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Rematerialising Memories: Alternative Pathways to Public Knowledge of the Past in China

JIANG FU, Lan. 2024. *Confucius revisité. Du marchand confucéen à l'entrepreneur du XXI^e siècle : Le phénomène rushang dans la Chine contemporaine* (Confucius revisited. From Confucian merchant to twenty-first century entrepreneur: The *rushang* phenomenon in contemporary China). Paris: Hémisphères Éditions, Maisonneuve & Larose

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are being redefined through non-Western ontologies, providing an alternative to governance models that prioritise collectivism over individual agency.

The theoretical versatility of this volume opens promising avenues for future research, especially concerning the intersection of “cultural roots” and digital culture. Although the contributors ground their analysis in foundational cultural forms such as Confucianism, Islam, Christianity, and ethnicity, the framework established in this work provides a valuable lens for future scholars to investigate digital communities and cybernationalism. The text’s capacity to inspire such applications demonstrates its generative potential, indicating that the concept of cultural reach can significantly enhance understanding of the digital landscape in the twenty-first century.

In conclusion, *Reconsidering Chinese Citizenship* represents a landmark contribution and an empirically rich collection that fundamentally challenges established narratives. The volume encourages readers to look beyond the *hukou* system and the Party-state apparatus to understand how citizenship is experienced and negotiated through the cultural fabric of daily life. This book is indispensable for sociologists, political scientists, and scholars of Chinese studies seeking to comprehend the resilience and adaptability of societal actors in an authoritarian context. As the Chinese state continues to promote the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, the editors have produced a timely and insightful guide to the cultural roots of citizenship, one that is poised to shape the field for years to come.

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Based on Lan Jiang Fu’s doctoral dissertation defended in 2021, *Confucius revisité. Du marchand confucéen à l'entrepreneur du XXI^e siècle : Le phénomène rushang dans la Chine contemporaine* (Confucius revisited. From Confucian merchant to twenty-first century entrepreneur: The *rushang* phenomenon in contemporary China) provides a fascinating account of the affinities between traditional Chinese culture, companies, and private entrepreneurs in China. Having been a prime target of criticism during the Maoist era, Confucianism’s reemergence in Chinese society from the end of the twentieth century onward has been spectacular. The Party-state’s increasing references to Chinese traditional culture and Confucianism are particularly noteworthy, from speeches by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao with Confucian emphasis on “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和諧社會), to Xi Jinping’s strong endorsement of Confucianism under the “Chinese dream” (*Zhongguo meng* 中國夢).

This book draws from a body of scholarship on the resurgence of Confucianism in contemporary China. In *The Sage and the People: The Confucian Revival in China*, Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval shed light on the multifaceted Confucian practices that emerged in China after the 1980s. They examined in a sophisticated way both grassroots Confucian initiatives and the official discourse on Confucianism, reflecting on why it is difficult to examine them through the concept of “religion” (*zongjiao* 宗教) imported from the West. In line with this literature, Lan Jiang Fu’s book discusses the entanglements between capitalism, “Confucian” entrepreneurs, and the Party-state in post-Maoist China.

The book builds on rich and nuanced ethnographic fieldwork conducted in three private companies in 2016–2020 and carried out in three Chinese coastal cities (in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Guangdong Provinces) characterised by high rates of development since the

1980s. These companies of various sizes (two small and medium-sized firms and one big company) specialise in the manufacturing sector (electronic devices, home, and kitchen equipment). The family nature of their management is worth noting.

Part One evokes the historical roots of the concept of “Confucian merchant” (*rushang* 儒商) from the 1671–1687 period of the Ming dynasty, to its academic rediscovery from the 1980s onwards. The author points out the complexity of the Confucian revival in Chinese society, which indeed permeates society, and takes various cultural, religious, educational, patrimonial, economic, and touristic forms.

Part Two sketches Confucianism in Chinese companies as an educative project, as underlined by the key term *jiaohua* 教化 (transformation of self and training dispensed to others). The study of classics such as the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), the *Rules of Disciple* (*Dizigui* 弟子規), and the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學) occupies an important place in the daily activities of these companies. Throughout the often-compulsory reading of these canonical texts, the employees’ behaviour and states of mind are supposed to be transformed to reflect the creation of moral citizens endorsed by the Party-state. The author also analyses the paternalistic and family-based leadership of the entrepreneurs who claim to be Confucian, along with their ecological commitment. For instance, some develop organic agriculture to provide support to the “left-behind” children of migrant workers who remain in the countryside (*liushou er’ tong* 留守兒童).

Part Three focuses on the intricate relationships between so-called Confucian business leaders, Confucianism, and the Party-state. Since Xi Jinping took office in 2012, the Party-state has placed renewed emphasis on traditional values. Xi launched a new campaign in 2015 around the slogan of “core socialist values” (*shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan* 社會主義核心價值觀) in which traditional culture is stressed. However, political restrictions on grassroots and non-governmental organisations have also intensified. The author observes that many traditional private schools (*sishu* 私塾) have been closed in recent years. “Confucian” entrepreneurs also avoid delivering speeches in public. However, Confucianism is at the same time strongly endorsed by the central authorities. In 2019, for instance, Wang Qishan, the vice-president of the People’s Republic of China, delivered a speech at an international symposium celebrating the birth of Confucius. Meanwhile, numerous events have been organised by *rushang* to promote Confucianism, such as the Bo’ao Forum for Entrepreneurs since 2016.

Lan Jiang Fu’s book is a significant contribution to the study of the renewal of Confucianism in relation to capitalism and the state in China in two ways. First, the book avoids reducing the complex Confucian phenomena to specific aspects – official ideology, ethics, or religious rituals – to account for it. Second, the author locates the renewal of Confucianism in relation to capitalism in a Chinese context, while drawing on examples from various parts of the world – Japan, France, or the United States. As the author points out, the Party-state indeed plays a central role in China’s economic and moral configuration, making it unique compared to the Western modern trajectory.

Despite its significant contribution, the book has two main weaknesses. First, the author’s Introduction could have provided a

more comprehensive theoretical framework on how the Chinese case relates to and diverges from Max Weber’s thesis on the affinities between capitalism and various religious ethics – Protestantism, but also Confucianism. This argument could have been more developed to highlight the specificities of Chinese capitalism. In this sense, the book lacks a cohesive discussion on these theoretical debates that could unify the subsequent chapters.

Second, the author also draws on the theoretical framework of “reinvention of tradition” invented by Hobsbawm and Ranger to explore the resurgence of cultural tradition in China. The author could have delved deeper into examples as well as the literature on Chinese nationalism to support this theoretical frame. Additionally, the culturalist dimensions of the debate over “Asian values” in the 1980s could be worth exploring. The “moral crisis” discourse, positing the deterioration of moral values due to unregulated capitalist growth in China is also debated, as it remains impossible to garner sufficiently solid evidence, leading to the impossibility to assessing whether China is facing a moral crisis more than other countries. Overall, it could be worth exploring how contemporary Confucian representations relate to culturalism and Chinese nationalism.

Lan Jiang Fu’s book remains a significant contribution to the relationships between Confucianism, self-claimed “Confucian” businessmen, and the Party-state in post-Maoist China, which speaks to studies of state-society relations, religion, politics, and capitalism in contemporary China. It is also an erudite yet accessible empirical account of Confucianism and companies, valuable to any reader concerned about contemporary Chinese society.

Reference

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