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A Historical Setting for the Forming of Neo-Confucianism in Classical China

Tyson J. Yost

There is a saying that a Chinese man wears a Confucian cap, Taoist robe, and Buddhist sandals.¹ Yet how is it that these three differing ideologies can co-exist within the same framework in the life of the Chinese? It is rightly conceived that the three philosophies of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are fundamentally different and, at the basic level, seemingly incompatible. Yet all three are at the foundation of what makes the Chinese who they are today. The answer to this enigma lies in the melding and utilization of these three prevalent philosophies that have dominated China for centuries and weaving them into one unified pattern of existence that has been termed by historians as Neo-Confucianism.²

The Chinese have traditionally been known to be very eclectic in regards to religion. To understand why the Chinese have such a seemingly ambiguous stance towards practicing a single religion one must first understand the historical background of religious development in China. Then one can look at the role of spirituality in China and the nature of religion in the lives of the Chinese people both in classical and modern times.

There is a saying that a Chinese man wears a Confucian cap, Taoist robe, and Buddhist sandals.¹ Yet how is it that these three differing ideologies can co-exist within the same framework in the life of the Chinese? It is rightly conceived that the three philosophies of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are fundamentally different and, at the basic level, seemingly incompatible. Yet all three are at the foundation of what makes the Chinese who they are today. The answer to this enigma lies in the melding and utilization of these three prevalent philosophies that have dominated China for centuries and weaving them into one unified pattern of existence that has been termed by historians as Neo-Confucianism.²

Within this paper we will take a brief look at the historical setting that prepared the stage for the forming of Neo-Confucianism. We will then study the assimilation of several specific Buddhist and Taoist ideas into traditional Confucianism. Finally we will explore the ultimate synthesis and clarification of these ideas into the cohesive and unified philosophy of Neo-Confucianism as it is known today.

The development of Neo-Confucianism occurred over the span of several centuries. It was not simply one man in a single lifetime that promulgated this philosophy, but rather it was the result of centuries of evolution and the assimilation of ideas from numerous scholars and philosophers. In order to understand the reason for the development of Neo-Confucianism and the factors that influenced that development it is important to understand the historical setting of China at the time that this development first took place.

With the decline and fall of the Han dynasty in A.D. 220 and the subsequent three-and-a-half centuries of numerous small dynasties and warfare a great unrest and dissatisfaction with the old tradition arose among the people of China. Arthur F. Wright, in his book *Buddhism in Chinese History* states, “The breakdown of the old order, the ensuing age of questioning, of social and intellectual discontent, rendered Chinese of all classes receptive to a great variety of new ideas and attitudes.” With this unrest Buddhism was able to flourish and take its place in Chinese culture. Along with this surge in Buddhism, there also came a heightening of Taoism and its principles among the people who were questioning the usefulness of Confucianism since it had so obvious failure to keep the government of the Han dynasty unified.

For those three-and-a-half centuries when there was a major surge in the development of Buddhist and Taoist thought, Confucianism in general was in a perpetual state of downfall and

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disuse by many of the factions among the Chinese. Yet Buddhism and Taoism were unable to bring stability to the political unrest that had swept over China. Once again the people questioned the usefulness of the common practices and beliefs that were held by the majority of the elite. With the establishment of the Sui Dynasty (A.D. 581–618) we find the beginnings of a revival of Confucianism. Wright explains it in these words: “Of far greater historical significance was the selective revival of Confucianism. Its ritual-symbolic procedures were refurbished for use in the court and countryside to give the Sui an aura of legitimacy.”

The Sui Dynasty was quickly replaced by the militarily strong Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618–907), which reestablished the examination system for bureaucratic advancement and held the Confucian classics as the official philosophy of the government. Yet after years of domination by such highly metaphysical and mystical philosophies as Buddhism and Taoism, Confucianism seemed to some to be unable to provide for the spiritual needs of the people. The philosopher Fung Yu-Lan said

Confucianism had by this time already lost the vitality which it had once manifested. . . . The original texts were there . . . yet they failed to meet the spiritual interest and needs of the age. After the revival of Taoism and the introduction of Buddhism, people had become more interested in metaphysical problems.

Perhaps the two most influential men in this period of reestablishment were Han Yu and Li Ao. Wing-Tsit Chan states that, “so far as Chinese thought is concerned, his greatness [Han Yu] and that of Li Ao lie in the fact that they saved Confucianism from its possible annihilation by Taoism and Buddhism.” They

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4 Ibid., 66.
5 Fung Yu-Lan, Selected Philosophical Writings of Fung Yu-Lan (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1991), 484.
were able to save Confucianism by “attacking Taoism and Buddhism, which were then at their height,” and in so doing “Han Yu reversed the tide of Confucian decline.”6 Dun J. Li proposes that

The beginning of Neo-Confucianism can be traced to two major sources: the reaction to the kind of Confucianism practiced from the Han times and the response to the challenge of Taoism and Buddhism, especially the latter. . . . During the T’ang dynasty scholars like Han Yu called upon China’s intellectual elite to rebuke Buddhism as a form of superstition, but to combat it they did not develop a new ideology.7

It was in this time of turmoil that the people entered into a state of dissatisfaction and intellectual unrest. Buddhism and Taoism were failing to provide a political foundation upon which to build a dynasty and Confucianism had failed to provide metaphysical answers to the intellectual curiosity of the people. In order to establish Confucianism again as the dominant path of thought and governance many Confucian scholars began a great effort to persecute and destroy the opposing two modes of thought and to elaborate upon Confucianism to provide a spiritual justification to their claims of supremacy.

Dun Li explains the Confucian elaboration in this way:

One must have one’s own system to fight an alien system, and they [the scholars] searched diligently in the Confucian classics for those ideas that were regarded as most appropriate for the occasion. When these ideas were found inadequate, they did

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not hesitate to borrow from their opponents . . . the result was a Confucianism strongly imbued with Buddhist and Taoist influences.  

Lawrence C. Wu states:

The Confucianists began to construct a metaphysics, with considerable appropriations from Buddhism and Daoism, which would provide a foundation for the Confucian ethic and a philosophically more satisfying understanding of the universe. . . . Given the synthetic tendency of Chinese philosophers, the new philosophy . . . would understandably incorporate features of Buddhism and Daoism [Taoism] along with the strong moral and social concerns of Confucianism.

It is interesting to note that as time went on, the more the Confucianists tried to improve their claim of supremacy and establish themselves as the dominant thought the more they incorporated the ideals and philosophies that they were opposing.

The elaboration and incorporation of foreign ideas into Confucianism resulted in a wide variety of philosophical developments. In the interest of time and length I am not going to elaborate upon the various philosophers and the evolution of the ideas over time, but rather I am going to discuss and define three of the basic principles found within Neo-Confucianism and their relation to Buddhism and Taoism and then briefly discuss how Neo-Confucianism was ultimately synthesized into a comprehensive, unified school of thought.

The first principle of Neo-Confucianism I wish to address is the idea of the tai-ji, or the “Great Ultimate.” Siu-chi Huang defines the tai-ji in this way, “The tai-ji is (1) the primary and neces-
sary cause of the universe, (2) forever in a continuous process in terms of motion and rest, and (3) the highest moral standard of mankind.” As the Tao is to Taoism, so is the tai-ji to Neo-Confucianism. Tai-ji is the base of truth for the universe, and it is upon this that everything is built. Tai-ji is in a continual cycle of motion and rest that is analogous to the idea of the yin and yang principles found in Taoism and Confucianism. From this constant state of flux within the great ultimate evolves the five elements, which are organized to create things and from which all things spring. Many philosophers expounded upon this concept that was often the foundation for many of the diagrams and charts used to explain the basis of the universe. While Tai-ji obviously echoes both the Tao and Taoism, it is also reminiscent of Buddhism and the idea of a constant cycle of death and rebirth, destruction and re-creation in which there is a power that is greater than the processes that take place within that power. There is a great ultimate within which all things come into being, pass away, and then come again. Yet this great ultimate is really beyond our ability to describe or understand.

Housed within this concept of tai-ji are the principles of li and ch’i. As the tai-ji is the universal cause of all things and all things are housed within this great ultimate, it is seen that everything has a purpose and the ability to carry out that purpose to its natural end, this is described as li and ch’i.

Dun Li provides an excellent insight into the meaning of li as expounded by the Neo-Confucianist.

The possession of a human form does not necessarily make a man; more important is the principle of reason (li) that underlies the essence of being a man. . . . As a chair is not a chair if

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11 Ibid., 21–26. Huang provides greater explanation and insight into the meaning of tai-ji, which I have only briefly touched upon.
it cannot sustain the weight of a human body, a man is no longer a man and is in fact indistinguishable from the lowest animals if he has lost his sense of humanity or his essence of being a man.\textsuperscript{12}

All objects and causes of the universe are found within the tai-ji, and all objects are endowed with li. In many ways li can be considered an object’s nature or reason for existence.

So what is man’s li? To what purpose or end is man striving for? Fung Yu-Lan gives us an interesting answer and insight into this question by stating that “the ultimate purpose of Neo-Confucianism is to teach men how to achieve Confucian Sagehood.”\textsuperscript{13} Yet li is only half of the equation. For, if li is the principle, reason, nature, or mind of man, there must be substance to house this ephemeral essence. Herrlee G. Creel explains the li and ch’i in this way, “All existent things are made up . . . of principle [li] plus ch’i. The term ch’i cannot really be translated, but is somewhat like our idea of ‘substance’. . . . All things (even bricks) consist both of ch’i and of the li.”\textsuperscript{14}

The great ultimate is the cause of all things in the universe and in order to allow li to be fulfilled the great ultimate provides ch’i as the vehicle.

Man’s nature . . . is his li, which is part of the Supreme Ultimate. Thus the li of all men is the same, but unfortunately their ch’i (“substance”) is not. If one’s ch’i is impure, one is foolish and degenerate, as if a pearl (one’s li) lay concealed in muddy water (the impure ch’i). One must get rid of the impediment of this cloudy ch’i and recapture one’s original nature.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12} Li, 232.

\textsuperscript{13} Fung Yu-Lan,\textit{ Selected Philosophical Writings,} 489.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 207.
Dun Li gave one of the best explanations of ch’i when he said, “To develop ch’i to its fullest extent is to attain moral perfection—the highest goal, which every man should strive to achieve.”\(^{16}\) Li is a principle of nature that exists before substance is created, but the substance is necessary for the purpose to be fulfilled. Just like the idea of a “perfect” chair can exist in the mind of a carpenter, but it cannot actually be sat in until the wood and other necessary parts are put together in the proper and perfect way in order to fit the “ideal” chair.\(^{17}\)

This explanation of li is somewhat different from the li that was taught by Confucius and his followers. So where did this change come from? It clearly has received some influence stemming from Buddhism. Fung Yu-Lan said,

> The ultimate purpose of Buddhism is to teach men how to achieve Buddhahood . . . likewise, the ultimate purpose of Neo-Confucianism is to teach men how to achieve Confucian Sagehood.\(^{18}\)

It seems plausible that the Chinese had become so indoctrinated with the teachings of Buddhism that they were unable to understand the simple concept of Confucian sagehood unless it was presented to them in Buddhist terms. The idea of li is equal to that of man becoming Buddha. Likewise the idea of ch’i is analogous to the Buddhist idea that matter is an illusion and must be overcome. If I a person were to become a sage and fulfill his destiny he

\(^{16}\) Li, 232.


\(^{18}\) Yu-Lan, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 489.
must do all that he could to develop his ch’i and overcome the
ilusion of his own flesh, desires, or physical shortcomings.
Presenting this old idea in such a mystical fashion seems to have
become almost a requirement in order to allow the teachings to be
received with great appeal. With this change in approach the peo-
ple acquired a metaphysical ideal that not only was not alien, but
also, in its combined form, it offered a practical method for gov-
ernment and order.

Yet this change did not come about by happenstance, rather it
was mostly through the tireless efforts of a man, Zhu Xi. Indeed,
Wing-Tsit Chan, when speaking of Zhu Xi, states that, “Generally
speaking, while he reaffirmed the basic doctrines of
Confucianism, he brought its development over the centuries, es-
specially during the Sung period, into a harmonious whole and
gave it a new complexion.”

Neo-Confucianism exists as it does today due to Zhu Xi and his synthesis of these ideas.

Along with synthesizing the various strands of thought Zhu
Xi also promulgated his own philosophy as to how one is to de-
velop ch’i in order to fulfill one’s li. According to Creel, Zhu Xi
taught that, “we should seek knowledge by ‘investigating things,’
not merely their li or principles. Our ultimate goal is to under-
stand the li, but, in order to understand this abstraction, we must
examine its concrete manifestations.” It is the investigation of
things that allow us to understand the principle behind them. One
cannot understand li without investigating the ch’i that houses
and allows the li to be fulfilled.

Not only did Zhu Xi also synthesis these thoughts into a uni-
fied whole but he also was able to make Neo-Confucianism more

19 Chan, 589.
20 Creel, 211.
21 There are generally considered to be two main schools of Neo-
Confucianism: the one taught by Zhu Xi and the other by the great scholar
Wang Yang Ming. The former focused upon the investigation of things and is
called the rational school of Neo-Confucianism. The later is considered the mind
or thought school of Neo-Confucianism and is associated with and closely
utilitarian and closer to the actual doctrine of Confucius. Wing-Tsit Chan states, “Through his interpretations . . . he made Neo-Confucianism truly Confucian, stripped of the Buddhist and Taoist influence which had been conspicuous in previous Neo-Confucianists.” Yet, the necessity to house one’s thoughts in a metaphysical casing remained behind, as did the mystical nature of some of the teachings.

It must be remembered that Confucianism, in any form and in any age, is at heart a moral philosophy of virtuous acts and government.

Although Neo-Confucianists did base their whole movement on the metaphysical concept of principle (li), metaphysics is not one of their distinctions. But in emphasizing the Confucian Way of having action and of sustaining and supporting the life of one another . . . in reiterating the ancient Confucian ideal of . . . ordering the state, and bringing peace to the world . . . they did much to retain the real strength of the Confucian system.

Despite the metaphysical ideologies that are associated with Neo-Confucianism, it is at its core a political philosophy concerned with governing people and making life worth living. Neo-Confucianism opposed the escapism and nihilism of Taoism and Buddhism and promoted activity and stability in an unstable society.

resembles the Chan Buddhist teaching of gaining enlightenment in one’s own mind and not from outside sources. As Zhu Xi’s school was officially adopted by the government of the time as the philosophy that was used in the examination system and has continued through to the present century, it is considered the official standard of Neo-Confucianism. Therefore I do not make mention of Wang Yang Ming in this paper. For more information on Wang Yang Ming and his philosophy see Creel, 209–216; John E. Wells, Jr., Mountain of Fame: Portraits in Chinese History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), ch. 13.; and Chan, ch. 35.

22 Chan, 589.
23 Ibid., 451.
It is of interest to note that since the beginning of the development of Neo-Confucianism, which started in the Sui and T’ang era, there has been no major lapses of political continuity between dynasties such as those found in the warring states period and the era of the three kingdoms at the fall of the Han dynasty. It is possible that, despite all of its wonderful moral and virtuous teachings for the government and rule of the people, traditional Confucianism was lacking that basic element of spirituality which seems to add great faith and power to the confidence of the people in their belief system.

This paper has shown the historical setting of early China and the process by which Neo-Confucianism has amalgamated traditional Confucianism with Buddhism and Taoism to help mold Chinese culture into what it is today. “The pattern of behavior that we sometimes associate with the Chinese . . . does not originate in Confucius . . . It originates in Neo-Confucianism, rather than classical Confucianism of the pre Ch’in period.”

No matter what one might understand or think of Neo-Confucianism it cannot be denied that it has left an indelible impression upon the minds and culture of China. It has influenced virtually every aspect of Chinese and Asian culture. This in turn has allowed for the rich flowering and unique development of a society that is worthy, in many ways, of our respect, admiration, and emulation.

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24 Li, 229.