianism is not one but *many* throughout the vast East Asia region. This is the contribution of this book. But the book forgets to mention that there exist so many “Confucianisms” within China itself. Perhaps the very variety of the plurality of Confucianism *within* China has given birth to the plurality of Confucianism outside China in East Asia.

The insights of Confucius have sired Mencius their people-rooted version, Hsün Tzu their ruler-centered version, and even Name Scholars their name-righting version, and the list goes on. It deserves to devote much labor to comparing these “Confucian schools” on their similarities and differences, and showing how they all feature Confucian sentiment in their differences, that their differences enrich the fecundity of Confucianism. Differences, plurality, and enrichment are three in one.

What is noteworthy is that despite such rich variety, Confucianism stays as scholarship, not branched out into esoteric religiosity as Taoism and Yin-Yang School. Our natural question is of course why Confucianism stays scholarly throughout its development. Is there anything special in Confucianism to feature it as specifically *scholarly* all the way? What is that special Confucian feature?

Now, to my knowledge, no essay, much less book, has appeared that even mentions these interesting and significant queries, much less discusses them or responds and answers them. But if it is impossible to handle these queries at all, then it would have been great if this book did mention these probes and then cite some reasons for not discussing them. After all, these five desiderata are “desired” for consolidating and establishing “Confucianism” that has been quite pivotal in China since those illustrious days of august Confucius. Such is what is desired on this good book to enhance even more the value of this book.