

Of xinzhong yao's book introduction to confucianism assignment

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In Introduction to Confucianism, Xinzhong Yao strives to convey a balanced understanding of the Chinese / East Asian tradition of Confucius as it has evolved over the last 2500 years from ancient times to contemporary relevance, from the classics into practice and all within a single book. Yao aims to distinguish his presentation of the subject matter from previous introductions that have taken a more historical approach.

He writes for a western audience and for students who are assumed new to Confucianism while also appearing to address his peers and anticipated critics. He draws from his experience of teaching Confucianism in a university setting and includes excerpts of academic articles that he has previously published. His arrangement is primarily thematic, with aspects of the religious and philosophical nature of Confucianism and the intellectual creativity of prominent Confucian scholars sprinkled throughout.

Yao's methodology is to conduct a 'double investigation', acting both from the inside as a 'bearer of the values examined' and from the outside as a 'critic of the doctrine presented'. By continually revisiting the underlying question, over what Confucianism was and is from different angles, Yao intends to lead the reader into greater depth and complexity. The effort Yao puts forth is truly admirable, yet he tries to accomplish too much in a single book. In large part, he succeeds at presenting a balanced, academic understanding of Confucianism in light of his five stages or dimensions.

In my experience however, many aspects of Yao's organization and methodology interfered with my sincere effort to gain an 'inside' understanding of and appreciation for the spiritual / religious nature of

Confucianism, even though this appears to be his ultimate goal. In the introduction, Yao states his five stages or dimensions of the subject matter. For the remainder of the book, I could sense these dimensions as an undercurrent that remained present and relevant to the material presented, although Yao never addresses them again formally.

Chapter 1 begins with the conditions giving rise to the inception of Confucianism and discusses its fundamental themes in broad strokes. Readers acquire a basic sense of who Confucius was and what motivated him within the context of a turbulent period in China. Then, instead of narrowing in on a definition of Confucianism, Yao pushes the parameters of any definition further and further out by exploring its different themes. Before delving into the Confucian classics and their significance, Yao prematurely begins to jump between various names, schools and debates that helped to shape Confucianism and propel it forward.

I would have preferred Yao to introduce the many new names and titles in order and in context before switching between different interpretations. By the time I reached the second chapter, which lays out a historical evolution / transformation of Confucianism, I felt determined to get a handle on this new terminology. By presenting snapshots, including significant names, concepts and titles, and placing these in the order of how events transpired, Yao effectively constructs a skeleton of Confucianism as it has taken shape over time.

I referred back to this skeletal formation of parts when reading about a name, date or title later in the book, and this proved to be essential in aiding

my understanding. Not only could I recall information, I was also able to see how things fit together and in relationship to one another within a continuum of Confucian interpretation and application. In the third chapter, Yao focuses on the three main elements, which he designates as Heaven, humans and harmony of the Confucian Way. In *The Way of Heaven*, Yao attempts to explain some very abstract concepts concerning various interpretations of the meaning and function of Heaven.

I found the section concerning humans particularly useful in addressing some lingering questions regarding various Confucian views of human nature. Some Confucians argue that humans are born good and others claim just the opposite. There is no consensus among Confucians regarding the meaning and function of Heaven, and explaining the concepts of religion, immortality and evil for example, require Yao to act as a bridge between the east and west. Overall, he does a good job at explaining these definitions. From the outside, Yao exposes these ideas as resistant to the western constraints of categorization.

When viewed from the inside within the Confucian Way, the 'contradictions' that the western eye may observe do not present a problem. Yao's detailed explanation of Harmony as the most important virtue added to my understanding but also presented me with some challenges. Confucianism has no clear distinction between Heaven and humanity and the relationship between Heaven and humans is perceived through *The Way of Harmony*. Harmony is indeed a central theme within Confucianism and on all levels of relationships and society (individual, familial, governmental, and spiritual).

Some of the traditional ideas concerning the roles of women and children and the obligations of people in the name of 'harmony' were particularly unsettling for me. Yao navigates through this messy territory by trying to stick to his 'double investigation'. At times, he seems to lean towards a defense or rationalization of the ways Confucianism has been misused. Still, he does acknowledge the role of Confucianism in contributing to these applications, but only partially and indirectly.

In my opinion, Yao simply did not go far enough in settling these concerns and for me this weakened his position as a 'bearer' of Confucian values. This unfortunately overshadowed the positive characteristics of Confucian harmony. It is interesting that a discussion about harmony left me feeling more disharmonious. According to Confucian belief on the other hand, the responsibility of achieving harmony rests with me. With all of Yao's reminders about how significant and meaningful Confucianism has been as a religion, I was looking forward to the fourth chapter about the ritual and practice of Confucianism.

To my surprise, Yao repeats many of the same sentiments about its religious elements and significance. I read carefully to find something that would add to my understanding of the depth and meaning of ritual and its practices. Yao misses this opportunity by talking about ritual or around practices, but never draws me in as if from the inside. Close to the beginning of the last chapter, I was happy to see Yao's comprehensive and balanced articulation of how Confucianism has interacted with other traditions. However, after having read numerous slanted statements throughout the book about

Buddhism contaminating or Daoism failing and then about the principal of righteousness or about the Confucian Ultimate, this much needed explanation came entirely too late. I would have liked to read Yao's fair-minded perspective regarding the relationship between these three religions right from the start to avoid any misunderstandings. The last chapter presented an interesting look at the efforts currently happening to revive Confucianism with some critics claiming it is a dead tradition.

Yao argues for the modern relevance of Confucianism by pointing out characteristics that he has already highlighted and bringing up more debates. He makes some overgeneralizations regarding what Confucians believe, making claims such as ?? nobody would deny?? (page 277) a gradual revival of its relevance, without including any evidence. This is hardly persuasive after having read how truly diverse Confucianism is. Still, by looking at the efforts of those who care deeply about Confucianism, I could perceive it as a living tradition. This was an appropriate place to leave off in the long journey of Confucianism.

Throughout the book, Yao reveals so many ways of looking at Confucianism on so many levels, that this investigation of Confucianism tends to overpower Yao's request for my empathy. His approach triggered the critical thinking part of my brain to the extent that I found it difficult to put this 'outside' approach aside so that I could sense and appreciate the spiritual dimension of Confucianism from the 'inside'. An example of this is when Yao discusses the chief aim of Confucian Learning in terms of understanding

Heaven within the context of ritual and religious practice on page 213 where he identifies ren as the most important virtue.

Instead of appreciating the feeling of this concept, I flipped back to page 172 where harmony is featured as ?? the most important of all virtues??. At the time it seemed as if I had caught Yao making contradictory claims. Upon further reflection, I realized that this was not the case. What is it about Yao's approach that activates my suspicion? I realized later that I would have liked to know exactly when Yao is using his 'inside' position and when he is speaking from the 'outside'. This is not always clear and this caused me to put my guard up not knowing how to interpret these variations.

Secondly, Yao switches between inside and outside presentations so seamlessly that his statements appear to be contradictory at times. Even though the reader has been warned of the pitfalls and Yao has explained his methodology in advance, more needed to be done to clarify which position he is taking at a given time. I experienced catching myself stuck in the western analytical mindset of criticism, remaining removed from the material most of the time. In my view, it is not by talking about something, but rather showing that a reader is most likely to see something that is unfamiliar (especially with empathy and from the inside).

Talking about something, just based on the feeling of the words used alone leads to the experience of viewing something as if outside of it. I wonder if it would have helped if Yao had chosen to use descriptive language and avoided the analytical voice when speaking from the inside (in a transparent way). Perhaps then, he would have drawn me into seeing Confucianism for

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myself. As Yao has presented the material, I found I was in a constant struggle with my critical tendencies.

I have read other eastern explanations of cultural differences where this was not the case. Yao's 'double investigation' as it stands may have backfired with its emphasis on the debates. In the area in which I believe Yao to have reserved his greatest personal aspiration in writing this book, he has been the least successful. In the end, this may be due to Yao taking on more than can be reasonably handled in a single book. Attempting to cover the material as he did, Yao reveals how talented he is when it comes to understanding two worlds and the spaces in between.

Yet for me, the feeling of Confucianism was never transmitted in any deep and meaningful way. By the end, I found that I had cultivated more criticism than empathy and accumulated more debates than harmonious agreement. Perhaps Yao did as well as anyone could have under the circumstances after placing such high expectations upon himself. Then again, perhaps the task of finding harmony... rightfully rests on me. With time and reflection, I have little doubt that feeling left behind by Yao's book will be transformed into something new.