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A Reconsideration of the Characteristics of Song-Ming Li Xue

Abstract By analyzing Zhu Xi and Zhang Zai’s three representative explanatory paradigms—that of Feng Youlan, Mou Zongsan and Zhang Dainian, the paper tries to show that studying Chinese philosophy in a Western way and emphasizing logical consistency will unavoidably lead to the defects of simplicity and partiality. In addition to Buddhism and Daoism, Song-Ming philosophy had also absorbed thoughts from the Pre-Qin, Han, Wei and Jin dynasties. The existence of multiple philosophical thoughts and their new synthesis lead to internal contradictions in Song-Ming philosophy and Li Xue 理学 (Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming dynasties). The contradiction between the doctrine of tiandao 天道 (the way in which the world runs) and that of xinxing 心性 (mind and human nature) was even sharper. Li Xue and Xin Xue also overlapped one another. The transition from the doctrine of tiandao to that of xinxing was a long journey. It was begun by Zhu Xi in his later years, and was finally completed by Wang Yangming. Unveiling the complexity and special characteristics of Song-Ming philosophy is a task for scholars on the history of Chinese philosophy.

Keywords Li Xue, realism, known principles, activities, logical consistency

1 Philosophy Is a Focused Reflection on the Spirit of the Time

Confucianism’s revival began during the Qingli New Deal and Wang Anshi’s Reform in the Northern Song dynasty. A group of Confucians, represented by Hu Yuan, Shi Jie and Sun Fu wrote books and gave lectures, cultivating a large
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Among these Confucian scholars were the period’s most famous figures: Fan Zhongyan, Ouyang Xiu, Wang Anshi, Shao Yong, Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, etc. They brought fresh air to society, changing the outer features of culture, academia, philosophy and the Shi class. Compared to earlier times, this was a new epoch. Just like the May Fourth Movement, which had also suddenly changed culture, academia, philosophy and people’s spirit, the new epoch also had several prominent new signs or elements, which were:

1. During this time, the self-consciousness, self-esteem and independent personality of Shi was awakened. In this society, composed of the new “four civilians” (as the nobles and powerful families which had dominated Sui and Tang society had been eradicated)—Shi, peasants, craftsmen, merchants—Shi became the leader of the “four civilians,” and became conscious of the political and moral responsibility to “govern society together with the emperor” (Yu 2003, pp. 287–313). “To worry about the monarch when retired in the countryside, and to worry about the common people when holding office” (Fan 2004, p. 168). Such a sense of anxiety, filled with the self-consciousness of moral and political responsibility, soon became the collective consciousness of the intellectuals. The Confucian theory of “the lineage of Dao”—“To implement the Dao (the Way) with the help of a proper monarch,” the Dao is superior to the power, the lineage of Dao is superior to the ruling lineage—became a strong force in restricting politics and imperial power. As for “internal wisdom,” the new slogans were “to learn what Yanzi 颜子 had learnt, and to aspire to what Yiyan 伊尹 had aspired to,” and “A sage admires the Heaven; a man of virtue admires the sage; a Shi admires the man of virtue” (Zhou 1990, “Zhixue” in Tongshu). The merger of xin 心 (heart, mind) and xing 性 (human nature) became the theoretical basis for and the approach to “internal wisdom.” As for “external kingship,” the new slogan was “go back to the three epochs,” which aimed to restore the jingtian 井田 system, repeal corporal punishment, and reassert Yao and Shun’s way of rule. Internal wisdom was thought to be the foundation of external kingship. The monarch’s integrity and sincerity, and Shi’s morality and personalities were considered to be the foundation of good governance. Wang Anshi said: “For a man of superior morality, he will not be confined to this. Even the emperor should pay homage to him northwardly and ask for advice; this is what Shun called ‘to be followed’” (Wang 1974, “Qianzhou Xueji”). This reflected the spirit

1 A shi usually refers to an educated person, whose social status was between the patrician and the plebeian, and who shoulders certain responsibilities to the society. It also refers to the class he belonged to. A shi can be an intellectual or a warrior.