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Review

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Book Reviews

To Acquire Wisdom: The Way of Wang Yang-ming. By Julia Ching. New York: Columbia University Press, 1976. Pp. 373. \$17.50.

Neo-Confucian Thought in Action: Wang Yang-ming's Youth (1472–1509). By Tu Wei-ming. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976. Pp. 222. \$10.00.

Since the publication in 1963 of Wing-tsit Chan's masterful translation of the *Ch'uan-hsi lu* under the title *Instructions for Practical Living*, Western-language studies of the philosophy of Wang Yang-ming have flourished, as scholars working in the West have found themselves in the fortunate position of being able to draw not only on the work of Chan but also on the contributions of such distinguished Chinese and Japanese scholars as Mou Tsung-san, T'ang Chün-i, Shimada Kenji, Okada Takehiko, Araki Kengo, and Yamashita Ryūji. Few subjects in Chinese thought are of comparable importance for those concerned with postclassical Chinese ethical theory and practice: it is in the person and thought of Wang Yang-ming that we find perhaps the richest expression of Chinese spirituality at the point of intersection with Chinese moral practicality.

Two of the most recent beneficiaries of and contributors to the scholarly exchange over the significance of Wang Yang-ming's philosophical legacy are Julia Ching, a historian of philosophy with allied competence in the history and philosophy of religion, and Tu Wei-ming, an intellectual historian with an active interest in current work in psychohistory and philosophy as well as remarkable personal sensitivity to the psychological depths to be discovered within intellectual structures. Though sharing a profound sympathy for their subject and a conviction that his philosophical contribution transcends the historical context in which Wang Yang-ming lived, Ching and Tu differ fundamentally in their approach to Wang and their conclusions about his thought.

Julia Ching's book, *To Acquire Wisdom: The Way of Wang Yang-ming*, completes an undertaking begun in two earlier studies, a monograph entitled, "Wang Yang-ming: A Study in 'Mad Ardour'" (Papers in Far Eastern History, the Australian National University, March 1971) and a volume of translation, *The Philosophical Letters of Wang Yang-ming* (Canberra, 1972). The present work is, to my knowledge, the first full-length study of Wang Yang-ming's thought to appear in English.¹ It is essentially a work of textual exegesis, focusing primarily on the principal philosophical doctrines expounded in the *Ch'uan-hsi lu* and drawing also on several of Wang's poems, letters, and seven essays, four of which have not previously been translated into English. The poems and essays appear in translation in appendices to the work.

The author's intention, as stated in the preface (pp. xiii–xiv) is "to see Wang's thought as a 'way' of acquiring wisdom against the background of the problem of 'orthodoxy' . . ." and, more specifically, "to see Yang-ming's philosophy as a departure from the Ch'eng-Chu norm." She begins with an introductory chapter entitled, "Truth and Ideology: The Confucian Way (Tao) and Its Transmission (*Tao-t'ung*)." The evolution of Ch'eng-Chu "orthodoxy" is here rehearsed: the prefiguring of Neo-Confucianism with Han Yü and Li Ao in the T'ang, its creative development with Chou Tun-i, Chang Tsai, and the Ch'eng brothers in the Northern Sung, its completion and synthesis by Chu Hsi in the Southern Sung. Professor Ching finds a problem involved in Chu Hsi's idea of a *tao-t'ung* or orthodox transmission of the Confucian inheritance (p. 11):

The problem . . . arises from the contradiction inherent in a "lineal" transmission of "insights" into a dynamic truth: a problem of criteria. How can it be decided that a certain man has attained any real insight at all, and what is the nature of such insight, and of truth itself? Chu Hsi's determination of the "line" of "orthodox transmission" did not provide any external criteria. It merely set up the authority of Chu himself as *the* criterion of judgment regarding the orthodoxy of the insights of those thinkers whose names had been included among the transmitters of the Tao.

In her view this problem of the criteria for orthodoxy was inbuilt from the beginning. Then the "truth" to be found at the heart of Ch'eng-Chu philosophy hardened into "ideology" when that philosophy was accepted as state orthodoxy in 1313 under the Yüan: a characteristically Confucian eclecticism gave way to literalistic dogmatism as this orthodoxy became the basis for the civil service examination system in succeeding centuries. She argues (pp. 20–21) that once having received imperial patronage, the Ch'eng-Chu school produced "no more great thinkers" and became "merely an ideology to which lip service was paid by countless students eager to achieve an eminent position in government service." The result of this transformation was that ". . . the Chinese philosophical genius went underground again, to express itself in those students of Ch'eng-Chu orthodoxy who revolted against both these orthodox philosophers and the intellectual tyranny that supported them" (p. 21). Wang Yang-ming is presented in subsequent chapters as a dissident who reacted against the rigidity and stagnation of the orthodox system and followed through on the intellectual and spiritual promise contained in the teaching of Chu Hsi's philosophical antagonist, Lu Hsiang-shan.

What followed from Wang's experience of enlightenment in 1508 during his exile in Kweichow was a rejection of the emphasis placed by Chu on the moral principles to be discovered alike in the self, the classics, and external events and things, and a concentration instead on another starting point, *hsin*, or "mind-and-heart," as Ching prefers to translate it. The link between Lu and Wang is found in a shared commitment to the internal standard of *hsin* and to a form of learning known as *hsin-hsüeh*. Wang's refinement of *hsin-hsüeh* began with his doctrine of "the unity of knowledge and action" (*chih-hsing ho-i*) and culminated in his elaboration of the Mencian concept of *liang-chih*. *Liang-chih*, "the inborn moral sense, common to all" (p. 107), became the basis of Wang's moral philosophy; the extension of *liang-chih* (*chih liang-chih*), his Way; *liang-chih-in-itself* (*liang-chih pen-t'i*), his understanding of the Absolute. The shift is from an emphasis on external authority characteristic of "orthodoxy" to a commitment to internal authority characteristic of the *hsin-hsüeh* tradition, sealed through Wang's deeper understanding of interiority and his conviction of the self-confirmation implied by sagehood. The problem of authority is, in this interpretation, solved in *liang-chih* (p. 165):

[Wang] has now given his own criterion, *liang-chih*, and radically changed the notion of orthodoxy, declaring as real heretics, not the adherents of alien creeds or practices, but the hypocrites of the Confucian school itself, who mouth traditional ideals but deny them in life and action. By rendering obsolete the old criteria of correctness and orthodoxy, which were applied to a man's thoughts rather than to his life and action, and by substituting a new one, that of personal insight into the good, he has performed a signal service to the cause of sagehood itself. He has declared himself in favor of truth rather than of ideology and of virtue rather than of worldly success. He has also pointed out that sagehood confers an assurance of its own correctness or "orthodoxy," because it reveals to man that in him which, united to all things, is greater than himself: his *hsin*, which is also called Tao.

The obvious strength of Ching's approach lies in its capacity to illuminate the timeless value (or the value in and out of time) of a powerful spirituality and a compelling vision of man. That spirituality is evoked with such intensity and the vision is recreated with such conviction, that the writing of the book seems itself a religious act. At the same time the approach has certain limitations: the juxtaposition between "truth" and "ideology" is peculiarly stark, and the possibility of alternative truths, of which Yang-ming's was one, receives less attention than it might. The actual challenge of Chu Hsi's thought may be difficult to recognize when Wang's need to shed the encumbrance of "orthodoxy" is made to seem so evident, and the problem here is compounded by the fact the distinction between philosophical orthodoxy and state orthodoxy during the Ming is not clearly drawn. An innocent reader might almost conclude that the former was engulfed by the latter and drained of any residual truth value it may have held. One might not realize that throughout the Ming period there were thinkers who identified themselves with Ch'eng-Chu orthodoxy and yet were as opposed as Wang himself was to the sterile formulations of the ideologues and the political machinations of the "time-servers." There was an alternative vision of the truth, a different but nonetheless valid Way. Though adherents of the Ch'eng-Chu school were characteristically committed to study of the classics and a developed appreciation of the cultural tradition, it does not follow that adherence to "orthodoxy" inevitably implied submission to wholly external standards of authority or unquestioning acceptance of a corpus of "correct" beliefs and practices.

Because the issue of authority was only one of the issues that Wang confronted, because his contemporaries included some powerful thinkers with complex philosophies of their own, and because Wang's significant dialogues were rather with such thinkers as Lo Ch'in-shun and Chan Jo-shui than with less creative minds whose thought was circumscribed by the ideas and values sanctioned through the examination system, the treatment of the controversies between Wang and his contemporaries is of considerable importance. One may well argue that a suitably complex reconstruction of the lively intellectual debates of the early sixteenth century is essential to a balanced appreciation of the thought of any one of the participants in those debates. Even Wang, who was, no doubt, the "giant" among the sixteenth-century thinkers, was the advocate of *a* truth, defined in relation to other truths. In a central chapter on "The Controversies: *Ko-wu*," the debate over the problem of the investigation of things is reconstructed in such a way that only Wang's view seems fully compelling. My question about the interpretive strategy of this book would be whether the overriding emphasis on the issue of "authority" does not involve something of a reduction, whether a fuller exploration of the philosophical alternatives to Wang's view would not be conducive to a richer insight into his own truth as well.

This emphasis on the problem of authority may also explain an interpretation of *liang-chih* which, to some readers, may seem imperfectly nuanced. Granted that Yang-ming's development of the concept of *liang-chih* represented a repudiation of, or, more likely, a response to Chu Hsi's doctrine of *ko-wu*, one may yet wonder whether the tension experienced by Wang himself is fully expressed in the proposed dichotomy between "wisdom" and a "static deposit of unchanging truths that have been discovered by any one man who can therefore claim for it a certain monopoly" (p. 102). It would be impossible to overturn the argument that, "The capacity to know good, while being

inborn, relies not on abstract principles which can be applied universally, but on the guidance of experiential wisdom” (pp. 109–110). But there may be some question whether the alternative view had serious exponents or a genuine life even among those most determined in their advocacy of study of the classics or the objects of the external world. The association of *chih liang-chih* with “the acquisition of wisdom” reflects the author’s altogether cogent view that wisdom involves the capacity to respond freely, flexibly, and creatively to the exigencies of given life situations. Yet the term *liang-chih*, as used by both Mencius and by Wang Yang-ming, has the sense of knowledge which is innate or intuitive. It may be developed, but can it be “acquired”? The term “wisdom” in its common usage implies the sound judgment, good sense, sanity and prudence associated with accumulated knowledge, both intellectual and moral. Does it convey the proper nuance when used in regard to the action of consciousness that is involved in developing and generalizing the spontaneous, prereflective moral impulses that derive from our shared and most reliable affective nature?

Unhappily, this important book is flawed by an inordinate number of errors. Before desisting, I counted some 350, including 150 in the otherwise impressive bibliography. Many are typographical errors. Some involve mistakes in the romanization of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean names and titles. Several dates are incorrect, including those given (p. 28) for Wang Yang-ming’s father, Wang Hua. There are also several minor errors of fact. Suffice it to say that, though the spirit may be valued above the letter, these errors should be routed in a second edition.

In developing his portrait of Wang Yang-ming, Tu Wei-ming employs the techniques of intellectual biography with unusual intelligence and insight. Through a careful study of Ch’ien Te-hung’s chronological biography, Chan Joshui’s epitaph, as well as other sources, he succeeds in presenting a fascinating psychological profile of the youthful Wang as an aspirant to sagehood. Tu has evidently learned much from Erik Erikson, and in *Neo-Confucian Thought in Action: Wang Yang-ming’s Youth*, he adopts the perspective of psychohistory where he finds it useful. However, as an intellectual historian he retains an active awareness that ideas have a life of their own and therefore require exploration at the level of ideas and of symbolism. As he explains in his preface, his study “is focused on the interplay between the kind of symbolic resources Yang-ming continually tapped in formulating his self-definition and how, through his intellectual appropriation of these resources, he fundamentally reshaped some of the well-established patterns of thought that he drew upon” (p. xiii). In the course of his account of Wang’s “struggle to be human,” Tu suggests that in some sense the symbols and the aspirations, the ideas and ideals played a part in creating Wang’s needs and drives and his inclination to seek self-transformation—in other words, in conditioning his psychological commitment to the ethicoreligious ideal of sagehood. Whereas in the psychohistorical framework the tendency is generally to read intellectual or spiritual striving in terms of psychological motivations, the mode of analysis here is more consistently integrated: the symbolic resources to which Tu refers belong both to psychological reality and to intellectual and spiritual reality, and the reading is done in both directions.

This is a methodological commitment which must have been aided and abetted by the subject matter. Wang’s life is seen, from one perspective, as “a sincere effort to

actualize a personality ideal that can transcend the restrictions of society and history,” and, from another, as “the inner struggle of an individual at a specific juncture of time and place” (p. 2). Seen from either the perspective of the aspiration to universal significance or the perspective of the struggle of a particular individual, Wang’s philosophy is distinctly psychological in its orientation. Since sagehood itself is defined as a personality ideal, the need to read in both directions from psychological to intellectual/spiritual and from intellectual/spiritual to psychological signs becomes urgent. To this urgent need Tu responds with his concept of “Confucian symbolism” as a resource of a Confucian personality. Once one has encountered it, this approach seems so right, not only for the master who taught the doctrine of “the unity of knowledge and action,” but for any Confucian subject of intellectual biography, that it seems almost obvious, which, of course, it is not, it is brilliant.

The study traces Wang’s ancestry, reviews the accounts of his birth, follows his career from childhood through adolescence and into the maturity of his late thirties, and culminates in his formulation of the doctrine of “the unity of knowledge and action” in 1509. There were philosophical advances of great import made by Wang after this time; his famous teachings on the subject of *liang-chih* date from the 1520s and are absent from Part I of the *Ch’uan-hsi lu*. But the design of this book was not to cover the whole of Wang’s philosophical development but rather to concentrate on the formative years and to reintegrate those aspects of career and thought which, as the product of one life, were originally one, but, as the objects of scholarly scrutiny, have often been compartmentalized. In the course of reintegrating what can be known of Wang’s life and thought, the author reconstructs the agonies and crises Wang experienced: his speechlessness in early childhood, restlessness in youth, repeated failure in the metropolitan examinations, literary competitiveness, and alienation from the intellectual life of his generation in his twenties, attraction to and ultimate disappointment in the Taoist and Ch’an Buddhist alternatives in his early thirties, humiliation in punishment and terrifying loneliness in exile in his mid-thirties, and chronic ill health throughout life.

These sufferings are seen not merely retrospectively as occasions for the deepening of Wang’s vision, but as much as possible from within. Tu sees Wang as, at crucial points, truly tried, genuinely conflicted. The psychological depths he evokes make the spiritual ascent—through such experiences as the “existential choice at Yang-ming grotto” in 1502 and the enlightenment of 1508—at once more believable and more significant because, ultimately, more human.

The success of this book is partly owing to the discernment with which the author utilizes the biographical materials. He exercises caution in dealing with sources which are laced with legendary and hagiographical elements, urging that one be neither so skeptical as to discard potentially valuable clues nor so credulous as to suspend critical judgment. When the sources are insufficient to support more than a tentative interpretation, the interpretation remains tentative. This restraint is apparently dictated both by scholarly reserve and personal sensitivity: an operating assumption seems to be that one treats a biographical subject with the same respect for his human dignity and complexity that one would accord to a living contemporary.

Whereas Ching tends to adhere to a traditional view of the phenomenon of *hsin-hsüeh* by recurring to Wang’s inheritance from Lu Hsiang-shan and his departure from the

Ch'eng-Chu tradition, Tu, who focuses on the earlier period of Wang's life, notes that Lu's influence on Wang in the years prior to 1509 seems to have been negligible. When he emphasizes the importance in the early years of the challenge of Chu Hsi's thought, particularly in the matter of *ko-wu*, his judgment is in accord with that of Ch'ien Mu and T'ang Chün-i and with the consensus of recent Japanese scholarship. The case is persuasive. In a concluding chapter on "The Meaning," Tu considers the formulation of the doctrine of "the unity of knowledge and action" in reference to the method of *ko-wu*. In this treatment the discussion centers on the account in Wang's chronological biography of the circumstances surrounding the formulation of the doctrine and on the problem of intellectual influences on Wang. The philosophical implications of the doctrine are only partially explored; this was perhaps unavoidable since a fuller exploration of its significance would have required an extension of the discussion into a later period of Wang's life and a consideration of his mature concept of *liang-chih*. Here there is room for another book.

These two studies, which are so different in their emphases and conclusions, ideally should be read in tandem. Each has something distinct to offer; together they suggest certain fruitful tensions. The divergent emphases recall the observation of Wang's disciple Huang Mien-chih that "... the subtlety of [Yang-ming's] influence and attraction was like ever-changing spirit that cannot be localized in any particular place or direction. It was this, of course, that made the difference."²

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NOTES

1. For additional bibliographic references, consult Wing-tsit Chan, "Wang Yang-ming: Western studies and an Annotated Bibliography" in *Philosophy East and West* 22, no. 1, (January 1972).

2. Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 246.

Tangles and Webs: Comparative Studies in Existentialism, Psychoanalysis and Buddhism.

By Padmasiri de Silva. Colombo, Sri Lanka: Lake House Investments Ltd., 1976. Pp. 75. Price not given.

This monograph, which confirms Professor de Silva's status as one of the leading East-West thinkers in Sri Lanka, revolves around the related issues of anxiety and self as understood by various existentialist thinkers and psychotherapists and in early Buddhism. The book follows an irregular course, touching on issues raised by Kier-