A Neo-Confucian "Theology of Liberation"? Humanism and Ethics in Levinas, Liberation Theology, and Wang Yangming*

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Abstract

This article reconsiders the sixteenth-century Idealist Neo-Confucian philosophy of Wang Yangming (1472–1529) in light of the development of twentieth-century Latin American liberation theology. After defining liberation theology, this study identifies the crucial contributions made to it by Emmanuel Levinas's assertion of the primacy of ethics over ontology and critique of the egocentric nature of Western philosophy. It then delineates the epistemological and deontological criticisms made of Roman Catholic orthodoxy—and institutionalized Christianity in general—by Latin American liberation theologians, particularly Enrique Dussel and José Porfirio Miranda. These are compared with Wang's critique of the Rationalist Neo-Confucianism that had been official orthodoxy and the legitimating philosophy for imperial China for three centuries. The study finds that Wang's Idealist philosophy incorporates epistemological, spiritual, and ethical perspectives with powerful democratic and liberationist elements that prefigure the development

* The author is grateful to Pierre J. Boyreau, Matthew W. Draper, Piper L. Sterling, and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and helpful suggestions on previous versions of this article. Support for this research was provided by the University of California San Diego Academic Senate Committee on Research (RW-266 and RY-261).

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HTR 118:1 (2025) 85–109

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025000069 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of late-twentieth-century Latin American liberation theology. Thus, contrary to the conventional view of Confucianism as a conservative philosophy, these elements in Wang's Neo-Confucianism render it a theology (or philosophy) of liberation.

Keywords

philosophical idealism, liberation theology, Neo-Confucianism, Emmanuel Levinas, Enrique Dussel, José Porfirio Miranda, Zhu Xi

Introduction

For over a century, Confucianism has generally been viewed in China, as in the West, as a conservative philosophy. In a sense, that has been by design. The Neo-Confucianism that legitimated the Chinese imperial regime was the product of an effort to fortify the native philosophy to which Ruist (Confucian)[1] scholars attributed China's greatness against the appeal of what they considered "barbarian" influences. That endeavor culminated in Zhu Xi's[2] (1130–1200) "Great Synthesis,"[3] which became the basis for the Chinese imperial civil service examination system until its abolition in 1905. The Qing's abandonment of its own Socratic legitimating myth triggered the New Culture Movement, as Chinese intellectuals sought non-Ruist alternatives as a foundation for a modern, democratic China.

After 1949, the Chinese Communist Party's characterization of Ruism as a "feudal" or "semi-feudal" philosophy became the new orthodoxy. Attempts to revive interest in Ruism during the Mao era were firmly suppressed.[4] Yet a certain ambivalence toward Ruism has always been reflected in the works of Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi and the party's practice. Mao and Liu relied upon Ruist concepts to explain Marxism in Chinese terms, citing both Zhu's ideas and those of Wang Yangming's Idealist School of Neo-Confucianism.[5] Since the 1980s, however,

[1] Ruism is the Mandarin term used for what Jesuit missionaries termed Confucianism based on their latinization of Kongfuzi (Master Kongzi) as Confucius.

[2] Chinese names are given in their traditional Chinese order, with the family name preceding the given name.

[3] Wing-tsit Chan, "The Great Synthesis in Chu Hsi," in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (ed. Wing-tsit Chan; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 588–653.

[4] René Goldman, "Moral Leadership in Society: Some Parallels between the Confucian 'Noble Man' and the Jewish 'Zaddik,'" *Philosophy East and West* 45 (1995) 329–65; Merle Goldman, "China's Anti-Confucian Campaign, 1973–1974," *The China Quarterly* (1975) 435–62; John Bryan Starr, "Weeding through the Old to Bring forth the New," *Asian Survey* 15 (1975) 1–12; Germaine A. Hoston, *The State, Identity, and the National Question in China and Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 434.

[5] See Germaine A. Hoston, "Revolutionary Confucianism? Neo-Confucian Idealism and Modern Chinese Revolutionary Thought," *Political Research Quarterly* 77 (2024) 607–19, https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129241228489/. There I also explain that both the Rationalist and Idealist Neo-Confucian Schools are in fact both rationalist and idealist. I capitalize the names of these schools here to indicate that they are the official names of the schools in Chinese (*Lixue*, literally, "School of Principle/Reason" and *Xinxue*).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025000069 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there has been a revival of Ruist studies, particularly regarding Wang's thought.[6] As a philosophy that "set Chinese thought free" in the Ming period (1368–1644),[7] Wang's thought encapsulates democratic impulses found in the classics of Kongzi and Mengzi.[8] It also articulates a spirituality consonant with key elements of Latin American liberation theology. It is argued here that the full promise of Wang's Neo-Confucianism as a theology with political dimensions promoting humanism and justice is realized when it is recognized to constitute a Neo-Confucian "theology of liberation."[9]

This argument is premised on the observation, made by German Sinophiles Gottfried Leibniz and Christian Wolff, that there is a concordance among the ideas expressed by the various world religions.[10] Obviously there are differences between the socioeconomic contexts in which liberation theology emerged in Latin America and Wang's Ming China, as well as divergences between their philosophico-religious antecedents. It is precisely such contrasts that render the significance of the harmony between their key tenets—and its implications—worthy of serious consideration.

This article first defines liberation theology, highlighting the crucial role of Emmanuel Levinas's work in its formulation. Levinas's postulation of ethics as "first philosophy"[11] is central to the liberation theologians discussed here, because it provides fertile ground upon which to support their claims. The attribution of primacy to the Other repudiates what they consider the degeneration of the original Christian message into a stifling dogma that has reduced God to a mute idol. Five centuries earlier in China, the effects of the institutionalization of Zhu's Neo-Confucianism had sparked a remarkably similar reaction. Wang Yangming's reaffirmation of Kongzi's original call to ethical action possessed this vital component of liberation theology.

[6] George L. Israel, "The Renaissance of Wang Yangming Studies in the People's Republic of China," *Philosophy East and West* 66.3 (2016) 1001–19.

[7] Wing-tsit Chan, introduction to Wang Yang-Ming, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings* (trans. Wing-tsit Chan; Records of Civilization: Sources and Studies; New York: Columbia University Press, 1963) xl.

[8] This study uses the Chinese names of Kongzi and Mengzi, rather than the latinized Confucius and Mencius, respectively.

[9] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (ed. and trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson; rev. ed.; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

[10] David Mungello, *Leibniz and Confucianism: The Search for Accord* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1977) 40ff.; idem, "Leibniz's Interpretation of Neo-Confucianism," *Philosophy East and West* 21 (1971) 3–22, at 15–16; Martin Schönfeld, "From Confucius to Kant—The Question of Information Transfer," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 33 (2006) 67–81, at 74; cf. Germaine A. Hoston, "Neo-Confucianism and the Development of German Idealism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 85.2 (April 2024) 257–87.

[11] Adam T. Peperzak, preface to *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* (ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi; Studies in Continental Thought; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) xii.

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Key Elements of a Theology of Liberation

What is liberation theology? Does it even make sense to talk in terms of "theology" with regard to Ruism, long deemed in the West to constitute more an ethical code for cultured gentlemen than a religion?[12] Max Weber insisted that Ruism was not a religion because, unlike spiritual Daoism, Buddhism, and Christianity, it lacked a "concept of salvation" and belief in an afterlife with rewards and punishments to hold individuals accountable.[13]

Nevertheless, the founders of both Neo-Confucian schools shared deeply spiritual perspectives centered on a higher power they called Heaven (天 *Tian*). Fung Yu-lan notes that this term has had five referents: 1) the physical sky or Heaven as contrasted with the "Earth"; 2) a ruling *Tian*, evoked in the anthropomorphic term "Imperial Heaven Supreme Emperor" (皇天上帝 *Huangtian Shangdi*); 3) a concept "equivalent to the concept of Fate"; 4) a "naturalistic" conception equating Heaven to Nature; and 5) a force or divine being that embodies the highest principle governing the cosmos.[14] The second sense is historically associated with the notion of a Heavenly God (天帝 *Tiandi*),[15] in the Song era connected with the notion of the Great Ultimate (太极 *Taiji*), the supreme cause of the creation of all things.[16] The Great Ultimate is part of the Ruist metaphysical tradition and refers to a supreme force that is the origin of everything in the universe, depicted by some as nontheistic, while the notion of *Tian* represents an anthropomorphic theistic manifestation of the Great Ultimate.[17] In any event, characteristics associated with all but the naturalistic referent are shared with the God of Abraham, Yahweh. As creator of the universe, Yahweh is physically "in Heaven," exercises ultimate control over the universe, and dictates the good. The notion of *Tiandi* that had emerged by the Zhou period likewise entailed political authority: "Shang-ti stands in supreme judgment of the entire dynastic line. Heaven is the supreme moral will on which the endurance of the dynasty depends. Heaven is the God of History."[18]

[12] Matteo Ricci and Niccolá Trigault, *China in the 16th Century: The Journals of Matteo Ricci, 1583–1610* (trans. L. J. Gallagher; New York: Random House, 1953) 30; Tang Chun-I, "The Development of Ideas of Spiritual Value in Chinese Philosophy," *Philosophy East and West* (1959) 32–34, at 32.

[13] Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (New York: Doubleday, 1960; Anchor Books ed., 1962) 123–25.

[14] Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy* (trans. Derk Bodde; 2 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952–1953) 1:31.

[15] Yu Yamanoi, "The Great Ultimate and Heaven in Chu Hsi's Philosophy," in *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism* (ed. Wing-tsit Chan; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986) 88–89.

[16] Ha Tai Kim, "Transcendence without and within: The Concept of T'ien in Confucianism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 3 (1972) 146–60, at 153.

[17] See Bin Song, "Comparative Theology as a Liberal Art," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 31 (2020), https://rstudies.org/index.php/jirs/article/view/531/525, 103–05. Note that Zhu Xi claims: "The Great Ultimate is nothing other than principle" (Chan, "Great Synthesis," 638, 641). He also says: "The Lord (*Ti*) is principle acting as master" (idem, "Great Synthesis," 643).

[18] Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1985) 48; cf. Kim, "Transcendence without and within," 150ff.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025000069 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Despite the differences in understanding of these concepts, the Ruist Heaven, like the Judeo-Christian God, exercises dominion over humankind, imposes upon humankind those obligations of the Will of Heaven (*tianming)*—the Way of Heaven (*Dao*)—and intervenes actively in human affairs, as when bestowing its mandate to rule *(tianming*) upon the emperor (the Son of Heaven) and withdrawing it.[19] With its metaphysical implications, *Tiandi* viewed as a representation of the Great Ultimate is consistent with the Judeo-Christian notion of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which also has metaphysical implications, especially in the mystical and esoteric parts of that tradition. Such a Chinese Supreme Being is as properly the subject matter of theological inquiry as the God of the Torah, the Bible, and the Qur'an. The term *theology* is used here, then, to refer to the consideration of the spiritual aspects of Wang's views as they resemble or depart from those of Latin American liberation theologians.

Theology and Philosophy in Levinas's Thought

Such broadly defined theological inquiry ultimately underlies Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy. He defines the obligation to the Other as comparable to that owed to the unnamed God; humility before both is demanded by the fact that one can no more fully "know" the Other than one can know God. Renowned for his *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas is also known for his writings on Hebrew theology.[20] While the theological writings rely upon scripture based on divine revelation, and philosophy does not, Levinas's theological views left their indelible imprint upon Levinas's philosophy.

The primary philosophical influences on Levinas were the work of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Along with the "horizon structure" of consciousness in Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, the role of intersubjectivity—which "occurs in the course of our conscious attribution of intentional acts to other subjects, . . . [as] we put ourselves into the other one's shoes"—is decisive.[21] It is on this point that Levinas departed from Husserl. The latter's assumption that the other is "just like me" is dangerous and disrespectful to the other, in Levinas's view. Disenchanted with Husserl's notion of "essences" as excessively abstract, Levinas turned to the concrete approach to existence found in Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927).

Heidegger's work demarcated the "ontological turn" in Western philosophy by redefining hermeneutics as "ontology." Claiming to demonstrate "the structures

[19] For other insightful comparisons between Confucianism and Judaism, see Goldman, "Moral Leadership in Society."

[20] Originally published in 1961 in French as *Totalité et l'infini*. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (trans. Alphonso Lingis; Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). The theological writings include those in idem, *Beyond the Verse*: *Talmudic Readings and Lectures* (trans. Gary D. Mole; London: Continuum, 2007).

[21] Christian Beyer, "Edmund Husserl," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. E. N. Zalta), plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/husserl/.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025000069 Published online by Cambridge University Press

constitutive of the particular kind of being that is the human being"—*Dasein*—his premise was that it is not pure consciousness in which human beings are originally constituted. His point of departure was not consciousness, but *Dasein* (the Human Being) in its being. Initially impressed with Heidegger's philosophy, Levinas was soon disillusioned by it, as he contemplated the connection between Heidegger's ideas and his adherence to the 1933 Oath of Allegiance to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi State that placed Levinas in a prison camp during the 1940s.[22]

It is astonishing that Levinas should ever have been attracted by Heidegger's account. Characterizing human being as "Being-With" (*Mitsein*), Heidegger rejected the "Cartesian thinking thing conceived as a substance," arguing that Dasein constituted "equipment [that] is often revealed to us as being for the sake of (the lives and projects of) other Dasein."[23] That view affirmed the logic of instrumental reason, the perversity of which was accentuated with the rise of fascism. Levinas finally repudiated Heidegger's approach in his essay "Is Ontology Fundamental?" (1951), explaining the unacceptability of Heidegger's position:

> How . . . can the *relation* with *being* be, from the outset, anything other than its comprehension as being (*étant*) . . . ?
>
> Unless it is the [O]ther (*Autrui*). Our relation with the other (*autrui*) certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension. Not only because knowledge of the other (*autrui*) requires, outside of all curiosity, also sympathy or love, ways of being distinct from impassible contemplation, but because in our relation with the other (*autrui*), he does not affect us in terms of a concept. He is a being (*étant*) and counts as such.[24]

Levinas not only asserts the primacy of ethics here; he also demonstrates the haziness of the boundary between philosophy and theology. His *Totality and Infinity* presents the relationship between two individuals in phenomenological terms. It describes, from the perspective of the ego (the self), the encounter with the Other—the latter capitalized because the responsibility the ego owes to the Other is infinite, like one's responsibility to God ("the Infinite"). The Other is absolutely unknowable, as in Hebrew theology, because it is impossible to know God or the Other fully. The Other summons me, imploring, "please do not kill me" with his eyes, demanding that I acknowledge my infinite responsibility to him.[25] Clearly this phenomenological account is derived from the two sets of obligations stipulated in the Ten Commandments. The format of the commandments, etched on two tablets, reflects the intimate relationship between parallel sets of obligations: those owed

[22] Richard A. Cohen, introduction to Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other* (trans. Nidra Poller; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006) viii.

[23] Michael Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 ed; ed. Edward N. Zalta), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/heidegger/; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson; Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

[24] Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental? (1951)," in *Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* (ed. Peperzak et al.), 5–6.

[25] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 40–52, 75.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025000069 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to God and those owed to our neighbor.[26] Neither set of responsibilities can be fulfilled unless the other is as well.

Therefore, the relationship between individuals is not a matter of ontology but of prayer: "The essence of discourse is prayer [*prière*, which, in French, can also mean imploring the other]."[27] The crucial element that Levinas offers to liberation theology, then, is the primacy of ethics as "first philosophy," based on a notion of *embodiment* that is fundamentally different from that of Heidegger. For Levinas, our own humanity is affirmed and confirmed in our humaneness toward the Other within the web of relationships in which we are enmeshed as human beings.[28]

Consequently, any acceptable philosophy must begin, then, with acknowledgment of the preeminence of the responsibility that every individual owes to the Other, to whom one owes the same duty owed to the Infinite. Levinas's "humanism of the other"[29] repudiates the "egology" of Western philosophy,[30] and opposes the Enlightenment tendency to set "humanism" against faith in God. Instead, for Levinas, faith commands humanism, which is incomplete without such faith. This insight would help to inspire a new Latin American theology that emerged in the decade after *Totality and Infinity* was published.

Catholicism, Marxism, and the Advent of Liberation Theology

Liberation theology emerged from a confluence of circumstances. The Vatican's Second Ecumenical Council (Vatican II) (1962–1965) was convened in response to Pope John XXIII's conviction that increasing secularization required "updating" (*aggiornamento*) the Church to enhance its appeal.[31] To promote additional change, in 1968, the Latin American bishops met in Medellín, Colombia, where they adopted the tenet of the preferential option for the poor.[32] Three factors encouraged this posture: 1) Jesus had emphasized serving the poor and "being rich became poor"[33] to "t[ake] to himself all the consequences of men's sinful condition";[34] 2) the extreme poverty afflicting the vast majority of mass-goers in Latin America

[26] David L. Baker, "Ten Commandments, Two Tablets: The Shape of the Decalogue," *Themelios: An International Journal for Pastors and Students of Theological and Religious Studies* 30.3 (2005) 6–22, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/ten-commandments-two-tablets-the-shape-of-the-decalogue/.

[27] Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?," 7.

[28] Emmanuel Levinas, "Without Identity" (1970), in Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other* (intro. by Richard A. Cohen; trans. Nidra Poller; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006) 58–69.

[29] Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 3–8.

[30] Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?," 43ff.

[31] *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret* (ed. Edward P. DeBerri et al.; 4th rev. ed.; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; Washington, DC: Center of Concern, 2003).

[32] The Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), "Poverty of the Church," in *Medellín Documents on Peace and Justice* (1968), https://www.geraldschlabach.net/medellin-1968-excerpts/%20, esp. paras. 9–11.

[33] 2 Cor 8:9; CELAM, "Poverty of the Church," para. II.4.c.

[34] See Phil 2:5–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025000069 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and their perception that the clergy was indifferent to their needs; and 3) the observation of *dependency theory* scholars[35] that underdeveloped Latin American societies existed in "dependence on a center of economic power [the U.S.], around which they gravitate," which caused economic inequality and oppression within Latin America.[36]

Like dependency theorists, Latin American theologians found Marxism useful for analyzing the systemic nature of the ills confronting the poor. Although other figures are mentioned where appropriate, the focus of this article is the work of Enrique Dussel and José Porfirio Miranda. Both adapt Levinas's critique of Western ontology by incorporating the Marxian analysis of political economy. Dussel, who has disseminated Levinas's views among his colleagues,[37] is a traditional orthodox Catholic who was initially suspicious of Marxism. Under Levinas's influence, Dussel reread Marx, especially Marx's early writings, through the lens of his (Dussel's) own new "ethical hermeneutics"[38] and realized that Marx was a humanist always attuned to the perspective of the Other. Dussel and Miranda have combined Marxian analysis with Levinas's philosophy to proclaim the possibility of a humanistic socialism consonant with the Judeo-Christian prophetic tradition.[39]

In their early writings, Marx and Engels denounced their initial Hegelianism as "The German Ideology,"[40] and Marx advocated the unity of theory and praxis: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it."[41] This assertion is appealing to theologians like Leonardo Boff, who repudiates conflation of the heavenly city—Augustine's "City of God"—with the institutional Church. After surviving persecution, the early Church known as "the Way" "did not abolish the existing order. Rather, it assumed it and adapted itself to that order." Once Constantine became Christian, "a paganization of Christianity

[35] G. Arroyo, "Pensamiento latinoamericano sobre subdesarrollo y dependencía externa," *Mensaje* (1968) 516–20; Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependencia y desarrollo en América Latina: Ensayo de interpretación sociológica* (Mexico: Siglo Ventiuno Editores, 1969); Fernando Henrique Cardoso, *Cuestiones de sociología del desarrollo en América Latina* (Santiago, Chile: Ed. Universitaria, 1968); idem, "Desarrollo y dependencia: Perspectivas en el análisis sociológico," in *Sociología del desarrollo* (Buenos Aires: Solar, 1970); Theotonio dos Santos, *Dependencia y cambio social* (Santiago: Centro de Estudios Socio Económicos, Universidad de Chile, 1972).

[36] The Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), "Peace," in *Medellín Documents,* para. 8; Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time* (1972; trans. Patrick Hughes; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978) 275–78, 323n.

[37] Enrique Dussel, *Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana. II. Eticidad y moralidad* [Toward an ethics of Latin American liberation. II. The ethical life and morality] (Buenos Aires: Siglo Vientiuno Argentina Editores, 1973); idem, "Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures)," in *The Postmodern Debate in Latin America* (ed. John Beverley, Michael Aronna, and José Oviedo; *Boundary 2* 20.3; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995) 65–76, at 65–66.

[38] Michael D. Barber, *Ethical Hermeneutics: Rationality in Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation* (Perspectives in Continental Philosophy 2; (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998) 166.

[39] Ibid., 90–105.

[40] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German Ideology (1845–1846)," in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (ed. Robert C. Tucker; 2nd ed.; New York: Norton, 1978) 146–200.

[41] Ibid., 145 (italics in original).

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took place." The Church, theretofore "more of a movement than an institution, became an heir of the empire's institutions: law, organization by diocese and parish, bureaucratic centralization, positions, and titles."[42] Over time, the Church increasingly allied itself with "secular powers," and its dependence upon them was reflected in its teachings.

Prior to the Medellín conference, the Roman Catholic Church had addressed socioeconomic injustice in a series of papal encyclicals that formed Catholic social doctrine. Written specifically to counter the appeal of Marxism, this doctrine has consistently reasserted the right to private property (disingenuously distinguished from "private ownership" connoting "use"), which is predicated upon a capitalistic economic system that allegedly promotes expansion of human freedom.[43] John Paul II briefly embraced the "preferential option for the poor," but the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith firmly rejected that posture. Ironically, Miranda notes, "the encyclicals take their diagnosis of society from Marx, a [class] society, in which some are owners of the means of production and others, the proletariat, are able to contribute only their own labor and are forced to submit to the decision-making power of the capitalists." Yet, *Populorum Progressio* [Progress of the peoples] (1967) echoed *Quod Apostolici Muneris* (1878), which "condemns the socialist critique of private property," "attack[ing] . . . 'messianisms laden with promises but fabricators of illusions,'" a thinly veiled reference to Marxism.[44] Some encyclicals affirm the dignity of workers, yet they do not acknowledge that the inequality in the distribution of property arises directly from capitalism as a system, in which payment of wages representing less than the value of the commodities produced by the workers is a sine qua non, as both Marxist and (in modified form) non-Marxist economists recognize.[45] Otherwise, individual enterprises would have difficulty surviving, since so few other variable inputs can be controlled by them. Omission of this point has allowed the Church to urge obedience to established authorities and the entire socioeconomic order, which precludes advocacy of radical change.[46] Liberation theologians reject the Church's response to socioeconomic injustice as inadequate. Insofar as it fails to support the Other—victims of oppression—the Church ineluctably supports their oppressors: It cannot avoid "choosing sides."[47]

[42] Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (1981) (trans. John W. Diercksmeier; New York: Crossroad, 1990) 50.

[43] See especially Pope Leo XIII, "Rerum Novarum" (1891), https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html.

[44] José Porfirio Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression* (1971) (trans. J. Eagleson; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974) xiv.

[45] Karl Marx, "*Capital*, Vol. 1," in *Marx-Engels Reader* (ed. Tucker), 344–61; Patrick M. Emerson, *Intermediate Microeconomics* (Corvallis: Oregon State University, 2019) 133–55.

[46] E.g., but not exclusively, in Pope Leo XIII, "Quod Apostilici Muneris: Letter of Pope Leo XIII (1878)," https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_xiii_enc_28121878_quod-apostolici-muneris.html.

[47] Juan-Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (trans. J. Drury; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976) 43.

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Such a church, Miranda asserts, betrays the original message of the Bible, which is consistent with Marx's "Christian humanism."[48] Indeed, Miranda insists that "Christianity is Communism,"[49] depicting "Marx's Thought as a Conscious Continuation of Early Christianity."[50] Miranda extends Levinas's critique of Western egology to trace the Church's betrayal back to the "philosophy of oppression" that "has its roots in Western and Greek philosophy."[51] He concludes: "The Greek *technē* cannot be dissociated either from its metaphysics or [from] its ethics." Western positivism, with its claims of objective empiricism beholding the object of its "contemplation" from afar, is a product of the pernicious influence of Greek philosophy. The problem lies in "the very concept of being, the 'in itself,' which was the absolute criterion of the Greek mind."[52] Levinas identified the result: "A philosophy of power, ontology, as a fundamental philosophy which does not call into question the self, is a philosophy of injustice."[53]

The task, then, is to eradicate Greek philosophical influences to disclose the true message of the Bible, which bears a different kind of knowledge, the product of revelation. Rudolf Bultmann averred: "The independent gnosis which relies on itself and which lacks 'obedience' inevitably sees its objects as phenomena which are present at hand. It does not need to submit itself to them, to 'hear' them."[54] Only "dehellenization" of Christianity, Miranda says, will avert the tendency "to prescind from the cry of the poor who seek justice by objectifying God. . . . [A]t that very moment he is no longer God but an idol" who does not speak. Such idolatry is reflected in the Church's focus on "cultus," on the *form* of worshiping God rather than on obeying God's command to *do* justice. The prophets "deny that cultus and prayer could put the people in contact with Yahweh while injustice exists on earth." Isaiah specifically warns how God will respond to such disobedience: "When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood."[55]

Thus, Miranda agrees with Marx's emphasis on the unity of theory and practice. One cannot even really know God, he insists, without engaging in the action

[48] José Porfirio Miranda, *Marx against the Marxists: The Christian Humanism of Karl Marx* (trans. J. Drury; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books,1980) (originally titled *El cristianismo de Marx* [Marx's Christianity] when published in Spanish in 1978).

[49] José Porfirio Miranda, "Christianity Is Communism," in *Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader* (ed. D. W. Ferm; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986) 1–20. Here, Miranda is not referring to state communism as practiced in the former Soviet Union and its satellite states, but rather stateless communism as advocated by Marx, which refers to social (not state) ownership of the means of production.

[50] Chapter title in Miranda, *Marx against the Marxists*.

[51] Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, xix.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46.

[54] Rudolf Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding* (ed. Robert W. Funk; trans. Louise Pettibone Smith; New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 217.

[55] Isa. 1:15, 17 (NRSVUE); Cf., Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, 58–59.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025000069 Published online by Cambridge University Press

necessary to fulfil God's commands—not only to love God and the Other but to render *love* a truly active verb, rather than mere sentiment, by doing justice. "Those who desire a direct relationship with God yet prescind from the 'other' . . . have enclosed themselves in solipsism and in the irremediable immanence of solitude."[56]

This emphasis on the need to act with an orientation that is always open to and responsive to the Other is echoed by Boff.[57] "The human being is defined, in contrast to the animal, as a being open to the totality of reality, as a nexus of relationships going in every direction."[58] Likewise, Gustavo Gutiérrez stresses that the Gospel commands us to "do the truth": "Faith in a God who loves us and calls us to the gift of full communion with him and brotherhood among men not only is not foreign to the transformation of the world; it leads necessarily to the building up of that brotherhood and communion in history."[59] All liberation theologians agree that the Church's failure to do justice places the Church on the side of the oppressors, and the Church itself alienates human beings from God as well as from their fellow human beings.

From this discussion, the key features of a theology or philosophy of liberation are readily discerned. They include: 1) repudiation of distortion of the faith that reduces the God/Supreme Being to a mute idol; 2) reassertion of the true message of the Scriptures, which call humankind to obedience to God/Heaven; 3) ontological and epistemological perspectives that support elevation of humane concern for the Other demanded of humankind by divine command; and 4) emphasis on action as essential to knowing the divine and to realizing humanity and justice, as opposed to mere cultus. All these elements were present in the thought of Wang Yangming, five centuries before the emergence of Latin American liberation theology.

Neo-Confucianism as Theology and Orthodoxy

When Wang elaborated his philosophy, Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism had been the Chinese empire's official legitimating philosophy for nearly three centuries.[60] It was Zhu who compiled the Four Books, the orthodox teachings (*tongdao*) transmitted from the ancient (semi-mythical) sage kings through Kongzi and then through Mengzi, whose stature Zhu elevated by including the *Mengzi* in his compilation.[61]

[56] José Porfirio Miranda, *Being and the Messiah: The Message of St. John* (trans. John Eagleson; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1973) 137.

[57] Leonardo Boff, "Salvation in Liberation: The Theological Meaning of Socio-historical Liberation," in Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, S*alvation and Liberation: In Search of a Balance between Faith and Politics* (trans. Robert R. Barr; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988) 13; Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 251.

[58] Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 251.

[59] Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 10.

[60] Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart* (Neo-Confucian Studies; New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) 1–66 passim.

[61] These are: 1) the *Analects* and 2) the *Mengzi*, collections of dialogues between Kongzi and Mengzi, on the one hand, and their respective students, on the other; 3) the *Great Learning*; and 4) the *Doctrine of the Mean*.

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Zhu's reformulation of Ruism is based on the cosmogony outlined in the Diagram of the Great Ultimate prepared by Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073). The Great Ultimate contains the Principle (*Li* 理) that governs movement and quiescence in the universe. It had generated the complementary material forces of *yin* (the female principle, associated with quiescence and passivity) and *yang* (the male principle, associated with movement and activity). As described in the *Book of Changes*, activity and quiescence alternate, each giving rise to the other. The interaction between these principles produced the "Two Forms" of Heaven (governed by *yang*) and Earth (governed by *yin*), then the five elements (earth, wood, metal, fire, and water), and finally, all the various things in the universe.[62]

Zhu deploys this cosmogony to settle the conflict between Mengzi and Xunzi regarding human nature decisively in favor of Mengzi's claim that human nature is fundamentally good. Moreover, Zhu also finds in Zhou's Diagram of the Great Ultimate[63] a cosmic explanation for the need to engage in continual self-cultivation of the four cardinal Confucian virtues: humanity (or humaneness) (*ren* 仁); righteousness or justice (*yi* 义); propriety *(li* 礼*);* and wisdom (*zhi* 智). Zhu equates the Great Ultimate with Universal Principle (*Li* 理) and incorporates the classical notion of material force (*qi* 气) and then the distinction introduced by Zhou's students, Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, between material force and Principle (*li* 理). Zhu refers to the individual physical items that exist—including human beings—each of which has a physical form and a particular function, as *qi* (器 "instruments").[64] This terminology is intimately related to Zhu's epistemology, which determines his prescription for the proper method of cultivating virtue.

Zhu also reintroduces the notion of the Dao (道), which Kongzi used to refer to the Way of Heaven. Zhu uses it in two ways, the more important being to refer to the body of orthodox teachings transmitted from the ancient sage kings through Kongzi to Zhu himself.[65] Moreover, in Zhu's cosmogony, the Dao is that which subsists "above shapes and forms" (*xing er shang* 形而上)[66] and "has no shape or shadow." By contrast, everything that exists in the material world has shape or form (*xing er xia* 形而下) and a specific function. Only when Principle is combined with material force can any principle assume a specific shape, and therefore both *Li*—Universal Principle—and material force are universal in a way that a *qi* (instrument) is not.[67]

[62] Fung, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 2:546; Yang Guorong 杨国荣, "Xinxue xingcheng de lishi qianti" 心学形成的历史前提 [The historical preconditions for the formation of idealism], in *Wang Yangming* 王阳明 [Wang Yangming] (Nanjing: Nanjing Daxue Chuban-she 南京大学出版社, 2010).

[63] Yamanoi, "The Great Ultimate"; Aimin Teng, "On Chu Hsi's Theory of the Great Ultimate," in *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism* (ed. Chan), 93–111.

[64] Fung, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 2:546ff; Wing-tsit Chan, "Chang Tsai's Philosophy of Material Force," in *Source Book* (ed. Chan), 495–543; and idem, "Great Synthesis."

[65] Julia Ching, *To Acquire Wisdom: The Way of Wang Yangming* (Studies in Oriental Culture 11; Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University Oriental Monograph Series 16; New York: Columbia University Press, 1976) 6.

[66] This is the term for "metaphysics" in modern Chinese.

[67] The discussion in this section is based on Zhu's writings in Chan, "Great Synthesis," 588–653.

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Thus, the notion of *li*—principle—is both multiple (all things have it, including human beings) and unitary, in the sense that the universal *Li* (the Dao) subsumes all potential forms in a single Principle that defines and governs the universe. This Universal Principle—which emanates from Heaven, the divine—is perfection itself; but material force (*qi* 气) has both pure and impure content. Thus, when material force combines with Principle in a physical form, the purity of that item's *li* (principle) is inevitably diminished. As Fung explains Zhu's cosmogony, "Principle, though wholly good in itself, loses its perfection as soon as it becomes actualized in the {material force}, owing to the impediments imposed by the latter."[68] Consequently, while the *li* (principle) of human beings is perfect, once individual persons (instruments—a term strikingly similar to Heidegger's "things-at-hand") physically exist, their material force possesses both purity and impurities. It follows that "among human beings, too, there should be some who receive the {material force} in its purer aspects and some in its less pure." Therefore, Zhu concludes, "in the cases of those who are born wise {sages}, material force is extremely clear and principle is not obstructed."[69] Conversely, persons who are evil have more impurities in their material force.

Hence there is the necessity for self-cultivation. Kongzi asserts that human beings are "born with uprightness."[70] Mengzi goes further, contending that all persons have the roots of the four virtues implanted in them by Heaven. That all feel the urge to help a child about to fall into a well is attributable to the "mind-and-heart[71] of humanity," which "cannot bear to see the suffering of others." This "feeling of commiseration is the beginning of humanity; the feeling of shame and dislike [of one's own wrongdoing] is the beginning of righteousness; the feeling of deference and compliance is the beginning of propriety; and the feeling of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom." Anyone who has not been endowed with these "Four Beginnings" is simply "not a human being."[72] Yet Kongzi admits his own need for self-cultivation: It was fifty-five years before he "could follow [his] heart's desire without transgressing moral principles."[73]

[68] Fung, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 2:553–54. Both Fung and Chan use extensive brackets in their quotations. Therefore, in quotations from their texts, brackets refer to their editorial editions, while braces refer to my own. In this particular quotation, I have replaced Fung's use of "Ether" with "material force." In my own translations, brackets indicate my insertions.

[69] Zhu, in Chan, "Great Synthesis," 626; Julia Ching, "Chu Hsi on Personal Cultivation," in *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism* (ed. Chan), 276.

[70] *Analects* 6:17, in James Legge, *The Four Books* (reprint ed.; Taipei: Ch'eng-wen Publishing, 1971) 190.

[71] Unlike Greek philosophy, which clearly distinguishes the cognitive notion mind (*nous*) from the heart (*kardía*) as the emotive center, classical Chinese philosophy makes no such distinction, combining both aspects in the single term *xin* 心 (cf. Li Zehou, "Some Thoughts on Ming-Qing Neo-Confucianism," in *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism* [ed. Chan], 553). Therefore, *xin* is translated here as "mind-and-heart."

[72] *The Works of Mencius* 2A:6, in Legge, *Four Books*, 202. Note that Legge's translation omits this key point. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from this volume are mine.

[73] *Analects* 2:4, in ibid., 147.

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Zhu agrees with Mengzi that human nature is fundamentally good, but he explains that this "nature" is the state before activity begins, while the feelings are the state when activity has started.[74] Therefore, Zhu endorses Cheng Yi's two-step approach to self-cultivation: One must first combat the influence of the feelings by establishing purity of thought and then seek "the extension of knowledge through the continu[ous] investigation of things . . . in order finally to gain a 'free and automatic comprehension of [everything].'"[75] Although one cannot investigate everything, eventually one "will naturally achieve a far and wide {understanding} of Principle itself."[76]

Zhu's Neo-Confucianism is "rational" because the central concept *li* also means "reason"; yet it also offers a spiritual connection to Heaven that can fulfill spiritual needs without requiring recourse to alien religions such as Buddhism. In nativist fashion, Zhu's Neo-Confucianism retains and reinforces the notion of the Mandate of Heaven as the Confucian legitimating myth: The emperor is virtuous because his material force has fewer impurities than that of others. Partly because of these strengths, Zhu's philosophy soon became the official political orthodoxy.

Wang Yangming's Critique of Zhu's Neo-Confucianism: Humanism, Justice, and Ethics[77]

Wang was an esteemed scholar, official, and military leader of the Ming period.[78] As the son of a distinguished scholar-official, Wang was educated in Buddhism and Daoism as well as in the Ruist classics, but Zhu's orthodoxy became the dominant philosophical influence in Wang's life.

Nonetheless, after passing the civil service examinations and while working as an official for a number of years, Wang was already developing an alternative philosophy, one that marked a dramatic reorientation away from Zhu's thought. Two major factors animated this transformation. The first was Wang's own lack of success applying Zhu's self-cultivation method. For Wang, Ruism was not merely knowledge to be acquired in order to gain status. It was a living faith, a spiritual discipline to which he committed himself and which he sought to reflect in every aspect of his life.[79] Profoundly disturbed when he failed in exercising that

[74] Chan, "Great Synthesis," 600–01.

[75] Fung, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 2:551–62ff.

[76] Chan, "Great Synthesis," 610.

[77] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Chinese in this section (including those from the Legge volume) are mine.

[78] George L. Israel, *Doing Good and Ridding Evil in Ming China: The Political Career of Wang Yangming* (Sinica Leidensia; Leiden: Brill, 2014).

[79] Tu Wei-ming, *Neo-Confucian Thought in Action: Wang Yang-ming's Youth (1472–1509)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) passim; Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000) 59–72; Wei-ming Tu, "Subjectivity and Ontological Reality: An Interpretation of Wang Yang-ming's Mode of Thinking," *Philosophy East and West* 23 (1973) 187–205, at 191; Israel, *Doing Good*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025000069 Published online by Cambridge University Press

discipline as prescribed by Zhu, Wang agonized over whether he lacked the qualities necessary to succeed in that endeavor. The other factor was Wang's observation that, as orthodoxy, Zhu's Neo-Confucianism seemed to have had inadvertently deleterious effects. The impurities in the material force of human beings that Zhu stressed necessarily resulted in a divergence between the perfection of their principle (*li)*—human being as *noumenon*—and their physical being—the human being as *phenomenon*, in Kant's terms.[80] Logically, this disparity explains limitations on human beings imposed by impurities in their material force, confirmed by Zhu's observation above that sages have fewer impurities in their material force. This most likely explains the reticence to take appropriate actions that Wang perceived among scholar-officials. These two concerns were interrelated, and Wang's new philosophy addressed both of them. The manner in which Wang resolved these weaknesses in Zhu's philosophy and reestablished ethics to a central position in his philosophy qualifies his Neo-Confucianism as a theology of liberation.

Wang's apprehensions about Zhu's philosophy emerged early. As a child, he and a classmate tried to implement Zhu's self-cultivation method by searching for the *li* (principle) in bamboo outside Wang's father's office. After three days, Yangming's friend fell ill; but Wang persisted for four more days until he too collapsed. Wang concluded that he could never become a sage because he lacked the strength to do so. Persuaded now that the principles of things and the Way of Heaven must be separate, Wang was deeply unsettled. Subsequently, Wang was serving successfully as a government official until he offended a powerful eunuch. Wang was caned for his insouciance and banished to live "among the barbarians" in Guizhou Province in 1508. On the way, encouraged by the notion of "nurturing life" (*yangsheng* 养生),[81] Wang experienced an epiphany. He awoke one night in the grotto where he was staying with his men and realized that "the true meaning of ko-wu . . . [is] to be found internally rather than externally."[82] There is nothing outside the mind-and-heart, which is the Way of Heaven (the Dao)[83] and is, indeed, Heaven itself, he realized. One need only establish the will to love—to show humanity to—the Other and do the good sincerely in order to cultivate virtue.[84]

Much as Miranda repudiates the conventional Catholic understanding of what it means to "know" God, Wang asserts that the deficiency of Zhu's self-cultivation method arises from his misunderstanding of a key passage in the classics. There

[80] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason: Unified Edition (with All Variants from the 1781 and 1787 Editions)* (trans. Werner S. Pluhar; Hackett Classics; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996). *Noumenon* is derived from the Greek word *nous.*

[81] Tu, *Neo-Confucian Thought*, 164–65.

[82] Ibid., 120.

[83] Ibid., 90.

[84] Wang Yangming 王阳明, "Chuanxilu" 传习录 [Instructions for practical living], in *Wang Yangming quanji* [Complete works of Wang Yangming] 王阳明全集, vol. 1, *Guoxue Jingdian Wenku* 国学经典文库 [National Classics Series] (4 vols.; Beijing: Tuwen Zhencang Ban 图文珍藏版, Thread-binding Books Publishing House, 2016) 1:174.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025000069 Published online by Cambridge University Press

are three intertwined issues here: 1) Zhu's rearrangement of the original classic text; 2) the correct interpretation of the term *gewu*, which Zhu understood to mean "the investigation of things"; and 3) discernment of the connection between the human mind-and-heart, on the one hand, and Principle (*Li*) equated with the Way of Heaven, on the other, and the implications of that relationship for what it means to *know* the Will of Heaven.

A. "The Great Learning" and Self-Cultivation

The passage at issue is from the *Great Learning*, teachings of Kongzi allegedly compiled by his greatest pupil, Zengzi:

> The ancients who wished to manifest their clear character to the world would first bring order to their states. Those who wished to bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds-and-hearts. Those who wished to rectify their minds-and-hearts would first make their wills sincere. Those who wished to make their wills sincere would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things.[85]

In his epiphany, Wang suddenly realized that Zhu had rearranged this text when he compiled The Four Books. Only limited portions of the original *Great Learning* survived the burning of the books in 213 BCE. The original text of the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*), from which the *Great Learning* was excerpted, ended with the following two sentences: "This is called knowing the root (*ben* 本). This is called the extension of knowledge."[86]

This seemingly minor manipulation had momentous ramifications for the interpretation of the passage. Without these two sentences at the end of the paragraph, the passage ends with "the investigation of things," which Zhu made the foundation of self-cultivation. Zhu viewed the acts described as "a series of stages of refinement, beginning with the awareness that the 'heart' or mind—the metaphysical portion of the self—was the master of the body."[87] Here, Zhu explains that the phrase *zhizhizhi* (知之至) referred to the cumulative process of extending knowledge over a long time, until one "suddenly find[s] himself possessed of a wide and far-reaching comprehension of things."[88]

While in the grotto, however, Wang realized that when the two lines are restored to their original position at the end of the paragraph, the passage ends with "the extension of knowledge" (知之至) instead of the "investigation of things." Zhu

[85] Wing-tsit Chan, "Moral and Social Programs: The *Great Learning*," in *Source Book* (ed. Chan), 86–87.

[86] This appears in ibid., on pp. 88–89, instead of on p. 86, its original location.

[87] Frederic Wakeman, Jr., *History and Will: Philosophical Perspectives of Mao Tse-tung's Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) 246. Wang agrees that the mind-and-heart is the master of the body (Wang, "Chuanxilu," 1:128).

[88] Chan, "Moral and Social Programs," 89.

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distorted the meaning of the passage by reversing the order of the tasks, beginning at the end, the rectification of the mind-and-heart, and ending with the starting point, the "investigation of things." This left the student with "no place to start."[89] Instead, according to Wang, the undertaking outlined in the *Great Learning*, is, contrary to the way Zhu presented it, really all the single task of "manifesting the clear character":

> Manifesting the clear character is nothing other than making the will sincere, and the task of making the will sincere is nothing other than the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge. If one regards the sincerity of the will as the basis and from there proceeds to the task of the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge, only then can there be a solution to accomplishing the task.[90]

This deficiency in Zhu Xi's method of self-cultivation, according to Wang, can lead directly to the separation of knowledge and action.

B. "Gewu" and the Original Substance of the Mind-and-Heart

This brings us to the matter of the correct interpretation of the characters *gewu* 格物, understood by Zhu to mean "investigation of things." The term *ge* has a number of meanings besides "investigate," including "rectify," "oppose," and "guard against"; and the combination of *ge* with *wu*, meaning "things" or "affairs," has historically resulted in "a multiplicity . . . of interpretations."[91] Wang clarifies the appropriate interpretation: "The character *ge* in *gewu* is the same as the *ge* in Mengzi's reference to 'a great man rectifying (*ge*) the mind-and-heart of the ruler.'"[92] *Ge* means to "correct,"[93] to eliminate what is incorrect in the mind-and-heart *so as to preserve the correctness of the original substance* (*benti* 本体) of the mind-and-heart.[94] However, whatever the will is, the incorrectness must be eliminated so that all that is correct may be preserved. In other words, "the Principle of Heaven must be preserved at all times and in all places. . . . The 'Principle of Heaven' is the 'clear character,' and examining Principle is 'manifesting the clear character.'"[95] "Everything, from 'the rectification of things (*gewu*)' and the 'extension of knowledge' to 'bringing peace to everything under Heaven' is merely manifesting the clear character. . . .

[89] Wang, "Chuanxilu," 1:127.

[90] Ibid., 1:193.

[91] Tu, *Neo-Confucian Thought*, 164–66.

[92] *Mengzi*, 4A:20; cf., Wing-tsit Chan, "Idealistic Confucianism: Mencius," in *Source Book* (ed. Chan), 75.

[93] Wang, "Chuanxilu," 1:294.

[94] Wang also defines this original substance of the mind-and-heart as "the highest good." "There is nothing in it that is not good"; ibid. (emphasis added).

[95] Ibid., 1:128. Chan renders the term *ge* as "to rectify" in one place and "to investigate" in another; Chan, "Dynamic Idealism," 673–74 (emphasis added). This clearly was not Wang's intent.

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Manifesting the clear character means manifesting the morality of this mind-and-heart, which is [the virtue of] humanity."[96]

"So as to preserve the correctness of the original substance" is a crucial component of Wang's thought. His philosophy, like Zhu's, is based on a cosmogony. The notion of Principle is as all-embracing for Wang as it is for Zhu, but Wang's interpretation thereof reflects the influence of Chan Buddhism (pronounced "Zen" in Japanese),[97] as well as the central importance for Wang of Mengzi's assertion that "human nature is naturally good just as water naturally flows downward."[98] Alluding to Mengzi's notion of the humane mind-and-heart, Wang asserts that "the person of humanity can regard Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things as one body."[99] This is not because they intend to do so, but because it is in the nature of their mind-and-heart to do so. In fact, "forming one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things" is natural for all individuals, but if lesser persons do not do so, it is because "they make themselves lesser persons." Since "[t]he mind-and-heart [itself] is Principle," all are naturally endowed with the innate knowledge of the good (*liangzhi*) that gives them the ability to become a sage:[100] "The learning of the great man consists entirely in getting rid of the obscuration [caused by the presence] of selfish desires in order to make manifest his clear character by his own efforts, so as to restore the condition [for] forming one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things."[101] Since the knowledge of the good is intrinsic to human nature and "there is not the slightest evil originally in human nature, we speak of extending knowledge to the utmost."[102] Nothing need be added to the innate knowledge of the good that is implanted in every individual by Heaven.

Wang's reference to the "original substance of the mind-and-heart" is attributed to Zhu's contemporary, Lu Xiangshan (Lu Jiuyuan). Wang agrees that this "original substance" of the mind-and-heart is the Principle of Heaven.[103] In fact, this concept can be traced back to Mengzi's comment, "is there not a mind-and-heart of humanity and righteousness originally existing in human beings?"[104] "Those who have examined their mind-and-heart know their nature; and knowing their nature,

[96] Wang, "Chuanxilu," 1:142, 395–96.

[97] "This is evident in his mistrust of the adequacy of the spoken word and endorsement of quiet sitting (meditation, 禅 read *chan* [*zen* in Japanese]), the source of the name of the Chan/Zen Shool." See Tu, "Subjectivity and Ontological Reality," 187–88.

[98] *Mengzi* 6A:2, in Legge, *The Four Books*.

[99] Wang, "Chuanxilu," 1:142; Tu, "Subjectivity and Ontological Reality," 203.

[100] Wang describes the innate knowledge of the good being like an elixir that can banish "evil thoughts and erroneous ideas"; Wang, "Chuanxilu," 1:306, 1:125.

[101] Chan, "Dynamic Idealism," 659–60.

[102] Wang, "Chuanxilu," 1:142.

[103] Wing-tsit Chan, "The Unity of Mind and Principle in Lu Hsiang-shan," in *Source Book* (ed. Chan), 572–73; Wang, "Chuanxilu," 1:143.

[104] *Mengzi* 6A:8, in Legge, *Four Books*, 407.

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they thus know Heaven."[105] Hence, Wang insists, "The mind-and-heart of the evil person has simply lost its original substance."[106]

Lu and Wang agree that Heaven has endowed the mind-and-heart with an innate knowledge of the good (*liangzhi* 良知);[107] therefore, self-cultivation is by no means as arduous as Zhu characterized it. Indeed, Wang condemns Zhu for misleading people into seeking knowledge where it does not exist. Because of Zhu's influence, people "believe that everything or every event has its own definite principle. As a result, they search for the highest good in individual things,"[108] while in reality, "the highest good is the original substance of the mind-and-heart."[109] Therefore, Wang argues, self-cultivation is an intuitive, internal process, not a matter of empirical investigation of things outside the self. The only potential impediment is the role played by the will, which must rectify the mind-and-heart as it responds to any good or evil "human desires" or thoughts that arise.[110]

Even this does not completely resolve the problem, however, because of the nature of the will: "What arises from the will may be good or evil, and unless there is a way to make clear the distinction between good and evil there will be a confusion between [what is true and what is false]. Therefore, he who wishes to make his will sincere must extend knowledge." Here, citing Mengzi, Wang reinterprets the "extension of knowledge" (*zhizhi* 至知) in the *Great Learning* to mean that one must develop one's innate knowledge of the good to the greatest possible extent.[111] One thereby draws near to Heaven, because "as one gradually reduces human desires, one then regains some of their original Heavenly Principle. It is that effortless! It is that easy!"[112] This is why Wang's self-cultivation begins from within—it has nothing to do with "investigation of things" external to one's own mind-and-heart. This is consistent with Wang's claim that there is only one mind-and-heart and that everything originates from the mind-and-heart:[113] "All principles are contained therein, and all events proceed therefrom. There is no Principle outside the mind-and-heart; there are no things or events outside the

[105] *Mengzi* 7A:1, in ibid., 448.

[106] Wang, "Chuanxilu," 1:134.

[107] Dong Ping and George L. Israel, "The Eight Virtues of *Liangzhi:* An Analysis of the Fundamental Characteristics of Wang Yangming's Central Doctrine," *Journal of World Philosophies* 5.2 (2020) 73–93, at 73–74.

[108] Wang Yang-ming, "Inquiry on the *Great Learning*," in Wang, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings* (trans. and ed. Wing-tsit Chan; Records of Civilization: Sources and Studies; New York: Columbia University Press, 1962) 275. Cf., Hiroyuki Iki, "Wang Yang-ming's Doctrine of Innate Knowledge of the Good," *Philosophy East and West* 11 (1961) 27–41, at 34–35.

[109] Wang, "Chuangxilu," 1:125, 1:307.

[110] Ibid., 1:126, 1:294.

[111] Ibid., 1:127.

[112] Ibid., I:145.

[113] Wang, *Instructions for Practical Living,* 16.

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mind-and-heart."[114] Thus, the mind-and-heart is effectively identified with the Way of Heaven and with Heaven itself.[115]

Thus, Wang completely rejects Zhu's distinction between subject and object in the process of self-cultivation. Indeed, he repudiates all the dualisms in Zhu's system that stem from the distinction between Principle (*Li*) and material force (*qi*) and result in the low probability of becoming a sage. Self-cultivation does not involve the mind-and-heart as the subject of the action of investigating so-called external things—as the objects of the action—precisely because there is really nothing external to the mind-and-heart.[116] The entire task described in the *Great Learning* "lies in the *rectification* of things (*gewu*) [within the mind-and-heart], which consists in making the will sincere."[117]

C. Ontology, Epistemology, and the Unity of Knowledge and Practice

Wang's repudiation of Zhu's dualisms is directly related to his insistence on the unity of knowledge and practice. Wang's ontological disputes with Zhu lead him to fundamental epistemological disagreements as well. Wang emphasizes the importance of "loving the good." However, much as Miranda avers that one cannot know God unless one acts to obey God's commands, Wang also stresses that where there is no self-cultivation, no action, no "doing the good," there is no true knowledge at all. It is not sufficient "to sincerely love the good known by the innate faculty but not in reality do the good"; in that case, "it means that the {incorrect thing in the mind-and-heart} has not been rectified and that the will to love the good is not yet sincere."[118]

Zhu's erroneous epistemology, Wang argues, causes him to separate self-cultivation from the most important action of all, "loving the people."[119] Zhu fails "to realize that manifesting the {clear} character and loving the people are basically one and the same thing."[120] Indeed, Wang insists that not only is action necessary, but it is part of self-cultivation itself. Without action, there is no self-cultivation at all:

> Knowledge is the beginning of action and action the completion of knowledge. When this is understood, then when only knowledge is mentioned,

[114] Wang, "Chuanxilu," 1:125; cf. Wing-tsit Chan, "Chang-Tsai's Philosophy" in *Source Book* (ed. Chan), 674; Ch'un-yi Tang, "The Development of the Concept of Moral Mind from Wang Yang-ming to Wang Chi," in *Self and Society in Ming Thought* (ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and the Conference on Ming Thought; Studies in Oriental Culture; New York: Columbia University Press, 1970) 100.

[115] Wang, "Chuanxilu," 1:174.

[116] Ibid., 1:128.

[117] Ibid., 1:142, 294; Wang Yangming, "Preface to the Old Version of the Great Learning (1518)," in Ching, *To Acquire Wisdom,* 200 (emphasis added).

[118] Wang Yang-ming, "Inquiry on the *Great Learning*," 279.

[119] Wang also rejects Zhu's claim that the character 亲 *qin* (to love) should read 新 *xin*, which means "new," as in "make the people new." Even if Zhu's claim were correct, Wang asserts that the correct interpretation means "loving the people" by allowing them to live in peace so that they can renew themselves; Wang, "Chuanxilu," 1:124–25.

[120] Wang, "Inquiry on the *Great Learning*," 276.

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> action is included therein, and when only action is mentioned, knowledge is included. . . . Yet certain people today distinguish between knowledge and action and pursue them separately, . . . believing that they must know before they can act. They will discuss and learn about knowledge first, they say, and wait until they truly know before they implement their knowledge. Consequently, for their entire lives they will never act, and they will also never know. . . . My advocacy of the unity of knowledge and action today is precisely the medicine for that disease.[121]

Now, one could object that this criticism of Zhu is unfair, for Zhu certainly recognized that "knowledge and action always require each other." However, Zhu did indeed insist, "with respect to order, knowledge comes first. . . . [W]e must first know before we can act."[122] By contrast, Wang's point is that any knowledge gained before action is false. One cannot know without doing. After all, how can one possibly "know" an apple without taking the action of picking it (before it decays) and tasting it, thereby acting upon it and changing it? One cannot know any given thing without interacting with it, thereby effecting transformation. Nor can one "know" filial piety or any other virtue without actually practicing it.[123]

Interestingly, Wang's thought bears the imprint of Chan Buddhism, with its stress on the mind-and-heart, the notion of the mind-and-heart being in "peaceful repose," and emphasis on intuition. His insistence on the primacy of the mind-and-heart over the material world is why Wang's Neo-Confucianism is correctly described as "idealist." Just as Hegel's phenomenology asserts that the world is the product of the operation of the Mind of God, for Wang the entire universe is the product of the mind-and-heart. Yet at the same time, Wang's is an activist philosophy, a call for action and interaction with others in order to attain the highest good.

It should be clear now why Wang has been accused of being a "Buddhist in Confucian dress." Yet Wang is as critical of Buddhism as his Song Neo-Confucian predecessors were.[124] Since Buddhism demeans physical existence as the source of suffering, Buddhism distracts us from human relationships,[125] from the "duties of universal obligation" between father and son, ruler and minister, husband and wife, elder and younger siblings, and between friends.[126] In each of these "bonds," one must cultivate the form of humanity and justice that is proper to the relationship involved. In this schema, the ego lives in an exquisite yet agonizing vulnerability to the Other and accountability to the judgment of Heaven and of the Other as to

[121] Wang, "Chuanxilu," 1:126–27.

[122] Chan, "Great Synthesis," 609, paras. 20–21.

[123] See Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mengzi and Wang Yangming* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), and idem, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation*.

[124] Ching, *To Acquire Wisdom*, 13ff.

[125] "Buddhists and Taoists . . . abandoned the constant principles of human relationships and worldly affairs"; Wang, "Preface to the Collected Writings of Lu Chiu-yüan (1520), in Ching, *To Acquire Wisdom*, 207.

[126] The *Doctrine of the Mean* specifies that these are to be fulfilled by the virtues of "wisdom, humanity, and courage" (in Legge, *Four Books*, 406–7).

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one's faithfulness in fulfilling those obligations. As indicated in the *Great Learning* passage, the Ruist vision may be reactionary insofar as Kongzi sought to restore the peace and order of the Zhou dynasty. Yet the original Ruist vision was always "modern" in that it attributed to every individual an active role in realizing the ideal order in which the political realm plays a central role. If, as Wang emphasizes, each individual does the good by exhibiting humanity and seeking justice, the highest good can be attained in the social and political realm. Thus, while Wang's spirituality owes a debt to Buddhism and Daoism, his commitment to ethics compels him to denounce the "selfishness" of the Buddhist and Daoist pursuit of individual salvation and immortality.[127]

Wang's concerns for the Other are not articulated, however, in terms of a "preferential option for the poor" or other terms that could be labeled "materialist." Yet his prioritization of ethics clearly is consonant with the manner in which Levinas's advocacy of ethics as "first philosophy" inspired Latin American liberation theology. Indeed, the passage from the *Great Learning* at issue for Wang clearly articulates the intimate relationship between the obligation to engage in spiritual self-cultivation—one's personal relationship with God in the Judeo-Christian tradition—and the obligation to serve the Other. The latter is evident in Mengzi's emphasis on the moral imperative of leaders to ensure the "people's livelihood" (*minsheng* 民生) by restoring the ancient well-field land (re)distribution system.[128] That system resembled socialism enough to inspire late Qing revolutionaries such as Sun Yat-sen to invoke it in endorsing a form of state socialism.[129]

Now, Zhu's philosophy also had a strong spiritual component[130] and agreed with Lu that, "unless [a human being] fully practices the Way of [human beings], [that person] will not be qualified to coexist with Heaven and Earth."[131] However, focusing on an exhaustive "investigation of things" outside of oneself could divert one from the moral imperative stressed by Mengzi to examine critically one's actions in one's relations with others mandated by Heaven. Once institutionalized as the official state orthodoxy, the role of Zhu's philosophy in selecting officials, Wang lamented, turned "learning" into a process of rote memorization,[132] rather than a dynamic process of *loving*—exhibiting humanity—*and doing justice* in one's relationship with the Other.

Wang's Idealist Neo-Confucianism, then, reasserts the primacy of ethics that was central to Kongzi's original vision, in a manner not unlike Dussel's and Miranda's incorporation of Levinas's definition of ethics as "first philosophy" half a

[127] Tu, *Neo-Confucian Thought*, 58–59.

[128] *Mengzi* 3A:3, in Legge, *Four Books*, 243–45.

[129] Hoston, *State, Identity, and the National Question*, 116–17, 187–89.

[130] See Julia Ching, *The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[131] Chan, "Great Dynamic Idealism," 575.

[132] Wang Yangming, "A Farewell Essay in Honor of Chan Jo-shui (1511)," in Ching, *To Acquire Wisdom*, 198.

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millennium later.[133] Of course, there are important respects in which Wang's views diverge from those articulated by Dussel and Miranda, with their grounding in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Despite the resonance of the Chinese notion of Heaven with the Christian God, there is in Neo-Confucianism no notion of a messiah (Christ) as the incarnation of God in the form of Jesus. Nor does Ruism hold that the redemptive death and resurrection of such a messiah—both fully human and fully divine—has resulted in the remission of sins for all believers.

It is precisely faith in Jesus as the messiah that led Miranda and Dussel to endorse Levinas's assertion of ethics as "first philosophy" and to interpret that contention through the lens of Jesus's emphasis on the importance of serving and caring for the poor and oppressed. This concern was accentuated by their experience living in a capitalist economy that, in their view, constantly increased the gap between rich and poor, both within individual societies and internationally as well. This led them to conclude that the Church cannot really fulfill its obligation to *be* what it is called to be with faith alone; faith must be accompanied by action in obedience to the will of God.

Thus, despite the important differences described above, Wang's arguments bear an undeniable resemblance to the liberation theology developed by Dussel, Miranda, and other liberation theologians. In both philosophies, the realm of social connection is indispensable to a correct understanding of God/Heaven and its commands. Indeed, Wang maintains that it is impossible to engage in self-cultivation in isolation; there is no self-cultivation without reliance upon intuition, subjectivity, but most of all, intersubjectivity, generated as one cultivates humanism and justice within one's relationship to the Other. Wang's ethical unification of knowing and doing prohibits any real distinction between epistemic and ethical intersubjectivity. Wang denies the separation of "inner" cultivation of the virtuous self and the obligation that the individual try to remake the "outer" world as commanded by Heaven. Again, Wang shares Zhu's metaphysics. Where he differs is regarding the method of self-cultivation. Where Zhu emphasizes an externally focused method of self-cultivation, Wang disagrees, emphasizing that self-cultivation begins internally, employing intuition based on one's innate knowledge of the good. Yet, through the notion of the unity of knowledge and practice, Wang's internally oriented intuition culminates in the reassertion of the importance of social relations ultimately in the social change envisaged in the *Great Learning*. In this way, despite the clear differences in their respective philosophico-religious frameworks, Wang's epistemology and self-cultivation method share much with those of Latin American liberation theologians. Just as ethics is fundamental through a method of self-cultivation that stresses that one cannot truly know the humanistic values characteristic of Ruism without putting them into practice, Miranda and

[133] Some have argued that Zhu asserted the primacy of ethics over cosmology (Li, "Thoughts on Ming-Qing Neo-Confucianism"), but Wang's point is about the practical effect of Zhu's self-cultivation method.

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Dussel stress that one cannot truly know God without fulfilling God's commands in action, specifically social action in interaction with other human beings. This primacy of ethics is fundamental to Wang's epistemology, much as it would be as "first philosophy" for Levinas, carried forward by both Dussel and Miranda in their assertion of the primacy of social action over mere cultus. Consequently, while Zhu claimed to articulate orthodoxy as transmitted from the ancients, Wang asserts a robust claim to be a more authentic conveyor of those teachings with his stress on Mengzi's assertion that "everyone can be a Yao or a Shun,"[134] coupled with the need to be self-critical in one's relations with the Other.

Wang's critique of Zhu expressly articulates the belief that the two concerns are inextricably intertwined. Wang's insistence that we possess an innate knowledge of the good liberates us from the fear of acting before we know enough and is reinforced by his claim that it is only in acting in fidelity to our duties to the Other that we truly come to know the Will of Heaven. In calling for all to engage in such virtuous action, Wang's Neo-Confucianism reinvigorates the democratic and liberatory impulses in Kongzi's original vision. This is thrown into sharp relief by this comparison with Latin American liberation theology.

Conclusion

Wang Yangming's Idealist Neo-Confucianism clearly incorporates the key components of liberation theology identified here. Like other liberation theologies, such as Black theology and Islamic liberation theology,[135] Latin American liberation theology includes elements that are specific to the circumstances of the "others" involved. The concrete context of capitalist economics, with increasing concentration of wealth, economic inequality, and political repression, impelled Latin American theologians to incorporate socioeconomic as well as political analysis into their theology. The lack of such a preoccupation, which gave rise to the preferential option for the poor in Latin America, does not vitiate claims that other theologies in different socioeconomic contexts constitute liberation theologies.

Moreover, like Levinas, Dussel, Miranda, and other Latin American liberation theologians, Wang has spiritual commitments that impel his reformulation of Neo-Confucianism to implement the authentic teachings transmitted from the ancients. The values that Latin American liberation theologians emphasize in the Judeo-Christian tradition are the same Ruist values of humanity and justice stressed by Wang; and the epistemologies attacked by Levinas, Dussel, and Miranda are remarkably similar to the empiricist orientation Wang believes discouraged

[134] Wang, "Chuanxilu," 1:295. The key to this is that "the task of making the will sincere actually lies in the rectification of things [in the mind-and-heart]," which is something of which everyone is capable.

[135] See, e.g., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979* (ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), and Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (London: Routledge, 2008).

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individuals from acting to fulfill the essential ethical obligations to the Other dictated by Heaven. For Wang, knowing Heaven requires doing the Will of Heaven, just as knowing God, for Latin American liberation theologians, requires fulfilling "God's demand for justice."[136] Wang's contention that self-cultivation requires that one "love the people" resonates with 1 John 3:14: "The man who does not love is still in the realm of death" (NRSVUE).[137] Finally, like Miranda, who argues that faith ultimately is a matter of will for the human being, who has free will, Wang stresses the importance of the will—made sincere—in expressing and fulfilling Heaven's command to love the good and the Other.

Of course, both Latin American liberation theology and Wang's philosophy have their critics. Liberation theologians are accused of overemphasizing the material world and politics. Wang's critique of Zhu has been deemed misdirected, his reinterpretation of *gewu* ill-founded, and his self-cultivation method superficial.[138] The comparison drawn here illuminates the liberatory political dimensions elevated by the common stress on the primacy of ethics shared by Wang and Latin American theologians Miranda and Dussel. Wang's call to action in service of the Other and his self-cultivation method offer a path to enlightenment that liberates—and requires—the ordinary individual to engage in action to promote humanity and justice. This explains the embrace of Wang's philosophy by merchants and samurai alike in Tokugawa Japan, where it helped to nurture the way of the warrior (*bushidō*) and a nascent way of the merchant that supported revolutionary change.[139] Even after its influence had waned in Qing China, Wang's philosophy helped to inspire the spiritual element in the thought of Mao and other twentieth-century revolutionaries.[140] Perhaps, viewed as a liberation theology, Wang's Neo-Confucianism can inspire renewed faith in more sanguine prospects for yet another century.

[136] Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, 41.

[137] Miranda, *Being and the Messiah,* 75; cf. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible,* 60–61.

[138] Chan, "Dynamic Idealism," 655.

[139] Cf. Oleg Benesch, "Yangming and Bushidō: Japanese Nativization and Its Influences in Modern China," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36 (2009) 439–54.

[140] Hoston, "Revolutionary Confucianism?"; cf. Wakeman, *History and Will*, 238–73; and Germaine A. Hoston, "A 'Theology' of Liberation? Socialist Revolution and Spiritual Regeneration in Chinese and Japanese Marxism," in *Ideas Across Cultures: Essays on Chinese Thought in Honor of Benjamin I. Schwartz* (ed. Paul A. Cohen and Merle Goldman; Harvard University Asia Center 150; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 164–221.

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