

*The Kongs of Qufu: The Descendants of Confucius in Late Imperial China.* By Christopher S. Agnew. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2019. Pp. xi + 241. \$95 cloth, \$30 paper.

Christopher Agnew's informative and well-written book analyses the strategies that leaders of the recognized descendants of Confucius used in gaining, maintaining, and managing the lineage's exceptional social, political, and economic privileges for almost one thousand years. Based on his 2006 Ph.D. dissertation, Agnew presents theoretically informed close readings of evidence from several centuries' worth of documents in published archives and stele transcriptions, efficiently cutting through the layers of Kong 孔 mythology. His insightful observations are particularly timely, giving readers a critical perspective on ways that the Chinese party-state is officially celebrating Confucius and endorsing selected "Confucian" ideals.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, his discussions should help visitors (and armchair travellers) to Qufu see beyond the hype associated with this major tourist destination, whose "Three Kong" 三孔 (Kong temple 孔廟, cemetery 孔林, and mansion 孔府) became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1994, and many Confucius-themed attractions have been added more recently to engage and instruct young and old alike.

At the centre of the Kong enterprise was the office of the Duke for Perpetuating the Sage (Yansheng gong 衍聖公), which headed a massive kinship organization and governed parts of Shandong province, while providing ritual and ideological support to dynasties from the Song through the Qing. Although rulers from the Han dynasty onward had intermittently rewarded individual descendants with titles, lands, stipends, and tax exemptions for maintaining sacrifices to Confucius and taking care of his temple and tomb, it was only in the Northern Song that a hereditary position was established to institutionalize these responsibilities and rewards. In 1055, Emperor Renzong 仁宗 designated forty-sixth-generation descendant Kong Zongyuan 孔宗願

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<sup>1</sup> To the many well-known examples already discussed in Western scholarship and journalism, I would add the major recent exhibition at the National Museum of China in Beijing: 高山景行——孔子文化展 (High Mountains, Broad Paths: An Exhibition on the Confucian Culture); see <http://www.chnmuseum.cn/portals/0/web/zt/20191227kongzi/> (Chinese) or [http://en.chnmuseum.cn/exhibition/current\\_exhibitions\\_648/201912/t20191230\\_185157.html](http://en.chnmuseum.cn/exhibition/current_exhibitions_648/201912/t20191230_185157.html) (English), both accessed 27 February 2020. The display includes over 70 treasured artefacts and books from the Kong Mansion Archives (now in the Confucius Museum in Qufu 曲阜), as well as 86 objects from the National Museum's own collection, other items borrowed from the Palace Museum, works specially commissioned from 41 contemporary artists, and Wu Weishan's 吳為山 bronze statue of Confucius, which in 2011 was too controversial to stay on public view outdoors near Tiananmen Square.

as the first Duke for Perpetuating the Sage. For the first few centuries, the position was unstable, and its scope and powers were redefined more than once. Conflicting claims were sometimes settled by force, and at one point, in 1225, three different descendants simultaneously claimed the ducal title in three different locations. In 1316, Kong Sihui 孔思晦 gained definitive control over the succession for his descent line, from which came the dukes of all generations from the fifty-fourth through seventy-seventh. (The ducal succession from 1055 to 1935 is conveniently diagrammed in two Appendices.)

The Duke for Perpetuating the Sage affirmed the ideological legitimacy of a dynasty by offering his allegiance and ritually supported cosmic harmony by conducting regular sacrifices to Confucius. Successive dynasties demonstrated their veneration for the Way of Confucius by giving his descendants tracts of land, official positions, servant households, exemptions from taxation and labour service, and varying degrees of autonomy in local governance. To maintain their privileges and fend off challenges to their dominance from other Kongs and unrelated elites, the senior line periodically produced genealogies and gazetteers that reinforced their powerful mystique as rightful inheritors of inborn virtue. Their relationship with dynastic authority was mutually beneficial and evolved in response to larger social changes and economic conditions, as well as political transitions. It ended after the Republic desacralized the ideology of governance and the ducal institution became an anachronism.

Agnew bases his illuminating discussions on published transcriptions of documents from the archives of the Kong Manor (Kongfu) and stele inscriptions from the temple, cemetery, and manor. He correctly points out that these publicly accessible materials may give an incomplete picture.<sup>2</sup> When parts of the Kong archive were published in the 1980s, a prevailing Marxist orientation governed the selection of documents, resulting in a bias toward those dealing with land management and labour relations on the Kong estates, which scholars then used to characterize the Kong duke as the archetypal feudal landlord. While the published volumes also include documents that shed light on the ducal establishment's interactions with the imperial state, as well as hundreds of genealogies submitted by various branches of the Kong lineage, the unknown contents of unpublished materials leave other areas of research underserved. Having had the rare opportunity myself to see unpublished documents in the Kong archive some years ago, I would add that published lists of contents are incomplete and misleading; moreover, unrelated materials are sometimes bound

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<sup>2</sup> Agnew also points out errors in the dates attributed to a couple of important stele inscriptions; e.g., see p. 199, nn. 22–23.

into the same volume. A large-scale scanning and digitization project is currently underway in Qufu,<sup>3</sup> which could eliminate selection bias if it gives access to the entire archive.

In the Introduction, Agnew provides an overview of the Kong lineage as a special kind of centralized, aristocratic kinship organization that was much larger and existed more continuously than any other lineage. Besides ruling over an ever-increasing membership that was eventually subdivided into households (*hu* 戶) and halls (*tang* 堂), Kong dukes also participated in the political governance of their home region, with which their interests sometimes diverged. In some periods they appointed local magistrates of Qufu county or at least participated in the selection, leading to problems with corruption. The position always went to a member of the Kong lineage until 1756, when the magistracy was absorbed into the regular territorial bureaucracy of transfer appointments. The Kongs did not need to maintain their privileged status by producing officials through the highly competitive civil-service successful examinations, although some did acquire degrees and benefited from designated quotas. Their special relationship with the dynastic state was periodically renewed with revised versions of lineage history, and genealogies controlled the potential number of beneficiaries. The ducal establishment's extensive landholdings in western Shandong and the commercial activities facilitated by the nearby stretch of the Grand Canal provided an economic foundation that waxed and waned, vulnerable to encroachment by rival elites and competing merchants, natural disasters, and deteriorating infrastructure, social unrest, and warfare. Mainland writings have castigated the Kongs as feudalistic oppressors of workers and peasants, particularly in the late Qing. A broader range of perspectives has emerged in recent years, including what Agnew calls "enthusiastic nostalgia" in accounts by Kong Demao 孔德懋, the last duke's centenarian sister.

Chapter 1, "Inventing the Dukedom," examines the creation and early evolution of the hereditary position in 1055, which originated as a reform intended to curb the duke's political power by confining his role to the ritual realm. It failed to do so for long, leading to protracted contestation over the title's meaning and powers, and the duke retained control over Qufu with few interruptions. His allegiance was politically, ideologically, and militarily important during wars for the control of north China. Duke Kong Duanyou 孔端友 supported the Song during the Jin invasion and fled to the South in 1127, and sacrifices resumed under Southern Song auspices at a new

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.shjinji.net/news/259.html> (last accessed 27 February 2020).

base in Quzhou 衢州 (Zhejiang).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the Jin recognized a new line of dukes in Qufu, starting with Kong Duanyou's brother Duancao 孔端操. In 1225, while the Jin duke, Kong Yuancuo 孔元措, was away in the capital, the Southern Song mounted a brief invasion that installed yet another duke in Qufu, whom the Mongols endorsed in 1226. Kong Yuancuo supported his recovery of the ducal title by compiling an encyclopedic history of the lineage that omitted the line of descendants in Quzhou. Kong Sihui usurped the dukedom in 1316 and justified his succession with a genealogy carved on stone, fabricating an ancestor to legitimate his claim to seniority. However, the deposed duke and his line retained control of Qufu county, separating the political centre from Queli 闕里, the ritual complex of temple, tomb, and ducal mansion.

As described in Chapter 2, "Estate Expansion and Ducal Power," the Ming founding emperor strictly limited the Kong duke to ritual and cultural duties, but gave him the right to recommend lineage members for the Qufu magistracy. The ducal establishment gained great wealth and economic power by acquiring reclaimed and resettled lands in western Shandong, particularly after the Yongle emperor extended the nearby Grand Canal to connect Jiangnan with Beijing. The imperially awarded "sacrificial fields" (*sitian* 祀田) that supported the ritual complex in Qufu were tax-exempt, and the duke kept them separate from his personal property to prevent other lineage members from making claims on them. In contrast to his direct administration of ducal estates near Qufu, the settlements in western Shandong were managed through intermediaries, who paid the rent in silver as agriculture became monetized by the growth of commerce along the Grand Canal. The enrichment of the ducal establishment led to political connections with the court that increased the duke's power. In 1511 he was able to have the magistrate's office, nine *li* 里 from the ritual complex, moved inside a new city wall that was centred on the temple. Agnew characterizes the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a time of prosperity, when major elements of Qufu's current configuration were established, and Kong history and institutions were codified in the *Queli Gazetteer* (*Queli zhi* 闕里志 / 誌).

The seventeenth century was another matter. Chapter 3, "Savage Tigers," details threats to the ducal establishment due to the political, military, ecological, and socio-economic crises that fatally weakened the Ming. As families on the estates around Qufu and in the settlements in western Shandong amassed wealth by selling their excess produce to merchants, they began defying ducal authority. Backed by local

<sup>4</sup> Although most accounts, including Agnew's, say that Kong Duanyou himself moved to Quzhou, more recent research suggests that he died before the Kongs were resettled there; see Wei Shuguang 魏曙光, "Yansheng gong Kong Duanyou nandu kao" 衍聖公孔端友南渡考 (Investigation of Duke for Perpetuating the Sage Kong Duanyou's crossing to the South), *Chifeng xueyuan xuebao* (*Hanwen zhexue shehui kexue ban*) 赤峰學院學報 (漢文哲學社會科學版), 2016, no. 8, pp. 30–31.

thugs or private militias, they resisted paying rent, and some banded together in popular religious cults that helped them organize to protect their own interests. The Manchu conquest proved to be the Kong establishment's salvation. Following the model of previous dynastic founders, the Qing supported the veneration of Confucius and Confucian ideology to win over the literati elite. The Qing restoration of order enabled the duke to regain control over lost territory and reinstate administrative arrangements, leading to another period of prosperity and power. However, pacification of the South brought a revival of commerce on the Grand Canal, and increased merchant wealth again empowered challenges to the duke's hegemony.

Chapter 4, "The Duke and the Magistrate," deals with many forms of conflict that arose in the eighteenth century between the ducal establishment and county governments in the region. Local magistrates often did not appreciate the duke's translocal jurisdiction and competed with him to control markets, levy taxes, conscript labour, and adjudicate disputes. County officials also helped wealthy tenants on the Kong estates avoid paying rent or providing labour service to the ducal establishment. Besides the sacrificial fields that supported the ritual complex in Qufu, land privately owned by individual Kongs also was tax-exempt because they were the sage's descendants, causing others to bear larger burdens of tax and obligatory labour service as the Kongs increased their holdings. Further abuses arose as non-Kongs rented land from Kong estates and used its status to avoid taxes and labour service on other lands they owned. Agnew explains the relevant issues in detail and discusses several cases that illustrate specific types of problems. The chapter concludes by examining the vexed relationship between the dukedom and the Qufu magistracy, which led to the permanent removal of the Kongs from the latter in 1756.

In Chapter 5, "Inscribing the Past," Agnew draws on memory studies to analyse the ways that the Kongs appropriated the past to support their political agendas, maintain ducal hegemony, and strengthen their collective identity. As a fascinating case in point, he traces the evolution of the story of the tenth-century Kong Renyu 孔仁玉, the alleged progenitor of all subsequent generations of legitimate descendants. Renyu first appears in a late Northern Song genealogy as a grown man guarding Confucius's tomb and gaining renewed patronage for the cult from the Later Zhou Emperor Gaozu, who revived official sacrifices. An early Southern Song preface to this genealogy portrays Renyu as saving the Kong lineage in a time of warfare, obviously resonating with Duke Kong Duanyou's flight to the South in 1127.<sup>5</sup> Kong Yuancuo adds much more detail about Renyu's life and official career, even his

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<sup>5</sup> The initial version of the genealogy, *Dongjia zaji* 東家雜記 by Kong Chuan 孔傳, was compiled in Qufu around 1124, while surviving versions have prefaces with Southern Song dates of 1132 and 1134. The preface by Kong Duanchao 孔端朝 is dated 1132, not 1191 as Agnew says, although the earlier date strengthens his argument.

physical appearance and personality, and establishes him in a sequence of senior-line descendants leading to Yuancuo himself. Kong Sihui adds a villain, Kong Mo 孔末, a commoner who tried to kill all the Kongs descended from Confucius and established his own family in power in Qufu, until the Later Zhou ruler removed him. Since Kong Sihui ousted another duke in 1316, this story insinuates that his rival's line was illegitimate and sprang from a servant who had been appointed to sweep the master's grave. In this telling, moreover, the Later Zhou ruler is absent and Kong Renyu has become an infant, saved by his mother hiding in her parents' home. The role of her clan, the Zhang 張, is highlighted in a 1430-dated stele further elaborating the story, perhaps because educated men from non-Kong elite families were needed to staff Kong financial and educational institutions. A text from 1482 emphasizes Renyu's importance to the continuity of genealogy and sacrifices, and he has a place in the Kongs' family temple alongside Confucius, his son, and grandson. A 1622 genealogy portrays Kong Mo as the progenitor of "false" Kongs who coveted the legal and economic privileges of "true" Kongs, reflecting the growing need to control membership as commercial wealth, printing technology, and social mobility facilitated the purchase of Kong identity. With far-flung branches of the Kongs establishing contact with the duke, comprehensive genealogies provided a way to restrict access and preserve lineage institutions, while editions of the *Qufu Gazetteer* reinforced his political primacy by incorporating Qufu within the history of the cult of Confucius and senior-lineage descendants. By contrast, the 1774 regional-administrative *Gazetteer of Qufu County* (*Qufu xianzhi* 曲阜縣志) marginalized the Kong lineage after the magistracy was taken away. Nonetheless, the compilation still characterized Qufu as a special place infused with the sage's teachings and legacy, giving it a greater, translocal significance. Over the centuries, Kong mythologizing became normalized as undisputed fact.

In Chapter 6, "Ritual and Power," Agnew examines ritual (*li* 禮) as "an elite discourse reproduced ideologically through educational institutions, sacrificial performance, and written text" (p. 153). Regular sacrifices to Confucius and canonized Confucians in the main temple justified support from the dynastic state, while ancestral rites in the family shrine sustained Kong lineage cohesion, and private offerings in the ducal manor to Kong Sihui and four generations of the current duke's ancestors affirmed the legitimacy of the senior descent line. The produce of Kong estates and settlements supplied material resources for sacrifices and the maintenance of the temple and cemetery. Kong-controlled academies (*shuyuan* 書院) in and around Qufu held sacrifices to Confucius and served as sites of ritual practice where young men performed the highly scripted sacrificial music and dance. One academy also provided education that prepared them for examinations and bureaucratic posts, most useful for Kongs outside the senior descent line to improve their status. *Li*

also encompassed behaviour and ritual practices that distinguished the Kong lineage from ordinary people. As Agnew observes of Kong Jifen's 孔繼汾 ill-fated attempt to prescribe and codify Kong rites, however, they were not a strictly private concern because of Confucius's importance to the dynastic state and literati elite. Jifen's well-ordered and systematic text included language that was accused of signalling subtle criticism of the Qing, and in 1784 he was exiled to Xinjiang for literary sedition. Confucian *li* also shaped the world view of non-elites, as Agnew demonstrates with cases of subaltern outsiders appropriating it for their own unorthodox, even bizarre, purposes.

Chapter 7, "The Fall of Imperial China and the End of the Dukedom," narrates a century-long process of disintegration of ducal power leading up to the elimination of the title in 1935. Adding to the economic and political problems described in Chapter 4, the rise of Western merchant activity reoriented commercial transportation away from the Grand Canal to the coastal area. The increasingly desperate ducal establishment compensated for declining revenues from Grand Canal traffic and its weakening control over western Shandong properties by selling more lineage affiliations and official posts to outsiders. The state's neglect of infrastructure led to devastating floods in western Shandong, but Kong agents hounded tenants for rent despite the loss of the harvest. Many fled when the Yellow River changed course in 1855 and permanently submerged a vast area, and the widespread dislocation brought an upsurge of violence that eventually reached Qufu itself. Although the state funded repairs to some of the sacred sites, the region remained impoverished, and the Kong wealth and cultural prestige declined sharply. The 1911 revolution and shift to a republic made the ducal establishment a feudal anachronism and further undermined its financial resources, despite efforts to designate Confucianism as a religion and establish Qufu as a holy land, with the duke as the pope of the new "church." Such proposals were tarnished by Duke Kong Lingyi's 孔令貽 obstruction of modernization projects and enthusiastic support for attempts to restore imperial rule.<sup>6</sup> New Culture intellectuals clamoured to abandon Confucianism altogether as incompatible with a modern China. Although the New Life Movement of 1934 endorsed certain Confucian principles to cultivate a populist nationalism, and state-sponsored sacrifices in Qufu

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<sup>6</sup> Kong Lingyi quickly endorsed Yuan Shikai's 袁世凱 short-lived assumption of the throne in 1916 and Zhang Xun's 張勳 attempted restoration of the Qing Xuantong 宣統 emperor in 1917 and remained personally close with members of the deposed Qing royal family. His successor, Kong Decheng 孔德成, was still a toddler in 1923 and could not have written a letter using a Xuantong date and thanking him for gifts, as Agnew says (p. 172). Others in the ducal establishment shared the nostalgia for Qing rule and must have drafted it on his behalf, using his seal.

were revived, the dukedom was abolished in 1935. The last duke, Kong Decheng 孔德成, was made part of the state bureaucracy as a Sacrificial Official (Fengsi guan 奉祀官).<sup>7</sup>

In the Conclusion, Agnew summarizes subsequent events and restates his main arguments. Kong Decheng fled to Taiwan and became more active politically than his ancestors had been for centuries. Under the People's Republic, the Kongs were vilified, and the Cultural Revolution brought vicious attacks on Qufu's cultural sites. In recent years, Confucianism has gradually regained acceptance and official support, and many Kongs once again use descent from Confucius as the basis of their associational identity. A massive eighty-volume genealogy was published in 2009, including Kongs outside of China and women for the first time. Agnew ends with a brief but intriguing comparison with the Islamic world, where the descendants of the prophet Muhammad have also maintained a long continuity in identity but have functioned differently in their more diverse political and cultural environments.

To sum up, Agnew's book is impressive in its chronological and thematic scope, and he makes persuasive arguments about economic, political, and social factors that shaped the history of the Kong ducal establishment. Specialists in these disciplines may disagree about some of his points, but his synthesis of a considerable amount of primary-source material is a great help to scholars such as myself, for whom the Kongs are part of the context for other kinds of inquiry. The book would have been even better if it had included Chinese characters in endnotes and bibliographic references,<sup>8</sup> and the character glossary is woefully incomplete.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, Agnew's writing style is generally lucid,<sup>10</sup> and he keeps the story moving, making it accessible for advanced undergraduate students as well as a wide range of scholars.

JULIA K. MURRAY  
*University of Wisconsin-Madison*

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<sup>7</sup> The same title was also given to the head of the "Southern Kong" lineage in Quzhou, creating parity between the two lines for the first time since the thirteenth century.

<sup>8</sup> Without characters, the bibliography has also mixed together the writings of two different men named Kong Xianglin 孔祥霖 (*fl. c.* 1915) and 孔祥林 (b. 1951).

<sup>9</sup> I wish Agnew could also have been more precise in his references to different editions and imprints of the *Qufu Gazetteer*, which he treats in an overly generalizing, even simplistic, way. There were several Ming editions. My impression is that what he calls the "Yongzheng edition" is actually Kong Yinzhi's 孔胤植 mid-seventeenth-century edition with later addenda.

<sup>10</sup> My main quibble is his repeated use of "providence" when he clearly means "provenance"! And Mount Ni 尼山 is southeast of Qufu, not southwest (p. 138). Otherwise, the editing is very good, with only the occasional word inadvertently left out.