

# The Ascended Confucius: Images of the Chinese Master in the Euro-American Esoteric Discourse

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## Abstract

This article provides a diachronic panorama of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Euro-American esoteric images of Confucius. After selected appraisals capturing the polyphony of nineteenth-century notions of Confucius, emphasis is given to spiritualist and Theosophical appropriations. Next, his soteriological elevation and the introduction of fellow Chinese Masters within the Ascended Masters context are explored in relation to the I AM Activity and, specifically, the post-Second World War groups The Bridge to Freedom (present-day The Bridge to Spiritual Freedom) and The Church Universal and Triumphant. Overall, this article traces the transformation of the esoteric Confucius trope, which substantially contributed to the wider public perception of Confucius and Confucianism.

## Keywords

China – Confucianism – Confucius – esotericism – occultism – New Age – reception history

“Confucius stands tall near Tian’anmen” headlined the *China Daily* in January 2011. The one-hundred-day thirty-feet bronze presence of “the ancient sage Confucius” at the center of political power – vis-à-vis Mao Zedong’s (1893–1976) likeness – was deemed “the latest sign of the philosopher’s comeback” (Zhu

2011) in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Master's metamorphosis from the Cultural Revolution's "arch-villain of the feudal past" (Murray 2015: 157) to the PRC's chief sociopolitical theoretician tenderly evoked by Xi Jinping (b. 1953), is a most recent, monumental episode in the ever-expanding hagiographical continuum of one Kong Qiu 孔丘 (tr. 551–479). This historical figure, in his guise as Kongzi 孔子 (Master Kong), personifies the ancient *ru* 儒 (gentle scholar-teachers) tradition, emically serving as its "crucial transmitter" upon which one of China's Three Teachings (*sanjiao* 三教) was effectively built: "Confucianism," a nineteenth-century neologism derived from the Jesuit missionary project of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The Jesuit encounter proved enormously influential for the western reception of China and its religious heritage until modern times. Kongzi became an integral part of the Jesuit accommodation (Rule 1972; Mungello 1985). His favorable appropriation qua "Confucius" sparked a globally entangled negotiation of his credentials.<sup>1</sup> This ongoing manufacturing of the Confucius trope (Jensen 1997) spread across many discourses with numerous parties involved, generating a plethora of profiles and identities in the process.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the European imagination of China and Confucius embraced both Sinophile fascination and Sinophobic vilification (Dijkstra 2022: 266–268) as well as everything in between, with the Master's portrayal oscillating from a noble monotheizing savage and a moral icon of the Enlightenment to a cold and pagan fossil of sterile hierarchism and paralyzing ritualism. Confucius, the "notable philosopher ... of most upright and incorrupt manners," was first introduced to a wider readership in 1599 through a second-hand travel account (DeLapp 2022: 75–76), the sixth volume of *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* by the prominent English writer and cleric Richard Hakluyt (1553–1616). Hakluyt never went to East Asia, nor did the vast majority of those engaging publicly with China, Confucianism, and Confucius in the centuries ahead. Meandering across the centuries, "their" Confucius was the multifaced expression of an ever-growing intertextually linked corpus of writings, which at the core was indebted to the Jesuit interpretative paradigm – however qualitatively different its actual reception – garnished by a panoply of (factual or factitious) travelogues.

1 Probably his first mention, namely, as "Confusius," is given in Michele Ruggieri's (1543–1607) *Vera et brevis divinarum rerum expositio* (A True and Brief Exposition of Divine Things; 1579–1581), the Latin draft version of his 1584 *Tianzhu shilu* 天主實錄 (The True Record of the Lord of Heaven).

A watershed in the general history of religions, the nineteenth century witnessed a surging proliferation of source materials in translation and scholarly expositions. At this vibrant juncture of reception history, a distinct discursive prism came increasingly to be applied that significantly contributed to the shaping of the wider public perception of (East) Asia and its religiosities, including Confucianism (Pokorny and Winter, Forthcoming).

This article sheds light on the variegated portfolio of roles assigned to Confucius in the course of the wider Euro-American esoteric encounter with “him” and “his” tradition across some nearly two hundred years, tracing in particular Confucius’s soteriological elevation.<sup>2</sup> A focus is thereby put on the English-language context. The following section starts in the nineteenth century with a collage of appraisals of Confucius that clearly echo the dichotomous portrayals of the preceding centuries. It then briefly addresses the appropriation of Confucius in spiritualist and, specifically, Theosophical circles. Especially the latter’s appreciation of the Chinese sage in conjunction with a newly defined concept rising in centrality, namely, that of spiritual Masters – that is, enlightened intermediaries between transcendence and immanence who gradually initiate their disciples to a perennial truth – put Confucius on a particular trajectory alongside other distinguished religious and philosophical personalities.<sup>3</sup> It subsequently came into bloom within the Ascended Masters narrative concocted and saliently carried forward from the 1930s by the I AM

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2 In this article, “Euro-American” is a qualifier meant to delimit the globally enmeshed esoteric discourse geographically. That is, this article draws on sources that were largely exhibited (however internationally entangled their effective formation processes) by individuals residing in, and/or being (originally) native to, this very geographical context (i.e., Europe and North America). Moreover, these individuals’ writings predominantly targeted and/or were largely received by a likewise Euro-American audience. Naturally, a range of these sources (all the more in recent decades) circulated globally, thus finding readers from Australia and Latin America to South Asia and East Asia, and possibly beyond. The same goes for the use of “western,” which in this article is understood purely as an admittedly vague geographical qualifier and not a (cultural) essentialist category.

3 The Theosophical notion of “Masters” had its more mundane precursors in Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry (Goodrick-Clarke 2010). Brendan James French rightly indicates that the “Master enfleshes Theosophical cosmology,” for s/he is deemed “proof of the penetration of the divine into the human sphere, and an augury of the possibility of humanity transcending its physical limitations and communing fully with the divine presence” (French 2000: 604). To this day, this idea lies at the heart of the Masters narrative. Furthermore, the Masters concept serves as a powerful tool to enact perennialist thinking. That is to say, it allows mythical and historical figures from around the world to be brought together and appropriated *ad libitum* while adding to their ranks an ever-growing number of newly devised spiritual agents, all of whom can be drawn upon to corroborate and further develop whatever the doctrinal trajectory taken.

Activity, which arose out of a marriage of Theosophy and New Thought. After the Second World War, the extended I AM Discourse held in store a great salvific transformation for Confucius, fleshing out most resonantly in *The Bridge to Freedom* and *The Church Universal and Triumphant*. Born in a schismatic fashion, these two represent pivotal movements within the New Age current, serving as a powerhouse for the still continuing expansion of the Ascended Masters universe today. The second part of this article examines Confucius's progression into a prime salvational figure therein while also touching on his Chinese peers.

## 1 Euro-American Esoteric Musings of the Long Nineteenth Century

Confucius was generally but a side note in the majority of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century esoteric discourse. If mentioned, he mostly appeared as the Great Chinese Philosopher or Sage, but at times also took other guises, such as “the reformer of the degenerate Bhuddism [*sic*], or Lamaism” (Rebold 1868: 367), “a firm believer in mesmerism” (Gee 1885: 11), a revelator and handler of ancient magic (Lévi 1860: 3, 410), and a failed God-sent redeemer of a decaying civilization (Nason 1880: 363–364). Drawing on the Flemish Jesuit Philippe Couplet's (1623–1693) reading of a passage from the Daoist *Liezi* 列子,<sup>4</sup> the “Moses of China” (Yarker 1882: 85) was sporadically ranked among the prophetic voices presaging Jesus's arrival. As one English Freemason suggested, the misattribution of Confucius's alleged foresight to involve Buddha in lieu of Jesus had his disciples flock to the former and China thus quickly “became celebrated for the practice of every impurity and abomination which characterized the most degraded nation of the heathen world” (Oliver 1829: 59–60).

Spiritualists occasionally traced him as a fellow practitioner of the art, a “great purifier of the morals” (Home 1878: 25) reviving “primal knowledge” with his spiritualistic teachings (Howitt 1863: 298). For some, losing sight of his real message led Chinese society into “degradation ... appear[ing] almost irremediable” (Home 1878: 26), whereas others viewed his authoritarianism

4 Couplet, in his seminal *Confucius Sinarum philosophus* (Confucius, the Philosopher of China; 1687) like Inácio da Costa (1603–1666) and Prospero Intorcetta (1625–1696) before him (Meynard 2015: 62), quotes the *Liezi* 4.3: “Si fam, Yeu Xim gin, virum sanctum in Occidente existere” (Intorcetta et al. 1687: cxx), that is, *xifang you shengren* 西方有聖人 (there is a saint in the West), equating this individual with Jesus. *Liezi* 4.3 reads: *xifang zhi ren, you shengzhe yan* 西方之人，有聖者焉 (the people of the western regions have a sage). Notably, this very passage, likely a later Buddhist insertion, was variously used by Buddhist and Muslim scholars as heralding the emergence of Buddha and Muhammad, respectively.

and secularism as the very reason for “the decadence of all true grandeur of religious idea among so many millions of Chinese” (Kenealy 1878: lxvii). The eminent Danish-American Theosophical connoisseur of Chinese thought, Carl Henrik Andreas Bjerregaard (1845–1922), deemed Confucius’s ceremonialism to be no less than “the bane of China” (Bjerregaard 1912: 96).

When directly compared in esoteric assessments, Laozi usually eclipsed Confucius. Austrian physician Joseph Ennemoser’s (1787–1854) characterization in his *Geschichte der Magie* (History of Magic) is a case in point: whereas Confucius is at first introduced alongside Laozi as “the greatest mind of the Chinese Nation,” he is subsequently degraded to lack his older peer’s deep inwardness and pondering the secrets of God and the world. Barren of enlightenment, Confucians would have facilitated spiritual idleness and the inactivity of the Chinese mind while fighting societal progress (Ennemoser 1844: 334–335). Similarly, the English spiritualist Emma Hardinge Britten (1823–1899) disparaged the Chinese sage’s spiritual teachings as greatly inferior vis-à-vis those of “Lao-Kiun” (Hardinge Britten 1876: 92). Finally, writing for *The Occult Review*, German-born mysticism aficionada Regina Miriam Bloch (1888–1938) put it bluntly: “Naturally, one’s heart goes out more to Lao-tsze than to Confucius. The latter was a great educative factor, but the former was both a poet and a mystic and altogether higher and finer” (Bloch 1923: 167).

However rarely, Confucius also came to be marshaled in séances, if only to confirm succinctly that the “doctrine of Christ is in the centre of our true heart” (Anonymous 1881: 499). The English Swedenborgian and spiritualist William Oxley (1823–1905) even elevated Confucius to a chief (albeit largely taciturn and unintelligible) agent of Christianity, the “Mighty Operating Angel” (Oxley 1877: 238). Not only did he utter English aphorisms or indulge in enigmaticness, but Confucius was later also to demonstrate both his oral Mandarin proficiency and his Chinese writing skills, such as prominently displayed through the well-known mediums George Valiantine (1874–1947) and Mina “Margery” Crandon (1888–1941) in 1927 (New York) and 1928 (Boston), respectively (de Brath 1929).

More than half a century earlier, in 1866, the famous Boston medium Frances Ann Conant (alias J. H. Conant, 1831–1875) allegedly attested to Confucius (reincarnate) even a millenarian role. While in rapport with a spirit addressing French spiritist Allan Kardec’s (1804–1869) theory of reincarnation, the spirit suddenly presaged that upon re-embodiment in circa 1868, Confucius “would ... shed a great spiritual illumination among the Chinese” (von Langsdorff 1889: 270). “His” actual reincarnation, as it was conjectured in the Boston-based spiritualistic magazine *Banner of Light* in a December 1888 article, might indeed have been confirmed by an account of an approximately

twenty-year-old “Duke Confucius ... of Pekin” (Anonymous 1888: 4), published two months earlier in a Pennsylvanian newspaper, the *Warren Mirror*.<sup>5</sup> The apparent new Confucius was in fact the Duke of Yangsheng 衍聖, Confucius’s seventy-sixth direct descendent Kong Lingyi 孔令貽 (1872–1919), who, in 1888, came from Qufu to Beijing for his own wedding and an audience with the Guangxu 光緒 Emperor (r. 1875–1908). With low sociopolitical visibility hardly going beyond his ancestral home, Kong turned out not to be Conant’s “mes-sianic” Confucius.

One American spiritualist, Marcenus Rodolphus Kilpatrick Wright (1830–?), although not in mediumistic conversation with Confucius or related spirits, offered one of the very first books on the Chinese Master printed in the United States, *The Moral Aphorisms and Terseological Teachings of Confucius* (1870).<sup>6</sup> To him, Confucius was a “pungent maximist of unexceptionable character,” whose unmatched “love of justice” made him into the “originator of the most astute civil and religious philosophy ever given to mankind” and thus “the REDEEMER of the Mongolian race” (Wright 1870: 7–8). Wright did not give his book an explicit spiritualistic bent. Indeed, he concluded that despite affirming the existence of “good and mischievous spirit-beings ... [Confucius] refused to countenance their delivery to mankind as familiar messengers” (33). Yet, his Confucius homage circulated relatively well, leading to the publication of a second edition in 1900, which was sympathetically reviewed in the *Free Thought Magazine* (1900: 541). Wright’s *Terseological Teachings* also found its way into the bookshelves of esotericists, such as those of the eminent American Rosicrucian Sylvester Clark Gould (1840–1909) and the founder of chiropractic Daniel David Palmer (1845–1913) (Albanese 2007: 406). That the published maxims of Confucius, within whom “the light of divine truth shone,”

5 The account in turn was likely taken from a report in *The Chinese Times* from July 14, 1888.

6 Likely the first one was the twenty-page booklet *Moral Sayings of Confucius, A Chinese Philosopher* (1855) by one Cleveland-based L. E. Barnard, whose historical introduction (Barnard 1855: 3–10) is largely a verbatim copy of the Confucius entry in the 1784 edition of *A New and General Biographical Dictionary* (vol. iv, pp. 77–85). The seventy-four “moral sayings” (Barnard 1855: 11–20) are taken word-for-word from the article “The Moral Sayings, and Wise Maxims, of Confucius, A Chinese Philosopher” in the first issue of English freethinker Richard Carlile’s (1790–1843) journal *The Moralist*, published ca. 1823. The aphorisms in turn were culled from the 1818 edition of *The Life and Morals of Confucius, A Chinese Philosopher* by Josephus Tela (perhaps the pseudonym of one Joseph Webb), an edited reprint of the 1691 partial English translation of *Confucius Sinarum philosophus*. Wright drew on Barnard’s *Moral Sayings of Confucius*, rearranging and largely rephrasing the latter’s seventy-four to arrive at his more resonating one hundred aphorisms. In his historical introduction, Wright likewise champions merging, elegantly and at times exaggeratingly reformulating existing accounts.

were held dearly also by other giants of the long nineteenth-century esoteric universe, one finds in the American spiritualist Andrew Jackson Davis's (1826–1910) *Arabula or The Divine Guest*, which contains “The Gospel according to St. Confucius” (Davis 1867: 310–312), that is, a selection of aphorisms from Barnard's *Moral Sayings of Confucius*.

### 1.1 *Theosophical Snippets*

Confucius's transition from a sage to a highly evolved Master gained esoteric momentum through the Theosophical project. Foundress Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), at first dismissively depicting him as a “cold, practical,” narrow-minded nationalist philosopher and explicitly endorsing Ennemoser's negative appraisal (Blavatsky 1875: 224), shortly thereafter reluctantly positioned Confucius as a second-rank “divine son of God” in *Isis Unveiled* (Blavatsky 1877: 159). In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky's Confucius, partially echoing French occultist Éliphas Lévi (1810–1875) (cf. Winter, Forthcoming), appears as “one of the greatest sages of the ancient world” and a “Fifth Round” practitioner of “ancient magic” (Blavatsky 1888: 162, 441). Blavatsky divided human spiritual evolution into seven cycles or “rounds” further partitioned into seven “root races” with seven “subraces” each. Confucius qua “fifth rounder,” specifically mentioned alongside Plato, she deemed being tens of thousands of years spiritually ahead of ordinary humans, who would represent the fifth (or “European”) subrace of the fifth (or “Aryan”) root race in the fourth round. Yet, Confucius still clearly lagged behind spiritually the “sixth rounders” Buddha and Christ. Eventually, Confucianism found a solemn place within Blavatsky's perennialism as a distinct expression of Theosophical Ethics (Blavatsky 1889: 48–49). Alongside Laozi (cf. Pokorny, Forthcoming), Confucius commonly became one of the “two greatest Chinese Theosophers” (Countess of Caithness 1887: 199) in the Theosophical tradition; his writings, like those of all other major traditions – such as the Kabbalah, the Vedas, and the Apocalypse – containing a “hidden doctrine,” which was the “basis of Theosophy” (Anonymous 1882: 30).

Second-generation Theosophist mastermind and former Anglican clergyman Charles Webster Leadbeater (1847–1934) weaved Confucius into his messianic Maitreya narrative, if merely in a passing comment. Confucius (and Laozi) turned into a disciple of the then-World Teacher “Lord Buddha,” who had initiated the former into arhatship, that is, bestowing the so-called Fourth Initiation and therefore freeing the spirit from the cycle of forced rebirth. When Buddha moved on to even grander duties as part of the triune Logos forming the “Occult Government of the world” (Leadbeater 1925: 303), his predecessor, Maitreya, sent Confucius (and Laozi) specifically “to incarnate

in China” in order to propel the religious progress of humankind in East Asia (Leadbeater 1913: 216). However, Leadbeater’s Confucius, relegated to the status of “arhat,” was not part of the so-called Great White Brotherhood, the community of even higher initiated undying custodians of the “secret doctrine” and life givers of all religions.

“Great White Brotherhood” is a term not coined but widely popularized by Leadbeater; it was derived from Blavatsky’s band of “mahatmas,” which she seminally defined as individuals “who, by special training and education, [have] evolved those higher faculties and [have] attained that spiritual knowledge, which ordinary humans will acquire after passing through numberless series of re-incarnations” (Blavatsky 1884: 233). Leadbeater’s Theosophical sister in arms Annie Besant (1847–1933) thus spoke of these Great Masters to represent the Great White Lodge (Besant 1894: 496). Around the same time, American Theosophist William Lincoln Garver (1867–1953) creatively novelized Theosophical ideas centering on “the true occult school, the White Brotherhood of the East ... [or] Great White Brotherhood” (Garver 1894: 176, 187) also involving Confucius, giving the overall topos additional momentum. Subsequently, the Great White Brotherhood gradually turned into more common esoteric currency when chief Theosophists of the day – Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840–1921), Besant, and especially Leadbeater – picked it up to marshal it in their writings.

The Theosophical Confucius, however, generally retained a pale and rarely referenced profile: a “fine Statesmen as well as a great Sage” (Besant 1925: 131) but not a Great Master in his own right. Invoking Ennemoser and the early Blavatsky, Scottish Theosophist Violet Tweedale (1862–1936) therefore had the pragmatic Confucius, unsurprisingly, lack Laozi’s “[deep] spirituality and direct divine inspiration” (Tweedale 1930: 85). An unexpected glimpse into what salvific course was allegedly lying ahead of Confucius in the New Age (current) – given his otherwise almost complete invisibility in her oeuvre – was offered by Neo-Theosophy’s *grand dame* and dear friend of Tweedale, Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949). A member of the Great White Brotherhood/Lodge, Confucius was to “incarnate in order to superintend the [millenarian] work” (Bailey [1925] 1999: 1080) of a New World Religion emerging from Bailey’s very own Arcane School. Bailey’s systematic teachings massively influenced the New Age (a term she had popularized) in general and the (post-Second World War) I AM discourses in particular. The conspicuous millenarian role of the Baileyan Confucius might have been the driving force behind his widespread promotion into the highest echelons of the Great White Brotherhood. For example, one of the most eminent self-styled Bailey disciples, Scottish New Ager Benjamin Creme (1922–2016) (Pokorny 2021) saw Confucius as one of the most



spiritually elevated beings on the earth, far superior to even the likes of Jesus, Mohammed, Zoroaster, Hermes, and Laozi (Creme [1986] 1996: 373–393).

## 2 The Ascended Confucius and His Master

Occult fiction following in the footsteps of Garver's *Brother of the Third Degree* (1894), such as Maude Lesseuer Howard's *Myriam and the Mystic Brotherhood* (1912), and, especially, Baird T. Spalding's (1872–1953) series *Life and Teaching of the Masters of the Far East* (vol. 1 and 2: 1924/1927) helped to spread the Great Masters theme in the first decades of the twentieth century. Leadbeater and Bailey aside, a more specialized seminal treatment was also given by fellow English Theosophist Brian Ross (alias David Anrias) in his *Through the Eyes of the Masters* (1932). Neither Confucius nor China was of concern to Ross, whereas Spalding – while likewise ignoring Confucius – deemed China to be one of several “far eastern” abodes of the Masters (Spalding 1924: 3, 8).

These and other writers were formative for the thought of American Guy Warren Ballard (alias Godfré Ray King; 1878–1939), the mediumistic founder of the I AM Activity together with his spouse and successor Edna (1886–1971). A student of the wider occult milieu with a special interest in Theosophy and New Thought, Ballard, in the 1930s, coined the term “Ascended Masters” around which he built his nationalism-steeped esoteric program that spawned a range of groups after the Second World War (Rudbøg 2013) and echoes widely in the New Age to this day. Ballard relocated the Great White Brotherhood's chief present-day stronghold from the “Far East” to Wyoming's Grand Teton Mountain (that is, the “Royal Teton”), thereby assigning to the United States utmost millenarian import. Yet, he retained a connection to the “(Far) East,” which pervaded the “Masters narrative” since Blavatsky, for the ancient Royal Teton Retreat, was not led by the group's salvific favorite Saint Germain or an American Master but by a certain “Lanto” (King 1935: 246), an “oriental” Master, introduced by Ballard, whose credentials were not disclosed but who probably stemmed from China, deemed as the most honest nation in the world (Anonymous 1943: 15). Whereas there is no trace of Confucius in the early I AM Discourses, two Chinese Masters are occasionally mentioned, namely, “the Goddess of Mercy Quan Yin,” that is, Guanyin 觀音,<sup>7</sup> and one American-Chinese “Fun Wey [or, alternatively, Fun Way],” the alleged “embodiment of happiness” (Anonymous 1941: 14).

<sup>7</sup> The *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara's Chinese manifestation.

Lanto's key soteriological role in the I AM current notwithstanding, he remained mostly a passing note in the writings at large. However, his biography and function were to be expanded and elevated in line with the further schismatic evolution of the tradition, which also introduced "his disciple" Confucius among the top-tier Ascended Masters. I AM Messenger Geraldine Innocente (alias Thomas Printz, d. 1961) hived off her *The Bridge to Freedom* (today's *The Bridge to Spiritual Freedom*) in 1951, drawing on messages she allegedly received from two particularly powerful Ascended Masters, the Maha Chohan and El Morya, who, alongside Kuthumi, had famously featured in the early Theosophical Society. Innocente thus fused the I AM and the Theosophical Great White Brotherhoods, creatively populating the Ascended Masters hierarchical spectrum with old as well as entirely new Masters.<sup>8</sup> The office of World Teacher, hitherto famously inscribed by Besant and Leadbeater onto Maitreya, for whom Krishnamurti (1895–1986) was meant to serve as a vessel (Wessinger 1988: 284–287), she passed on to Kuthumi and Jesus in 1956, having Lanto (who had "embodied" over millennia in China) succeed Kuthumi as so-called Lord of the Second Ray.<sup>9</sup> According to Innocente (Printz 1958), Lanto's promotion entailed another key personnel change on July 4, 1958: the inauguration of his disciple Confucius as "Hierarch of the Rocky Mountain Retreat" or Temple of Precipitation (that is, Ballard's Royal Teton Retreat), the venue of humankind's first embodiment and paramount rallying site of the Ascended Masters where they are thought to gather semiannually to decide on humanity's further millenarian course. Innocente's knowledge regarding Confucius was largely informed by English Humanist Richard Dimsdale Stocker's (1877–1935) booklet *Considerations from Confucius* (1910),<sup>10</sup> a prefaced selection of translated sayings, of which she quotes several passages that were taken in turn from the works of British Sinologists James Legge (1815–1897) and Lionel Giles (1875–1958).<sup>11</sup> Innocente's Confucius account is very brief, highlighting his belonging to the lineage of the (mythical) Yellow Emperor (Huangdi

8 One of these new Masters was "the God of Happiness Lord Ling," a Chinese Master who was previously embodied as Ananda and Moses.

9 The Baileyian notion of Seven Rays refers to the division of reality into seven God-imparted energies with distinct attributes and colors. The Second Ray is conventionally connected to wisdom.

10 In fact, Innocente's brief biographical account of Confucius is largely a verbatim copy of portions of Stocker's (1910: 5–12) introduction.

11 Legge's translations of the "Sacred Books" of Confucianism (vols. 3 and 16 [1879], 27 and 28 [1885]) and Daoism (vols. 39 and 40 [1891]) in the *Sacred Books of the East* series (1879–1910) alongside his earlier (1861–1872; revised: 1893–1895) eight-volume *The Chinese Classics* became the seminal reference for the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century (esoteric) reading of both Confucianism and Daoism.

黃帝), a pedigree first addressed by the German Jesuit Johann Adam Schall von Bell (1592–1666) and dismissed by Couplet (Meynard 2015: 73), but frequently adopted by later writers. While Innocente vested “Beloved Confucius” with a conspicuous role as manager of the Great White Brotherhood headquarters, she simultaneously underlined his retiring profile and still subordinate status vis-à-vis his “guru” and effective co-Hierarch Lanto (Printz 1959) – who later in the tradition even came to occupy an immediate superior rank qua Patriarch at the Temple itself – at whose feet he was instructed the universal Law of which Confucianism is but a fraction (Printz 1961). Following Innocente’s passing, personnel shifts among the Masters continued with Lanto being promoted even further, rising to World Teacher in union with Kuthumi and Bailey’s very own Master Djwal Khul, the latter was also to succeed Confucius as Hierarch.<sup>12</sup> “Lord Confucius,” in turn, had a quick interlude as Lord or Chohan of the Second Ray before virtually disappearing from the group’s mythoscape.<sup>13</sup>

Whereas Confucius indeed sank into functional insignificance in *The Bridge to Freedom* in more recent decades, he lives on with a larger back story and more eminent visibility and popularity (as does Lanto) in *The Church Universal and Triumphant* (CUT). Reestablished in 1974 by Elizabeth Clare Prophet (née Wulf, 1939–2009), this movement evolved into the international esoteric lighthouse of the Ascended Masters trope. CUT’s origins are rooted in the first wave of I AM splinter groups from some twenty years earlier when a *The Bridge to Freedom* member, Francis Ekey, branched off with her own group, *The Lighthouse of Freedom*. One of its new Messengers was Wisconsin-based former railway worker Mark L. Prophet (1918–1973), who like Blavatsky, Sinnett, and Innocente supposedly followed El Morya’s direct call to take revelatory action. Toward the end of the 1950s, Prophet, again acting upon the Master’s request, eventually severed ties with Ekey and founded his very own *The Summit Lighthouse*. Mark met his future spouse Elizabeth in 1961, guiding her alongside Masters El Morya and Saint Germain through a five-year Messenger training. Ultimately, Mark, like Ballard before him, became a revered Master in his own right upon his premature death in 1973. His wife took the organizational reins, renamed the group to *Church Universal and Triumphant*, and gradually turned it into the chief crucible of Ascended Masters storylines (Whitsel 2003: 19–42; Melton 1994), which to this day bring

12 Best-selling American Ascended Masters Messenger Joshua David Stone (1953–2005) even turned Confucius into an earlier incarnation of Djwal Khul (Stone 1995: 137), Stone’s own chief conversation partner.

13 An office in which he was succeeded by a fellow (newly introduced) Chinese Master “Lady Soo Chee.”

forth ever-new Messengers who keep expanding the Ascended Masters cosmos into various directions.

The CUT Confucius is more lasting and powerful than any of his esoteric alter egos of old, save for his quick detour as Chohan of the Second Ray in The Bridge to Freedom, a position persistently claimed by Lanto in CUT. Like the early The Bridge to Freedom Confucius, the CUT Confucius is the present-day Hierarch of the Royal Teton Retreat, an office he assumed on July 3, 1958, that is, one day prior to the date Innocente had revealed. Confucius is introduced as a “brilliant social, economic, political and moral philosopher” who facilitated China’s rise to “one of the greatest civilizations of all time” (Prophet and Prophet 2003a: 61), a status the PRC has lost due to its energetic and moral perversion. Prophet’s hagiography of Confucius reiterates the standard traditional account, highlighting his connection to the Duke of Zhou. But not only did Confucius serve as a clerk in a memorial temple of the latter, but he was allegedly his direct disciple, for the duke was no other than Lanto whom Confucius assisted in a previous embodiment formulating the “ideals for God-government” and spiritual cultivation, whose etheric patterns are most strikingly contained in the *Yijing* 易經 (Classic of Changes). Lanto’s career reportedly commenced eons ago, becoming a “master of sages and philosophers” under one Lord Himalaya. He subsequently served as a High Priest of the Divine Mother (that is, God’s feminine aspect) in the now lost continent of Lemuria/Mu before spending several lives in Atlantis after which he was incarnated as the Yellow Emperor or Huangdi 黃帝, in whose guise he originated the Chinese civilization and established Daoism, some two thousand years before Laozi put down into writing its major tenets in his *Daodejing* (Prophet and Prophet [2003] 2018b: 114). Finally, he became the “guru” of Confucius and later his contemporary as the reigning monarch (most likely either King Jǐng 周景王 [r. 544–520] or King Jìng 周敬王 [r. 519–477]), more recently handing over to him the administration of the physical-etheric Ascended Masters headquarters, where Lanto still serves as a special instructor for “God-government.” In fact, Lanto is viewed as one of many Masters teaching in this veritable Great White Brotherhood University, which incidentally also houses, among others, the Akashic Records. CUT deems the Chinese Masters the lynchpin of the global dissemination of wisdom. Unsurprisingly, their chief sponsor, the Archangel Jophiel, is an apparent Sinophile, who with an angelic partner works out of the vicinity of Lanzhou in the PRC, both being frequently joined by Innocente’s Lord Ling.<sup>14</sup> Wisdom as personified by Confucius is seen to be

14 According to CUT, a range of other powerful Masters and deities chose the ethereal space over China as their retreats or they originally stem from China, such as Edna Ballard’s

at the very heart of ancient Chinese culture. Accordingly, to call the Chinese the “yellow race” would be no coincidence for yellow/golden represents the color of wisdom (Prophet and Prophet [2003] 2018b: 115). Yet, the Chinese refused to follow the “light of Confucius.” “Had he been heeded, so China should never have fallen” (Prophet and Prophet [1986] 2018a: 241). Notably, because of China’s degeneration, the Chinese Masters turned to the new spiritual hub on the earth, that is, the United States, and with them many other souls of ancient China were embodying there in recent decades. According to Confucius, the mission of these “quiet Buddhist souls” is to anchor familism in America and from there, being the spiritual superpower, to the world at large. The CUT Confucius is nicknamed the “Champion of Families” and “Architect of Community Building,” who alongside legions of reembodied wisdom-laden ancient Chinese souls promotes “learning as the means to God-awareness” (Prophet and Prophet 2003a: 465). Referencing Legge’s translation,<sup>15</sup> the *Daxue* 大學 (Great Learning), probably the quintessential Confucian writing, is presented as a formula for community building and spreading pioussness and self-realization concentrically from the individual, the family, the society, to the world (Prophet and Prophet 2003b: 34–36). Whereas his mission failed in ancient China, his new home, the United States, greatly enables him to victoriously put into practice his teachings of divine government based on God-centered self-reliance and familism. He acts as the loving and caring grandfather of the American people and, by extension, the whole of humankind. His ethereal presence and message, upon which the Ascended Masters disciples act, put the United States at the scientific and technological vanguard. He inspires the extraordinary practical skills of the American people and can be called upon for spiritual empowerment and guidance in daily life affairs. Drawing on Russian Theosophist Nicholas Roerich’s (1874–1947) appraisal (Roerich 1929: 97), Confucius is given as one of the “law-givers of

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Fun Wey. The Goddess of Mercy, Kuan Yin, for example, would reside in the Beijing area rendering the Chinese people distinctively gentle, family-oriented, and benevolent. The “Cosmic Christ and Planetary Buddha” Maitreya is occasionally found in his abode over Tianjin. And, most notably, Shamballa, the miraculous stronghold of the Lord of the World indeed hovers over China’s Gobi Desert. Built in Venusian architectural style, the city is now seen as home to the Buddha. Interestingly, Laozi does not receive particular attention in the CUT oeuvre.

- 15 Legge’s translations, for example through Charles Francis Horne’s (1870–1942) fourteen-volume *Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East* (1917), remain the most important ones in the CUT discourse. Other translations related to Confucian works used in CUT publications are by Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930), Arthur Waley (1889–1966), and James Roland Ware (1901–1993). One also encounters emic translations by a CUT member with Sinological training.

human welfare” and “justice of life” (Prophet 1984: 279–280), embodying the fusion of wisdom and practicality. Finally, it was reportedly Confucius who, in August 1977, revealed to Prophet her actual spiritual name “Guru Ma,” thereby both affirming her status as the Great White Brotherhood’s chief mouthpiece on earth and bestowing upon her the religious title and post-ascension (that is, posthumous) appellation.

### 3 Concluding Remarks

This article diachronically traces major contributions to the Euro-American esoteric encounter with Confucius since the nineteenth century. It spotlights in what different ways and informed by which internal and external sources Confucius was appropriated, thereby coshaping and amplifying multiple perceptions of the Chinese Master in the esoteric and public discourse. Particular attention is drawn to one especially influential strand in the overall reception process, namely, Confucius’s wider soteriological appearance. That is, the varying appreciation and salvational functions he is credited with in the writings and reports of nineteenth- and especially twentieth-century esotericists beyond the taciturn standard portrait of Confucius qua Sage and Great Teacher. Indeed, almost always Confucius served as a part-time extra and not one of the *dramatis personae*. When being summoned before the curtain of the esoteric play, he usually remained there but for an instant, relatively tight-lipped before retiring into oblivion. In these brief appearances, however, he occupied a range of roles that mostly presented him as an ancient renovator with a “sound message.” Increasingly, toward the end of the nineteenth century, this notion of Confucius solidified. He became gradually more referenced specifically by those pursuing the perennialist agenda in a global perspective, as was so powerfully enunciated and fostered by the Theosophical Society. Notwithstanding, Confucius remained an extra for the esoteric stage, oftentimes performing in a duet together with his “complementary partner” Laozi. Both were solicited when Chinese representatives were needed to add to a global gathering of interlocutors of ancient wisdom.

In particular, Theosophy’s newly conceived Masters narrative could well make use of Confucius and so it occasionally did. Against the backdrop of first- (Blavatsky, Sinnett) and second-generation (Besant, Leadbeater) Theosophists, Bailey’s Arcane School in tandem with Ballard’s I AM Activity elevated the Masters narrative to new heights from the 1920s and 1930s. From there an incredibly versatile and visible stream within twentieth- and twenty-first-century

esotericism emerged. The post-Second World War Ascended Masters current, as most stridently encapsulated within The Bridge to Freedom and the CUT, gave both Confucius and other Chinese Masters old and new, powers and storylines hitherto unknown. His “own” Master – Ballard’s Lanto – aside, Confucius in particular climbed to the forefront of humankind’s supposed conclave of divine-like spiritual teachers, the Great White Brotherhood, in many cases eclipsing the erstwhile esoteric popularity of his senior Laozi. The “Ascended Confucius” still wields the favorable attributes of his nineteenth-century occult alter ego – excelling pragmatism and superior moral wisdom – but more mightily so. In addition, he transcended time and space. No longer is he a sage limited to the Sinosphere who only lives on through his broadly misunderstood doctrinal legacy, but an immortal superhuman vested with salvific abilities he deploys for the sake of humankind’s spiritual evolution at large or, upon invocation, directs straight to every disciple on his/her path of divine self-transformation. A journey across nearly two centuries of esoteric characterologies of Confucius exhibits an impressive hagiographical career, one indeed only surpassed by a few other time-honored exponents of the world’s religions.

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