

SHU-HSIEN LIU. *Essentials of Contemporary Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, Resources in Asian philosophy and religion, Westport, London: Praeger, 2003, pp. xv+165. ISBN 0-313-27581-5 (HB)

One's expectations may rise quite high when one holds in one's hands a book about a philosophical movement-in-making written by the prominent member of that very movement. To read and investigate this kind of intellectual self-reflection of a scholar who influences and forms an entire system of thought is both an intriguing and an exciting occupation for a reader. This is exactly the case with the book written by Liu Shuxian (Shu-hsien Liu). A current member of the Academia Sinica in Taiwan, Professor Liu devotes himself to the difficult task of telling the story of an intellectual movement that he calls Contemporary Neo-Confucianism (he also uses the terms 'Contemporary New Confucianism' or 'New Confucianism' interchangeably). Liu's book is still one of a very few studies available in Western languages on a topic that receives great attention in the academic and even public circles in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea. While the world's economic and political reality of today has already convinced a great number of people of the necessity to get more familiar with the Chinese way of living and thinking, contemporary Chinese thinkers whose line of thought and work is in a very close relation to traditional Chinese philosophical systems are still too little known to Western audiences. Thus any attempt to introduce such a broad and diverse philosophical movement with a background rooted in tradition more than 2500 years old is worth compliment and support.

Liu Shuxian's undertaking appears even more difficult and of greater importance having in mind that among the scholars in the field there is still a lack of consensus about the origination, scope, influences, and even representatives of Contemporary Neo-Confucianism. Liu's organic overview of almost a century of the newest history of Chinese thought makes his book a valuable guide for Western scholars and students alike.

As Liu Shuxian makes it clear in the Preface, the current volume is 'a sequel' to his earlier *Understanding Confucian Philosophy: Classical and Sung-Ming* (Westport, 1998) (p. xi). This also becomes obvious from the text itself because of plenty of notes referring to the pages of that previous book. On the one hand, it signals two vital and most probably interdependent features of Chinese intellectual tradition—continuity and creative adjustment of tradition to the present circumstances. That gives a reader a valid and correct feeling that contemporary Chinese thinkers cannot be grasped without at least some knowledge about the previous epochs of Chinese philosophy that nurtured and stimulated them. On the other hand, some of those references are rather lengthy (for example note 15 in Chapter 1 suggests consulting pages 113–257 of the previous work) causing some inconvenience to a reader, since many arguments seem to be left untold in the present work. It becomes questionable whether *Essentials of Contemporary Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, although a 'sequel', can be read as a separate volume as the separate title would suggest.

Liu declares that his 'emphasis is on philosophy' (p. xi), and that is proved in Chapter 1, 'Paradigm Shift in the Transitional Period from the Late Ming to the early Ch'ing', which is the most philosophical in the entire book. The author starts with a terminological consideration on the validity of the very term *Neo-Confucianism*, which has no direct equivalent in Chinese. Liu argues that the usage of the term is justifiable if we were to restrict it to the *lixue* 理学 of Song and Ming dynasties, both of the most influential schools of that time—those of Cheng-Zhu and Lu-Wang—included (p. 2). This definition is a theoretical basis that allows Liu to argue against the inclusion of Qing (Ch'ing) thinkers such as Yan Yuan (Yen Yüan) or Dai Zhen (Tai Chen) into the Neo-Confucian school, as Feng Youlan (Fung Yu-lan) did in his influential and still widely read *History of Chinese Philosophy*. Liu explicitly and convincingly demonstrates that there was what he calls a 'paradigm shift' in the years of late Ming and early Qing dynasties, which resulted in 'radical naturalistic humanism', dropping the transcendent perspective altogether (p. 7). In other words, the mark of the intellectual world of the Qing Dynasty after the paradigm shift was that 'philology came to the fore while philosophy retreated to the rear' (p. 15).

Liu Shuxian's position brings a lot of conceptual clarity and consistency into the research of history of Chinese philosophy done in Western languages. It however remains unclear why Chapter 1 is in a book about Contemporary Neo-Confucians and how is it related to the problems discussed in the rest of the book. As an introductory chapter, it leaves too many unaddressed questions of how this paradigm shift and the altered intellectual climate in the Qing Dynasty in general influenced contemporary Chinese thinkers, or what their attitude towards the Qing legacy is.

Chapter 2 is an actual introduction in which Liu lays the theoretical foundation to approach a number of 20th and 21st century Chinese thinkers as belonging to

more or less a coherent movement. A lot of energy in the research of contemporary Chinese thought goes into disputing whether one or another scholar should or should not be included in the Contemporary New Confucian movement. Liu, in his own words, goes 'one step further' and assigns fifteen scholars to four groups in three generations (p. 24). By doing so Liu once again brings more clarity into the field and sets up a framework in which future discussions on the nature of Contemporary New Confucianism may be held. As Liu reaffirms the determination to concentrate his discussion on philosophy (p. 26) and dedicates individual chapters to the five most philosophical representatives of New Confucianism, the rest of Chapter 2 is devoted mainly to Liang Sou-ming (Liang Shuming) and discussions on the status and understanding of science and philosophy in China in the early 1930s. Liu then goes on to provide a general sketch of what could be regarded as the basic position of New Confucians in metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, cosmology, science, ethics, politics, and other realms of human concerns (p. 37–8).

What follows in the next five chapters are the introductions of the philosophical views of Feng Youlan, Hsiung Shih-li (Xiong Shili), Thomé Fang (Fang Dongmei), T'ang Chün-i (Tang Junyi), and Mou Tsung-san (Mou Zongsan), who receives the most attention. Liu talks extensively about their scholarly careers and philosophical works, introduces their philosophical vocabulary, and gives an account of their attitudes towards the complex political and social reality of 20th century China. Liu is not reluctant to show his personal evaluations, agreements and disagreements with the philosophers concerned, and that undoubtedly is the best account of the position of yet another, more recent representative of the New Confucian movement—Liu Shuxian himself.

Nevertheless, huge parts of descriptive narration rather than critical and comparative analysis make this book seem something more of a collection of intellectual biographies of five profound and bright minds of Chinese philosophy, than an account on the essentials of one discrete movement that unites all of them. Nonetheless, the thorough piece on Mou Zongsan's thought could be an exception in this context.

In the last chapter, Liu tells the story of four members of so far the youngest mature generation of New Confucians and as their most common and outstanding feature presents the 'international dimension' in their thought and activities (p. 142). This declared international dimension allows us to hope that Western scholarship on classical and contemporary Chinese thinkers is going to increase both in scope and in depth. The present book of Liu Shuxian is definitely a gigantic step in this direction.