
UTILITARIAN CONFUCIANISM
Ch'en Liang's Challenge to Chu Hsi

HOYT CLEVELAND TILLMAN

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Utilitarian Confucianism

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*For
Tina
and to the memory of her father
Mih Shih-tsoong
(1902-1980)*

Foreword

Contemporary Western students of Chinese thought seem to have a twofold aspiration. On the one hand, they aspire to make this thought accessible to a Western audience. On the other hand, they are striving to demonstrate the broad range and inner complexity of this thought in both its synchronic and diachronic dimensions. Above all, there is a desire to demonstrate the historicity and problematic nature of this thought.

In all of this, there is a kind of mute protest against facile cultural anthropological approaches which profess to provide us with descriptions of the essential structure of an unchanging "Chinese mind." The notion that there exist simple "keys" to Chinese culture remains, of course, most seductive even to those who might be highly resistant to any notion of simple keys to Western civilization. Even if we concede to the "culturalists" the existence of certain pervasive and persistent overarching orientations in Chinese culture, the historian of Chinese thought can easily demonstrate that such common orientations by no means preclude variety, tension, conflict, and change over time. Furthermore, the historian of Chinese thought is not simply interested in Chinese thought as an inert deposit. He is concerned, in the words of Joseph Levenson, to observe Chinese *thinking* within their existential and historical situations.

The effort to make Chinese thought accessible is of course, beset with difficulties. It involves the question of the "translatability" not only of language but of cultural categories as well. One must

constantly contend with the questions raised by linguistic and cultural relativists as well as with the philosophic questions concerning "translatability" raised by philosophers such as Quine. In striving to achieve accessibility one must avoid the easy expedient of simply applying without reflection unexamined "middle-range" Western notions such as "materialism," "nationalism," "historicism," "rationalism," etc. On the other hand, one must also avoid the dogmatic assertion that such notions which have complex semantic histories even in their Western context are *absolutely* inapplicable to Chinese thought. One may find in dealing with Chinese thought that some issues can, with some adjustments, be readily translated into Western discourse. Other issues may continue to seem "peculiarly Chinese" and often remote from Western, particularly modern Western, concerns. Within the Chinese context, however, the two types of issues may be intimately linked. Even in the case of "remote" issues, the student of Chinese thought will continue to hope that they are not incommunicable.

Hoyt Tillman's *Utilitarian Confucianism* is, in my view, a major contribution to the ongoing effort to make Chinese thought accessible as well as to the effort to convey to us a sense of the richness, complexity, and historicity of this thought. He has chosen in this work to focus his attention on certain key issues of Confucian thought in China of the twelfth century illustrated in the debate between two adversaries, Chu Hsi and Ch'en Liang. The issues involved happen to be eminently translatable. The question of the opposition between an ethic of utility—an ethic of "results"—and an ethic of motives and intentions is readily recognizable to any student of Western ethical theory. The issue of the relation between ethical values and norms and the historic process is equally recognizable, particularly to students of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western historical thought. To be sure, the idiom is different. The ethic in question is Confucian—not Benthamite or Kantian. The entire context of the discussion is radically different from Western contexts. Yet is it precisely the fact that the same or similar issues may arise within entirely different cultural and historical contexts which provides the mind-stretching challenge of

comparative thought. The observation that a utilitarian approach to ethics in China may be linked to a Confucian ethic rather than to Victorian individualism is an observation that may open new perspectives on the question of utilitarianism itself.

Professor Tillman, moreover, offers more than an examination of these specific issues. He also provides us with a broad view of the historical setting within which these issues arise. He has in this work presented us with what seems to me to be one of the most vivid and accessible accounts of the various strains of Confucian thought in the Sung period that I have yet seen in any Western language. There are those who may differ with some of his interpretations or use of terminology. Yet there can be no doubt that he has managed to breathe life into the "problematique" of major trends of Northern and Southern Sung thought.

Finally, he has also managed to relate his issues to the concrete life experience and personalities of his two adversaries. The august figure of Chu Hsi emerges here not as a disembodied "philosopher" or "sage" but as a thinker whose particular philosophic commitments can be seen in intimate relationship to all the anxieties and concerns—both public and private—of a particularly thoughtful literatus living in twelfth-century China. On the other hand, Ch'en Liang is presented as a man of particularly striking personality who emerges as much more than the incarnation of a fixed viewpoint. We find him to be a man subject to a variety of influences whose ideas are often ambiguous and subject to change over time. Here we observe not only Chinese thought but "Chinese thinking."

Benjamin I. Schwartz

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I should like to thank Cheng Chung-ying and Antonio S. Cua for permission to utilize in Chapter 5 of this book material revised from my article that appeared in the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*

5.4:363-369 (December 1978). I do not repeat here the argument about historicism that I developed in that article, although I still maintain the view detailed therein. An earlier version of some of the material in the last section of Chapter 5 and the first section of Chapter 6 was used to address the question of nationalism in traditional China in my article for the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 39.2:403-428 (December 1979).

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Utilitarian Confucianism

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Introduction

A study of Ch'en Liang and his debate with Chu Hsi is essential for understanding Chinese socio-political thought. Chu Hsi (1130-1200) synthesized Chinese humanistic culture into the version of Neo-Confucianism that became intellectual and state orthodoxy in China until the twentieth century. Ch'en Liang (1143-1194) represented utilitarian orientations that were eclipsed by Neo-Confucian ethics and metaphysics during the twelfth century; but he has gained popularity in the twentieth century because most Chinese now favor utilitarian approaches and disparage Neo-Confucian ones. One major reason for centering a study on Ch'en Liang is that, compared to Chu Hsi's philosophy, Ch'en's assumptions are relatively similar to modern ideas in the West as well as in China; thus, they provide more familiar ground for exploring seminal ideas and a crucial period in the evolution of China's political philosophy. Indeed, both these twelfth-century scholars have become symbols for two dominant trends within Chinese thought; strains we might label "ethics of absolute ends or personal virtue" and "ethics of social orientations or end results."¹ (The intent of the one seeking end results here is always for positive and not negative results.) Their "debate" crystallized these alternative emphases on either motives or consequences and was conducted through letters and visits from 1182 through 1186 (and followed by a more limited exchange to 1193). The issues were not new;

but the debate was one of the most intense and sustained discussions of them by Chinese scholars. By analyzing a case in which tensions between Confucian polarities were acute, this study will draw the elements of the polarities into sharper focus. These polarities were present because Confucianism emphasized both the cultivation of personal virtue and the importance of social and political effectiveness. Even when disagreements among Confucians strained the balance between these polarities, differences were essentially ones of nuance and priorities. Such nuances are significant in themselves for understanding Chinese thought, and one does not need to portray divisions as the sharper cleavages and antagonisms that are sometimes drawn in twentieth-century accounts.

Ch'en Liang and Chu Hsi were responding to a national and cultural crisis. A renaissance of classical studies had flourished in China during the middle decades of the eleventh century, but the optimism about regaining classical social and political ideals had faltered by the beginning of the twelfth century. Both reformist and conservative programs had failed to resolve national problems; in response, the government increased restrictions on intellectual freedom in an effort to achieve more unity in the pursuit of national goals. Literary inquisition and factional disputes exacerbated the country's weaknesses until Jurchen conquerors from Manchuria destroyed the Sung dynasty (960-1279) in the mid-1120s. Although the dynasty managed to re-establish itself as the Southern Sung in 1127, it had lost North China and its eleventh-century national and cultural confidence. In the wake of this debacle, a period of cultural entrenchment enabled many scholars to turn to moral cultivation and education so as to find a basis for confidence in those Confucian values rediscovered by the eleventh-century renaissance. During this cultural entrenchment, scholars fostered a spirit of accommodation among themselves. But the country's social and economic problems, compounded by the loss of North China, continued to arouse fundamental questions and varying opinions about values as well as policies.

Endeavoring to develop more systematic and defined approaches to such problems, Ch'en Liang and Chu Hsi individually rejected

the diffuse intellectual positions of the middle decades of the century. Between the two men there was a large spectrum of agreement on particular political issues, for instance the need for a war of irredenta against the Jurchen conquerors of North China. Even those issues, however, illustrate their diverse value orientations and approaches to problems, which could yield similar conclusions about what concrete policies to follow.

Chu Hsi's and Ch'en Liang's policies do not entirely reflect their social standings, but their personal backgrounds did influence their ideas. Chu Hsi was the son of a scholar-official who had resigned in protest against the peace policy of the Southern Sung court. Although his interest in Northern Sung Confucian philosophy was nurtured by his father, Chu Hsi also explored Taoism and Buddhism; however, after he identified himself with the Confucian tradition, he gradually developed a synthesis that set boundaries for what he considered to be acceptable affinities with other traditions. Government sinecures allowed him to dedicate energy to working on his philosophical system. He had passed the civil service examinations at an early age, but his ethical standards and pronouncements made it difficult for the government to deal with him as an active official. Problems with government officials even resulted in his being blacklisted during the last years of his life; but the strength of his philosophical system and the devotion to it among growing numbers of scholars eventually led the government to adopt elements of his system as orthodoxy. Ironically, although he had even in his own lifetime more status in society and government than Ch'en Liang, Chu Hsi was generally more utopian and ideological in his critique of the government; Ch'en Liang would have been satisfied with a return to the rules of the dynasty's founders.

Lack of success in gaining a government office until the end of his life frustrated Ch'en Liang and probably contributed to his challenging some Confucian values and norms of his day. During his youth, he was tutored by his grandfather, but the grandfather's repeated failures at both military and civil service examinations contributed to a drinking problem and to the decline of the family