

EAST ASIA

JAMES A. FLATH:

Traces of the Sage: Monument, Materiality, and the First Temple of Confucius.

(Spatial Habitus: Making and Meaning in Asia's Architecture.) xix, 290 pp. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. £50.95. ISBN 978 0 8248 5370 9.

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In contrast to mountains of scholarship on Confucius and “Confucianism” from ancient times to the present, material aspects of the cult for venerating “China’s greatest sage” have received little attention. With the publication of *Traces of the Sage*, historian James Flath advances our understanding of the primordial temple of Confucius in his hometown of Qufu, Shandong, as a major factor underpinning the sage’s sustained ritual and cultural pre-eminence. Theoretically informed and empirically rich, the book analyses the ever-evolving history of the temple’s architecture, patronage, rituals, management, and political significance, covering a period of well over 2,000 years. Using diverse sources that range from ancient commemorative inscriptions and local gazetteers to contemporary government documents and articles in obscure regional journals, Flath has created a compelling account that eloquently explicates “the work of creating architecture, the art of constructing memorials, and the problem of managing a sacred place” (p. 2). Parts of his discussion are illustrated with archival as well as contemporary photographs, including a section of colour plates. An appendix contains a convenient table of important events, titled “Chronology of construction, state patronage, and assets and entitlements of Kong Temple and the Kong family”.

Throughout the book, Flath calls his subject “Kong Temple” to distinguish it from the many other temples of Confucius in China and elsewhere, and he refers to the sage himself as “Kongzi” (Master Kong) to highlight the familial connections to the Kong lineage that made the hometown temple unique. Repeatedly rebuilt and rearticulated, Kong Temple developed from a family-ancestral shrine into a local then national site of state-sponsored ritual, including “the specific configuration of sacrifice, the conferral of titles and honors, the appointment and salary of officers, and the provision of endowments” (p. 52). Because Confucian ideology and ritual provided the cosmic-conceptual basis of dynastic governance, the demise of the imperial system in 1911 threatened the foundations of Kong Temple’s very existence. Faced with this fundamental challenge to its identity, the temple emerged as a multivalent and at times highly contested element of modern China’s cultural heritage. Flath shows how the continuity of the temple’s space and architectural substance created an enduring monument that could be regenerated even after the most dire calamities.

The first half of the book offers two chapters focusing on the materiality of Kong Temple in its episodic reconstructions and expansion during the imperial era, and one chapter each on its ritual provisions and the configuration of its sacred space. Flath lucidly describes the layout and characteristics of Kong Temple’s ultimately palatial architecture and the diverse functions of its gates, halls, stele pavilions, and ceremonial archways, sequenced with courtyards and transitional spaces. The temple’s patrons and participants in its rituals included government officials, scholars, and members of the Kong lineage in Qufu, who claimed to be the direct descendants of Confucius. Awarded various titles and substantive emoluments over the

centuries, the Kongs gained prestige from their responsibilities for preserving, managing, using, and promoting the temple. Thus “an active culture of transaction and negotiation” (p. 52) among diverse groups underlay the building of structures, organizing of space, and performance of rituals. Commemorative texts framed specific developments within a grand narrative of the temple as a continuous and permanent entity, while archival sources recorded managerial practicalities relating to the construction and maintenance of the temple, involving not only elite patrons but also other social groups who provided labour and material resources.

Emphasizing the temple’s spatial and architectural continuity over the long course of its existence, Flath demonstrates that dynastic-era patrons understood themselves to be participating in the ongoing renewal of a still-vital and relevant antiquity. By contrast, modern actors have approached the temple as a surviving “relic” from the past, regardless of whether they denounce it or seek to exploit it in some way. In the second half of the book, he offers a riveting account of the competing players and conflicting forces that have repeatedly redefined Kong Temple from the late-nineteenth century up to the present. Transformed under the Republic from an inspirational sacred site to an outmoded remnant of largely discarded traditions, Kong Temple was repeatedly associated with reactionary elements, but it eventually gained recognition as a monument of China’s historical and cultural heritage to serve the modern nation. During the Cultural Revolution, however, it became a prime target representing the “old society” and was physically attacked, resulting in grievous damage that included the destruction of its over-lifesize sculptural icon of Confucius and the smashing of many of its stone steles. In recent years, the temple and its contents have been repaired and shown new appreciation, in tandem with the return to favour of selected aspects of Confucianism and the conscription of the sage himself to help validate China’s rise to international prominence.

Flath’s final two chapters on the conflicting priorities of various forms of commercial development (“Kong Temple Inc.”), tourism, and heritage conservation are of particular interest. Drawing from planning reports and legal documents of the party-state, articles in regional journals of tourism and architecture, and other sources, he illuminates the range of considerations underlying different recent approaches to the “Confucian relics”. At various times and particularly since 1978, Kong Temple’s aura has been exploited by Kong descendants, local Qufu authorities, the Shandong provincial government, and the national party-state to serve the perceived needs of the present, especially economic ones. Treated as a static artifact, Kong Temple has lost “any sense of the sacred, heroic, or mythical that once inspired its pilgrims” (pp. 201–2). Yet, Flath concludes, “it continues to influence the way in which the community makes sense of its past – and its present” (p. 203). His engaging book explains how Kong Temple came to loom so large and why it still matters.

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JI HAO:

The Reception of Du Fu (712–770) and His Poetry in Imperial China. (Sinica Leidensia.) x, 266 pp. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017. €99. ISBN 978 90 04 34104 3.

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This reception study on Du Fu (712–770), the greatest poet in Chinese history, is a welcome contribution to the scholarly field of traditional Chinese literature, and it is