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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Neo-Confucian Thought in Action: Wang Yang-ming's Youth (1472-1509)
by Tu Wei-ming

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jargon of the rhetorical tradition of an alien culture such as the medieval European as has been done in the book.

In all events the kind of *fu* from the T'ang dynasty and later was quite a different thing from that of the Han. The prose-poetry/essay form that the *fu* gradually evolved into was a complex piece of composition. In the hand of the master they were subtle and delicate studies; layers of consciousness can be peeled off like an onion. The eventual core of meaning arrived at may be quite different from a superficial reading of the subject-matter, but the masters of the form were always alert to a multitude of meanings and shadings. Their concern was the universe and man, and they employed their art to probe into the variegated expressions of such relationships. The narrowing down of their meaning to a single, obsessional didactic intention is to miss the point entirely.

TAO TAO SANDERS

TU WEI-MING: *Neo-Confucian thought in action: Wang Yang-ming's youth (1472-1509)*. xvi, 222 pp. Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press, [c1976]. \$10. (English agents: IBEG Ltd. £8.)

In attempting to assess critically and describe Tu Wei-ming's most recent contribution to our understanding of Neo-Confucianism, the most difficult problem lies in following his approach to the relevant materials. Shortly after the publication of this book, *Neo-Confucian thought in action*, *Ming Studies*, 3, 1976, 11-17, carried Tu's reflections on his own methodology. While he admits that he has been strongly influenced by Erik Erikson's 'psychohistorical' analyses of Luther and Gandhi, he states quite categorically and quite correctly that 'the kind of autobiographical data indispensable for a sophisticated psychohistorical analysis is absent in Wang Yang-ming's case' (p. 11). In fact, the primary source for biographical material, the *Nien-p'u* compiled by Yang-ming's disciple, Ch'ien Te-hung (1496-1574), is somewhat eulogistic and hagiographic in its treatment of biographical information. In addition, as early as Mao Ch'i-ling's (1623-1716) critical assessment of the *Nien-p'u* data in his *Wang Wen-ch'eng chuan-pen* and as recently as W. T. Chan's *Instructions for practical living*, p. xxi, n. 2, and Julia Ching's *The philosophical letters of Wang Yang-ming*, p. xiii, n. 16, questions have been raised as to the historicity of many of the events included in the *Nien-p'u*. Tu asserts that 'since the *Nien-p'u* was compiled by Yang-ming's most trusted disciples... the *Nien-p'u* is not only a thoughtful portrayal of Yang-ming's personality but also a reliable record of the basic historical events in Yang-ming's life' (p. 9). By the same token, can we conclude that the Gospels, complete with miracles and resurrection, are a 'reliable record of the basic historical events' in the life of Jesus?

The difficulties inherent in Tu's methodo-

logy—his modified 'psychohistorical' analysis of existing biographical data on Yang-ming—can be illustrated by an examination of his assessment of personal details—Yang-ming's marriage, for example. In his *Ming Studies* 'reflections', Tu suggests that there is 'a possibility that he (Yang-ming) may have suffered from impotence almost through the entire period of his adult life'. Tu posits a rather unconventional interpretation of an anecdote in *Nien-p'u* 17 *sui* in which Yang-ming, on his wedding night, prefers the company of a Taoist priest to his new bride. As an alternative to the traditional interpretation of intellectual and spiritual curiosity superseding basic human passions, Tu offers the explanation of reticence arising out of sexual inhibitions (pp. 45-6). To begin with, the historical genuineness of this wedding night account is not a foregone conclusion, especially since the same priest reappears in a *Nien-p'u* 36 *sui* anecdote which is dismissed by most scholars (including Tu himself) as being rather far-fetched. Again, if the historian chooses to project a Freudian paradigm on to the biographical data, his speculation as to why Yang-ming would prefer a Taoist monk to his new bride is subject only to the limits of his own imagination and candour.

The existing biographical material on Yang-ming provides us with a faint sketch of his personality and his psychological development. While a subjective inflation of this material—a psychoanalysis at a distance of 400 years, as it were—does exhaust every biographical detail available, the rather Dostoyevskian portrayal of a man wending his way from one spiritual crisis to the next is a creative act subject to the necessity of constantly interpreting data in order to fill in blank spaces in the portraiture. While this study does contain some valuable insights, one might wish that Tu had turned his years of research and his knowledge of Yang-ming to more profitable account by pursuing a methodology which is not rendered suspect from the outset by a lack of suitable data.

Another criticism I would make of this book is with respect to Tu's English translations of Yang-ming's poetry. For example, the translation of a poem contained in *Nien-p'u* 57 *sui* found on p. 15 is, to me, incomprehensible.

'In a hundred or even a thousand years
How many attuned ears would a lifetime
bring

True communion leaves notable traces
Wish they do not betray the original mind.'
Again, compare a portion of his translation of 'Yüeh-yeh', *YMCS* (*SPPY*), 20.34b, with that of Julia Ching.

'You must treasure the old wisdom
Come by a thousand generations,
And you can't waste the life of a man.
Now I doubt Chu Hsi's words—
So much shadow and echo,
And I'd be ashamed to sound
Like Cheng Hsüan—split and scattered.
But there was that Tien
Who set his lute down
Still vibrating from the wind—
O, he was wild, but makes my heart glad.'

Julia Ching, *To acquire wisdom*, 238.

'Alas, that learning should already have been interrupted for a thousand years! Waste not your one life, men born to greatness!

Whether our influence will outreach Chu Hsi's is a matter of doubt.

Yet in no wise shall we imitate Cheng Hsüan's quest for details and fragments

Setting aside the lute while the notes are still vibrating in the spring breeze,

Tseng Tien, the ardent and eccentric, understands my mind best.'

(Compare also Tu, 111, with Ching, 221; Tu, 110, with Ching, 225, and C. Chang, *Wang Yang-ming*, 4.) Granted that in the translation of Chinese poetry there is considerable room to exercise interpretative licence, still the reader has the right to expect that the translation will carry the intention of the poem. Tu's translations are frequently obscure.

An important and interesting feature in Tu's study is his discussion of Lu Hsiang-shan's influence on Yang-ming's thought. Although Tu asks the question: 'To what extent was Yang-ming really in the Hsiang-shan tradition?', he suggests that a considerable amount of research will be necessary to arrive at a satisfactory answer. Even so, Tu (p. 161) seems to have already reached his conclusion: 'Lu Hsiang-shan was virtually irrelevant as an alternative to Chu Hsi in Yang-ming's formative years'. While I would go as far as agreeing with Tu in his assertion that the 'Lu-Wang' kind of designation is both simplistic and misleading, I am not convinced that the philosophical orientation which can be traced through Lu Hsiang-shan to Wang Yang-ming can be so easily dismissed. Given that the ideas of Chu Hsi were the currency of Ming scholarship while those of Hsiang-shan had faded into obscurity after a brief revival by Ch'en Hsien-chang, it is not surprising that Yang-ming spent considerable energy in defending his divergencies from the prevailing orthodoxy. Even so, to regard Yang-ming as simply a response to Chu Hsi and to reject the traditionally accepted link between Hsiang-shan and Yang-ming is perhaps going too far. From Tu's discussion on this subject, one receives the distinct impression that he will have much more to say about it at a later stage. Tracing the source of Yang-ming's ideas and locating his system in the continuum of Chinese intellectual history is certainly an issue which must be dealt with in our attempt to understand his ideas. It is also an issue which has not really been tackled in recent researches on Yang-ming.

ROGER T. AMES

NATHAN K. MAO and LIU TS'UN-YAN: *Li Yü*. (Twayne's World Authors Series, 447.) 173 pp. Boston: Twayne Publishers, [1977]. \$9.95.

The Twayne's World Authors Series has been the midwife to many good books on Chinese writers, and to some not so good ones. This one does not raise the average. It does, of

course, make a contribution: Li Yü (Li Li-weng), the seventeenth-century dramatist, critic, story-teller, and essayist, is not as well known as he deserves to be, and this book will make him a more familiar figure. Substantially, it supplies details of his life and life style, summaries of his two collections of stories, *Wu-sheng hsi* and *Shih-erh lou*, and a description of his dramatic theory. The biographical and bibliographical data have a thoroughness typical of Liu Ts'un-yan. Less substantial are the arguments adduced to support the attribution to Li of the notorious *Jou p'u-t'uan*. The opposing case is not very strong either, but that does not excuse the triviality as evidence of the 'similarities' disclosed here between the *Jou p'u-t'uan* and Li's short stories (pp. 92-5). We might agree, however, to look upon this as the advocate trailing his robe. What seriously devalues the book is the superficiality of the critical and evaluative comment. One shrinks from quoting as from an act of cruelty. Suffice it to say that much of it is inept. Particularly unfortunate is the routine practice of bracketing Li Yü's literary ideas and achievements with optimistically comparable elements in the Western tradition. The discipline of comparative literature is admissible and may be illuminating if it is kept under control. Here it explodes like grapeshot. Though some balls may hit the mark, in the general alarm and disarray they can all too easily pass unnoticed, along with the stray shots.

D. E. POLLARD

C. A. CURWEN: *Taiping rebel: the deposition of Li Hsiu-ch'eng*. (Cambridge Studies in Chinese History, Literature and Institutions.) vii, 357 pp. Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1977. £10.50.

The meetings of Li Hsiu-ch'eng and Tseng Kuo-fan between 28 July and 6 August 1864 were wrapped by their only survivor in calculated obscurity; but how Dr. Curwen's fascinating study of the long deposition that Li wrote in his tiny prison cage during the last nine days of his life makes one long to know what they said to each other. For years each had been the other's most formidable opponent on the field of battle; each had loyally served his cause despite reservations about his superiors; and though the defeat of the Taipings was now virtually complete, Tseng's hour of triumph was also one of danger now that a court jealous of his extraordinary military and political powers no longer had to accept them as the necessary alternative to the greater threat posed by the Taipings.

Although neither left a record of their talks (summaries of Li's answers to questioning by other Ch'ing officials do, however, survive and are included here as appendixes) the facsimile publication in 1961 of the apparently long-lost original manuscript deposition that Li dashed off in his cell has brought us much closer to his thoughts than do any of the previously available versions. By showing us what Tseng