The Dialogical Consciousness of Third Generation Neo-Confucianism

By

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Abstract

The term ‘Third Generation Neo-Confucianism’ refers to Neo-Confucian scholars who have emerged since the late 1970s and early 1980s. This paper focuses on three third generation Neo-Confucian philosophers who continue the preceding generations of Neo-Confucian thinking. Their work attempts to explain and promote Confucianism while actively cultivating and participating in a dialogue among both traditional Chinese and western philosophy. Consequently, their work develops new characteristics of Confucianism in this age. This paper focuses on the work of three prominent leaders of third generation Neo-Confucianism while arguing that their work has allowed Neo-Confucianism to develop a dialogical consciousness that has overcome the limitations of first and second generation Neo-Confucianism.

Introduction

As a prominent scholarly group with an important influence, Neo-Confucianism has gone through three generations. Each generation reflects different cultural and social backgrounds and plays active roles in inheriting and preserving Chinese culture while reinterpreting Confucianism for present times. The first generation, from 1920 to 1949, labored to make Confucianism relevant in a time of national crisis. Important representatives are Liang Shuming, Feng Youlan, Xiong Shili and He Lin. The second generation, from 1949 to 1970, includes philosophers such as Tang Junyi, Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan and Fang Dongmei. Many of these thinkers left China to live abroad, mainly in Hong Kong and Taiwan. They tried their best to inherit and retain Confucianism in difficult surroundings. Compared with the third generation Neo-Confucianism, the first and second generations of Neo-Confucianism were conservative and traditional. Third generation Neo-Confucian philosophy not only attempt to promote, explain, and develop Confucian thought but actively participate in the current dialogue among Chinese and western civilizations.

(1)

It is well known that in this era of globalization, there exists not only communication and interaction among different cultures and religions but also conflict and friction. If we choose communication and dialogue rather than conflict
and friction, it is important to understand that no one culture should have priority over others. This means that tolerance should be recognized as the first of spiritual virtues and that ‘moralism,’ the tendency to judge other cultures by one’s own morality and culture, is no longer a viable option. The choice for dialogue among global civilizations is not only an important condition for the continuation and development of the great civilizations but also a necessary path for mutual understanding and integration in the now globalized world. Important third generation Neo-Confucian scholars such as Du Weiming, Cheng Zhongying, and Liu Shuxian understand the necessity to carry out inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue in the framework of contemporary globalization. These thinkers focus on dialogue between Confucianism and other civilizations to promote a globalized world that is less torn by ideological conflict and more open to the production of shared values and points of view.

As a result, their theories and actions indicate three characteristics. First, following the lead of the first generation of Neo-Confucianism, third generation Neo-Confucian philosophers actively seek to absorb western ideas in a spirit of tolerance, difference, and diversity. Secondly, third generation Neo-Confucianism regards traditional Confucianism as one tradition among many. Thirdly, by participating in the flow of information and cultural exchange made possible by contemporary globalization and by recognizing that no one tradition or culture, including one’s own, is superior to all others, third generation Neo-Confucianism has developed a dialogical consciousness. On the basis of this dialogical consciousness and its recognition of the multiple sources for global wisdom, the third generation Neo-Confucianism has overcome the parochial limitations of first and second generation Neo-Confucianism and in this way has propelled Confucianism and Chinese traditional culture to a more open mind and recognition of the multiple structures of contemporary society. (2)

Neo-Confucian Responses to Globalization

In the late 1940’s, German philosopher Karl Jaspers proposed that from the 8th century B.C.E. to the 2nd century B.C.E. human civilization went through a ‘turning’ or ‘axial age’ occurring in China, India, Greece, and in what is now Israel. After two thousand years of development, these axial cultures have become the world’s major spiritual traditions and have lasted to this time. (3) Du Weiming argues that contemporary globalization, structured by inter-cultural dialogue, is crucial to the development of an emerging ‘new axial age’ in which no one religion will be supreme. (4) This new axial age will retain the insights and wisdom of each of the world’s major spiritual and cultural traditions, e.g., Judaic religion and Greek philosophy (from the west) as well as Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism.
While emphasizing the importance of religion in inter-cultural dialogue and the openness to new ideas, Du Weiming sees the importance of diverse cultures retaining their traditional characteristics while resisting the exclusivity of fundamentalism. He thinks that dialogue must be open to appropriating external ways of thinking that enrich and thus transform one’s understanding of cultural self-identity. Culture must not be desalted but rather seasoned by alternative ways of thinking. Therefore inter-cultural dialogue requires a multivariate, dialogical attitude which understands differences as complementary rather than as mutually exclusive. Such dialogue requires an open interactive recognition with others and should be deepening but not desalinating.

On the basis of this psychology, Du Weiming argues that real inter-cultural dialogue occurs through the equal interaction of cultures transforming their self-identity by being open to alternative ways of thinking. On this view, world cultures would retain their traditional characteristics while sharing in the global construction of a new axial civilization. This would facilitate the possibility of diverse cultures consulting each other on globally important issues such as environmental protection and social integration. Recognition, appreciation, and tolerance for cultural pluralism are the points of departure for this new axial age emerging from dialogue among world civilizations.

Du Weiming envisions this sort of dialogue occurring not only among different cultures but within particular cultures. The Confucianism of cultural China can and should interact with and complement the Confucianism of East Asian civilization just as east can and should interact with and complement the west. In a word, the shared global civilization in this new axial age should be equal, multivariate, and multiple-level. In fact, Du Weiming is not only the advocator but also the practitioner of inter-cultural dialogue. He has written extensively on Confucianism and Liberalism while incorporating the work of scholars from Europe, America, Asia, and Africa. His work also draws on Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions.

Cheng Zhongying is another important representative of third generation Neo-Confucianism. In discussing the current dynamics of inter-cultural dialogue he distinguishes between the clash of civilizations, conceived as negative and adversarial, and the positive challenge of civilizations to rationally engage with each other. Cheng Zhongying argues that the rationality inherent within each culture makes both dialogue within a culture possible as well as dialogue between cultures possible. Such rationality makes possible self-reflection, self-criticism, and self-transcendence by recognizing the many different points of view within a culture and the many points of view in other cultures.
view between cultures.

Following the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, (8) Cheng Zhongying argues that language is not only the tool but also the medium of communication and dialogue. Language is a tool used to accomplish basic tasks such as expressing our meaning, reading books, and so on. Language is also a medium of thought, i.e., a storehouse of cultural perspectives and values. Therefore the translation of languages provides the possibility to integrate cultural differences and the creation of new values. Cheng Zhongying argues that cultures have the possibility of dialogue with others only on the basis of understanding and communicating with other languages. (9)

Both dialogue within a particular culture and dialogue between cultures begin with the on-going process of translating the other’s point of view, into one’s own. During this continuous process one not only begins to understand the others point of view, but also begins to reflect on, criticize, and transcend his or her own point of view. This is only possible when one recognizes diverse and pluralistic points of view and multivariate forms of rationality. Only in this way can the contradictions within and between cultures begin to be resolved and overcome. The recognition, acceptance, and tolerance of diversity and pluralism construct a more open horizon of thought able to focus on the common interest of humanity. By building on these ideas and specifically focusing on the integration of traditional western philosophy and traditional Chinese philosophy Cheng Zhongying develops his theory of Onto—Hermeneutics.

Specifically, Cheng Zhongying argues that traditional Chinese philosophy presupposes a rich ontology that recognizes a fundamental unity and harmony between culture and nature. (10) Within traditional Chinese philosophy ethics as well as social and political philosophy are situated within an ontology that recognizes differences as complementary, i.e., as contributing to a larger unity. As a result, within traditional Chinese philosophy rationality is understood as integrated with culture and nature, it is concrete and situated. Rationality and humanity are internal to nature rather than separate and opposed to nature as assumed by traditional western philosophy. The result for western philosophy is that both the understanding of humanity, culture, and rationality are abstracted from nature rendering an excessively abstract and instrumental understanding of rationality. Cheng Zhongying argues that this abstract understanding of rationality leads western philosophy to emphasize methodology while de-emphasizing ontology. (11)

Chinese philosophy, on the other hand, puts ontology first while de-emphasizing methodology. Cheng Zhongying’s Onto-Hermeneutics attempts to
integrate ontology and methodology as each is used to inform and criticize the other. As a result, the advantages of western rational methods can be integrated with the holistic ontology of Chinese thinking and the one-sidedness of each approach can be overcome. This, in turn, makes possible the emergence of a world-philosophy constructed through a self-other reflection, a self-other criticism, and a self-other transcendence.

Liu Shuxian is another outstanding representative of third generation Confucianism. He argues that Confucianism can learn from non-Chinese religions (particularly Christianity) in three important ways. First, he claims that the Confucian idea of the harmony of man and nature leads traditional Chinese philosophy to de-emphasize the possibility of ‘purity or external transcendence’ in favor of an ‘immanent’ or ‘internal transcendence.’ Chinese culture has typically cultivated their ethics with the goal of reaching a harmonious condition with nature and heaven; i.e., an ‘internal transcendence.’ Confucian philosophers emphasize the harmony between man and nature and believe the individual human can transcend his or her current condition by moral actions.

Christian philosophers, on the other hand, typically believe that God (and Heaven) is radically different from humans, i.e., that God completely transcends the human, the natural, or the mundane. On this view, western culture has often cultivated its ethics with the goal of transcending nature. This spiritual transcendence which brings humanity closer to God and Heaven is an external transcendence which seeks to ‘purify’ humanity from its entanglement with nature. According to traditional Christian philosophers, the human entanglement with nature results from the ‘fallen’ condition of mankind and must be overcome.

Liu Shuxian argues that although Confucianism pays attention to the importance of individuality it typically does not adequately realize the difference between Heaven and human, therefore it leads to many problems such as the inhibition of abstract thought and lack of experimentation. The focus on internal transcendence overlooks the possibility of the movement toward external transcendence that opens up the detached, objective, and abstract point of view that leads to experimentation and technology.

The second point that Liu Shuxian makes is that western philosophy’s radical separation of man and nature has led to the rapid development of science and technology while Chinese philosophy’s holistic integration of man and nature has inhibited abstract thought and experimentation. In western culture, man wants to objectify and master nature in hope of overcoming suffering. As humans try to master and control nature, humanity and nature are increasingly separated. As a result,
western science and ontology emphasizes the methodology of objectivity and impartiality. Hence, Liu Shuxian believes western philosophy’s radical separation of man and nature has led to the rapid development of science and technology. On the other hand, Liu Shuxian argues that Chinese philosophers typically believe that human beings are a part of nature; they want to keep a harmonious relationship with nature, so they do not wish to objectify nature and master it. In this way, Chinese philosophy’s holistic integration of man and nature has inhibited abstract thought and experimentation. As a result, China is less developed than western countries in recent modern years. (15)

A third point which Liu Shuxian makes is that the Confucian belief in the basic goodness of human nature results in a lack of understanding the rough and unpleasant side of human nature. (16) In fact, human nature can sink into a very low point. Confucianism believes that the nature of human is good. It is regarded as a kind of optimism in human nature. (17) On Liu Shuxian’s view, Christianity (focusing on ‘original sin’ and the ‘fall of mankind’) can remind us of this unpleasant side of human nature while aiming at the possibility of spiritual transcendence.

The Confucian emphasis on the goodness of human nature leads many Chinese people to overlook and not discuss the unsavory side of human nature. Liu Shuxian argues that this is harmful to democracy as Chinese culture focuses on the cultivation of human character through ethics rather than through law. Consequently, because Confucianism lacks a clear understanding the rough side of human nature it is harmful for the development of democracy and the rule of law. (18)

**Three Characteristics of Third Generation Neo-Confucianism**

Just as traditional Confucian thinking developed in the context of an intra-China dialogue with different currents in Chinese culture and philosophy, Neo-Confucian philosophers seek to engage dialogue with other cultures within the rapidly emerging inter-cultural context created by current globalization. Each of the approaches toward intercultural dialogue of the Neo-Confucian authors discussed here share three characteristics.

First, third generation Neo-Confucianism has a tendency to actively absorb western learning through a dialogue with western culture by emphasizing tolerance, difference, and diversity. The first and second generations of Neo-Confucianism also sought a dialogue with western culture but lacked the extensive contact with the West enjoyed by the third generation authors. The first generation Neo-Confucian authors, such as Liang Shuming and Xiong Shili, attempted to integrate ideas from western philosophy and Confucian thinking but they did not adequately understand these
ideas. The second generation Neo-Confucian philosophers, such as Mou Zongsan and Tang Junyi, exceeded the first generation of Neo-Confucian thinkers in absorbing the western culture, but their understanding was still incomplete.

The third generation Neo-Confucians, including Du Weiming, Cheng Zhongying, and Liu Shuxian, have experience studying abroad. Their strict training in western philosophy endows them the capacity to more adequately distinguish the differences between Chinese and western culture. Each of these approaches to intercultural dialogue begins from a Confucian and Chinese perspective and seeks to integrate wisdom from other traditions. The resulting dialogue with western culture seeks to integrate traditional and modern wisdom.

Secondly, third generation Neo-Confucianism regards Confucianism as one part of a multicultural world. The first and second generations of Neo-Confucianism often regarded Confucianism as the only correct path for all human cultures. They typically believed that Confucianism was unique and supreme. Different from the first and second generations, third generation Neo-Confucians no longer maintain that Confucianism is the only correct source of wisdom or that Confucianism can solve all problems. They recognize the disadvantages and shortcomings of Chinese culture. They do insist, however, that Confucianism be recognized and venerated as one part of the world’s culture. They believe it can provide a valuable contribution to solve some global problems; therefore, it cannot be ignored. (19) In this way, the status of traditional Confucianism is transformed by intercultural dialogue.

Thirdly, by its openness to western ideas and by recognizing that no one tradition or culture is superior to all others, Neo-Confucianism has developed a dialogical consciousness. By stressing communication with other traditions Confucianism becomes modernized and internationalized through this contact and dialogue with other cultures. This dialogical consciousness seeks to understand and evaluate the possibilities represented by western ideals such as democracy, science, wisdom, human rights, and rationality. In this way, third generation Neo-Confucianism is able to integrate valuable insights of western culture within the framework of traditional Chinese culture. This dialogical consciousness further seeks to present the best of Chinese culture and philosophy to the world’s other traditions. The development of this dialogical consciousness allows third generation Neo-Confucianism a method to further develop Confucianism and the continued dynamic construction of Chinese culture. (20)

Notes:

1. Xi Liuqin, “Annalistic Study on Third Generation Neo-Confucianism’s


7. Du Weiming is the Director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute and Harvard-Yenching Professor of Chinese History and Philosophy and of Confucian Studies at Harvard University. He is widely regarded as the main scholar of third generation Neo-Confucianism.


17. Certainly, not all traditional Chinese philosophers think human nature is good. Outstanding examples include Hsun Tzu and Kao Tzu. Hsun Tzu believes that the nature of human is evil and Kao Tzu believes that human nature is neither good nor evil. Their opinions are very important but have generally been regarded and neglected as heretical in Chinese history.


19. Jing Haifeng, “Civilization Dialogue and the Development of Neo-Confucianism” in Shenzhen University Journal, vol.22, no. 2 (March, 2005), pp.19-24. In Jing Haifeng’s opinion, in this new context of globalization, the background of civilizations and the meaning of religions are gaining currency. The global and realistic aspects of culture are intricately interwoven with its local and indigenous parts. The removal of barriers calls for understanding and dialogue. The communication and dialogue among different civilizations have become an inevitable trend. The third generation Neo-Confucianism proposes many new issues for the study of Confucianism, thus boarding the scope of
Confucian studies and leading Confucianism to international scholarship.