

*Neo-Confucian
Orthodoxy
and the
Learning
of the
Mind-and-Heart*

Wm. Theodore de Bary

道學與心學

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*Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy
and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart*

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To Thomas Berry

Neo-Confucian Studies

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Preface

Until recently it was the modern custom in China to blame Confucius or Confucianism for much that had gone wrong in the past. As late as the 1960s and '70s Confucius was portrayed, in the bizarre spectacle of the Cultural Revolution, as still a ubiquitous and malign presence on the contemporary scene. Made a scapegoat for many of the continuing ills of the Revolution, he also became a prime target for concerted ideological attack. In this role he served, as he had in the earlier revolutionary seizures which convulsed China for half a century, as a symbol of the new generation's contempt for the old order and their determination to be rid of all its traces. Yet in the end the goal of total liberation from the past has proved to be elusive. Even with the frenetic effort of the Great Leap Forward and the forced marches of the Red Guards, no way has been found for the Revolution to jump out of its Chinese skin. To face the past and come to terms with it now seems more in order than striving mightily but vainly to abolish it.

In the meantime, a somewhat different light has been cast on China's Confucian culture by the experience of the rest of East Asia. Japan, Korea, and Taiwan are also what might be called "post-Confucian" societies, in the sense that they shared in the Neo-Confucian culture of the premodern period, and—though less violently than on the mainland of China—they too have experienced some of the modernist reaction against it. Nevertheless, the dramatic successes of these countries in rapid modernization, by contrast to the slow pace of development elsewhere in Asia, Africa, and South America, and all the more notably in the absence of great natural resources other than their human endowment, has drawn new attention to a factor long overlooked in the common background of the peoples of East

Asia: a long-shared process of intellectual and moral preparation through Neo-Confucianism. Whereas previously the Neo-Confucian influence had been seen as inimical to modernization (and it was unquestionably averse to certain aspects of westernization), the idea that the peoples of China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hongkong, and Singapore have benefited from the love of learning, commitment to education, social discipline, and personal cultivation fostered by Neo-Confucianism can now be entertained.

When these peoples had been adjudged by Westerners to be inferior, backward, and resistant to change, it was understandable that the "blame" for this should have been assigned to Neo-Confucianism as representing the dominant culture of premodern East Asia. Moreover, since it had stood par excellence as the distinguishing mark and common ideology of the educated elite in these several societies, it was natural that Neo-Confucianism should have become identified with established authority. Its involvement with the ruling class and association with state power gave it all the aura and prestige of an official doctrine. From this, in the eyes of many, it assumed the proportions of a formidable orthodoxy, stifling dissent and repressing all original or progressive thought.

Today as the peoples of post-Confucian East Asia impress us with their special aptitude for learning and their proficiency in the use of modern skills, and as we ourselves tend less to equate modernization simply with westernization, the time may have come to reassess Neo-Confucianism more as a positive educational force in the premodern era than as a negative, restraining orthodoxy. Yet it is still the latter image which one encounters in texts widely used today—an orthodoxy that represented "the unchanging core of Chinese thought," a system of "authority and obedience," and a metaphysics "accepted without question," so that "once established as an orthodoxy, [it] proved to be an intellectual strait-jacket reinforcing the growing rigidity of Chinese society."¹

One reason for the persistence of this view is the paucity of attention paid to the actual content of early Neo-Confucian teaching and the remarkable way in which it came to be established as "or-

¹ J. K. Fairbank, E. Reischauer, and A. Craig, *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), pp. 147, 150–51.

thodox." Simplistic views have gained ready acceptance when even cursory study of the historical record would have revealed many varieties, both philosophical and institutional, of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. Without overstressing the complexities of the matter, one may easily distinguish the sense of orthodoxy adhered to in Neo-Confucian schools, in themselves many and diverse, from the forms of orthodoxy established by the different dynasties and regimes of East Asia in conformity with their own institutional patterns.

If these orthodoxies had anything in common, it was by inheritance from the teachings propagated soon after the death of the great Neo-Confucian master, Chu Hsi (1130–1200). Early formulations of his ideas have been little studied by modern scholars, however, and his followers have been dismissed as adding nothing new to them. This is explainable only in terms of the prevalent fallacy that ideas gain no new significance from being repeated. In point of historical fact, even secondhand ideas can have a powerful impact when introduced into new situations, as was the case at the court of Khubilai, where Neo-Confucian doctrines had decisive consequences for the way in which human affairs were to be conducted. Oblivious to this, historians of Chinese thought and philosophy have largely ignored the work of the so-called Chu Hsi school during the two centuries after his death: the transmission of his ideas, one is led to believe, occurred by some process of hypnotic transference or worshipful, ritual repetition. Yet no such simple assumption will explain how Chu's teachings, proscribed by the state at the time of his death, could have turned the tables and become so widely accepted within the ensuing century.

In the absence of closer study, misinterpretations and misconceptions have gone unchecked. The impression has been widely conveyed that Neo-Confucianism owed its entrenchment as an orthodoxy to some kind of narcissistic reversion of the Chinese to a self-absorption with their traditional values, or to an isolationist withdrawal of the Chinese into the shell of an ethnocentric world-view. From this it was an easy step to conclude that Neo-Confucianism's installation as the official orthodoxy of the Ming dynasty went hand in hand with its expulsion of the Mongols, its seclusionist policy in foreign affairs, and its consequent loss of touch with the progress of

world civilization. Neo-Confucianism then came to be seen as the quintessential expression of an attitude that rejected all foreign influence and smugly reasserted the superiority of things Chinese.

So plausible was this view, considering Neo-Confucianism's undoubted reaffirmation of certain basic Chinese values, that for those whose studies were already narrowly preoccupied with China, it was easy to overlook some rather obvious facts of Neo-Confucian history. One is that this teaching first became established in the curriculum of the official schools and civil service examinations under a foreign dynasty, that of the Mongols, whose culture could hardly have been more in contrast to the Chinese and whose power rested on maintaining a regime of conquest with a clear cultural identity. What interest could they have had in reasserting Chinese culture simply for its own sake, or in accepting as the official ideology a teaching which would blur their identity and subvert their own special prerogatives and control? But further, having overcome the natural resistance of the Mongols to anything purely conservative of Chinese values or defensive of Chinese interests, the Neo-Confucians went on to convert Central Asians in the service of the Mongols, as well as Koreans, Japanese, Vietnamese, and later Manchus, to the new teaching. How could this have been accomplished if the appeal of Neo-Confucianism had been primarily ethnocentric, rather than universalistic?

In this connection another common assumption has been that it was the Neo-Confucian natural-law philosophy, based on the central concept of ordered principle or reason (*li*), which had a universal value for authoritarian regimes of whatever national origin. Such a highly structured world-view, emphasizing a strict hierarchy of values and well-defined code of social morality, was ideal for the defense of the status quo and maintenance of entrenched power regardless of cultural differences. In effect, it consecrated the existing order and reinforced all forms of repression.

But with this view there have likewise been difficulties. Chu Hsi had insisted on the transcendence of principle precisely to deny its use to the established order. For him principle provided the basis for a continuing critique of human conduct and political institutions, which at their historical best in the Han, T'ang, and Sung dynasties

had never fully embodied it. Thus within the tradition the prime values of Neo-Confucianism were as often invoked to support demands for change and reform as to justify the existing order. Certainly this was the case in the crucial developments surrounding the "triumph" of Neo-Confucian reformers at the Yüan (Mongol) court.

A further difficulty with the view of the philosophy of principle as a closed authority system is the strong emphasis in Neo-Confucianism on the active role of the creative mind, responsive to human needs, and in the frequency with which the early teaching was identified with this Learning of the Mind-and-Heart (*hsin-hsüeh*) rather than with principle understood as a given structure of laws. Moreover, the prominence given to the active conscience and humanitarian impulse has other implications for commonly held views regarding the relationship of Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism. On the one hand, Neo-Confucianism has been seen as a strong antiforeign reaction to the influence of Buddhism from India. On the other hand, almost any reference to the mind, intuition, or enlightenment in Neo-Confucianism has readily been taken as showing the influence of Buddhism. Each of these views contains something of a half-truth, but half of just what, and how it is to be located in the teaching and practice of the Chu Hsi schools, are questions which have awaited clarification.

Study of the early Ch'eng-Chu Learning of the Mind-and-Heart should go a long way toward resolving these questions; hence the focus of this book. Such resolutions lie partly in the domain of institutions and partly in the realm of ideas. Thus the first study presented here focuses on the institutional background and political involvements of Neo-Confucianism, especially in the Yüan period, while the second explores further the ideas of this intellectual and educational movement as they developed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and in the works of certain major figures. The two are largely parallel in time and complementary; in the actual historical development these two strands are interwoven and cannot be neatly separated out. Consequently, there is in these essays a certain amount of overlapping and cross-reference from one to the other.

The period covered by the first two essays, from the late Sung to the early Ming, may seem like a passing moment, a brief transi-

tional phase, in the long history of Chinese thought. Largely overlooked though they have been, these two-hundred-odd years cover a wide span of Confucian scholarly activity, and this book must be understood to deal with very broad trends, as well as, in a highly selective way, with key figures in their development. The final section of this book brings together portions of earlier explorations of mine in the field of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy and what I now call the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart (*hsin-hsüeh*). For the most part they pertain to a later period (the seventeenth century), and in particular to the development of this learning and orthodoxy in Japan, but they also relate to issues in Ming thought raised in Part II.

Taking a long view of Neo-Confucianism implies a broader conception of it than has been customary, one which recognizes that the life of Neo-Confucianism was not confined to China. This "orthodoxy" has been subject to social and cultural variation outside its homeland, though the latter is the usual focus of studies which have treated it as a Chinese, rather than as an East Asian, phenomenon.

The broader standpoint taken here, however, is new only in the sense that it includes the perspectives gained from outside vantage points. In its essence the problem of an inclusive definition of Neo-Confucianism is as old as the seventeenth century at least, when Huang Tsung-hsi (1610–1695) made the first comprehensive attempt to represent the tradition, or the "Way" as transmitted to his generation, and argued in the preface to his *Case Studies of Ming Confucians* (*Ming-ju hsüeh-an*) for a broad conception of the "Way" coming down from the Sung which allowed for many individual contributions to its rich and varied growth. Essentially the same standpoint is adopted here, but in a wider context.

"Neo-Confucianism" itself is a term coined by early Western observers who noticed new developments in Sung Confucian thought which were not simply reducible to their classical antecedents. The term remains useful inasmuch as it points to basic factors of both continuity and change in the tradition. Rather than specifying any one aspect of the new development as crucial, it allows for the possibility that several new trends combined to generate this most creative movement in the later history of Chinese thought.

In time this neoclassical movement itself became a tradition

spoken of as the "learning of the Way" (*tao-hsüeh*) or the "orthodox tradition" (*tao-t'ung*) or by other designations to be discussed below. Given the inevitable changes in language, meaning, and the structure of experience that separate one age from another, there is always a question as to what tradition actually represents. Here it means simply the body of continuing discourse about central and perennial questions of life as defined within a culture, which presupposes one's understanding of the terms of the discourse that has preceded it. In other words, one cannot comprehend what is going on unless one has access to the past record which establishes the context of the discussion. Normally, it was through education that one gained such access in the past, and it is through the study of the traditional curriculum, or alternatives to it, that we today may understand on what basis the discourse has been conducted from generation to generation. Against this, then, we can measure the significance of discontinuities that arise in the process, including the extent of conceptual change.

Within the tradition one of the more common terms for Neo-Confucianism was *hsing-li hsüeh*, the "study [or learning] of human nature and principle." This specified that the understanding of human nature was a central focus of discussion. A variant was the term *li-hsüeh*, the study or the learning of principle, which was understood to mean the principles in things generally, though the ideal, integrating principle of human nature was central to it.

Another common term for Neo-Confucianism was *hsin-hsüeh*, the "Learning of the Mind-and-Heart," the main subject of this book. In more recent times this term has been applied to an outgrowth of Neo-Confucianism identified with Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529) and his putative predecessor Lu Hsiang-shan (1139–1193). Originally, however, it was applied to Neo-Confucianism as a whole, and expressed the idea that this "learning" offered an alternative to the Buddhist view of the mind, as well as a method of mental cultivation consistent with the Confucian view that value distinctions were intrinsic to the natural order in both the mind and things.

Another common designation for Neo-Confucianism was *sheng-hsüeh*, the "learning of the sages" or the "learning of sage-

hood." Originally this expressed a strong belief in the possibility of anyone's attaining sagehood through self-cultivation, but in the form of the *sheng-wang chih tao*, "the Way of the sage-kings," it also set forth an ideal of the human community ruled by the wisdom of sages and governed through sagely institutions.

Another important tendency in Neo-Confucianism emphasized the reality of the dynamic physical element in the universe and things, "ether" or "material force" (*ch'i*). There was, traditionally, no term such as *ch'i hsüeh* applied to Neo-Confucianism as a whole, but modern scholars have referred to this major evolute from Neo-Confucian thought as the "philosophy of *ch'i*," and Huang Tsung-hsi himself was a representative of this widespread tendency in China, which had its counterparts elsewhere in the Neo-Confucian world.

Finally we return to the term *tao-hsüeh*, "learning of the Way," which made the claim that the Ch'eng-Chu school of Neo-Confucianism spoke for the Way as a whole, and did so with what one would have to call a sense of religious certitude. (This claim was viewed skeptically by those who applied the term *tao-hsüeh* to it ironically.) The initial dynamism of the movement, described in this book, derived from that school's powerful sense of mission in the world.

Huang Tsung-hsi, as I have said, was heir to all this and affirmed all these tendencies equally as fundamental aspects of the Way which he attempted to interpret and perpetuate in the seventeenth century. We need not perhaps adopt him as a model, but it would be unwise not to take at least as broad a view of things as he did. Therefore in what follows the term "Neo-Confucianism" is generally meant to embrace all these tendencies, while "Neo-Confucian orthodoxy" is used to designate the Ch'eng-Chu teaching in one or more of its forms claiming descent from Chu Hsi. The Learning of the Mind-and-Heart discussed herein was originally the heart of this orthodoxy. In the Ming this central ground was largely captured by the Wang Yang-ming school, but down into the nineteenth century, Ch'eng-Chu schools in China, Korea, and Japan, according to their own understanding of the matter, continued to claim it for their own.

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