Chapter 4
Li Zehou and New Confucianism

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Introduction: Is Li Zehou 李澤厚 (1930–) a New Confucian?

As John Makeham has pointed out in the introductory chapter, there is as yet no consensus as to who is or is not a New Confucian. To most adherents of New Confucianism outside mainland China, Li Zehou, an avowed Marxist or “post-Marxist,” would be the last person to be accorded a place in the New Confucian canon. It is their common perception that Marxists and communists are responsible for destroying the Confucian tradition in China. By a curious twist of fate, Li has been pejoratively called a New Confucian in mainland China in the 1980s and 1990s by those who are probably no less anticommunist but even more anti-Confucian.1 The mainland Chinese scholars who identify themselves with New Confucianism, or who at least maintain scholarly neutrality toward that school of thought, have generally preferred to avoid the sensitive issue of Confucianism versus communism, and have widened the category to include non-anticommunist philosophers such as Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990). Even so, many of them are still evasive as to whether Li is a New Confucian.

Li Zehou himself is critical of the brand of New Confucianism developed by Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885–1968) and inherited by his disciples Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–95) and others.2 He also declared that he could identify himself with Confucianism, but never with New Confucianism.3 What then is the justification for including him in this volume?
It is now widely recognized that Confucianism is by no means a homogeneous body of teachings, but that as certain ancient texts were passed down through generations of scholars over many centuries, they received various interpretations, in which new elements were introduced, and non-Confucian ideas were creatively adapted and assimilated. Xunzi’s introduction of materialist and legalist elements, Dong Zhongshu’s assimilation of yin-yang cosmology, and the adaptation of Buddhism by Neo-Confucians of the Song Dynasty are some of the most noted cases in point. Thus, what is known as Confucianism today actually consists of many strands of thought, some of which are mutually contradictory. In a word, the spirit of tolerance of diversity is characteristic of the Confucian school. New Confucianism, if it is true to the Confucian tradition, should not be dogmatic and sectarian, but should be broad enough to accommodate and creatively transform all the trends either already in the Confucian canon, or which can be adapted to harmonize with Confucian teachings.

In order to have a working definition of Confucianism, I shall venture to identify certain shared beliefs and concerns among Confucians. I believe that Confucianism can be summed up as a teaching about inner sageliness (nei sheng 内聖) and outer kingliness (wai wang 外王). This ideal is defined in the opening passage of the Great Learning (Daxue 大學) as “illustrating the illustrious virtue, loving (regenerating) the people, and resting in the highest good.” It goes on to explain that illustrating the illustrious virtue to the myriad things under heaven has to be done by steps, beginning with cultivation of one’s moral self (xiu shen 修身), then regulation of one’s family (qi jia 齊家), then ordering of the state (zhi guo 治國), and finally bringing about universal peace (ping tianxia 平天下). Confucians of all times believe that these four goals are interrelated and that self-cultivation is the basis for the other three. They therefore treat Confucianism primarily as a philosophy of ethics. They all hold that the cardinal Confucian virtue is benevolence (ren 仁). It is benevolence that enables people to live a richer and more fulfilling life—the goal of self-cultivation—and makes them more loving of their fellow beings. Moreover, they also subscribe to a basic Confucian moral metaphysics, namely, that the moral order is somehow in harmony with the cosmic order, the latter also being underpinned by benevolence. While upholding these general principles, Confucians have had many different opinions concerning details. For instance, they have argued over whether the universe is dualistic (noumenal/phenomenal; spiritual/material; ti/yong 體/用, and so on) or monistic, and hence whether “objective” knowledge is essential to moral cultivation. The difference