

## Article

# Way-Making: Portability and Practice amid Protestantization in American Confucianism

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**Abstract:** While the study of Confucianism has been ongoing in the United States for quite some time, the idea of its viability in the American context is quite recent. Even more recent are experimental attempts to practice Confucianism in the U.S. This article chronicles several such attempts and considers what demographic data there are, and their frameworks of measurement, of Confucianism in the U.S. It focuses on a case study of debates and conversations about what it means for Confucianism to be “portable” among a small but committed second generation of Boston Confucians. From quiet-sitting meditation, to textual studies and interpretation, to ritual veneration of Confucius and ancestors, this article is one of the first empirical studies of Confucianism as a lived tradition in the United States. It situates these practices, and descriptions, discussions, and debates about them by their enactors, in the context of the Protestantized religious landscape in the U.S. It also considers how Confucianism has registered in unexpected ways in the U.S. context amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Confucianism in the U.S. emerges as a form of way-making, irreducible to the categories of philosophy or religion, that both reflects and transforms its inheritance of Confucianism from East Asia.

**Keywords:** Confucianism; Protestantization; United States; American; Boston Confucianism; COVID-19; ritual; meditation; identity; Transnationalism



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## 1. Introduction

The Americas, including the United States of America, which is the focus of attention here, are an unexpected focus for an expedition looking for Confucians. Confucianism was birthed, and until relatively recently remained ensconced almost exclusively in East Asia. Further, scholars continue to debate the very possibility of its being transplanted beyond that milieu. Under the logic that *esse proves posse*—the existence of a thing proves its possibility—a finding of Confucianism in the U.S. would thus be a significant intervention in that debate.

Inevitably, any claim to have found Confucianism in the United States will immediately be challenged as to whether or not what is identified is authentically Confucian. This is largely due to the fact that what it means to be a Confucian remains contested: is it a philosophy, a religion, both, or neither? Moreover, Confucianism is widely considered influential across East Asia, but very few people explicitly identify as Confucians. To get at this implicit religiosity, Anna Sun has suggested measuring practice of Ancestral Rites as a proxy (Sun 2013, pp. 117–19), raising further questions as to how beliefs and practices are linked, or not, in Confucianism. In the U.S. context, this leaves us to wonder whether Confucians are those who espouse Confucian beliefs or those who practice Ancestral Rites and quiet sitting, and whether they must do so having adopted an explicit Confucian identity?

In this article I seek to give an empirical account of various ways in which Confucianism registers in the context of the United States. The issue of whether Confucian identity is explicit or implicit is particularly critical in this context because of the background of

Protestantization in the United States against which the emergence of Confucianism must necessarily play out. Indeed, an empirical account would be severely wanting apart from careful consideration of this dynamic. I conclude by considering several ways in which Confucianism, at least in some senses, may interface with the trend away from religious affiliation in the U.S. A non-Protestantized form of Confucianism is a means of way-making, a set of principles and practices that, in various combinations with others, can effectively guide life at individual and communal levels. This sort of religiosity may be particularly appropriate in the context of the dramatic shifts in the religious landscape being experienced in the U.S. ([In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace 2019](#)).

## 2. Terminology and Scholarship as Practice

Some Confucians in the United States have raised concerns about the very term “Confucian. It was Christian missionaries who named religious traditions they encountered after the founder of the tradition, just as their tradition, Christianity, was named after its founder, Jesus Christ. Thus, Muslims were referred for many decades by religion scholars as “Mohammedans” after their founder, the Prophet Muhammad. Likewise, it was Christian missionaries who identified members of a lineage traced back to Confucius as Confucians. However, that lineage already had a name in China: 儒家 (Rú Jiā), perhaps best translated “School of Scholars, or classicists who reflected on and with classical literature ([Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan 2003](#)). Thus, Bin Song argues that the tradition should be known as Ruism rather than Confucianism ([Song 2016a](#)).

This terminological debate provokes a further question regarding empirical inquiry into Confucianism in the United States. One of the main loci of engagement with Confucianism in the U.S. is by sinologists, philosophers, and religious studies scholars in the academy. Of course, these scholars are usually studying Confucian texts and traditions alongside others, especially Daoism and Buddhism. Moreover, their status in the academy is neither extensive nor uncontested. Bryan Van Norden reports that, as of 2016, “Among the top fifty philosophy departments in the United States that grant a PhD, only six have a member of their regular faculty who teaches Chinese philosophy” ([Van Norden 2017](#), p. 21). This is perhaps unsurprising given that at least some philosophers reject Confucianism as belonging to their discipline ([Møllgaard 2021](#)).

Should such study of Confucianism by scholars be considered evidence of Confucianism in the U.S., since Confucians have been understood as scholars who reflect on and with classical literature ([Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan 2003](#))? Heup Young Kim 金洽榮 questions the appropriateness of such a procedure: “Can one be a genuine Confucian only by reading and understanding Confucian scriptures and literature but without learning and practicing the complex and highly nuanced Neo-Confucian system of *li* (propriety) in which humility (not epistemological immodesty) and moral conduct (not ethical hubris) in everyday life are essential?” ([Kim 2020](#), pp. 14–15). An empirical account should be based on observation, but it remains unclear whether or not observation of scholars studying Confucianism should count as instances of Confucianism.

Related to scholarly study of Confucianism by its location adjacent to higher education is the phenomenon of Confucius Institutes. Like Germany’s Goethe Institutes and parallel nationally sponsored organizations, Confucius Institutes make Chinese language and cultural learning available as well as facilitating intercultural exchanges for college students. Unlike their largely European parallel organizations, however, Confucius Institutes have drawn accusations of limiting academic freedom ([Sahlins 2013](#)) and foreign influence-peddling, and lawmakers and regulators in Washington have expressed concerns about secrecy, visa irregularities, and lack of reciprocity in China ([Jackson 2019](#); [Wood 2018](#); [Bauman 2018](#)). More recently, regulators have backed off somewhat, and academics and administrators have also come to the Institutes’ defense ([Kelderman 2021](#); [Bell 2018](#); [Julius 2018](#)). That said, the spread of Confucius Institutes has stalled, and in fact reversed ([Thompson 2021](#)). That Confucius Institutes are intended as forms of Chinese soft power is difficult to interpret as a critique, since their parallel nationally sponsored organizations

intend them similarly, and their actual influence on students who participate in their programming is often contradictory to those aims (Hubbert 2019). Moreover, in spite of their name, Confucius and Confucianism is a minimal part of the cultural teaching offered by Confucius Institutes, much as the works of Goethe are a minimal part of the offerings of Goethe Institutes. In fact, I participated in a video about Boston Confucianism produced by the Confucius Institute U.S. Center as a means of introducing Confucius and Confucianism to the Confucius Institutes (Boston Confucianism 2018). They do, however, mediate Chinese culture broadly, which is heavily influenced by Confucianism, so they are at least worth noting in terms of evidence of Confucianism in the U.S.

For present purposes, I will stick with the terminology of Confucianism rather than Ruism largely for the sake of familiarity, while acknowledging the colonialist origins of the name. I will also not dwell further on scholarly attention to Confucianism as instances of Confucianism, though I will offer two caveats. First, some scholars are self-consciously attempting to put Confucian ideas into practice in ways that might profitably be considered instances of Confucianism (Crane 2013). For example, Stephen C. Angle has regularly made the case for “Confucianism as a Way of Life”, including in his keynote address on 29 September 2018 at the Rectifying the Name of Confucianism conference I cohosted with Bin Song at Boston University. Second, since Confucianism is primarily an implicit form of religiosity, it may be that the study of Confucian thought, texts, and traditions has influenced scholars to behave in certain ways characteristic of Confucianism without their necessarily adopting the Confucian label. Such would be consistent with Confucianism as way-making. Both caveats point back to the opacity of the theoretical lens that requires clarification prior to empirical work proceeding fruitfully in this trajectory.

### 3. Demographics of Confucianism in the United States and Confucian Criteria

The number of self-identified Confucians in the United States is vanishingly small, to the point that no hard number can be assigned. “Confucian” is not included as a potential identifier in surveys fielded by the Pew Research Center, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), or the General Social Survey (GSS). Instead, Confucians, if they register, do so in categories such as “Other World Religions” (Pew) or “Other eastern” (GSS) (Pew Research Center 2014; NORC at the University of Chicago 2018a). Confucians do not even register in narrower studies specifically of Asian Americans or Asian American and Pacific Islanders (Public Religion Research Institute 2019; Pew Research Center 2012).

This paucity of self-identifications is not due to deficiencies in any of these surveys but is rather a straightforward statistical reality that there are not enough Confucians to meaningfully register, let alone power further social analysis. As the Pew Research Center notes, members of other religious groups, including Confucians, “are included in the overall results for all Asian Americans, but the survey sample does not include enough individuals from these religious groups to allow for separate analysis of each group” (Pew Research Center 2012, p. 51). As political scientist Ryan Burge notes, regarding analysis of religious demographics, “It’s impossible to do quant[itative] analysis of [a] group that’s 1–2% of the gen[eral] pop[ulation]” (Burge 2021), let alone a group that barely registers, if at all.

It is hardly clear that measuring self-identifications is an effective way of measuring Confucianism demographically anyway. Anna Sun recounts the ways in which surveys have failed to recognize Confucianism in various East Asian countries when asking people to self-identify (Sun 2013, pp. 112–15). She instead recommends a threefold paradigm for identifying Confucians in East Asia (Sun 2013, p. 127):

1. A minimal criterion of those who participate in Confucius worship in Confucius temples, i.e., perform religious rituals in a sacred space.
2. An inclusive criterion of those who participate in ancestral rites in an ancestral temple or at the gravesites of deceased ancestors or family members.

3. An extended criterion of those who practice filial piety and other Confucian virtues, Confucian spiritual exercises such as reading the Confucian classics and meditating, and other Confucian rituals such as family rituals.

It is worth considering whether any of these criteria can be observed in the U.S. context.

Regarding the first criterion, there are no Confucius temples in the United States, though there is a geological formation called “Confucius Temple” in the Grand Canyon ([United States Geological Survey 1981](#)). As a result, examples of the minimal criterion in the U.S. are precious few. Anna Sun recounts the Harvard Divinity School ritual celebration of Confucius’ birthday led by Shumo Wang 王舒墨 in 2018 and the Confucius veneration and Tian worship Bin Song 宋斌 and I led at a Confucian retreat at Boston University in 2016 ([Sun 2020](#), pp. 225–26). In addition, Dr. Song and I led a similar ritual as part of the above-mentioned conference in 2018. Beyond these examples, I am unaware of any further public rituals of Confucius worship in the U.S. that would qualify for meeting the minimal criterion outlined by Sun.

In contrast, there is some evidence of ancestral rites being performed in the United States, at least by Chinese and other East Asian families ([Tam 2018](#)). There are, though, two complications to empirical engagement with ancestral rites in the U.S. context. The first is that the practice of ancestral rites is in tension with the dominant Christianity, which largely proscribes such rituals as taboo. This in turn constrains the Confucian character of the practice among the East Asian diaspora in the U.S., 42% of which are Christian ([Pew Research Center 2012](#), p. 14), and resists its diffusion into the wider culture. Second, the wider culture is already replete with forms of ancestor worship despite Christian taboos, though not necessarily in a discernably Confucian form. Indeed, the universality ([Steadman et al. 1996](#)) and evolutionary advantages ([Dávid-Barrett and Carney 2016](#)) of ancestor worship explain its prevalence under the conditions of pluralism even while rendering its utility as a proxy for Confucianism problematic. At least in China, the implicit Confucianism indicated by the practice of ancestral rites, even when they incorporate Buddhist, Daoist, or other elements, further implies the influence of the Confucian lineage transmitted through cultural processes. In the U.S., the causal chain behind those assumptions breaks down.

Empirical evidence for the extended criterion is likewise wanting. Very few in the U.S. read the Confucian classics, though Justice Anthony Kennedy did cite the Liji 禮記 *Book of Rites* in his majority opinion in *Obergefell v. Hodges* ([Kennedy 2015](#), 576:657). Meditation is very popular in the U.S., with the Centers for Disease Control reporting that 14.2% of adults in the U.S. practiced meditation in 2017, up from 4.1% in 2012, but none of the examples of meditation practice cited are of Confucian origin ([Clarke et al. 2018](#), pp. 1, 5). There are certainly plenty of family rituals in the U.S., and psychologists recognize their importance for effective family therapy ([Imber-Black et al. 2003](#)), but there is again no indication of Confucian influence.

Survey data regarding family values, i.e., filial piety, in the U.S. are tepid. In the General Social Survey (GSS), 41% of respondents in 2018 agreed or strongly agreed that “You should take care of yourself and your family first, before helping other people”, though 50% responded that the statement is “not applicable” ([NORC at the University of Chicago 2018b](#)). Meanwhile, in the American Values Survey, 53% of respondents thought their generation was better off financially than their parents’ generation, while 46% did not, and 45% thought that their generation is better off financially than the next generation will be, while 53% do not. In the same survey 47% of respondents said that their family is more divided by politics than it was five years ago, while 52% disagreed with that statement ([Public Religion Research Institute 2021](#), p. 16). Notably, none of these questions really get at filial piety as enacted in Confucian-influenced cultures, and family as a central value is common across a range of religious traditions, including the dominant Protestant Christianity in the U.S. ([Henrich 2020](#)).

Based on these considerations, while the three criteria identified by Sun provide expanded capacity for tracing the contours of Confucian influence in East Asia, their application in the U.S. is unlikely to ground a useful analysis.

A recent study presents findings regarding the influence of East Asian teachings as indicated by ideological factors derived from their core texts and philosophies (Lin et al. 2021). The “Three Teachings of East Asia Inventory” distinguishes a “Restrictive Confucianism” characterized by propriety pressure, intrinsic propriety, interpersonal harmony, conforming to social norms, and relational hierarchy, from an “Empowering Confucianism” characterized by self-cultivation, leading by example, and human heartedness (Lin et al. 2021, p. 13). They found that white Americans, in comparison with Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, and Asian Americans, scored the lowest on measures of Restrictive Confucianism and highest of all on measures of Empowering Confucianism (Lin et al. 2021, p. 16). It is perhaps unsurprising that their Empowering Confucianism correlates strongly with what Stephen C. Angle calls “progressive Confucianism” (Angle 2012).

While interesting, this study runs into similar problems as attempting to apply Sun’s criteria in the U.S. The authors claim that their inventory provides a “direct measure of the internalization of the various tenets and beliefs examined” (Lin et al. 2021, p. 22). As applied to people in East Asia, and even potentially Asian Americans, it is not necessarily too far of a stretch to assume that what is being internalized are principles from these traditions mediated through East Asian cultures. Again, that link is broken with respect to white Americans, in spite of the fact that the founders of the U.S. took some inspiration from China (Wang 2021). The sharing of values cross-culturally and across traditions is a better explanation for the presence of some of these ideological factors among white Americans than that they have internalized tenets and beliefs from Confucianism.

#### 4. Protestantization and Boston Confucianism 2.0

Since Confucianism is virtually undetectable at the social level in the United States, a case study provides the best view into the problems and prospects for the tradition in this context. Here, I present a case study of a second generation of Boston Confucians wrestling with how to formulate Confucianism in the U.S. context, which is heavily Protestantized.

The first generation of Boston Confucianism was chronicled in Robert Neville’s *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World* (Neville 2000). Neville expressly argues against many East Asian Confucian scholars that Confucianism need not be inextricably East Asian as it has the internal resources to be a viable transnational cultural dialogue partner. Instead, he construes Confucianism as a portable tradition, by which he means one that is readily able to participate in a world philosophic conversation beyond its context and make substantive contributions thereto. Furthermore, another important figure in the first generation, Tu Weiming, emphasized the religiousness of Confucianism (Tu Weiming 1989; Hung Tsz Wan Andrew n.d.). Thus, the first generation of Boston Confucianism was largely an intellectual endeavor expressing a common agenda within the realm of more broadly Confucian scholarship in East Asia and elsewhere, especially greater Boston, Massachusetts.

The emerging second generation of Boston Confucianism seeks to realize the insights of the first generation programmatically and practically, and ranges far beyond greater Boston, across the U.S., and globally. Unsurprisingly for a 21st century movement, the primary incarnation of this second generation of Boston Confucians is online. The focal point of the movement has been the Facebook group “Friends from Afar: A Confucianism Group”. A subset of the participants in this group gathered at Boston University in July of 2016 for a weekend retreat (Ruist (Confucian) Friends from Afar’ Retreat on 1–3 July 2016 (2016)). A more theoretically oriented related Facebook group is the “Ruism Discussion Group: Confucianism in America”. Additionally, the Ruist Association of the United States is an online fellowship aimed at formation, Dr. Bin Song maintains a robust blogging presence on the Huffington Post, including his “Catechism of Ruism (Confucianism)”, and an affiliate has started a YouTube channel entitled “The American Ru”. One Boston



Confucian, who does not read or speak Chinese, has even developed an adaptation of the *Analects* ([Stone Chimes—The Analects of Confucius 2021](#)). Through all these media, and more, the second generation of Boston Confucians are experimenting with ways of rendering Confucian ideas practicable in daily life, both personally and socially.

The cohort of Boston Confucians includes a range of participants with different backgrounds and orientations toward the tradition, and thus expressing a diversity of interests regarding its proper practice and best institutional expression. Some participants are either native Chinese in China, or native Chinese living in the West either as immigrants or for a short stay, 1.5 or second-generation immigrants to the West, or from other Confucian-influenced East Asian countries. Others are westerners living in the West or in East Asia who have become interested in Confucianism either as a replacement for western traditions they find lacking or as a supplement or dialogue partner for western traditions. Some participants are long-time students of Chinese thought, culture, and history, while others are rather newcomers to the tradition as it developed in China and East Asia.

In what follows, I describe the ways discussion among this second generation of Boston Confucians is controlled and constrained by playing out in a Protestantized context. By “Protestantization” I identify a social process that abstracts cultural values and norms, but not doctrine, from Protestantism, and holds society more broadly accountable to them, including non-Protestant religious traditions. Peter Berger identifies Protestantization as a necessary consequence of the social reality of pluralism under the conditions of democratic social order ([Berger 2004, 2007](#)). When non-Protestant religious traditions encounter Protestantized social milieus, they often undergo transformations of their ideology, structure, and practice. Such processes have been chronicled with respect to Catholicism ([Miles 1976](#)), Judaism ([Sussman 1986](#)), Islam ([Khan and Aslan 2014](#); [Alatas 2007](#)), Buddhism ([Horinouchi 1974](#); [Matsudo 2000](#); [Tuck 1987](#)), Daoism ([Palmer and Liu 2012](#)), and Hinduism ([Bauman and Saunders 2009](#)), particularly as they have incarnated themselves in Western societies as a result of immigration. Insofar as Protestant norms and values are incarnated in the capitalist and liberal democratic social systems of the late modern West, they impact the ideology, structure, and practice of non-Protestant religious traditions by pressing them to adopt congregational structure and practice, cognitively articulate their underlying beliefs with reference to classic texts, and transcending social and cultural boundaries ([Yang and Ebaugh 2001](#)).

#### 4.1. How to Practice

One of the questions that arises regularly across the various platforms on which the second generation of Boston Confucians engage is how someone who is interested in Confucianism can practice the tradition in daily life ([Friend 4 2017](#); [Friend 5 2017](#)). The question often comes from newcomers who are looking for a way to implement a set of ideals that they have encountered among the Boston Confucians and found compelling. One answer to this question has to do with reading and studying a variety of texts, the topic of the next subsection. Two other answers include the Neo-Confucian meditation tradition of quiet sitting, and the performance of the three sacrifices (三祭 sanji).

##### 4.1.1. Quiet Sitting Meditation

The need to distinguish themselves from alternatives in the marketplace of traditions is something that Boston Confucians have in common with the Neo-Confucians of the eleventh through seventeenth centuries. In advocating the Neo-Confucian meditation practice of quiet sitting ([Taylor and Choy 2005](#), pp. 90–92), one participant in the Friends from Afar group quotes John and Evelyn Berthrong’s *Confucianism: A Short Introduction* as regards the goal of quiet sitting for Neo-Confucians: “The goal of quiet-sitting is not just to achieve a quiet mind-heart. Confucians were critical of Daoists and Buddhists for mistaking the real aim of meditation: it was to perfect and cultivate the mind-heart and not to remain in some kind of quasi-independent mental state. Remembering Confucius’ dictum, if quiet-sitting did not help understanding, then it was useless. And if understanding did not

lead to ethical action, then it was not really understanding” (Berthrong and Berthrong 2014; Butina 2017).

Likewise, a participant affirms that “The West is full of competent meditation teachers in the Buddhist, Hindu, and secular mindfulness traditions—and they can be very helpful for learning the necessary techniques—but none of them share our view on the ultimate goal of meditation practice. We must train up Ruist meditation teachers who are superb in both their technique and their view of the goal. In the meantime, we should be vigilant and cautious when receiving instruction from meditation teachers from other traditions. We can learn much from their skill and experience, while never losing sight of the fact their goals are not ours” (Friend 2 2016c). Nevertheless, when asked in the comments whether meditation is necessary, the participant replies, “No. Just useful.: )” In a later post the participant notes that the purpose of quiet sitting is to balance the mind, which, according to the Confucian classic text *The Great Learning*, is necessary for self-cultivation (Friend 2 2017; Legge 1885, p. 9), but this is just one means to that end, as some Confucians historically viewed meditation “as a dangerous distraction from the work of moral action in the world” (Friend 2 2016b).

In both the medieval and modern Confucian cases, the impulse to distinguish what is authentically Confucian from other practices and schools of thought arise from a process at the very heart of the Protestantization phenomenon: protest. Protest does not refer to activism in the streets, in this sense, but rather to the cultivation of identity as over against and so distinct from other identities in a common market. The medieval case of Neo-Confucian Protestantization is extensively historically and socio-culturally chronicled in Yair Lior’s PhD dissertation, *Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism: a comparative morphology of medieval movements* (Lior 2015, pp. 340–519). Without invoking Protestantization, Lior describes how Confucianism became a distinct identity vis-à-vis Buddhism and Daoism, with debates about text and practice leading to conventions demarcating Neo-Confucians from other players in the social sphere. What is notably different about the Protestantization process in the modern case vis-à-vis the medieval case is that the common market is specifically religious, which would not have been intelligible as a distinct market in medieval China. In the articulation of quiet sitting as having a different goal than Buddhist, Hindu, and secular mindfulness traditions, the Boston Confucian making the claim is positioning Confucianism as a contrast to traditions that register in the classificatory scheme of so-called “World Religions”. This scheme itself emerges from a Protestant framework and set of interests that have become taken for granted (Masuzawa 2005). At the same time, the view that quiet sitting is useful rather than necessary indicates Confucian practice as a contribution to way-making rather than a means of signaling a discrete identity.

#### 4.1.2. Three Rituals 三祭 Sanji

Other aspects of the Protestantization process become clear when considering the development of Confucian rituals developed by the Boston Confucians that register as religious in a Protestantized frame. For Confucians, the concept of ritual (禮 li) is extremely broad, encompassing any conventional human behavior, but the modern New Confucian philosopher Tang Junyi (唐君毅, 1909–1978) identified three ritual sacrifices (三祭 sanji) that he took to be particularly determinative for Confucian religiosity (Ivanhoe and Kim 2016, p. 64; Fröhlich 2017). Bin Song has written two posts on his Huffington Post blog regarding these three rituals, both having been published following the enactment of his modified version of them at the retreat held at Boston University in July of 2016. In the first, he takes issue with calling the three rituals “sacrifices” on the basis that sacrifice, as understood in Western thought, presupposes a distinction between the sacred and the secular that is foreign to Confucianism. Instead, he suggests that the ritual oriented toward Heaven (天 Tian) is a form of worship, the ritual oriented toward Confucius and other sages is a form of veneration, and the ritual oriented toward the performer’s ancestors is a form of devotion (Song 2016b). Notably, the distinction between worship and veneration was a key site of conflict in the Chinese Rites Controversy in the Roman Catholic Church in the seventeenth

century (Phan 2002). In Catholic theology, worship is due only to God, while saints may receive veneration. With respect to Tian, Bin claims that “as the origin of all the creatures and things in the universe, we express our feelings of gratitude, awe and piety towards it, we worship its inexhaustible, transcendent creative powers, and then, being galvanized by its powers, we determine to take good care of the entire cosmos in our distinctively human way”. The ritual with respect to Confucius is different because “during this ritual, we honor his teachings, rather than his person, so that what he taught can be continually practiced and brought to fruition by human society”. The ritual with respect to ancestors is again different as “during the ritual, we express and nurture our feelings of gratitude, we try to continually cultivate ourselves according to the moral and cultural influences left by our ancestors” (Song 2016b).

With this theology of the three religious rituals in place, the next blog post clarifies that, historically, the ritual in celebration of Tian was only performed by the Chinese emperor in the suburb of a capital, usually Beijing. The ritual in celebration of Confucius, while in principle allowable for anyone, was mainly undertaken by the Confucian literati. The ritual in celebration of ancestors is private, taking place in the home, in a family temple, or in cemeteries. Bin Song then undertakes a reinterpretation of the three religious rituals to render them more egalitarian and thus more appropriate for the modern context. He conceives the Confucian community as “friends (友 you), committed to the Dao of Tian (天道 tiandao), who are trying to realize dynamic harmony at all levels of human existence in accordance with Confucius’ teachings”. Furthermore, “when studying the tradition, each Ru is not only a student of Confucius, but also a citizen of Tian (天民 tianmin)”. The remainder of the blog post consists in a description of the combined ritual in celebration of Tian and Confucius as performed at the retreat, including the caveats that “future practitioners will surely choose whether to follow my interpretation or not according to their own understanding of the Ruist tradition” and “the performance of this suggested ritual is entirely voluntary” (Song 2016c).

There are several aspects of the three rituals themselves and their interpretation that bear on the process of Protestantization. First, the linking of the three rituals as an expression of Confucian religiosity is itself a modern way of conceiving them in relation to one another and to other rituals under the category of religion, which was already explained above to be itself a category generated by Protestantization. Second, the democratization of the rituals and the declaration of modern Confucianism as egalitarian (Song 2017) is clearly a move to render Confucianism acceptable within a modern, Western, Protestantized, liberal democratic milieu, which sets universal agency and equality as the terms of social acceptability. Such a move is in keeping with what Stephen Angle calls “progressive Confucianism” (Angle 2012). Finally, the idea that the performance of these rituals is voluntary and customizable, as is the practice of meditation as explored above, is yet a further way in which Boston Confucianism understands itself to be one among a plurality of religious options. Each option in the plurality is a voluntary association both in terms of membership and in terms of extent and degree of membership, and this volunteerism is a hallmark of Protestantization (Berger 2007). Yet, the caveats position the three rituals as elements of way-making, to be taken up as appropriate in various ways in diverse situations by different people, which is in some contrast to the overall Protestantized theologizing undertaken through most of the blog post.

#### 4.2. Texts and Tradition

One of the key features of the Protestantization process in a pluralistic field is that social movements, religious and otherwise, are pressed to give an account of themselves in relation to foundational texts and as a coherent and unified tradition. This has played out in the Boston Confucian movement in each regard separately and together as the issues of text and unification are themselves brought together in discussion of what should be considered a modern Confucian canon of texts. One leader in the second generation of Boston Confucians has taken a strong stand in this regard: “In my mind, the future



American Ruism should take these six books as its basic curriculum: The Great Learning, Zhong Yong, the Analects, the Mencius, the Xunzi, and the Commentary of the Book of Changes (among which, the Appended Texts is the key). In my humble view, until finishing reading these six books, no one can be qualified to say anything of ‘Ruism’ as a whole” (Friend 1 2016c). This approach to a modern Confucian canon exemplifies Protestantization in two ways. First, it identifies which texts should be considered foundational for the tradition, such that outsiders may know which texts to consider most authoritative. This leads to a natural concern with the authenticity of the texts determined to be authoritative (Friend 3 2015). Second, it seeks to instantiate the coherence and unity of the tradition around these texts, knowledge of which would be conditional for representing the tradition. The very idea of representing the tradition at least implies some level of institutionalization thereof, which is the topic of the next section.

In addition to the question of which texts should be considered foundational, Boston Confucians are also concerned about the proper interpretation of texts. Given that not all Boston Confucians understand Chinese, the issue of translation is an important part of the question of interpretation (Friend 6 2017). Questions of authorship are also debated among Boston Confucians, including questions of Confucius’ own involvement in the five Classics and influence as expressed in the *Analects*. Hermeneutics proper are also discussed. One participant, upon hearing the very Protestant principle (Carson 2006) mentioned in a lecture by a Buddhist with Catholic inclinations that “text without context is pretext”, noted that “this is also very Ruist (Confucian), since all moral principles in Ruism need to be adjusted to concrete situations in order to cash out their full values” (Friend 1 2016a). However, he went on to reinterpret this principle to say that “Contexts are flowing. Pretext is part of context” (Friend 1 2016a, n. 1116504461695510). He then further clarified, in response to the issue of how Neo-Confucians employ the primitive Confucian classics, that “every generation has its context and pretext, and therefore, an interpretation is legitimate to emphasize the flowing contexts” (Friend 1 2016a, n. 1116509051695050). The implication seems to be that appropriating classic texts as pretext and then reinterpreting them in the present context is acceptable apart from the context of the classic text.

The issue of texts and their interpretation also impinges on debates among Boston Confucians regarding how hard or porous the boundaries of the tradition are. For example, one leader in the movement advanced the idea, based on his interpretation of *Analects* 13.23, 2.14, and 15.22, that “Ruism is 100% opposing the rigid boundary between insiders and outsiders of any religious group. A loyal confession of religious identity is also not a decisive element for a Ruist practitioner, since we all know we are cultivating ourselves to become better and better” (Friend 1 2016b). Another leader then pushed back, saying that “On one hand, I agree that we must reject rigid boundaries between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders.’ At the same time, we need to create a sense that there’s an ‘inside’ for people to seek! That is, we need to help Ru develop a sense of identification *as Ru*” (Friend 1 2016b, n. 1158737144138910). Similarly, the same leader posited that “the fact that there are spiritual creeds and ethical teachings, but no religious dogmas in Ruism is its most precious heritage” (Friend 1 2016d). Another participant pushed back, saying “in my opinion, some dogma is a must . . . there must be some objective truth stated in any religion or philosophy . . . if it is to be of any true value” (Friend 1 2016d, n. 1328455583833730). These debates reflect the tension between particularity and universality that groups inhabiting plural societies made up of voluntary associations, that is, Protestantized cultures, must mediate. They also reflect the tension between a vision of Confucianism as way-making and Confucianism as a distinct identity.

Finally, the issue of textual appropriation down through history is one way in which the question of the coherence and unity of the tradition as a whole gets elaborated among Boston Confucians. Some, myself included, take a more or less historicist approach (Friend 6 2017, nn. 1401327493213200, 1401339489878670, 1401343256544960, 1401347659877850), which is itself a Protestant approach to textual interpretation, whereas others are comfortable allowing the tradition to ascribe authorship to Confucius as a means of indicating

the authority of the content of the text (Friend 6 2017, n. 1401369073209040). This latter approach allows for the conclusion: “let’s be loyal to the mainstream commentarial tradition and see how the tradition received the text. In this received tradition, there is by large a coherent Confucian cosmology which neatly ties with its ethics and political philosophy. In this regard, I didn’t see any ‘multiple’ or diverse versions. Only diverse interpretations about the one version anchored in these two key texts” (Friend 6 2017, n. 1104457722900180). The coherence and unity of a tradition become important in a plural context as guarantors that the tradition meets the minimal threshold of participating in the marketplace of traditions, namely reasonableness. Additionally, coherence and unity serve defensive functions among competing traditions within the marketplace, just as Protestants sought to represent themselves as having coherent positions on par with their Roman Catholic competitors, and being internally unified over against both the Catholics and one another.

#### 4.3. *The Urge toward Institutions*

Confucianism never had a discrete institutional expression apart from being embedded in broader state and civil society institutions in imperial China when it held sway. Confucianism was a set of principles and practices for way-making across domains of society. As Bin Song notes, “Confucian virtuous-persons (君子) could serve their parents as a filial child in their family, preside as a clan patriarch, teach and intercede as a community leader, and take an official position in the government all at the same time. In this sense, the most important ‘religious’ institutions were embedded in the family, community, school, and government” (Song 2016d). After quoting Song to this effect, another leader in the Boston Confucian movement notes that, “This creates a bit of a dilemma for those of us who believe that a religious institutional form would be helpful for promoting Confucianism in the U.S. To be considered a religion by the government and mainstream society, this institution must have ‘clergy’ of some sort. But how can we have ‘clergy’ without corrupting the traditional Confucian view of the virtuous-person Bin describes above?” (Friend 2 2016a). Another leader replied, suggesting that, “if there is a professional Confucian ‘religious’ institution in U.S, like a Confucius temple, or Confucius academy, the teachers (it is better to call the Confucian priests ‘teachers’ rather than ‘priests,’ as the latter is also alien to the tradition) ought to be part-time. They have their own professional careers in other institutions, like university, school, company, media, etc., but simultaneously, they will teach, provide consults, and also preside over rituals in the Confucian institutions” (Friend 2 2016a, n. 1089623261050300). A participant concurred with the first leader that, “I see the lack of institution a deficiency in regard to promoting Confucianism on the community level and also cultivating one’s self on the individual level” (Friend 2 2016a, n. 1089728737706410). For a time at least, the Ruist Association of the United States saw itself as such an institutionalization, complete with spiritual formation program and mentoring, although that prospect has fallen away.

The explicit recognition that at least some degree of institutionalization is requisite “to be considered a religion by the government and mainstream society” is a direct result of Protestantization. Liberal democratic orders identify their religious constituencies on the basis of analogy to the institutional forms of their founders, namely Protestants. Thus, any other tradition that comes along and wants to be counted as religious must conform to this Protestant institutional form in order to even register as intelligible within the category of religion (Yang and Ebaugh 2001, pp. 273–78). The question then becomes, as the Boston Confucians have wrestled with, how to maintain as much of the Confucian spirit as possible within this foreign form.

Attitudes toward institutionalization within the Boston Confucian movement vary widely among its participants, reflecting what each wants the tradition to be and do for them. For many who are either from Confucian influenced countries, or 1.5 or second generation from those countries, Confucianism is a vehicle for cultural identification and expression, either in the mode of rediscovery, or as a means of self-assertion in a

highly plural context. For those in this cohort, conceiving Confucianism in religious terms may generate cognitive dissonance, and many would prefer the development of Western Confucian-influenced educational institutions and media outlets.

Another cohort among the Boston Confucians are those who have become disillusioned with Western religious traditions, either partially or entirely, including Protestantism, Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, and Judaism, and find either a supplement to those traditions or a replacement for them in Confucianism. These members of the movement need Confucianism to take on the shape and characteristics of religion according to the Protestantized schema, at least to some extent, in order to fit the bill as a supplement or replacement in the religious aspect of their lives. It is largely these participants who are concerned about religious institutionalization and leadership.

Then there are a number of participants in the movement who approach Confucianism from the angle of the academy, and these mainly take on a disinterested observer role. Some participants find in Confucianism a congenial dialogue partner for their political ideology, which spans the spectrum from neoliberalism to neoconservatism, libertarianism, socialism, and quite a few others besides. Many participants have limited exposure to Confucianism, but what taste they have had motivates them to learn more, and Boston Confucianism is a community in which to do so.

#### *4.4. Transnationalism, Translation, and Hybridity*

Protestantization operates at two different levels: the level of social (political and economic) systems and values, and the level of religious forms. At the higher level, transnational Protestantization must be theorized in conversation with early theories of Protestantization in terms of ethical values and norms that undergird economic and political modernity in the forms of capitalism and democracy, respectively. Confucianism has been posited as a “functional equivalent” to the Protestant dynamo driving capitalist economics in the West (Lew et al. 2011; Usman 2016; Berger 2010; Weber 2001). Likewise, Confucianism may well provide equivalent intellectual conditions for the flourishing of democracy, as does Protestantism: individual conscience, radical egalitarianism, and a high value on literacy and education (Berger 2004; Wang 2021; Zubatov 2019), though these conditions may also be more or less peculiar (Henrich 2020). This first level has become global in the sense that liberal democratic political order is the global norm for governance, even in countries that are not really democratic, and capitalist economics is the global norm to which planned economies must fit themselves. Because it is global, at this level Protestantization operates on flows in both directions between Asia and North America, making debates around text and tradition and questions of orthopraxy intelligible on either side of the Pacific.

The transnationality of Protestantization at this level is already apparent in the case of Boston Confucianism 2.0. Their articulation of Confucianism as a coherent and unified tradition in dialogue with a range of texts and their development of practices that make the tradition relevant to daily life inspired philanthropic giving from China to the Boston University Confucian Association for the purposes of furthering the movement and extending its reach. From the perspective of the donors, Confucianism is clearly a viable alternative in the marketplaces of religion, spirituality, philosophy, and politics. In the other direction, there is discussion among at least some Boston Confucians of reviving Confucian ritual and meditation practices among native Chinese in China who are unaware of their distinctiveness, at least from a Protestantized Confucian perspective, from Buddhist and Daoist forms thereof.

In contrast, the second, and lower, level of Protestantization, that of religious forms, is translational rather than transnational because it is only operative in the late modern West. It is at this level that questions of institutionalization and leadership emerge as a result of the taken for granted assumption that all religion is recognizable by analogy to Protestantism. At this level, the flow from North America to Asia is likely to be less

interpretable and appropriable upon arrival because the institutions being developed in the North American context are not necessarily relevant in Confucian influenced Asia.

From the perspective of translational Protestantization, it is Protestantized Confucianism that is culturally bound, as opposed to the portability of the Chinese tradition, and this too can be seen in the experience of the Boston Confucians. Participants in the Boston Confucianism movement who are either themselves from Confucian-inspired countries or are 1.5 or second generation are far less interested in the questions of institutionalization than are their domestic counterparts. While the concept of Confucian clergy is imminently intelligible in the U.S. context, and Confucian chaplains have served at Boston University and the University of Chicago, in Confucian influenced Asia it is the Daoists and Buddhists who have monks and priests, not the Confucians. That said, more explicit forms of Confucianism have ridden the waves of globalization such that they have adopted Protestantized forms in Singapore and Indonesia (Sun 2020, pp. 211, 228–30; Sutrisno 2018). Thus, even without the pressure of Protestant norms to adopt religious forms, it may be that the translational transcends itself to become transnational by demonstrating the utility of distinctively religious institutions in capitalist economies and democratic Polity.

Protestantization tends to reify texts, traditions, people, and communities as one thing or another: religious or not, coherent and unified or not, sincere or not. This notion of being one thing to the exclusion of all other possibilities is not a native sensibility in Confucian-influenced Asia, and the currency of the notion is increasingly unstable in the late modern West as well. Instead, what is sometimes referred to as multiple religious belonging (Berthrong 1999) is increasingly prevalent, although the term itself is problematic for rendering traditions monolithic, independent, and clearly bounded; that is, it is a Protestantized construct. It may be, then, that a non-Protestantized Confucianism—one that offers principles and practices that may be combined with others in processes of way-making—has a role to play in Western societies as well.

An emerging theory of transnational Protestantization will need to internalize the hybridity that is, in fact, already inherent particularly in East Asian cultures and traditions. Whereas Christianity has promulgated itself by adopting cultural patterns and forms into itself, Confucianism has always existed alongside Daoism, Buddhism, and a variety of indigenous traditions, in varying degrees of harmony and tension with each at different times and in various contexts. While the pressures of Protestantization are very real and can be felt the world over as they have been carried over into the norms, values, and systems of liberal democratic political orders and capitalist economic systems, they are not yet entirely dominant, and they likely contain the seeds of their own destruction. Instead, what is emerging in the plural marketplace is the increasing transgressing of boundaries and calling into question at least their appropriateness, if not their reality. As this continues, traditions that had understood themselves to be independent, distinct, and rigidly bounded are having to find ways of engaging and harmonizing themselves with their competitors. That is, they are having to engage in a process of way-making. Thus, another name for transnational Protestantization might be Confucianized Protestantization.

## 5. Confucianism and COVID-19

Confucianism received a closer look by some in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic as the tradition was cited, in popular and scholarly forums, as contributing to an explanation as to why East Asia was better able to manage the crisis. On 13 March 2020, *The Wall Street Journal* noted that “the lingering cultural imprint of Confucianism gives a paternalistic state a freer hand to intrude in people’s lives during an emergency” (Martin and Walker 2020). Exactly one month later, *Asia Times*, an English-language news media group based in Hong Kong, ran the headline “Confucius is winning the Covid-10 war”. The subtitle reads, “Compare hundreds of millions of Asians’ serene response to the coronavirus crisis with the West’s fear, panic and hysteria” (Escobar 2020). On 6 November 2020, Nicholas Kristof, then still a columnist for *The New York Times*, echoed this view on Twitter: “Countries with high cohesion, with strong sense of community and interpersonal

ethical obligation, have managed COVID-19 well; Japan, S Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, other Confucian societies are all examples" (Kristof 2020).

On 26 June 2020, Jing Wang published a post on the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health's China Health Partnership blog arguing that strategies for fighting the pandemic in East Asia are rooted in Confucian values: "The traditional East Asian Confucian culture values order, family, and the common interest. While in the United States, individualism and freedom are widely held as basic values, in East Asia, they have selfish and unruly connotations. Confucianism argues that "there is no rule without a circle", individualism breeds anarchy, and certain social rules are necessary to advance the collective interests of society" (Wang 2020).

Then, in December of 2020 a group of policy scholars at George Mason University published an article in the journal *World Medical & Health Policy* entitled "Culture, Freedom, and the Spread of COVID-19: Do Some Societies and Political Systems Have National Anti-Bodies?" They also find reason to believe that Confucian influence contributes to success in combatting COVID-19 specifically and pandemics generally: "We find that two cultures were significantly better at preventing the spread of COVID-19 than the rest of the world: Confucian and South Asian cultures . . . Speculation as to why Confucian culture seems to offer some advantage in this pandemic has ranged from genetics to higher rates of obedience and even to bacterial biology in the stomach (Denyer and Achenbach 2020). Confucian cultures also feature relatively great attention to cleanliness and also tend to involve nonphysical greetings and farewells among all but the most intimate relationships. Another possibility is greater exposure to coronaviruses over centuries (Denyer and Achenbach 2020). Perhaps some of the East Asian nations have developed antibodies to coronaviruses generally, which offer some protection against infection" (Mayer et al. 2020). Notably, the only source they cite in generating these speculations is a *Washington Post* article by Simon Denyer and Joel Achenbach, which does not itself draw a connection between Confucianism and East Asian cultures.

This perspective on Confucianism as beneficial for fighting the pandemic was prevalent and influential enough to draw potent counterarguments from several quarters. Five days after *The Wall Street Journal* published its article lauding Confucianism, *Wired* published an article about fighting COVID-19 in Taiwan. The subtitle reads, "The island nation's government is staying ahead of the virus, but don't ascribe it to 'Confucian values.' Credit democracy and transparency" (Leonard 2020). Two weeks later, *Foreign Policy* published an article, "Confucianism Isn't Helping Beat the Coronavirus", with the subtitle, "Cultural tropes don't explain South Korea's success against COVID-19. Competent leadership does" (Park 2020). Then, at the end of May 2020, a group of eight policy scholars published a piece in *Global Policy* in which they note that "Arguing that Confucianism explains East Asia's success would be as implausible as the argument that Europe's and the United States' failures stem from their Christian roots; no serious study has yet offered evidence for such claims" (Pacheco Pardo et al. 2020). Notably, a serious study was published two months later linking Christian nationalism with various problematic behaviors in the context of the pandemic (Whitehead and Perry 2020).

It is hard to sustain an argument that Confucianism as a social movement contributes meaningfully to a causal explanation for East Asian successes in combatting COVID-19. It is easier to argue that values steeped into East Asian culture from Confucianism made East Asian societies more amenable to public health policies and practices that would stem the tide of the pandemic. This is an example of Confucianism as way-making, emphasizing implicit principles and practices rather than explicit forms. What is most relevant for the sake of interpreting Confucianism in the United States is that these values have been recognized at play in East Asia amidst the pandemic, connected with Confucianism, and at least in some quarters, admired. What remains unclear is the extent to which further exploration of Confucianism, let alone its adoption, might follow.



## 6. Conclusions

Confucianism, as a religious movement cast in the Protestant mold of identity and institution, barely registers in the United States. There are no reliable demographic data regarding the number of self-identifying Confucians in the U.S., which must be presumed to be vanishingly small, and none of the attempts to develop Confucian institutions have lasted or produced sustaining fruit. Moreover, political tensions between the United States and China make the idea of adopting an identity so closely tied to East Asian culture even less culturally palatable here. The question may legitimately be asked, then, whether an empirical study of Confucianism in the U.S. is worth the effort?

A counterquestion proves much more revealing: is a Protestantized Confucianism worth pursuing? There are advantages, to be sure, in adopting the dominant Protestant model, especially in terms of being interpretable as an option in the marketplace of religion. Yet the dynamics of that marketplace are shifting, in turn driving seismic shifts in the religious landscape in the U.S. (In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace 2019). The result is that spirituality in the United States is shifting from a model of inherited norms and forms of identity and institution to a model of exploration of and experimentation with the spiritual significance of everyday life (Ammerman 2013), which is to say styles of way-making. A non-Protestantized Confucianism as way-making may have a great deal to offer at such a moment, irreducible to the comprehensive categories of philosophy or religion, that both reflects and transforms its inheritance of Confucianism from East Asia.

It is precisely because Confucianism as way-making will not simply adopt the forms of its incarnation in East Asia that empirical observation of its emergence in the U.S. context will likely remain fraught for quite some time. Who and what are we to observe? How do we distinguish what is happening as Confucian or not? What counts as evidence of Confucianism and how do we measure its success or failure? Just as a great deal of dialectical engagement between theory and empirical study went into formulating measures of Confucianism in East Asia, a similar process will be necessary in the U.S. and the rest of the world to arrive at sound answers to these questions.

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