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## **Anna Sun. Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.**

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**Anna Sun. *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.**

An ideological conflict regarding the nature of Confucianism has led to a deep study of whether or not Confucianism can be classified as a religion. Anna Sun explores the components of Confucianism that are often cited as religious and questions Confucianism being qualified as purely religious, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The preface briefly outlines the context of each of the nine chapters, which divide the book into three sections: Sun (1) explores the complexities of classifying Confucianism as a world religion, (2) provides a methodical evaluation (ethnographical research) that attempts to identify who are the Confucians, and (3) discusses the importance of the modern revival of Confucianism in China. The author also highlights the motivations and interests behind her work, and she does "... not attempt a substantive definition of religion in this study; as a sociologist, [Sun] believe[s] that it is important for us to stay value-neutral regarding whether Confucianism is a religion" (p. 7). As such, those interested in the historical construction and development of Confucianism, specifically in China, will find *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* an enjoyable read.

The concept of Confucianism was formally recognized at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago as one of the major world religions. James Legge, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish sinologist and the first professor of Chinese at Oxford University, and Friedrich Max Müller, a philologist and orientalist editor of the *Sacred Books of the East*, strategically used their academic expertise to introduce a novel way of studying religion. It can be argued that Confucianism as a world religion was merely a concept shaped by Legge and Müller to gain academic respect by institutionalizing the term "Confucianism" as a full discipline in religious studies. Sun argues that "[i]t was through Legge's interpretation of Confucianism as an ancient religion of China that Confucianism came to be seen as one of the great world religions" (p. 60). However, the issue of whether Confucianism should be classified as a religion is still up for debate. Sun suggests that there are four historical controversies over the religious nature of Confucianism. She examines the involvement of the Jesuit missionaries in China, scholarly and intellectual debates, a failed movement to establish Confucianism as a state religion, and the religious nature of Confucianism by pointing out the main issues, participants, and resolutions with respect thereto in a chronological manner.

Being a long tradition of over 2,500 years, Confucianism is difficult to define as it elaborates on multiple human conditions ranging from conventional wisdom to our association with Heaven (*tiān rén hé yī* 天人合一). While the Chinese government has not recognized Confucianism as one of the five major religions (Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism), many historians, philosophers, Confucian experts, and a number of academics believe that Confucianism should be recognized as one of the major religions in China. These individuals argue that Confucianism involves a collective set of widely practiced religious acts that play an important role in the social and religious lives of the Chinese people. Such proponents claim that while the Chinese tend to have limited affiliations with other religions, they widely adhere, unwittingly on occasion, to the themes and practices of Confucianism.

In her ethnographic research, Sun discovers that there are no specific religious rituals that make someone a Confucian (e.g. like baptism does in Christianity or the *guiyi* does in Buddhism)<sup>1</sup>. She agrees that modern practices of Confucianism lack an official religious organisational infrastructure and notes that is not practiced in dedicated temples. In fact, she declares, “[a]ll Confucian temples [in China] belong to SACH [State Administration of Cultural Heritage],” and such temples “are officially classified not as religious sites but as cultural ones...” (p. 158). Needless to say, Confucianism remains widely classified by the outside world as a religion. Indeed, Sun lists (in chapter 4, table 4.2) ten institutions of higher education in the United States offering courses on world religions, among which Confucianism is included. Her study shows how these universities position themselves towards Confucianism and how their courses refer to Confucianism as a religion.

Sun then compares and presents both the non-religious and the religious interpretations of Confucianism. She first examines the non-religious interpretation of Confucianism as a sort of code principles or philosophies dealing with having good morals and virtues, i.e. individual morality or righteousness (*yì* 義) and being humane (*rén* 仁)<sup>2</sup>. The American Philosophical Association, for example, identifies Confucianism as a philosophy. On the other hand, the religious interpretation is regarded as a religion mainly because of the academic recognition (in late nineteenth century) of it as such and its ritual practices (*lǐ* 禮) such as ancestral worship and other ceremonial activities performed in Confucian temples, households, or elsewhere. Moreover, the American Academy of Religion, an influential institution on religious studies, delimits Confucianism as a religion and publishes articles that reflect this assumption. Fournier De Flaix and Louis Henry Jordan (chapter 5), both social scientists from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, redefined the religiosity of Confucianism and made a strong declaration that Confucianism was in fact a religion—the second largest in the world behind Christianity.

The third part of this volume deals with the revival of Confucianism in contemporary China. Sun began her fieldwork in 2000, studying Confucian rites and practices in approximately twelve Confucian temples and Chinese households. Her research consisted of the observation of individuals’ personal conduct and the assessment thereof through surveys in order to determine whether or not Confucianism can be said to be emerging as a religion in the country. She dedicates chapter 7 to the relationship between women and Confucianism and the intellectual impact they have had on the revival of Confucianism in China. She notes that Confucian rituals are usually practiced by women—though others, including predominantly students and senior citizens, participate in religious rituals at Confucian temples; the former to receive blessings from Confucius for their national university entrance examinations, and the latter to bless their family members through prayers.

In recent years, the Chinese government has identified the importance of Confucianism and its core values. A clear example was Hu Jintao’s political slogan on a desired “harmonious society”. This motto was taken from the teachings of Confucius while many other references to Confucius were made in the 2008 Olympics. Also, more than 400

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<sup>1</sup> *Baptism* symbolizes the admittance to the Christian Church whereas in *guiyi* one ‘takes refuge’ in the three gems, i.e. Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

<sup>2</sup> Within this interpretation, Confucianism is generally linked to political concerns and social order.

Confucian Institutes have been established around the world promoting mandarin language studies, the Chinese culture, and educational and cultural collaborations; the Institutes do not offer a heavy emphasis on Confucian doctrines, yet one of the general principles of the Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes is to construct a “harmonious world”.

*Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* gives the reader a general guideline to follow while deciphering both sides of the argument central to determining whether Confucianism ought to be classified as a religion. The text does not truly answer the question as to whether Confucianism *is* a religion or not (disregarding the fact that it was formally recognized as such by the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893) but instead offers an alternative to classifying it either way. Anna Sun gives the audience the opportunity to reflect on the historical construction of Confucianism and how it has developed since the late nineteenth century. She asserts that “[w]ithout a recognizable or identifiable base of believers, Confucianism as a religion has primarily been a matter of academic and political concern” (p. 80); nonetheless, no matter its official classification, Sun leaves the reader with no doubt that Confucianism will continue to be an essential part of Chinese cultural traditions.

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