

Nicolas ZUFFEREY: *To the Origins of Confucianism: The ru in pre-Qin times and during the early Han dynasty*. Bern: Peter Lang 2003. 409 S. SFr. 94,00.

The question of the identity of the *ru* (or Ru) ? in ancient China is a complex one. Intellectual trends of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have sometimes shed light upon and sometimes obscured the origin of this group, whose roots had long before grown murky. The conventional approach is summarized in the translation of *ru* as “Confucian(ism),” conjuring up the notion of a religion founded by Kongzi ? ? (551–479 BC). In *To the Origins of Confucianism*, Nicolas Zufferey examines the origins of meaning of the word *ru*, and the traits of the men labeled with this term down into the Han ? Dynasty (206 BC – AD 221). Zufferey considers and, in the end, refutes most of the commonplace ideas about *ru*. Zufferey’s is a competent, though not groundbreaking, consideration of difficult questions, which may be of interest to scholars and students of early Chinese intellectual history.<sup>1</sup>

Zufferey’s study divides into two parts. The first (pages 15–161) is a summary of major 20<sup>th</sup> century theories about *ru*, where discussion of root meaning and etymology blends more or less seamlessly into conjecture about the identity of the group(s) identified with the term. The second part (pages 165–375) is the author’s own excursion into related questions, which he pursues by taking up a number of particular historical cases relating to the *ru*, as well as a number of individuals so identified.

Zufferey begins his discussion of 20<sup>th</sup> century notions about *ru* with a brief summary of the information about the roots of *ru* available in early sources. Here we find the first mention of the *wang guan shuo* ? ? ? , a theory which suggests that the *ru* are “descendants of ancient teachers, educators, and tutors” (22)—officials of the Zhou ? court, like the predecessors of the other major philosophical schools. This theory appears already in Han times, receives attention in later pre-modern periods and also figures large in 20<sup>th</sup> century discussions on the topic.

Fast-forwarding to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Zufferey begins his discussion with Zhang Binglin ? ? ? (1868–1936), commonly known by his cognomen (*zi* ? ), Taiyan ? ? . Zhang generally propounds the *wang guan shuo*, with some refinements: He posits a multivalent nature for the term *ru*, arguing for its diachronic development and potential reference “to the world of religion, divination or witchcraft” (30).

Hu Shi ? ? (1891–1962) is the next scholar treated. Hu was one of the most important Chinese intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and his 1934 paper “Shuo ru” ? ? inaugurated the modern debate on the nature of *ru*. Hu Shi argues that, “Originally, the *ru* were priests ... of the Yin dynasty”, whose “special skill lay in organising funerals and rituals in general” (34). For Hu Shi, the role of Kongzi was not that of founder but of revolutionary, who broadened the parochial and tory ideas of the Chunqiu-era *ru*, and “turned them into men of strength who shared a lofty ideal” (34–35).

In the time after Hu Shi, many other scholars put forth theories about the origin and development of the *ru*. Zufferey discusses such famous scholars as Rao Zongyi (Jao Tsung-yi) ? ? ? , Feng Youlan (Fung Yu -lan) ? ? ? , and Guo Moruo ? ? ? , who,

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1 Lionel JENSEN: *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese traditions & universal civilization*. Durham: Duke University Press 1997, touches upon some of the themes of Zufferey’s work. Jensen’s is a sophisticated and challenging book, to which readers interested in the topic of the *ru* would be well-advised to refer.

among others, have propounded notions which are essentially modifications of the *wang guan shuo*. Zufferey also summarizes the arguments of current scholars, who take up the question of the *ru* from a variety of perspectives.

Perhaps the most useful part of this section—indeed, of the whole book—is chapter six, “A (tentative) synthesis.” Out of the cacophony of opinion, Zufferey here achieves a harmony of the various stances on the question of *ru* origins that shows the similarities and differences of the multifarious theories without over-emphasizing trifling disagreements. Zufferey boils down to a few main points those things about which the cognoscenti are in agreement—or near-agreement, at least: The graph corresponding to ? does not appear in any extant source predating the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (though some would point to this or that graph as its ancestor). Most of the earliest sources that make mention of *ru* are not those later deemed “Confucian,” which, along with factors like the probable original meaning of the word (something along the lines of “soft” or “weak”), hints at a negative connotation for the word. Concerning the question of Kongzi’s relationship to *ru*, Zufferey rightly points out:

Despite various ideas on the history or nature of the *ru*, most “specialists” claim that there had been *ru* before Confucius, and, as a consequence, most of them would agree that there is no causal relationship between “Confucianism” and the *ru*; to be more precise: the *ru* were the ancestors of Confucius, not the other way round (148).

It is not that *none* of the *ru* were followers of the teachings of Kongzi, but rather that not *all* were. *Ru* is a polyvalent term that has had different meanings over its long history. “The hypotheses of various scholars, which initially appear to be mutually contradictory, can to some extent be reconciled, insofar as they perhaps match different situations at different times” (157). There is much useful information here, although the author’s arch tone sometimes distracts from his presentation.

The second part of Zufferey’s work treats a number of specific cases from the Qin and Han periods that relate in some way to the question of the *ru*. The first is a genealogical examination of *boshi* ? ? . Zufferey traces the evolution of the term *boshi* from a general term for scholars learned in one or another discipline, as it was used in the Warring States ? ? period (ca. 475–221 BC), to the title of a position in the imperial bureaucracy with special and specific qualifications and responsibilities in the Han. Far from a uniform group, over the course of history, *boshi* performed various tasks and adhered to varying philosophical schools. But they were ever taken from among the *ru*, and the status of *boshi* represented both ambition and distinction for the *ru*.

Every schoolchild in the sinophone world knows that Qin Shihuang ? ? ? (reg. 221–210 BC) “burned the books and buried the *ru* alive” ? ? ? ? . But in an analysis of this incident, Zufferey points out a number of serious problems with this commonplace story. He argues that the victims were not exclusively “Confucian,” but also included *fangshi* ? ? , “esoteric experts” (19); he suggests that as it was the *fangshi* who angered the First Emperor, they should certainly number among his victims. At the same time, the term *ru* as used during the Han dynasty could—and probably did—include people like the “esoteric experts.” On the other hand, those who one might expect to be victims—critics of the regime’s policies, prominent *ru*, etc.—were spared. Finally, Zufferey argues that the First Emperor was not particularly opposed to the doctrines of the *ru*, and so lacked the motive to carry out the crime for which he is accused.

Zufferey turns next to an examination of the cases of specific *ru* under the two most famous Han emperors, Gaozu ? ? (reg. 206–195 BC) and Wu ? (reg. 141–87 BC). For

the time of Gaozu, Zufferey takes up Li Yiji 李易 (ob. 203 BC), Shusun Tong 孫通 (ob. post 188 BC), and Lu Jia 魯嘉 (228–ca. 140 BC), three men, *ru* by Zufferey's definition, who share a biography in the *Han shu* 漢書.<sup>2</sup> Zufferey uses the cases of these three to demonstrate the wide divergence to be found in the lives and deeds of men called *ru*. Zufferey shows the three to be so far apart in belief and behavior that when he writes, "At least at times, the word *ru* had a very loose meaning" (273), it seems something of an understatement.

Zufferey delves also into the troubles that these three had pursuing political careers in the early empire, when most of those with political power—including Emperor Gaozu—were hardheaded military men without much sympathy for the *ru* and their literati cultivations. The idealistic and often impracticable notions of the *ru* did not help their popularity. In the end, it was the "mastery of discourse" that earned these bookworms the respect and patronage of the court, where they found places as "political advisors and as diplomats," "court propagandists," or "dynasty ideologues" (293–94).

The reign of Emperor Wu is a natural choice for further discussion of the role of *ru* in Han China. Not only is this period commonly considered a golden age of cultural achievement, it is also known as the time when the emperor granted exclusive preference to the *ru* and their doctrines. The latter development is often credited to Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BC), but as Zufferey shows, in all likelihood, "the so-called *du zun ru shu* [獨尊儒術] and the various steps accompanying it were in fact a collective enterprise" (314). Zufferey's analysis demonstrates that the process leading to the preference of the *ru* was under way before Dong rose to prominence, and that particular steps that occurred during the time of Dong are properly credited to others. The precise extent of Dong's involvement remains unclear, and it seems to me that Zufferey may be too quick to downplay Dong's role, but he lays out some forceful criticisms of the received narrative. He then turns to Gongsun Hong 公孫宏 (200–121 BC), a *ru* who advanced to the very heights of the imperial bureaucracy. Gongsun is known to have proposed a series of improvements and reforms for the identification, preparation, and advancement of candidates for the bureaucracy. But like the putative achievements of Dong Zhongshu, those of Gongsun Hong turn out to be part of larger trends.

Not content to reevaluate the achievements of Dong Zhongshu and Gongsun Hong, Zufferey next turns his attention to the victory of the *ru* itself—at least as commonly conceived. Zufferey's first point is that the *ru* who effected the victory did not adhere to a system of abstract thought: they were bureaucrats, with bureaucrats' concerns. The support of the emperor probably resulted not from a preference for *ru* doctrine, but rather from an apprehension of its practical utility. In the end, the very existence of the victory is brought into question, as Zufferey points out that, "a majority of senior officials appointed during Emperor Wu's reign were not *ru*" (349). Whatever victory the *ru* did enjoy, it was not permanent. Zufferey cites the historical records concerning Emperor Xuan 宣 (reg. 73–49 BC) to demonstrate that the predilections of the monarch could do much to determine the balance of culture (*wen* 文) and martiality (*wu* 武) in the government of the realm, and the role of the *ru* in government.

For it is in their unique, "consubstantial relationship" (371) with *wen* that the *ru* ultimately find definition and potency. As Zufferey states in his conclusion, "*wen* was the

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2 Ban Gu 班固 (32–92): *Han shu*. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962, 43.2105–33. The same biography also includes Zhu Jian 朱建 (ob. ca. 177 BC) and Lou Jing 樓靖 (ob. post 200 BC; granted the surname Liu 劉 by Emperor Gaozu).

common denominator for the *ru*, and not other features frequently put forward to characterize them, for instance an adherence to Confucius' ideas ... or a training in the Classics" (371). This is a convincing analysis of the many source materials available on the topic that seems to argue for the translation of *ru* as Literati. Let us hope that Zufferey's accurate observation that "there was no word 'Confucianism' in ancient Chinese" will put to rest that old conventional translation of *ru*.

As my summary of his work indicates, this book does not contain much that will come as a surprise to those familiar with early Chinese intellectual history. It is of potential interest to readers who are unfamiliar with the topic, especially those interested in Chinese perspectives on the question. Zufferey's aversion to strong statement drives him to always give the two sides of the questions he treats, which permits readers a broad view of the topics under consideration. Ultimately, though, this aversion seems to hold the book back not only from overbold assertions, but from the bold as well.

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