

Huang Sui-chi. **Essentials of Neo-Confucianism: Eight Major Philosophers of the Song and Ming Periods**. London: Greenwood, 1999. Pp. 280, glossary, bibliography, index.

Lanlan (Diane) Kuang
Indiana University

Huang Sui-chi's book on Chinese Neo-Confucianism is an impressive and well-organized work. Prior to her presentation of the eight major philosophers: Zhou Dun-yi 周敦頤 (1017-1073), Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011-1077), Zhang Zai 张载 (1020-1077), Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032-1085), Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107), Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), Lu Xiang-shan 陸九淵 (1139-1193), and Wang Yang-ming 王阳明 (1472-1529), Huang lays out the historical context in which Neo-Confucianism arose and the sociopolitical influences on its formation. Most importantly, Huang points out the main differences between Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, thus her reader can trace and compare the two schools of thought.

Neo-Confucianism, notes Huang, was named by the Jesuits in the 17th century. It began in the 11th century and continued into the middle of the 19th century, covering a period of several hundred years. Neo-Confucianism rose during the Song-Ming era, one of the greatest creative periods in the history of Chinese philosophy and regarded as "a Chinese renaissance" (4). The Song-Ming era follows the Warring States era, a period during which numerous schools formed through the Chinese civil service system and in response to the social and political problems of the time, the unification of Legalist Qin dynasty in 211 B.C., and Emperor Han Wu's orthodoxy of Confucianism. According to Huang, the Song-Ming era was politically unstable and a period of intense turmoil for the Chinese, providing fertile ground for a new ideology. Huang provides four reasons for the development of Neo-Confucianism during this period: 1) the necessity of fostering national independence against foreign invasions, which included foreign faiths, such as Buddhism; 2) the attack on foreign faiths eventually led to the long-criticized nihilist metaphysics of Buddhism, which opposed the Confucian humanism; 3) the influence of Daoism; and 4) the need to revive Confucianism in a "Hegelian" spirit, by reconciling conflicting traditions from the past.

Due to political disorder and internal disunity intensified by invasions of nomadic steppe peoples from the North and West, Confucianism, with its pragmatic emphasis on social and political problems, had been overshadowed by the metaphysical speculations and religious doctrines of Buddhism and Daoism. The eight philosophers

presented in Huang's book—Zhou Dun-yi, Shao Yong, Zhang Zai, Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, Zhu Xi, Lu Xiang-shan, and Wang Yang-ming—all returned to the ancient Confucian texts as the source of their intellectual pursuits. Nevertheless, each of them was able to transform some abstract ideas found in the early Confucian classics into something of philosophical significance relevant to “the needs of the time” (xii).

Representative Neo-Confucianist ideas are Zhou Dun-yi's cosmological concept tai-ji 太极 (Supreme Ultimate), Shao Yong's basic cosmic notion xiang-shu 象数 (image-number), and Zhang Zai's ontological basis of materialisms qi 气 (vital force). The Cheng brothers, Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi advocated for the li 理 (Principle). Zhu Xi, presented by Huang as the greatest mind of the Song dynasty, synthesized these concepts and developed them into a comprehensive system—a system that developed into orthodoxy. Zhu's dualistic realism (initiated by Cheng Yi) was severely criticized by his contemporary Lu Xiang-shan, who developed a school of monastic idealism of Neo-Confucianism with the xin 心 (mind) as the ultimate reality. Wang Yang-ming of the Ming dynasty took up Lu Xiang-shan's idea and formed the Lu-Wang school, or school of Mind 心学 (xin xue), the rival of the Cheng-Zhu school, or school of Principle 理学 (li xue).

Huang lists the factors that allowed Neo-Confucianism to succeed in bringing about the intellectual and philosophical renaissance that dominated the next nine centuries. First, Neo-Confucianism received support from the ruling class when Chinese tolerance of foreign influence (aka Buddhism) reached a saturation point. Second, the Neo-Confucianists were all creative writers who left behind a substantial body of work which influenced succeeding generations. Additionally, the humanistic concepts in the teaching of Neo-Confucianism were welcomed by the realistically minded Chinese. Finally, the unconscious bearing of Buddhist elements in the mind of the Neo-Confucianists led to the attempt to synthesize the ethnically humanistic realism and the highly religious mysticism of Zen Buddhism.

In the latter chapters of her book, Huang presents each of the eight major philosophers of Neo-Confucianism as realists and/or neo-realist. It is obvious that to Huang, these thinkers were also “the realistically minded Chinese”—as she states in her opening chapter. She argues that these philosophers aimed to abolish a nihilistic and self-serving Buddhism and to revive the humanistic and practical Confucianism. Therefore, they ultimately turned away from the pure metaphysical principles such Dao (Way 道), tai-ji, shu (number 数), qi, li, or xin, and dedicated themselves to the realistic principle that would guide the world of man.

One of the most interesting things Huang does in this work is to draw ideas from Classical and contemporary Western philosophies in order to explain or compare the Neo-Confucianism concepts. I enjoyed the cross-references enormously, but found them

difficult to navigate. Some cross-references lean towards the esoteric, such as Huang's comparison of Zhu Xi's idea of the interpenetration of opposites to the Hegelian notion of negation in the dialectic triadic thesis-antithesis-synthesis process, describing Hegel's process as "patterned in a spiral, upward direction" and Zhu's in the cyclical setting (161). Readers of this book really must have background knowledge of Western philosophy, particularly the works of Aristotle, Bergson, Percy, Pythagoras, Kant, Anaximenes and Hegel, to benefit from these inter- or intra-texts.

This book is a well-written analysis of how the eight philosophers of the Neo-Confucianism school reworked abstract, classical Confucian ideas into a tenable ideology relevant to "the needs of the time" (xii) and, thus, were welcomed by the "realistic-minded Chinese." My sole suggestion is that this cross-referential work would be made even stronger with the inclusion and cross-referencing of the canonical texts of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.