The Liberal Tradition in China

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Introduction

When I was invited to give the Ch'ien Mu Lectures 錢賓四先生學術文化講座 for 1982 the honor of being asked to participate in such a distinguished lectureship was enough to compel my acceptance, whatever doubts I had about being able to meet the expectations aroused by so great a name in Chinese scholarship. I had, too, strong personal reasons for taking up this charge. For many years Ch'ien Mu 錢穆 has been a teacher of mine through his writings, and though others also have taught me in this way, he was one of the earliest and most influential in guiding my studies of Chinese thought. If a request comes in the name of a teacher to whom one is so indebted, it cannot be refused.

Ch'ien Mu's impressive scholarly contributions are linked in my mind to the name of an earlier scholar in the seventeenth century, Huang Tsung-hsi 黃宗羲, who attracted my attention soon after I first ventured into Chinese studies. That was in 1937–38, when most people would have thought that only missionary connections could draw one to such an out-of-the-way field. But in New York and at Columbia then the interest in China was just as likely to be political as religious, and I soon found myself in a Chinese class with Paul Robeson and others of a radical persuasion, sharing with them socialist leanings and a youthful enthusiasm for Mao Tse-tung's revolutionary exploits. Later there was to be some disenchantment on my own part as I, and others of my generation, watched the course of events in Europe—the betrayal of revolutionary idealism in Stalin's purges, the Hitler-Stalin pact which let loose the violence of World War II, the division of Europe between Nazi and Soviet forces, the spreading holocaust and Soviet gulag, etc. Less optimistic about Western-style revolution as the way out of China's difficulties, I began to search for something in the life and history of the Chinese people themselves which might offer

grounds for hope in a future less torn between revolution and reaction.

Casting around I lit on Huang Tsung-hsi, about whom not much was then known in the West. At the turn of the century he had been something of a hero—some called him "China's Rousseau"—to Chinese reformers and anti-Manchu revolutionaries, who looked to find some sanction in the past for democratic values, though they rarely pursued the comparison very far or examined Huang's ideas closely in the context of his own times. Later the revolutionary tide swept all such Confucian reformism aside as a "brave new world" burst forth which saw total emancipation from China's past as the only solution.

It was here that Ch'ien Mu came into the picture for me, his approach to Chinese history and thought offering a larger perspective in which to view these disjointed times. As he later reaffirmed this view and articulated it more fully in his inaugural lecture for this series, China's true liberation would not be achieved in the manner of the Cultural Revolution, by trying to root out all vestiges of the past and destroy them, but only by coming to terms with Chinese culture, whatever its virtues and deficiencies, and seeing the future of this great people as authentically rooted there. While some Chinese might emigrate to other countries and adapt to different cultures, this was not possible for the great mass of Chinese who had to live with each other in a condition, and with an outlook, very much shaped by their common past.[1]

As a rare and accomplished historian of Chinese thought, Ch'ien Mu earlier had reopened the Neo-Confucian record and established the context of Huang Tsung-hsi's thought in the intellectual history of the Sung 宋, Ming 明, and early Ch'ing 清 periods. I discovered Professor Ch'ien's work, especially his *History of Chinese Thought in the Last Three Centuries* (*Chung-kuo chin san-pai-nien hsüeh-shu shih* 中國近三百年學術史) just at the time (after World War II service in the Pacific theater) when I was digging into Huang's own studies in intellectual history. Professor Ch'ien prefaced his history of seventeenth-to-nineteenth-century thought by reminding his readers of its roots in Sung Neo-Confucianism.[2]

Huang's best-known work, the *Ming-i tai-fang-lu* 明夷待訪錄 (*Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince*), had been written

in 1662, not long after his retirement from years of struggle in the resistance movement against the Manchus. His frustrations as a participant in reform efforts at the end of the Ming, and then as a member of remnant Ming forces holding out against the invader, were given powerful expression in this critique of Ming despotism and decadence. As a loyal minister of the Ming he rendered his penultimate service to it (in the Confucian sense) by offering forthright criticism of its weaknesses, and as a Neo-Confucian with a broad grasp of history he extended his analysis of these evils back into the earliest of the imperial dynasties.

The outcome of this scholarly effort stands as probably the most sweeping and systematic critique of Chinese despotism in the premodern period. It was indeed a radical attack on traditional Imperial institutions, and the succeeding Manchu dynasty, notwithstanding Huang's excoriation of the Ming, saw his work as no less threatening and subversive to them. To me it remains a major landmark of Confucian political thought, remarkable for its breadth of historical scholarship, depth of moral passion and power of trenchant expression.

In these respects, then, Huang's work is almost in a class by itself, yet one would be mistaken to think of it as wholly unique or exceptional. Huang was no solitary genius, breaking with his past and at odds with the scholarship of his time. Rather, his protest only gave more pointed expression to political views which other thinkers of the day shared with him, and his radical manifesto, though sharpened by the crisis of dynastic upheaval and foreign conquest, was but one culmination of a liberal Neo-Confucian tradition he was glad to acknowledge and reaffirm.

Huang's essay was not, however, to be his last word on the Ming. He did not just expose its bankruptcy and divest himself of a bad business. Most of the remaining years of his life he devoted to preserving the record of Ming Confucian scholarship in thought and literature. Representative of this later work is his *Case Studies of Ming Confucians* (*Ming-ju hsüeh-an* 明儒學案), a critical anthology of Ming Confucian thought which has come to be recognized as a major monument in the writing of Chinese intellectual history, and one much emulated (even by Ch'ien Mu himself, in his *Chu Tzu hsin hsüeh-an* 朱子新學案). In an explanatory note at the beginning of this magnum opus, Huang

asserted that whatever the other failings and shortcomings of the Ming, in the central domain of Neo-Confucian thought (*li-hsüeh* 理學), Ming scholars had won unprecedented achievements.[3]

It is a claim with more than one significance for us. On the surface Huang's massive work of compilation could be seen as a conservative effort—a typical example of Confucian scholarship conserving tradition. But since Huang was so critical of the Ming in other respects, his expressed admiration for its philosophical achievements cannot be taken for granted or dismissed as conventional praise. Moreover Huang's generally sympathetic approach to the subject, and his insistence on the positive importance of preserving Ming thought, contrasts with the prevailing judgment against it in the latter half of the seventeenth century, when it was seen as empty, decadent, and best left interred with the ashes of the fallen Ming. Indeed, Huang had to buck a tidal wave of reaction against Ming thought that was to carry down into the present century. From this standpoint, in his effort to "conserve" the Ming Neo-Confucian legacy, Huang was adopting an independent stance vis-à-vis the dominant intellectual trend, and certainly one counter to the official view, in his time.

I shall have more to say later about the deeper significance of this commitment on Huang's part. Here it may not be out of place for me to suggest that the more recent scholarship of Ch'ien Mu, likewise, has had to withstand some of the same hostility to Neo-Confucianism, and even more, violent political attacks against Confucianism as a whole. Ch'ien was one of a very few distinguished scholars who resisted the prevailing trend in his own time and thus effectively emulated, in my view, the earlier example of Huang Tsung-hsi in preserving, though not uncritically, his Neo-Confucian heritage.

When Huang spoke for Ming *li-hsüeh*, he referred to a distinctive phase in the development of thought trends that had first appeared in the Sung period (960–1279). Later, having completed his anthology of Ming thought, he extended his survey backward in time to cover the Sung and Yüan periods as well, leaving at his death an unfinished anthology, the *Sung-Yüan hsüeh-an* 宋元學案 (*Case Studies of Sung and Yüan Confucians*). These works covered the whole broad movement of

Confucian thought which was traceable from the Sung period, as its formative phase, down through the Yüan and Ming. Clearly he still hoped in the late seventeenth century that the flowering of thought he so admired in the Ming would bear further fruit in his own time and thereafter.

The modern Western expression "Neo-Confucianism" as it has been used by Fung Yu-lan 馮友蘭, Derk Bodde, Carsun Chang 張君勱, and in our *Neo-Confucian Studies Series* at Columbia, is generally coextensive with the new trends covered by Huang. This means that it embraces a range of schools and thought-currents stemming from the Sung masters of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, including *li-hsüeh* in the form not only of the Ch'eng-Chu 程朱 school but also of the so-called Lu-Wang 陸王 school (so-called because of a certain affinity of thought between Lu Hsiang-shan 陸象山 and Wang Yang-ming 王陽明, though the latter actually emerged from the Ch'eng-Chu school of the early Ming and was linked to Lu by no line of scholastic filiation coming down from the Sung). For Huang Tsung-hsi, and for other historians of Neo-Confucian teaching like Sun Ch'i-feng 孫奇逢, the school or learning of principle (*li-hsüeh*) included Lu Hsiang-shan and Wang Yang-ming,[4] and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart (*hsin-hsüeh* 心學) was as much identified with the Ch'eng-Chu school as with Lu and Wang.

Recently certain Western writers, falling in with one particular claim to orthodoxy, have identified Neo-Confucianism exclusively with the Ch'eng-Chu school and with what the latter spoke of as the School or Learning of the Way (*tao-hsüeh* 道學). But Huang Tsung-hsi explicitly rejected the claim of Ch'eng-Chu adherents to an exclusive hold on the Way, and refused to confine *li-hsüeh* to *tao-hsüeh*.[5] The latter term has a valid historical basis as a designation for the Ch'eng-Chu school, since both Ch'eng I 程頤 (1033–1107) and Chu Hsi 朱熹 owned up to the name. Moreover, since this school's claim to orthodoxy was accepted by many later Neo-Confucians in China, Korea, and Japan, there is a sense in which one can legitimately speak of the School of the Way (*tao-hsüeh*), or the Ch'eng-Chu school, as "orthodox Neo-Confucianism." However, to limit the term *li-hsüeh* or Neo-Confucianism to the Ch'eng-Chu teaching alone would run contrary to historical fact in respect to *li-hsüeh* and be a departure from established usage regarding

"Neo-Confucianism."

The terminological issues faced here are not trivial. They go to the heart of the matter I shall be addressing in these lectures. For Huang Tsung-hsi fought on two fronts against a narrow conception of Neo-Confucianism. He rejected the conservative, proprietary, and authoritarian claims of a narrow orthodoxy and, with equal vigor, the antipathetic reaction of those who, repudiating that "orthodoxy," would dismiss the whole tradition as moribund and irrelevant. In other words, as both historian and philosopher he argued for a broader, more liberal, and more vital interpretation of Neo-Confucianism.

In using the word "liberal" I must of course anticipate other possibilities for misunderstanding. There will be objections from those who adhere to a narrow, purist view of liberalism as defined within a specific Western context (as identified, say, with John Stuart Mill), and others too who, reacting against certain libertarian features of the presumed Western prototype, would reject it as alien and inapplicable to China. To me these are small risks to run. Indeed I welcome the fullest possible discussion and delineation of differences in historical experience between China and the West, as long as this does not preclude the finding of some common ground between the two and thus arriving at a deeper understanding of each other.

A few years ago in a symposium held at Columbia my late colleague Charles Frankel, well known as an articulate spokesman for both liberalism and the humanities in America, defined seven senses of the term liberalism, which I summarize as follows:

1. Cultural liberalism, as opposed to parochialism and fanaticism: "An affirmative interest in the promotion of diversity and qualities of mind which encourage empathetic understanding and critical appreciation of the diverse possibilities of human life";
2. Political liberalism: "emphasis on procedures for the legitimation of peaceful change";
3. Economic liberalism: "policies designed to correct imbalances of economic power";
4. Philosophic liberalism: "belief in the supremacy of rational methods of inquiry";

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5. The liberal temperament or style, characterized by moderation, restraint, and compromise;
6. Liberal education: "commitment to long-term moral ideals, long-term ideals of culture, long-term ideals of civilization," and to "compromise without complacency."[6]

It would not be difficult to cite aspects of the Confucian traditon corresponding to each of those just listed, though any satisfactory treatment of them would also have to qualify the comparisons substantially and deal with significant differences between what we might call Confucian liberalism and the Western variety—for instance, under number 4 in how one would understand the supremacy of rational methods of inquiry—differences equally illuminating with regard to the limitations of both.

Confucian teaching was humanistic in the sense that it saw man as playing a central, creative role in the transformation of the world. Insofar as Confucius 孔子 viewed human life and experience as the focus of all valid learning, "humanistic" here means "this-worldly." It was not, however, seen as opposed to the divine order of things; rather, Confucius conceived of the human order itself as revelatory of the divine ("Heavenly") order.

The enduring value of human experience was affirmed by Confucius in his efforts to conserve what was best in traditional culture. In this sense he could be called conservative. But Confucius was, at the same time, liberal in viewing past ideals and models as the basis for a critique of existing institutions and as a reminder of the greatness to which man was called by Heaven. "Liberal" here could stand for "reformist" vis-à-vis existing unjust governments, which denied men the opportunity to fulfill their legitimate wants and aspirations. As Gilbert Murray has said of conservatism and liberalism in the West, they are not contrary principles but complementary. "The object of conservatism is to save the social order. The object of liberality is to bring that order a little nearer to what ... the judgment of a free man—free from selfishness, free from passion, free from prejudice—would require and by that very change to save it the more effectively."[7]

Confucians in later centuries were also reformist in their

advocacy of humane social welfare policies. Revolutionary Maoism, or "leftism" as it might now be called in the People's Republic, acknowledged the existence of this kind of liberal reformism among Confucians, but criticized it as a misguided, meliorative approach to social infections which should have been allowed to fester and erupt into revolutionary action. Confucian reformism, according to the Maoist view, temporized or compromised by pursuing methods of peaceful change rather than insisting on radical surgery.

Nevertheless, Confucius himself was far from complacent or content with the status quo. He spoke of himself as struggling on with his efforts to change things even when these efforts seemed to be getting nowhere; and he lamented it when, with advancing age, he could no longer conjure up visionary dreams of his political ideal as a spur to reform. Men had a positive obligation to respond to the needs of others; for their leaders to be unresponsive was to be less than human. Thus Confucian reformism was inspired by a positive commitment to human welfare and informed by a critical attitude toward established institutions which reflected an awareness of alternative possibilities for improvement.

The Confucian revival in the Sung, which gave birth to Neo-Confucianism, expressed these same attitudes but brought them to a new stage of development in ways characteristic of that age. In what follows, then, I shall call "Neo-Confucian" those elements in this movement which have a distinctive quality of their own, though they are not without some precedent in the Confucian past, and I shall continue to call "Confucian" perennial values or attitudes which, though inevitably different in some ways from the past, are not markedly so. Among the new developments I shall point to are some which draw upon traditional Confucian values and yet move in a "modern" "liberal" direction. For purposes of illustration in these lectures, which cannot hope to trace complex historical trends in substantial detail, I shall refer to certain key concepts of Neo-Confucianism representative of these general trends. My method then will follow the history of ideas, much in the style of Ch'ien Mu himself, citing central concepts prominent in the Neo-Confucian discourse of the Sung and Ming periods, but with occasional reference to Korean and Japanese uses of the same in the extend-

ed East Asian dialogue. Neo-Confucianism, as a whole, in the broad sense of Huang Tsung-hsi's *li-hsüeh*, will provide the larger context for the discussion of these ideas, but the concepts themselves will mostly be drawn from the mainline of Neo-Confucian thought usually identified with the Ch'eng-Chu school or "orthodox" Neo-Confucianism.

First I should like to characterize the intellectual climate of the Sung period as one in which a new emphasis on the vitality and creativity of the Way, as well as a new critical temper, abetted each other in the reappropriation of the past and amplifying of tradition to make them serve contemporary needs. Significant expressions of these attitudes are found in the Learning of the Way (*tao-hsüeh*), the repossession or reconstitution of the Way (*tao-t'ung* 道統) and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart (*hsin-hsüeh*). Next I should like to discuss liberal education and voluntarism in Neo-Confucian thought as the basis for an expanded concept of the self and a distinctive individualism in the Sung and Ming periods. Here the key concepts will be "learning for the sake of one's self" (*wei-chi chih hsüeh* 爲己之學), "getting it oneself" or "finding [the Way in] oneself" (*tzu-te* 自得), "taking responsibility [for the Way] oneself" (*tzu-jen* [*yü tao*] 自任 於道), and related concepts involving the "self" in Ch'eng-Chu thought. Finally I will assess the impact of these tendencies on the late Ming and conclude with Huang Tsung-hsi's attempt to achieve a new synthesis, representative, I would say, of a more mature Neo-Confucian liberalism. The epilogue, based in part on a public lecture at Columbia in November 1979, suggests how these Sung-Ming developments may relate to the current scene in China.

1.
Human Renewal and the Repossession of the Way

Neo-Confucianism, in general, and the Learning of the Way (*tao-hsüeh*) in particular, had their inception in the great reform movements of the Northern Sung period (960–1127). Politically these reached a high point in the determined efforts of Wang An-shih 王安石 (1021–86) to effectuate his New Laws (*hsin fa* 新法), which can be read also as new methods, systems, or policies. Here, however, the key word is "new," for it stands in seeming contrast to tradition as expressed in the dominant restorationist ideal of the time, that is, to the idea that the institutions of the ancient Chou 周 dynasty should be revived and put into practice in eleventh-century Sung China. Actually what this signifies is that tradition and innovation went hand in hand, rather than going in opposite directions. When Wang An-shih invoked the Confucian classics, and especially the *Rites* or *Institutes of Chou* (*Chou kuan* 周官), as sanction for his radical reforms, it was because tradition in this form afforded him high ground from which to attack existing institutions, not because his new institutions would bear any close resemblance to their presumed models in the *Institutes of Chou*.

Confirmation of this innovative use of tradition is further found in the need Wang felt to write a new commentary on the *Chou kuan*, with the revealing title, *New Interpretation of the Institutes of Chou* (*Chou-kuan hsin-i* 周官新義). Reinterpretation of the classics employed a new criticism by which neo-classicism was made to serve the purposes of reform. Thus "restoration of the ancient order" (*fu-ku* 復古) ushered in a new day, and the "Way of the Sage-kings" of the past was to prove in practice a new Way.

Though berated for his authoritarian ways and dogmatic manner in the pursuit of his goals, Wang was not alone among the great scholars of his day in believing that one could find

in the ancient order the basis for a new order. Speaking in terms reminiscent of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society," the philosopher Ch'eng I asserted no less insistently than Wang the need for a "great reform" to bring about a "Great Order" or "Great Benefit" in those times.[1] Politically at odds with Wang, he was equally dogmatic in claiming the authority of the classics for his own ideas. And this was possible for both Wang and Ch'eng because they shared a view of the Way as not fixed in the past but as vital and adaptive to new human situations.

One branch of Confucian scholarship in the Sung which encouraged this thought was the study of the *Book of Changes* 易經, the Great Appendix to which gave prominence to a conception of the Way as vital and creative, life-renewing (*sheng-sheng* 生生). To Ch'eng I, the early proponent of the Learning of the Way (*tao-hsüeh*), this conception contrasted with the negative Buddhist view of change as impermanence and its view of the Way as deliverance from the cycle of life and death. Instead, the Confucian metaphysics of the *Changes* offered a positive view of the Way as readily accessible to human understanding and adaptable to ordinary human needs. Rediscovery and renewal then became significant values presupposed in Ch'eng I's neoclassicism. Truth was directly available in the classics and immediately applicable to the renewing of human life. As Ch'eng I quite consciously put it, the Way of the Great Learning called for the "renewing of the people" (*hsin min* 新民), which he substituted for "loving the people" (*ch'in min* 親民) in the earlier version.[2] Chu Hsi, in his own commentary on the *Great Learning* (*Ta-hsüeh* 大學), greatly stressed the idea of self-renewal as the basis for a larger human renewal. In turn the dynamism of the early Neo-Confucian movement in the Yüan 元 and Ming periods drew heavily on this promise, for it was on Chu Hsi's new articulation of the moral nature of man and individual perfectibility that this hope of social renewal rested.[3]

One cannot take this emphasis on renewal or innovation as necessarily expressing a "progressive" view of history if by that one would imply a linear development toward some higher stage. Its "newness" is like the regeneration of the New Year, or of spring, which may allow for an evolutionary process but is not predicated upon it. Nor can one understand "vitality" or

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