Review of Jensen: Manufacturing Confucianism

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Confucianisms, according to Lionel Jensen, are the results of a four-century long process of pious manufacture: pious, because aimed at truth rather than manipulation; manufacture, because the work has been done out of materials close to hand. These materials are the texts, words, and symbols out of which traditions are invented and re-invented. Jensen’s book is simultaneously a meditation on the ecumenical goals of “traditionary invention” and a close study of the specific ways in which sixteenth- and twentieth-century communities have negotiated between inherited meanings and current circumstances. Its case studies splendidly exemplify its broader theoretical themes; I will look at each before returning to an assessment of the book’s conclusion.

The first two chapters explore what Jensen aptly calls the “sino-Jesuit community.” He surveys the degrees to which the Jesuits were sinified and their efforts to find room for Chinese traditions in an expanded idea of natural religion, in part by redefining their own canon and seeing “Confucius” as an “ethnic philosopher” akin to Plato. Jensen argues that the Jesuits adopted and popularized the rarely used formulation “kong fu zi” as an appellation for their Chinese hero, and it is from this term that “Confucius” was ultimately derived.

Jensen works to make us see things sympathetically from the inside: the challenges the Jesuits faced, and the reasonableness of their responses, from initially likening themselves to Buddhists, to their later identification with the “ru.” He criticizes Gernet’s China and the Christian Impact (Cambridge, 1985) for being too ready to see the Jesuits as engaged in cynical manipulation for their own ends. Instead, Jensen urges us to see the Jesuits as working within the constraints of their adopted cultural universe to seek the truth, as they understood it. This process of seeing universal significance in the particulars of Chinese culture is then repeated when a fairly crude version of the Jesuit’s “Confucius” makes an appearance on the European stage—providing for Europeans evidence of the possibility of harmonious life under a benevolent monarchy—in the Confucius Sinarum Philosophus of 1687.

The book’s second pair of chapters take up two twentieth-century Chinese efforts to understand the early history of “ru,” the term which at least until modern times, Jensen says, functioned “as an emblem of the culture’s central value system” [155]. For Zhang Binglin, with whose “The Etiology of Ru” Jensen begins, the ru began as a group of broadly talented gentlemen, but under the pernicious influence of the teacher Kongzi (a.k.a., Confucius), they turned towards the narrower concerns of government careerism. Reacting against the calls by some in his day to make “Kongjiao (Confucianism)” into a national religion, Zhang argued that the original goal of “ru,” and thus China’s true intellectual heritage, was wide-ranging service to and direct engagement with China’s people.
Hu Shi’s “Explaining Ru,” on the other hand, argues for a positive connection between the ru and Kongzi. According to Hu, the ru had been priests in the Shang dynasty whose status had declined after the Zhou conquest, only to be revitalized and transformed by Kongzi, a sage prophesied to save the world. Jensen finds a number of parallels between Hu’s picture of Confucius and Christian accounts of Jesus, and argues that these similarities are not coincidental. Hu was determined to find a way to make modern (universal) civilization “congenial and congruous” with Chinese civilization; this he accomplishes, in Jensen’s words, by collapsing China and the West “into a single process of civilizational growth, the self-same identity of which was explicit in the patterned variation in the biographies of their spiritual exemplars, Kongzi and Jesus” [263].

I began this review by writing of “Confucianisms.” Jensen does not actually use this word, but while he sometimes seems to want to confine the application of “Confucianism” to the Jesuit’s sixteenth-century notion—arguing that at least the uncritical use of that word consigns one to “the closed space of later Jesuit interpretation” [144]—I believe he would endorse my usage. Confucianisms are efforts to say something of universal application through the medium of a particular, continuously re-invented tradition. New symbols can come into the foreground, like “kong fu zi,” “Confucius,” and more recently “Neo-Confucianism” and “xin ruxue,” but each interpretation is alike, according to Jensen, in being “a metaphorical wager on coherence,” succeeding only “insofar as it is able to command contemporary assent” [18]. This brief reference to coherence and assent falls well short of a satisfactory theory of standards for interpretation, but given the much more nuanced practice of assessing interpretations in which Jensen engages throughout the book, I believe we should read him as saying that all Confucianisms stand or fall as interpretations—none are privileged—and with this we should concur.

Like Alasdair MacIntyre, whom Jensen cites for support, Jensen sometimes forgets that traditionary invention continues today, as when he worries that the word “Confucian” is today “swiftly approaching meaninglessness” [139]. To be sure, some uses of the adjective convey little more than a vague connection to an idealized and essentialized East Asia, but the problems with such usages have little to do with the term’s Jesuit origins. I also find it necessary to object to a few of his translations: “lordling” fails as a translation of “junzi,” for instance, because it does not convey the most central commitment that users of the term were expressing, namely the exemplary nature of those to whom it is applied. “Supernal ridgepole” for “taiji” is similarly problematic. But these are small points. Manufacturing Confucianism is a deeply learned and richly theoretical work. It both teaches us about the Chinese past and raises questions that we would do well to consider as we seek to interpret and assess Confucianisms.