

Book Review

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Confucius and Confucianism: The Essentials

Lee Dian Rainey. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. xiii, 262 pages. ISBN 978-1-4051-8840-1. £19.99 paper.

Lee Dian Rainey, who teaches in the Department of Religious Studies at the Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada, has produced a lively addition to the small group of good college-level textbooks on Confucianism. The book begins with a chapter on "Confucius' world and his life," followed by two chapters on his thought, two on his opponents, and one each on Mencius and Xunzi. This brings the book roughly to the midpoint of its basic text (not including notes, glossary, suggestions for further reading, and bibliography). There follow three chapters on the Qin, Han, and Han-Tang periods, one on Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, and one on "Confucianism and modernity" (Qing through the present day, including the "New Confucians"). The final chapter covers such issues as the tradition's relationships to democracy, capitalism, and women, and the philosophy/religion debate.

Throughout the book the author makes very clear how contested most of these subjects are, drawing upon very recent scholarship in English. She has done her own translations from the Chinese, often improving upon those already available. There is, however, one glaring exception: *tianming* 天命 as the "choice of Heaven," instead of the usual "mandate of Heaven." The reasoning behind this is clear enough: Heaven "chooses" one ruling family over another. But Rainey surely knows that "choice" has no connection with the root meaning of the word *ming*, which derives from *ling* 令 "command." And "mandate," which does reflect this etymology, is commonly-enough used in English not to be obscure to the average undergraduate (e.g. "The solid electoral victory gave the new president a mandate – i.e. the authority -- to pursue his policies"). So I find this odd translation quite baffling.

In all other respects the book does an excellent job of explaining Confucianism on an introductory level and – especially -- making it accessible and relevant. Sentences like "The practice of filial piety is not for wimps" (p. 27) and "Confucius lived in a world where standards were declining, sleaze and corruption were everywhere, and most people were behaving badly"

(p. 204) have a freshness to them that appeals to the undergraduate in me. Rainey is good at illustrating Confucian ideas in recognizable ways, e.g. "ritual" (*li* 禮):

We practice rituals all the time, mostly not noticing them until they break down. The next time you feel annoyed at someone's behavior, try to think what your expectations were. The person who butts into line, for example, is ignoring ritual and disrespecting everyone else in the line. We are annoyed by this because this person has not followed the proper ritual (p. 37).

She also does a good job of situating Confucius the man and Confucian ideas in their historical contexts, including the role of women wherever possible, without glossing over the limitations of our evidence. The two chapters on Confucius' thought are organized very well, the first on "the foundation of the good person" and the second on "the foundation of a good society." Chapter 4 includes good sections on "problems with 'schools' and '-isms'" and "problems with the term 'Confucianism,'" exemplifying the way Rainey works consistently on both the "factual" and methodological levels.

Chapter 8 (Confucians, "Confucian" Texts, and the Qin Dynasty) contains a short but helpful discussion of the various strands of interpretation among the first generation of Confucius' disciples – a topic not usually treated in relatively short introductions. Chapter 9 has a very clear delineation and description of the New Text and Old Text schools. In chapter 10 I like the way Rainey consistently refers to both the "karmic" and "nirvanic" levels of Buddhist practice (aiming for a better rebirth and enlightenment, respectively), although she does not use these terms.

In chapter 11, on Neo-Confucianism, Rainey makes a valiant attempt to explain Zhu Xi's system concisely and in plain English, but I find it less successful than her discussions of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi. Part of the problem is the opacity of some of the standard translations that she uses, such as "principle" (*li* 理), "Supreme Ultimate" (*taiji* 太極), and "Ultimate-less" (*wuji* 無極). There are also some debatable interpretations; for example, she says that *taiji* "is an entity beyond time and space" (p. 162), which appears to contradict Zhu Xi's insistence that *taiji* is only found *in* the concrete actuality of *qi* 氣. I would not count on students

having a firm grasp of Neo-Confucian metaphysics and cosmology after reading this chapter, but that is indeed a tall order.

In chapter 12 (Confucianism and modernity) there are some equally questionable statements. "The reason for seeing Confucianism as a religion is a desire to experience the Confucian Way" (p. 185). I confess that I don't know what that means. "The core of Confucianism is reached by self-cultivation and it is only those who practice this who truly understand Confucian teaching. The difficulty with this argument is that it can be used to deflect criticism from outsiders: after all, only those inside the tradition really understand it" (p. 186). But since every religious tradition has an experiential dimension, this observation applies to all of them. "When interviewed in the 1970s and asked 'What is your religion?' only 1 percent of people in Taiwan replied 'Confucian'" (p. 187). The problem here is with the Chinese word for religion, *zongjiao* 宗教, which does not have the same range of meanings as the English word "religion." In chapter 13, though, Rainey does a good job on the question whether Confucianism is religion or a philosophy: she suggests that the problem stems from the modern tendency to define religion using Christianity as an implicit model. One final quibble: Rainey's discussions of "filial piety" (*xiao* 孝) in chapters 2 and 13 rely too heavily on the popular interpretation of this central Confucian virtue as "unquestioning obedience" (p. 197), ignoring the strong statement in the *Xiaojing* 孝經 (Classic of Filial Piety) that true filial piety requires the son/daughter to argue or contend (*zheng* 爭) when the parent is not following the Way.

Rainey takes pains to present Confucianism both sympathetically and critically, and in my view she strikes the right balance. Minor quibbles aside, *Confucius and Confucianism: The Essentials* is an excellent, well-written, and accessible introduction to the Confucian tradition, eminently suitable for both an undergraduate class and a general readership.

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