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The ontologicalization of the Confucian concept of *Xin Xing* : Zhou Lianxi’s founding contribution to the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism

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**Abstract** The Confucian concept of “cheng” (integrity) emphasizes logical priority of value realization over “zhen shi” (reality or truth). Through value realization and the completion of being, *zhenshi* can be achieved. *Cheng* demonstrates the original unity of value and reality. Taking the concept of *cheng* as the core, Zhou Lianxi’s philosophy interpreted *yi Dao* (the Dao of change), and integrated *Yi Jing* (*The Book of Changes*) and *Zhong Yong* (*The Doctrine of the Mean*). On the one hand, it ontologicalized the Confucian concept of *xin xing* (mind nature), and proved and established the significance of *Dao ti* (the ontological Dao) as the principle and origin of the utmost goodness. On the other hand, it also extended the significance of value realization to the process of *qi hua* (transformation of *qi*) and transformation of myriad things. He proved *li yi* (the One Principle) of *Dao ti* from its many manifestations and established his own metaphysical system. Zhou Lianxi’s philosophy sets up a new theoretical direction for the Song-Ming Confucians to reconstruct Confucian Metaphysics.

**Keywords** *xin xing*; ontologicalization; *cheng*; to really obtain; *qi hua*; *liyi fenshu*

Huang Baijia said, “Since the time of Confucius and Mencius, Han Confucians merely made textual studies of the classics. The subtle doctrines of the *Dao* (*Tao*) and the nature of man and things had disappeared for a long time. Master Zhou rose...
like a giant. The Cheng brothers (Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi) followed him. And other great Confucians like Zhang Zai appeared one after another. So the learning of Sages became prosperous. An Ding (Hu Yuan) and Cu Lai (Shi Jie) possess Confucian demeanor, but they can just be said to be the forerunners. It is Master Zhou who brings light to the exposition of the subtlety and refinement of the mind, the nature, and moral principles.” ([1], Vol. 11, p. 233) Huang affirms Zhou Lianxi’s contribution to the foundation of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, and points out that “the learning of mind, nature, justice and principle (xin xing yi li zhi xue)” is the theoretical essence of Neo-Confucianism.

However, the learning of mind, nature, justice, and principle does not only belong to Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. The Pre-Qin Confucian theory of “xing yu tian Dao” (nature and the Dao of Heaven) is also based on this. The Song-Ming Neo-Confucians constructed their system of learning on the classics of Pre-Qin origin, especially Yi Zhuan (Appended Remarks to the Book of Changes) and Si Shu (The Four Books). They emphasize the inner mutual communication of nature and the Dao of Heaven, which is also the inherent spirit of Pre-Qin Confucianism. The approach of Pre-Qin Confucians’ investigation of the Dao of Heaven is manifested in the following expressions: “One should make an exhaustive discrimination of what is right and effect complete development of (every) nature, and arrive at what is appointed for him (by Heaven).” “Fully developing his own nature” he should fully develop the nature of other men and that of animals and things to assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth. “He who exerts his mind to the utmost knows his nature. He who knows his nature knows Heaven. To preserve one’s mind and to nourish one’s nature is the Dao to serve Heaven. Not to allow any double-mindedness regardless of longevity or brevity of life, but to cultivate one’s personality and wait for destiny (fate, Heaven’s decree or mandate) to take its own course is the Dao to fulfill one’s destiny.” But theoretically speaking, Pre-Qin Confucians’ thoughts of mind-nature (xin xing) and the Dao of Heaven are actually two systems, as manifested in the Confucian classical texts. Yi Zhuang is concerned with the system of the Dao of Heaven. Zhong Yong and Mencius pay much attention to the system of mind-nature. Song-Ming Neo-Confucians unified the two systems into one when they constructed their own theory. The unity resulted in the ontologicalization of the concept of mind-nature. Song-Ming Confucians argued that “xin ji li” (mind is principle) and “xing ji li” (nature is principle). They applied “xin ti” (the ontological mind) and “xing ti” (the ontological nature) to explain mind-nature, and “tian di zhi xin” (the mind of Heaven and Earth) to manifest the meaning of the creation of Dao ti (the ontological Dao). This manifests the change in Confucianism. “The subtle doctrines of mind, nature, justice, and principle” interpreted by the Song-Ming Confucians are based on the Pre-Qin Confucians’ doctrines of nature and the Dao of Heaven (xing yu tian Dao). The essence of the new theoretical creation is to ontologize mind-nature (xin xing), and to unify the system of mind-nature and the system of the Dao of Heaven. It is Zhou Lianxi who started to ontologize mind-nature by unifying the system of Yi

1 My teacher, Mr. Zou Huazheng, calls the theory of xin xing of the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism as “the ontologized universal theory of xin xing” . [19]