

# The philosophical thought of Dai Zhen and Chinese tradition

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Received: 12 July 2016 / Revised: 17 July 2016 / Accepted: 20 July 2016 /

Published online: 30 November 2016

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**Abstract** This article examines the philosophical ideas of Dai Zhen (1724–1777), a prominent classical scholar and thinker in the Confucian tradition. The writer argues (i) that what triggered Dai Zhen’s criticism of Neo-Confucianism, especially Zhu Xi’s School of Principle, was his perception that its ideas were used to oppress people; (ii) that he derived this perceived oppressive function from the philosophical error of taking *li*, principle, as a subjective entity, which people could define at will, rather than as an objective feature of reality; and (iii) that he considered this error as a deviation from the early Confucian thought of Confucius, Mencius and others caused by Buddhist and Daoist influence. Convinced that the Confucian Classics contained the fundamental truths about human beings and our place in the universe, the idea that these classics contained serious errors was unthinkable for Dai Zhen. In this sense he still operated within the confines of a totalitarian intellectual order. Yet, he was as concerned with the abuse of power in the name of Confucianism as with philological errors. While he would not have questioned the authority of the classics, it is striking how he insisted that their interpretation must be determined by intellectual criteria rather than dynastic power. In this respect Dai Zhen anticipated an essential feature of modern thought, and so it is not surprising that he caught the attention of seminal early modern thinkers such as Zhang Taiyan, Liang Qichao, Wang Guowei, Liu Shipei and, especially, Hu Shi.

**Keywords** Dai Zhen · Confucianism · Neo-Confucianism · Meaning and function

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In the evolution of human cultures and societies, widely shared beliefs and systems of beliefs—upheld by religious, intellectual and political authorities—have played and continue to play a key role. They provide a sense of meaning and identity; they offer guidelines for behaviour; and they constitute a source of legitimacy. Invariably, beliefs and belief systems are surrounded by questions concerning their validity: they may be seen as truths revealed by a deity or they may be secular in nature. From a comparative perspective, it is interesting to examine the foundations on which their validity and legitimacy rest.

In China Confucianism was for 2000 years the most prominent belief system. It was the ideological pillar of the imperial order and an essential source of identity and values for people, whether they read the Confucian texts or not.

Throughout its long history Confucianism has taken many different forms and performed different ideological functions. For the imperial dynasties it was a source of legitimacy, but it was also used as an ideological tool in opposition to imperial policies. At all times the understanding of Confucianism was based on a particular reading of classical texts, the Confucian classics. But to reduce controversy over the meanings of Confucianism to philological discussion would be an oversimplification. While the meaning of Confucianism has always been anchored in a specific interpretation of the classics, interpretations have been conditioned by factors extraneous to the texts, notably the political and ideological context and the personal idiosyncrasies of the interpreters.

In this paper I wish to analyze Dai Zhen's 戴震 (1724–1777, also known as Dai Dongyuan 戴东原) philosophical thought and illuminate some aspects of the social dynamics of Confucianism in Chinese history, especially with regard to the relationship between the meaning and function of Confucian ideas and beliefs.

### *Dai Zhen's life*

Dai Zhen was the son of a cloth merchant in the town of Longfu 隆阜 in Xiuning 休宁 County, Huizhou 惠州 Prefecture, Anhui 安徽 Province.<sup>1</sup> As we know, Huizhou was at that time a highly developed area, economically as well as culturally. The tea and cotton trades flourished there, and many young people from the area became famous intellectuals, writers and artists.<sup>2</sup>

Dai Zhen's parents were poor, but through well-to-do friends of the family he had access to books from early years. During the years 1740–42 he accompanied his father to Nanfeng 南丰, Jiangxi Province. After returning to Huizhou, he studied for some time with the famous scholar Jiang Yong 江永 (1681–1762), who was staying with Wang Wufeng 王梧凤 (1726–1772), a well-known patron of scholars. In his youth Jiang Yong had come into contact with the work of Mei Wending 梅文鼎 (1633–1721), the famous mathematician and astronomer who was familiar with

<sup>1</sup> For accounts in English of Dai Zhen's life, see Fang (1970) and Chin and Freeman (1990). The most important source for knowledge about Dai Zhen's life is still Duan Yucai (1980). Other early biographical accounts are Hong Bang (1980), Ling Tingkan (1998), Qian Daxin (1980); Wang Xu 王旭 (1980) and Yu Tingcan (1980).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Ye Xian'en (1983) and Benjamin Ellman (1984).

Western learning in these fields. In addition to phonology and the classic *Liji* 礼记 (*The Book of Rites*), we know that Dai Zhen studied mathematics with Jiang Yong, and it has been suggested that Jiang Yong transmitted knowledge of Western geometry to Dai Zhen that would become important for his intellectual development.

In the mid-1750s Dai Zhen had to leave Huizhou as a result of a family feud, and during the following 20 years he led a vagrant life. He first went to Peking, where he supported himself as a private tutor, first in the home of Ji Yun 纪昀 (1724–1805), who later became the chief editor of the *Siku quanshu* 四库全书 (Complete Library of the Four Treasuries), and then in the home of Wang Anguo 王安国 (1694–1757), whose son Wang Niansun 王念孙 (1744–1832) was to become one of China's foremost philologists. During these years Dai Zhen got to know several luminaries in the intellectual world, including Lu Wenchao 卢文弨 (1717–1796), Qian Daxin 钱大昕 (1728–1804) and Zhu Yun 朱筠 (1729–1781), in addition to those already mentioned.

Towards the end of the 1750s Dai Zhen moved to Yangzhou, at that time one of the country's economic and cultural centres. For a few years he worked as a private tutor in the home of Lu Jianzeng 卢见曾 (1690–1768). In Yangzhou he got to know the famous textual critic Hui Dong 惠栋 (1697–1758).

During the 1760s Dai Zhen again spent time in Peking, where he gave lectures that attracted considerable attention. Among his listeners was the linguist Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815), who was so impressed that he declared himself to be Dai Zhen's pupil. After Dai Zhen's death, Duan Yucai wrote a biography of his master that remains the most important source of information about Dai Zhen's life.<sup>3</sup>

In the late 1760s and early 1770s Dai Zhen visited the provinces of Zhili 直隶 and Shanxi 山西. He was invited to Zhili to help complete a work on the canal system in the province, and in Shanxi he took part in work on two local gazetteers, one on Fenzhou 汾州 Prefecture and one on Fenyang 汾阳 County.

In 1772 Dai Zhen became the president of the local Academy in Jinhua, Zhejiang Province, and in the summer of 1773 he had a meeting with Zhang Xuecheng 章学诚 (1738–1801), whom he had probably first met in Ningbo in 1766.<sup>4</sup> They had an interesting discussion on the question of which principles should be applied when compiling local histories. Later the same summer they had another meeting, now in Hangzhou. At this time the subject of discussion was Zheng Qiao's 郑樵 (1104–60) *Tongzhi* 通志, which Dai Zhen criticized as unscholarly, while Zhang Xuecheng found it truly significant. The diverging intellectual inclinations of Dai Zhen and Zhang Xuecheng found expression in diametrically opposed perspectives of the so-called vicious circle of hermeneutics: Dai Zhen argued emphatically that one must start with the smallest unit—the written character—and then proceed upwards in order to finally grasp *dao* 道, whereas Zhang Xuecheng insisted that in order to understand the individual facts one must have a grasp of the whole.

<sup>3</sup> See above note 2.

<sup>4</sup> Concerning Dai Zhen and Zhang Xuecheng, see Yu Yingshi (1980) and David Nivison (1966).

In the autumn of 1773 Dai Zhen returned to Peking to take up work as a compiler for the *Siku quanshu* project. He remained in Peking until his death in the summer of 1777.

On the basis of many years of research and using a heretofore neglected version of the *Yongle dadian* 永乐大典, Dai Zhen in 1774 presented a version of the *Shuijing zhu* 水经注 (Commentary on the Water Classic), a work compiled by Li Daoyuan 酈道元 (died in AD 527) on the basis of an even older geographical text dealing with waterways. Dai Zhen's achievement attracted much attention. In a poem, the Qianlong Emperor expressed his delight and ordered that Dai Zhen's work be published in the imperial series *Wuyingdian juzhen ban congshu* 武英殿聚珍版丛书. But as a result of criticism directed against it, Dai Zhen's text was then revised before it was copied into the *Siku quanshu*.

Dai Zhen's version of the *Shuijing zhu* became the subject of controversy. A number of scholars argued that Dai Zhen had plagiarized the work of other scholars. In the 1940 s, however, after a thorough examination Hu Shih found that he could free Dai Zhen of these accusations.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1750s and 1760s Dai Zhen passed the *xiucai* 秀才 and *juren* 巨人 degrees in the imperial examinations. After failing on six occasions to pass, he was awarded the *jinshi* 进士 degree in 1775 by imperial decree and was also appointed as a member of the prestigious Hanlin 翰林 Academy.

### *Dai Zhen's time*

In 1313 the Mongol rulers of the Yuan dynasty had decreed that the civil service examinations should henceforth be based on *Lixue* 理学, the School of Principle, the main current of Neo-Confucian thought formulated by the great Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200).<sup>6</sup> *Lixue* would serve as ideological orthodoxy in China until the early twentieth century, albeit compelling to varying degrees, and it was on the *Lixue* orthodoxy that Dai Zhen focused his critique of Neo-Confucianism, although he was in fact philosophically even more critical of *Xinxue* 心學, the School of Mind, the other main branch of Neo-Confucianism, which as we know was based primarily on the writings of Lu Xiangshan 陆象山 (1139–1193) and Wang Yangming 王阳明 (1472–1529).

In Dai Zhen's time—the Qianlong era—*Lixue* was not rigorously upheld as an ideological orthodoxy outside the realm of the examination system. In fact, the intellectual luminaries of the day were generally quite critical of Zhu Xi. This was the era of *Hanxue* 汉学 and textual criticism. As leading scholars found Zhu Xi's interpretations of the classics too speculative, they went back to the early Han dynasty commentaries in search of textually sounder interpretations.

The intellectual climate in Dai Zhen's time was characterized by an interest in philology rather than philosophy, and during this time philological and phonological

<sup>5</sup> Hu, Shih (1970).

<sup>6</sup> See Liu (1973).

studies took several important steps forward. Scholars such as Duan Yucai, Qian Daxin, Wang Niansun and the like produced works of enduring value.<sup>7</sup>

Dai Zhen himself was a prominent representative of *Hanxue*. In his lifetime he was not really well known for his philosophical ideas but rather for his studies of ancient texts and his insights into the phonology of the ancient Chinese language and, to some extent, for his essays on mathematics. He differed, however, from the mainstream of *Hanxue* scholars by going beyond philology into the realms of thought and philosophy. He seems to have been cautious in presenting his philosophical views, maybe because they so openly challenged the *Lixue* orthodoxy and did so in a way that could also be understood to imply a critique of dynastic rule.

### ***Dai Zhen's philosophical works***

Dai Zhen's works span a large field, from mathematics and natural science to philology and philosophy. He wrote at least thirteen works on philosophical themes, of which twelve are still extant. My presentation here of these thirteen works is based on Professor Wang Mao's 王茂 seminal work *Dai Zhen zhexue sixiang yanjiu* 戴震哲学思想研究 (Studies of Dai Zhen's philosophical ideas).<sup>8</sup> These thirteen works are:

1. *Faxianglun* 法象论 (On images and patterns). This work discusses questions related to the basic principles governing the universe. *Dao* is the origin and ultimate principle of everything, and the movement of *dao* oscillates back and forth between "division" (*fen* 分) and "unity" (*he* 合) in an endless sequence. Wang Mao believes that Dai Zhen wrote this text before 1753.
2. *Yuanshan* 原善 (Tracing the origin of goodness) in three paragraphs. In this work, which Wang Mao concludes was written between 1753 and 1763, *shan* 善 (goodness) has become the transcendent principle.
3. *Du Yi Xici lun xing* 读易系辞 (Reading "Appended Words" in *The Book of Changes* on human nature). This work, which focuses on the notion of "human nature" (*xing* 性), later made up the first part of the first volume of the *Yuanshan* in three chapters. (See below no. 5.) Wang Mao believes that Dai Zhen wrote it while he was in Yangzhou from 1763 to 1765.
4. *Du Meng Zi lun xing* 读孟子论性 (Reading Mencius about human nature). This work was incorporated into the second volume of the *Yuanshan* in three chapters (see below, no. 5). Like no. 3, above, it focuses on the conception of human nature. The four works so far mentioned give special prominence to the three notions of *dao* 道 (The Way), *shan* 善 (goodness), and *xing* 性 (human nature). Together they may perhaps be regarded as an explication of a sentence in the "Appended Words": "*Yin* and *yang* in alternation are what is meant by *dao*. What succeeds *dao* is goodness, and what completes it is [human] nature."

<sup>7</sup> Concerning the intellectual scene in China at this time, see Ellman (1984).

<sup>8</sup> Wang Mao (1980), pp. 90–132.

5. *Yuanshan* 原善 (Tracing the origin of goodness) in three chapters. Wang Mao believes that Dai Zhen completed this work during his sojourn in Yangzhou from 1763 to 1765. In his preface Dai Zhen explains that he had been afraid that his *Yuanshan* in three paragraphs might easily be misinterpreted and that he had therefore expanded it, placing each paragraph at the head of a chapter and then supporting his arguments with quotations from the Classics. It was to achieve this objective that he incorporated nos. 3 and 4 into the first two chapters respectively. We should thus regard this work as an expanded version of no. 2 above. While this is undoubtedly so, Wang Mao has also drawn our attention to the fact that the philosophical views of the two versions of *Yuanshan* are not at all identical. In the *Yuanshan* in three chapters Dai Zhen appears, perhaps for the first time, as a social critic castigating the abuse of power:

If those who are in office are in general prone to be weak in virtue and good at cheating and perjury, they will bring injury to the people; then the people will also cheat one another; and there will be no end to the process. [...] No sooner do the causes of trouble begin with those in high posts than the people below act under the influence of their superiors and imitate them. This is accomplished without the people's awareness. Hence, it is charged that "[t]he things that people practice are not good." That we are to blame the people on this ground is very perplexing.<sup>9</sup>

6. *Meng Zi sishulu* 孟子私淑录 (Record of Mencius's private virtue). This work, which seems to have been unknown by Dai Zhen's contemporaries, was first published only in 1942. Wang Mao argues convincingly that it probably predated no. 7 below and so dates it to 1766.
7. *Xuyan* 绪言 (Prefatory words). This work, which may be regarded as a revised version of no. 6, was probably written during Dai Zhen's visit to Shanxi Province in 1769.
8. *Daxue buzhu* 大学补注 (Additional annotations to the *Daxue*). This work is no longer extant. Wang Mao believes that Dai Zhen wrote it c. 1769.
9. *Zhongyong buzhu* 中庸补注 (Additional annotations to the *Zhongyong*). Wang Mao presumes that Dai Zhen wrote this and the preceding two works at about the same time, c. 1769.
10. *Meng Zi ziyi shuzheng* 孟子字义疏证 (Evidential Commentary on the Meaning of the Words of Mencius). This is Dai Zhen's most important philosophical work, which he completed in the winter 1776–77. All themes that he had treated in his earlier philosophical works are here given a systematic and more complete treatment.

<sup>9</sup> Trans. Cheng (1971), p. 120.

11. *Yu mou shu* 与某书 (A letter to a certain person), probably written in the winter of 1777, at the same time as no. 10. It is in this letter that Dai Zhen makes the famous statement that *li* 理 (principle) was “used to kill people” (*yi li sha ren* 以理杀人).
12. *Yu Peng jinshi Yunchu shu* 与彭进士云初书.<sup>10</sup> This is a scholarly work comprising about 5000 characters which Dai Zhen is believed to have written in May 1777, a month prior to his death, in response to a critical letter from Peng Yunchu (1740–1796, also known as Peng Shaosheng 彭绍升), to whom Dai Zhen had shown the manuscript of his *Evidential Commentery on the Meaning of the Words of Mencius*. Dai’s letter has been translated into English by John Ewell under the title “Letter in Reply to Advanced Scholar Peng Yunchu.” This was Dai Zhen’s last philosophical work.
13. *Dingchou zhengyue yu Duan Yucai shu* 丁丑正月与段玉裁札 (A letter to Duan Yucai dated in the first month of the year dingchou [February 1777]), which affirms in strong words the legitimacy of human desires and attacks Neo-Confucianism.

These works reflect the evolution of Dai Zhen’s thought from the dualistic orientation of his early life to the monistic orientation of his last years. The early works still bear the imprint of Song thought, tending to suggest a rather transcendent interpretation of words such as *dao* 道, *ze* 则, and *li* 理, which have traditionally been used in the Confucian tradition to describe the basic properties of man and the universe. This is readily apparent in the first two works, the *Faxiang lun* and the *Yuanshan* in three paragraphs. However, in the works that he wrote towards the end of his life, criticism of Neo-Confucianism became Dai Zhen’s main concern. He argues that there is nothing beyond the empirical world of *qi* 气, and insists that words such as *dao* and *li*, which in Zhu Xi’s universe existed in the metaphysical world above form, refer to immanent categories.

There is still a need for much more research on the evolution of Dai Zhen’s thought. In this paper, however, I will not be concerned with the development of Dai Zhen’s thought. Instead, I will base my discussion almost entirely on his main philosophical work, the *Evidential Commentary on the Meaning of the Words of Mencius*.

### ***A note on the reception of Dai Zhen’s philosophical thought***

Dai Zhen was appreciated by his contemporaries as an erudite textual scholar rather than as a thinker.<sup>11</sup> But many other textual scholars—such as Cheng Jinfang 程晋芳 (1718–1784) and Weng Fanggang 翁方纲 (1733–1818)—were critical of his excursions into philosophy, while philosophically minded scholars—such as Yao Nai 姚鼐 (1732–1815) and Peng Shaosheng 彭绍升 (1740–1796)—were often dissatisfied with the content of his philosophical thought.

<sup>10</sup> Ewell (1990).

<sup>11</sup> On the reception of Dai Zhen’s thought, see Fang Lishan (1987), and Qiu Weijun (2004).

However, there were also those among his contemporaries and friends who realized the importance of Dai Zhen's philosophical works. To this category belong writings by scholars such as Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763–1820), Duan Yucai (1735–1815), Hong Bang (1745–1779), Ling Tingkan (1757–1809), Qian Daxin (1728–1804), Yu Tingcan, Wang Xu (1725–1806) and Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801).

In the first half of the 19th century Dai Zhen was praised by *kaozheng* 考证 scholars such as Jiang Fan 江藩 (1761–1831) and Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849). But proponents of *Lixue*, the School of Principle, continued to criticize him. For example, Fang Dongshu 房东树 (1772–1851) attacked Dai Zhen for “merely trying to make it difficult for the Cheng-Zhu School without realizing that this was the way of great disorder”.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Republican period, Dai Zhen's philosophical thought began to attract attention as a possible philosophical and ideological weapon against the dynasty and for China's cultural regeneration. Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1869–1936), Liu Shipai 刘师培 (1884–1919), Wang Guowei 王国维 (1877–1927), Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1929), and Hu Shi 胡适 were prominent representatives of this early high tide of interest in Dai Zhen as a thinker of great significance for China.<sup>13</sup>

In 1924 a conference in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of Dai Zhen's birth was held in Peking, and the volume *Dai Dongyuan erbai nian shengri jinian lunwen ji* 戴东原二百年生日纪念论文集 (Collected essays in memory of Dai Dongyuan's two hundredth birthday) was published. A year later Hu Shih published his *Dai Dongyuan de zhexue* 戴东原的哲学 (The philosophy of Dai Dongyuan), a pioneering work in terms of analysing Dai Zhen's ideas in the contemporary philosophical and ideological context of the New Culture Movement.

In 1937 Professor Qian Mu 钱穆 published his *Zhongguo jin sanbai nian xueshu shi* 中国近三百年学术史 (A history of Chinese scholarship during the past 300 years), which includes a very influential chapter about Dai Zhen.<sup>14</sup> We also find a long chapter discussing Dai's philosophical ideas in Fung Yu-lan's *A History of Chinese Philosophy*.<sup>15</sup>

During the period from 1949 to 1976 Mainland Chinese scholars analysed Dai Zhen's thought in Marxist terms. One of the few monographs on Dai Zhen produced in China during this time was Professor Zhou Fucheng's 周辅成 book *Dai Zhen—shiba shiji Zhongguo weiwuzhuyi zhexuejia* 戴震 - 十八世纪中国唯物主义哲学家 (Dai Zhen—an eighteenth century Chinese materialist philosopher), published in 1957. Numerous articles and book chapters also appeared. One notable example is the chapter on Dai Zhen in Professor Hou Wailu's 侯外庐 monumental history of Chinese thought.<sup>16</sup> Another example is Professor Yang Xiangkui's 杨向奎

<sup>12</sup> *Hanxue shangdui* 漢學商兌 2A/19A. For a detailed analysis of Fang Dongshu's criticism of Dai Zhen, see Winter (2016).

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Zhang Taiyan (1985), Wang Guowei (2009), Liang Qichao (1924a and 1924b) and Liu Shipai (1997).

<sup>14</sup> Qian Mu (1996), pp. 337–418. English translation by Bruce Yen Lin Wu; see Wu (1966).

<sup>15</sup> Fung (1953), pp. 630–672.

<sup>16</sup> Hou Wailu (1958), pp. 430–464.



*Zhongguo gudai shehui yu gudai sixiang shi yanjiu* 中國古代社會与古代思想史研究 (Studies of society and thought in old China) from 1964, where Dai Zhen's ideas are also seriously discussed.

In the 1970s Dai Zhen was designated a "Legalist" and the group Anzhenghui 安正辉 was organized in Hefei to produce the volume *Dai Zhen zhexue zhuzuo xuanzhu* 戴震哲学著作选注 (Selected philosophical works by Dai Zhen with commentaries). A leading scholar in this group was Professor Mao Huaixin 冒怀辛 from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, not so well-known but immensely erudite. Mao Huaixin later published a superb translation into modern Chinese of the *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng: Mengzi ziyi shuzheng quanyi* 孟子子义疏证全译 (A Complete translation of the *Evidential Commentary on the Meaning of the Words of Mencius*).

In 1980, one year after the publication of this work, professor Wang Mao's seminal study *Dai Zhen zhexue sixiang yanjiu* marked the beginning of more ideologically independent scholarship on Dai Zhen in Mainland China. After Wang Mao's book a great number of writings on Dai Zhen have appeared in Mainland China, but an overview of these works will have to wait for another occasion.

Dai Zhen has of course attracted attention also outside Mainland China. In 1948 the Japanese sinologist Yasuda Jiroo 安田二郎 published a Japanese translation of the *Meng Zi ziyi shuzheng*.<sup>17</sup>

Professor Chung-ying Cheng's book *Tai Chen's Inquiry into Goodness*, published in 1971, stimulated the interest in Dai Zhen among Western China scholars. Professor Yü Ying-shih's [Yu Yingshi] book *Lun Dai Zhen and Zhang Xuecheng* 论戴震与章学诚 (On Dai Zhen and Zhang Xuecheng) from 1980 represents a landmark in Dai Zhen studies. Benjamin Elman's *From Philology to Philosophy* and Kent Guy's *The Emperor's Four Treasuries* are pioneering studies of the intellectual scene in China in Dai Zhen's time.

In his pathbreaking work *Zhongguo sixiang shi* 中国思想史 (A history of Chinese thought), Professor Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光 discusses Dai Zhen's scholarship and thought in its historical context (see especially vol. 2, pp. 413–445). In Taiwan Professor Qiu Weijun 丘為君 (Eugene W. Chiu) has published an important book about Dai Zhen entitled *Dai Zhen xue de xingcheng* 戴震學的形成 (The emergence of Dai Zhen studies). Last year Professor Hu Minghui published a study focusing on Dai Zhen from the perspective of China's modernization, entitled *China's Transition to Modernity: The New Classical Vision of Dai Zhen*.

Only a few European sinologists have published any works dealing with Dai Zhen. The first was most likely Mansfield Freeman who in 1933 published an article entitled "The Philosophy of Tai Tung-Yüan". More recently Ann-ping Chin and Mansfield Freeman have published an English translation of *Meng Zi ziyi shuzheng* with a long introduction on Dai Zhen's life and work. The section on Dai Zhen in Alfred Forke's *Geschichte der neueren chinesischen Philosophie* from 1938 is also worth mentioning in this context. More recently Professor Anne Cheng in Paris has included an insightful section on Dai Zhen in her *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Yasuda Jiroo (1948).

<sup>18</sup> Cheng (1985), pp. 562–573.

There are at least three translations of the *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng* into English by Anping Chen, John Ewell and myself. (See the bibliography at the end of this article).

### ***Dai Zhen's philosophy and his critique of Neo-Confucianism***

Dai Zhen was relentless in his criticism of Neo-Confucianism. His criticism focused on Zhu Xi's *Lixue* but he was even more critical of *Xinxue* 心學, The School of Mind, the competing current in the Neo-Confucian tradition that we associate primarily with Lu Xiangshan 陆象山 and Wang Yangming 王阳明.

As we have seen, Dai Zhen went so far as to claim that *li*, one of the key concepts of the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, was “used to kill people”. He argued that for the Neo-Confucians *li* had ceased to refer to the objective structure of the world and had become a subjective notion considered “as if it were a thing, received from heaven and embodied in the heart” (*ru you wu yan, de yu tian er ju yu xin* 如有物焉, 得于天具于心; *Evidential Commentary* 1.5). As a result anyone with authority could claim that his “subjective opinions” (*yijian* 意見) were principle, with disastrous consequences. He said:

I am afraid that those who seek *li* and righteousness take these to be represented by their opinions—who knows the end of the calamities that this will cause the people? (*Evidential Commentary*, 1.4.)

He also said:

Even if they [the Song Confucians] see people who suffer from starvation and cold, or people who lament their poor conjugal relations, or even people who shun death and want to live—they consider this nothing but human desires. [...] Of all those who consider principle as “residing in the heart” and who [argue] that what does not emanate from desires emanates from principle, there is no one who has not taken opinions as *li* and so brought disaster to the world. (op.cit. 3.5.1.)

In the *Evidential Commentary* we can distinguish between three different features: (i) it offers an interpretation of the *Mencius*, and (ii), by introducing other classical texts as well, it offers a critique of the broader Neo-Confucian tradition; further (iii), it expounds Dai Zhen's own philosophical views. Let us now briefly try to summarize Dai Zhen's major philosophical ideas as they become manifest in his *Evidential Commentary*.

Dai distinguished between two major aspects of human beings: our “blood-and-qi” (*xueqi* 血气), or bodies, and our “heart-perception” (*xinzhi* 心知), or mental faculties. While it is our “blood-and-qi” that enables us to discern colours and other properties of the external, objective world, it is our mental faculties that distinguish us from other creatures and enable us to discern principles and to recognize and take pleasure in what is “necessary” (*biran* 必然), i.e. the ethical aspect of being. *Li*—principles—were part of the external, objective world:

Principles and righteousness exist in facts but come into contact with our mental faculty. [...] Principles and righteousness are to be found through a careful and detailed analysis of matters of fact, but when they come into contact with our mental faculty we are able to discern them and take pleasure in them. (op.cit., 1.6.)

From the perspective of the European tradition of David Hume and G. E. Moore, Dai Zhen would be considered to commit the “naturalistic fallacy” in that he derived what is necessary from what is natural. He said: “To conform to what is necessary is precisely to fulfil what is natural, and this is what is meant by the ultimate of the natural.” (op.cit., 3.2.1.)

Dai Zhen was a monist in his insistence that there is nothing that exists beyond the empirical world of *qi* 气. Accordingly, he disagreed with the dualism that in his view permeated the thought of Zhu Xi and other Neo-Confucian thinkers. He opposed the interpretation of the notions “above form” (*xing er shang* 性而上) and “below form” (*xing er xia* 性而下), which had allowed Zhu Xi to define a number of oppositions between entities of a pure and flawless metaphysical world, on the one hand, and entities of an impure and defective physical world on the other hand. In Dai Zhen’s view, the notions of above and below form both referred to the world of *qi*, distinguishing the stages before and after *qi* has taken the form of “objects” (*qi* 器).

Dai also used *li* to refer to the analysis of the objective world in accordance with its inherent order and to behaviour in accordance with this order: “Principle is a name referring to the examination and subtle analysis necessary to make distinctions.” (1.1.) He also said: “Principle refers to feelings that do not err.” (1.2.)

In other words, in his usage *li* has a subjective as well as an objective aspect. The subjective aspect appears subordinated to the objective aspect, and perhaps this is the reason why it has often been overlooked by students of his philosophy.

He criticized the Song philosophers for divorcing “heavenly principle” (*tianli* 天理) from “human desires” (*renyu* 人欲):

When people in ancient times talked about principle, they sought it in man’s feelings and desires; when these were made flawless, they considered them as principle. When people nowadays [i.e. Neo-Confucians] speak about principle, they seek it apart from feelings and desires [...] This separation of principle and desires serves precisely to turn all people under heaven into deceivers and phonies. How could one fully describe how disastrous [this separation is]? What they call desire is when emperors and kings do their utmost for the people. (op.cit., 3.5.4.)

He argued that desires are indeed central to man’s moral capacity:

There is no greater pain in man’s life than to be unable to preserve and fulfil his own life. To desire to preserve and fulfil your own life and also to preserve and fulfil the lives of others is humanity. To desire to preserve and fulfil your own life to the point of destroying the lives of others without any regard is inhumanity. It is true that inhumanity starts when your heart desires to preserve and fulfil your own life and that, if this desire were eliminated, there

would definitely be no inhumanity. But then you would also look upon the poverty and hardship of others in the world with indifference. You do not necessarily have to preserve and fulfil your own life, but then you will not have a feeling for preserving and fulfilling the lives of others either. (op.cit., 1.10.)

For Dai Zhen morality was the capacity to feel compassion and shame; in this sense he was indeed a faithful, albeit creative, follower of Mencius. Also, and as importantly, it was the capacity to understand the order of the objective world.

Thus, he wished to overcome the opposition between *li* and *qi* as well as between heavenly principle and human desires. His philosophical thought was a search for unity. The opposition between *li* and *qi* he sought to overcome by externalizing the notion of principle to refer to the order of the objective world. The opposition between heavenly principle and human desires he sought to overcome by describing desires as essential to man's capacity to act in accordance with principle.

In his argument, the use of the word *qing* 情 played a key role. We may first notice that he used *qing* to explicate principle; as we have seen, he even seemed to include *qing* in his definition of principle:

Question: What did people in ancient times mean when they spoke about heavenly principle? Answer: *Li* refers to feelings *qing* that do not err. (op.cit., 1.2.)

Elaborating further on the relationship between *qing* and principle, he expounded a kind of utilitarian ethics:

Whenever you do something to others, you should examine yourself and think quietly: would I be able to accept this, if another person did it to me? Whenever you demand something from others, you should examine yourself and think quietly: If another person demanded this from me, would I then be able to meet his demand? When the measure of the self is applied to others, principle will become clear. That which is called heavenly principle refers to the natural principle of discrimination. Using the natural principle of discrimination you can measure the feelings of others in terms of your own, and then there will be no injustice or imbalance. (op.cit., 1.2.)

If you unerringly use your own *qing* (feelings) to measure the *qing* (feelings) of others, you will surely be in accord with *li* in your deeds. (op.cit., 1.3.)

Thus, the satisfaction of someone's feelings and desires, to the extent that it does not encroach on the satisfaction of the feelings and desires of others, is morally right and good. The more desires are satisfied and the more feelings fulfilled the better—provided that the distribution is regulated by means of the measure of the self.

On the one hand, Dai Zhen argued that our feelings are important in helping us understand moral values. On the other hand, he also argued that the satisfaction of desires and feelings, under the limitations provided by the measure of the self, is the criterion of moral goodness and rightness. He was brave in expounding his utilitarian ethics, which indeed stood in sharp contrast to orthodox Neo-Confucianism and which could very well be considered to have potentially

destabilizing political implications. However, he was also able to draw support for his view of ethics from early Confucian thought as expounded by Confucius and Mencius. With good reason he reminded his readers:

Mencius told the rulers of Qi and Liang to “share their enjoyment with the people”, “reduce punishment and taxation”, “ensure that [the people’s means of support] are sufficient for the care of [their] parents, on the one hand, and for the support of wife and children, on the other hand”, and to see to it that “those who stay at home have full granaries and those who go to war have full sacks” and that “there are neither girls pining for a husband nor men without a wife”. This is what humane rule and the kingly way are like. (op.cit, 1.10.)

He characterized the rule of the legendary ancient sages in the following words:

In governing the whole world the sages sympathized with the feelings of the people and satisfied their desires. Thereby the kingly way was completed. (op. cit., 1.10.)

However, he did not content himself to show that his view accorded with the views of the founding fathers of Confucianism; he also took pains to make other arguments. Very important was his use of the character *qing* 情 .

In expounding his utilitarian ethics, there is no doubt that he used *qing* in the sense of “feelings”. But in seeking arguments in support of his utilitarian thesis, it seems to me that he also took recourse to another meaning of *qing*. Consider, for example, the following statement: “Now if people give free rein to their opinions, they will fail [to grasp principle], but if they themselves seek this *qing* they will grasp [principle].” (op.cit., 1.5)

Using the words “seek this *qing*” (*qiu qi qing* 求其情), it seems to me that he suggested another meaning of *qing*, i.e. “actual circumstances” or possibly “original nature”.

On the one hand, he argued that principle refers to the structure of the objective world. On the other hand, he argued that it is right to follow one’s own feelings and desires as long as they do not conflict with the feelings and desires of others. By asserting that principle must be sought in *qing*, which denotes objective facts as well as feelings, the distinction between these two tenets of his thought becomes blurred.

He pointed out again and again that principle exists in *shiqing* 事情, which we may translate as “matters of fact”. In discussing a famous passage in the *Mencius*, he remarked that *qing* means *su* 素 (original) or *shi* 实 (genuine). Mencius had said: “As far as his *qing* is concerned, man can be good. That is what is meant by saying that human nature is good.”

Dai Zhen comments:

Mencius referred to the heart of commiseration, shame and dislike, deference and compliance, right and wrong in terms of the heart, not in terms of the feelings. When at first he says “as far as his *qing* is concerned”, this is not *qing* as in *xingqing* (nature and feelings). [...] *Qing* means “original”, “genuine”. [...] That he says “can” [be good] is because nature varies [among men], but

as far as judging it as good, no one has been known not to be able to [be good]. (op.cit., 3.1.2.)

Thus, I contend that Dai Zhen played persuasively on a double meaning of *qing*. In expounding his utilitarian ethics, he used *qing* to refer to feelings, but in trying to overcome the opposition between the subjective and the objective and anchor his ethics in the external objective world, he used *qing* to refer to “actual facts”.

To sum up, we have found that in his attempt to overcome the opposition between principle and *qi* and between heavenly principle and human desires, Dai Zhen developed two different strands of thought on ethics.

On the one hand he argued that morality is somehow contained in the order of the external, objective world. By means of his unique nature, man possesses the capacity to understand and even take pleasure in this immanent moral order. But in order to understand the content of morality he must engage in study. This strand in his ethical thought we may characterize as naturalist and intellectualist.

On the other hand, he argued that the satisfaction of desires and the fulfilment of feelings, subject to the so-called measure of the self, constitute basic moral values. This strand in his thought we may characterize as utilitarian and hedonist.

Dai Zhen believed that the distorted views propounded by the Neo-Confucians could largely be explained in terms of the influence that the Buddhists and the Daoists had exerted on Zhu Xi and other Song Confucians. In his critique we may discern six major, closely interrelated aspects of the influence of Buddhism and Daoism on Neo-Confucian thought:

1. As a result of Buddhist and Daoist influence the Song Confucians directed their attention away from mundane affairs, or from what we would call the empirical world: “The Song Confucians [...] followed Lao, Zhuang and Shakyamuni and turned away from the daily activities in human relations [...]” (op.cit., 3.2.2.)
2. The Buddhists and the Daoists separated the spirit from the body, placing the spirit in a realm beyond time and space where it could live “for ever divorced from the body” (*qi shen li xingtü er chang cun* 其神离形体而长存). (op.cit., 1.15.) Dai Zhen quotes the Neo-Confucian Shao Yong’s 邵雍 words “the spirit has no spatiality” (*shen wu fang* 神无方) to give an example of how this tenet of Daoism and Buddhism influenced Neo-Confucianism. (op.cit., 1.15)
3. The separation of the spirit from the body also meant that the Neo-Confucians, like the Buddhists and Daoists, tended to denigrate the body while esteeming the spirit; human beings should as far as possible free themselves from the limitations imposed by the body. Central in this context was the negative view of desires:

Lao Zi valued “to hold on to the one” and “to have no desires” [Lao Zi, 22 and 57] and the book of Zhuang Zhou says: “The sage is tranquil not because he takes tranquility to be good but because the myriad things are insufficient to distract his heart. [...] If water is clear when still how much more so is the spirit. How tranquil is the sage’s heart! [...] Vacuity, tranquility, limpidity,

quietness, inaction—these are the level of heaven and earth, the quintessence of dao and its virtue. [Zhuang Zi, “Tian dao”] (op.cit., 1.10.)

Dai also wrote:

According to the doctrine of having no desires propounded by Lao Dan and Zhuang Zhou and the notion of emptiness which Shakyamuni later formulated, it is possible to transcend [the physical existence] and not have one’s heart entangled by the need to nourish the body or by the life and death of the body, while only selfishly caring about “long life and everlasting existence” and about “not being born and not perishing” [...].”(op.cit., 3.5.1.)

4. According to Dai’s analysis the separation of the spirit from the body was rooted in selfishness. Discussing Buddhism and Daoism he wrote: “Both proceed from selfishness” (*jie qi yu zisi* 皆起于自私, op.cit., 1.15). This is indeed a major aspect of his criticism of the influence of Buddhism and Daoism on Neo-Confucianism. When principle is defined at will to suit the interests of those who hold power, this shows that their desires, which they deny, “err in selfishness”.
5. Dai points to the unwillingness to act—the passivity—in Neo-Confucianism as something inherited from Buddhism and Daoism:

There is necessarily no one in the world who can abandon the *dao* of life and nourishment and still exist. Behind any fact or action there is a desire. If there is no desire there is no action, only when there is desire can there be action. [...] Lao, Zhuang and Shakyamuni place the main emphasis on having no desires and on taking no action, and thus do not speak about principle. (op.cit., 3.5.4.)

6. The final major aspect of the evil influence of Daoism on Neo-Confucianism is what we may call anti-intellectualism. Dai quotes Lao Zi:

Exterminate learning and there will no longer be worries  
 [...]
 Hence to rule a state by cleverness  
 Will be to the detriment of the state.  
 Not to rule a state by cleverness  
 Will be a boon to the state.<sup>19</sup>

Dai comments that Lao Zi argues that “if you are tranquil and have no desires then you will transcend good and evil” (*wu yu er jing, ze chao hu shan e zhi shang* 无欲而静, 则超乎善恶之上) and that “wisdom is not as good as stupidity” (*zhi nai bu ru yu* 智乃不如愚, op. cit., 1. 14).

<sup>19</sup> Lao Zi, 20 and 65, quoted in *Evidential Commentary*, 1.14; trans. D.C. Lau (1980), p. 76 and p. 127.

For Dai Zhen, the essence of the Buddhist and Daoist influence on Neo-Confucianism was the transformation of principle into a subjective entity; bringing principle from the observable, objective reality into the human heart “as if it were a thing, received from heaven and embodied in the heart”. In fact, he argued that principle as used by Zhu Xi and his followers was another name for the Buddhist concept “True Emptiness” (*zhen kong* 真空) and the Daoist concept “True Master” (*zhen zai* 真宰).

This was also the essence of Dai Zhen’s critique of Neo-Confucianism. By describing principle as residing within human beings rather than in the external world, thus turning it into a subjective entity, it became possible for people with authority to claim that his subjective and arbitrary opinions were equivalent with principle. In Dai Zhen’s perspective, this subjective turn was a distortion of the original meaning of the classics, especially Mencius.

Thus, we can see that there are two main theses involved in Dai Zhen’s critique of Neo-Confucianism. On the one hand, he argued that the subjective turn resulted in disastrous consequences in terms of human suffering; on the other hand, he insisted that this subjective turn was a distortion of the true meaning of the classics. The relationship between these two theses is worth pondering. In my reading of Dai Zhen I cannot escape the impression that it was his insight into the oppressive use of Neo-Confucianism as official ideology that was the motive force behind his critique. As a Confucian scholar in the Qianlong era, he could not and would not raise questions of the validity and truth of the classical texts. Whatever beliefs he held, he had to anchor them in the classics.

His concern with the oppressive role of Neo-Confucian thought and his explanation of this role with reference to the interpretation of principle as a subjective entity demonstrate that for Dai Zhen philology was not enough. As a concerned scholar, philology was for him subordinate to basic moral and philosophical, not to say sociological, questions concerning human life and society.

### ***Is Dai Zhen’s criticism fair?***

The question to what extent Dai Zhen’s criticism is valid involves at least three different issues: 1. Was the Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi actually used as an instrument of oppression? 2. Does Dai Zhen give an accurate description of those tenets of Zhu Xi’s thought from which he derives the oppressive function? 3. Granted that the first two questions are answered in the affirmative, is the linkage that Dai Zhen proposes between the meaning and function of philosophical ideas valid?

As for the first question, it is well documented that Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucianism, was indeed often used to legitimate oppression and the abuse of power. On the other hand—and this is something that Dai Zhen keeps silent about—there are also many examples of intellectuals who have tried to use Neo-Confucianism as an intellectual weapon for justice and against the arbitrary and oppressive exercise of power. In the words of Professor Jacques Gernet:



One would be wrong to see in Confucianism only an official ideology in the service of the government; it was just as often a weapon in the hands of the opposition.<sup>20</sup>

As far as the second question is concerned, we may note that Dai Zhen repeated, again and again, his criticism that Zhu Xi regarded principle “as if it were a thing, received from heaven and embodied in the heart”. Zhu Xi never really said this explicitly, and he would probably not have agreed that this was how he regarded *li*. Yet it is true that Zhu Xi used this notion *li* in a subjective way, and that although exaggerated Dai Zhen’s criticism in this regard was not entirely unfair.

It is true that Zhu Xi emphasized the opposition between desires and feelings, on the one hand, and morality and reason, on the other hand. Like other Neo-Confucian philosophers, he made a distinction between non-activated and activated human nature. While non-activated and at rest, *li* prevails; when the human mind is acted upon, it is set in motion and human nature also becomes activated and the feelings are aroused. The word *qing* (feelings), he explained both as activated mind and as activated nature. When activated, human nature enters the realm where things may go wrong. Discussing why human beings may err, Zhu Xi spoke about man being obscured by human desires and generally underlined the opposition between “heavenly principle” (*tianli* 天理) and “human desires” (*renyu* 人欲). However, he did not say that desires and principle are absolute opposites. In fact, he ridiculed the Buddhists for advocating that all desires, whether good or bad, should be exterminated. He even said that human desires exist in heavenly *li*. It is not desires as such that are bad; it is when desires become selfish that they become bad. He often used the word “human desires” (*renyu* 人欲) in the sense of “selfish desires” (*siyu* 私欲), which easily misleads, as he certainly considered selfish desires bad.

We may thus conclude that Dai Zhen had a point when he criticized Zhu Xi for emphasizing the opposition between desires and morality more than Confucius and Mencius had done. But he overstated his case when he asserted that Zhu Xi regarded this opposition as an absolute dichotomy.

However, we should also recognize that *Lixue* as official ideology often juxtaposed principles and desires as more or less absolute opposites. One slogan was that human beings should “preserve heavenly principles and annihilate human desires” (*cun tianli mie renyu* 存天理灭人欲). Nevertheless, if questioned, the ideologues of Ming-Qing China would probably have admitted that there is a distinction between legitimate desires and selfish desires.

Did Dai Zhen’s critique of Neo-Confucianism imply, as he claimed, a return to the views of Confucius or Mencius? Or were his attempts to support his argument with quotations from the classics only a tactical device to conform with the needs of the prevailing discourse? These are complicated questions, which it is very difficult to answer. It seems to me that Dai Zhen’s interpretation of the *Mencius* appears reasonable, although he now and then went beyond the consciousness horizon of Mencius and other early Chinese thinkers.

<sup>20</sup> Gernet (1982), p. 432.

More specifically I believe that Dai Zhen was quite right when he argued that both Confucius and Mencius felt that only when human desires are satisfied and feelings fulfilled can the moral norms be fulfilled. In the *Analects* and the *Mencius* there is not so much a question of suppressing basic human instincts and needs, so as to give place to objective morality, but rather a concern with finding a harmonious accord between the two. The goal to strive towards is to reach the stage where one can let one's desires loose and still not come into conflict with the moral principles: "At seventy I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing moral principles." (*The Analects*, 7:4.)

Thus, in his own philosophical outlook one might say that Dai Zhen combined the emotionalism of Mencius and the intellectualism of Xun Zi. In view of the central importance that he attached to our innate moral capacity, and the way he described this capacity as inextricably linked with feelings and desires, I still think that his philosophical views were most fundamentally based on Mencius rather than Xun Zi, just as the title of his major philosophical work suggests.

Dai Zhen's utilitarian tendency may on the surface be seen as opposed to Mencius, who—as we know—told King Hui of Liang not to think about "profit" (*li* 利) but to focus on "righteousness" (*yi* 义). But although the utilitarian tendency is much more outspoken and elaborated in Dai Zhen than in Mencius, I do not see a clear-cut contradiction between them with regard to their views of motives and results respectively as criteria of moral value. Mencius insisted time and again that sensuous desires and pleasures are legitimate and good as long as they are equitably shared. Therefore, I believe that he would have agreed with Dai Zhen that it is right to follow one's feelings and desires as long as they do not collide with the feelings and desires of others.

It seems that Dai Zhen was justified in several respects in saying that he reverted to Mencius. However, it also seems rather obvious that in his analysis of numerous key terms in the language of Mencius and other early Confucian texts, he went beyond what we may surmise was the intended meaning behind these texts and developed his ideas about ethics, human society and metaphysics much more systematically, and with a greater depth of intention, than we meet in the early Confucian texts.

Thus Dai Zhen's critique of Neo-Confucianism, and especially Zhu Xi's *Lixue*, seems somewhat exaggerated and misleading if compared with Zhu Xi's own writings, but more accurate when considered as a criticism of the Neo-Confucian state orthodoxy.

When it comes to the third question, regarding the validity of Dai Zhen's thesis concerning the linkage between the oppressive function of Neo-Confucianism and the basic tenets of Zhu Xi's thought, we can first of all see that Dai Zhen's thesis is weakened by the fact that his interpretation of Zhu Xi is not completely accurate and by the fact that Zhu Xi's ideas have also been used as a weapon against oppression. Even if we were to assume that Dai Zhen's description of the functions of Neo-Confucianism as well as his interpretation of Zhu Xi's ideas were complete and accurate, the asserted linkage would still be arguable. There is a linkage in the sense that Zhu Xi's ideas were such that they could be used, and were indeed used, as an instrument of oppression. However, this is not the same as saying that the beliefs

and ideas that Zhu Xi espoused are necessarily and logically used to oppress people, let alone kill people.

It is interesting in this context to consider the ideas of the School of Mind, the current within Neo-Confucianism competing with the School of Principle for intellectual hegemony. Just like Dai Zhen, Wang Yangming and, most archetypically, his radical followers in the so-called Taizhou School—Wang Gen 王艮 (1483–1541), Li Zhi 李贽 (1527–1602) and He Xinyin 何心隱 (1517–1579)—criticized the ideas of the School of Principle as oppressive. But to them it was not subjectivism that caused the suppressive function. They argued that it was by emphasizing that “principles” are to be sought in the external world and, in particular, in the classical texts rather than within humans that they fettered and constrained people, not allowing them to seek their own insights into the mysteries of life and reality. Thus, they insisted that we should seek *dao* in ourselves rather than in the external world. In Julia Ching’s apt words:

[Wang Yangming] was anxious that no external criterion be set up for truth and orthodoxy and the quest for sagehood, which should discourage people from its pursuit.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, Dai Zhen and Wang Yangming, as well as the philosophers of the Taizhou School, shared the view of *Lixue* as an instrument of oppression. Likewise, they derived this function from its fundamental philosophical content. But whereas Dai Zhen felt that the main error was subjectivism, the others found that its opposite, objectivism, was the main flaw. If anything, this demonstrates the tension between the meaning and function of ideas and beliefs.

In fact, if we look at European or Western history we can easily find numerous examples showing that similar ideas and beliefs can be used for widely different ideological or political purposes, both oppressive and liberating. Likewise, different beliefs may be used for similar purposes.

The loose connection between the basic meanings and the functions of ideas and beliefs means that we should not lightly adopt or dismiss basic philosophical or religious ideas—be they Christian, Confucian, Marxist or Muslim—with reference to how they are implemented. Implementation matters, but we must still also seek intellectual and moral criteria with which to evaluate ideas and beliefs.

## Conclusion

In evaluating Dai Zhen’s criticism of Neo-Confucianism and defining his position in the Confucian tradition it is important to distinguish between Confucian thought as philosophical speculation and ideological orthodoxy. Dai Zhen’s criticism of Neo-Confucianism as state philosophy seems to have been well-founded, since the power holders in the celestial empire did indeed arbitrarily define *li*, principle, in accordance with their own interests and use it as a tool for oppression. However, his criticism seems less valid against Zhu Xi, who was himself by no means an

<sup>21</sup> Ching (1976), p. 162.

unreservedly obedient servant of his superiors. Dai's attempt to deduce the oppressive function of the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy as a necessary consequence from some basic philosophical notions of *Lixue* seems to have been erroneous. Practice has shown that these notions may be used for divergent and even contradictory purposes.

Dai Zhen was convinced that the Confucian Classics contained fundamental truths about human beings and our place in the universe. The idea that these classics could contain serious errors was probably inconceivable to him. In this sense he still operated within the confines of a totalitarian intellectual order. Yet, he was at least as concerned with the abuse of power in the name of Confucianism as with philological errors. And while he would not have questioned the authority of the classics, it is striking how he insisted that their interpretation must be determined by intellectual criteria rather than dynastic power. He found it vitally important that the criteria of what is true and false and what is right and wrong are universal, objective and accessible to everyone. In this respect Dai Zhen anticipated an essential feature of modern thought, and so it is not surprising that he caught the attention of seminal early modern thinkers such as Zhang Taiyan, Liang Qichao, Wang Guowei, Liu Shipei and, especially, Hu Shih.

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