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'Unexpected Affinities' and 'Fatal Errors': Ambiguities in the Romantic Reception of Confucius

In the field of orientalist study there has been much discussion of the ways in which the British during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries engaged with eastern religion, most notably the beliefs of Hinduism and Islam, about which there is now a substantial body of criticism. In the case of Hinduism, it is frequently argued that Romantic period writers and scholars alternatively classicized or mystified this body of religious thought. It is often claimed that Britons either homogenized and simplified such complex and various bodies of belief in the service of their colonial agendas or, less frequently, resisted this very orientalist project. Richard King, for instance has argued that the "notion of a Hindu religion [...] was initially invented by Western Orientalists basing their observations upon a Judaeo-Christian understanding of religion [...] the product of an interaction between the Western Orientalist and the brahmanical pundit" (90). We are very familiar with the view that Romantic Orientalists mystified such Eastern cultures, frequently in a spirit of admiration (Coleridge and Shelley) but equally as often to demonize or degrade (Southey and De Quincey). This essay, however, deals with the cognate and contemporary process of translating and evaluating another 'eastern' belief system; in this case, it is applied to Romantic period understandings of the Chinese Confucianism.

By and large, Confucianism seems to have been highly resistant to the process of Romantic mystification, largely because it was already established in the European imagination as primarily an ethical system of practical thinking rather than a visionary one, unlike, say, Daoism and Buddhism, and one that had a substantial Enlightenment presence in the major Jesuit translations of the seventeenth century (Porter, *Ideographia* 78-132). As such, Confucianism escaped Romantic period exoticization. While concerned with ethical introspection, it also privileged social and collective relationships, rather than the spiritual individualism often identified as one of the hallmarks of Romanticism. In Max Weber's influential theoretical perspective, it was precisely Confucianism's lack of personal or individual spiritual dynamism that prevented the growth of capitalism and thus industrialization in China. Against the construction of a passive and dream-like Hinduism, so congenial to the young Coleridge, Confucianism was concerned with activity in the world and rather too close to the tenets of a hierarchical Catholicism to be subject to obvious mystification and exoticization. In this respect, it was difficult to imagine Confucianism as a clear alternative to an active, rationalist, British Protestantism, to be held in dialectical relationship of opposition and attraction to western beliefs. Conversely, Confucianism's stress on the hierarchical relations between rulers and subjects, and fathers and their wives and children, also rendered it unlikely to be a candidate for a radical and countercultural appropriation for mainstream Romantic political and

religious thought, though it had previously permeated the American Enlightenment of Paine and Franklin. Thus, despite its own classicizing dynamic, Confucianism failed to emerge as a rival to the very powerful Hellenic *zeitgeist* that swept the second generation of Romantic writers, Keats, Shelley, and Byron and their German contemporaries, exemplified in Shelley's famous and perfunctory dismissal of China and Japan in his preface to *Hellas* (1819) with their "stagnant and miserable state of social institution" (431).

This essay features the first British attempts at translating Confucius. We might think that such attempts would be more celebrated and well-known than they are at present, given the renewed interest in the emerging canons of world literature, and that scholars of Sino-British history and cultural exchange would have rushed to explore their cultural and literary significance. British sinology is primarily founded on the works of later scholars of Chinese culture; diplomats such as Herbert Giles and Thomas Wade, and the first truly accomplished British sinologist, the missionary and first professor of Chinese at Oxford (1876), James Legge. Legge famously developed an understanding of the Confucianism as symbiotic with Christianity and deserving of serious respect (Barrett; Giradot). Yet British sinology began much earlier, as David Porter has claimed, with the Chinese researches and publications of Thomas Percy and Sir William Jones (Porter, *Chinese Taste* 154-83). Their pioneering work was built upon by a range of missionaries, diplomats, and East India Company servants, notably George Thomas Staunton, John Francis Davis, Robert Morrison, William Milne, Walter Henry Medhurst, Samuel Kidd and others, such as David Collie, who finally translated the 'Four Books' attributed to Confucius in 1828 at Malacca. This body of scholarship I have described elsewhere as a 'Romantic Sinology', marking it off from the great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sinology of the Catholic missionaries (notably that of Jesuit Matteo Ricci) and the later Victorian sinology of Wade, Giles, and Legge, enabled by the defeat of China in the 'Opium Wars' of 1839-42 and 1856-59 and the violent realignments that they accomplished (Kitson).

This essay poses the question of why Confucian philosophy, which had the enormous potential to synergize with much Romantic thinking, seems to have made comparatively little impact on thinkers and artists in the period. Confucian cosmogony, founded on the notion of the unity of a dynamic and active natural world in which heaven (*tian*) is both transcendent and immanent and the universe is infused with an active and vital principle (*qi*), or 'plastic nature', could be seen to have obvious synergies or affinities with the ideas of those Romantic writers such as Coleridge and Shelley who enthusiastically embraced the concept of an active nature that they believed was foreshadowed in Eastern thought. Confucian thought, so appealing to the mind of the European Enlightenment, did not appeal to British Romantic writers in quite the same way, becoming instead for them symptomatic of China's apparent political, moral, and economic stagnation. One of the main problems for British writers is that, in the nineteenth century, Confucianism came to stand for a China constructed in a virtual opposition to British notions of modernity, actively resistant to

contemporary understandings of progress. The prestige of Confucian thinking both in China and in the West presented one of the single most substantial challenges to those who wished to claim the superiority of the Christian religion and British culture and science. The Confucianism that Britons encountered was an ancient, classical body of thought, which aspired (and still does), as much as western ideologies to the status of universality.

Bengal Confucianism: William Jones and Joshua Marshman

For many in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Confucius simply *was* China, and the esteem in which the philosopher was held was intimately bound up with the prevailing estimation of the empire. In the words of Adolf Rochwein, Confucius became "the patron saint of eighteenth-century Enlightenment" (Rochwein 98). Prior to the first English translations of Confucian texts, Britons had to rely on a body of Confucian thought produced, or in Lionel Jensen's account 'manufactured' by Jesuit missionaries to China (Jensen). They employed Latin Jesuit translations that presented Confucian thinking as a form of rational monotheism, entirely devoid of pagan idolatry. Jesuit scorn was instead reserved for the more popular forms of Chinese Buddhism and Daoism. The first British attempts at the systematic study of the Chinese philosopher's work occurred not in Great Britain itself, but at Calcutta in Bengal, administered by the English East India Company and the adjacent town of Serampore. This project was initiated by the major orientalist and Company servant, Sir William Jones, and the missionary, Joshua Marshman (Kitson 45-72). Despite their differing ideological assumptions, both these men attempted to assimilate Confucian thinking, at least initially, to their own distinctive and differing worldviews rather than dismiss it as antiquated or pagan.

In many ways, William Jones, chief justice of the Supreme Court of Judicature at Fort William in Bengal and translator, interpreter and editor of classical texts of literature, philosophy and law, may well have been struck by the similarity of his position to that of the Chinese philosopher.¹ As a radical thinker of deistic sentiments, highly sympathetic to classical oriental culture, Jones found the rationalism of Confucian thinking rather congenial and admired the "venerable dignity" of this "Chinese Plato" (*Letters* 1:59-60). He read the major Jesuit edition of Confucian works, *Confucius sinarum philosophus, sive, Scientia sinensis latine exposita* (1687), early in his career and later came to possess Chinese originals of several Confucian texts, including the *Shijing* (Book or Classic of Poetry) and the *Lunyu* (Analects) supplied by his friends the Guangzhou (Canton) merchants, Whang Atong and James Henry Cox.²

1 For Jones and China see Fan Cunzhong; Kitson, 45-59.

2 The Catalogue of manuscripts and books gifted to the Royal Society by Jones includes several volumes of works by Confucius, the *Shijing* and *Lunyu* supplied by Whang as well as an MS Chinese and Latin Dictionary(Jones, *Works* [1807] 6:452-53).

Jones knew something of Confucius as early as 1770 when, impressed by the educational arguments of the Confucian classic the *Daxue* (Great Learning), he adapted its leading principles for his emerging educational ideas as set forth in his "Tract of Education" (Fan).

A celebrated Eastern philosopher begins his first dissertation with the following period. The perfect education of a great man, consists in three points: in cultivating and improving his understanding; in assisting and reforming his countrymen; and in procuring to himself the chief good, or a fixed and unalterable habit of virtue. (Jones *Memoir* 1:177-78; Fan 325-57)³

Jones states the essentials of Confucian ethical thinking here, though he interprets the first Confucian imperative as espousing a process of self-renovation through the cultivation of virtue rather than understanding (see Fan 327; Hilleman 58-60). He claims that the primary purpose of education should lie in an Enlightenment-inspired ethic of "fixing the good of ourselves and our fellow creatures," and he considers the cultivation of our understanding and the acquisition of knowledge" as secondary purposes. Before it is even possible to grasp the differences between right and wrong, the "mind must be enlightened by an improvement of our natural reason" (*Memoirs* 1:179). The presence of Confucian pedagogy in Jones's enlightened educational scheme is further evidence that such knowledge had a truly global circulation and context. As Michael J. Franklin aptly puts it, "the wisdom of China, imported to Europe by a Belgian Jesuit, is reapplied in Calcutta by a half-Welsh Orientalist for the benefit of 'Company hands'; it is within their hands to enrich the West, and indeed India, by their researches" (20).

Though Jones was highly sympathetic to Confucius and classical Chinese writing, it was the Jesuit account of Confucian thinking that he appears to have assimilated without any serious reservations, despite his religious scepticism. Throughout his life, he aspired to translate the three hundred or so odes in the Confucian Classic of Poetry, or the *Shijing*, but was never able to accomplish his wish. In his "On the Second Classical Book of the Chinese" of 1790, Jones quotes Confucius from the *Lunyu* 16.9-10 at length, justifying the value of the poetry of the *Shijing*: "the Odes teach us our duty to our parents at home, and abroad to our prince; they instruct us also delightfully in the various productions of nature."⁴ Jones's stress on the "productions of nature" here strikes a familiarly Romantic chord. He claimed to possess both an original Chinese copy of the *Lunyu*, probably supplied to him by Whang Atong, as well as "a verbal translation of the work" which was probably the very first direct translation of a complete Confucian text into English (*Works* [1799], 1:100). In his "Seventh Anniversary Discourse, on the Chinese," also of 1790, Jones summed up what he understood by Confucian thinking about religion:

3 See also Jones, *Memoir*, 1:78-79; 163-65; 170-80, 487-89 and Fan, 325-57.

4 William Jones, "On the Second Classical Book of the Chinese" (in *Works* [1799] 2:367-68; Confucius, *The Analects*, 145).

[...] they professed a firm belief in the supreme GOD, and gave a demonstration of his being and of his providence from the exquisite beauty and perfection of the celestial bodies, and the wonderful order of nature in the whole fabrick of the visible world. From this belief they deduced a system of Ethicks, which the philosopher sums up in a few words at the close of the *Lín-yù*: 'He,' says Confucius, 'who shall be fully persuaded, that the Lord of Heaven governs the universe, who shall in all things chuse moderation, who shall perfectly know his own species, and so act among them, that his life and manners may conform to his knowledge of GOD and man, may be truly said to discharge all duties of a sage, and to be far exalted above the common herd of the human race' (Works [1799] 1:106-7).

While this summary of Confucian cosmology is close to what we might call Jones's own enlightened deism where both a supreme being and a system of practical ethics is deduced from the beauty and perfection of the "fabrick of the visible world" rather than by divine revelation. This ethical system, Jones believes, promotes moderation and positive action.

Despite the sophistication of his linguistic study of Chinese, however, Jones was unable to produce his own Confucian texts to challenge the major Latin translations of the Jesuit missionaries. Thus his project of a new Enlightenment Confucius never took definitive shape to influence the coming generations. It was not rational deists like Jones but more obsessive British Protestant missionaries that began the translations of Confucian texts in the early nineteenth century. These fervent Christians were rather surprised and, perhaps, not a little disappointed in not finding any unambiguous references to a supreme God or to the mention of an afterlife, which the artfully constructed Jesuit accounts had encouraged them to expect. Jones's discourse is thus testament both to the continued acceptance of the existing Jesuit construction (or falsification) of Confucianism at the end of the eighteenth century as an ancient monotheist form of worship and of his willingness to accept Confucian philosophy on equal terms with that of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle.

It was thus certainly possible for Chinese thought and literature to have made a substantial impact on British Romantic period writing if Jones or someone of his linguistic ability had had the opportunity to develop his Chinese studies in addition to his Persian and Sanskrit studies. The deistic Enlightenment's championing of Confucian rationalism would persist. Benjamin Franklin admired Confucian thinking and, in his *Age of Reason* (1794), Thomas Paine compared the morality preached by Jesus Christ to that of the Chinese sage: "though similar systems of morality had been preached by Confucius, and by some of the Greek philosophers, many years before; by the Quakers since; by many good men in all ages; it has not been exceeded by any" (211). Yet an influential radical Enlightenment thinker, such as Constantin Volney, regarded China as the Asian despotism *par excellence* "held in awe by strokes of the bamboo, enslaved by the immutability of their code, and by the irremediable vice of their language [...] an abortive civilization and a race of automata" (119). It would not henceforth be easy for reformers or radicals to appeal to a philosopher so closely identified with what was increasingly viewed as the archetypal oriental despotism, nor

would those of a more socially conservative mind find the tenets of a thinker especially congenial who did not comment to any extent on spiritual matters and whose position among the Chinese was increasingly identified with idolatry or atheism. But before Confucius could be fully weighed in the balance and found wanting, sinologists would need to penetrate beneath what they saw as the accretions of Jesuit casuistry and sophistry to produce an authentic Confucius with their own editions of his writings stripped of Catholic bias.

Bengal remained the key site to produce British knowledge about China until the second decade of the nineteenth century (Hillemann). At Danish-administered Serampore, just a few miles north of British-governed Calcutta, William Carey had established his missionary Baptist College. As part of the Baptist project to translate scripture into the languages of Southeast Asia, Carey's fellow labourer in Christ, Joshua Marshman, began a study of Chinese language and literature. He published a Chinese grammar in 1814 and translations of two of the 'Four Books', the *Lunyu* and the *Daxue* in 1809 and 1814 respectively (or *Lun-gnee* or *Ta Hyoh* in his transliteration). With Marshman and his colleagues an important strand, possibly the dominant one, in early British sinology is established. Throughout the nineteenth century the leading British experts on China were primarily missionaries, with a few notable exceptions, such as George Thomas Staunton and John Francis Davis. Primarily this was because of their chief imperative to translate the Bible into Chinese. To do this they needed to be able to write Chinese and master advanced forms of Chinese writing. A proficiency in Chinese made them *de facto* leading sinologists who had access to Chinese literature and philosophy. It was not until the British government began to deal directly with the Qing court (after the end of the East India Company monopoly on trade in 1833) that career diplomats such as Herbert Giles and Thomas Wade and maritime administrators such as Samuel Turner Fearon, also began to emerge as important sinologists (Barrett; Kitson; Giradot).

Marshman was one of the first of the Protestant missionary body to translate this message to Southeast Asia. He arrived at Danish-administered Serampore in 1799 to support Carey.⁵ In 1809 he published the first volume of his projected series of *The Works of Confucius; containing the original text, with a translation*. This volume contained the first known published translation into English of the first ten books of the *Lunyu*. It was described as the first of a five-volume set, although the rest remained unpublished. As far as is known this is only the second direct translation of a major Chinese text into English to be published after Thomas Percy's *Hau Kiou Choann* of 1761. Marshman's later *Elements of Chinese Grammar* of 1814 contained a complete translation of the "Ta-Hyoy" (the *Daxue* or the *Great Learning*) into English by his son James Clark Marshman. Marshman produced his Serampore translation with the help of the Armenian Chinese speaker Johannes Lasser, the Chinese Ya Meng (Aman), and several other assistants.⁶ I have discussed Marshman's pioneering translation in

5 For the Serampore Mission, see Chatterjee; Frykenberg; Dasgupta; Sivasundaram.

6 See Wang Hui and Ye Lamei 413-26; and Chatterjee 59-60.

more detail elsewhere, but for the purposes of this essay, it is sufficient to note that he attempted to reassess Confucianism as akin to Protestant thought, arguing that Confucius held to a notion of a providential supreme ultimate (Kitson 64-72).

Marshman's *Confucius* was influential, especially in America. It was known to Emerson and Thoreau who were sufficiently intrigued by the 'unexpected affinities' (in Zhang Longxi's redolent phrase) with their own thought. The *Quarterly Review* for 1814 devoted a very substantial (in size if not in understanding) 'state of the art' review essay by John Barrow entitled "Progress of Chinese Literature in Europe" that assessed Marshman's edition for a readership of some 20,000 or so Britons. Barrow had served as the comptroller of Macartney's 1792-94 embassy to China, and was author of a very influential account of it, *Travels in China* (1804). Though praising the missionary's linguistic skills, Barrow mocks his literary abilities, branding the work as a 'laborious drudgery'. He accuses Marshman of being impervious to the cultural significance of the work, producing a crude and rather literal decipherment. In a withering passage the review comments that:

The disciples of Confucius, in preserving his moral maxims, imitated his style. That a plain man like Mr. Marshman, in attempting to translate symbols of this description into the English language, without any knowledge of the peculiar tenets and habits of thinking which prevail among the Chinese, should altogether fail, and frequently write nonsense, is not in the least surprising; but we confess that we were not prepared for the extremely mean and meagre dress in which he has exhibited these homely truths of the great sage: they are absolutely disgusting from their nakedness; and we will venture to say, that the manual of a village schoolmistress or parish clerk never exhibited a set of maxims more trite and puerile than those to be found in every page from the first to the last of Mr Marshman's tremendous quarto. (Barrow 336-38)

In deflating the scholarship of Marshman's team (Barrow seems entirely unaware of the collaborative nature of the edition), the *Quarterly* sets the British tone for the new century by diminishing Confucius as a teacher and philosopher. For Barrow Confucian 'dogmas' were enveloped in 'mystical characters' which lead to the belief that they contained truth, but Marshman's basic translation has rendered them threadbare and demystified. Barrow argues that it is the 'visible symbol' of the talismanic Chinese character that has given Confucius his authority. Deprived of this mystique in literal prose translation and glosses, the charisma of the sage is lost. Barrow's point here oddly recalls Thomas Paine's criticism of Burke and his demystification of monarchy. Confucius is accused of inculcating in the reader a 'dull passive morality' preaching only 'patience, obedience and gravity'. Barrow criticizes Marshman as a dissenter possessed of zeal and enthusiasm but of no literary sensibility. However biased, this criticism has a certain accuracy. Marshman's translation has very few stylistic flourishes, doing a disservice to his highly literary originals: "the charm is at once dispelled and we find nothing remaining but the mere *caput mortuum* of some stale remark or homely truth" (Barrow 337, 338).

Malacca Confucianism: Robert Morrison and the Anglo-Chinese College

Barrow's rather crabby estimation of Confucius sets the tone for much of the early and mid-nineteenth century prior to the serious and sophisticated re-evaluation in the translations of James Legge much later in the century (Giradot). Up until that historic reappraisal, Barrow's understanding of Confucianism was as an integral and informing part of China's problem, an ossified system of established textual learning which functioned mostly as an obstacle to China's progress and a reason to explain its allegedly stationary and non-progressive status. The London Missionary Society's Robert Morrison and his fellow labourers at the Anglo-Chinese College at Malacca were instrumental in this process. While Marshman had, with difficulty, attempted to accommodate Confucius to a Protestant theology, identifying key concepts such as providence and a personal god in his philosophy, Morrison and his group would now stigmatise the Chinese philosopher with atheism, materialism, and idolatry.

The group of missionaries organized around the College at Macao, newly established in 1818 to promote the study of Chinese and English, published a series of new translations of Chinese texts and literature and the first British translation directly into English of the *Daxue* or *Great Learning* by Morrison in 1812 and the complete *Four Books*, including the first direct English translation of the complete *Lunyu*, the *Zhongyong*, and the *Mengzi* in 1828.⁷ Like Marshman, the Malacca missionaries thought it important to translate the 'Four Books' into English. However skewed their underlying assumptions and methodologies, this process nevertheless involved real and sustained engagement with, and the cultural transmission of, knowledge between China and Britain. In his *Horae Sinicae*, for instance, Morrison published a "literal translation" of the *Daxue* or *Great Learning* "in which the object is not only to give his ideas, but also the style and manner of the original" (*Horae Sinicae* 20). The *Daxue* is probably preferred because of its brevity and its focus on individual ethics and self-renovation. Morrison's comments on the work are, however, minimal and he allows his translated text to speak for itself without comment.

Morrison's chief collaborator, William Milne, provides a more telling example of the overall estimation of Confucian thinking by the Malacca missionaries. He demonstrates the missionary attempt to domesticate rather than mystify Confucianism, rendering it familiar (St André 3-42). Confucius, he argues, came near to the truth but lacked those key insights only to be vouchsafed by divine revelation. He blindly "felt" his way "to many important truths in morals, yet directed his disciples to respect the Gods and KEEP THEM AT A DISTANCE." As such he is closer to the missionaries' most bitter enemies, those enlightened deists and materialists who wished to "extinguish the light of Divine Revelation" (Morrison, *Memoirs* ii). After claiming to carefully read the *Four Books*, Milne, though conceding that their morality has much value and that their style was attractive, expressed his profound disappointment at their dogged refusal to engage with notions of divinity:

7 For Morrison and the College at Malacca, see Daily; and Harrison.

These books are the Bible of the Chinese. But alas! After having read and examined them repeatedly with tolerable care, from beginning to end, how little can be discovered illustrative of the perfections of deity! How little suited to the state of man as an immortal creature! Scarcely a sentence adapted to his condition as a sinner! Even in point of morals, though there is much that is good; much that is beautifully expressed; yet how defective, and how ill suited to conduct man to virtue and to happiness! With respect to futurity they leave man entirely in the dark (*Transactions* 3:377).

Milne has read and studied these books as they are as significant to the Chinese as the Bible is to British Protestant Christians, hence his despair in finding this body of work, despite Jesuit apologetics, to constitute "*a sceptical philosophy*" closer to the thought of the rationalist Enlightenment than that of Christianity and a practical difficulty for the mission (*Retrospect* 166). He judged that the Chinese already have their Bible in the Old and New Testaments of the Confucian Five and Four Books, and that, by implication, these texts occupy the place in Chinese minds that the Christian Bible must now usurp and retain if it is to make an impact on Chinese society. Confucianism is thus not just another pagan philosophy, but an institutionalised canon of writing that structures belief, education and thought within China. This is combined with the dissenting Christian's opposition to state religions both at home and abroad. The actual worship of Confucius and the ritual sacrifices apparently made to him also encouraged the missionaries to expose and destroy this heathen idol. More disturbing, however, was the anxiety that Confucians constituted a virtual fifth column, pernicious allies of Enlightenment deists, free-thinkers, sceptics at home capable of infecting the Christian heartland with their rationalist poison. Although the challenge was never really taken up, Confucian thinking transferred to the British metropolis had the potential to undermine Christian social and ethical norms at home.

It is clear, whatever they may have said, that the missionaries gave Confucian texts their very serious attention and understood their importance for the Chinese, but that they were largely unsympathetic to their subject, often claiming that Confucius' hugely influential works more deservedly should have the status of translation exercises or exemplars of the limitations of human achievements when deprived of the blessings of divine revelation. They confronted the bare classical Chinese texts without the knowledge and understanding of the sophisticated and established tradition of Chinese commentary, and this left them puzzled by the reputation of Confucianism. Scandalized by the Chinese equivalence of the Four Books to their New Testament, they began their programme of Confucian degradation, a prelude to the political degradations of China in the Opium Wars, the first course of those nineteenth-century English lessons, described by James L. Hevia as part of the pedagogy of imperialism. Their statements about Confucian thought become harder and less ambivalent as the decades pass, though it seems likely that they began their study, like Marshman, with the Jesuit accommodationist reading in mind and became progressively disillusioned by what they saw as Confucianism's refusal to engage with their own cherished shibboleths of an afterlife, immortality, and human sinfulness.

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