

Neo-Confucianism

Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality

JeeLoo Liu

六經責我開生面

WILEY Blackwell

"JeeLoo Liu is a gifted philosopher and an elegant writer. This book is a splendid introduction to Neo-Confucian ideas about the metaphysics of morality and related issues. The personalities are presented vividly and the ideas explained thoroughly. Liu succeeds in her goal of showing analytical philosophers how to engage with the richness of Chinese philosophy."

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Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality engages the latest global scholarship to offer an articulate and penetrating analysis of Chinese philosophy in the Song-Ming era from the eleventh to seventeenth centuries and its application to Western philosophy. Chapters contextualize neo-Confucianism for contemporary analytic philosophy through a rigorous, cross-cultural approach to today's most fundamental philosophical questions and debates. Divided into three parts, the volume outlines the metaphysical foundations of neo-Confucian moral philosophy and examines the relationship between human nature, human mind, and morality. Grounded in textual evidence from Chinese primary sources, the book incorporates a wealth of additional research from both Chinese and English secondary literature, and examines the ideas of eight major neo-Confucian philosophers, from Zhou Dunyi and Cheng-Zhu to Zhang Zai and Wang Fuzhi.

An accessible yet authoritative narrative by an esteemed scholar of Chinese philosophy, *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality* presents an incisive and philosophically-engaging treatment of neo-Confucian thought and its relevance to the contemporary world.

JeeLoo Liu is Professor of Philosophy at California State University, Fullerton. She is the author of *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy: From Ancient Philosophy to Chinese Buddhism* (Wiley-Blackwell 2006), co-editor of *Consciousness and the Self* (2012), and co-editor of *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy* (2014). She is currently the Executive Director of the International Society for Chinese Philosophy.

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to "The Six Classics make it incumbent upon me to break a new path and present a new facet."

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Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality

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Neo-Confucianism

This book is dedicated to my mother Chu-Wei Lin Liu (劉林祝闈), whose high standards made me who I am today.

Preface

This book is not about the history of Chinese philosophy, and it does not confine neo-Confucianism to its historical contexts. Instead, it aims to extract the philosophical core of neo-Confucianism in the Song-Ming era to make it relevant to contemporary philosophical discourse. The methodology of this book is comparative philosophy, and the angle of comparison is that of analytic philosophy. The analytic reconstruction of neo-Confucianism is chosen on the grounds of my philosophical training and expertise. It provides one credible analysis of neo-Confucianism among many other respectable approaches to Chinese philosophy. My intent behind writing this book is not to define what neo-Confucianism is, but to demonstrate how one could philosophically engage neo-Confucianism.

In this book, many contemporary philosophical theories in the analytic tradition are employed to provide a hermeneutic entry to the ancient philosophical ideas in neo-Confucianism. The claim is of course not that neo-Confucians of the eleventh to the seventeenth century did embrace these contemporary doctrines, since such a claim would result in anachronistic or Procrustean interpretation. The contemporary recontextualization, however, can liberate neo-Confucianism from its particular historical contexts and make it relate to contemporary readers. I believe that most philosophical ideas, though having their contextual roots, emerge out of shared human concerns, and can thus be recontextualized in different eras. A text should live on through its interpreters and readers.

At the same time, such a comparative approach, that is, using Western philosophical concepts to interpret Chinese philosophy, could incur the criticism of epistemological colonization, or the so-called reversed matching of meaning (*fanxiang geyi* 反向格義, borrowing Xiaogan Liu's terminology), to which many Chinese historians and Sinologists strongly oppose. Some Chinese scholars have vehemently argued against using any Western philosophical ideas to explicate Chinese thought, in that such Westernization would maim "the essence" of Chinese thinking. What I want to challenge in this book is exactly this kind of philosophical nationalism or essentialism that takes

Chinese philosophy to be exclusively of Chinese intellectual lineage, and intelligible only to Chinese readers. Using Western terminology to explicate Chinese philosophy is not necessarily to force the latter into the former's conceptual framework. If the interpretation remains true to the text, and does not distort the philosophical ideas of the philosophers, then the comparative angle can serve as a bridge for outsiders to gain intellectual access to Chinese philosophy. At the same time, scholars familiar with Chinese philosophy can also be motivated to learn more about Western philosophical theses. By reconstructing neo-Confucianism with the terminology of contemporary analytic philosophy in this book, I hope to render these philosophical ideas accessible and philosophically inspiring. To be true to the philosophical import of neo-Confucianism, the reconstruction is based on careful textual analysis, in consultation with other relevant interpretations both in English and Chinese secondary sources.¹ What I hope to present to the readers is a refreshing, innovative and perspicuous articulation of the philosophical dimension of neo-Confucianism.

1 Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Chinese into English are my own.

Acknowledgments

This book was made possible by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation. I wish to thank its past and present directors Hyung Choi, Michael J. Murray, and John Churchill for their assistance.

This book serves as the sequel to my first book, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy: From Ancient Philosophy to Chinese Buddhism* (Blackwell, 2006). I am deeply indebted to the former philosophy editor of Wiley-Blackwell, Jeff Dean, for helping launch my writing career. In the late 1990s, when I was a junior assistant professor at SUNY Geneseo with little writing credentials, I approached Jeff with my idea of writing an introduction to Chinese philosophy with an analytic approach. He embraced the idea enthusiastically and provided me with helpful feedback along the way. I am very grateful to Jeff for trusting me to write the book the way I wanted to write it. We agreed at the time that an introduction that spans into neo-Confucianism would have made the book too long, so neo-Confucianism would have to wait for the second volume. It took me nearly 10 years to complete this project. With this book, Jeff was again welcoming and encouraging, and offered his shrewd editorial suggestions including the current title for this book. I was sorry that Jeff left Wiley-Blackwell before the book could be completed; however, I am thankful that the current editor Marissa Koors took over the project for publication. I would also like to thank the two reviewers of this book for their friendly and very helpful suggestions for improvement.

Neo-Confucianism has always been my passion. When I was an undergraduate at National Taiwan University, I loved reading neo-Confucian writings on the rooftop balcony at my parents' apartment. Watching the sunsets and beautiful clouds, I often thought that this was the same sky that these neo-Confucians shared hundreds of years ago and felt connected with them. The person who instilled this passion in me was my undergraduate professor and later my master's thesis advisor, Yongjun Zhang 張永僊. He is a living neo-Confucian in our times, dedicated to learning, teaching, and passing on the torch of *Dao*. I am extremely grateful to him for opening the door to neo-Confucianism for me.

In 2009, when my idea for writing this book first emerged, I was invited to conduct an experimental summer course on the same topic at National Chengchi University in Taiwan. I would like to thank the Philosophy Department of National Chengchi University for giving me this great opportunity to develop my thoughts through engaging discussions with students. I must credit the participants for helping make this book possible: my teaching assistant Zili Zhang 張子立, the fellow scholars as well as the students in this class. I am also grateful to the Philosophy Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong for providing a sponsored sojourn during the final stage of my manuscript revision.

Last, but most important, I also want to thank my husband Michael Cranston and our two sons Collin and Dillon, for they have provided a loving, supportive, and stress-free environment for me to work on my book over the years.

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Introduction

This book gives a detailed philosophical analysis of eight central figures in Chinese neo-Confucianism from the Song-Ming era (between the eleventh and the seventeenth centuries). It is a sequel to the author's first book *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy: From Ancient Philosophy to Chinese Buddhism* (Blackwell, 2006), which examines five major philosophical schools in the ancient period as well as four principal schools of Chinese Buddhism. This book continues the analytical introduction to Chinese philosophy given in the first book and focuses on neo-Confucianism.

The book draws comparisons to analytic philosophy in regard to its main issues and concerns. This approach helps to bring neo-Confucianism into the context of contemporary philosophy and to show how issues expressed in distinctively neo-Confucian terminology relate to issues in contemporary philosophy. One of the aims of this comparative approach is to show that even though Chinese philosophers used different terms, narrative strategies, and analytic modes, their concerns were often similar to those of their Western counterparts, for example: What is the nature of reality? Wherein lies the foundation of our moral values? Is human nature fundamentally good or bad? How do human beings connect to the whole universe? What is the foundation of our knowledge of the world and of moral reality? Such an approach will make these issues accessible to Western thinkers by shedding light on their universality through the analytic explication of these texts. This book will enable Western readers who are not familiar with Chinese philosophical terminology or its intellectual history to gain a philosophical appreciation of neo-Confucianism. Furthermore, by consulting both English secondary sources and representative Chinese works on neo-Confucianism, it will facilitate a more active philosophical exchange between Western philosophers working on neo-Confucianism and contemporary Chinese scholars by coming to see the shared concerns as well as the common pursuits laid out in a clear and accessible language.

What Is Neo-Confucianism?

“Neo-Confucianism” typically refers to the revival of classical Confucianism developed between eleventh and eighteenth centuries in China, spanning over four dynasties in Chinese history: Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Neo-Confucianism was a new form of Confucianism that came after the dominance of Daoism and subsequently Buddhism within Chinese intellectual circles. Comparable to what “Modern Philosophy” accomplished in Western philosophy, neo-Confucianism also revitalized classical philosophy and expanded the traditional philosophical discourse, adding new dimensions and attaining new heights. The transformation of Confucianism as a result of the challenge and influence of Daoism and Buddhism was the most remarkable and significant development in the history of Chinese philosophy. Neo-Confucianism invigorated the metaphysical speculation found in classics such as the *Yijing*, and incorporated different concepts and perspectives derived from Daoism and Buddhism into its discourse. Also, partly as a response to the Daoist skeptical attitude toward the possibility of knowledge, neo-Confucianism brought the theory of knowledge asserted in classics such as *The Great Learning* to a much more sophisticated level.

Frank Perkins gives neo-Confucianism an apt summary: Neo-Confucianism “can be broadly characterized as the attempt to integrate a speculative, systematic metaphysics influenced by Buddhism and Daoism into the ethically and socially oriented system of Confucianism” (Perkins 2004, 20–21). Neo-Confucians were fundamentally concerned with the role humans play in the moral reconstruction of the world around them. In their view, humans not only endow the world of nature with meaning but also share moral attributes with natural phenomena. Neo-Confucians’ metaphysical views lay the foundation for their moral theories. The goal of this book is to explicate Song-Ming neo-Confucianism in its three major themes (metaphysics, mind, and morality) and to show how they exemplify a coherent underlying concern: the relation between nature and human beings. In their various debates, neo-Confucians touched on the possibility of an innate moral sense and the various means of moral knowledge. In addition, neo-Confucianism contains an intriguing discourse on the possibility and foundation of morality. In neo-Confucians’ views, morality takes its root either in the universal goodness of human nature or in the individual’s moral reflection and cultivation of the human mind. This debate between the School of Nature and the School of Mind was one of the major themes in neo-Confucianism. Finally, in neo-Confucianism we see a consistent effort not only to redefine a realist worldview that affirms the world as existing independently of human conception, but also to reassert a humanist worldview that places human beings at the center of meaning and values. Both the realist and the humanist commitments were direct responses to the challenges of Daoism and Buddhism, and they delineate the spirit of neo-Confucianism.

Neo-Confucians were generally concerned with establishing a moralistic naturalism, that is, the natural world in which we live demonstrates many good