

Article

Religionizing and De-Religionizing Confucianism—Joseph Levenson’s Conceptual Framing in *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy*

Zhenhao Zhong *  and Chaoyong Zhao *

School of Foreign Languages, East China Normal University, Shanghai 200241, China

* Correspondence: joeee@stu.ecnu.edu.cn (Z.Z.); cyzhao@esp.ecnu.edu.cn (C.Z.)

Abstract

This article reconsiders Joseph Levenson’s *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (hereafter *Trilogy*) as a modern site for the classification of Confucianism within, against, and alongside the category of religion. Rather than revisiting the question of whether Confucianism “is” a religion, we ask how Levenson’s account makes Confucianism legible through a double movement of de-religionization and partial religionization. On the one hand, Levenson presents Confucianism as an ethical, political, and civilizational order rather than a religion in the doctrinal or ecclesiastical sense; on the other hand, his analysis repeatedly invokes forms of sacralized authority, symbolic centrality, and moral transcendence that complicate any simple secularization of the Confucian tradition. Through a close reading of Levenson’s conceptual vocabulary and historical framing, this article argues that his interpretation does not merely deny Confucianism religious status; it reveals the instability of the modern classificatory boundary between moral philosophy, civil religion, and religious formation. By treating Levenson not simply as an interpreter of Confucian China but also as a producer of modern categories, the article contributes to current debates on *rujia* (Confucian “school”, 儒家) and *rujiao* (Confucian “religion”, 儒教) and reflects more broadly on what becomes visible, and what is distorted, when Confucianism is examined through the conceptual toolkit of religious studies.

Keywords: Confucianism; Joseph Levenson; religionization; de-religionization; religious classification; *rujia* and *rujiao*



Academic Editors: Qiyong Guo and Vincent Goossaert

Received: 1 April 2026

Revised: 12 June 2026

Accepted: 20 June 2026

Published: 23 June 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

1. Introduction

Confucianism has long occupied an uneasy place in discussions of religion in Chinese intellectual history. It is often described as lacking the defining features commonly associated with religion: belief in transcendence, institutionalized worship, or doctrines of salvation; yet it has exercised a profound and enduring influence on Chinese social, political, and cultural life (Angle and Tiwald 2017, pp. 76–79; Fu 2024, pp. 12–13). Therefore, the problem lies not only in religious classification, such as *rujia* (Confucian “school”, 儒家) and *rujiao* (Confucian “religion”, 儒教), but also how we interpret the role of Confucianism in shaping common norms, ritual order and moral authority. We need to avoid putting it into the religious model that mainly comes from Western experience too early.

The debate on modern religious research shows that religion is not a neutral label or universal analytical category, but a historical concept. It is influenced by specific ideological traditions and institutional history (Smith 1990, pp. 68–72; Asad 1993, pp. 83–87;

Fitzgerald 1997, pp. 107–10). When scholars apply this category to different cultures, especially non-Western traditions, it often leads to tension rather than clear explanations. Confucianism is the most typical example. It is difficult to incorporate into the traditional religious definition. At the same time, we cannot simply reduce it to secular philosophy or moral teaching. If we do that, we leave out important parts of what it is. It has therefore been described, variously, as a moral teaching, a political ideology, a civil religion, and a cultural tradition, but none of these designations fully resolves the tension.

One of the most influential modern attempts to think through this difficulty appears in Joseph R. Levenson's (1920–1969) *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (hereafter *Trilogy*). Levenson, widely regarded as one of the major American historians of modern Chinese intellectual history in the mid-twentieth century, left a body of work whose impact far exceeded the brevity of his career (Huang 2018, pp. 4–5). The *Trilogy* has remained a landmark in modern interpretations of Confucianism, valued for its interpretive force but also debated for its strong emphasis on rupture and decline (Tian and Zhu 2004, pp. 9–11). In it, Levenson approached Confucianism less as a doctrinal religion than as an ethical and historical order that had long structured Chinese civilization (Levenson 1958, p. 146; 1965, p. 117). For him, the significance of Confucianism lay in its place at the moral center of “Confucian China”, where *xiushen* (修身)¹, *zhengtong* (正統)², and *chuancheng* (傳承)³ were closely bound together (Levenson 1958, pp. 46–50). Its “modern fate” emerged when this order encountered modern categories—religion, secularization, and ideology—that were poorly suited to its historical mode of operation. Later assessments have continued to return to the *Trilogy* precisely because it combines remarkable interpretive brilliance with a stark narrative of Confucianism's loss of living social force under modern conditions.

Levenson's account is often marked by a strong sense of rupture. Confucianism no longer appears there as a living and self-reproducing moral order, but as a tradition whose social vitality has been largely exhausted⁴ in the modern world (Levenson 1958, pp. 108–12). This judgment should be read against a broader view of modernity in which rationalization, specialization, and ideological transformation progressively weaken the older ethical frameworks that once gave civilizations their coherence. In this sense, Levenson's argument about the modern fate of Confucianism is not only a claim about China, but also part of a larger narrative about modern historical change. It is further shaped by his concern with the divided position of modern Chinese intellectuals⁵, suspended between attachment to inherited tradition and commitment to the categories and values of the modern West (Levenson 1958, pp. 82–85). That tension is central to his understanding of Confucianism's modern predicament.

Read in this light, Levenson's analysis is not simply an answer to the question of whether Confucianism “is” or “is not” a religion (Levenson 1958, pp. 11–15). Rather, it shows the tension that appears when scholars place Confucianism within classificatory frameworks that already assume religion is a separate social sphere. In these frameworks, religion is usually defined by belief, church-like institutions, or some form of transcendence. Confucianism does not fit these assumptions in any simple way. In this sense, the modern fate of Confucianism is not only a story of decline or marginalization. It is also a story of conceptual mismatch. The main problem does not lie in Confucianism itself. The problem lies in the categories that scholars use to explain it.

Levenson places strong emphasis on rupture. Later scholarship, however, has often qualified this view by drawing attention to longer histories of intellectual continuity. Such work has drawn attention to the persistence of *daotong* (道統)⁶, the endurance of *tianxia* (天下)⁷ imaginaries, and the continued effort of late imperial and modern Chinese thinkers to connect moral universality with civilizational self-understanding (Levenson 1958, pp. 174–78). Seen in this context, Levenson's account belongs to a broader

historiographical tension between discontinuity and continuity, a tension that remains central to the modern classification of Confucianism as religion, ethics, or civilization.

At the same time, Levenson's importance does not lie only in his rhetoric of decline. His work also identifies a deeper problem within modern Chinese thought: not simply the danger of national survival, but the experience of cultural and political marginalization in a world no longer organized around Chinese norms. What comes into view here is the predicament of a civilization whose moral centrality could no longer be taken for granted. In this sense, Levenson's claim that modern Chinese intellectuals never fully abandoned the ideal of *tianxia* matters not only for intellectual history, but also for the study of religion and moral order (Levenson 1958, pp. 52–56). It suggests that Confucianism's "modern fate" concerns not only the weakening of a tradition, but the loss and reconfiguration of the symbolic center that once sustained it.

Existing studies of Levenson have usually approached the *Trilogy* through several related questions: his thesis of rupture, his view of modern Chinese intellectual history, his account of nationalism and culturalism, and his elegiac narrative of Confucian decline. These discussions have clarified the power and the limits of Levenson's historiography. Yet they have paid less attention to another problem that runs through his language: how his account moves Confucianism across the boundary between religion and non-religion. In other words, previous work has often asked whether Levenson's view of Confucian decline is historically persuasive, but it has less often asked how his vocabulary produces Confucianism as an ethical, political, civilizational, and quasi-sacred formation.

Building on this insight, the present article reexamines the relationship between Confucianism and religion by shifting attention from doctrinal classification to historical and social function. Rather than asking whether Confucianism qualifies as a religion, it asks how Confucianism operated within Chinese society and why its mode of operation continues to resist stable classification in modern scholarship. This approach fits with broader work in religious studies that gives more attention to practice, social integration, and historical context than to formal belief or fixed institutional definitions (Bellah 1964, p. 366; C. Taylor 2007, p. 18; Lee 2024, pp. 6–7).

The main argument of this article is very clear: though Confucianism has not developed into a popular religion centered on transcendence or redemption, it still plays several roles that people usually associate with religion, as it has shaped ethical norms, ritual practices and a common view of history. Through these elements, it helps to build social order and collective meaning. In this way, Confucianism functioned in ways that were similar to religion in other settings, but it did not simply repeat those same religious forms. Its authority rested not in revelation or ecclesiastical structure, but in moral cultivation and participation in a historically grounded ethical world.

Methodologically, this study combines a historical and hermeneutical reading of Levenson's *Trilogy* with close textual analysis and comparative reflection on prevailing models of religion. It also treats Levenson not only as an interpreter of Confucian China, but as a producer of modern conceptual distinctions. In doing so, the article asks not only what Levenson makes visible about Confucianism, but also what his classificatory language leaves out or distorts.

The aim, then, is not simply to defend Levenson against later criticism, nor only to correct him by replacing his framework with contemporary theories of religion. It is to reread him through those later theories. Such a rereading treats the *Trilogy* as a text in which modern classificatory boundaries are actively formed. Levenson is important here not because he offers a final answer to whether Confucianism is a religion, but because his language shows how Confucianism could be de-religionized as ethics, civilization, and history while still being partially religionized through ritual order, moral authority, and

symbolic centrality. By revisiting Confucianism through the lens of function rather than status, this article seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions about the scope and limits of “religion” as an analytical category. Confucianism’s ambiguity, we suggest, should not be treated simply as a problem to be solved. It is more productively understood as a case that reveals the constraints of cross-cultural classification itself. Thus, this article does not simply defend Levenson, nor does it only correct him. We reread him through later theories of religion.

2. Literature Review: Levenson and the Problem of Religion as a Category

The question of whether Confucianism should be classified as a religion has long occupied a central place in both Sinology and the academic study of religion. While earlier scholarship often attempted to resolve the issue through definitional criteria, such as belief in transcendence, institutional worship, or soteriological doctrine, more recent studies have emphasized the historical and conceptual limits of applying the category of “religion” across cultural contexts (Y. Zhu 2017, p. 238; M. Zhu 2025, pp. 23–25; Jun Zhang 2026, pp. 12–15). Scholars now increasingly argue that Confucianism did not mainly work as an institutional religion. Instead, it worked as a normative system rooted in social life, political order, and ritual practice (Juzheng Zhang 2018, p. 8; Hahm 2025, pp. 257–62; Han 2026, p. 56). From this perspective, Confucian traditions shaped patterns of moral cultivation, governance, and collective identity without necessarily constituting a discrete sphere of religious belief. Such insights have encouraged scholars to revisit classical interpretations of Confucianism, including the influential work of Joseph R. Levenson, whose notion of “Confucian China” highlights the inseparability of ethical order, political authority, and historical consciousness in the formation of Chinese civilization (Levenson 1958, pp. 150–54; 1965, pp. 12–13). Contemporary research on Confucian revival, civil religion, and ritual practice has further reinforced the view that Confucianism operates primarily as a moral–cultural framework rather than a belief-centered religious institution (Chan 1996, pp. 42–44; Sun 2013, pp. 72–75; Billioud and Thoraval 2015, pp. 121–23). Against this background, revisiting Levenson’s analysis provides a useful starting point for reconsidering the problem of religion as a classificatory category in the study of Confucian traditions.

This body of scholarship is useful for the present article, but it also shows a gap. Studies of Confucianism and religion have often focused on whether Confucianism should be counted as religion, philosophy, ethics, civil religion, or cultural tradition. Studies of Levenson, by contrast, have tended to focus on his narrative of rupture, his interpretation of modernity, and his account of Confucianism’s decline. The connection between these two discussions has not been fully developed. What remains underexamined is how Levenson’s own conceptual vocabulary helps produce the very ambiguity that later scholars describe: Confucianism appears in his writing as neither doctrinal religion nor secular ethics, but as an ethical–political order with residual sacred weight.

2.1. *Confucian China and the Limits of Religious Classification*

Joseph Levenson’s engagement with Confucianism is not framed as a contribution to the definition of religion, yet his analysis repeatedly exposes the limits of applying the category of religion to the Chinese intellectual tradition. In Levenson’s *Trilogy*, he neither regards Confucianism as a belief system nor an institutionalized religion, but as an ethical and historical order, which builds social life through moral cultivation, political legitimacy and continuity with the past (Levenson 1958, pp. 34–39). This discussion does not implicitly deny the “religious” meaning of Confucianism, but refuses to interpret it with classification criteria centered on faith, transcendence or worship.

Levenson's concept of "Confucian China" refers to a form of civilization in which ethical norms are inseparable from political authority and historical consciousness (Levenson 2013a, pp. 12–15). Confucianism is not so much an independent religious field as a moral grammar that shapes and maintains social order (Wu 2014, p. 175). In this sense, its authority does not depend on the doctrine of redemption or faith in the transcendental realm, but on participating in an ethical world based on history (M. Hu 2010, p. 76). This structure is difficult to fit with modern mainstream religious models, because these models usually assume that there is a clear boundary between religious beliefs and secular social systems (Smith 1990, pp. 76–78; Rošker 2017, pp. 282–85).

In Levenson's discussion on the encounter of Confucianism and modernity, this classification tension is most obvious. In his opinion, the "modern fate" of Confucian China is not only the decline of tradition under the pressure of secularization (Levenson 2013b, pp. 23–26), but also a kind of ethical order that is disintegrated by a conceptual framework that cannot be explained by its own logic (Levenson 1965, pp. 83–87). When scholars use modern religious categories to measure Confucianism, it often seems incomplete. It seems to lack transcendence, organized worship, and a clear boundary between the sacred and the world (Xiao 2013, pp. 110–12). But these so-called omissions are not the historical defects of Confucianism itself (Zhao 2024, p. 201). On the contrary, they point to the mismatch between the analysis category and the tradition it wants to describe.

From this perspective, Levenson's work points to the later criticism of "religion" as a universal category. Scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Talal Asad argue that religion is not a neutral term. It is shaped by specific historical and institutional settings, and these settings influence what people recognize as religious life (Smith 1990, pp. 22–26; Asad 1993, pp. 34–39). Levenson does not discuss religion in exactly these terms. Even so, his analysis of Confucianism brings out the same kind of classificatory tension that Smith and Asad later describe. Confucianism resists religious classification not because it lacks normative or integrative force, but because the way it works does not match the conceptual structure built into modern religious discourse.

Rather than trying to resolve this tension, Levenson treats it as a sign of a broader problem in cross-cultural understanding. For him, the importance of Confucianism lies in its historical force as an ethical and social order, not in whether it fits external categories (Levenson 2013c, pp. 83–87). The difficulty of classifying Confucianism as a religion therefore tells us less about Confucianism itself than about the limits of the category of religion when it is applied outside the contexts in which it first took shape. This article therefore shifts the focus of Levenson studies. It does not treat the *Trilogy* only as a historical account of Confucian China's decline. Nor does it treat Levenson merely as a modernization theorist whose rupture thesis must be accepted or rejected. Instead, it reads him as a writer whose conceptual language participates in the modern classification of Confucianism. The contribution of this article lies in showing that Levenson's importance for the study of religion is not limited to what he says about Confucianism's decline. It also lies in how his language makes Confucianism visible as a formation suspended between religion and non-religion.

2.2. Modern Fate as Conceptual Crisis

In this rereading, Levenson's idea of Confucianism's "modern fate" marks not only a thesis about historical decline, but also a problem of conceptual classification. The *Trilogy* does not simply describe a tradition that has been modernized or secularized. It also shows how Confucianism becomes difficult to name once modern categories separate religion, ethics, politics, and culture into distinct domains. The crisis, therefore, is not only social

or political. It is also epistemological: Confucianism loses clarity when it is interpreted through a framework that treats religion as an independent and clearly bounded sphere.

This difficulty stems from the modern redefinition of religion itself. In this view, religion is often defined by belief, transcendence, and institutional separation from politics and ethics. Once this framework is in place, people begin to judge traditions by a fixed set of standards (Huang et al. 2025, pp. 3–5). These standards usually give priority to faith commitments, worship practices, and clear distinctions between the sacred and the secular (Yang 2011, p. 160). When Confucianism is examined through these lenses, it appears anomalous: neither fully religious nor adequately secular. Levenson’s analysis repeatedly emphasizes that Confucian authority historically derived from ethical cultivation and historical continuity rather than from revelation or doctrinal belief (Levenson 1958, pp. 112–15). The resulting tension is not accidental but structural, arising from a mismatch between the analytical category and the historical form of life it seeks to describe.

This tension gives substantive meaning to Confucianism’s “modern fate”. Rather than marking the decline of Confucianism as a social force, modernity introduces classificatory pressures that recast Confucianism as deficient or incomplete (Zheng 2000, pp. 29–33). In this respect, Levenson’s account anticipates later critiques of secularization narratives that equate modernity with the differentiation and marginalization of religion (Levenson 2013b, pp. 35–37). As Charles Taylor has argued, modernity reorganizes the conditions under which belief and moral order are understood, rather than simply eliminating religious forms (C. Taylor 2007, pp. 62–66). Confucianism makes these common narratives less stable. It shows that a broad moral order can continue to shape society without fitting modern ideas of what religion should look like.

Later scholarship has made this issue even clearer. Wilfred Smith famously questioned the treatment of “religion” as a fixed and universal object. He instead stressed lived traditions and historical practices (Smith 1990, p. 52). More recent scholars have made a similar point. They believe that “religion” is a category shaped by history, which develops in specific Western thought and institutional history (Asad 1993, p. 57; Sandal 2012, pp. 78–81; Nongbri 2013, p. 102). From this point of view, Confucianism does not resist religious classification because of the lack of normative or symbolic power, but because modern Western religious concepts are not applicable to China.

Levenson did not simply redefine Confucianism as a secret religion to solve this problem, nor did he simplify it into a secular moral philosophy (Levenson 2013c, pp. 18–20). On the contrary, he retained this tension and regarded it as the core feature of the encounter between Confucianism and modernity (Levenson 1965, pp. 278–79). Therefore, he pointed out that classification is not a neutral descriptive behavior. It is also a site where power works and where conceptual limits become visible (Levenson 2013a, pp. 61–64; 2013b, pp. 83–87). Confucianism’s “modern fate” thus emerges not as a narrative of loss, but as a sustained crisis of interpretation produced by the cross-cultural circulation of analytical categories.

Understanding this crisis as conceptual rather than substantive allows Confucianism’s ambiguity to become analytically productive. It shifts attention away from the question of whether Confucianism qualifies as a religion and toward the broader problem of how religion is defined, deployed, and limited as an analytical category (Juzheng Zhang 2018, p. 8). This reframing provides the basis for examining Confucianism in terms of social function and historical efficacy rather than religious status, a move that will guide the analysis in the following sections (Ye 2018, pp. 194–98).

3. Levenson's "Confucian China" and the Double Movement of Religion: A New Interpretive Perspective

Levenson does not simply put Confucianism outside religion, but he does not fully return it to religion either. The *Trilogy* moves between these two positions. On the one hand, Confucianism appears as an ethical, political, and civilizational order rather than a religion in the doctrinal or ecclesiastical sense. On the other hand, Levenson still describes it in ways that suggest symbolic centrality, sacralized authority, and a kind of moral elevation, so that it cannot be reduced to a purely secular philosophy. This chapter follows that tension. It begins by looking at how Levenson writes Confucianism into ethics, governance, and historical continuity, and then turns to the quasi-sacral elements that remain in his account of Confucian China.

In this article, the two terms need to be understood in a precise textual sense. "De-religionizing" does not mean that Levenson denies every sacred, ritual, or symbolic dimension of Confucianism. It refers to the way he moves Confucianism away from the modern markers of religion, especially theology, church, salvation, institutional worship, and a separate religious sphere. "Partial religionizing", by contrast, refers to the moments when his own vocabulary gives Confucianism a sacred-like weight through ritual, Heaven, moral authority, universal kingship, and symbolic centrality. The two terms therefore describe a tension within Levenson's language, not two separate historical stages.

3.1. Confucianism as Ethical, Political, and Civilizational Order

One of the most striking features of Levenson's interpretation is that he does not treat Confucianism as a religion in any ordinary modern sense. He is not primarily concerned with it as a system of belief, a mode of worship, or a tradition centered on salvation. Instead, what comes to the fore in his account is Confucianism as an ethical order, a political tradition, and a civilizational framework. In the *Trilogy*, Confucianism appears less as a matter of faith than as a structure through which social life, historical continuity, and moral authority were organized (Levenson 1958, 1965).

This is significant because it quietly shifts the terms on which Confucianism is understood. Once Confucianism is placed in the category of ethics, governance and civilization, it is difficult to be simply classified into the category of modern religion. Its authority does not come from doctrine or church-style organization, but from its guiding behavior, maintaining the hierarchy and giving order to the common historical world. In Levenson's writings, Confucianism is no longer just regarded as a tradition of belief, but more like a civilized grammar (Levenson 1958, pp. 133–36). This transformation does not mean that the seriousness or depth of Confucianism has been reduced, but it shows that its power plays a role in a different way, which can be seen in Levenson's own wording in the General Preface:

Confucianism moving from "objective" to "subjective" significance. As the world changed, the world view lost its wholeness and contemporary relevance. Confucianists had always been historicalminded; now they became historical themselves. Modern men could still voice Confucian thoughts, but the complexity of a Confucian system was gone. (Levenson 1968, p. x)

He describes the modern transformation of Confucianism as a movement from "objective" to "subjective" significance and adds that the Confucian "world view lost its wholeness" under modern conditions. This sentence is important because Levenson does not describe Confucianism's crisis as the decline of theology, church, or salvation. He describes it as the loss of a whole moral and historical world. The term "world view" places Confucianism within a civilizational order, while the loss of wholeness points to the collapse of the social context that once made this order effective. In this sense, Levenson's de-religionizing move

is a historical relocation: Confucianism is not treated as a failed religion, but as a once-living normative center that becomes an object of historical memory.

Recent academic research has further clarified this point. Some studies describe Confucian ethics as a profound relational ethics. They emphasize a “way to get along with others”, which stems from patterned interpersonal relationships, not from repentant promises or transcendent beliefs (Stowers 2007, pp. 21–23; Sandal 2012, pp. 75–77; Angle and Tiwald 2017, pp. 135–38). From this perspective, the power of Confucianism does not depend on the content of a person’s public declaration. It depends on how a person lives within family relations, social life, ritual practice, and moral self-cultivation (Bai 2011, pp. 69–70). This is useful for reading Levenson, because it helps explain how Confucianism can exercise deep normative power without taking the form of a belief-centered religion.

A related line of argument appears in recent discussions of *pre-Qin thought* (先秦思想)⁸ on rule by virtue. Here, morality is understood as assuming a role that, in other contexts, might be associated with religion, yet without becoming religion in any formal institutional sense (Li 2024). Moral cultivation, political legitimacy, and social order are thus closely intertwined. This is very close to what Levenson identifies in Confucian China (Levenson 2013c, pp. 92–96). What he describes is neither a failed religion nor a merely secular philosophy, but a moral–political formation whose authority was woven into the fabric of historical life.

Seen in this light, Levenson’s reading de-religionizes Confucianism in a specific sense. He does not deny its importance, symbolic force, or historical reach; rather, he relocates them (Levenson 1958, pp. 71–76). These qualities are grounded in ritual life, ethical hierarchy, historical memory, and political order rather than in a separate religious sphere (Levenson 1965, pp. 22–24). Confucianism thus emerges as something broader than philosophy yet less clearly bounded than religion. It stands at the center of civilization, yet it still resists classification within the conceptual categories that modern religious studies often take for granted. Levenson makes this relocation even clearer when he explains why *Monarchical Decay*⁹ is central. He calls its focus an “institutional” theme and states that the Confucian amateur ideal was “institutionalized as well as conceptualized”:

As studies of intellectual history, these volumes, even when they seem most rarified, at least imply the social context. *Monarchical Decay*, with its “institutional” theme, is properly the centerpiece. The “amateur ideal”, so prominent a motif in Confucian China and in *Intellectual Continuity*¹⁰, was institutionalized as well as conceptualized. (Levenson 1968, p. xi)

This language shows that Confucianism, for Levenson, is not a detachable creed that can remain unchanged after the collapse of imperial institutions. It is bound to the bureaucratic monarchy, to elite cultural practice, and to the social form in which moral authority was exercised. The point is therefore not that Confucianism becomes merely secular. Rather, Levenson moves it away from religion as a separate institution and places it within the larger structure of imperial civilization.

At the same time, this is not the whole story. To describe Confucianism as ethical and civilizational does not mean that it is simply secular. Levenson still attributes to it a distinctive kind of gravity, one that exceeds the domain of ordinary moral philosophy (Levenson 2013b, pp. 62–66). For this reason, his de-religionization of Confucianism is never complete. Even as he moves it away from religion in the doctrinal sense, he continues to present it as a tradition of exceptional moral and symbolic centrality.

3.2. Sacralized Authority, Symbolic Centrality, and Moral Elevation

Yet Levenson does not simply recast Confucianism as an ethical and political tradition. Even as he distances it from religion in the ordinary modern sense, he continues to describe it in terms that lend it unusual weight and elevation. In the *Trilogy*, Confucianism is not merely a body of moral teaching or a set of social norms. It occupies a central place in the symbolic life of “Confucian China” (Levenson 1958, pp. 212–15). It authorizes, orients, and gives coherence to an entire historical world. In this respect, Levenson’s account still leaves room for something close to sacralization, even if he never names it as such.

This is where Levenson’s reading becomes more complex. On the one hand, he does not treat Confucianism as a religion built on belief, salvation, or organized worship. On the other hand, he did not simplify it into a set of codes of conduct. In his discussion, Confucianism is close to the core position of Chinese civilization (Levenson 2013b, pp. 23–25). It is not one of the many discourses, but a tradition with extraordinary normative power. In some respects, Levenson even believes that Confucianism maintains a complete moral world (Levenson 1958, pp. 57–59). That kind of central place is hard to explain in fully secular terms. The other side of the double movement appears in Levenson’s discussion of imperial ritual:

Just as the seemingly absolute dynastic claim on loyalty may well have been ambiguous, so even the famous ceremony of prostration before the emperor, the *k’ou-t’ou* (kow-tow) cannot be viewed simply as “the great symbol of total submission” of the Confucian bureaucracy. The gesture dramatized a Confucian conception of imperial power, a conception that went so far beyond Legalist monarchy’s own requirements that it hints, paradoxically, at a submission far from total. This act of abject deference identified a monarch infinitely high because his mandate of Heaven, his *T’ien-ming*, made him Vicar of Heaven on earth. (Levenson 1968, vol. II, p. 67)

He argues that the kowtow cannot be understood only as a “symbol of total submission”. The ritual also stages a Confucian conception of imperial power. Levenson then links this ritual elevation to the Mandate of Heaven and describes the emperor as “Vicar of Heaven on earth”. These phrases do not turn Confucianism into a church religion or a doctrine of salvation. Yet they do show that Confucian political order receives a sacred-like form in Levenson’s account. Ritual submission, Heaven, mandate, and universal kingship give Confucianism more than ordinary political or ethical weight.

Confucian sacrificial systems should not be understood as formal ceremony alone. They show that ritual practice can produce emotional forms of governance and social cohesion. In this way, ritual shapes the symbolic and affective life of a community, rather than simply reflecting political order from the outside (Stewart and Strathern 2014). This point is useful here because it suggests that ritual can carry forms of authority that are not simply religious and not simply secular either. A similar pattern appears in Levenson’s account. Even when he presents Confucianism as ethical and civilizational, he still leaves room for a ritual depth that gives it more weight than ordinary philosophy (Levenson 2013b, pp. 111–14).

The comparative study of Neo-Confucian self-cultivation and religious spirituality provides another useful perspective. These studies do not erase the differences between the traditions they compare. However, they show that Confucian self-cultivation can support forms such as reflection, moral orientation and inner transformation, which are similar to spiritual practice (Angle and Tiwald 2017; Fu 2024). This helps to explain why Levenson’s discourse sometimes seems to go beyond the scope of political ethics. In the *Trilogy*, Confucianism contains a kind of moral seriousness and symbolic nobility, which can be regarded at least to some extent as a realm beyond the world (Levenson 1958, pp. 85–87).

What we see here is not a simple contradiction. It should be understood as a double movement in Levenson's vocabulary. He first moves Confucianism away from religion understood as doctrine, church, or salvation by describing it through ethics, governance, civilization, and historical continuity. Yet his own language also gives Confucianism a different kind of sacred weight. This weight appears in his treatment of ritual, Heaven, moral authority, universal kingship, and symbolic centrality. Confucianism is therefore not religionized as a church or creed. It is partially religionized as an immanent moral-symbolic order. This sacredness does not exist in the form of theology, church, or dogma, but in the form of symbolic authority, ritual depth, and moral elevation (Y. Zhu 2017, pp. 238–39). At the same time, Levenson does not sacralize imperial power without qualification. The Mandate of Heaven also makes the ruler morally accountable:

This Confucian implication included, first, in its identification of the Confucianists' monarch with the world's monarch, recognition of the universal supreme value of Chinese culture (a characteristically Confucian, not a monarchical tenet). And it included, second, in the very "mandate" conception which justified monopoly of power and the appropriate gesture of abasement, a reminder of the monarch's moral responsibility. The allegiance of "tributary states" to Chinese emperors enhanced the imperial prestige—but in a cautionary Confucian manner. For such acceptance of Chinese suzerainty, for the very reason that it often went unenforced by military strength, could be understood as a dramatization of "dominion through virtue", which Confucianism conferred on no dynastic line as an inalienable right. (Levenson 1968, vol. II, p. 68)

When he discusses tributary allegiance, he describes it as "dominion through virtue" rather than simple domination by force. This qualification is central to the word "partial". Confucianism is religionized in Levenson's language only as an immanent moral-symbolic order. Its sacredness does not rest on revelation, ecclesiastical authority, or salvation. It appears through ritualized hierarchy, moral evaluation, and the symbolic relation between Heaven, ruler, and world.

From this perspective, Levenson's "Confucian China" occupies an unstable zone between religion and non-religion. It is not a revived religion, nor is it a flattened secular order. This *Trilogy* reveals a tradition that cannot be fully covered by modern categories. Confucianism is presented as a moral world that has gradually been interpreted in increasingly non-religious terms, yet still retains certain religious traces. This unstable middle position leads to the next question: Why has Confucianism not become a religion in the modern sense, even though it still plays the function that people usually think to be related to religion?

4. Levenson's Framework and Confucianism's Resistance to Religious Classification

This section does not move away from Levenson to offer a general survey of whether Confucianism is a religion. Rather, it uses that debate to clarify why Confucianism appears in Levenson's *Trilogy* as difficult to classify. The question is not simply whether Confucianism possesses belief, worship, or salvation. It is how Levenson distinguishes Confucianism from traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity, and how this distinction supports his larger account of Confucian China as an immanent moral-political order.

The view that Confucianism is not a religion has been around for a long time in the academic circles of the West and China, and it is constantly controversial. This view does not come from a single theory, but comes from people's repeated attempts to take religion as an analytical category to interpret a tradition that is inconsistent with the mainstream religious organizational model (Smith 1990, p. 77; Rošker 2017, pp. 283–84;

Juzheng Zhang 2018. p. 9). Early Western observers had already noticed this problem. Max Weber offers a famous example. He described Confucianism as an ethical rationalism whose goal is to adapt to the real world, not religious salvation. He also argued that Confucianism lacks the unique tension with the world of religions characterized by transcendence that he sees (Weber 1951, pp. 37–40). Many scholars later criticized Weber's interpretation. Even so, his explanation still lays the foundation for a debate that still influences the modern academic community.

Later studies further supported the view that Confucianism does not conform to the religious model mainly based on faith or redemption. Scholars such as Fingarette believe that Confucianism is best understood as a moral and etiquette system rooted in social relations, rather than a religion based on faith or doctrine (Fingarette 1972, pp. 32–35). From this perspective, Confucian etiquette does not point to the worship of gods beyond the world (Fukuyama 1995, pp. 25–27), but to the practice of shaping ethical tendencies and maintaining social harmony (Wang 2026, pp. 18–19). In this sense, the normative power of Confucianism works through the inherent moral order, rather than resorting to an independent sanctuary.

From the institutional level, Confucianism is also different from what people usually call religious traditions. It did not develop an independent class of clerics, an organizational structure similar to the church, nor did it form a clear and independent group of believers. On the contrary, Confucianism was spread through education, subject examination system and public services (Yang 2011, p. 160). As Benjamin Schwartz pointed out, Confucianism, as a broad cultural and ethical framework, shapes government and daily life, so there is little room for religion to appear as an independent field (Schwartz 1985, pp. 55–57). In this sense, the authority of Confucianism comes from its deep roots in the country and society, not from its institutional independence.

Levenson's own comparison of Confucianism with Buddhism, Taoism, and Taiping Christianity gives this point a more specific textual basis. In his discussion of the Taiping challenge, he argues that Buddhism and Taoism were not as drastic a break with Confucianism as Christianity, because they had a wide "extra-rebellious existence" in "normal" China. Taiping Christianity, by contrast, was different "in kind", since it existed in China mainly as a "cultural concomitant of violence" (Levenson 1968, vol. II, p. 87). The crucial contrast appears in his formulation that Taiping monarchy was based on "a transcendental religious conception", whereas "Immanent virtue, not transcendental power, was the Confucian ideal for monarchy" (ibid., p. 88). This sentence is central to Levenson's framework. Confucianism resists religious classification not because it lacks normative force, but because its authority is immanent, ethical, and political rather than transcendental and salvific.

When we compare Confucianism with Buddhism and Taoism in the Chinese context, this is clearer. Both Buddhism and Taoism have developed organized religious institutions, etiquette experts, and salvation narratives that explore the ultimate meaning and redemption (Zheng 2000, pp. 29–32). In contrast, Confucianism has always focused on the moral cultivation of the present world (Xiao 2013, p. 112). As Rodney Taylor argued, Confucian self-cultivation emphasizes moral transformation through social roles, rather than avoiding the world or uniting with the principle of transcendence (R. L. Taylor 1990, pp. 73–78). This orientation helps to explain why Confucianism, despite its far-reaching and lasting influence, has failed to become a popular religion (Hill 2006, pp. 7–9; S. Hu 2007, pp. 142–45; Li 2024, pp. 11–14).

These comparisons are used here not to replace Levenson's analysis with a general typology of Chinese traditions, but to make clearer the distinction already present in his own text. Levenson's contrast between Confucian immanence and Taiping transcendental

power shows why Confucianism, in his account, cannot be approached simply through the model of organized religion. It is not outside the sphere of moral seriousness or symbolic authority. Rather, it operates through the this-worldly structures of virtue, bureaucracy, ritual, and political responsibility.

Modern academic research has made this problem more complicated, which questions whether religion is an appropriate category of Confucianism. Some scholars believe that calling Confucianism a religion is to impose Western concepts on a non-Western tradition. Robert Campany and other religious historians warned people not to regard religion as a universal category. They pointed out that traditions such as Confucianism challenge common assumptions about faith, worship and sanctity (Campany 2003, pp. 291–96). From this perspective, it is not uncommon for Confucianism to be difficult to classify as religion. It reflects the historical limitations of the religious category itself.

At the same time, trying to redefine Confucianism as a “civil religion” or “implicit religion” does not completely solve the problem. These methods do highlight the social and integrated functions of Confucianism, but they may also blur the specific way in which Confucian ethics, etiquette and political order develop together within Chinese history (Tian and Zhu 2004, pp. 8–12). As Tu pointed out, Confucianism is a kind of “present-world spirit”. It does not rely on the belief in transcendence, but still pays deep attention to the moral meaning and the well-being of mankind (Tu 1985, pp. 27–28). For this reason, simply calling it a religion may cover up important differences in its structure and orientation.

To understand why Confucianism is not a religion, we need to examine its ethical core, its status in the system and its historical inheritance. Confucianism has not failed to become a religion. On the contrary, Confucianism has embarked on a different path, on which moral cultivation, etiquette practice and political responsibility constitute a unified order (Huang 2018, pp. 5–7). Therefore, Confucianism is difficult to be classified as a religion. Rather than the problem of Confucianism itself, it is caused by the limitations of modern analysis. This leads to the next section, which will discuss how Confucianism continues to perform the social and integration functions that are usually associated with religion.

5. Levenson’s Confucianism Beyond Religion: Moral Order and Integrative Force

If Confucianism did not develop in the usual religious form, we still need to explain why it is so important in history. For centuries, Confucianism has shaped the ethical norms, ritual practices, social hierarchy and political legitimacy of Chinese society (Cai 2014, pp. 160–62). This far-reaching influence leads to a fundamental question: how can Confucianism have such a powerful integration force without adopting the institutionalized and doctrinalized forms that people usually associate with religion?

An effective way to solve this problem is to shift from classification to function. Classical sociology has long believed that the function of religion is far more than expressing faith or organizing worship activities. It can also create social cohesion, symbolize order and share meaning. Durkheim explained this very clearly. He described religion as a system of practice and characterization, which distinguishes between the sacred and the secular and unites people into a moral community (Durkheim 1995, pp. 72–77). Those points can be used to make explicit a functional dimension that is already present in the *Trilogy*: Confucianism could integrate moral order, ritual practice, political legitimacy, and historical memory without becoming a church-like or salvation-centered religion. In this sense, the following discussion asks how later theories of religion help us describe more precisely what Levenson had already identified in historical terms. From this perspective,

a tradition can have religious power without theology or transcendence. What matters is whether it can build a normative order and collective identity.

As we have mentioned before, Levenson's discussion of the kowtow offers a concrete historical example of this kind of integrative force. He cautions that the rite should not be viewed only as "the great symbol of total submission". Rather, it "dramatized a Confucian conception of imperial power" (Levenson 1968, vol. II, p. 66). This formulation is close to the functional issue raised by Durkheim, but it remains historically specific. The ritual does not merely express private belief. It organizes a moral and political world in visible form. Levenson later describes tributary allegiance as a dramatization of "dominion through virtue", a form of authority that Confucianism did not grant to any dynasty as an inalienable right (ibid., p. 68). The point, then, is not that Confucianism is simply a religion in Durkheimian terms. It is that Levenson's own examples show how Confucian ritual and political symbolism could perform integrative work without becoming theology or church.

Confucianism is a powerful example of this view. Confucian *li* (禮)¹¹ does not mainly refer to the worship of transcendent public gods; rather, it serves to regulate social relations and guide ethical behavior (Wu 2014, p. 175). Herbert Fingarette made a famous explanation of this point of view. He believes that etiquette transforms daily social behavior into a far-reaching field, which can be described as "the world is sacred" (Fingarette 1972, p. 67). In Confucian practice, the sacred does not exist in an independent metaphysical field, but is reflected through patterned ethical relationships. Daily behaviors such as filial piety, etiquette norms and moral cultivation are all normative, which is very close to the sacred level of social life defined by Durkheim.

Levenson's own contrast between Confucianism and transcendental monarchy helps keep this argument within his framework. He argues that literati Confucianism "was committed unequivocally to immanence" and that the Mandate of Heaven "made rulers legitimate and committed them to virtue (not power), to the end of harmony (not creative change)" (Levenson 1968, vol. II, pp. 91–92). This means that Confucian political authority was not grounded in transcendental power. It was grounded in immanent virtue, moral responsibility, and the maintenance of harmony. Confucian *li*, in this reading, is not sacred because it points to an independent supernatural realm. It is sacred-like because it makes moral hierarchy, political responsibility, and social order visible within the world.

This interpretation is also in line with Tu's description of Confucianism, that is, Confucianism is a "present spirit based on the transformation of moral self" (Tu 1985, p. 82). From this point of view, the transcendence of Confucianism is not metaphysical, but ethical. The cultivation of *ren* (仁)¹² and the improvement of etiquette norms have built a moral vision and placed individuals in a lasting civilized order. Confucian practice does not lead people to supernatural salvation, but gives them meaning by placing them in a world of moral order with a long history.

When we read Confucianism in combination with Robert Bellah's concept of "civil religion", the integrated role of Confucianism is clearer. Bellah believes that society will create a symbolic system to give collective ideals, historical memory and moral commitment sacred value. In this way, these systems can perform a function similar to institutionalized religion (Bellah 1967, pp. 4–8). Bellah developed this model in the context of the United States, but it still provides a useful comparative perspective. Historically, Confucianism has given sacred meaning to ethical hierarchy, political legitimacy and cultural continuity without the establishment of independent religious institutions. Its etiquette, classics and moral models carry the symbolic authority shared in society.

At the same time, Confucianism does not fit civil religion theory in a simple way. Bellah's model still assumes some distinction between the religious and the secular. Con-

Confucianism did not clearly work through that distinction. In the Confucian tradition, ethical cultivation, governance, and ritual practice formed one connected normative order (Bai 2011, pp. 69–70). As Rodney Taylor argues, Confucian religiosity appears through an “ultimate concern” with moral selfhood and social harmony, not through belief-centered structures (R. L. Taylor 1990, pp. 72–75). For this reason, the integrative force of Confucianism does not come only from giving sacred value to the state. It comes from placing moral meaning throughout social life and its institutions.

When we look at Confucianism through these functional and sociological approaches, its historical force no longer seems strange. The fact that it lacked a church-like organization or a doctrine of salvation does not mean it could not produce sacred-like normativity. Instead, Confucianism shows a form of moral integration in which ethical practice itself becomes the place where symbolic authority is produced (Juzheng Zhang 2018, p. 9). The sacred is enacted in practice rather than directed toward an object of worship. Transcendence is expressed in ethical life rather than in metaphysical doctrine (Huang 2018, pp. 12–15).

This functional reading does not mean that Confucianism should simply be renamed a religion. Critics of the category of religion have made this point clearly. Functional similarity does not mean conceptual identity (Asad 1993, pp. 37–39; Nongbri 2013, pp. 58–60). So when we say that Confucianism performed integrative roles often linked with religion, we are not redefining it as a religion. We are showing the limits of sharp binaries that treat religion and ethics as fully separate spheres.

In this sense, the lasting ambiguity of Confucianism is analytically useful. This shows that even if it does not meet modern people’s expectations of religion, tradition can integrate moral order, etiquette and public practice and collective meaning. This perspective helps us look at Confucianism in a different way. It is not simply a “non-religious” case, but a historically self-consistent ethical and symbolic tradition.

6. Modern Fate Revisited: Secularization and the Problem of Classification

It is more meaningful when we interpret Levenson’s views on Confucianism’s “modern fate” with the current debate on secularization and religious classification. Modernity not only challenges Confucianism from the outside, but also changes people’s understanding, interpretation and classification of traditional conceptual rules. In this sense, the fate of Confucianism is inseparable from the rise of a new epistemological framework that redraws the boundaries between religion, ethics, and culture (Levenson 1965, pp. 72–76).

Classical secularization theory often assumes that modernization leads to the separation of social spheres and to the decline of religious authority. But Talal Asad and Charles Taylor both show that secularization is not only a social process. It is also a change in the conceptual language through which people understand belief, normativity, and legitimacy (Asad 1993, p. 37; C. Taylor 2007, pp. 82–84). Confucianism creates a special difficulty in this context. Its weaker position in modern discourse does not simply come from a loss of social function. It also comes from the difficulty of placing an immanent ethical order into a conceptual scheme that treats religion as a separate and bounded sphere.

This problem becomes especially clear in the many labels that modern scholars have used for Confucianism. Some call it philosophy. Some call it ethics, civil religion, political ideology, cultural tradition, or spirituality (Bell 2006, pp. 32–35; Lazenby 2010, pp. 473–75). The large number of labels does not only show disagreement among scholars. It also shows a deeper instability in the categories themselves. As Brent Nongbri argues, the expectation that traditions must be sorted into religion or non-religion is historical, not natural or nec-

essary (Nongbri 2013, pp. 17–21). In this sense, the ambiguity of Confucianism reveals the limits of classificatory binaries shaped by modern Western intellectual history.

This instability in modern labels brings the discussion back to Levenson's diagnosis of Confucianism's modern fate. His account can be read as an early sign of later critiques of conceptual universality. From this angle, Levenson's diagnosis of Confucianism's modern fate can be read as an early sign of later critiques of conceptual universality. He does not simply treat Confucianism as deficient when compared with religion. Instead, his analysis points to the epistemic conditions that make Confucianism appear anomalous. Confucianism seems difficult to describe, not because it lacks symbolic or normative force, but because the way it works resists translation into categories built on assumptions foreign to its historical formation (Levenson 1958, pp. 51–53).

A return to Confucianism's modern fate also makes standard stories of secularization more complicated. Confucian ethical norms, ritual forms, and cultural values did not simply disappear in the modern period. They were reframed, redistributed, and selectively reinterpreted (Zheng 2000, pp. 31–34). Robert Bellah's theory of religious evolution is quite inspiring here. Bellah believes that tradition does not follow a simple decline trajectory, but will undergo profound changes (Bellah 1964, p. 363). Therefore, the persistence of Confucianism in social and cultural practice challenges any view that regards secularization as the simple extinction of normative traditions.

From this perspective, the modern fate of Confucianism should be understood as a continuous classification problem caused by conceptual restructuring. Modern categories do not only describe tradition from the outside, but also actively shape the area where tradition can be understood. Therefore, the ambiguity of Confucianism has analytical value (Sorensen and Nielsen 2018, pp. 225–27). It reveals the instability of religion as a universal category, and shows why it is necessary to use a historically sensitive framework instead of a rigid classification model to study cross-cultural traditions.

Confucianism's encounter with modernity, then, should not be read as a narrative of absence or failure. It represents a site at which the limits of conceptual translation and the historical contingency of analytical categories become visible. The question is no longer whether Confucianism is a religion, but what its persistent indeterminacy reveals about the categories through which religion itself is understood.

7. Conclusions: Confucianism and the Limits of Religious Classification

The longstanding difficulty of situating Confucianism within modern discussions of religion reveals less about Confucianism itself than about the conceptual frameworks through which religion is defined and applied. As this study has shown, Confucianism did not develop as a religion in the conventional sense characterized by belief-centered doctrines, institutionalized worship, or transcendence-oriented soteriology. Yet its historical role as an ethical, ritual, and social order demands explanation beyond classificatory absence.

By revisiting Joseph Levenson's formulation of Confucianism's "modern fate", we have argued that the ambiguity surrounding Confucianism's religious status should be understood not only as a problem in Confucian studies, but also as a problem in Levenson's own conceptual language. The point is not simply that Confucianism does not fit modern Western definitions of religion. The more specific point is that Levenson's *Trilogy* helps produce this ambiguity by moving Confucianism in two directions at once. It de-religionizes Confucianism by relocating it from theology, church, salvation, and institutional worship into the language of ethics, civilization, monarchy, and historical continuity. At the same time, it partially religionizes Confucianism through the language of Heaven, ritual order, moral authority, universal kingship, and symbolic centrality.

Also, this reading changes how we understand Levenson. He should not be read only as a historian of Confucian decline, nor only as a representative of a rupture-centered view of modern Chinese intellectual history; he should be read as a writer whose conceptual vocabulary reveals how modern categories classify, translate, and unsettle Chinese traditions. This article therefore does not simply defend Levenson against later criticism, nor does it merely correct him from the standpoint of contemporary religious studies. It rereads him through later theories of religion in order to show that the value of the *Trilogy* lies not only in its historical narrative, but also in the classificatory tension that its own language makes visible.

This point also marks the limit of Levenson's "Confucian China". His account is centered on elite intellectual history, bureaucratic monarchy, and the decline of Confucianism as a civilizational framework. It does not fully address other religious formations that shaped Chinese life outside this Confucian-centered narrative. In this respect, the later emergence of Daoist Studies, especially in the work of Kristofer Schipper, may be noted as an important counterpoint. By foregrounding Daoist ritual, bodily practice, local religious life, and the Daoist canon, this scholarship makes visible dimensions of Chinese religious history that Levenson's framework could not fully capture (Schipper 1993). The aim of this article, however, is not to replace "Confucian China" with "Daoist China," or to turn Levenson into a theorist of Chinese religion in general. It is more limited and, for that reason, more precise. The article shows that Levenson's importance for religious studies lies in the instability of his own categories. His *Trilogy* allows us to see Confucianism not as a simple anomaly to be included in or excluded from religion, but as a case through which the boundary between religion, ethics, civilization, and political order is made and remade.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Z.Z. and C.Z.; methodology, Z.Z.; validation, Z.Z. and C.Z.; writing—original draft preparation, Z.Z.; writing—review and editing, Z.Z. and C.Z.; supervision, C.Z.; project administration, Z.Z. and C.Z.; funding acquisition, Z.Z. and C.Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by [Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities] grant number [No. YBNLTS2025-050], and [Key Project of the National Language Commission of China] grant number [No. ZDI145-144].

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ *xiushen* (修身) literally means "cultivating the self". In Confucian discourse, it refers to moral self-cultivation through ethical discipline, ritual practice, and the refinement of character.
- ² *zhengtong* (正統) literally means "orthodox succession" or "legitimate lineage". In political and intellectual history, it often refers to rightful rule or political legitimacy grounded in an accepted moral-historical order.
- ³ *chuancheng* (傳承) refers to continuity and transmission, that is, the persistence and intergenerational passing down of moral, cultural, and historical forms.
- ⁴ One influential later summary of Levenson's position describes Confucianism as surviving in modernity only with a "museum-like value", that is, as an object of historical memory rather than a living normative order. This formulation usefully captures the sharpness of Levenson's rupture thesis, even if it somewhat condenses the complexity of his historical argument.
- ⁵ This tension has often been described in terms of a split between attachment to "history" and commitment to "value", where "history" refers to the inherited world of Chinese tradition and "value" increasingly points to the normative claims associated with modern Western civilization.

- ⁶ *daotong* (道統), “orthodox transmission of the Way”, refers to the normative continuity of Confucian teaching across generations.
- ⁷ *tianxia* (天下), “all under Heaven”, designates a universal moral–political order that exceeds the territorial logic of the modern nation-state.
- ⁸ *pre-Qin thought* (先秦思想): Chinese intellectual traditions before the Qin dynasty, especially the major schools of thought that emerged during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods.
- ⁹ *Monarchical Decay*: Volume Two of the *Trilogy*, also known as *The Problem of Monarchical Decay*.
- ¹⁰ *Intellectual Continuity*: Volume One of the *Trilogy*, also known as *The Problem of Intellectual Continuity*.
- ¹¹ *li* (禮) denotes the patterned practices through which Confucian moral order takes social form. It includes ceremonial rites, but also everyday norms of conduct, hierarchy, and self-discipline. For this reason, *li* is central to understanding Confucianism as an ethical and civilizational order rather than merely a system of belief.
- ¹² *ren* (仁): a central Confucian concept usually translated as “humaneness” or “benevolence”, referring to the moral quality of caring for others in human relationships.

References

- Angle, Stephen C., and Justin Tiwald. 2017. *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bai, Yuxiao 白欲曉. 2011. ‘Rujiao’: Zhongguo xiandai sixiang zhong de guannian puxi “儒教”: 中國現代思想中的觀念譜系 [“Confucianism”: A Conceptual Genealogy in Modern Chinese Thought]. *Fujian Luntan (Renwen Shehui Kexueban)* 福建論壇 (人文社會科學版) [Fujian Tribune (Humanities and Social Sciences)] 3: 69–72.
- Bell, Catherine. 2006. Paradigms Behind (and Before) the Modern Concept of Religion. *History and Theory* 45: 27–46. [CrossRef]
- Bellah, Robert N. 1964. Religious Evolution. *American Sociological Review* 29: 358–74. [CrossRef]
- Bellah, Robert N. 1967. Civil Religion in America. *Daedalus* 96: 1–21.
- Billioud, Sébastien, and Joël Thoraval. 2015. *The Sage and the People: The Confucian Revival in China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cai, Zhidong 蔡志棟. 2014. Xiaodao de xiandai mingyun ji qi zhuanhua—Dui Zhongguo xiandai sixiangshi de jianlue kaocha 孝道的現代命運及其轉化——對中國現代思想史的簡略考察 [The Modern Fate of Filial Piety and Its Transformation: A Brief Study of Modern Chinese Intellectual History]. *Qinghai Shehui Kexue* 青海社會科學 [Qinghai Social Sciences] 3: 160–67. [CrossRef]
- Campany, Robert Ford. 2003. On the Very Idea of Religions (In the Modern West and in Early Medieval China). *History of Religions* 42: 287–319. [CrossRef]
- Chan, Adrian. 1996. Confucianism and Development in East Asia. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 26: 28–45. [CrossRef]
- Durkheim, Émile. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: Free Press.
- Fingarette, Herbert. 1972. *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy. 1997. A Critique of “Religion” as a Cross-Cultural Category. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 9: 91–110. [CrossRef]
- Fu, Amy Yu. 2024. Wanwuyiti and Finding God in All Things: A Comparative Study between Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation and Ignatian Spirituality. *Religions* 15: 521. [CrossRef]
- Fukuyama, Francis. 1995. Confucianism and Democracy. *Journal of Democracy* 6: 20–33. [CrossRef]
- Hahm, Chaihark. 2025. Law, Culture, and the Politics of Confucianism. *Columbia Journal of Asian Law* 16: 254–96. [CrossRef]
- Han, Yanli 韓燕麗. 2026. Rujia meide lunli de zhengchengxing yu goujian Zhongguo lunli de zizhu zhishi tixi—Jiyu san zhong yanjiu fanshi de taolun 儒家美德倫理的證成性與構建中國倫理學自主知識體系——基於三種研究範式的討論 [The Justificatory Character of Confucian Virtue Ethics and the Construction of an Autonomous Chinese Ethical Knowledge System: A Discussion Based on Three Research Paradigms]. *Kongzi Yanjiu* 孔子研究 [Confucius Studies] 1: 53–60, 158.
- Hill, John S. 2006. Confucianism and the Art of Chinese Management. *Journal of Asia Business Studies* 1: 1–9. [CrossRef]
- Hu, Miaosen 胡淼森. 2010. Mozhat shi de wange beihou—Levensen ‘Rujiao Zhongguo ji qi xiandai mingyun’ de shenceng jizhi 莫扎特式的輓歌背後——列文森《儒教中國及其現代命運》的深層機制 [Behind the Mozartian Elegy: The Deep Mechanism of Levenson’s *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*]. *Zhongguo Tushu Pinglun* 中國圖書評論 [China Book Review] 2: 74–79.
- Hu, Shaohua. 2007. Confucianism and Contemporary Chinese Politics. *Politics & Policy* 35: 136–53. [CrossRef]
- Huang, Junfu 黃軍甫. 2018. Minzuzhuyi neihan shanbian yu Zhongguo xiandaihua de daolu xuanze 民族主義內涵嬗變與中國現代化的道路選擇 [The Transformation of the Connotation of Nationalism and the Choice of China’s Path to Modernization]. *Shehui Kexue* 社會科學 [Social Sciences] 4: 3–15.
- Huang, Kewu 黃克武, Rui Wang 王瑞, and Zhoujie Zhao 趙洲潔. 2025. Jindai ruxue de liangci zhuanxiang—Rujia Zhongguo ji qi xiandai mingyun de zai sikao 近代儒學的兩次轉向——儒家中國及其現代命運的再思考 [Two Turns of Modern Confucianism: A Reconsideration of *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*]. *Guoji Ruxue (Zhong Yingwen)* 國際儒學 (中英文) [International Confucian Studies (Chinese and English)] 5: 1–17, 190.

- Lazenby, J. Mark. 2010. On “Spirituality”, “Religion”, and “Religions”: A Concept Analysis. *Palliative and Supportive Care* 8: 469–76. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- Lee, Jongtae. 2024. Religious Dimensions of Confucius’ Teachings on Ren and Li in the Analects. *Religions* 15: 668. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Levenson, Joseph R. 1958. *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Levenson, Joseph R. 1965. *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: The Problem of Intellectual Continuity*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Levenson, Joseph R. 1968. *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Levenson, Joseph R. 2013a. *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate, Volume One: The Problem of Intellectual Continuity*. London and New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Levenson, Joseph R. 2013b. *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate, Volume Two: The Problem of Monarchical Decay*. London and New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Levenson, Joseph R. 2013c. *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate, Volume Three: The Problem of Historical Significance*. London and New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Li, Yunlong. 2024. Where Should Morality Go: A Reexamination of the Confucian Rule by Virtue Thought in the Pre-Qin Dynasty and the Chinese Traditional Ideological Dilemma. *Religions* 15: 928. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Nongbri, Brent. 2013. *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Rošker, Jana S. 2017. Is Confucianism a Religion? Modern Confucian Theories on the Ethical Nature of Classical Discourses. *Asian Philosophy* 27: 279–91. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Sandal, Nukhet Ahu. 2012. The Clash of Public Theologies? Rethinking the Concept of Religion in Global Politics. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 37: 66–83. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Schipper, Kristofer. 1993. *The Taoist Body*. Translated by Karen C. Duval. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Schwartz, Benjamin I. 1985. *The World of Thought in Ancient China*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. 1990. *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Sorensen, Bjarne, and Bo Bernhard Nielsen. 2018. Social Capital as It Pertains to International Ventures in Asia: A Comparative Study of Theravada Buddhist Laos and Confucian China. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management* 18: 221–40. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Stewart, Pamela J., and Andrew Strathern. 2014. *Ritual: Key Concepts in Religion*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.
- Stowers, Stanley. 2007. The Concepts of “Religion”, “Political Religion” and the Study of Nazism. *Journal of Contemporary History* 42: 9–24. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Sun, Anna. 2013. *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, Rodney L. 1990. *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Tian, Zhengping 田正平, and Zongshun Zhu 朱宗順. 2004. Ping Levensen de jindai Zhongguo shiguan—Dui Liewensen ‘Rujiao Zhongguo ji qi xiandai mingyun’ de sikao 評列文森的近代中國史觀——對列文森《儒教中國及其現代命運》的思考 [On Levenson’s View of Modern Chinese History: Reflections on Confucian China and Its Modern Fate]. *Zhejiang Daxue Xuebao (Renwen Shehui Kexueban)* 浙江大學學報（人文社會科學版）[*Journal of Zhejiang University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*] 1: 6–13.
- Tu, Weiming. 1985. *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Wang, Zhongjiang. 2026. Confucius’ Belief in Natural Deities and Sacrifice. *Religions* 17: 172. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Weber, Max. 1951. *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*. Edited and Translated by Hans H. Gerth. New York: Free Press.
- Wu, Haixia 武海霞. 2014. Liewensen heyi hui changshuai Rujia wenhua 列文森何以會唱衰儒家文化 [Why Levenson Sang the Decline of Confucian Culture]. *Ningxia Shehui Kexue* 寧夏社會科學 [Social Sciences in Ningxia] 6: 173–76.
- Xiao, Jing 肖京. 2013. Cong Rujiao Zhongguo dao gongchanzhuyi Zhongguo—Ping Liewensen ‘Rujiao Zhongguo ji qi xiandai mingyun’ 從儒教中國到共產主義中國——評列文森《儒教中國及其現代命運》 [From Confucian China to Communist China: A Review of Confucian China and Its Modern Fate]. *Wenhua Zongheng* 文化縱橫 [Beijing Cultural Review] 4: 108–13. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Yang, Hongyun 楊紅運. 2011. Chuantong de zouxiang: Du ‘Rujiao Zhongguo ji qi xiandai mingyun’ 傳統的走向：讀《儒教中國及其現代命運》 [The Direction of Tradition: Reading Confucian China and Its Modern Fate]. *Lilunjie* 理論界 [Theory Circle] 7: 159–61.
- Ye, Bin 葉斌. 2018. Cong wenhua zhuyi dao shijie zhuyi: Levensen shixue de zhuti yu lichang. 從文化主義到世界主義：列文森史學的主題與立場 [From Culturalism to Cosmopolitanism: Themes and Positions in Levenson’s Historiography]. *Shilin* 史林 [Historical Review] 5: 194–203, 221–22.
- Zhang, Jun. 2026. The Mandate of Heaven: One of the Fundamental Beliefs in Confucian China. *Religions* 17: 150. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Zhang, Juzheng 張居正. 2018. Cong chuantong dao xiandai de jiannan zhuanxing—Du ‘Rujiao Zhongguo ji qi xiandai mingyun’ 從傳統到現代的艱難轉型——讀《儒教中國及其現代命運》 [The Difficult Transition from Tradition to Modernity: Reading Confucian China and Its Modern Fate]. *Kecheng Jiaoyu Yanjiu* 課程教育研究 [Course Education Research] 27: 8–9.
- Zhao, Liuyang 趙劉洋. 2024. Duanlie, yanxu yu zhuanhua: Haiwai xuejie Rujia Zhongguo jindai mingyun de san zhong shuxie lujing 斷裂、延續與轉化：海外學界儒家中國近代命運的三種書寫路徑 [Rupture, Continuity, and Transformation: Three Writing Paths in Overseas Scholarship on the Modern Fate of Confucian China]. *Xueshujie* 學術界 [Academics] 9: 198–209.

- Zheng, Jiadong 鄭家棟. 2000. Liewensen yu 'Rujiao Zhongguo ji qi xiandai mingyun' 列文森與《儒教中國及其現代命運》 [Levenson and Confucian China and Its Modern Fate]. *Kaifang Shidai* 開放時代 [Open Times] 5: 27–35.
- Zhu, Mingchuan. 2025. Rediscovering 'Popular Confucianism': Rujiao in Modern Sichuan. *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 11: 95–120. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Zhu, Yuanbo 朱淵博. 2017. Rujiao de shuaiwang—Chongdu 'Rujiao Zhongguo ji qi xiandai mingyun' 儒教的衰亡——重讀《儒教中國及其現代命運》 [The Decline of Confucianism: Rereading *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*]. *Wenhua Xuekan* 文化學刊 [Cultural Journal] 10: 237–39.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.