

The Bulletin

of

Sung ~ Yuan Studies

Number 18

1986

Reflections on Sung Literati Thought

Peter K. Bol
Harvard University

Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, *Utilitarian Confucianism: Ch'en Liang's Challenge to Chu Hsi*. Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1982, xvi, 304 pp. \$20.00.

Hoyt Tillman's *Utilitarian Confucianism* contributes to the study of Sung literati thought and Chinese intellectual history in several ways. (1) It is an historical study which traces Ch'en Liang's (1143-1194) development as a literatus and thinker. (2) It defines the debate between Ch'en and Chu Hsi (1130-1200), enabling us to see precisely how the two differ. (3) It is a survey of Sung literati thought, in particular of the eleventh century, which synthesizes much recent scholarship. (4) It addresses important methodological issues in the study of intellectual history.

1. Ch'en Liang. Tillman discerns three stages in Ch'en Liang's development. As a youth and young adult bearing the name Ju-neng (1143-1168), he evinced a strong interest in politics and military strategy. This led him into the examination process and informal service as a secretary to a Vice-President of the Military Board. But his plans for an even brighter reputation began to go amiss soon after the adoption of the name Liang in 1168. He failed the chin-shih examination and gained no response to his proposals for the recovery of the north. Although Tillman calls this decade from 1168 to 1178 a "transitional phase," it is really not easy to sort out. It began with a year at the Imperial College under the tutelage of men such as Lü Tsu-ch'ien who were interested in the works of Chou Tun-i, Chang Tsai and the Ch'eng brothers. It continued, after his failure in the exams, with a withdrawal into "learning." As Tillman demonstrates, learning involved studying the works of the leading thinkers of the day, Chu Hsi, Lü and Chang Shih, their eleventh century models, Chou, Chang and the Ch'engs, and their ancient sources, the classics and the Four Books. In short Ch'en turned to that kind of literati learning which Tillman labels tao-hsüeh during this "transitional tao-hsüeh and politically conservative phase" (p. 75).¹ The final period of Ch'en's life (1178-1194) identified as a

1. The evidence for Ch'en's serious interest in tao-hsüeh may be considered overwhelming. Note, for example, that just when Chu Hsi was writing his *Records of the School of the Two Ch'engs* 伊洛淵源錄, Ch'en was writing his *Account of the Orthodox School of the Two Ch'engs* 伊洛正源書.

"utilitarian and relativistic phase," prompts Tillman to ask "Why did Ch'en Liang leave tao-hsüeh and cross over to utilitarianism?" (p. 9). Indeed, by 1182 Ch'en's positions are at odds with tao-hsüeh interests. Now for Ch'en "the inner nature of mankind is exclusively physical," "the ruler's power to reward and punish [is to be praised] as a positive good for society," and "any sharp contrast between the golden age of the Three Dynasties of antiquity and the imperial age of Han and T'ang" is to be denied (p. 105). This is the Ch'en Liang known best to history, the man who defended Han and T'ang as sources of models, called for the "restructuring of Confucianism to serve a present historical moment" (p. 106), and criticized concern with the inner moral nature at the expense of practical affairs.

What is the importance of Ch'en's tao-hsüeh and his departure from it for our understanding of the twelfth century intellectual world? We are told that Ch'en left tao-hsüeh because he was unable to master tao-hsüeh self-cultivation, his teachers had died (except Lü) by 1174 and he began to act as a teacher himself, and his social situation had improved. But did Ch'en ever really enter into tao-hsüeh? Did he ever believe in an idea as crucial as the innate endowment of moral principle? Or was he in effect pursuing an exploration au fonds and trying to determine his own position vis-à-vis tao-hsüeh? Tillman's account suggests we ought to see Ch'en as a believer, at least for a period. Moreover he finds "arguments--both philosophical and historical--that document the profound impact of his studies during the transitional tao-hsüeh phase" (p. 102).

I am not yet persuaded that there is evidence that Ch'en "believed" in tao-hsüeh. Was his thinking profoundly affected by it? Ch'en was always an advocate of the recovery of the north and he tended to subordinate all other issues to this purpose. The impact of tao-hsüeh which Tillman sees is to be found in three "new" arguments for recovery. First, Ch'en began to contend that the Central Plain possessed "standard energy" (cheng-ch'i 正氣) which determined the "special characteristics of the Chinese people and civilization" as a cosmological-historical argument for the recovery of the north (pp. 102, 173-174). But this is strikingly similar to Tu Yu's argument for China in contrast to barbarian states in the T'ung-tien (ch. 185). Second, criticism of centralization and Wang An-shih (pp. 102-103) was not limited to advocates of tao-hsüeh. It could just as well have been taken from Su Shih or his sympathizers--note that Wang Huai (1127-1189) claimed Ch'en "inherited the literary and historical ideas" of the three Sus (pp. 7-8). Third, the attack on court officials (p. 103) could just as well have been a

product of frustration, bitterness and (even) insight. In short these are not compelling arguments for a "profound impact."

Moreover, Tillman shows that Ch'en's study of tao-hsüeh was marked by a concern with issues which served his original political and strategic interests. It was not, by and large, an exploration of the concerns the tao-hsüeh writers themselves thought central. For Ch'en function came before substance, institutions and rituals before principle, and the external before the internal. He wrote on Wang T'ung (although he bowed to Lü Tsu-ch'ien's pressure and delayed publication) and he prepared an anthology of Ou-yang Hsiu's political writings. Neither Wang nor Ou-yang attracted the admiration and adherence of tao-hsüeh thinkers. Finally, Ch'en's concern with the hsin in the hitherto neglected essays on Han which Tillman has brought to light can also be construed as a criticism of the tao-hsüeh concern with the minds-and-hearts of all literati (and all men and women), for in these essays Ch'en's point is that the ruler's values are the foundation of the social order.

If Ch'en did not turn to tao-hsüeh in search of belief why did he take it seriously? Part of the answer can be found in Ch'en's desire to be taken seriously by literati and the government. If he could not serve, if his proposals and advice were spurned, then at least he could claim attention as a man devoted to learning, a hsüeh-che 學者). But to claim to be one who "learned" and could teach others how to learn required taking up the "learning" prominent literati intellectuals defined as essential. In the 1160's this was beginning to mean tao-hsüeh. Thus to make his case Ch'en had to show that he had taken tao-hsüeh texts into account. He had to show that they supported his own conclusions as to what literati ought to care about. Ch'en's demand that literati should give primary importance to the recovery of the north thus put him on course for a confrontation with the foremost tao-hsüeh advocate of his day, Chu Hsi, and the "orthodox learning" (this is Ch'en's phrase, p. 129) which Chu was seeking to establish.

2. The Ch'en-Chu Debate. Ch'en Liang reminded Chu Hsi that not all those who learned were willing to submit to Chu's intellectual authority. Ch'en preferred, he told Chu, to be a "complete man" (ch'eng-jen 成人) combining "talent and virtue," rather than to be a "pure Confucian" (ch'un-ju 醇儒) as defined by Chu Hsi (pp. 121, 123-125). Their debate illuminated a number of areas of disagreement.

The debate concerned Ch'en's defense of Han and T'ang rulers as models for action, achievement and benefit as goals of action, and hegemony as a means of action. Chu countered by claiming that only the sage rulers of

antiquity were models, morality and virtue were goals, and true kinship was the means. Tillman argues that the basic difference between them can be defined as a polarity in the understanding of ethical conduct. For Ch'en the ethical quality of an act was defined by its consequences, he had a "utilitarian ethic of end results" (p. 134). The hegemonic style of Han and T'ang rulers led to achievement and benefit. For Chu the motive had to be moral, he had a "morality of personal virtue and motivation" (p. 143). The sage rulers brought about a moral world because they realized virtue in themselves. Chu was not against results; he simply believed that true success depended on being moral. Ch'en was not against morality, he argued that morality ought to be defined by the results sought. These were polar positions, but these poles define, Tillman contends, a major polarity in literati thought which has not been previously examined.

It is true that this polarity helps us define Chu's uneasiness with a number of his contemporaries (e.g. Lü Tsu-ch'ien [p. 182], T'ang Chung-yu [p. 184], and Yeh Shih [p. 187] who were particularly sympathetic to Ch'en. But the polarity does not explain why Ch'en and Chu chose their respective positions. One could argue that Ch'en and Chu differed in answering the question of how literati should determine the ethical quality of their choices because they differed in answering a more fundamental question: What was the basis of Chinese civilization and China? The loss of the north had made this an issue. Tillman's extension of the debate to the problem of recovering the north (pp. 167-180) shows that for Chu Hsi morality was the only true basis; thus recovery was to await the moral reconstruction of the south. For Ch'en political unity was the true basis; thus internal order was possible only after the recovery. The polarity in ethics obscures this. Chu was concerned with morality but Ch'en was concerned with politics. Each attacked the other's priorities from his own perspective. But why was Chu convinced of the necessity of moral integrity and Ch'en political unity? One might argue that ultimately their answers depended upon where they found the basis for real values. For Chu the realm of Heaven-and-Earth was that basis. The existence of a moral nature, as the only true basis for human commonality, was inferred from an understanding of that realm. For Ch'en the realm of Chinese history was the basis. The necessity of political unity, as that which made possible a harmonious society, was inferred from his understanding of history. Underneath the polarities with which we can distinguish the two men lie choices which cannot easily be reduced to another polarity. Their attitudes toward policy, education, and the past all have to do, I suspect, with where they locate the foundation of common values.

The term "utilitarian Confucianism" does not bring out this profound difference between Ch'en Liang and Chu Hsi. It is true that Ch'en can fit J. J. C. Smart's definition of utilitarianism--"the doctrine which states that the rightness or wrongness of actions is determined by the goodness or badness of their consequences" (pp. 6-7)--but then so can Kant according to Smart. More consequential is the criterion by which men judge the goodness or badness of results. Ch'en's answer is quite absolute, Tillman tells us: political unity is the only sure standard by which to measure the consequences (pp. 165-168). Holding such a standard does not keep Ch'en from serving as the representative of one strand of literati thought, but it may well throw doubt on our supposition that he was a Confucian.

3. Characterizing the Eleventh Century. Tillman's work demonstrates the signal importance of the eleventh century in what I have been calling literati thought. With him we recognize at least two distinct developments during this period. The first is the emergence of a "special renaissance orientation" (p. 40) in mid-century, articulated by "Confucians who perceived themselves as reviving the Tao of the Confucian sages of the classical period" (p. 30) such as Ou-yang Hsiu. Tillman calls this trend "Sung learning" to mark it as a new development in the history of Confucianism. Within Sung learning there developed, second, a particular set of ethical, philosophical and metaphysical concerns articulated by Chou Tun-i, Chang Tsai and the Ch'eng brothers. Tillman calls this trend "tao-hsüeh." This term can be applied also to the concerns of those in the twelfth century who identified themselves with the founders. Tillman proposes that we use tao-hsüeh to include diverse tendencies among those who believed that the eleventh century masters were on the right track; thus, it would include both li-hsüeh and hsin-hsüeh. He banishes the term "Neo-Confucianism" from our descriptive vocabulary for Sung while allowing that it can be used as a general term for the "new Confucianism during the Sung through Ch'ing Dynasties" (p. 214).

Sung learning and tao-hsüeh are thus terms which combine references to representative figures and the interests they promoted. Such an approach to terminology has historical value to the degree that later men identified themselves in terms of their predecessors and the interests of their predecessors. This seems to have been frequently the case in Southern Sung and, of course, it is a particular mark of the tao-hsüeh tradition. But better terms will not relieve us of the problem of explaining why men of similar orientation were often so very different.

Terms which can have both broad and narrow meanings tend to cause confusion when they are used for explanatory purposes. Tillman realizes that

"Neo-Confucianism" creates confusing results. I would suggest that our continued use of the terms Confucian and Confucianism creates similar problems. It would bring clarity if we were to use "Confucian" to translate Jü and not extend it to include literati (shih), literati-officials (shih tai-fu) or scholars (hsüeh-che). I am less certain about what "Confucianism" is supposed to mean. Can issues in the pre-eleventh century Jü tradition ("basic problems in the Confucian tradition" [p. 23]) be historically defined, as here, through a discussion of Confucius, Mencius, Hsün Tzu and Tung Chung-shu? Or should we take the Five Classics, their Han and T'ang commentaries and historiography into account? Can we demonstrate that all self-proclaimed Jü in Sung believed that Confucius defined Jü interests and thus ought to be called Confucians? It is convenient, but not necessarily historical, to define the Jü legacy as it was available to eleventh century literati according to what eleventh century men selected as normative and important in the Jü tradition. But it is more interesting, and possibly more accurate, to see eleventh century literati as men struggling to define what it should mean to be a Jü in order to define their own role. We can explore this debate without assuming that the results of it constitute an accurate interpretation of pre-eleventh century or antique ideas.

We still do not know precisely what eleventh century literati thought they were reviving--what they thought the "Tao of the Confucian sages" meant or how they understood common values. The commonalities among eleventh century thinkers have been the subject of some debate,² but we may learn more about what was shared by first gaining a better understanding of the real differences between individuals. For whom must we account? Tillman points to three significant generations. The first includes Hu Yüan, Sun Fu, Fan Chung-yen and Ou-yang Hsiu who, "taken together, laid out the whole pattern of ethical, political, social and intellectual concerns that constitute Sung learning in the broad sense . . ." (p. 31). The second generation, defined by Wang An-shih and Ssu-ma Kuang, marks the breakdown of consensus. Disagreement marked the third generation of Su Shih and Ch'eng I. I find this arrangement persuasive. I am less certain that the description of the "general goals" given here is viable for all or any of these generations. Tillman defines those goals on the basis of Liu I's famous claim for Hu Yüan's

2. See for example Wm. T. de Bary's "A Reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism" in *Studies in Chinese Thought*, ed. Arthur F. Wright (University of Chicago, 1953), 81-111, and his "Common Tendencies in Neo-Confucianism" in *Confucianism in Action*, eds. David Nivison and Arthur F. Wright (Stanford, 1959), 25-49. See also Nivison's use of Ou-yang Hsiu to this end in the introduction to the latter volume, 4-8.

teaching which credited Hu with treating the Tao in terms of substance, literature and function (p. 30). There is some evidence that Liu's claim was historically inaccurate. If so the use of it to define the general goals of Sung learning will have to be defended in the future.³ Liu made his claim to attack Wang An-shih. His career suggests a rigid person much concerned with orthodoxy.⁴ Lü Hsi-che's account of Hu Yüan makes him the antithesis of Liu. Hu, Lü tells us, had a reputation for both wen-hsüeh (cultural accomplishment and learning) and principled conduct. He rewarded individual initiative and excellence. He encouraged literati to pursue their various interests and divided them into four separate groups with separate quarters according to those interests. There were, we are told, four such groups made up of men interested in the classics, military affairs, literary arts, and moral conduct. Students would be summoned to discuss what they had learned in their respective fields. Hu would also start discussions by suggesting a "principle" and students would then debate its acceptability and applicability to contemporary policy.⁵ This open approach to learning, stressing individual creativity and diversity, seems to me to give us a far better sense of the eleventh century. As Lü points out it also helps explain why Hu Yüan was such a popular and inspiring teacher. Lü does not speak of general goals, but he does give us a sense that these literati shared a belief in the possibility of figuring out what they ought to do in all fields of literati endeavor.

4. Methodological Issues. Our understanding of Sung intellectual history depends on both the historical questions we choose to pose and our ability to account for the differences between thinkers.

Tillman proposes a series of important questions. "What was the nature of the Confucian renaissance" of mid-eleventh century? "How was the unity of 'Sung learning' shattered by political and cultural conflicts" after 1068? "How did tao-hsüeh emerge as the principal intellectual movement of the middle half of the twelfth century? Why did leading thinkers in the last generations of the century reject the intellectual accommodation of the middle decades and systematize positions in confrontation with one another?" (pp. 23-

3. Liu I's claim was first used to define commonalities in eleventh century thought in the Sung-yüao hsüeh an 宋元學案. It was first translated by de Bary in "A Reappraisal."

4. See Liu I's biography in the Sung-shih 宋史, ch. 334.

5. Lü Hsi-che 呂希哲 is quoted by Li Chih 李廌 in his Shih-yü t'än chi 師友談記 (Hsüeh-chin t'ao yüan), 23a-23b.

24). Tillman's willingness to engage these questions should compel students of Chinese history to read this book. I am not sure these questions can be fully answered in terms of an "inner logic" implicit in our reading of literati intellectual stands. Our subjects were, after all, literati. They spoke, almost exclusively, to other literati. They dealt with problems which literati faced in their effort to establish and maintain themselves as the political, cultural, and intellectual elite. The intellectual and philosophical questions literati posed can also be seen as means of addressing shared historical questions having to do with the role of the literati in society. Often enough literati thinkers were important because they spoke to problems which were relevant to many literati.

The texts we have can often be construed as answers to questions which are left unarticulated because they were understood. Yet whether we are sure of the questions or not, we still have the answers to cope with. How are we to distinguish among the answers? Tillman adopts two analytic frameworks for making distinctions between intellectual positions.

The first, proposed by Robert Hartwell, defines three possible intellectual positions: classicism, moral didacticism and historical analogism.⁶ This framework was generated by examining attitudes toward history. It works well for Wang An-shih, who believed the classics depicted an ideal society from which the present should learn, Ssu-ma Kuang, who believed that a comparative study of history ought to guide the present, and men like Ch'eng I, who believed that history ought to serve the inculcation of moral values. I do not see how Su Shih can be made to fit into this framework, but Hartwell's analysis does expose three distinct ways of thinking about values.

The second, to which Tillman is most committed, makes distinctions in the value orientations of individuals. This comes from Benjamin Schwartz, who showed that thinkers could be located relative to each other in terms of polarities between self-cultivation and the ordering of society, between the inner and outer realm, and between knowledge and action which were originally present as tensions in the Confucian vision.⁷ To these Tillman adds the tao-hsüeh polarity between moral and intellectual knowledge or essentialism

6. Robert M. Hartwell, "Historical Analogism, Public Policy, and Social Science in Eleventh and Twelfth-Century China," American Historical Review 76:3 (1971), 690-727.

7. Benjamin Schwartz, "Some Polarities in Confucian Thought," in Confucianism in Action, 50-62.

and erudition discussed by Yü Ying-shih⁸ and his own discovery of the polarity between virtue and achievement or integrity and utility. These polarities were present in Sung literati thought. They allowed literati thinkers to adopt diverse orientations while claiming unity. No doubt important additions, such as the polarity between holism and individualism, will be added in the future. But do polarities help us make sufficiently consequential distinctions between thinkers? Do they adequately account for intellectual change? How do we explain why one polarity becomes more important than another? How do we account for an individual's choice for one role over another? I was not convinced that by using polarities Tillman was able to make his account of different attitudes toward the hegemon "provide a way of summarizing and delineating Sung learning" (p. 46).

Is there an alternative to polarities? Tillman's account of the Ch'en-Chu debate suggests that there is. He argues that distinctions with explanatory power do exist in Chinese thought: "Chinese thought operates on three distinct but organically related levels: metaphysical principles, cultural values, and socio-political commentary on institutions" (p. 153). In a sense this integrates what Ch'eng I thought was separate when he said that scholars had split into three specialties: the study of the classics (which at the time stressed institutions), belles lettres (which addressed cultural values in the eyes of composers), and moral principles (which for Ch'eng were also metaphysical principles) (p. 45). It follows, Tillman points out, that when thinkers are speaking of something as overarching and integrative as Tao "one must establish from context the level to which the statement is directed" (p. 153). And, we might add, the level from which a statement is made. This allows Tillman to make the important point that the debate concerns Ch'en Liang's challenge to Chu from his concerns in the "historical and cultural sphere" (the second and third levels are sometimes hard to distinguish) which prompts Chu to respond at the same level. The debate is not about metaphysics (as previous scholars have thought), but the debaters talk past each other because Chu's response has its foundation at the level of metaphysical principles.

This discrimination of levels of discourse and sources of values points the study of Chinese thought in a promising direction. While we recognize that Sung literati thinkers were particularly concerned with integrative

8. Yü Ying-shih, "Some Preliminary Observations on the Rise of Ch'ing Intellectualism," Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies 11:1-2 (1975), 105-146.

values and often tried to claim that their particular approaches were equally applicable to (or not contradicted by) all possible realms, we can also see that in practice such holistic and universal claims were grounded in one sphere rather than another. Chu Hsi's morality of personal virtue and motivation applies to the cultural and institutional levels (or more simply: to literature and government), but it depends upon assumptions about man and morality which are explicitly grounded by Chu in the sphere of metaphysical principles or Heaven-and-Earth. Ch'en Liang's ethic of end results is justified by an understanding of the role of institutions in society which is explicitly grounded in history. The two do not agree. Perhaps they cannot. Tillman's work thus seems to support Willard J. Peterson's very persuasive argument that we can make consequential distinctions by asking "where" men know from rather than by asking "how" they know.⁹

Tillman's tripartite division clearly has explanatory value in analyzing the Ch'en-Chu debate. But it can also be used to make some illuminating distinctions among eleventh century literati thinkers. The tao-hsüeh masters differed from other leading figures in Sung learning. I would suggest, in that they knew that there were real integrative values and overarching principles from the realm of Heaven-and-Earth. They believed that men could understand these in their own lives through the cultivation of the moral self and realize them in society through moral conduct in all situations. But Ssu-ma Kuang, Wang An-shih and Su Shih found integrative values and overarching principles in the realms of culture and history (while claiming that what they found did not contradict or ignore the so-of-self processes of Heaven-and-Earth). Wang turned to the classics and antiquity, Ssu-ma turned to history, and Su turned to the cumulative record of cultural accomplishment. For them the understanding of integrative values was to be gained through extensive scholarship, expressed through literature (in the broadest sense), and realized through political and social action (although there were important differences between them). The tao-hsüeh masters and the Sung learning scholars pointed their respective followers in different directions and promoted different interests. This is why the rise of tao-hsüeh marks a radical shift in the value orientation of the literati. But both groups shared a belief in the existence of universal values and overarching principles which could provide a foundation for an integrated human order. And this, more than anything else, characterized Sung literati thought as a whole.

9. Willard J. Peterson, "The Grounds of Mencius' Argument," Philosophy East and West 29:3 (1979), 307-321, and "Making Connections: 'The Commentaries on the Attached Verbalizations' of the Book of Change," Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies 42:1 (1982), 67-116.