

THE MESSAGE
OF THE MIND
in Neo-Confucianism



WM. THEODORE DE BARY

心學與道統

THE
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OF THE MIND
in Neo-Confucianism

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The frontispiece is the
"Diagram of the Noble Man Modeling Himself on Heaven"
by Ch'en Chen-sheng (1410-1473). See p. 227.

The jacket design is taken from the
"Diagram of Heaven, Earth, and Sagehood"
by Ch'en Chen-sheng (1410-1473).



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Preface

The present volume has emerged from lectures delivered at the Collège de France in May 1986 which were intended as a sequel to my *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart* (1981). In the earlier study I drew attention to key doctrines concerning the mind which linked the Neo-Confucian view of self-cultivation to the dominant political philosophy in pre-modern East Asia. The focus in that first study was on the historical process by which certain Neo-Confucian ideas and texts became institutionalized as an official orthodoxy during the late Sung, Yüan, and early Ming dynasties (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries). In the present work, I follow this development down into the nineteenth century, but with more attention to how certain core ideas and practices underwent change in the continuing discussion and debate that marked the later Confucian tradition. What we speak of as "tradition" may indeed be better understood as a sustained discourse in which the central values of Neo-Confucianism never ceased to be at issue, with two among them—the "mind" (*hsin*) and tradition (*tao-t'ung*) itself—most seriously contested.

My title "The Message of the Mind" expresses in another way something essential to the "Learning of the Mind-and-Heart." It is meant to suggest that, besides being "about" the mind, this communication was to be "by" and "of" the mind, i.e., an active involvement of the mind was required for passing the message on. Such is the intention which underlay the Neo-Confucians' frequent use of the term *hsin-fa* in this connection. *Hsin-fa* defies literal translation, and, even among free renderings, there is no single one that adequately conveys

its several meanings and uses. In *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy* I translated *hsin-fa* as method or system of the mind-and-heart (the latter often shortened just to "mind," once the idea had been registered that mind always stands for heart as well, and vice versa). Subsequently I have considered such possible renderings as "formula," "recipe," or "secret" of the mind. At this point, however (and I will not say "finally"), I have decided on three separate translations—"message," "method," and, less often, "measure" to express three distinct meanings that attach to *hsin-fa* in Neo-Confucian discourse as recounted in this book. "Message" conveys the idea that this is an instruction transmitted from the early sage-kings; in this sense *hsin-fa* is parallel to the "transmission of the mind [of the sages]" (ch'uan-hsin) also much discussed in Neo-Confucianism. "Method," *fa* as a way of doing or practicing something, lends itself to the Neo-Confucian view that the message bears with it a specific formula for moral practice (*kung-fu*) in the conduct of life and especially of government. Lastly, "measure," besides connoting a step to be taken, can represent *fa* as a model or norm, and thus suitably stand for *hsin-fa* as the "measure of the mind." In Neo-Confucian parlance, in contrast to Buddhist, it asserts a definite standard of moral value or judgment as inherent in, and intrinsic to, the mind.

If one looks in standard dictionaries or histories for the meaning of the closely related term *hsin-hsüeh* ("learning of the mind-and-heart"), one invariably finds it identified with the teaching of Lu Hsiang-shan in the Sung period and then with Wang Yang-ming in the Ming, or with the so-called "Lu-Wang School of the Mind," even though no evidence is given for such usage of the term earlier than the sixteenth century.¹ One of the purposes of this study is to show that in fact Neo-Confucian *hsin-hsüeh* originated in the Ch'eng-Chu school and primarily in reference to the "message" and "method" of the mind. Only later, with the rise to dominance of Wang Yang-ming's teaching, was the term appropriated for Wang's own purposes. Then, so prevalent did this new interpretation become that virtually all modern writers have accepted it unquestioningly, without searching behind the smokescreen of sixteenth-seventeenth-century controversy that obscured the view of what had gone before. Nor, given the accepted view that "School of the Mind" was to be equated with "Lu-Wang," did anyone attend to the continuing manifestations of this learning of the mind in orthodox and

neo-orthodox forms of Ch'eng-Chu Neo-Confucianism down into the nineteenth century.

With this anomaly we inherit a problem as to how orthodoxy itself is to be understood. The "tradition" includes phases in which new movements establish themselves as orthodox (whether in scholarly or official terms); reform movements emerge from within to challenge and take over from the old orthodoxy, and still newer formulations arise out of the attempt to reconcile conflicting claims in a mainline consensus. Hence some clarification of my own use of key terms is in order.

"Neo-Confucianism," a Western term, is applied in general to the new trends of thought emerging from the Confucian revival in the Sung, which thought of itself as renewing ancient ideals. Roughly, it covers the same ground as the term Way or Learning of the Sages (*sheng-hsüeh* or *sheng-jen chih tao* or *sheng-tao*), as Sung Chinese referred to this broad movement. "Orthodox Neo-Confucianism" limits it to the Ch'eng-Chu teaching which became established both in schools and government, based on the writings of Chu Hsi and, for practical purposes, mostly on his version of the Four Books. One can be quite specific about the new ideas, texts, and practices which attach to orthodoxy in this form.² This is not to say that such doctrines and texts go undisputed. On the contrary the very fact of their being perennially questioned and reinterpreted confirms their crucial importance in the new tradition. The "Learning of the Way (*tao-hsüeh*), a term antedating Chu Hsi and originally applicable to more strands of Neo-Confucian thought in the twelfth century than just Chu Hsi's alone, became more narrowly defined in the *Sung History*, a Yüan period compilation in which *tao-hsüeh* came to be identified almost exclusively with the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy of the Ch'eng-Chu school.³

Resisting this narrowed conception of orthodoxy, however, other Neo-Confucians in the Ming and Ch'ing insisted that one could be faithful to tradition (whether Confucian or Neo-Confucian) without keeping within the limits or conforming to the models thus officially defined. And among those who stood for a more broad-gauged tradition were some who redefined even "orthodoxy" more loosely. Thus there is need for a term which can distinguish this more liberal sense of orthodoxy from the narrower Ch'eng-Chu line, and I have used "neo-orthodoxy" for this purpose, since it allows for the incorporation of some new elements into the Ch'eng-Chu system.

Another recurrent problem in the life of the Neo-Confucian “tradition” is that presented by fundamentalism and radicalism. In the studies which follow there are several instances of thinkers who claim to be fundamentalists in their adherence either to basic values or to canonical texts. Such fundamentalism may be directed either to classical Confucianism (i.e., the “literal” sense of the Confucian classics) or to orthodox Neo-Confucianism (i.e., the basic doctrines or texts of Chu Hsi). Often these come into conflict with officially established or scholastically approved teachings, and thus have a reformist thrust as well as a traditionalist appeal. In political and social terms, the same can be true of a restorationism that, literally, claims to be rooted in tradition, and is actually radical in program. We should not be misled into thinking that fundamentalism simply equals traditionalism or is ipso facto conservative of the status quo. Rather, like modern fundamentalist movements, it may offer a direct challenge to accepted views or be quite radical in its demands for change in the established political or social order.

Finally a word about the relation of the foregoing to Neo-Confucian developments in Korea and Japan. In *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart* I tried to show how important a correct understanding of Chinese developments was to the extensions and transmutations of Neo-Confucian thought and practice elsewhere in East Asia. It would be my hope that a better understanding of the Chinese case, such as I try to present here, would be helpful to comparative study of parallel developments in Korea, Japan, and no doubt also in Vietnam. But to pursue these possibilities is another task and awaits another time—as well as, no doubt, the work of other hands.

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I

General Introduction

The concept of the mind-and-heart (*hsin*), which for Chinese encompassed the emotions as well as the intellect, had already been much discussed in classical Confucianism before it attracted new and still greater attention in the Sung period, as Confucian thinkers reexamined and reconceived its significance for a new era. Then, so central did the mind become as a philosophical and practical concern of what we now call Neo-Confucianism that, for many of its adherents, the new teaching would often be known as the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart.

Yet this new importance of the mind came only as the outgrowth of earlier developments, each marked by its own characterization of what was central to the new teaching, and most notably by such terms as the Way of the Sages (*sheng-tao*), the Learning of the Sages (*sheng-hsüeh*), and Learning of the Way (*tao-hsüeh*). In the first two cases the sages referred to were mainly ancient sage-kings, put forward in the eleventh century as models for the rulers of the Sung dynasty and frequently evoked as symbols of an idealized social order in antiquity. In other words this Sagely Learning purported to convey to rulers what they ought to know about the wise rule and benevolent institutions of the sage-kings, as the basis for a new reform program.

Increasingly, however, as difficulties were encountered during the Northern Sung period in implementing such a program, the emphasis in this learning shifted to the personal cultivation of the educated elite and how they might exemplify the Way of the Sages in their own conduct of life, no matter what obstacles may have arisen to the accomplishment of their political goals. In such circumstances the terms

"Learning of the Sages" or "Way of the Sages" took on more the meaning of a personal Way to the attainment of Sagehood. With the hope of social renewal now seen as lying in the moral self-reformation of the educated elite, the latter's responsibility for leadership in the society, often on the local level rather than at court, assumed more of an educational role and cultural burden than a political one.

By the time of Chu Hsi, the leading Neo-Confucian of the twelfth century, he could even think of this aim in learning as one to which any poor lad in a rural village might aspire, depending only on his readiness to undertake such a task, i.e., take responsibility both for himself and for the Way (*tzu-jen yu tao*). In this sense it became a Way for everyman, provided only that he could measure up to the noble man's sense of a high calling, in which he would join the company of other dedicated bearers of Confucian culture.

At this point one's view of the "Way" and of the "self" acquired heightened importance, and the "Learning of the Way" took on a deeper significance for those who followed this path of intellectual, moral, and spiritual cultivation. Undertaking such a commitment amounted virtually to a religious decision; it meant dedicating oneself to a set of ultimate values such as one could live or die for. For such devotees then this Way had an absoluteness and finality to it, often expressed by quoting Confucius' "Hearing the Way in the morning, one can die content in the evening" (*Analects* 4:8), whence adherents to the "Learning of the Way (*tao-hsüeh*) became known for their total earnestness and complete dedication to its practice, though to less sympathetic observers they might appear instead to be overly serious and excessively punctilious about it.

There is significance, however, not only in this understanding of the "Way" as an ultimate value, but also in its being thought of as a form of "Learning" rather than just as a "school." The translation of *tao-hsüeh* as "Learning of the Way" may have a certain awkward ring to it in English. "School of the Way" might seem more felicitous and is certainly not inappropriate as a rendering for *tao-hsüeh* in the sense of a company of scholars, a fellowship of like-minded persons who exhibit a distinctive manner and life-style. In some contexts the "Teaching of the Way" may also convey better the sense of *tao-hsüeh* as a defined set of doctrines. Yet Chu Hsi, the teacher par excellence of *tao-hsüeh*, attached first importance to the student's self-motivation and active pursuit of learning, rather than to the passive assimilation of what is

taught or to anything like indoctrination. Thus "Learning of the Way" may, in its very awkwardness, draw special attention to Chu Hsi's emphasis on the individual will to learn and the intensely personal nature of this process, as distinct from the given content of the teaching or the school as an institution.

The same consideration bears upon Chu Hsi's frequent identification of the Confucian way as "Learning for the Sake of One's Self" (*wei chi chih hsüeh*). I have discussed this in *The Liberal Tradition in China*, but the essential point bears repeating, as it bore repetition by generations of Neo-Confucians down into the nineteenth century, for whom the crucial criterion of the learning's authenticity was its commitment to the self-fulfillment of the human person as the ultimate value in both education and government. By contrast, seen as unworthy goals were Tao-hsüeh's two major rivals as competing life commitments: the "utilitarian" pursuit of power, wealth, or prestige on one side, and the Buddhist/Taoist path on the other. Confucius and Mencius had exposed the former in their time, and Chu Hsi in his day singled out the latter as an even more subtle form of human perversion. Most of Chu Hsi's discussion of learning aims at achieving a mean between these two, which represent opposite extremes but share a common failing. In a word, they are equally selfish—in different ways but essentially for the same reason: their lack of any true concept of the self.

This conclusion was not of course self-evident, but Chu Hsi was quite prepared to argue it out. In the case of utilitarianism (*kung-li*), its main failing lay not in mere expediency per se. Chu recognized the need in human life and given historical circumstances to adapt to less than ideal conditions and make reasonable compromises. But this is workable only if one has a clear conception of the principle that should govern and of what exceptions or concessions can be made within the limits of tolerance. Unfortunately those who pursue utilitarian advantages rarely have any notion of principle. They go after immediate advantages, often in the name of providing material gratifications for the individual or else rationalizing self-interest in high-sounding language. But, for want of any clearly defined conception of what it means to be human, or of what true fulfillment as a human person consists in, such gains and gratifications inevitably prove ephemeral. Dealing with human nature solely on the physical and appetitive level, the utilitarians end up treating men as animals—most often sacrificed to the selfish ambitions of those who hold power. Shallow appeals to self-interest, though

alluring, fail to recognize the full dimensions of human capability or the deep complexity of human needs and motivations. Such inducements are no more than tactics, and as the basis of a political order, simply specious. As Chu Hsi insisted:

. . . the cultivation of what is essential and the examination of the difference between the principle of Heaven and human selfish desires are things that must not be interrupted for a single moment in the course of our daily activities . . . If one understands this point clearly, he will naturally not go so far as to drift in to the popular ways of success and profit and expedient schemes. . . . Master Ch'eng said, "one must not let the myriad things in the world disturb him. When the self is established, one will naturally understand the myriad things in the world" (*I-shu* 6:2a). When one does not know where to anchor his body and mind, he talks about the kingly way and the despotic way, and discusses and studies the task of putting the world in order, as if it were a mere trick. Is that not mistaken?¹

Note that the crux of the problem, for both Cheng Yi and Chu Hsi, lies in "establishing the self" and "knowing where to anchor the body and mind." This problem is also at the heart of the danger perceived in Buddhism and Taoism. In the latter case, however, the error lies on the other side of shortsightedness. Chu allowed that Buddhism offered a lofty ideal in the attainment of Buddhahood and Bodhisattvahood, but, for him, this was too visionary and unreal, unconnected with the need for "establishing the self" in a human world or providing an "anchor for the body and mind" in the natural order. Indeed Buddhism fore-swore all conceptions of the self in ordinary empirical terms and resisted any anchoring of the body and mind except in a Buddha-world. In Ch'an, the form of Buddhism Chu was most exposed to, the self was indefinable in rational, moral terms. One could only intuit one's nature by looking directly within, through an experience of enlightenment incommunicable in ordinary language.

When Ch'an was of a mind to express itself more philosophically, it often did so in the language of Hua-yen Buddhism, explaining the relation of this higher wisdom to the world of actuality in terms of "principle and fact" (*li, shih*), while affirming the complete compatibility of the two (i.e., the mutual accommodation of the higher principle