
CHAPTER 5

Reforms in Neo-Confucianism

The Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries

Chinese rule of China was restored when the Ming dynasty conquered the Mongols in 1368. In 1415 the Ming leadership published by imperial decree its own edition of Neo-Confucian interpretations of the Four Books and Five Classics, which became the standard for the Ming civil service examinations. However, the first fifty years of Ming rule brought about remarkable Neo-Confucian sacrifice. A cruel usurpation by the uncle of the second Ming emperor led to the slaughter of some forty thousand people as the uncle's dragnet for suspected dissenters swept down from Beiping (Beijing) to the southern capital in Nanjing. The future Yongle emperor falsely accused officials of turning his young nephew against the policies of the founding Ming emperor, who was the usurper's father. Yet some of these same court officials would become indispensable in validating the uncle's claims, and several turned out to be men of inviolable principle.

After the palace was burned by the uncle and the emperor presumed killed in the fire, the uncle took over the emperorship. He then sought public legitimation of his accession and turned to a prominent official named Fang Xiaoru (1357–1402), who was a former advisor to his nephew and a dedicated follower of Song Neo-Confucianism. Fang had counseled the nephew to pursue a less centralized model of government based on the Song period; he had also called for enlarging the role of scholar-officials relative to the emperor.

As the uncle took power, Fang was swept into prison by his soldiers, but he now brought Fang from his prison cell and tried to enlist his support in order to justify his attack on the nephew. However, upon Fang's questioning, the uncle's true motives were revealed when he

weakly claimed that his nephew had taken his own life in the palace fire. Fang had heard earlier that another high official who had refused to validate the usurper's claims had had his tongue cut out — although he still managed to expose the usurper's treachery by writing on the floor in blood.

Even knowing this, Fang rejected the usurper's false arguments and responded with statements regarding how succession should legitimately proceed. The usurper told Fang, "My proclamation to the realm must be drafted by you, sir," and gave him a brush pen. Flinging the brush to the floor, Fang answered, "If I must die then let me die; I will not draft your proclamation."¹ Enraged, the usurper ordered Fang's death by dismemberment, as well as the extermination of Fang's living relatives to the tenth degree of blood relationship.

The Thought of Wang Yangming

In 1521 Wang Yangming, the exiled scholar of singular insight discussed in the introduction to this volume, developed a new direction in Neo-Confucian thought. After his sudden insight during his exile and during his subsequent career of leadership as both a scholar-official and general, he made public some of his suspicions regarding the doctrines of Song-period Neo-Confucians. He believed that the Cheng brothers and later Zhu Xi had left some basic insights of Confucius and Mencius behind in formulating Neo-Confucianism. Just as Lu Xiangshan had argued during the Song, for Wang and others who gradually joined his Learning of the Mind-and-Heart school, that which made a person good came not from recognizing the principle in things, but from innate knowledge (*liangzhi*). This position referenced the classical insights of Mencius that human beings are born with built-in capacities to be good. When apprehended, Wang further argued, these innate moral sensitivities brought about a change in one's behavior.

During the Song period Lu Xiangshan had gone so far as to state that no curriculum of texts was necessary to guide one in finding the Way. After all, the earliest primitive kingship in Chinese lore, that of the sage-kings Yao and Shun, had preceded writing altogether. Following the Ming period, the adherents of the Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming position (the Lu-Wang school) did not stress a detailed program of academic study, as did the more orthodox Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism. Some of Lu's followers in the Song period, in

fact, went to the extreme and pursued sudden enlightenment in Chan Buddhism — whose discipline stressed not being dependent upon the written word at all. Despite this temptation Wang condemned Chan Buddhism and had his own way of accessing innate knowledge.

Wang's position was intriguing. One's mind-and-heart is given at birth devoid of the conventional distinctions one makes in everyday social life. Serious self-cultivation through the absolute sincerity of intentions allows one to see the true character of the innate self. Because it is an act of will or intention that reveals one's inner sensibilities, this new knowledge also implies a change in one's behavior. For example, if we found ways to access commiseration in the innate physical nature of our mind-and-heart, we would begin to act with a new awareness of that capacity. Much like a pungent or sweet smell, mental knowledge of morality implies repulsion or attraction; that natural reaction determines how one will act. In short, access to one's innate knowledge means knowing becomes doing.

Wang's critique of the Cheng-Zhu position was finally articulated on paper in a radically revised way to look at the Eight-Step program found in the *Great Learning*. While Wang's rereading of the classic imposed his views rather heavily on the text, his critique began with a concern that was credible to a large number of scholars, because the original text of the Eight-Step program in the *Record of Rites* had actually begun with Zhu Xi's step three, "Make One's Intentions Sincere." It was Zhu who had revised the order so that the idea of principles metaphysically inherent in nature and in minds-and-hearts would become the first step of recognizing (investigating) things. Wang restored the original opening of the ancient text to "Make One's Intentions Sincere" in order to emphasize human intention, action, and the extension of innate knowledge.

As far as Zhu's insistence that step one be "Recognition of Things and Affairs," Wang believed it was an unwarranted addition by Zhu to begin the text and self-cultivation with a search for metaphysical principles. Instead, Wang saw the first step as correcting that which is selfish or incorrect in one's mind-and-heart (*xin*) so that one could then see its original makeup. Pure knowing in this way thus presumed that all moral principles are not independent of a person in the outside world, but are products of the mind-and-heart. Moral knowledge is ultimately innate knowledge.

Apart from these differences with Zhu, Wang's long service in public office left him quite bitter regarding the political realities that selfishness and ambition had perpetuated in the society he loved. He wrote, "For up to the present time it has been several thousand years since the poison of the doctrine of success and profit has infected the innermost recesses of the human mind, and has become our second nature. People have mutually boasted of their knowledge, crushed one another with power, rivaled each other for profit, mutually striven for superiority through skill, and attempted success through fame."² Wang felt the Confucian message had little chance of reversing so lamentable a record in his own lifetime. How could such a grasping society recognize the powers of innate knowledge?

Even accepting that the Confucian Way had not prevailed in Chinese history and was lost in his own day, Wang still lamented the related development that "some students turned to Buddhism and Daoism and were deceived by them." He added, "At bottom there was nothing in these systems that could overcome their desire for success and profit." Yet Wang held out hope for an eventual return of virtue to power because human nature itself is innately good, and he felt there was hope for the sage who could understand the promise of human nature. He shared a nuance about the function of humaneness that Cheng Hao and Zhang Zai had endorsed long before, in the Song period, but that Zhu Xi did not share.

The mind of a sage regards Heaven, Earth, and all things as one body. He looks upon all people of the world, whether inside or outside his family, or whether far or near — but all with blood and breath — as his brothers and children. He wants to secure, preserve, educate and nourish all of them, so as to fulfill his desire of forming one body with all things. Now the mind of everybody is at first not different from that of the sage. Only because it is obstructed by selfishness and blocked by material desires, what was originally great becomes small and what was originally penetrating becomes obstructed.³

In his own Ming dynasty Wang particularly lamented that the scholarly class had turned to the literalness of "seeing and hearing," rather than actively standing up for moral government, and he also condemned academic dedication to memorization, recitation, and the

indulgence in flowery compositions that got in the way of access to innate knowledge.

Explicitly populist Neo-Confucians such as He Xinyin (1517–1579) and others in the left wing of the Wang Yangming subgroup further argued that the ordinary person could find direct access to sagehood — that “simple and concise” teachings could be understood directly even by the most humble peasant. He Xinyin believed that the moral capacity of everyone in the realm could be activated by founding public schools and independent academies that were open to students from common families. His own teachings focused on “discussion” (*jiang*), the aim being to identify the intellectual quality, reciprocity of sharing, and collegial friendship among fellow learners. He wrote, “Discussion implies stimulating and, usually, amicable discourse with varying opinions offered and discussed, making learning a many-sided process in contrast to the one-sided process of the learning of the self-taught and of the master-pupil relationship.”⁴ While Wang’s ideas spread widely, some other Neo-Confucians during the same era warned that his followers were not taking book learning seriously enough.

In the early 1600s Huang Zongxi (1610–1695), a Neo-Confucian political theorist inspired by Wang, wrote *Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince*, and in it he proposed some solutions to the lamentable state of dynastic norms that Wang had criticized earlier. Huang had been disheartened by the corruption of the Ming dynasty that led first to his father’s expulsion from officialdom and eventually to his death. His book included an indictment of official Confucian accommodation of despotic dynastic law, which had been misused to serve the clever and the powerful. Like Wang, he found that Zhu Xi’s optimistic hope for the self-cultivation of emperors had proven unrealistic. Huang called for the kind of institutional restraints on despotic government that would provide conscientious and good officials with relative autonomy from the autocracy of the emperor and the inner court of obsequious officials around him. *Waiting for the Dawn* argued that the obstruction to good government — much like the selfishness that blocked innate knowledge — was due to the misuse of imperial dynastic law uniquely to serve the perpetuation of the royal family, and that impeded the work of competent and decent men who served in the name of the people as a whole.

*Reexamination of the Definition of Humaneness
(Ren) and the Role of Ritual*

The violent end of the Ming dynasty in 1644 unveiled a historical demonstration of perfidy, hypocrisy, and the blinding appeal of force equaled only by the usurpation of the second Ming emperor by his uncle in 1402. Yet the feeling of moral retribution from the usurpation was still powerful in 1644, when the Chinese bandit, Li Zicheng, conspired with the Manchu army and successfully captured the Ming capital of Beijing. Popular legend later claimed that the bandit Li was in fact a blood descendant of the Jianwen emperor of 1402 whose body had been burned beyond recognition in the charred wreckage of the Ming palace, so a shred of doubt remained as to whether or not the Jianwen emperor had survived and gone into hiding. When the last Ming emperor, a lineal descendant of the uncle who had usurped power in 1402, hanged himself on a hill overlooking the Forbidden City palace in 1644, the popular story that even some historians had entertained — that the bandit Li was actually a disguised descendant of the murdered nephew and had pledged to avenge his uncle's treachery from some 250 years earlier — was revived. But the lessons in perfidy were actually the bandit Li's to suffer.

The relatively small Manchu military force from the northeast could not have conquered the much larger Ming state without deceiving the bandit who had helped them take the Ming capital. Before the Manchu Prince Regent, Dorgon (1612–1650), rode victoriously into Beijing, he had conspired with a Chinese general to kill his putative ally, the bandit Li, and Li's army was defeated not far from Beijing by the combined forces of that general and the Manchus. As if that were not enough, Dorgon declared himself the inheritor of Chinese legitimacy and issued a declaration outlining a Mandate of Heaven to rule based on the founding Ming emperor's statement when he overthrew the Mongols in 1368. Dorgon even dared to call his foreign Manchu dynasty the Qing, or "pure," dynasty. He argued that he had been given a moral mandate to rid Beijing of the immoral bandit Li, then claimed that his Manchu people should have this mandate to keep as leaders of all of China. For the next seven years he ran the government of the young first Manchu emperor of China who took power in 1644.

Scholars in the Qing dynasty never accepted this argument, but

they did raise the bitter question of what internal weaknesses in China could have allowed these foreigners — much like their ancestors, the Jurchen, in the Song era — to again overthrow a Chinese dynasty in 1644. Some Confucian scholars accused Neo-Confucianism and the inward turn that had become the norm in Neo-Confucian education after the eleventh century. The Cheng-Zhu Learning of the Way position remained strong through the 1600s, but for many scholars the question of whether to turn away from metaphysical speculation lingered.

With the issue of whether there really were metaphysical principles in all external things in question, scholars around 1700 began new philological research into the wording of the Confucian classics. They demanded verification of all ideas attributed to the sages, and they scrutinized etymologies for key terms to ensure that those terms were not interpolations reflecting non-Confucian influences. Such rigorous new textual research succeeded in uncovering a major forgery.

The shocking forgery exposed was the venerable sixteen-word Neo-Confucian formula titled “The Counsels of the Great Yu,” extracted from the Old Text chapters of the *Classic of Documents* supposedly found in the fourth century of the common era and written in characters used before 221 BCE. This particular passage, which both Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming had relied on, did justify the metaphysical claim that reality had principles in it that were quite independent of the human ability to know those principles. However, by 1745 the previously accepted Old Text chapters of the *Classic of Documents* were shown to be not so old after all — in fact, they were outright forgeries written much later. Needless to say, the shock to Neo-Confucian metaphysics was destabilizing, and textual criticism spread to other texts in the Neo-Confucian canon.

One focus of the eighteenth-century philological “housecleaning” that followed was rigorous analysis of the precise meaning of the term “humaneness,” or *ren*. Scholars demonstrated that the early character for *ren* was literally composed of two pictographic components: (1) the stick figure for “person” and (2) the number two. It had been written in the following way since the unification of writing in 221 BCE: 仁.

Confucians back in Han China (202 BCE–220 CE) had acknowledged this derivation, and etymological dictionaries at the time were clear that the meaning of *ren* should be “people living together.” The etymology

suggested that humaneness “developed” externally through human interaction. As Ruan Yuan (1764–1849), one of the greatest Confucians who bridged the period into the nineteenth century, put it, “In all cases, *ren* must first be exhibited in personal actions before it can be observed. In addition there must be two people involved before *ren* can be seen. If a person shuts his door and lives peacefully alone, closes his eyes and sits still with a peaceful attitude, although his mind contains virtue and principle, in the end this cannot be counted for what the sagely gate called *ren*.”⁵ The argument from philology indicated that the gateway to sagehood was not a conception of humaneness grounded in metaphysically real “principles,” or that intuition into the mind might reveal, but rather a conception that social conduct instilled. The eighteenth-century philologists cited a Han dynasty commentary on the *Analects* written by Zheng Xuan (127–200) confirming he also agreed with the newly clarified etymology of *ren*. The bare-bones meaning of humaneness was then redefined and reclaimed as deriving from the interaction of two individuals.

Eighteenth-century academies began teaching that misleading definitions of humaneness posed in the post-eleventh century era could be avoided by relying upon Han-era scholars. Philological erudition redefined humaneness as realizable only in concrete human action; humaneness meant people being mutually concerned for each other. This social dimension of *ren* made interpersonal relationships the central idea in Confucian morality.

Qing dynasty scholars attacking Neo-Confucian interpretations of the classics also replaced their predecessors’ emphasis on moral principle with a reassertion of the importance of ritual propriety. Confucius himself had provided a one-sentence definition of humaneness that tied it to ritual. But that passage, 12.1 in the *Analects*, was understood by Neo-Confucian interpreters to mean, “To subdue the self [interpreted as eliminating the selfish desires of the self] and return to ritual constitutes humaneness.” Zhu Xi had elaborated that there is no separate way to “return to ritual” other than “subduing the self” because what is contrary to ritual is selfishness. And further, ritual was that innate moral value — “heavenly principle in measured display” — that Zhu saw as accessed immediately when selfish desires were eliminated.⁶ This interpretative commentary implied that Confucius had claimed that eliminating desires was the way to humaneness. But

the philologists corrected it to read “Restraining oneself in order to return to ritual.” Note that the word “restrain” was not a small change; this milder reading of “subdue,” to read “restrain,” actually affirmed that desires need full expression in living humanely, but with moral restraint through observing proper social norms or ritual, as a constant monitor.

Proper social norms from past traditions were understood as the place to find ritual restraint. The remaining sentences in passage 12.1 were strong advice from Confucius: “If contrary to ritual, do not look; if contrary to ritual, do not listen; if contrary to ritual, do not talk; if contrary to ritual, do not act.” Hence, whether in one’s own words, in what one saw, what one heard, or in what one intentionally acted on, “restraining oneself” meant bringing oneself in line with the moral values and standards of conduct that had been tested and affirmed in past ritual practices.

Other more minor strains of Confucian thought joined the critical philologists of the eighteenth century in reconstructing the prominent position of social ritual. One such scholarly lineage that actually had its own roots in the Southern Song was the Eastern Zhejiang School of Scholarship. This added current contributed to the importance of ritual, understood as proper social usage, in keeping moral thought in conformity with past reality.

The Popularity of Xunzi

Dai Zhen (1724–1777) argued that the practice of ritual was good because it would expand our innate sense of the good. His student Ling Tingkan (1757–1809), however, changed the message: the external practice of ritual was necessary to regulate one’s natural impulses that were not so obviously good at birth. This argument reopened the ancient debate between Mencius and Xunzi about whether human nature at birth was incipiently good (Mencius said “had the capacity to be good”) or bad (Xunzi).

Ling Tingkan did not consider “Recognition of Things and Affairs,” as the first step in an Eight-Step program, as defined by recognition of principle inherent in the natural world and human affairs; rather, it could best be revealed by analyzing the record of what rituals have been passed down, and what these rituals have taught us about human behavior. Ling even argued that the first five steps found in the *Great*

Learning required mandatory work with ritual to move from one step to the next. And in ancient China Xunzi had stood out as arguing for the essential role of ritual in moral growth.

Mid-Qing scholars who resurrected the reputation of Xunzi saw him as the authority on how ritual should reassume a central role in modernized Confucianism. Yet his popularity went even deeper. His attack on goodness in human nature was implicitly an attack on Neo-Confucian assumptions of innate goodness — which was an attack on both the Cheng-Zhu and Lu-Wang schools of Neo-Confucianism.

Confucius himself had never treated any of the five moral values — humaneness, rightness, ritual, wisdom, or sagacity — as innate. One hundred and fifty years later, however, Mencius viewed all but sagacity as at least innate capacities, and we have seen that this is one reason the Neo-Confucians were fascinated with the arguments in the *Mencius*. We now know, from the newly excavated Confucian texts, that treatises like *Five Kinds of Action*, attributed to someone in Confucius' grandson's (Zisi) generation, were connected to Mencius in a lineage of transmission. One great parallel between the two thinkers was what the author of *Five Kinds of Action* said about humaneness (*ren*) and rightness (*yi*): that as one's "outer mind" engaged in social ritual, it pulled humaneness and rightness from one's "inner mind."⁷ This position resonated with the *Mencius* and with the inner orientation of the Neo-Confucians much later.

Xunzi conceived of the entire Mencian argument — if sprouts of goodness in human nature are nurtured they will become *ren* (humaneness) and *yi* (rightness) — as pulling Confucianism away from the practical concerns of bettering oneself and society. Instead, one must regulate one's inborn impulses, which are largely bad and which actually required a lifelong practice of ritual. Just as a T-square provides a ninety-degree angle for an architect designing a structure, so rituals provide stable guidance for conduct that will be morally proper. A well-ordered state based on ritual will consequently be well supported and strong.

Xunzi taught that participating in considerate activities humanizes one's emotions. Lazy or gluttonous behavior, on the other hand, can tempt everyone. Planning one's life around satisfying these pleasing but ultimately negative feelings is to invite disaster, not just for oneself but in one's relationships. Like an unused muscle, one's empathy will

atrophy, and neglect will prevail, accompanied by reckless, wanton, or even vicious behavior, all in the service of immediate gratification. Conversely, observing proper social norms will allow one to find emotional recuperation in those rituals. Ritual cultivates socially positive feelings.

Xunzi openly acknowledged a transmission of ideas in his time that he identified as the Zisi-Mencius lineage, but he debunked it as making unwarranted assumptions regarding the human capacity for innate goodness. In fact, Xunzi went so far as to claim that human nature is bad (something about which Confucius had consciously preferred to remain agnostic). He felt that a new role for ritual as well as education was required because people need both in order to constrain their bad inborn impulses.

Xunzi also distinguished progressive stages of personal cultivation. A “scholar-apprentice” (*shi*) could recite the classics, while a morally exemplary person (*junzi*) who has studied the ritual texts and internalized their message has a sense of moral compass.

Anyone who has reached the stages of the exemplary person and scholar-apprentice observes the proper degree of courtesy and obeys the rules of seniority. No improper words leave his lips; no evil sayings come from his mouth. With a benevolent mind he explains his ideas to others, with the mind of learning he listens to their words, and with a fair mind he makes his judgments. He is not moved by the censure or praise of the mob; he does not try to bewitch the ears and eyes of his observers; he does not cringe before the power and authority of eminent men; he does not feign delight in the words of the ruler’s favorites. Therefore he can abide by the Way and not be of two minds, can endure hardship without betraying his ideals, and can enjoy good fortune without overstepping the bounds of good conduct. He honors what is fair and upright and despises meanness and wrangling. Such is the discourse of the exemplary person and scholar-apprentice.⁸

Moral direction from a teacher will revitalize ceremonious virtue and reauthorize moral actions. The exemplary person in Confucianism is both a teacher and a mentor.

China’s final three centralized bureaucratic states, the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, all endorsed the study of Cheng-Zhu Neo-

Confucianism as the orthodox way to prepare for the civil service examinations, meaning that from the fourteenth to the twentieth centuries the Learning of the Way interpretation of the classics was officially sponsored in China. The brilliant ideas of Wang Yangming inspired many reformers during that time, but they never challenged the official Cheng-Zhu interpretation that prepared scholar-officials through the examination system. At the end of this period, in the eighteenth century, the widespread movement to reassess the meaning of the Confucian classics through philology and literary criticism redefined some Neo-Confucian interpretations of the canonical texts. But a philologically corrected Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy remained the ideological pillar supporting the dynastic state as the nineteenth-century dawned.