The Confucian Mix: 

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At the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century Confucianism was widely regarded as a (world) religion, emblematic of and encompassing Chinese culture, and a barrier to social, political and economic development. At the beginning of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century the consensus on the first two propositions is possibly strengthened even though the third is no longer accepted, certainly not as a general or necessary truth. At the beginning of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, however, there was no Chinese equivalent term for religion and Confucian teaching existed alongside Daoist and Buddhist teachings, from which it borrowed extensively over a long period of historical time. Such borrowing, though, did not deplete these other traditions nor did Confucian thought lose its identity to them. Indeed, the lattice of interchange between these three teachings was seen as distinctive of Chinese civilization, rather than Confucian teaching alone bearing the load of Sinic culture. These changes in the perception of Confucianism, or in its substance (the two may be only loosely connected) are arguably characteristic features of Confucianism itself. As shown below, Confucianism is a complex phenomenon with different constitutive elements manifest in different ways at different times and under different circumstances.

Interpretations of Confucianism vary enormously concerning its modus operandi, whether it is principally a philosophical, spiritual, socio-ethical, administrative or some-other form of discourse, and also concerning its content, claims and values. Given the long history of Confucianism and its diverse roles in different settings this is not surprising. It is possible, nonetheless, to point to certain texts and even particular passages in them that represent its core. One such passage, from the Daxue (Great Learning), is likely to be accepted in this regard by the majority of interested discussants:

Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their States were rightly governed. Their States being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy (Legge 1971: 358-59).

Here is the notion of sincerity as a core value, self-cultivation as a required activity, filial piety as a necessary responsibility, and political order and world peace as imperative goals or purposes. Confucianism arguably entails each of these, even though there has been variation in the balance between them.

While the text, Daxue, from which the above quotation is taken, has been regarded as one of the Four Books (Sishu) crystalizing Confucian thought since 1190, it is originally a chapter of the Liji (Book of Rites). Liji is a compilation of loosely connected documents of unknown authorship describing Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BC) ritual and administrative practices. Yet it is not anomalous that
the Confucian canon should include material Confucius (551-479 BC) did not write or which predated him; he was, in words attributed to him: ‘A transmitter and not a maker, believing in and loving the ancients’ (Legge 1971: 195). Indeed, that the so-called Confucian tradition includes texts predating Confucius and extraneous to him as a person indicates that he was part of a current broader that the terms ‘Confucian’ and ‘Confucianism’ capture.

The ruija (ruists, ‘scholars’), a body of intellectuals and administrators that originated in the Zhou dynasty court, have continued to play a significant role in all subsequent dynasties. The ruists were responsible for ru teaching (rujiao) and ru learning (ruxue), later drawing on Confucius’ sayings recorded in the Analects and the ideas of his major interpreters Mencius (372-289 BC) and Xunzi (ca. 310-230 BC), in the development of imperial court ideology and practices. From the late Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) ruists or literati preserved Confucian thought by reconfiguring it in various ways, and from that time the imperial court practiced rites that included sacrifices to Confucius.

An influential commentary on Confucianism, The Religion of China (1964), written by Max Weber during the early period of the Chinese Republic (1912-49), confines its discussion to the imperial dynasties of China and draws extensively on contemporary European sinological sources. In treating Confucianism as a class ethic of the literati, the scholar administrators of imperial China, Weber draws three conclusions. First, because it is a traditional ethic Confucianism ‘meant adjustment to the world, to its orders and conventions’ (Weber 1964: 152). Second, Confucian self-perfection was achieved in compliance with mundane powers, especially ‘the requirements of social life … [through] ceremonial and ritualist propriety’ and through ‘family piety … [or] organically given, personal relations’ (Weber 1964: 228, 236). Thirdly, then, while family piety ‘rested on the belief in spirits’ (Weber 1964: 236) the mundane-ethical and this-worldly orientation of Confucianism had no place for a ‘doctrine of salvation, or any striving for transcendental values and destinies … [and] lacked individual prayer’ so that Confucianism, according to Weber, ‘lacked the notion that men are differently qualified in a religious way, and beyond these reasons Confucianism was indifferent to religion’ (Weber 1964: 145-46).

In this way, against the measure of a modern European notion of religion, entailing personal devotion and belief, sacrament, an organized clergy and so on, Weber argues that Confucianism is not a religion. Nevertheless, he compares Confucian values with Protestant values in order to demonstrate that only the latter could underpin a vocation generative of modern industrial capitalism (Weber 1964: 226-49). This is because ‘Confucian rationalism meant rational adoption to the world [while] Puritan rationalism was rational mastery of the world’ (Weber 1964: 248). Modern capitalism failed to emerge in imperial China, according to Weber, because of the limitations of Confucian ‘mentality’ (Weber 1964: 55, 104). Weber’s views regarding the character and limitations
of Confucianism overlap with those of the contemporary New Culture Movement (1913-17), which rejected Confucian traditionalism that it held to be responsible for China’s subordination to Western powers, and sought regeneration in Western values (Weston 1998).

A contrasting view, of Confucius as founding an original religion of the Axial Age (Jaspers 1953), is indirectly related to Weber through his inspiration of Jaspers in his account of the age of prophets (Weber 1978: 439-50). Ironically, though, Weber (1978: 442, 447) excludes Confucius by instead referring to the ‘ethics of the pre-Confucian period’ and ‘the Taoists’. More recently Bellah (2011: 409-23) returned Confucius to the Axial Age, drawing on Fingarette’s (1972) argument concerning Confucius’ supposed transcendentalism. Fingarette (1972: 12) is correct in finding li (rite, ritual) at the centre of Confucius’ concerns and the source of a ‘binding power’ that requires neither force nor legislation. He is also right to connect ren (nobility of character, benevolence) with li in so far as ren refers to the person who ‘pursues’ a ‘pattern of conduct and relationships’ that is li (1972: 42). But to associate li with not only moral but magical, spiritual and religious energy (1972: 3-10, 15-6, 20, 46, 77-8) is unwarranted. Confucius, and more thoroughly Mencius and Xunzi, explain the power of ritual and its connection with ren through the notion of xin (heart/mind) (Qi 2014: 172-76). This is reminiscent of Collins (2004) argument that interactive rituals generate emotional energy through which morality and moral communities are formed. Religion may be read into this situation but it is not inherent in it. We shall consider the connections between Confucius and religion below, but can here note that there is no basis in the idea that religion is implicit in Confucius’ understanding of li and ren.

Over its long history Confucian thought and practice have changed considerably, sometimes through internal development and sometimes through foreign influence both direct and indirect. In tracing key developments in Confucianism, including its possible association with religion, the following discussion will pay attention to some of Weber’s observations regarding the nature of Confucian thought, but without focusing on his comprehensive treatment of imperial Chinese institutions and ideas, which has been undertaken elsewhere (Barbalet 2014a, 2014b, 2015). The purpose of the following discussion, rather, is to indicate the variable and contrasting expressions and representations of Confucianism, the different purposes it has attempted to achieve, and to show that Confucianism is not a singular phenomenon nor even an ensemble of ideas, but a mix.

**One of many: Confucianism in the Han and Tang dynasties**

The intellectual currents of the Warring States period (475-221 BC) were rich and diverse, comprising a number of retrospectively named ‘schools’. The best known of these (and their leading thinkers) are ruists (Kongzi [Confucius], Mengzi [Mencius]), Mohists (Mozi), Legalists (Shang Yang, Han Feizi), and
Daoists (Laozi, Zhuanzi). The Warring States period, during which seven major and a number of minor states struggled for dominance, concluded with the victory of the Qin state in 221 BC and the founding of the Qin dynasty, with which the Chinese empire began. The Qin court’s ruling doctrine was Legalism, supporting state-centric utilitarian authoritarianism. The Qin court effectively rendered irrelevant other Warring States teachings, especially the ideas associated with Mozi and Confucius, through a combination of neglect and repression, culminating in the ‘burning of books and burying of scholars’ episode (213-210 BC). The fortunes of ruists improved in the subsequent Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD).

Much can be made of the success of Dong Zhongshu, a high official of the Han court who allegedly convinced Emperor Wu (rule: 141-87 BC) to implement Confucian principles to the exclusion of all others. The late-Han adoption of Confucian ‘orthodoxy’ is apparently confirmed with the inauguration of a cult honouring Confucius in the Wu court in 136 BC (Jensen 1997: 6). The details of the ritual formation of Confucian orthodoxy have been documented by Wilson (1996) for the Ming dynasty. The application of such ritual foundations encourage the view not simply of a state orthodoxy centred on Confucian thought but the establishment of an ‘official’ Chinese imperial religion (Granet 1975: 97-119) in which the literati are functionally equivalent to priests, their canon a scripture and their training academies serving the same religious purpose as monasteries (Goossaert and Palmer 2011: 20-22).

Indeed, sacrifices and supplications to Confucius by both literati and emperors occurred throughout the imperial period, and many emperors bestowed titles and other honours in memorializing Confucius. These practices are associated with the metaphysics of imperial rule in China, summarized as the Mandate of Heaven. Heavenly Mandate operates in terms of the acquisition of the rightness of rule through a ruler’s able performance of his role and duties rather than his lineage. While a standard of secular statecraft and administration are necessary in achievement of the Heavenly Mandate they are not sufficient. Other relevant performances include the emperor’s participation and leading role in ritual practices that ensure legitimacy, especially when establishing a new ruling house, and also in rituals associated with the consolidation of the worldly order for which the emperor is responsible.

Is it possible to describe these imperial cults and ruist rituals as religious? An answer to this question will be contingent on what is meant by religion (Asad 1983; Ashiwa and Wank 2009). Certainly the participants had no term equivalent to the modern notion of religion. The sacrifices to Confucius, by both emperors and literati, expressed respect for a man and not sacramental offerings to a god. Also, the imperial court rites involved no congregation or communal observance but were exclusive to the imperial household. Another factor, which cannot resolve the religion question but discounts the strong claim of Confucian orthodoxy, is that not only Confucian but also Daoist rituals, temples and
liturgies were engaged by the imperial court during the Han dynasty and the following Tang dynasty, and from the mid-Tang Buddhist rituals were also introduced into the imperial court (Wang 2012: 274-75; Welch 2003: 153-6).

While the rituals of the literati may be described as ‘religious-like’ and their approach to the Confucian canon was a matter of ‘faith’, it is important to consider the various literati uses of Daoist texts and the Daoist trope more generally. The post-Han xuanxue movement attempted a revitalizing interpretation of Confucianism through the lens of philosophical Daoism (Chua 2010; Hon 2010). This has led to the miss-description of the movement as neo-Daoist even though Confucius remained through it the highest sage. Its purpose was to correct perceived distortions of Confucian teachings in the continuing quest for a secure basis of an essentially Confucian political order. In later dynasties literati cultivated Daoist approaches and affectations designed to complement their ruist personae (Zhou 2013: 67-135). But apart from such ‘compromises’ to ‘orthodoxy’ it is erroneous to think of the literati as a religious or priestly group or the imperial academy as a religious institution.

The literati were not a monastic order and their engagement was not pastoral, neither directed to saving souls, theirs or others, nor evangelical or doctrinally proselytizing. Rather, their training was for imperial administration and their Confucian creed and rituals maintained their professional or status solidarity. Weber is correct to dispel the idea that the imperial examination and the associated inculcation of Confucian principles were to establish or maintain orthodoxy, religious or otherwise; rather, they promoted ‘the ways of thought suitable to a cultured man’ (Weber 1964: 121) that both preserved privilege and encouraged status group formation (Weber 1964: 117). Indeed, the original implementation of only Confucian principles in state administration, instigated by Dong Zhongshu, was less an exclusionary effort and more a requirement of administration. Other schools focused on social and political philosophy, from which Confucians readily borrowed. Confucians, on the other hand, were adept in maintaining state records, understood the conduct and significance of ritual and the management of institutions (Fung 1952: 405-407; see also Wright 1971: 11-16).

**Expelling and incorporating Buddhist tropes: Song-Ming Confucian innovation**

By accommodating to the practical needs of imperial administration and the political structure of the Han state the ruists borrowed extensively from Daoist and Legalist thought. Their attention to stability and hierarchy provided the conditions for economic prosperity which in turn generated competing bases of social and political power. In these circumstances Confucians found themselves increasingly marginalized and discredited as the Han dynasty began to collapse under the strain of its own success. The transformations undertaken by Confucian thought in the subsequent reorganization of the empire depended on
continued borrowing from the Daoist classics, especially in the *xuanxue* movement which effectively lasted from the 3rd to the 6th century. This rectification of Confucian thought continued during most of the Tang dynasty (618-906 AD). Confucian intellectual exchanges with extraneous Chinese traditions were disrupted, however, in the late Tang through the influence of alien teachings in the form of Buddhism.

Buddhism arrived in China in the 1st century, during the Han dynasty, through the efforts of Indian missionaries. At this time Chinese reactions to Buddhism were dismissive; it was an uninvited import, irrelevant to local concerns and it failed to achieve a foothold in the Chinese imagination. By the 3rd century, however, through the endeavours of Chinese converts who melded Buddhist doctrine with Confucian and Daoist concepts, harmonizing it with Chinese principles (Keenan 1994), a sinicized Buddhism emerged that attracted increasing interest from peasant, landowning and merchant classes as well as members of the imperial court (Qi 2013: 352-59). Indeed, the post-Han decline of Confucianism contributed to a climate in which the appeal of Buddhism, with its adopted local Chinese vocabulary, was increasingly attractive (Wright 1971: 21-41).

Confucian objections to Buddhism were directed to its social philosophy and its metaphysics. Confucians believed that Buddhism, in promoting individual salvation, undermined filial piety, the centrality of the family and the five bonds (*wulun*) in social relations. Metaphysically, the Buddhist notion of ‘emptiness’, the Confucians believed, contravened the idea that Heaven (*Tian*) and Earth (*Di*) are foundational constituents of reality, and therefore ultimately undermined the basis of imperial rule. Confucian antipathy to Buddhism was expressed in the late Tang by the essayist Han Yu (786-824) and in the early Song dynasty (960-1279) by the statesman Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072). But it was only with Zhu Xi (1130-1200) that a direct Confucian challenge to Buddhism was mounted, through a reordered canon and a reconstituted philosophy, *Song-Ming Lixue* (neo-Confucianism). The problem for neo-Confucians was that a Buddhism incorporating key Daoist and Confucian notions so infused the intellectual universe that they were required to deal with issues unknown to pre-Han thought and therefore which the original Confucian doctrines were unable to accommodate.

Although by no means the only contributor to neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi was its most important exponent. From 124 BC the Five Classics (*Wujing*) of the *ruist* canon were incrementally augmented until by the early Song there were Thirteen Classics (*Shisan jing*), including two texts previously absent, namely the *Analacts* of Confucius and the *Mengzi* (*Mencius*). Zhu Xi performed a defining editorial fiat in 1190 by simplifying this canon to consist of Four Books, namely the *Lunyu*, the *Mengzi* and two short chapters from the *Liji* (*Book of Rights*) which was a part of the original *Wujing*. These chapters, the *Daxue* (*Great Learning*) and the *Zhongyong* (*Doctrine of the Mean*), were re-
edited by Zhu and each of the four texts was provided with his detailed commentaries (Gardner 2007). This simplification of the *ruist* canon, to consist only of the text of Confucius and his major interpreter Mencius, along with these two short chapters, was consolidated as a lasting contribution to Chinese thought by Zhu’s adoption of them as the exclusive texts for the imperial civil service examination, ensuring an approach to Confucianism that would last until the imperial examination was abolished in 1905.

There is much irony in the fact that while Zhu’s Four Books for the first time places Confucius’ *Analects* at the centre of the *ruist* canon, his interpretation of Confucian thought would have been unrecognizable to the sage he memorializes. In confronting Buddhist preaching of individual salvation Zhu returns to the Confucian concept of Heavenly Mandate, but in a manner that emphasizes individual self-cultivation (Wang 2012: 280). In its classic form the idea of Heavenly Mandate is core to the notion and practice of imperial sovereignty. In Zhu’s neo-Confucian revision the harmonization of the human realm through self-cultivation effectively bypasses the political realm of imperial legitimacy and concentrates on individual practices that those familiar with Buddhist meditation would have seen as a direct Confucian alternative. Indeed, Zhu advocated daily meditation (*jingzuo*) paralleling Buddhist practice but focused on principles of Confucian morality in a form unknown to Confucius (Needham 1956: 454).

In metaphysics also Zhu borrowed from Buddhist as well as Daoist ideas to bolster the intellectual basis of a revised Confucian outlook. The advent of Buddhism in China introduced a set of philosophical questions, concerning human nature, mind, self-realization and man’s relation to the cosmos, that were unknown to Warring States thinkers (Gardner 2007: xxiii; Qi 2014: 111). Zhu engaged a double agenda in his appropriation of aspects of Buddhist metaphysics to dispel the mystical elements of Daoist and Buddhist thought he saw infused in Han Confucianism. In particular, Zhu developed a dialectic of interaction between the principles of *qi* and *li*. Everything in the universe comprises these two elements, one consisting of vital energy, *qi*, and the other, *li*, representing absolute law-like principles that govern form (Fung 1953: 546-50). Whereas one is the source of growth the other entails an element of rational order. In this way neo-Confucianism borrowed from Buddhism in asserting a rationalist ethic designed to supersede it.

The intellectual reasoning that was a hallmark of Song-Ming neo-Confucianism contrasts with its courtly practices, especially new and arguably semi-religious rituals that elevated Confucius with new titles and associated sacrificial ceremonies. This more intense focus on the figure of Confucius is in part a consequence of his concentrated presentation in the Four Books (Wang 2012: 281-83). And yet the focus on individual self-cultivation and moral rectitude was connected not only with ‘spiritual’ engagements but also with commercial practices. During the Song dynasty agriculture grew in scope and
yield, increasing the size and significance of markets and market towns and expanding the numbers of wealthy landed and commercial families (Elvin 1973: 164-78; Gernet 1996: 316-26). These developments promoted a synergy with neo-Confucian ethical individualism and the rationality of profit orientation and entrepreneurship (Elvin 1973: 167).

The theme of a rationalizing ethical outlook in neo-Confucianism and its commercial consequences is taken up by Yu Ying-shih (1987). He regards neo-Confucianism as a functional equivalent of European Protestantism in a direct challenge to Weber’s argument concerning the inhibiting qualities of Confucianism on capitalist development. The individualistic ethical tensions within neo-Confucianism are discussed by Metzger (1977), who also argues that in failing to consider them Weber’s argument in The Religion of China is deeply flawed. It is not possible here to explore Yu’s and Metzger’s contributions (see Barbalet 2014b: 319-20). It must be acknowledged that Weber was simply blind to developments in Confucian thought during the Song-Ming period. Indeed, Weber’s lapse here reflects an absence in European sinology at the time that was generated through Jesuit missionary interpretations of Confucianism that pervaded European thought during the 18th and 19th centuries and which affected Weber’s understanding of China and Confucianism.

**Jesuit Confucianism**

A Jesuit mission arrived in China in 1583. By 1595 its members presented themselves, through their dress, expressed interests and engagements, as *ruists* or literati. The Catholic Church’s missionary orientation of ‘accommodation’ with the local belief system was taken to mean by the Jesuits in China that they should adapt Confucianism to the needs of their mission to ‘save’ China. This generated an interpretation of Confucianism that effectively narrowed the tradition of *ruxue*, ‘learning of the scholars’, so that Confucius alone was source of a gospel, the *Analects*, and, as the exemplar of the tradition associated with his name, a figure of saintly comportment. This transformation has been controversially described as the Jesuit ‘manufacturing’ of Confucianism (Jensen 1997).

Some readers have taken Jensen literally and misunderstood his claim regarding the Jesuit manufacturing of ‘Confucianism’ (Standaert 1999; Sun 2013: 37-38). Jensen is aware that the term ‘Confucianism’ was first used in 1862 (Jensen 1997: 4), long after the Jesuit intervention. Jensen’s argument, however, concerns not the development of a neologism but a distinctive interpretation or presentation of Confucian thought that is a catachrestical invention in the claims it makes concerning the singular role of that thought in the Chinese tradition, the dimensions of that body of thought and the significance of its author, Confucius (Elman 2002: 525-26; Kuo 2013: 239-40). As Jensen (1997: 33) says:
In Jesuit hands the indigenous Kongzi was resurrected from distant symbolism into life, heroically transmuted and made intelligible as ‘Confucius’, a spiritual confrere who alone among the Chinese – so their version has it – had preached an ancient gospel of monotheism now forgotten.

It is well known that the Jesuit image of China and the place of Confucianism in it influenced European Enlightenment thought, that it extolled the virtues of moral Confucian China against corrupt aristocratic Europe, especially in the works of Quesnay, Leibniz and Voltaire (Hudson 1961, 319–25; Zhang 1998, 99–101). While the 18th century European vision of China lost its political and popular appeal after the French revolution a number of its features continued to be accepted, both in Europe and in China.

The Jesuit interpretation of Confucius and Confucianism in many ways reflects the nature and purpose of the Jesuit order as an organization. The Company of Jesus, the Jesuits, was formed by Ignatius Loyola in 1534 with the express purpose of struggling for Catholic reform, of leading the Church’s Counter-Reformation (Mullett 1984: 22-25). This latter was the Catholic Church’s response to the religious anxieties that occupied Christian Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries, especially through the dual challenge of the new Protestantism of northern Europe and the non-Christian forces in Spain and other parts of Europe as well as in the newly discovered Americas, Africa and Asia. The Counter-Reformation was thus possessed by two moods, one defensive and repressive, expressed in the Inquisition; the other, confident and adventurous, that gave rise to Catholic Mission. For both of these engagements a new priesthood was required, replacing the medieval piety of harsh and debilitating self-punishment. Counter-Reformation priests were specially trained and prepared for active engagement in the world; their seminaries provided professional training directed to the performance of clear and strict duties concerning the moral and spiritual elevation of the laity, from whom the priesthood remained remote. The clergy of the Counter-Reformation Church was thus ‘an élite corps of highly disciplined and trained priests’ (Mullet 1984: 16); and none more so than the Jesuits.

It was not simply a vain conceit that led the Jesuits in China to regard themselves as literati, to dress as Chinese scholars and believe themselves to be ruists, trained in a seminary they saw as paralleling the ruist academy (Brockey 2007). While those the Jesuits imitated were scholar administrators not priests, the Jesuits nevertheless shared with their Chinese ‘counterparts’ a sense of responsibility for ru teaching (rujiao) (Jensen 1997: 48, 50). The particular Jesuit contribution, though, was to reduce the main dimensions of that tradition to the ideas of one man, Kongzi – Latinized as Confucius – who they elevated to a prominence he previously lacked, and purified the Confucian system, raising it to the essence of Chinese civilization. The ultimate purpose of this immense construction was to save Chinese souls. Its more proximate outcome,
though, was an interpretation of Confucianism that not only influenced European conceptions of China but also Chinese understandings of Confucian thought.

The Jesuits, through Matteo Ricci’s investigations, discovered in Confucius the New Testament ethic that ‘you should love your neighbour as yourself’; they held that Confucius thus operated through an implicit ancient monotheism (Jensen 1997: 33, 59-60). It was denied, however, that Confucius’ teachings and, indeed, the imperial cults associated with Confucius, were religious. In order to maintain a Catholic accommodation with Confucianism and avoid religious opposition between the two approaches it was necessary to insist that Confucianism was a moral code and that the imperial rituals associated with his name were civic. According to Jensen (1997: 69), ‘Ricci … did not so much displace religion as redefine it, emphasizing its character as an ethical system governing all of Chinese social and political life’. For it to embrace ‘all of Chinese social and political life’ Jesuit Confucianism would first have to be purified of the other forces that were current in China both before the Jesuits arrived and after they were expelled from China in 1724.

The Jesuits regarded Buddhism, firstly, to be an idolatrous heathen force which, secondly, had a corrupting influence on Chinese society, subverting native Confucianism (Jensen 1997: 47). In some ways this was close to the view of many literati who opposed Buddhism, as shown above. But the Counter-Reformation Jesuits read the Buddhist presence in the Confucian space not simply as an intrusive competitor but as a heresy, a concept previously unknown in China but central to Christian discernment. Daoism, in Chinese thought, was different from Confucianism but not contradictory with it, in the manner of Yin and Yang as complementary polarities generative of change through harmonious interplay (see Zhang 2002: 83–94). In the Jesuit mind, however, it was another heresy to be purged from the Chinese spiritual space. As we have seen, neo-Confucianism absorbed elements of Buddhism in confronting it. The Jesuits thus regarded neo-Confucianism as tainted, requiring its expulsion from the fold of ‘orthodox’ Confucianism, this latter ‘misunderstood and betrayed’ by the revisionist and synthesizing neo-Confucian scholars of the Song dynasty (Zhang 1998, 103).

The notion of Confucian orthodoxy in this sense, of not merely an accepted but an uncontaminated system of belief, is thus a Jesuit construction in which competing traditions are viewed through a European Christian lens forged in the Counter-Reformation. The idea, though, of Confucianism as the orthodoxy of Chinese spiritual and ethical discourse, with Daoism and Buddhism relegated to heterodox ascription, was continued by nineteenth and twentieth century sinologists (Legge 1880; de Groot 1912) and advocated by Weber (1964: 173-225), who follows their example. Weber so closely adopts the missionary sinologists’ approach that he disregards or is unaware of neo-Confucianism. His insensitivities to developments in Confucian thought have
given rise to criticism (Metzger 1977) although others, while acknowledging the fact, see it as methodologically explicable (Schluchter 1989, 112). But the notion of orthodoxy itself in this context is a Western projection, with Weber (1964: 214-15) reading Chinese developments through the prism of European history (Barbalet 2014a: 290-95). Imperial Chinese rulers were not concerned with the mental constructs of their subjects, with orthodoxy, but with the rightness of their practices, with orthopraxy (Watson 1993). The Confucian tradition of the literati was based on correct ritual, not faith.

In the creation of a Confucian orthodoxy, posited against the heterodoxy of Buddhism, Daoism and contaminated neo-Confucianism, the Jesuits were enacting European Counter-Reformation engagements with Chinese pieces. The identification of their purified Confucianism with Chinese culture and their self-identity as exponents of the true faith against heresy indicates how thoroughly the Jesuit mission required the terminology of inquisition. While the interpretation of Confucius developed by Ricci was not always accepted in Rome (Jensen 1997: 67-69), this should not distract from the fact that the Jesuit modeling of Confucianism was a construction paralleling the form of the universal church of pre-Reformation Catholicism; a church, already lost in Europe, that both encompassed European civilization and institutionally monopolized the spiritual and intellectual life of the faithful, necessarily denying alternate doctrine or practice. This form of Jesuitical Confucianism was attractive to elements of the contemporary literati and later generations of Chinese nationalists. When Confucianism takes the form of ‘Confucianity’, in the late-Qing, the universal church shifts its form to that of a national church, as we shall see below.

Qing Confucianism: antinomies of a modernizing state
After the Manchu conquest of China in the 17th century the new Qing dynasty, from 1644, paradoxically extended Confucian ideological dominance and at the same time weakened literati Confucianism. As non-Han rulers of China the Qing court’s need for legitimacy led to observations of ritual protocols, including tributes to Confucius, at a rate in excess of all previous dynasties (Wang 2012: 284-86). The Manchu rulers appreciated, though, that the literati presented the single most significant challenge to their rule. By the early 18th century the place of Confucius in court ritual was relatively reduced by unprecedentedly granting high title to five of Confucius’ ancestors but not to Confucius. This development was consonant with an earlier initiative, in 1657, when the Qing court issued a new version of the Xiaojing (Classic of Filial Piety). The Xiaojing had been excluded from civil examination preparation since 1190 through Zhu Xi’s revision of the Confucian canon but reintroduced by the Qing court in 1660 as required reading for candidates, thus effectively reducing the relative importance of the Four Books.
The Qing emphasis on filial piety had a number of consequences. First, the 1657 version of the Xiaojing was designed to be accessible not only to the literati but principally to ordinary people. Indeed, the Qing court’s emphasis on filial piety was to introduce a direct line of spiritual communication between the emperor and his imperial subjects by linking his role of ruler with that of teacher, previously the province of the literati. Second, the literati thus found their intellectual role reduced and their carriage of the Confucian tradition compromised relative to that of the neo-Confucians of the Song-Ming period. Third, the imperial promotion of filial piety enhanced the position of patriarchal clans in the structure of dynastic rule. Although the self-protection and social organizational roles of rural clans began to increase during the Ming dynasty this process was enhanced and consolidated by the Qing during which time clans effectively took responsibility for security, welfare, education and taxation in rural communities. Weber is aware of the importance of clan organization and its basis in the relations of filial piety (Weber 1964: 86-95, 157-58) but he assumed that the patriarchal principle was a constant of imperial rule and not something subject to developmental tendencies culminating in its refined manifestation during the Qing (Hamilton 1984).

Weber’s purpose in writing The Religion of China in 1913-15 was to demonstrate the uniqueness of the West in the advent of modern industrial capitalism. The failure of the latter to emerge in China, he argues, was because of the inherent traditionalism of Confucianism, among other things. While Weber acknowledges the cultist sacrifices to Confucius in imperial court rituals his notion of religion, as consisting of a congregation united in faith and organized by a specialist clergy, led him to insist that Confucianism is not a religion (Weber 1964: 146, 156). And yet at the time of his writing there were efforts in China to develop a Confucian religion along the lines of the Protestant church, endeavours undertaken as part of a program to modernize China’s economy and society and address the limitations identified by Weber of Chinese institutions and ‘mentality’. It is a weakness of Weber’s argument, then, that those Chinese efforts to address these problems are not discussed or even mentioned by him, for they indicate something of the complexity of and possibilities in Confucianism that significantly touch his argument.

China’s Self-Strengthening Movement, during 1861 to 1895, encompassed a number of initiatives of the Qing government in response to its defeat in the Opium Wars of 1839-42 and 1856-60, the subsequent unequal treaties and the concessions imposed by the British and other foreign powers. A contemporary slogan, Zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong (Chinese learning for substance, Western learning for function), captures the idea that borrowing from the West in defense of Chinese interests required some adoption of Chinese ‘substance’ to Western forms. This came to have a number of consequences for the development of Confucian thought and practice. The Self-Strengthening Movement, however, was an expression of Confucian conservatism in the sense
that it was uninterested in enacting social and political reform and primarily concerned with the transfer of modern technology, including military technology, to China. The next phase of official reform, Wuxu Bianfa (Hundred Days Reform) of 1898, had much wider consequences.

Wuxu Bianfa effectively introduced a modernizing trend within Confucianism through acceptance of two concepts previously unknown in China, zongjiao (religion) and mixin (superstition). Religion was seen by the Qing court as an element in the strength of Western powers, both in their state and economy, a proposition with which Weber would concur. The Qing government therefore in effect promoted religion in its commitment to rid China of superstition. The perpetrators of the attack on superstition were literati. They encouraged the destruction of Buddhist, Daoist and local cult temples in order to confiscate their income and property, to be used in financing new school buildings and thereby ultimately strengthen the state (Goossaert 2006). The anti-superstition posture of late-Qing Confucianism raised two contradictory possibilities. Prior to Wuxu Bianfa Confucianism was a socially-embedded set of practices tightly associated with an ethical-ritual core of filial piety and ancestor worship. With the religion-superstition distinction as part of state strengthening, Confucianism could take a religious form, institutionally distinct, hierarchically organized with a clergy over a congregation, and with worship of Confucius as a god. Alternatively, Confucianism could be a non-religious civic faith, expressing the Chinese national essence independent of the religious or doctrinal commitment of individual guomin (literally, nation’s people) or citizens. Both possibilities acquired support but neither succeeded.

A leading Confucian intellectual of the period, Kang Youwei (1858-1927), a principal exponent of Confucian anti-superstitionism, attempted to correct the perceived feebleness of literati Confucianism and its inability to strengthen the Chinese state by creating a Confucian church, modelled on European Protestantism. Kang’s Kongjiaohui (Confucian Church) was designed to transform Confucius into a Christ-like figure in the context of an organized clergy and a congregation of faithful believers (Kuo 2013). Although Kang’s success was limited, attracting few adherents, versions of his model were tried a number of times and persisted in various forms from the 1890s up to the Republican period (1912-49) into the 1920s (Fan 2010).

The Kongjiao (Confucian religion) movement met a number of obstacles. It never acquired support from the majority of Confucians, who objected to the notion that Confucianism could be disembedded from the fabric of ritual and convention and turned into an institutionally distinct organizational form founded on doctrine and faith. Also, Chinese modernizers, including many sympathetic to Confucianism, accepted that a modern political constitution required a separation of church and state. This meant that the Confucian heritage could be preserved by the state only by avoiding an official endorsement of Confucianism as a religion. It is for this reason that in 1893 the
Qing official Peng Guangyu argued at the First World Congress of Religion in Chicago that Confucianism is not a religion, understood as a sectarian tradition, but rather a ‘state doctrine’ (Yang 2008: 15). Similarly, the drafters of the Republican constitution in 1912-13 ‘struck down the Bill of National Religion and chose instead to write Confucianism into the constitution as the foundation of national education’ (Kuo 2013: 263). Both Peng and the drafters of the Republican constitution followed the example of Meiji Japan in its construction of State Shintō as a civic rather than a religious expression of Japanese nationality (Hardacre 1989).

The second possibility of modernized Confucianism, then, was to provide it with a central role in the educational reforms of 1902-04 and extending into the final days of the Qing dynasty. The creation of a national school system, partly connected with the campaign of temple destruction, was designed to strengthen the nation by providing training in modern vocational skills and disciplines, including science and mathematics, and also to inculcate patriotism and political loyalty in students. The curriculum was therefore a mix of both Western learning and Confucian learning, including recitation of Confucian texts and worship of Confucius in the classroom (Kuo 2008). The use of Confucian teaching to foster patriotism was also a lesson learned from Meiji Japan, where Shintō was elemental in a ‘national learning’ that inculcated a sense of national identity (Hardacre 1989). The importance of Meiji Japan as an example to Chinese reformers has been widely noted. But the Meiji Restoration occurred through regional or domain elite groups displacing, in 1868, the feudal Tokugawa shogunate. The dominant modernizing elites that emerged in China, however, were not associated with traditional society, as they were in Japan.

The New Culture Movement (1913-17) and May Fourth Movement (1919-21) were led by emergent elites disassociated from the elite of established Qing society. They identified Confucianism with the failed Qing dynasty, they rejected court ritual and in dispelling superstition they had no place for its coupled opposite religion, certainly not Confucian religion. A leader of the May Fourth Movement, Chen Duxiu (1879-1924), who went on to co-found the Communist Party in 1921, famously declared in 1919 his generation’s support for ‘Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science’ and its rejection of Confucianism:

In order to advocate Mr. Democracy, we are obliged to oppose Confucianism, the codes of rituals, chastity of women, traditional ethics (loyalty, filial piety, chastity), and old-fashioned politics (privileges and government by men alone); in order to advocate Mr. Science we have to oppose traditional arts and traditional religion (ghosts and gods); and in order to advocate both Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science we are compelled to oppose the cult of ‘national quintessence’ and ancient literature (quoted in Chow 1960: 59).

Some form of Confucianism may not necessarily be antithetical to a modern Chinese nation and society (Wang Gungwu 2012). At the time China attempted
to first achieve them, though, Confucianism was so inextricably connected with the failed attempts to transform Qing society from within that Confucianism itself was rejected by the new modernizers as inherently traditional. This was also Weber’s view. He failed to appreciate, though, that Confucianism is a mix of possibilities. We are reminded of the veracity of this last claim by the advent of Confucian Institutes around the world financed from Beijing and the present rise in mainland China of New Confucianism (Song 2003; Tan 2008).

Conclusion
The above account of developments in Confucianism, occupying over 2,000 years from the Han dynasty to the beginning of Republican China, indicates emergent themes and also sharp contrasts. One concerns the tension between Confucian borrowing from other traditions and claims regarding its ‘orthodoxy’ based on its association (until 1911) with state administration, providing Confucianism with ideological dominance through its role in imperial rule. The notion of orthodoxy applied to Confucianism during this period fails to grasp the nature of its dominance, however, given the emphasis Confucianism places on correct behavior – including ritual behavior – rather than correct belief, on orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy properly understood. At the same time, literati antipathy to Buddhism and Daoism can be related to the former’s responsibilities in imperial administration rather than to competition between these different traditions in doctrine and for influence. Jesuit transformation of Confucian ‘orthodoxy’, on the other hand, implies heresy in Buddhist and Daoist ‘heterodoxy’. Late-Qing literati anti-superstition campaigns introduced yet another understanding of Confucian orthodoxy in which heterodox sects were not merely heretical but politically illegitimate.

A notable contrast in consideration of Confucianism is the possible ascription to it of either religious or civic characterization. European observers disagreed whether imperial Confucian cults were religious or civic, a concern largely stimulated by Christian missionary interest. All agreed, however, that literati Confucianism was socially-embedded, consisting of rituals and codes concerning filial piety and ancestor worship, rather than a distinct organizational form in the manner of European churches. This changed during the late-Qing and early Republican periods when Confucian churches were established and the state, in a contrary move, attempted to found Confucianism as a non-religious civic faith supportive of a modern Chinese nationalism, both new departures in Confucian possibilities, neither of which survived beyond the Republican period. It was not possible to discuss here New Confucianism, developed during the 20th century in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Boston. The construction of this socially dis-embedded and intellectually-formed version of Confucianism, with carriage of a ‘spiritual’ and semi-religious dimension, takes these possibilities even further (Dirlik 2011). At the same time, these developments, like the earlier Song-Ming neo-Confucian appropriations of
Buddhist elements, qualify the idea that Confucianism remains an indigenous Chinese tradition.

An account of the historical development of Confucianism reveals a dynamism and plasticity that is simply missing from Weber’s detailed examination in The Religion of China. Weber confined his investigation to literati Confucianism during the imperial period and its role in the inhibition of Chinese capitalism. It can be noted, however, that he wrote at a time of fundamental revolutionary transformation in China in which Confucianism took on historically new roles and developed forms previously inconceivable. It is a matter of record that Weber neglected these and associated events. The consequences, though, for the relevance of his analysis of Confucianism for continuing research cannot be ignored.

References


