In this lively, concise, and erudite volume on Confucianism, Paul Goldin aims to provide an introduction to its core concepts and ideas. Roughly half of the original sources on which Goldin draws comes from what, after Zhu Xi, are called the Four Books of Confucianism. He draws on the Analects to extract his discussion of “Confucius and His Disciples” (the title of Chapter One), includes a brief discussion of the Great Learning, and provides an overview of Mencius’s teachings through the Mencius. The fourth of the Four, the Zhongyong (Application of Equilibrium in Goldin’s translation), is “cited at the appropriate junctures” (6). The other half of the book draws on the Canon of Filial Piety, the Xunzi, and very briefly on some relevant sources from the Song Dynasty to the recent present.

Concision about Confucianism is difficult. It seems to have been mandated in this case by the Ancient Philosophies series of the publisher, which exists “especially for students” and “offers a clear yet rigorous presentation of core ideas,” according to the publisher website description. Part of the difficulty is identification of Confucianism’s “core” from a scholarly point of view. The publisher’s description of the series establishes parameters that may be problematic in identifying such a core. For example, the emphasis on Confucianism’s ancient origins may excessively marginalize the innovative, dynamic quality of recent and current philosophical views, whose proponents regard themselves as shapers of the tradition—perhaps as even being at the core of Confucianism as a living tradition. Locating that core in the ancient world gives too swift an impression of recent and contemporary Confucians as mere commentators, or creators of the proverbial footnotes to the ancients. Likewise, the emphasis on core ideas may suggest too quickly that Confucianism, as a philosophy, is largely doctrinally centered when in fact ideas and teachings tend to be on a par with certain kinds of practices, institutions, and rituals that arguably are equally well qualified as “Confucian.”
Goldin negotiates this terrain pragmatically in his Introduction. Offering an “exacting yet workable definition of Confucianism,” Goldin states: “I shall use the term ‘Confucianism’ to refer to the philosophy of Confucius (551-479 BCE), his disciples, and the numerous later thinkers who regarded themselves as followers of his tradition. This definition is … flexible enough to admit the literally hundreds of philosophers who considered themselves as his latter-day disciples. Like any vibrant and long-lived tradition, Confucianism was never a monolith…. But competing Confucians rarely doubted each other’s sincerity or commitment to applying the Master’s teachings to the exigencies of their day” (1-2). What supports the claim of workability for Goldin’s definition is that it allows inclusion of teachings that are canonically controversial for a long historical stretch—those of Xunzi—as well as those that have been accepted as falling well within any of the bounds of orthodoxy suggested from time to time. Xunzi, I imagine, is the rare case alluded to by Goldin where sincerity and commitment to Confucius’s teachings were often doubted, to say the least.

On the other, exclusionary end, Goldin’s definition aims to prevent the “tendency to associate everything Chinese with Confucianism” (4). Perhaps because the definition is tacitly tied to actual, recorded teachings of professed followers of Confucius, Goldin believes it is possible to leave out of the bounds of Confucianism a variety of cultural aspects from the history of China that are often called “Confucian” but are not explicitly discoverable in text. In particular, feminist criticisms of Confucianism for promoting objectionable sexist features of Chinese society—patriarchal structure in general or foot-binding specifically—are singled out for dismissal based partially on lack of text-based principled Confucian support for them. Goldin argues, in part, that “Confucianism sanctions actions and habits if and only if they are conducive to the cultivation of morality; making oneself more attractive for the marriage market [which was the original purpose of footbinding] would never have qualified as a sufficient concern” (2-3). There is a quick response to this argument and even if it only furthers the conversation rather than settling anything, it would seem important for Goldin to address. Highly influential on Confucian thinking about society is Mencius’s assertion that not producing posterity is the greatest failure of filial duty (Mencius 4A26). For a woman in Ming dynasty China and to a lesser degree in the Qing—the periods in which footbinding is most widely practiced, attractiveness for marriage is not a mere vanity or economic necessity, as it may be in other places or times. Though it may come apart from cultivation of morality, a woman’s becoming a wife and bearing children is essential for satisfying the Confucian moral standard of filial piety, a standard that is relatively silent in most respects about women’s specific piety. So there is a short, clear argument from Confucian moral principle—“Confucian” in Goldin’s own sense—in conjunction with contingencies of social mores surrounding marriageability, to the promotion of footbinding in those particular periods of Chinese history. That holds whether or not, as Goldin offers, “some of the most prominent devotees of footbinding were men who praised it for erotic, not moralistic, reasons” (3). Erotic origin and men’s fetishizing are beside the point, morally speaking, for the girls and women who mutilated themselves with excruciatingly painful and physically injurious discipline. They did so dutifully for the sake of marriageability and its ultimate Confucian point of providing heirs for the continuance of pious moral devotion to ancestry.