

## From Confucius to Ancestors

Anna Sun

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just as important. For example, the question of devolution played out rather differently in the two cases. In the Protestant context, the key issue in devolution of control was the financial capacity of a congregation to pay for its own pastor and building maintenance (p. 147). The key measure of devolution, therefore, was a pastor in charge of his own congregation. That is a very different matter from the Catholic benchmark of putting Chinese bishops in charge of a whole diocese. Granted, there were similar questions in play as regards missionary perceptions of the ‘spiritual maturity’ of the Chinese congregations or their Chinese pastoral colleagues, but the differences require more attention than Wu provides.

A third implication of the author’s choices is that we learn more about ‘national rivalries’ (p. 62) than about specifically theological or ecclesiological differences, even when the latter were clearly important in the 1920s and after. On the Protestant side, we learn that the BMS missionaries were critical of Americanism, liberalism, and Calvinism, and that they chose to affiliate with the emerging Lutheran denominational structure in China, but little about what the distinctive Lutheran traits were in terms of doctrine or church organization.

These criticisms, however, only reflect the overall richness of the book. Readers will find much in it to consider and debate. It is an important and interesting addition to the scholarship on Christian missions in China and the difficult emergence of Chinese Christianity.

Ryan Dunch

*University of Alberta*

 ryan.dunch@ualberta.ca

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## From Confucius to Ancestors

In this ambitious and accomplished book, Albert Wu sets out to answer the following intriguing questions: Why did German missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic, change their view of Confucianism from extremely negative to enthusiastically positive in the short period of the first 30 years of the 20th century? How did they change their assessment of the followers of Confucianism from being an impediment to the Christian mission in China to the ones who ‘will point further to Jesus Christ’ (2)?

In addressing these questions, Wu opens up an intriguing religious, cultural, and political landscape that is unfamiliar to many scholars of China and Europe. His meticulous mapping of this complex terrain is most welcome, providing a missing chapter in our understanding of the history of the key encounters between China and the West. As Wu shows us, it is important to recognize that the field of missionary work involved not only the missionaries, but also their interlocutors in Europe and China, as well as theological, intellectual, and social currents relevant to their time. In the case of German missionaries in China, the significant events include the Boxer Uprising, Germany’s defeat in the First World War, the separation of church and state in Germany right after the war, and the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1911, followed soon by the birth of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921.

A fascinating historical encounter opens Wu's well-researched book: the 1902 meeting between the German Catholic missionary from the Society of the Divine World (SVD) Georg Stenz and 'the seventy-sixth direct descendent of Confucius', And 'the meeting left Stenz underwhelmed':

He called Qufu, Confucius' hometown, a 'Chinese Mecca, the bulwark of all pagans.' Beyond Confucianism, Stenz excoriated the myriad religious rituals that he saw around him. For him, the temples and pagodas that dotted the Chinese rural landscape reflected a decadent, depraved, and fallen culture. As he watched pious Chinese burn incense and paper money to the gods, he lamented, 'How many millions are wasted each year!'. (1)

But what exactly was Stenz reacting to in the first place? What was it that so offended his theological sensibility? Which was the most disturbing: the way people paid respects to Confucius, or the way they lived a life of 'superstition'? Stenz's fellow missionaries 'referred to the Chinese who worshipped at temples as "servants of the devil"' (2). Could it be the case that the missionaries were responding to something altogether religiously 'foreign,' not Confucianism *per se* but a ritual life that belonged to non-Abrahamic 'pagans' and 'heathens'?

This episode indeed captures the main concerns of the missionaries at the time: the 'myriad religious rituals' that they saw around them. Even for the Catholic missionaries, more accepting of ritual life than their Protestant counterparts, the rituals they saw in China were intolerably 'depraved.' One can easily imagine an even stronger response from the Protestant missionaries. How did it happen then that, by the 1930s, Confucianism was no longer associated with pagan ritual life, instead was warmly received as a valuable asset to the Christian cause?

Wu's argument is that many German missionaries genuinely accepted the 'indigenizing principle' after Germany's defeat in the First World War, with the hope of finding 'more allies in China' (8): 'spurred by their experience with failure, Germans began to rethink the relationship between Christianity, Confucianism, and traditional Chinese culture. Ultimately, German missionaries did learn from their failure—they began to treat the Chinese as equals' (10–11). Wu further argues that this has a profound impact not only on the missionaries' work in China, but also on the development of global Christianity in the 20th century. This ambitious and cogent argument is not only revealing, but also exciting.

But the question of what 'Confucianism' actually signified to the German missionaries during this period kept returning to my mind as I read Wu's book. It is fascinating that the changing attitude seems to suggest a *redefinition* of Confucianism by German missionaries. By this I mean that the missionaries seemed to have reconceptualized what 'Confucianism' meant to them in the period between the 1880s and the 1930s. The missionaries' first definition of Confucianism as the 'head' of 'traditional Chinese religions' seemed to have given way to their second definition, which was 'traditional Chinese culture' and 'Confucian thought,' as they looked for 'commonalities between Confucian and Christian thinking' (162). The result of this conceptual transformation is that the intensely unacceptable part of what missionaries viewed as the essence of 'Confucianism' in the 1880s—rituals to ancestors and other spirits and gods—was dropped, or at least much obscured, from their new definition. By the 1930s, Confucianism seemed to signify only philosophical and cultural Confucian 'thought and ethics,' a sanitized definition judiciously devoid of any reference to ritual activities.

One of the many interesting examples of the *first* kind of definition of Confucianism can be found in the words of Voskamp, a SVD Catholic missionary. As Wu writes: 'Calling Confucius

the “uncrowned king of China, a demigod to his people,” Voskamp belittled Confucius as “having produced absolutely nothing original.” For Voskamp, Confucianism was mere conservatism and ancestor worship, in contrast to Western hopefulness and future-orientedness, a doctrine that ‘chains the living to the dead’ (163).

Another SVD missionary, Rudolf Pieper, who represented the shift in attitude towards Confucianism within the missionary community, had what I think of as the *second* definition of Confucianism. As Pieper stated, ‘I hold Confucius, as a pagan philosopher, in much higher esteem when compared other so-called ‘Christian’ philosophers, who throw Christianity overboard, put themselves in God’s throne, and search for satisfaction in dirty, vile sensuality’ (164). What is telling in this passage from Pieper is that he seemed to have chosen to entirely ignore the issue of ancestral worship, the central aspect of Voskamp’s objection to Confucianism, instead focusing on the reassessment of Confucius and his teaching as ‘a pagan philosopher.’ Indeed, Voskamp later began to take a similar approach, presenting Confucius after the war ‘as a Christlike figure who through his wise teachings tried to elevate the spiritual state of the Chinese people’ (168).

This subtle yet significant shift in the redefinition of Confucianism amongst the SVD missionaries seemed to be a crucial feature of the change Wu examines. The change is certainly brought about by ‘broader cultural trends’ (168), but I think there is also something else at work: a resolution to overlook the ritual aspect of Confucianism in order to establish respect for Confucius, the sage philosopher whom missionaries believed could bring the Chinese people closer to Christ.

This certainly brings to mind another attempt by missionaries to reconcile Christianity and Confucianism, the legendary ‘Chinese Rites Controversy.’ The Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) advocated the ‘accommodation policy,’ which stipulated that a) the Chinese term *tian* could be used to denote *deus*, and b) Chinese converts could practice rites to Confucius and ancestors, because these rituals were civil rather than religious in nature. Franciscan and Dominican missionaries disagreed with ‘the Directives of Ricci,’ and the Vatican eventually overturned the accommodation policy in 1704. As a result, missionaries were ordered to leave China by Emperor Yongzheng in 1724.<sup>1</sup>

As Wu shows us, even the progressive papal encyclical *Maximum illud* issued by Pope Benedict in 1919 did not overturn the Vatican’s position regarding Chinese traditional rituals. During the 1924 Catholic Synod in Shanghai, a complex episode Wu analyzes with clarity and assuredness, Celso Costantini, an apostolic delegate to China, gave a ground-breaking homily regarding missionary work in China, declaring that ‘the opposition between traditional Chinese culture and Catholicism had to come to an end.’ In order to counter this notion of ‘dirty materialism,’ Constantini urged the conference attendants to ‘rise up the beautiful and wonderful virtues of ancient China to entirely overthrow it’ (129).

Yet, the synod also stated explicitly its position regarding rituals associated with Confucianism and other Chinese religious traditions. As Wu notes:

The Vatican ... did not overturn its position on the Rites Controversy: it continued to reject the Jesuit policy of accommodation and forbid Catholics from attending traditional Chinese rituals. ... The synod denounced Chinese spiritual practices as ‘superstition,’ labeling Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism as evil religions that the missionaries needed to vanquish. (129–130)

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<sup>1</sup>See Liam Matthew Brockey’s *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) and David E. Mungello, ed., *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1994).

Although the missionaries accepted the cultural value of Confucianism, they did not accept its ritual component. The acceptance of ‘ancestral worship’ of Chinese Catholic converts did not come until 1939, with Pope Pius XII’s decree. Not surprisingly, while trying to ‘forge an alliance with Confucianism,’ the missionaries ‘rejected a possible synthesis with Buddhism,’ a religious tradition rooted in rich ritual practice (185).


My current research, through surveys as well as ethnographic fieldwork, has been focusing on the revival of Confucianism as a religion in contemporary China, as well as the revival of ritual practice in general. One of my foci is ‘ancestral rites,’ a rather archaic term that refers principally to prayers and offerings made to the spirits of deceased family members. It is a rather astonishing fact that ‘ancestral rites’ are the rituals most frequently practiced in China today, with about 70% Chinese having conducted them ‘in the past year.’<sup>2</sup> In the past five years I have observed many concrete cases of ancestral rites, among well-educated urban professionals as well as migrant workers, most of whom have no clear religious affiliation. I have observed that some Christians—both Catholics and Protestants—conduct these rites as well, even though Protestant pastors explicitly forbid such activities, whereas Catholic priest emphasize their nature as ‘veneration’ rather than ‘worship.’ Do ancestral rites make Chinese Christians ‘idolaters,’ as the missionaries once worried about and may still do today?

I think a deeper and more empirical understanding of Chinese traditional ritual life, be it ‘Confucian,’ ‘popular,’ or ‘folk,’ needs to be undertaken before we can answer such questions. This is a different way of handling the issue of ritual life from the Jesuits missionaries, who downplayed ancestral worship as ‘civil’ rather than ‘religious,’ or the German missionaries, who chose to turn their gaze in another direction regarding rituals in the Confucian tradition in order to find ‘synthesis’ with Confucianism. If we dare to imagine a different understanding of ritual life, once we reconsider concepts such as ‘religion’ and ‘superstition,’ we might be able to see beyond the seemingly unavoidable conflict between God, gods, and spirits. The way to resolve the Chinese ritual issue is not to sidestep it, but to comprehend it through its own logic, its own grammar, and its own mode of understanding.

Wu’s superb book has shown us how far the German missionaries were willing to go in order to make sense of Christianity in the Chinese context through their engagements with China’s cultural and political realities. The next step is to go further still, to make sense of ‘ancestor rites’ and to understand religious experiences beyond the conceptual boundaries of Christianity. It is not the missionaries’ task to take the next step; it is now the duty of scholars.

Anna Sun

Kenyon College

 [suna@kenyon.edu](mailto:suna@kenyon.edu)

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<sup>2</sup>See my *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).