

The Aura of Confucius: Relics and Representations of the Sage at the Kongzhai Shrine in Shanghai

By Julia K. Murray. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 356 pp. £75.00 (cloth)

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By comparison with the large and well-populated field that is “Buddhist art,” the perhaps not quite analogous topic of “Confucian art” has attracted few scholars. To be sure, as a classic 1960 article by James Cahill shows, there are certainly Confucian elements in the body of theory surrounding Chinese painting, but does “Confucian art” as a category *per se* even exist? In a significant and impressive body of work dating back now over more than thirty years, Julia K. Murray has persevered in demonstrating the central importance of visual and material culture, and the practices surrounding them, to the ways in which all sorts of elites across the last millennium of Chinese history engaged with the cult of the Sage. This new monograph therefore builds on decades of close and rigorous attention to texts, images, and objects surrounding the cult of Confucius, and commands attention both by the novelty of its subject and by its commendable degree of critical thinking about the sources surrounding that subject.

Intriguingly, *The Aura of Confucius* deals *not* with the great cult site that grew up around Confucius’ dwelling and grave at Qufu in Shandong, nor with Quzhou in Zhejiang, where the cult was relocated by Kong lineage refugees from the Jurchen invasion that toppled the Northern Song dynasty. Instead, it looks at the occasionally flourishing, often tenuous, always at least slightly controversial site of Kongzhai or “Kong Residence,” now lost (in more than one sense) in the Shanghai suburbs, where contact relics of Confucius—his robe and cap specifically—were supposed to have been buried at some remote point in the past. If a myth is less a simple untruth than a story that enables certain things to happen, then this myth enabled, over the centuries, the creation of a cult site that at its peak in the Kangxi era enjoyed highly covetable marks of imperial favor. By contrast, skepticism about this myth at other periods allowed neglect and decay, by now possibly but not necessarily terminal, as Kongzhai has fallen out of both the pre-modern category of “famous site” and the modern one of “cultural heritage.” As a number of poignant photographs in this very well-illustrated volume show, photographs which also bear witness to the persistent fieldwork of the author over a lengthy period, there is nothing—or practically nothing—there now. What was there once, how it was recorded and what it meant, is the burden of the book’s contents.

The story of the Shanghai Kongzhai is a complex one, and readers may well be grateful for the Appendix containing a helpful and very detailed timeline showing “The History of Kongzhai and Relevant Events in the Cult of Confucius.” That wider context is certainly essential to understanding what happened at Kongzhai. For instance, in 1530, in a major ritual reform, the Ming emperor Shizong decreed the removal of

sculpted images of Confucius from all temples across the empire, but Kongzhai fell into the privileged category of those (like Qufu and Quzhou) that were permitted to retain their images. The timeline anchors an account that is not purely chronological but more thematic, looking at the site from a number of always interrelated angles. An initial chapter draws on Julia Murray's unequalled knowledge of the material to outline the evolution of Confucius and his cults over a long time span, and in particular the role of images (painted, printed, engraved on stone) within the cults. The plural—"cults"—is important here, since it has to be one of the conclusions readers will draw from this book that there was a variety of practices, and contesting agencies, over time and across regions, however much imperial and modern state authority sought to ensure conformity and control.

A second chapter proposes an outline history of Kongzhai that few will want to challenge, based as it is on superb control of a wide range of sources. The fortuitous discovery in the twelfth century of archaic jades in the vicinity of an existing if undistinguished Confucian shrine seems to have energized a legend of the burial there of personal articles of the Sage, but it was only in the late Ming that this led to the construction of a first dedicated building complex. This may have had something to do with the creation of the new county of Qingpu in 1573, and the desire of members of the local elite for visibility and cultural capital, but it also clearly had something to do with the climate of self-consciously "pure" Confucian revival associated with the Donglin Academy in nearby Wuxi. Kongzhai reached its apogee in 1705 when local elite men successfully waylaid the Kangxi emperor on one of his southern tours and induced him to take an interest, to the degree that (although he never actually went there) he presented a piece of his hugely prestigious calligraphy, necessitating the construction of a building to house it. However, the more austere standards of Qianlong-era evidential scholarship dismissed as bogus the whole tale on which Kongzhai was founded, omitting it from imperial compendia and necessitating tricky maneuvering to avoid drawing attention to what some, at least, might have thought gullibility on the Kangxi emperor's part. Kongzhai staggered on with varying degrees of vitality through the nineteenth century, sputtered briefly into life with early-twentieth century attempts to construct a viable national religion out of the cult of Confucius, and then collapsed completely in mid-century when it was destroyed in the Cultural Revolution. Unlike Qufu, it was not rebuilt. A lengthy third chapter, which closes the first part of the book, focuses on exactly which visual representations of Confucius were present at Kongzhai across the centuries; this is ground the author has long made her own and the discussion is correspondingly both comprehensive and incisive.

The second part of the book opens with the disarming admission that "The seemingly straightforward account of Kongzhai in Part I glosses over the inconsistencies and contradictions within the primary sources that record the site." Part II therefore proceeds to a deeper critical scrutiny of those sources, engaging with the discursive practices in which Kongzhai's history is embedded. It is this critical reading of the sources which is one of this strong book's greatest strengths, and which might provide a model of good practice for historians of other topics. Few sites of *any* date have been scrutinized with this degree of precision and commitment. Perhaps Kongzhai was not in the end such a big deal, but this exemplary microhistory shows that the study of it is in no sense trivial. Ranging across successive local gazetteers and the crucial dedicated gazetteers of the Kongzhai site itself, as well as poetry collections and other texts, the author studies how Kongzhai was written about as well as how it was pictured as a place, down to the modest 1957 photo album that is the last record of how it looked.

Significantly, these texts and images are never treated naively as unproblematic “evidence,” but are understood both critically and discursively as a part of how a “Kongzhai effect” was created and sustained in the face of (often) indifference and (occasionally) hostility.

This is in some ways a record of failure, of things that didn’t happen, plans that didn’t come off (quite literally; some of the most fascinating illustrations are hand-drawn plans for unachieved renovation in the 1840s, from the archives of the Confucian headquarters at Qufu). Kongzhai was clearly never as famous, never as prominent, never as *loved* as its most dedicated supporters felt it should be. Some readers may find themselves calling to mind the poignant chapters in the great Qing novel *Ru lin wai shi*, itself set in the mid-Ming, which deal with the ultimately unsuccessful attempts of a group of local literati to institute a cult of Tai Bo, legendary founder of the Kingdom of Wu. Despite the grand ceremony narrated in loving detail in chapter 37, by the end of the novel, his temple too is “falling down.” There may perhaps have been many such failed enterprises across the Ming–Qing ritual landscape, reminding us that history is not only written by the winners, it is written *about* the winners. There are sites of forgetting, as well as *lieux de mémoire*.

Perhaps appropriately, the few surviving material fragments that have survived the wreck of Kongzhai’s fortunes have now been relocated to become embedded in one of the rebuilt “classic gardens” which are a very visible “newly old” (*xin jiu*) manifestation of a “traditional Chinese culture” in the contemporary urban landscape. This very welcome study shows just how fluid and contingent that “traditional Chinese culture” really was, far from the monolithic and triumphalist presence taken for granted in so much contemporary official discourse, which might have plenty of room for the celebration of Confucius (in his place), but which has, it seems, no place for Kongzhai. In showing us how this situation was arrived at, and the many twists and turns that led there, Julia Murray has provided an outstandingly rich and thought-provoking account, which will be of enduring value.

From Rural China to the Ivy League: Reminiscences of Transformations in Modern Chinese History.

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Professor Yü, who passed away in August 2021, published this memoir in Chinese (as *Yü Ying-shih hui yi lu* 余英時回憶錄) in 2018 at the age of 88. He tells us at the outset