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Taking on Proper Appearance and Putting It into Practice: Two Different Systems of Effort in Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism

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Abstract Both “jianxing 践形 (taking on proper appearance)” and “jianxing 践行 (putting into practice)” were concepts coined by Confucians before the Qin Dynasty. They largely referred to similar things. But because the “Daxue 大学 (‘Great Learning’)” was listed as one of the Sishu 四书 (The Four Books) during the Song Dynasty, different explanations and trends in terms of the “Great Learning” resulted in “taking on proper appearance” and “putting into practice” becoming two different systems of efforts. The former formed a vertical kind of representation and a complete system of practice by “developing the sincerity of intentions inside and taking on proper appearance and looks outside” in “shendu 慎独 (self-discipline when alone)” and “chengyi 诚意 (developing the sincerity of intentions),” and the latter developed into a horizontal system of practice through the interdependency of zhi 知 (knowing or knowledge) and xing 行 (doing or practice). The “interdependence between knowledge and practice” promoted by the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi represented the vertical practice of moral understanding, while the “integration of knowing and doing” advocated by Wang Yangming represented using the way in “developing the sincerity of intentions” to adjust and transform the representation of the relationship between knowledge and practice. The ideas that were frequently stressed, such as “the same effort” and “naturally being so,” were all from “developing the sincerity of intentions” and “taking on proper appearance,” and they were all the representation of “really making intentions sincere.” In fact, the confusion over “the integration of knowing and doing” reflected the tension between two different systems and inconsistency in their thoughts.

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1 Introduction

Jianxing 践形 (taking on proper appearance) and jianxing 践行 (putting into practice) were only different by one character and their meanings were very close. They both came from pre-Qin Dynasty Confucian literature, but in Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism, they represented two different kinds of attempts. In terms of developmental trend, they also pointed at two different types of Confucianism. The argument and debate between Li Xue 理学 and Xin Xue 心学 in Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism were related to these different courses. Therefore, determining the different references and concrete meanings of “taking on proper appearance” and “putting into practice” has become important to understanding the origin, pedigree and course of efforts in the debate surrounding the development of Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism.

2 “Taking on Proper Appearance” and “Putting into Practice” in the Original Literature

According to sources, jianxing 践行 (putting into practice) may have appeared earlier than jianxing 践形 (taking on proper appearance). The earliest recognition of xing 行 (doing or practice) and the earliest discussion about knowledge and practice can be found in Guwen Shangshu 古文尚书 (The Book of History in Old Text Version), but the phrase “jianxing” 践形 (taking on the proper appearance) first emerged in Meng Zi 孟子 (Writings of Mencius). The significance of the word “jian” 践 was already fixed and meant “to fulfill” or “to carry out,” hence the difference between the two expressions mainly rests in the words “xing” (practice) and “xing” (proper appearance and looks). In the ancient usage, “xing” (practice) was mentioned in comparison to “yan” 言 (words) and “zhi” 知 (knowing or knowledge); but the expression “jianxing” 践形 (taking on the proper appearance) had a very specialized usage. From the perspective of its opposition to words, “jianxing” 践形 as an external representation was often mentioned only in comparison with internal “shendu” and “chengyi.” From this point of view, “jianxing” 践行 (putting into practice) varied in forms and usage although it emerged earlier; “jianxing” 践形 appeared later, but once it emerged, it had a fixed meaning, which it has maintained even today. We can begin with “zhi xing” 知行 (knowledge and action) and “yan xing” 言行 (words and deeds).

In The Book of History, Fu Yue 傅说 suggested to Wuding 武丁, “To know is not difficult, but to do what is known is really a hard work” (“Shuo Ming” in The