

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Neo-Confucian Thought in Action. by Tu Wei-ming

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Source: *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Summer, 1977), pp. 300-301

Published by: Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2756319>

Accessed: 14-05-2019 02:26 UTC

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NEO-CONFUCIAN THOUGHT IN ACTION. Wang Yang-ming's Youth (1472-1509). By Tu Wei-ming. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1976. 222 pp. \$10.00.

PROFESSOR TU'S BOOK is a detailed intellectual biography of Wang Yang-ming's formative years, with an emphasis on the inter-relationship between his thought and life situation in the context of mid-Ming society. Wang (d. 1529), is portrayed as a reformer who "reshaped the structure of Confucian thought in a fundamental way" by his stress on self-determination, personal commitment and the need to realize knowledge in action. For him the Confucian Tao was "a way of being human for all," hence the author suggests that ". . . what Yang-ming had done to Confucianism was no less profound than what Martin Luther had done to Christianity" (p. ix-x).

Tu approaches his task by suggesting the psychological implications of several crises in Wang Yang-ming's life, such as his early inability to speak, competition with his father (a prominent official), difficulty in examinations, and banishment. He then discusses Wang's intellectual reactions to these situations as portrayed in his poetry, letters and chronological biography. From here the author moves into a discussion of the philosophical and religious options available, and Wang's choices among them. He concludes that, while the young scholar was influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, after 1502 his commitment was fundamentally Confucian, because he never lost sight of the importance of society and human relations.

Some of the more specific contributions of this book are a section on Wang Yang-ming's relationship to the long scholarly tradition in his own family, discussions of his ambivalence toward official life, and his experiments with Taoist and Buddhist meditation, and clarification of his debt to Chu Hsi, who was long more important to him than Lu Hsiang-shan. The book concludes with an insightful treatment of *chih-hsing ho-i*, the unity of knowing and acting, which Tu sees as the key innovation of the first period of Yang-ming's thought. The treatment throughout is balanced and careful, giving due weight to all considerations, but never losing sight of Wang Yang-ming the inner man and his commitment to sagehood.

Wang Yang-ming was both a successful military leader and an ethically sensitive philosopher, and hence epitomizes the ancient Confucian tension between integrity and service, personal cultivation and public success. His concept of the unity of knowing and acting resolved this tension in a way that has appealed to many Chinese leaders ever since, including Sun Yat-sen and Mao Tse-tung. And beyond China this troubled and brilliant 16th-century man still speaks meaningfully to us today on how to live with clarity and

courage. Tu Wei-ming is to be thanked for providing this new base for Wang Yang-ming studies.

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TO ACQUIRE WISDOM. *The Way of Wang Yang-ming*. By Julia Ching. New York: Columbia University Press. 1976. 373 pp. \$17.50.

JULIA CHING has fulfilled her aim of producing an introductory, but not superficial, exegetical study of the thought of the 16th-century Chinese philosopher-official Wang Yang-ming. It is, moreover, now the best general descriptive treatment of the subject available in a Western language. In line with other recent publications evidencing a newly acquired maturity in the field, it is an appreciation of Chinese thought on its own terms, rather than an annex to Chinese history. A Yale associate professor of philosophy well-versed in Western thought, the author has wisely elected to minimize comparisons with the West and avoids the forced use of Western terminology. Nevertheless, since her handling of technical terms is clear and consistent—though some may quarrel with specific translations—this work will interest students of comparative philosophy as well as China specialists.

The book is loosely organized around Wang's relationship to Confucian "orthodoxy," quite rightly stressing method rather than system; for his central concern was not the content of sagely wisdom but how to become a sage. Introductory chapters treat the transmission of the Confucian Way and Wang's life, clearly pointing to the disparity between the theoretical accessibility of sagehood and the very real paucity of sages in the Confucian tradition. There follows an examination of the major conceptual stages in the evolution of Wang's philosophical quest. Proceeding from his dramatic realization that the key to sagehood lies in *hsin* ("heart-and-mind," in Ching's awkward but accurate translation) inherent in all human beings, Wang minimized the importance of external things while emphasizing the inseparability of knowledge and action. His means of attaining sagehood finally crystallized around the idea of the extension of *liang-chih* (rendered as "knowledge of the good"), a Mencian sense that is at once innate and capable of development. By positing *liang-chih* as a standard that both partakes of the objective sagely transmission and is subjectively an intrinsic part of the self, Ching argues that Wang entirely transcended the issue of orthodoxy.

*To Acquire Wisdom* is ambivalent about the interaction between Wang's life and thought. Treating his biography in a perfunctory and somewhat uncritical manner, it nevertheless presents his major ideas