



Chen, Lisheng 陳立勝, *From “Self-Cultivation” to Its “Methods”—Manifestation and Turn*

of the Confucian Theory of “Inner Sageliness”

從“修身”到“工夫”—儒家“內聖學”的開顯與轉折

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Self-cultivation has always been an important issue in Confucianism, but to date it has not been studied in length, not to mention a systematic study of its development. CHEN Lisheng’s 陳立勝 new book is such an endeavor. The book presents the history of Confucian philosophy that centers around self-cultivation and its methods and takes us back to the Confucian tradition of “knowledge about life” in a time when Confucianism has been distanced from people’s daily life and limited to professionals and academics.

The book consists of an Introduction and three additional parts, altogether 14 chapters. In the Introduction, Chen argues that the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation falls into four stages. First was the period of moral cultivation during the Spring and Autumn period when the purpose of self-cultivation was to become a morally superior person (*jun zi* 君子) and its focus was on the cultivation of morality in people and their behavior. Second was the period of mind drilling (*xin ling cao lian* 心靈操練) from the Tang 唐 dynasty to the Song 宋 dynasty when the purpose of self-cultivation was to “become sages” and the management of the will and ideas became its focus. In addition, the methods of self-cultivation were further developed both in scope and in depth. Third was the transitional period from the end of the Qing 清 dynasty to the early years of the Republic of China (1912–1949) when the key to self-cultivation was “self-enlightenment” (*jue wu* 覺悟), and its purpose was to become a new, morally superior person. The last stage is the modern period, another transitional period in which we begin to distinguish men from machines and doubt whether self-cultivation is

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still necessary. Doubt of this kind, together with challenges to the Confucian methods of self-cultivation, motivate us to think further about where Confucianism should go.

In Part One, Chen highlights the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation as a breakthrough in the axial age. He discusses the issue of “self-cultivation by being reverent” (*xiu ji yi jing* 修己以敬) beginning with Confucius, holding that as one of the basic propositions in Confucianism, “self-cultivation by being reverent” is to base the spirit of being respectful to heaven, men, and things on the consciousness of one’s own morality and life. Chen believes that the culture of being reverent prior to Confucius was elevated to the philosophical level through the proposition of “self-cultivation by being reverent” (32). In Part Two, Chen reviews the self-reflection phenomenon from Confucius’ time to the Song and the Ming 明 dynasties. He mainly discusses the self-reflection models, types, and domains. Following that, Chen elaborates on the methods of self-cultivation in Confucianism and then compares the Confucian view of anger and its way of controlling anger with the Stoic view of anger and its way of dealing with it. Chen also discusses two typical Confucian methods of self-cultivation, dreaming and “sitting in meditation” (*jing zuo* 靜坐). Finally, Chen explores in great depth the view on “punitive justice” (*yin guo bao ying* 因果報應) in Neo-Confucianism and how this view shaped one’s self-cultivation and education. Part Three highlights the turn and development of the Confucian theory of “inner sageliness,” that is, the mind-drilling period. Chen first analyzes the idea of “knowing only by oneself” (*du zhi* 獨知) of ZHU Xi 朱熹, and attempts to find the line of thought and characteristics of the Confucian theory of “inner sageliness” from the pre-Qin 秦 time to the Song and the Ming dynasties. Chen argues that Zhu’s idea of “knowing only by oneself” in effect paved the way for the later development of the idea of “intuitive knowledge” (*liang zhi* 良知) of WANG Yangming 王陽明. According to Chen, what is known only to oneself in Zhu’s theory is the same as what is meant by the “intuitive knowledge” in Wang’s theory. Chen then talks about the two meanings of “one flash of thought” (*yi nian* 一念): “thinking” (*yi nian* 意念) and “thinking of caution and fear” (*jie ju zhi nian* 戒懼之念). In this way, Chen reveals the significance of the issue of the “one flash of thought” in Yangming’s method of self-cultivation. Furthermore, Chen discusses the three key words in Yangming’s method of self-cultivation so as to show that ZHU Xi’s idea of “knowing only by oneself” was in effect in line with Yangming’s “intuitive knowledge.” Lastly, Chen discusses the method of self-cultivation of PAN Pingge 潘平格. He argues that Pan’s “method of self-cultivation with no method” (*wu gong fu zhi gong fu* 無工夫之工夫) was to construct by destructing, which seemed to refute the method of self-cultivation in Neo-Confucianism. However, it was in fact helping complete Neo-Confucianism, in particular, Yangmingism (*Yangming xue* 陽明學). It is in this sense that, Chen believes, Pan’s method is of great importance in the history of Chinese philosophy.

As a bold attempt to systematically study the self-cultivation issue in Confucianism, Chen’s book is invaluable and its merits are obvious.

First, it presents a unique methodology. It examines the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation and systematically presents the development of the Confucian idea of self-cultivation. It clearly defines and identifies various types of self-cultivation, such as “self-reflection,” “dreaming,” and “sitting in meditation.” The purpose is to present the diversity and variety of the methods of Confucian self-cultivation. Chen holds that the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation has attached much importance to the feelings of

the heart-mind and the body but little to the analysis of phenomena and the explanation of principles and ideas, which makes self-cultivation difficult to be universalized and operational. In this sense, Chen proposes a new model for the self-cultivation theory and for the methods of self-cultivation in Confucianism. Finally, Chen examines the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation from both the Chinese and the Western perspectives. He compares the view of anger and the way to deal with anger in Confucianism and those in the West and tries to find the differences among them, so as to manifest the two different types of self-cultivation subjects and their respective characteristics. Chen argues that both Confucianism and Stoicism emphasize the importance of resorting to oneself to control one's anger, though anger is other-regarding. "Anger tends to be other-regarding or society-regarding, the control of it, however, is self-regarding" (171). The best mental state of self-cultivation in both Confucianism and Stoicism lies in the "undisturbed mind" and both schools share similar "sense of the present." The Stoics focus on the present and tell people to release passion for both the past and the future. Similarly, the Neo-Confucians hold that one should "accept what happens, act appropriately, and let it go when it should" so that the present mind will not be affected (173). Chen argues that the fundamental difference between the two schools lies in their views on the "ways of anger control." According to Chen, Confucianism distinguishes two types of anger: one pertains to the physical body (*xue qi zhi nu* 血氣之怒), the other to morality (*yi li zhi nu* 義理之怒). Stoicism maintains that one should vent no anger at all. Through comparison and contrast, Chen reveals the universality of the Confucian ideas about emotions.

Second, Chen thoroughly explores the idea of "being alone" (*du* 獨) in Confucianism. In Chen's opinion, SHIMAMORI Tetsuo's 島森哲男 idea of "others' perspective" sheds new light on the issue of Confucian self-cultivation. Chen holds that in the Confucian idea of self-cultivation, "perspectives from spiritual beings" (*gui shen de mu guang* 鬼神的目光), "perspectives from others" (*ta zhe de mu guang* 他者的目光), and "light from one's intuitive knowledge" (*liang zhi zhi guang* 良知之光) play their respective roles. The perspectives from spiritual beings are a transcendent pair of watchful eyes when one is alone, hence they border on religiousness. The perspectives from others work in concrete living conditions and in interpersonal interactions, hence they allow those who are morally superior to examine themselves and be sincere. The light from one's intuitive knowledge is, in Chen's eyes, a sort of psychotherapy that purifies one's soul.

Last but not least, the book presents a panoramic view of the self-cultivation method in Neo-Confucianism. Compared with pre-Qin Confucianism, Chen argues, the self-cultivation methods in Neo-Confucianism underwent the following changes. First, the focus of self-cultivation shifted from behavior to the heart-mind. Second, control of one's thinking became an important part of the self-cultivation method. Third, unlike such methods of ex post facto self-reflection as Confucius' lifelong reflection and methods of post-reflection like the thrice-daily reflection by Zengzi 曾子, methods of immediate reflection after or when an idea occurs were also developed. Fourth, the scope and depth of self-cultivation was further extended. For example, "dreaming" became part of the self-cultivation method and control of one's thinking about life and death became part of one's self-cultivation. Fifth, ways of self-cultivation became more varied. For example, "sitting in meditation" became a way of living for intellectuals in the Song and the Ming dynasties, and making daily records or journals became part of

their self-cultivation. Sixth, the view of the mind and nature of a sage was reconstructed. From pre-Qin times to the Han dynasties, a sage was believed to be innate and thus rarely seen in generations, while WANG Yangming maintained that sages could be found anywhere on the street. Seventh, differing from Mencius' "development model" (*kuo chong mo shi* 擴充模式) and Xunzi's "re-forming model" (*gai zao mo shi* 改造模式), the self-cultivation methods in Neo-Confucianism were a "recovering model" (*fu qi chu mo shi* 復其初模式).

In general, Chen's book on self-cultivation has resolved some of the key issues with the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation and has greatly promoted research on self-cultivation and its methods, and will continue to do so in the future. However, problems with the book are also obvious.

First and foremost is a problem with organization. Chen divides the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation into four stages. However, he only discusses in detail the first two stages. He touches upon the third and fourth stages in the Introduction and then makes no mention of them later. In fact, the transitional period from the end of the Qing dynasty to the early years of the Republic of China was an important period, so there should have been a great deal for him to analyze and discuss. Unfortunately, he fails to do so. This makes his discussions less logical and his conclusions less convincing. As for his discussion about the necessity of self-cultivation in this time, when men are distinguished from machines, it is a new idea. Unfortunately, he fails to support his arguments with sufficient evidence and facts. This makes the book somewhat less organic or logical.

Moreover, the book tries to look at the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation from the perspective of the consciousness of dignity and the perspective of gradual moral internalization, which inevitably results in the neglect of various religious, economic, social, and political contexts that contributed to the formation of the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation. In this sense, Chen's approach to the Confucian self-cultivation tradition is more of a humanistic one, so it cannot present a whole picture of the breakthrough in this period of time, the pre-Qin period. This kind of over-humanistic interpretation of self-cultivation not only results in the loss of a transcendental dimension of beliefs of the Confucians but also neglects the responsibilities of Confucian sagely kings for education.

Third, although Chen discusses the Confucian theory of self-cultivation from the perspective of comparative philosophy and comparative religion, we still doubt the universality of its methods. Take, for example, the method of "dreaming." While WU Yubi 吳與弼 worked hard in his dreams, WANG Yangming received sudden enlightenment while dreaming and WANG Gen 王艮 dreamed that the sky was falling and he held it up by himself. Their ways of "dreaming" could only work for themselves and not for others. In this sense, Chen has failed to present a complete picture of Confucian methods of self-cultivation.

Finally, in the chapters on ZHU Xi, Chen attempts to establish connections between Zhu and Yangmingism, arguing that Zhu's "knowing only by oneself" is implicitly connected with Yangming's "intuitive knowledge." In fact, "knowing only by oneself" originally meant, in Zhu's view, the consciousness of the subtlety of the occurrence of an idea. This sort of consciousness was not in the strict moral sense of self-consciousness. Zhu's purpose was to deal with the self-deception crisis caused by man's desires and ideas by "being cautious and fearful" and by "being cautious when alone." When

Chen equates “being cautious when alone” with “knowing only by oneself,” he is then suspected of interpreting ZHU Xi’s “knowing only by oneself” with Yangming’s “intuitive knowledge.”

In conclusion, as the first monograph on Confucian self-cultivation, Chen’s book analyzes and discusses this Confucian tradition and offers a relatively new insight into the issue. Despite its problems, the book has not only presented the characteristics of the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation, but also demonstrated its universal values.

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