

Confucius and
The University of Chicago:
Of Myths and Men

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OLDER READERS, ESPECIALLY THOSE familiar with the University of Chicago, will recognize my title as an allusion to our own Herrlee Creel's *Confucius: The Man and the Myth*,¹ which did much to introduce Confucius to earlier generations of Chicagoans and, indeed, people throughout the English-speaking world. Herrlee Glessner Creel was the Martin A. Ryerson Emeritus Distinguished Service Professor of Chinese History at our University. According to that most authoritative of sources, Wikipedia, which even I am finding hard to avoid consulting these days, he "was regarded as a giant among specialists on early Chinese civilization, and was described in various circles as 'the doyen of American sinologists.'" The entry goes on to credit Creel with establishing the University of Chicago as a leading center of East Asian Studies; about that, at least, there can be no debate. Creel spent his entire life at the University, taking B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. degrees (in 1926, 1927 and 1929). Then, after spending several years in China, accepted a teaching position here in 1936. He won early fame among both academics and general educated readers with his book *The Birth of China*, published in the year that he began teaching here.² This book introduced the first fruits of archaeological work then on-going in the vicinity of Anyang, the final capital of the Shang dynasty, China's first historical dynasty. Over the course of nearly forty years of teaching at the University, he turned his attention increasingly to philosophical and administrative questions. His final book, published by the University of Chicago Press the year after he retired in 1973, was entitled *Shen Pu-hai: A Chinese Political Philosopher of the Fourth Century B.C.* (1974), in which he employed a quasi-archaeological methodology to claim for China the origins of administrative bureaucracy. There will

1 Herrlee Creel, *Confucius: The Man and the Myth* (New York: The John Day Company, 1949; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951); subsequent paperback editions were published under the title *Confucius and the Chinese Way* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960).

2 Herrlee Glessner Creel, *The Birth of China* (London: J. Cape, 1936).

be other occasions for us to explore in detail the scholarly work and legacy of Professor Creel. For today, it seems appropriate to comment on just his book *Confucius: The Man and the Myth*, published in 1949, after he had returned to the University from military service during the Second World War.

Having quoted Wikipedia above, perhaps I may be forgiven for now quoting the dust-jacket of the first edition of this book to give some sense not only of its contents but, more important, of its tone:

One of history's worst slanders is exposed in this unique biography. For 2000 years Confucius has been quoted in defense of conservative, reactionary, and totalitarian governments. His supposed sayings have been used by tyrants for the oppression of the people. But long original research now shows that Confucius was in fact a reformer and an individualist, democratic and even revolutionary. In his time he was a voice crying in the wilderness a "battle cry for democracy". His teachings became so popular that a totalitarian regime in 213 B.C. banned the Confucian books. But the common people of China forced many of his doctrines upon their rulers. So the Han Emperor Wu, posing as the patron of Confucianism, tried to convert it into a tool of despotism.

A biography which in fact slanders Confucius was written at this emperor's court around 100 B.C. It has generally been accepted ever since as the definitive portrayal of Confucius. In other books his philosophy was distorted, and words were put into his mouth which he never uttered. This perverted Confucianism was taken over by the Manchus in the 17th century as a technique for the control of the conquered Chinese. In modern times it has been used by war lords exploiting the people. This colossal deception has never before been exploded.

Turning to the back of the dust-jacket, Professor Creel's book won plaudits from colleagues, including Arthur Hummel, who was primarily responsible for the Chinese collection of the Library of Congress, and from Earl H. Pritchard, one of the first editors of *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, the precursor to the *Journal of Asian Studies*, the flagship journal in the field of East Asian Studies in America, and also from Pearl S. Buck, the Nobel laureate in literature, who wrote that Confucius "was a man of original force, creative, daring, revolutionary, modern. For the first time we see Confucius as he really was, and we ought to thank Mr. Creel for the revelation."

Creel's Confucius does indeed read as "a reformer and a individualist, democratic and even revolutionary," just as the dust-jacket says. In a penultimate chapter entitled "Confucianism and Western Democracy," he even contrives to compare Confucius with Thomas Jefferson:

They were alike in their impatience with metaphysics, in their concern for the poor as against the rich, in their insistence on basic human equality, in their belief in the essential decency of all men (including savages), and in their appeal not to authority but to "the head and heart of every honest man." Jefferson's statement that "the whole art of government consists in the art of being honest" is amazingly similar to Analects 12.17, and other such examples could be cited (p. 275).

Analects 12.17 pithily records Confucius's response to Ji Kangzi, who asked him about "government": "Government is to be upright. If you lead the people with uprightness, who would dare not to be upright!" It is worth noting that the character for the Chinese word for "government," 政, which is pronounced *zheng*, is simply the character for the word meaning "upright," 正, also pronounced *zheng*, and a hand holding a stick, 攴. One might conclude from this that Confucius's essential view of government was inherent in the Chinese language, and long pre-dated Confucius himself. Still, sometimes these things need to be said.

It perhaps does not need to be said that Creel's Confucius owed a great deal to post-war American triumphalism, but it was not for that entirely imaginary. For instance, when Creel went on to suggest that President Jefferson's 1806 proposal for a constitutional amendment to establish "a national establishment for education" may well have been directly influenced by Chinese—even if not necessarily "Confucian"—precedents, he drew on the solid research of a student, Donald F. Lach (1917-2000), and a colleague, Ssu-yü Têng (i.e., Deng Siyu 鄧嗣禹 [1905-1988]) at the University of Chicago. Lach, who would eventually return to teach at the University and to author the multi-volume *Asia in the Making of Europe*,³ had recently completed a Ph.D. at the University, "Contributions of China to German Civilization, 1648-1740,"⁴ and had still more recently published an influential article

3 Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe, Volume One: The Century of Discovery* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965); *Volume Two: A Century of Wonder* (1970, 1977); *Volume Three*, with Edwin J. Van Kley, *A Century of Advance* (1993).

4 Donald F. Lach, "Contributions of China to German Civilization, 1648-1740" (Ph.D. diss.: U. of Chicago, 1941).

entitled "Leibniz and China."⁵ Many of us know of Leibniz's discovery of the apparent convergence of his own binary number system with the trigrams of the *Yi jing* or *Classic of Changes*, but China contributed much more than just zeroes and ones to Leibniz's thought. Having learned most of what he knew about China from the Jesuit missionaries who had arrived in China at the beginning of the seventeenth century and whose reports about all aspects of China, including especially Confucius and Confucianism, would exert enormous influence on continental thought for the next two centuries, he famously declared "that Chinese missionaries should be sent to teach us the aim and practice of natural theology, as we send missionaries to instruct them in revealed theology." Lach's conclusion to his article on Leibniz strikes me as pertinent to today's ceremony.

In his great scheme of universal civilization the philosopher pictured China and Europe, geographical opposites, as intellectual allies. Ideas and philosophies, as well as mechanical contrivances, were to serve as connecting links in the chain which Leibniz visualized and which men had hitherto—and have even yet—failed to forge. His was not a mystical longing for union with the "enchanted" Orient; his was a carefully outlined plan to bring together in intellectual harmony the East and West which Kipling later contended would never meet" (p. 455).

Actually, at the time Lach was writing, East and West had already met in the person of Ssu-yü Têng. He was one of the first students of the famous history department at Yen-ching University in Beijing, or Beiping, as it was then called. He came to the United States in 1938 to assist Arthur Hummel with his *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*, was quickly awarded a Ph.D. by Harvard University, and in 1941 arrived in Chicago. In 1943, he published in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* an article entitled "Chinese Influence on the Western Examination System: I, Introduction."⁶ As the title suggests, this was a wide-ranging survey demonstrating the direct influence of the famed Chinese government examination system on first the French, then the English, and finally the American civil service examinations. All of these contacts are well documented in the work of Professors Têng and Lach, as also in that of Professor Creel. There was one other area of contact well documented by Professor Têng but not mentioned by

5 Donald F. Lach, "Leibniz and China," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6.4 (Oct. 1945): 436-55.

6 Ssu-yü Têng, "Chinese Influence on the Western Examination System: I, Introduction," *HJAS* 7.4 (Sept. 1943): 267-312.

Professor Creel in his study of Confucius, which however may be of interest to the University of Chicago and to its Confucius Institute. The Chinese influence on seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe was by no means limited to the workings of government bureaucracy or even to the philosophy of government. It also made itself felt on the newly emerging field of economics, as seen in the writings of François Quesnay (1694-1774), the father of the Physiocratic School, which is to say the *Économistes*. The Physiocrats were the original proponents of free trade, and so I suppose we can also claim a place for China in the University's recently established Milton Friedman Institute for Economics.

Let me go back to talking about something about which I know at least a bit. Creel's *Confucius: The Man and the Myth* would remain the paramount Western study of Confucius for almost a half century. Indeed, given the changing interests in the intervening period, it was—with pretty much only a single exception—just about the only Western study of Confucius. The exception was the little pamphlet by Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*,⁷ published just over two decades after Creel's book and of which Creel, not noted for dispensing praise lightly, said: "In the fifty years in which I have been studying Confucius, I cannot recall that I have found the work of another scholar more stimulating than that of Professor Fingarette."⁸ After another two decades, interests changed again, and Confucius once again became a topic of study in the Western academy—or perhaps I should say in the Western "imaginary," though I am doubtless using the term improperly. The first published example of this new interest was an article published by Lionel Jensen in the journal *Early China*: "Wise Man of the Wilds: Fatherlessness, Fertility, and the Mythic Exemplar, Kongzi,"⁹ in which the author claimed that Confucius, or Kongzi, as he preferred to refer to him, was probably entirely a myth—that his historicity was "arguable." Marshalling an impressive array of later sources, Jensen concluded that even the name Kongzi "is more like a mythic literary fiction and probably began ... as a symbolic deity that was made historical in one of its many Warring States incarnations."¹⁰

7 Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

8 Herrlee G. Creel, "Discussion of Professor Fingarette on Confucius," *JAAR Thematic Studies: Studies in Classical Chinese Thought, Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47.3 (September 1979): 414.

9 Lionel Jensen, "Wise Man of the Wilds: Fatherlessness, Fertility, and the Mythic Exemplar, Kongzi," *Early China* 20 (1995): 407-37.

10 Jensen, "Wise Man of the Wilds," abstract, p. xxxiii.

Jensen would go on two years later to publish his much discussed book *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization*,¹¹ in which he pushed the invention of the Kongzi—or now Kongfuzi—myth back another two thousand years, to the time of and at the hands of those seventeenth-century Jesuits who had supplied Europe with its earliest information about China. It would be as easy to caricature Jensen's Kongzi as it would Creel's Confucius; it was no less a product of its time.

That time brought another study of the manufacturing of Confucius, or at least of his book: *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors* by E. Bruce and A. Taeko Brooks.¹² The Brooks's book set out to provide precise dates for each of the twenty chapters of the *Analects*, arrayed in more or less equal increments across the 220 years from the death of Confucius in 479 B.C. until the fall of his home state of Lu in 249 B.C., essentially denying to Confucius any voice at all. Turning once again to the back cover blurbs, we read, from two of my own teachers no less, that this “represents an exciting mode of investigation that will require most past scholarship on ancient Chinese philosophy to be redone” (David S. Nivison) and that “It restores historical respectability to its subject, which has too long coasted on traditional assumptions” (David N. Keightley).

It is almost certainly the case that “past scholarship on ancient Chinese philosophy” will be “redone,” but this is nothing new; tradition has never ceased to evolve and renew itself. This at least is the thesis of the latest book to have been published—just published—on Confucius: *Lives of Confucius: Civilization's Greatest Sage through the Ages* by Michael Nylan and Thomas Wilson.¹³ As did Jensen and the Brooks, Professor Nylan dispenses with Confucius altogether, preferring instead the Confucius of Sima Qian (145-c. 89 B.C.), who on her first pages is praised as “the greatest historian China has ever known” (p. 2) and “the greatest storyteller ever to write in Chinese” (p. 3). This is the same biography that Herrlee Creel had said “slanders Confucius,” but it would be hard to know this from *Lives of Confucius*, in which the life of Confucius does not enter.

11 Lionel Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

12 E. Bruce and A. Taeko Brooks, *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

13 Michael Nylan and Thomas Wilson, *Lives of Confucius: Civilization's Greatest Sage through the Ages* (New York: Doubleday, 2010).

Time does move on and interests change, and so we are now seeing a return to “life of Confucius” studies. I would like to think that the University of Chicago has played some role in this development, even if the scholars involved work elsewhere. The first expression of this renewed interest in the life of Confucius himself came in an article by Robert Eno of Indiana University: “The Background of the Kong Family of Lu and the Origins of Ruism.”¹⁴ Like Lionel Jensen’s first publication on Confucius, this article, which also deals with Confucius’s birth, was also published in the journal *Early China*, long edited on our campus, and the article was first presented at a conference here. Combing through records in the *Zuo zhuan*, the detailed narrative for the years before and during which Confucius lived, Eno argues that Confucius’s father, Shuliang He, was an associate of the powerful Zang lineage of the state of Lu, which had as its responsibility the defense of the southern border of the state. This put the family in close proximity with the neighboring state of Zhu or Zhulou, and with the Yans, who were the or at least a prominent family of that Eastern Yi or “barbarian” state. Indeed, Confucius’s mother was a woman of the Yan family, as were at least seven of his closest disciples, including his favorite disciple of all, Yan Hui. Eno goes on to draw some bold conclusions about the contributions of these Zhulou Yans and of Yi culture in general to the development of Confucianism, or Ruism, as he calls it, suggesting that Confucius was to some extent a “cultural outsider” in his home state. This suggestion may go too far for some—though I find some personal satisfaction in it, considering that this is one of the things that my own Chinese name means. Nevertheless, it is at least firmly grounded in the geography of southwestern Shandong.

The intersection of geography and biography in the life of Confucius was also the theme of one of our recent Creel Memorial Lectures, by Professor Li Ling of Peking University.¹⁵ Professor Li has gone to great effort to trace the actual “footsteps” of Confucius, both at home and especially during the fourteen years late in his life when he traveled outside of Lu, presenting us with a slide show of the cultural relics that one can now find along the way. True, none of these pre-dates the Song dynasty (960-1278), but just walking through his countryside is an important reminder that Confucius really did live.

14 Robert Eno, “The Background of the Kong Family of Lu and the Origins of Ruism” *Early China* 28 (2003): 1-41.

15 Li Ling, “In the Footsteps of Kongzi: The Cities and States Where Kongzi Lived and Visited,” Herrlee Creel Memorial Lecture, The University of Chicago, 19 October 2007.

This is the spirit that animates the most recent biography of Confucius himself (as opposed to the Confuciuses of the imagination), Annping Chin's *The Authentic Confucius: A Life of Thought and Politics*.¹⁶ Professor Chin begins her book by recounting a visit she made to Zoucheng village in southwestern Shandong and a discussion she had with a group of high school students there. She says, "The students wanted to know what I thought of their government's latest push to create 'a harmonious society' with 'harmonious ties' to the outside world: whether it had any relation to Confucius' teachings and whether the incantation of Confucius' name in this campaign had anything to do with the historical Confucius" (p. 9). In attempting to answer their questions, she noted that their hometown had "received more visitors in the last two decades, but, for the Chinese, having a livelier tourist industry is not the same as reading in the papers that their party leaders are touting the virtues of a Confucian society and that their government is in the process of establishing Confucius Institutes to teach the Chinese language in Africa, Europe, Southeast Asia, and South and North America" (pp. 11-12). She continues: "Confucius probably never expected to be associated with language teaching. Even though the *Analects* says that Confucius 'always used correct pronunciations' when reciting from the *Classic of Poetry* or from the *Classic of Documents*, his interest in language was on a deeper level." After saying that "Confucius would not have wished China to widen her influence by making her language more accessible"—saying that "One can never be too careful when teaching others to speak: words are an extension of thought, and when voiced, they must be appropriate," she says in the end that Confucius's "latest comeback through the international language institutes is not completely absurd" (p. 12). To this I would say in closing, without any wish to put words into the mouth of Confucius, that not only is it "not completely absurd," it is not absurd at all. At the University of Chicago, we are very careful in the teaching of Chinese, as we have been for almost seventy-five years now. Indeed, we have even been known to be concerned with the correct pronunciation of the *Classic of Poetry* and the *Classic of Documents*. We look forward to working with the University of Chicago Confucius Institute and also with the international Confucius Institute office to continue to teach our students to speak—and to think.

16 Annping Chin, *The Authentic Confucius: A Life of Thought and Politics* (New York: Scribner, 2007).