

Neo-confucianism

Religion



Hart Benton Dr. Levey HI/Hon 282 26 November 2010 Neo-Confucian History and its Application to Government Neo-Confucianism arose in China during the Song Dynasty as a vehicle to reapply Confucian teachings and morality to an era in which Buddhist and Daoist followers were all but competing with Confucianism.

Such competition found Confucianism becoming more and more related to the state as an official religion, reducing the true existence of Confucianism as predicated by Kung T'zu's own canonical texts. The revival of Confucian thought during this dynasty led to replacement of a militaristically centered society with academia and cultural achievements, changing the view of Chinese history and the historian as well as leadership in the government as both began to take on the characteristics of Confucian practices such as The Way. The transformation of the view of history was radical at best. The overall essence of history was questioned as notable historians such as Lu Zuqian and Zhen Qiao professed the correct way of viewing history to be to view history as a continuous stream as opposed to solitary confined moments in time. Lu notes that history must be viewed as the continued record of organic growth and change in Lu Donglai wenji. Zheng Qiao claims that Confucius' credibility as a notable sage lies in his ability to view history as an entirety and the stream that makes it up as opposed to Ban Gu who compartmentalized history by narrowing on one topic, or as he literally puts it in Tongzhi, " Ban Gu wrote the history of only one dynasty, this principle of continuity has been ignored. " Another way that history became molded to the form of Confucianism was in its application.

The application of history could be noted as a two-way process, one being the application of the past to see the present and thereby stimulating intellectual growth as well as practicability, and the other being that history provides morals of conducts for the historian. The latter has a greater sense of Confucian character in that the process of being provided the conducts of morality involves the historian to mentally put himself into the actual situation, apply the context of the day, and imagine to face these facts and come to a conclusion. This, Lu Zuqian says, is the way “ you will get real profit from your reading. ” A sense of morality was also applied to the role of history in, quite literally, the beginning of the history. The words of an emperor were recorded in the Song Dynasty immediately at the moment, leading the historiographer to record the entirety of the emperor’s words, both the good and bad. In *Zizhi tongjian*, Sima Guang writes: The emperor said, “ If I do something that is not good, do you then also record it? ” Suilian replied, “ My office is to wield the brush. How could I dare not record it? ” The Gentleman of the Yellow Gate Liu Ji added, “ Even if Suilang failed to record it, everyone else in the empire would” *Zizhi tongjian* The necessary morality of the emperors in their actions transcended itself through the historiographer’s recording and into the text and finally into the readers.

Such a direct relationship between published and actual history manifests itself in the image of history as a mirror in this neo-Confucian era. The image is used in several ways: one being that upon looking in a mirror, everything is completely visible including any flaw or blemish. As Liu Zhiji states, “ When a clear mirror reflects objects, beauty and ugliness are bound to be revealed. ” It is the job of the historian to present a clean mirror, and

as Zhiji also notes, “celebrate the good, censure the evil, and control the powerful” in doing so. The second way that the neo-Confucian role of history should resemble a mirror is that any government official, leader, statesman, or ruler should be able to look into the mirror and in the reflection make a value judgment and discover a truth about the issues in their day. Herein lays the connection between governmental leadership and history. Perhaps no Chinese Song historian better notes the close connection between history and government than Sima Guang in his 294-chapter work, *Zizhi tongjian*, or *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*.

Using this same metaphor of the mirror, Guang strikes on the fact of history becoming a predominantly political history and attaining an almost entirely political purpose. Just as part of Neo-Confucianism’s role in history relayed the essence of The Way in its acquiescence and practice, the same holds true for government policy. Cheng Yi memorializes an appeal for the Confucian Way to be adapted as a foundation for Chinese governmental policy implementation and return rule to scholars and sage kings as opposed to leaders focusing more on the role of the military as was evident in pre-Song dynasties. In the adaption of the Way to government policy, Cheng Hao took a more pragmatic Confucian stance on reform of government in association with the Way in that laws should “change according to the times and be embodied in systems that suited the conditions in obtaining each.” In other words, let not the policies of the day digress to blanketing an entire spectrum disregarding of context and situational prowess, but rather cater the policy to where it fits in with the Way of the day by allowing the policy to follow in itself the Way. The emergence of Neo-Confucianism brought with it

a change in the view of the development of history, application of history, and the role of the historian as history overall began to follow the role of the Way and morality throughout the Song Dynasty. With this shift in the role of history came the shift in role of government policy.

As history became more politically applicable with the “ history as a mirror” metaphor, government followed the role of history and it too began to follow The Way in its practice and usage as a moral system.