

A Review of Lionel Jensen's *Manufacturing Confucianism* by Michael Ing

“[W]e may simply observe once again that the question “Is Confucianism a religion?” is one that the West has never been able to answer, and China never able to ask.”
(Wilfred Cantwell Smith, quoted in Jensen, 136)

The central call to action of *Manufacturing Confucianism* is presented immediately as Jensen states, “I propose that we resist the reflex to treat these entities, Confucianism and *ru*, as equivalent and consider rather that what we know of Confucius is not what the ancient Chinese know as Kongzi. I suggest instead that Confucius assumed his present familiar features as the result of a prolonged, deliberate process of manufacture in which European intellectuals took a leading role. Our Confucius is a product fashioned over several centuries by man hands, ecclesiastical and lay, Western and Chinese” (5). While his two part conclusion of differentiating between Confucianism and *ru*, and Confucius and Kongzi is generally accepted by all scholars in the field, his subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) implications of taking such a position are lightning rods of criticism. He provides a rather balanced effort in neither “defending, nor attacking Confucianism” (28), but is forced to deal with the result of deconstructing two very entrenched and misappropriated terms, and is therefore almost by default taken up in the position of dismantling the house, and no longer having a home to return to. Thus while he presents no aggression toward ‘Confucianism’, there is a direct affront to those that use the terms he has outmoded. His direct attack on such appears on page 142, “Obviously there are risks in using the term; it assumes much, conveys little, and by its simplicity conflates too many former meanings, thereby preventing a productive modern reading of the Chinese texts.” *Manufacturing Confucianism* does an excellent job at taking the reader to the point of grasping the complexity of the issue, but offers no solution to the dilemma. Not that it needs to; for it at least initiates a dialogue that

searches for a solution to the problem. But at the same time Jensen downplays any salvific hope of ever using the terms 'Confucius' or 'Confucian' in a respectable way.

The manufacturing of Confucianism was a three part process, stretching over two centuries, and arguably still taking place today. The first was the intentional religious manipulation by Jesuit missionaries beginning in the early seventeenth-century, interested in finding a direct juxtaposition for Christianity, for the sake of mitigating their proselytizing efforts. Jensen claims, "their interpretations may be taken as self-serving or ideological in offering justification for their evangelical work" (137). They imported a foreign concept, namely 'religion', and because they assumed an absolute world wide religiosity, they quickly saw 'religion' within the Chinese. In a sense, their position of Christian religious superiority lead them to be willing to accommodate themselves culturally but not to change what they saw as the essence religion. Therefore conforming to an alien definition of the term was not even a rejectable possibility. The second process was a social manipulation by European intellectuals interested in a foreign realm, but also looking for answers to questions of their times. They applied a new series of questions to the Chinese religion, and the answer they got was an assumed reality called 'Confucianism'. 'Confucius' came to symbolize anything Chinese, and Confucianism came to represent an ideal system of political morality. The third process, unlike the previous two, was not a conscious manipulation to serve a current Western trend, rather it was the importation of those ideas full circle back into China primarily by indigenous Chinese trained in the West. It left China as explained by the Jesuits, was interpreted by European intellectuals, and returned as 'Confucianism' rather than the native original concept.

If you stare at anything long enough you'll eventually see what you were looking for. Such may be said to be the case of the Jesuits that came to China at the close of the sixteenth-century. They came in the name of religion, and eventually found it. Using the theory of accommodation, embodied by Paul in his discourse on the unknown god, missionaries of the Order of Jesus created a sectarian religion in China that became compatible with their version of Christianity. It was cut and shaped to fit the needs of Jesuit justification in an attempt to demonstrate the conformity of the two traditions. This is not to say that any of the early priests had harbored any malecontent. They saw the *ru* tradition as one on par with their own, and of the *sanjiao*, was the only one to be fully Latinized whereas the other two are hybrid Anglo-Romanizations. Matteo Ricci even called the *ru*, '*la legge de' letterati*' (The Order of Literati), strikingly similar to the same term used to describe the Order of Jesus. They translated many Chinese religious texts, and even accorded Confucius the seat of a saint. They were even successful in persuading many on both Eastern and Western hemispheres that Confucianism was completely complementary to Christianity.

In doing such however, the Jesuits made "a native Christianity that was indistinguishable from *ru*." And at the same time forced each tradition to answer previously unasked questions. In a sense, they created meanings for 'Confucius' and 'Confucianism' that are not transferable back into the original Chinese. By taking the *ru* customs, which at the time had at least nine different classifications, and downplaying certain characteristics, such as the religious aspect of rites to Kongzi, and emphasizing others, such as *Shangdi* and *Tian*, the Jesuits were successful in not only manufacturing a

new way of life, but also persuading others that what they taught was the *Zhengxue*, and what they possessed was *Zhengdao*.

There are three primary alterations the Jesuits were responsible for:

1. They invented the term 'Confucius'. The Chinese characters 孔夫子 do not appear in any of the main stream philosophical literature; only a few obscure texts from the Yuan dynasty. The Jesuits chose most likely chose this translation to set Confucius apart for a Western audience, from other philosophers, especially those considered heterodox, that had the *zi* suffix. The Chinese did not need the extra hint. And in communicating with them, early Jesuits like Ricci, usually wrote 'kongzi', or 'zhongni'.
2. They redefined *Xianru* and *Houru*. For the Chinese this was a chronological distinction and for the Jesuits it became an ideological distinction, separating the original orthodox from the contemporary heterodox.
3. They reordered the *Four Books*, placing the *Analects* in the front, and *Mencius* in the back.

European intellectuals were responsible for taking the Jesuit concept of 'Confucius' and creating the term 'Confucian'. Primarily coming from *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, "European scholars embedded "China" and "Confucius" in the fearful symmetry of their then struggle to reconcile the plurality of God's vast creation with the unity of science" (139). 'Confucianism' became an idealized realm of moral unity used in opposition to the scourge of factionalism in the revolution. This same sense of 'Confucianism' was then later imported back into China from the West.

A Personal Reaction

Once 'Confucius' and 'Confucian' have been dismantled, we are left with two possible courses of reconciliation- Either justify our current usage of these terms, or shun away from them in favor of a more fitting alternative. Jensen unfortunately does not investigate comprehensively the former option and therefore relies on the latter, but is also unclear in constructing more fitting alternative. Thus arises the unclaimed position, of wholesale avoidance of the tainted terms (although I think he personally does a wonderful job at using almost all of the words he feels create ambiguity, vagueness, and uncertainty). Jensen exacerbates the situation by classifying 'Confucius' as a "figment of the Western imagination" (9), and draws three particularly grinding conclusions. First he states, "Obviously there are risks in using the term [Confucianism]; it assumes much, conveys little, and by its simplicity conflates too many former meanings, thereby preventing a productive modern reading of the Chinese texts" (142). He then goes on to say, "Thus, I would contend, pace Jordan Paper, that to employ the term "Confucianism," which we know lacks representational accuracy, in situations where accuracy is desired, is to create confusion" (144). And "I believe that to pronounce ru "Confucian" or Kongzi "Confucius" awakens the long history of the Jesuit project of accommodation responsible for these inventions" (139).

Beyond the fact that he offers no grounding of ever resolving the dilemma, and taints the terms beyond the point of return, the application of his position in not using vague expressions is detrimental to his original thesis. Under closer scrutiny even it falls victim to his implied conclusions, and is therefore not without serious ideological

perfunctories. It is worth stating again, “I propose that we resist the reflex to treat these entities, Confucianism and ru, as equivalent and consider rather that what we know of Confucius is not what the ancient Chinese know as Kongzi. I suggest instead that Confucius assumed his present familiar features as the result of a prolonged, deliberate process of manufacture in which European intellectuals took a leading role. Our Confucius is a product fashioned over several centuries by man hands, ecclesiastical and lay, Western and Chinese” (5). He uses two terms in particular that are at least, if not more, packed with ideological luggage than ‘Confucianism’. The first is ‘ancient Chinese’ and the second is ‘intellectual’. ‘Ancient Chinese’ presents an over simplified attempt at unifying a diverse period of time. Jensen of course accepts the notion that definitions change over time. However presenting a holistic, absolute version of China in his thesis makes the Jesuit “manufacturing of Confucianism” in the seventeenth-century appear all the more unprecedented. The term ‘intellectual’ traditionally referred to scholars that stood in opposition to the state, and while such may include the individuals he has in mind, that in no way represents the entirety.

Interestingly enough in the glossary of the book, Jensen glosses *de* (德) as ‘mana’, the Polynesian word for spiritual power. This is a perfect example of a word that is out of place in a book on deconstructing the purposive creation of culture by one party assuming superiority that deliberately transmits the manipulated version globally. In the end, there really are no words without baggage, and therefore rather than advocating a loss of all language, why not call for an added sensitivity in word choice? Of course the problem is much more complex than the simple answer I have provided, but that is not necessarily the purpose of this work. Rather, I see myself writing this for the sake of legitimizing the

alternative that still maintains the usage of terms that may have unintended meanings, but is not willing to concede the power to assign appropriate designation. In a sense we all *shu er bu zuo* (述而不作).