BOOK REVIEW

Barry C. KEENAN, *Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation*. Honolulu: The University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. 132pp. ISBN 978-0-8248-3548-4

Barry C. Keenan has been acknowledged as an influential American Sinologist since his doctoral dissertation entitled *The Dewey Experiment in China: Educational Reform and Political Power in the Early Republic* was published by Harvard University Press in 1977. His deft approach to the sociological history of Chinese education was further exemplified in his second monograph, *Imperial China's Last Classical Academies: Social Change in the Lower Yangzi, 1864–1911*, published by the University of California Press in 1994. This academic background suggests that Keenan had been actively involved in the new cultural history movements that sprung up in the 1970s.

Since 1994, however, Keenan has shifted his attention to the history of Confucian education and its eternal verities. This is not only because his undergraduate training was in philosophy at Yale University, but was also stimulated by his persistent search for new and effective approaches to moral education for American college students. Based on his experiments with curricular innovation and pedagogical practice, as well as on the Harvard program in Confucian learning program overseen by Tu Weiming, one of the most famous neo-Confucians, Keenan became convinced that classical Confucian texts can play a positive role in the moral development of contemporary student in the early 21st century.

Barry's students at the first were curious about the notion that Chinese could attain moral value without a fundamental belief in God. His experiments with Confucian pedagogy mainly borrowed from Zhu Xi, the second important figure in the history of Confucianism, have successfully addressed this question. What his students and other Western audiences have less knowledge of is the original Confucian education and its significant value in Chinese history. *Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation* provides western readers with a very good introduction that can fill this knowledge gap.

It may be argued that Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation is also a very timely and helpful book for Western scholars in the field of education as well as educational policy makers. In the recent ten years, one of most difficult issues educators have to face has been the reconstruction of values in a situation where there is widespread skepticism of "modernity." Many Western educational scholars have shown a favorable attitude towards the Chinese education heritage. However, even those such as Ruth Hayhoe who have done extensive research on China's

education, have not taken a deep look at the pedagogical structure of Confucian education and its value in Chinese history. Keenan's book will thus not disappoint Western educational scholars who are looking for a new approach to reform.

As the title indicates, Self-Cultivation is a sound framework to capture the spirit or essential characteristic of the legacy of New Confucian education. Within this framework, Keenan's exposition is divided into three parts. Part I consists of two chapters which respectively examine the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty, and the re-construction of the ideal of self cultivation as well as its integration into the new Confucian education. In this second chapter, readers will come to understand the outstanding contributions of Zhu Xi and the difficult political and cultural situation in which he lived.

Part II is dedicated to demonstrating the pedagogical practice of new Confucian self cultivation and it also contains two chapters. According to Zhu Xi, self cultivation was composed of 8 steps. Chapter 3 examines the first five steps which aim to foster "personal cultivation" for moral development. They are as follows: "investigate things and affairs, extend one's knowing, make one's intention sincere, rectify one's mind, and cultivate one's person." Chapter 4 explains the last three steps which are categorized as "social development." They are "regulate the family, order the state, and bring peace to all." This part forms the core content of the book and Keenan gives very good accounts of the pedagogical practice of new Confucian self cultivation. Of special interest are his discovery of curricular techniques invented by Zhu Xi, such as the reading of reflexive texts and keeping a daily dairy of thoughts and interactions.

Composed of the same number of chapters, Part III covers the development of new Confucian self cultivation from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century. Chapter 5 addresses the reforms in Neo-Confuciansim in the Ming and early Qing Dynasties, covering 300 years from the 15th century onwards. Keenan's account mainly draws on the thought of Wang Yangming, the most influential new Confucian of the Ming Dynasty, and the movements to reexamine Confucius' definition of Humaness (*ren*) and the role of Ritual that arose in the early Qing Dynasty. Chapter 6 studies the synthesis of Confucian learning in the 19th century up until China was forced to accept "modern" ideals and educational patterns. Readers will thus gain a good understanding of why the ideal and practice of self cultivation developed by new Confucianism was so important in Chinese traditional education, as well as why China could maintain its social and cultural order in turbulent political contexts for such a long time.

This book has been widely acknowledged in the Serological community and among Chinese cultural historians. It should also be welcomed by the world of educational studies for its authentic thinking on humanistic values in personal (educational) development, and for its wonderful and detailed descriptions of

neo-Confucian pedagogical practices. However, it must be pointed out that there are some crucial gaps in the book, such as the relationship between Zhu Xi's self cultivation and the official teaching system shaped by the civil service examinations, as well as the reaction of Zhu Xi's students to the learning programs developed by their great master. These missing themes in Keenan's book have been taken up by many other outstanding historians of neo-Confucianism. It would have been helpful if Keenan had provided readers with references to this literature so they could fill the missing gaps.

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