

## Enlightenment on the Crisis of Confucian Hermeneutics in Song Dynasty and the Establishment of the Ultimate Concern in Confucianism

### LA REVELATION DES DANGERS DE L'INTERPRETATION DU CLASSIQUE DE L'EPOQUE SONG ET LA CONSTRUCTION DE LA STRUCTURE ETROITE FINALE DE L'ETUDE CONFUSIEN

LI Liqin<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>International College of Remin University of China, Suzhou Research Institute, China.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 1 January 2012; accepted 15 April 2012

#### Abstract

"Scholars are determined to follow Dao." Confucianists conform to "Dao", which transcends their realm of cognition. "Dao" is inevitably represented through the medium of the "studies" on Confucianism. Therefore, the Confucian Hermeneutics as the ultimate concern for the Confucianists is designed to be Existential Hermeneutics from the very beginning, part of which is the Technical Hermeneutics. When Zhu Xi set a self-evident Absolute Presupposition for the benevolent Dao with his hermeneutics about "heart-nature-reason", the ultimate concern in Confucianism which the Confucianists had been seeking was fully established on an ontological sense. The piety and veneration contained in it might enlighten the contemporary academics and thoughts on beliefs.

**Key words:** Confucian Hermeneutics; Crisis; Ultimate concern; Zhu Xi

#### Résumé

"Shi zhi yu dao," le "dao" et le confucianisme et au-delà même, la présentation du "dao" sera inévitablement la capacité de compter sur "par les médias. Par conséquent, concernant quant à la préoccupation ultime des classiques l'herméneutique confucéenne, depuis le début de la série, c'est qu'il ya des théories herméneutique, c'est plutôt que de simplement sur les compétences herméneutique. Lorsque l'interprétation de la raison des conceptions de Zhu Xi "pour le chemin de la vertu et de définir la base absolue pour un ensemble de soi du confucianisme, des lettres confucéens a cherché à construire dans le sens ontologique d'y terminer par la préoccupation ultime.

L'implication de ces crainte pieuse, ou peut être une révélation de penser académique d'aujourd'hui et de la foi.

**Mots clés:** Interprétations du classique; Dangers; Attachement finale; Zhu Xi

LI Liqin (2012). Enlightenment on the Crisis of Confucian Hermeneutics in Song Dynasty and the Establishment of the Ultimate Concern in Confucianism. *Canadian Social Science*, 8(2), 74-78. Available from URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/j.css.1923669720120802.788> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.css.1923669720120802.788>

"Ultimate concern" is one of the core concepts of the theology of the Tillich culture. Its purpose is to hold together the human existence and give meaning to the human life. In this sense, the ultimate concern is a kind of belief in man's life.

Since the Spring and Autumn Period of China, the concept that "scholars are determined to follow Dao" has been an established inner value for Confucianists. When being entitled as a "scholar", a Confucianist should also undertake the value and responsibility related to the title.

However, as Chinese is a kind of ideographical writing system, "Dao" is inevitably represented through the medium of the "studies" on Confucianism. Dao is spread through scripts, and the ultimate reason for being a Confucianist is fallen upon "studies" on Confucianism. The "studies" on Confucianism, as the scripts representing "Dao", can integrate all the potential destinations and establish a complete world of meanings in the ultimate pursuit of Confucianists for "following Dao". The belief of Confucianists on "Dao" equals their belief on the "studies" on Confucianism. Their knowing Dao, spreading Dao and following Dao finally became their understanding about and spreading of the hidden meaning of the "Six

Classics”, because “articles are like this, and nature and the natural law are nothing else as well” (Gu, 1987, p.822).

In this way, the Confucian Hermeneutics as the ultimate concern for the Confucianists is designed to be Existential Hermeneutics from the very beginning, part of which is the Technical Hermeneutics<sup>1</sup>. In those eras when “scripts were lost and Dao was covered”, the “studies” on Confucianism were usually considered as mastery of knowledge, such as refinements of wordings, or were used as tools, such as the period of the “imperial exams” when Confucianism was the only standard for judging scholars. At that time, the “studies” on Confucianism already lost the meaning of being the belief of life for Confucianists. The question that Confucian Hermeneutics had to face in those eras should be: For such a Hermeneutics which should be regarded as a belief of life, what is the ultimate basis for its self-evident validity?

Before Zhu Xi, He Yan, Wang Bi and Han Yu all tried to establish an ultimate metaphysical basis for Confucianism with their different understandings about the Dao of saints. However, they were either accused of “playing tricks” and “talking nonsense” or “leading to nowhere” and “having an empty basis”. The result was that “there were fewer Confucianists, who could not hold the school.”

When Zhu Xi set a self-evident Absolute Presupposition for the benevolent Dao with his hermeneutics about “heart-nature-reason”, the ultimate concern in Confucianism was established after the ultimate construction of cosmology, disposition and cultivation was finished.

Zhu Xi honestly said that before he knew the ultimate value of the benevolent Dao, he felt that “I was driven by the large trend, like floating in huge waves, without a moment of stopping... Though I hated this secretly, I don’t know where it was from”<sup>2</sup>; but after a sudden awakening, “I understood that in these turbulent trends one actually has a home for oneself, which is the guidance for one’s consciousness and mortal life as well as the root of one’s being and the key points of one’s road of life. This is exactly the meaning for ‘being and development are of the same origin, and there is no difference between

phenomenon and the intangible reality’.”<sup>3</sup> According to Zhu Xi, from then on, he was able to find his own “home” which could guide his mortal life in the “huge waves” and the “turbulent trends”.<sup>4</sup>

Maybe this is the reason why Qian Mu praised Zhu Xi as “the one who unifies the academic thoughts after Confucius.” (Qian, 1987, p.1) As to the Confucianism in Song Dynasty, Qian Mu believed that “it had come back to the old basis of Confucian Thoughts in the pre-Qin period... After that, in China, Buddhism was no longer the guidance for people’s lives.” (Qian, 1994, p.181) After Zhu Xi, “China was no longer a world of Zen” (Qian, 1987, p.1074-75).

---

## II

When we take the risk to find out the function of Zhu Xi in the current Confucian Hermeneutics, we find that the lost, loose and alienated consciousness of people in Song Dynasty when they faced the written and the paradigm-like Confucian texts, which was exactly the cause for their Hermeneutical thinking. In other words, in a situation when Buddhism prevailed and the Confucius Temple was desolate, and the Confucian tradition and culture could no longer develop with its previous way of understanding and interpretation, the Confucianists in Song Dynasty were in desperate need to find new ways of Hermeneutics to interpret their own tradition. The crisis in the tradition of Confucian Hermeneutics finally became a requirement for new Hermeneutics. The Hermeneutical crisis for Confucianism in Song Dynasty has helped realize the deliberate thinking and perfect establishment of the ultimate concern in Confucianism.

One reason for the crisis of Confucian Hermeneutics which the Confucianists in Song Dynasty were facing is the contemporary ineffectiveness of the meaning reconstruction through the study of textual exegesis at the beginning of Song Dynasty. At the beginning of Song Dynasty, in the period of Emperor Tai Zu, Tai Zong and Zhen Zong, Confucianism largely followed the study of textual exegesis and annotation formed in Han and Tang Dynasty, which emphasized on the understanding of

---

<sup>1</sup> Note: For more information about Existential Hermeneutics and Technical Hermeneutics, see Yang Naiqiao’s essay “Hermeneutics in the Convergence of the Chinese and Western Academic Culture: On the Construction of the Chinese Confucian Hermeneutics”, published on *Journal of Xuzhou Normal University*, No. 11, 2009, pp.14-24.

<sup>2</sup> Note: Zhu Xi honestly said that before he knew the ultimate value of the benevolent Dao, he felt that “I was driven by the large trend, like floating in huge waves, without a moment of stopping... Though I hated this secretly, I don’t know where it was from”; but after a sudden awakening, “I understood that in these turbulent trends one actually has a home for oneself, which is the guidance for one’s consciousness and mortal life as well as the root of one’s being and the key points of one’s road of life. This is exactly the meaning for ‘being and development are of the same origin, and there is no difference between phenomenon and the intangible reality’”. Before this, I was exactly in a hurry-scurry and drifting state. I sought Dao from places other than myself, which was the cause of my awkward situation. I should laugh at myself.” (See Zhu Jieren et al. ed. *Complete Collection of Zhu Xi—Conversations with Zhang Jingfu*, Volume 21, Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House; Hefei: Anhui Education Press, 2002 edition, p. 1392.)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

the meaning of words and the logic in the articles. This was fundamental ancillary work for interpretation and understanding, of course. However, the Confucianists in Han and Tang Dynasty had always been trying to rebuild the conditions for the realization of the original stipulations of “Confucianism”, and they aspired the original meaning of the “Purports of Saints” which they had been pursuing. Such stipulations of Hermeneutics made Confucian Hermeneutics piles of ragged stones, and their understandings were narrow and could not be pieced together. The essence of Confucian thoughts was submerged by sophisticated annotations. In a word, due to our historical existence, it is a useless work to rebuild the contemporary purports of saints through textual exegesis, just as it is meaningless to mend and restore the life in the past. In the passing on of all the Confucian tutorship and family rules, the meanings of things were all stiff, dead and stagnant. That’s why Qian Daxin said: “At the beginning of Song Dynasty, Confucianism followed the annotations of Han and Tang Dynasty, and they checked the differences in sound and meaning according to the interpretations of Scholar Lu, so that there wouldn’t be many deviations. When Song Dynasty was at the summit of its development, Confucianists blindly followed the annotations in a strict manner. They remembered the words but understood little.” (Ma, 1984, p.110)

Another aspect of the crisis was that the superficiality of criticisms on “heresies” at the beginning of Song Dynasty. At the late Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties, Buddhism prevailed and Confucianism was desolate. People say that “the decline of Confucianism was caused by the Buddha.” Some “wise people” such as Wang Anshi, Su Shi, Su Zhe and Huang Tingjian were all very much interested in Buddhism and talked a lot about morality and life cycles in the theories about the human soul in Buddhism and Taoism. They were Confucianists externally, but internally they were Buddhists.

In the eyes of the two Master Chengs, such a trend was a “heresy” theory which might make the “theories on morality and life” lose their original meanings in pre-Qin Confucianism. The prevalence of the Zen fashion and the immersion of the “wise people”, who talked a lot about morality and life cycles, into Zen were the phenomena for the profound crisis within Confucianism.

At the beginning of Song Dynasty, the criticisms on the Buddhist and Taoist heresies by Confucian intellectuals were actually following the “against Buddha and Laozi” spirit of Han Yu, Ouyang Xiu, Sun Fu, Shi Jie, etc.. However, the problem was all these criticisms for the Buddhist and Taoist heresies were all superficial because they lacked profound theories and true achievements. The two Master Chengs commented on Buddhism out of selfishness, but they were also unable to truly define Buddha and Laozi as well as the people chasing vanities. Finally, it was Zhu Xi who gave out the last blow upon

Buddhism from the stance of Confucianism.

---

### III

---

First of all, Zhu Xi distinguished between “significance” and “meaning”. In Zhu Xi’s eyes, the “rules” created by the “words of saints” are “significance”. And this “significance” means that “my body is in it; everything in the world is in it; heaven and earth are also in it; they are all the same thing.” (Zhu, *et al.*, 2002, p.1357) “Rules” mean “understanding the meaning”, the inner understanding of the spirits contained in the written “words of saints” by the interpreters.

In this process, the interpreters comprehend on a higher level the rules created by the “words of saints”. Zhu Xi asked his disciples to “understand the meanings”, that is to say, only when the interpreters become independent spiritual beings and penetrate themselves historically with the texts for interpretation and communicate with other living beings can they finally finish their mission of interpretation.

Based on such points of views, Zhu Xi believed that if people hadn’t “fully understand the rules”, neither upholding the “tradition of Dao” nor “revision of texts” can “promote the right way”. The countermeasure in practice was that “fully understanding the rules is a premise for returning to Dao”, that is, “give up material things and fully understand the rules”. These “rules” are the “natural law” and the “inner cause for everything in the world”. They are the ultimate cause for the existence of all things. Zhu Xi said, “If we understand the fundamental rules about the human soul, we may understand everything.” (Zhu, *et al.*, 2002, p.233) He used the ontological meaning of “rules” or “Dao” to break through the inner crust of the soul, and established the belief in the benevolent Dao in Confucianism. He has found “home” for Confucianists to guide their mortal life!

Actually, Zhu Xi’s ontological way of thinking was the common trend for Confucianists in Song Dynasty. In Zhou Dunyi’s *Book of the Diagram of the Universe*, there was a “Tai Ji” that incorporated all above “the heaven law”, “the earth law” and “the human law”. Zhang Zai’s “rules” are above “heaven and earth”, and “the Dao of heaven and earth can be summarized in one word. All Dao can penetrate heaven and earth” (Zhang, 1978, p.312). Cheng Hao said, “There are Dao and rules, and heaven and man are the same, without any difference” (Cheng & Cheng, 1981, p.20). They all tried to describe the “rules” without contemporary existence, time or space, and used them to penetrate all. Cheng Yi said, “Nature is the same with the rules. For the rules, Yao, Shun and the common people are the same (Cheng & Cheng, 1981, p.204).” This is also to describe the “sole rules”. Through understanding the rules, revealing one’s nature and expand one’s life, people may inquire about the ultimate truth about the universe,

the society and the human beings. All these discussions about “Tai Ji”, “rules”, “Dao” and “nature” are the efforts of Confucianists of Song Dynasty in their argumentation about the ultimate rationality of the benevolent Dao of Confucianism in the establishment of the ultimate concern in Confucianism. When the Confucianists faced the strikes and threats of the spiritual realm and power of belief of Buddhism, they knew that they could never fight back the challenge of Buddhism with their understanding and conformity to the ethics of Confucianism accumulated in the process of text exegesis and daily life. But to rebuild an ultimate concept that can cover and interpret everything in the Confucian system requires a self-evident Absolute Presupposition or basis. This is the reason for the putting up of “the great rules” as the Absolute Presupposition by the two Master Chengs as well as the feeling of Zhu Xi for “the ample and poised atmosphere” after finding the “home” of benevolence in the “turbulent trends”. Zhao Yong ever asked, “If the ‘rules’ die, Heaven dies. But if the ‘form’ dies, Heaven still exists. Is it possible to use a technique to end the ‘form’ of Heaven? (Shao, 2003, p.927)” With the above-mentioned Absolute Presupposition, there is an answer to Shao Yong’s “doubt”.

#### IV

In the practice of the ultimate concern for the rules and the human soul, we may also find the innate paradoxes and fragility in the human nature. When facing the allure of material desires and the choice of the public rules, the selfish desire cannot get upper hand of the rules of Heaven. Therefore, people feel difficult to give up the material things and understand the nature of things. The difficulty is people don’t know how to go through this process with their own power and strength.

Zhu Xi has ever used the “mirror” as a metaphor for “heart”, which intended to express that the heart is originally bright and clean. The reason for the “evil thoughts” and the “ill behaviors” is that “the mirror is covered with dusts.” Therefore, we need to constantly wipe the mirror clean, so that it can restore its brightness. And the “dusts” that covered the heart are the selfish desires of human beings.

Zhu Xi has also used the “light” as a metaphor for the “rules”. The bright light shines out and enlightens the everyday life of man. If man tries to comprehend the everyday life, he can naturally understand “Dao”. To “follow Dao” should also be realized in everyday life.

In practice, “veneration” is the most important. “Veneration” means a pious and respectful heart. “No vain thoughts and no vain behaviors” is the definition of Zhu Xi for “veneration”. If scholars can keep their “veneration” and have a pious and respectful heart, they can keep their soul full of brightness and light when facing allures and desires, so that they may not fill their heart with desires

and lose the true heart. In this way, they can really elevate their academic and moral level.

Zhu Xi regarded “veneration” and “control of heart” as the key points for learning because they can restore the clean and brightness of the heart. “Veneration” is actually a way of understanding the relationship between “the respected” and oneself. It is also a kind of attitude when people face the wisdom of life. The trust, respect and acknowledgement contained in it can make people willing to give up the pride and self-centeredness existing in the human nature, and gain the wisdom about life with a humble and curious heart.

Therefore, Zhu Xi said, “Learning from saints has no other methods, but thorough ‘veneration’ (Zhu, *et al.*, 2002, p.1873).” And Zhu Xi’s wordings such as “veneration and self-restraint”, “concentration of mind” and “control of heart” are all emphasizing on the pious and respectful spiritual atmosphere in the inner heart. The state of “veneration” means unconditional trust and aspiration for “learning of saints”, in other words, to take the “learning of saints” as one’s ultimate concern. In addition, only when the Confucianists integrate the “learning of saints” into one’s own beliefs of life and take it as the ultimate source of power for one’s behavior and making contribution to the society can they find the “home” of benevolence in the turbulent trends and make themselves “at ease” in their own “house”. How to find the home between academics and beliefs is a question for the scholars in the modern world.

#### REFERENCES

- Gu, Yanwu [Ming Dynasty] (1987). *Daily Thoughts. Imperial Collection of Four Divisions* (Vol. 858, pp. 822). Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House.
- Yang, Naiqiao (2009). *Hermeneutics in the Convergence of the Chinese and Western Academic Culture: On the Construction of the Chinese Confusion Hermeneutics* *Journal of Xuzhou Normal University*, (11), 14-24.
- Zhu, Jieren, *et al.* (Ed.) (2002). *Complete Collection of Zhu Xi -- Conversations with Zhang Jingfu* (Vol. 21, pp. 1392). Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House; Hefei: Anhui Education Press.
- Qian, Mu (1987). *New Understandings About Zhu Xi* (pp. 1074-75). Chengdu: Bashu Publishing House.
- Qian, Mu (1994). *Introduction to Chinese Cultural History* (pp. 181). Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Ma, Zonghuo (1984). *History of Chinese Studies on Confucianism* (pp. 110). Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore.
- Zhu, Jieren, *et al.* (Ed.) (2002). *Complete Collection of Zhu Xi -- Zhu Xi's Words* (Vol. 15, pp. 1357). Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House; Hefei: Anhui Education Press.
- Zhang, Zai [Song Dynasty] (1978). *A Collection of Zhang Zai* (pp. 312). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

Cheng, Hao & Cheng, Yi [Song Dynasty] (1981). In Wang Xiaoyu (Ed.), *A Collection of Two Master Chengs* (pp. 20). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

Shao, Yong [Song Dynasty] (2003). In Chen Ming (Ed.), *Book of Imperial Extreme Statecraft* (pp. 927). Shanghai: Academia Press.

Zhu, Jieren, *et al.* (Ed.) (2002). *Complete Collection of Zhu Xi -- A Collection of Huian Dweller Zhu Wengong* (pp. 1873). Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House; Hefei: Anhui Education Press.