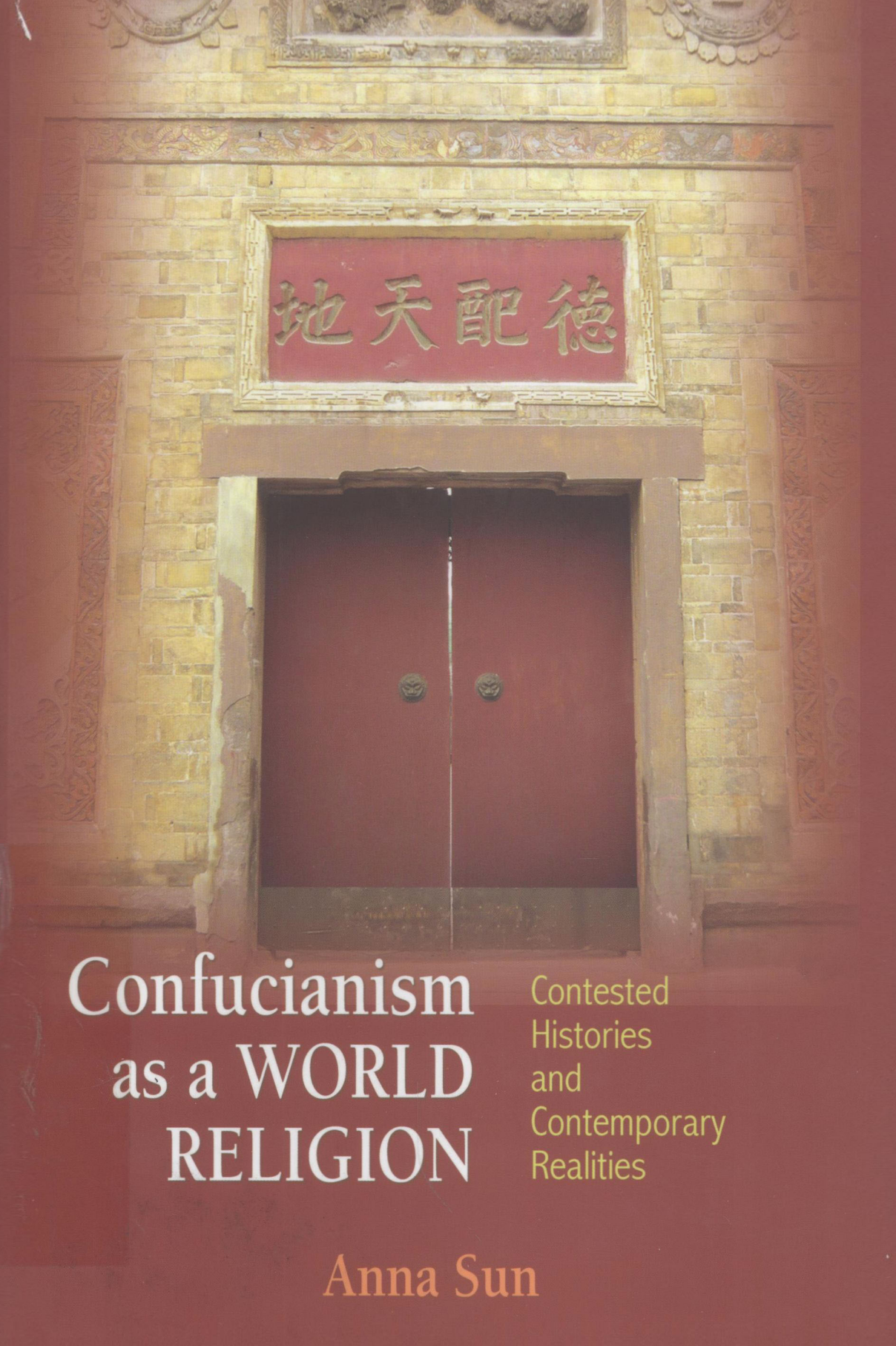

Confucianism as a WORLD RELIGION

Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities

Anna Sun

Confucianism as a World Religion

CONTESTED HISTORIES AND CONTEMPORARY REALITIES

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Confucianism as a World Religion

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I use the term Confucianism as covering, first of all the ancient religion of China, and then the views of the great philosopher himself, in illustration or modification of it, his views as committed to writing by himself, or transmitted in the narratives of his disciples. The case is pretty much as when we comprehend under Christianity the records and teachings of the Old Testament as well as those of the New.

James Legge, *The Religions of China*, 1880

Confucianism is no more a religion than, say, Platonism or Aristotelianism.

Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, 1948

I have not found any formulation of a named religion earlier than the nineteenth century: "Buddhism" (1801), "Hindooism" (1829), "Taouism" (1839), "Zoroasterianism" (1854), "Confucianism" (1862). . . . We 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, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 1963

Preface

I remember that day well.[1] I was a first-year graduate student in sociology at Princeton University in the spring of 1999, full of curiosity and attending as many lectures and talks as I could, from sociology to history, from philosophy to literature. One day I saw a poster advertising a roundtable discussion on America's religious discourse. It was to take place in Richardson Auditorium, the imposing concert hall built in the late nineteenth century that has a magnificent presence on campus.

That evening, as I sat in the capacity audience that filled the ornate hall, waiting for the discussion to start, I was deeply intrigued. The roundtable had the most interesting lineup. In an article published a few days later about the event in the *Princeton Weekly Bulletin*, the speakers were described as follows:

> On April 8, the University Center for Human Values sponsored a roundtable discussion in Richardson Auditorium moderated by broadcast journalist Bill Moyers. Participants included William F. Buckley, Roman Catholic author and journalist; Rev. Dr. James Forbes, senior minister at the interdenominational Riverside Church, New York City; Rabbi Laura Geller, senior rabbi of Temple Emanuel, Beverly Hills, Calif.; Joan Halifax, Buddhist, founder of Upaya in Santa Fe, NM; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University; and Tu Weiming, professor of Chinese philosophy at Harvard.[2]

For a long time I had known and admired the work of Professor Tu Weiming, a renowned scholar who was arguably the person most responsible for bringing Confucianism into the cultural mainstream in the United States in recent years, especially since the 1980s. But was Professor Tu a religious leader, the way the other panelists were? Was he representing a religion the way the senior rabbi was representing Judaism and the Zen Buddhist priest was representing Buddhism? What was the role of a "Confucianist," as Professor Tu sometimes called himself, in the company of people with clearly defined religious identities?

As someone who emigrated from Beijing to San Francisco at age nineteen, I was always deeply interested in religion. My parents were quite secular, although their secularity was more a matter of indifference than a concise decision. Not having grown up in religious households themselves,

they had never given much thought to religion; their intellectual training being in French culture and literature, they emphasized the value of reason and rationality above all else. Their secular attitude was not entirely dissimilar to the Enlightenment-minded ideology of the Chinese socialist state, although unlike the state they were not against religion; they were merely not interested in it. But so many books in their library—from fiction to history—touched on religion, I realized later; they simply ignored the theme, whereas I gradually consciously searched for it. I grew up with the collective works of Hans Christian Anderson—in lyrical Chinese translation—which were often Christian tales of salvation and redemption enchantingly veiled in fairy-tale form. My diet of books gradually included Greco-Roman mythology, history of Christianity, esoteric tales of Tibetan Buddhism, and a great deal of nineteenth-century French and Russian novels, before adding Kierkegaard and Zen Buddhism to the mix in my late teenage years.

When I moved to San Francisco to be with my family and later attended the University of California, Berkeley, I was already intensely interested in the philosophy of religion and even theology, reading Tillich and Bonhoeffer while studying social theory. It was not by accident that I took a course on the sociology of religion in my final year at Berkeley. The seminar was cotaught by Professors Robert Bellah and Ann Swidler, and it profoundly changed my perspective on religion. I was very fortunate to have been there, I soon realized, for it was the last course Professor Bellah taught before his retirement.

It was in this seminar that I first read Max Weber's seminal work, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* (1915). I found myself struggling with Weber's characterization of Confucianism as a world religion, which struck me as fundamentally problematic.[3] Isn't Confucianism a philosophy and a way of life rather than a religion, as I learned growing up in China in the 1970s and 1980s? From reading different accounts of Confucianism, I became aware of the many debates over the religious nature of Confucianism throughout history, but my impression remained that Confucianism was considered by most Chinese people to be a philosophy rather than a religion. For instance, I did not know anyone in China who would say that he or she is a believer of the "Confucian religion." The label "Confucian" normally refers to a moral or ethical outlook, or a particularly cultured or scholarly way of life.

On that day in the Richardson Auditorium at Princeton, each participant of the roundtable discussion represented a major religious tradition: Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, and, in the case of Professor Tu, Confucianism. This very much followed the commonly accepted category of "world religions" in our day; sometimes a few other religions, such as Daoism or Hinduism, are added, but the lineup on this

panel was quite standard. As I later discovered, such assemblies have been taking place ever since the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, during which a Confucian official-scholar, Pung Kwang Yu, represented Confucianism.[4] That day at the Princeton roundtable, a little over a hundred years after the Chicago World Parliament of Religions, Professor Tu explained what it meant to be a Confucianist in our pluralistic contemporary life with his customary clarity: "My commitment to my way as a Confucian, which means learning to be human, is predicated on my ability to appreciate many different paths."[5]

But I was troubled not only by the question of whether one could speak of Confucianism as a religion, but also by the larger assumption that made this entire event possible: how did Confucianism become one of the so-called world religions?

This question led me to Firestone Library, the university library only a few hundred yards from Richardson Hall, with its fifty miles of bookstacks. I started with contemporary publications about world religions and world civilizations, of which there was a great number, most if not all mentioning Confucianism as one of the great religions of China, alongside Buddhism and Daoism. But when did the concept first come into being? A historian of China, Lionel Jensen, argued in his 1998 book *Manufacturing Confucianism* that the Jesuit missionaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were responsible for turning the ancient Confucian tradition into "Confucianism." But the Jesuits' understanding of Confucianism had only a limited impact, mostly in the missionary realm rather than in the larger social world. The way we view Confucianism as a world religion today seems to have originated in a very different source. I wondered whether it might have something to do with the globalization of the world, a historical, material, and institutional process of which the idea of "world religions" might have been an essential part.

One late night, while browsing the open stacks on the third floor of the library, looking for the earliest texts on comparative religions or world religions I could find, I discovered quite a few volumes that attracted my interest: *The Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism Described and Compared with Christianity* by James Legge, published in 1880; *Natural Religion: The Gifford Lectures Delivered before the University of Glasgow* by Friedrich Max Müller, published in 1889; *Comparative Religion: Its Genesis and Growth* by Louis Henry Jordan, published in 1905. Then I realized that there seemed to be a pattern emerging. Many of these books were published between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, with quite a few printed in the 1880s and 1890s, the era that saw the convening of the first World Parliament of Religions in 1893. Eastern religions were prominent in the new classification of world religions, and many of the books included Confucianism as a

world religion. Why were there so many books about world religions, especially Eastern religions, published between the 1870s and the early twentieth century? What was the story behind this sudden emergence of comparative religion scholarship as well as general interest books? And who was Friedrich Max Müller, cited in so many people's work from those years? These questions, rooted in my encounter with Weber's inclusion of Confucianism in his sociology of world religions project, eventually led to my dissertation research.[6]

I had the great good fortune of being guided throughout the dissertation process by Professor Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist of religion whose deep historical sensibility and genuine depth and clarity of thought have been my intellectual inspiration ever since.

The search for answers has taken me from Firestone Library to archives in Great Britain as well as Confucius temples in China, and from my dissertation work to subsequent research projects. My journey first took me to Oxford University, where Friedrich Max Müller and James Legge both taught in the late nineteenth century. I spent several months in the Department of Special Collections and Western Manuscripts at Bodleian Library, the place where materials related to Max Müller are stored. In the New Bodleian Reading Room, which is across the street from the splendid original limestone Bodleian Library, I went through every piece of paper in the Max Müller Archive, which filled more than eighty archival folders and boxes, examining everything from manuscripts to letters, from notebooks in Max Müller's own meticulous hand (one of which was devoted to his new project, "Sacred Books of the East") to letters and newspaper clippings saved by Max Müller himself ("Letters on Various Controversies in Which Max Müller Was Involved, 1845–91"). Through my time in the Bodleian as well as excursions into the East India Company Archive in the British Library in London and the University Archives at Oxford, Cambridge, and the University of Manchester, Max Müller's singular contribution to the making of Confucianism as a world religion became more and more apparent. It was Max Müller, the first professor of comparative religion at Oxford, who was responsible for the inclusion of Confucianism in the world religions paradigm, and he was aided by his acquaintance James Legge, the first professor of Chinese at Oxford and a former missionary in China, who was responsible for the translation of the most essential Confucian texts into English.

Other discoveries and connections were made in more serendipitous ways. During my first visit to Oxford, I stayed at Harris Manchester College, a small college with beautiful gardens and quiet quadrangles, thanks to a philosopher friend's introduction. It was very convenient, for it was only a stone's throw away from the Bodleian Library. When I consulted the college library, however, I was astonished by the sheer

volume of books as well as pamphlets on comparative religions in its Carpenter Library. I later learned that it was the best collection of such texts at Oxford. The college was in fact one of the allies of the emerging field of comparative religion in the turn of the twentieth century, thanks to its status as one of only two non-Anglican colleges situated in Oxford, the other being Mansfield College, which was nearby. Leafing through the many pamphlets and books in the Carpenter Collection as well as the Library of Protestant Dissent at Harris Manchester, I discovered intellectual affinities between the German Lutheran Max Müller, one of only six Nonconformist professors at Oxford in his day, and Joseph Estlin Carpenter, the illustrious principal of Manchester College from 1914 to 1919, who was an important scholar of comparative religion and a well-known Nonconformist Protestant dissenter.

This connection allowed me to situate the making of Confucianism as a world religion in a broader historical context. It was certainly a story about missionary history in China and the British colonial production of knowledge of the East; it was clearly also a story about the institutional struggle to establish comparative religion as a progressive new discipline promoted by many Nonconformists (i.e., not members of the Church of England; non-Anglicans) in religiously conservative Anglican Oxford. These interconnected developments led to the birth of the new paradigm of world religions in the intellectual center of the British Empire, which has had lasting impacts in our contemporary world, including the classification of Confucianism as one of the great world religions. Indeed, the paradigm's ripples can still be felt today, which was what I experienced in the audience in Richardson Auditorium, astonished by the undisputed religious status of a Confucianist among religious leaders in the United States, nearly one hundred years after Max Müller's death.

But has this impact reached China? Why is Confucianism today not even one of the "Five Major Religions" recognized by the Chinese state? Are there people in China who treat Confucianism as a religion? What does it mean to be a Confucian in contemporary Chinese society in the first place? After my archival research in Oxford, which provided the main sources for my dissertation on the making of Confucianism as a world religion and the emergence of comparative religion as a discipline, I realized that these questions could be answered only through concrete fieldwork in China, through observing everyday practice and interviewing people about their religious life. This led me back to China for several years of extensive fieldwork; I traveled widely and learned firsthand about what was happening on the ground.

Between 2006 and 2009 I served as a co–principal investigator in the Templeton Foundation project "Empirical Studies of Religions in China," collaborating closely with other sociologists to study the contemporary

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revival of religion in Chinese society.[7] Working on a survey of 7,021 respondents in both urban and rural areas demonstrated to me the intrinsic complexity of doing survey research of religion in China; I also discovered the significant limits of the classification scheme of religions that most Western social scientists seem to take for granted. For instance, in the case of Confucianism, only 12 people out of 7,021 claimed to be "Confucians." Should we therefore draw the conclusion that Confucianism as a religion is nearly extinct in today's China?

My hunch was no, due to my awareness of the inherent methodological constraints of putting diverse Chinese religious practices into convenient yet problematic categories of "Buddhism," "Daoism," and "Confucianism." But how can we learn about the reality of Confucian religious life in China? The answer resides in Confucius temples, the sacred temple sites reserved for the veneration of Confucius and his disciples. We could learn a great deal about the present state of Confucian ritual life through studying ritual practice in these temples, whose tradition can be traced back two thousand years.

The first temple I conducted research in was the Confucius Temple in Foshan in 2000, a vibrant southern city known for its manufacturing. The experience was a revelation. From 2009 to 2011, as a participant in the "Confucian Revival in Mainland China: Forms and Meanings of Confucian Piety" international research project, I conducted fieldwork in twelve Confucius temples, including temples in Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Chengdu, Chongqing, Jinan, and Qufu. Along the way I interviewed people who offered prayers in Confucius temples, administrators and merchants who manage the temples and profit from the growing interest in Confucian ritual practice, as well as intellectuals involved in the current revival of Confucianism.

Indeed, the timing of this project couldn't have been better. There has been a gradual emergence of a revitalization of Confucian tradition in China in recent years, including a heated, very public intellectual debate over the religious nature of Confucianism in 2000–2004. I became one of the first social scientists to examine this revival. This has been a multifaceted revival that emphasizes, to different degrees, the cultural relevance, educational potential, ethical nature, and political prospects of Confucianism. Since 2008, around the time of the Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government has also been consciously promoting Confucianism for its own political purposes. One of the more radical developments is the formation of a small group of activists who envision Confucianism as a full-fledged state religion in China's future.[8]

The very last interview I conducted for this project was with Jiang Qing, the scholar who is an acknowledged leader in the promotion of Confucianism as the state religion of China. The interview took place

in his home office in the city of Shenzhen, the so-called Chinese Silicon Valley, in December 2011. The city was a fishing town as recent as the 1970s, but at the time of my visit, I saw only innumerable glass-and-steel high-rises under a brilliant southern sky. Shenzhen's transformation is a powerful reminder of the tremendous economic growth China has undergone in the past thirty years. Designated as the first "Special Economic Zone" at the beginning of China's "Reform and Opening" policy in 1979, Shenzhen today is a major financial center and commercial port and has an extraordinary concentration of high-tech factories. Foxconn Technology, a company that manufactures products such as the iPad and iPhone for Apple, alone employs about four hundred thousand people. Foxconn started to attract international attention in 2010 when an exceptionally high number of suicides were reported at its Shenzhen factory, where workers lived in crowded dormitories and routinely worked twelve-hour shifts.[9] A series of articles in the *New York Times* in 2012 further scrutinized "the human cost" of the amazingly efficient production of state-of-the-art goods such as the iPad as well as the economic competitiveness of the Chinese labor force.

In this somber new world of relentless expansion of global capitalism, uncertainty over the future of Chinese political reform, and lament of the loss of traditional cultural meanings and ethical values, it is not surprising that, for many intellectuals, Confucianism represents the hope of stabilizing a fast-changing society with a much-needed cultural, ethical, political, and even religious foundation. A self-identified Confucian who offers a rigid interpretation of Confucian values and ideals, not unlike fundamentalists in other traditions, Jiang has been writing about the possibility of establishing Confucianism as a national religion since the 1980s. He has also made concrete efforts to revive Confucian ritual practice through supporting a small Confucian center called the Sacred Hall of Confucius in Shenzhen.[10] His proposition of adopting Confucian political philosophy to replace communist ideology has made him into a kind of political dissident; his views have been tolerated by the state, but his publications are constantly monitored and sometimes censored.[11]

The most striking aspect of Jiang's thought is his insistence on turning Confucianism into a full-blown form of religion, with rigorous religious doctrines and rituals, as well as an institutionalized clergy that has the possession of all Confucian temple properties, currently owned by the state. It is important to note that most of these ideas cannot be found in the actual history of Confucianism in China. A religious seeker who first explored Buddhism, then Christianity, Jiang is someone who believes that religion is essential to the establishment of a good and just society. In his articulation of Confucianism as a state religion, he has clearly been modeling his vision based on his own understanding of Christianity. However,

although he is clearly attracted to both the ethical framework and religious depth of Christianity—in fact, he went as far as learning from a Christian friend how to pray—in his strongly nationalistic view, Confucianism would be a force against the spread of Christianity—a "foreign religion"—in a postsocialist China.

As Jiang narrated his own intellectual and religious journey over green tea in his book-lined study in one of the high-rise buildings, his gestures framed by a large window behind him through which numerous identical buildings could be seen in the distance, it suddenly dawned on me the extraordinary juxtaposition of different forces at work in this moment. Here, in a city representing the economic future of China, was an intellectual whose worldview had been shaped by the terrors of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, the spiritual search for meaning experienced by many of his peers in the 1980s and 1990s, and the pride over the great strides China has made as well as the fear over the perceived threat of the domination of Western values in the 2000s. The notion of Confucianism as a religion represented for Jiang a uniquely Chinese solution to the problems of socialism and global capitalism.

Is Confucianism finally going to become a real religious force in Chinese society? The long historical shadow cast by the nineteenth-century classification of Confucianism as a world religion has grown pale in the brilliant light of the twenty-first century. As China goes through a profound economic and social transformation that makes it an increasingly vital part of the global world, the changing role Confucianism plays as a religion is unfolding at this very moment and may have a profound impact on China's future. It has been my great privilege to follow and chart Confucianism's course.

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