

# *Strengthen the Country by Political and Educational Reformation or Culture Inheritance*

–Talk with College Party Members about Two Approaches of Modern Neo-Confucianism

Fang Sheng

Ningbo Institute of Technology  
Zhejiang University  
Ningbo, China  
shengfang0108@163.com

He Huimin

College of Foreign Languages  
Guangxi Teachers Education University  
Nanning, China  
309169869@qq.com

Zhen Su\*

Graduate School of Chinese Academy of Social Science  
Beijing, China  
suzhenhn@163.com

**Abstract**—Modern Neo-Confucianism refers to all the reformed Confucianism schools since the Opium War. The Modern Neo-Confucianism discussed in this paper is the Modern Neo-Confucianism School in the narrow sense, which includes the Confucian schools of Hong Kong, Taiwan, overseas and mainland since the May Fourth Movement. In the 1920s, mainland schools of Neo-Confucianism sprung up, and enjoyed growing influence in mainland China over the past ten years. Mainland Neo-Confucians were no longer satisfied with the philosophized Confucianism. They argued to develop the “Psychological Confucianism” into “Political Confucianism”; and to transform the “revival of Confucianism” into the “revival of Confucian Religion”. In contrast to Neo-Confucians HK&TW, the Neo-Confucians mainland China has strong political appeals. Drawing on the differences & similarities between these two schools, this paper will discuss the characteristics and influence of modern Neo-Confucianism thoughts.

**Keywords**—Modern Neo-Confucianism; Mainland Neo-Confucianism; Psychological Confucianism; Political Confucianism

## I. WHAT IS NEO- CONFUCIAN?

Neo-Confucian is also called Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucian used to refer to the persons who study Neo-Confucianism, however in current research field of academic thoughts; Neo-Confucian refers to an academic school of thought that seeks the value and modernization of Chinese native culture. In this sense Neo-Confucian is generally called Neo-Confucianism. They are interchangeable in many occasions. However, there are differences between the definitions of Neo-Confucian and Modern Neo-Confucian [1]. In Chinese history, “Confucianists in Song and Ming Dynasties” was called Neo-Confucian at some time in the past. Yet Modern Neo-Confucian generally refers to all the reformed Confucianism schools since the Opium War. In a

narrow sense, Modern Neo-Confucian refers especially to the Key Confucianists of Neo-Confucianism schools such as Liang Shuming, Xiong Shili, Feng Youlan, and Zhang Junmai. To make a difference with “Neo-Confucian” in Song and Ming Dynasties, folk people at that time also jokingly named “Modern Neo-Confucian” as “New-new Confucian” [2]. The Modern Neo-Confucianism discussed in this paper is the Modern Neo-Confucianism School in the narrow sense, which includes the Confucian schools of Hong Kong, Taiwan, overseas and mainland since the May Fourth Movement.

## II. DEVELOPMENT PHASES OF MODERN NEO-CONFUCIANISM

It is generally considered that the development of Modern Neo-Confucianism had gone through three phases: the first phase started from the May Fourth Movement to the establishment of PRC (People’s Republic of China), of which the representative figures were the above mentioned Liang Shuming, Feng Youlan, etc [3]. They were also regarded as the first-generation of Neo-Confucians. The second phase mainly refers to the Confucian schools rose in HK&TW areas after the 1950s. The key figures included Mou Tsung-san, Xu Fuguan, etc. [4,5]. The third phase was the emergence of overseas Neo-Confucian schools in the 1980s, which was represented by Du Weiming, Cheng Zhongying, Liu Shuxian, etc. Fang Keli held that, taking Guiyang Yangming Jingshe Confucianism Academy as a symbol, Modern Neo-Confucianism had entered into the fourth developmental phase [6]. The representative figures include Jiang Qing, Kang Xiaoguang, Sheng Hong and Chen Ming. In this period, Mainland Neo-Confucians showed an increasing tendency of renaissance. Moreover, compared with the former three generations of Confucianism schools, Mainland Neo-Confucians were no longer satisfied with the Confucianism. They argued to develop the “Psychological Confucianism” to “Political Confucianism”, and to transform the “revival of the

Confucianism” into the “revival of the Confucian Religion”. The strong political appeal of mainland Neo-Confucians are in marked contrast to Neo-Confucians in HK&TW [7]. This paper will discuss the characteristics and influence of modern Neo-Confucianism thoughts based on the comparison between these two.

### III. DEBATES ON PRESERVATION OR WESTERNIZATION OF MODERN NEO-CONFUCIANS

Although Modern Neo-Confucians (abbreviated as Neo-Confucians hereinafter) went through several phases of development, their common value appeals did not have any fundamental change since the emergence in the 1920s. Compared with Marxism and Western Liberalism, Neo-Confucians have typical characteristics as conservatism. But in different phases, Neo-Confucians hold different ideas about some specific questions such as the ways of handling relations between Chinese and Western theories, inheritance of academic schools, and inner sanctification or outer being kings. There is big difference in opinions on these questions especially in the first three generations of Neo-Confucians and the emerging Mainland Neo-Confucians. The first-generation of Neo-Confucians faced with not only the situation of New Culture Movement radically deconstructed traditional culture, but also the humiliating feelings of country defeated and home lost. Thousands of years of Chinese civilization is so fragile under the violent invasions of Western barbarians. Even if Westernization Group advocated that “Chinese Learning for Fundamentals, Western Learning for function”, and Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao led the reformation Movement of 1898, Chinese civilization got intense shock. Therefore, pioneers of Modern Neo-Confucians firmly stick to the traditional culture of Confucianism, and meanwhile had no choice but to seek advantages from western culture. Among the pioneers, Feng Youlan and He Lin were both having a thorough knowledge of western culture and Chinese culture. Liang Shuming made a series of changes to traditional Confucianism theories in his book *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies* so as to protect Confucianism, which mainly include de-institutionalization and de-ethicization of Confucianism. That is to say, traditional Confucianism theories were separated from political and educational functions, and preserved as a mere living attitude with a basis on the living wisdom of “benevolence”. With such changes, Confucianism theories were limited to play their role on cultural significance and spiritual level. However, Western Liberalism and science were used to improve material conditions. As stated by Chen Ming, the regarding of Chinese and Western cultures as different cultural types is a common cognition of modern scholars, and it is also a kind of strategic choice of self-defense for Modern Neo-Confucians. Under this premise, Neo-Confucians focus on psychological Confucianism in order to highlight its unique particularity and superiority.

In general, initiators of Modern Neo-Confucians stepped on the road of philosophizing Confucianism since the May 4th Enlightenment Movement. In terms of the ways of handling relations between Chinese and Western theories, they managed to seek advantages from the West by drawing

lessons from German classical philosophy masters Kant and Hegel’s miscellaneous and deep system of concepts to reconstruct Chinese traditional Confucianism, and to make them systemized and metaphysical. As for the inheritance of Chinese traditional culture, they valued Lu Jiuyuan and Wang Yangming’s “Theory of Mental-nature” in Song and Ming Dynasties. But Neo-Confucianism of Cheng-Zhu, which had always been regarded as orthodox, was criticized for deviating from tradition. As for the question of whether Modern Neo-Confucianism should be used to sanctify one’s heart or become kings, they prefer the former. Although Mou Zongsan also proposed in his book *Political Doctrine and Governmental Doctrine* that the most urgent task of Neo-Confucianism is to put forward theories which can be used to govern the country, thus to reach the ambitions of cultivating moral selves and ruling the country simultaneously. Nevertheless, judging from the development situation of Modern Neo-Confucianism, the first three generations of Neo-Confucians showed some deficiencies in modern theories of thoughts and social influence. Especially after the philosophizing of Confucianism, the power of Modern Neo-Confucianism was limited to academic and cultural fields. Speakers of Chinese culture, they were limited to cultivate the moral selves and lack of communication and dialogue with mainstream culture and ideology. They disregarded the cultivating of social relations and the reality of history, which was deviated from the development condition of Chinese reality. The above mentioned elements resulted inevitably in elimination and conflict from both inner and outside academic thoughts and realistic force. Therefore, the ideal road, “inheriting extinct academic thoughts for predecessors while creating a peaceful world for posterities” was gradually narrowed.

It was just under this circumstance, Mainland Neo-Confucians which emerged in the 1990s proposed the new way of revival of Confucianism. In contradiction to the approaches of the first three generations of Neo-Confucians’ “psychological Confucianism”, they insisted on the “political Confucianism” road. In their eyes, the nature of Chinese traditional 2000-years of Confucianism did not lie in pursuing perfect moral selves or inner transcend. The “psychological Confucianism” which proposed by former generations of Neo-Confucians deviated fundamentally from all the Confucianism spirits initiated by Confucius. In terms of Confucianism inheritance, Mainland Neo-Confucians claimed to popularize the Study of Confucius and spread the teachings of Confucius. Moreover, Mainland Neo-Confucians, with the representative figure as Jiang Qing, took the thoughts and principles of *Gongyang Commentary on Spring and Autumn Annals* as their tasks, and they insisted that the path of sanctify one’s heart and then become king put forward by Song Ming Confucians didn’t work. On the contrary, they thought returning to the theory of Gong Yanggao was the only possible way of governing the country.

As for relations between Chinese and Western theories, Mainland Neo-Confucians on the one hand placed emphasis on enhancement of exchange and communications between Western theories; and they on the other hand felt dissatisfied with mere adopting Western philosophical system of concepts

to reconstruct Confucianism. In recent years, not only in the field of Neo-Confucianism, but also in the mainland Western theory research domain, arose a fashion of studying classical theory of thoughts. In Western theory research domain, the study of classical theory of thoughts mainly followed Strauss to assign the tradition of political philosophy in ancient Greek. But this way of assigning the tradition inspired more or less Neo-Confucians to seek the way of regressing traditional Chinese classical theories. In the book collection of “Classics and Interpretation” which was held by Liu Xiaofeng and Gan Yang, masterpieces were found in the collection, for instance, Zhu Xi’s *Mencius Variorums*, *Philosophy of Gongyang* and *Qun Jun Da Yi Xiang Tong Lun*. Yet Cheng Zhu’s *Philosophy of Gongyang* was the significant theoretical source of Jiang Qing’s representative work, *Introductory Treatise on Gongyang Scholarship*. Moreover, some scholars named Liu Xiaofeng and Jiang Qing as pioneers of Chinese modern “cultural conservatives”, among which one is a representative of Western theory, and the other is Chinese theory. Besides, Fudan University, Zhongshan University, as well as People’s University of China implement Liberal Education in the undergraduate education. As can be seen from their courses, General Education placed emphasis on the tradition of Chinese and Western classical culture. Liu Xiaofeng and Gan Yang have been urging major universities of China to revitalize the tradition of classical education. On January 10, 2015, in the 15th anniversary of the series of “Classics and Interpretation” and 350 Publications Memorial Seminar which was held at the People’s University of China, Gan Chun song, Yang Lihua, Zhao TingYang and Chen Lai discussed in-depth with many Western academic celebrities about the relationship between the origins of Chinese and Western theories and contemporary China. The positive exchange and communications between Chinese and Western theories is an important characteristic of present Mainland Neo-Confucians.

Some of the above new situations were mainly due to Mainland Neo-Confucians’ converting from psychological Confucianism to political Confucianism. They pay more attention to explore political tradition of Confucianism, which happened to coincide with the political tendency of western philosophy. Compared to psychological Confucianism, which concerned about the way of cultivating moral selves, Mainland Neo-Confucians focused more on the approach of ruling the country. As questioned by Jiangqing: “Will Modern Confucianism be able to solve the question of whether Modern Neo-Confucianism should be used to cultivate the moral self or rule the country?” Is it possible for them to admit the sage inside while focusing on kingly outside, thus to inherit thorough spirits of Confucianism? This is a matter of life and death for Modern Neo-Confucians to handle, and the only opportunity for them to further develop and put forward theories which can be used to govern the country.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To sum up, in centuries of development, Modern Neo-Confucians encountered enormous impact of the Western civilization and full of difficulties from inner evolution of reviving traditional culture education. And with the rose of Mainland Confucianism, Modern Neo-Confucianism started

seeking a breakthrough in the narrow scope of academic research, and tried to assume more profound practical functions. From cultural inheritance to the ambition of governing the country, this is the most distinctive feature of current Neo-Confucianism. Whether this new feature of Neo-Confucianism will be recognized and supported by mainstream ideology and whether will Neo-Confucianism play more positive role in the future development of China are our current research foci of Neo-Confucianism.

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