Is there a Post-Neo-Confucianism? Ch'ng Yagyong, It

Jinsai, and the unraveling of li-ch'i metaphysics

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In this paper we plan to explore the varying extent and ways in which certain schools of thought in the Tokugawa and especially the Chosun period, exemplified by the work of It Jinsai (1627-1705) and Ch'ng Yagyong (1762-1836), may have challenged and transcended the boundaries set by the Ch'eng-Chu school, or in other words, orthodox Neo-Confucian thinkers.

These challenges are politically as well as philosophically significant, for orthodox Neo-Confucianism served as a de facto ruling ideology both in the Chosun dynasty as well as Ming and Qing China. Tokugawa Japan did not have a civil service examination system, and yet key advisers to the shoguns, and specifically members of the Hayashi family, used the neo-Confucian teachings as the basis of their political and ethical values and policies.

The term ANeo-Confucianism@ is often used as a translation of the Chinese term hsing-li hsueh, which literally means the Alearning of human nature and principle.@ and in practice refers to a philosophical movement which sought to construct a metaphysical framework for, and in so
doing, ascribe a cosmic significance to, the Confucian and Mencian teachings on practical ethics
and human nature. This movement includes two major schools of thought, the Ch=eng-Chu school
on the one hand, referring to the teachings of the Ch=eng brothers and Chu Hsi, and the Lu-Wang
school on the other, referring to the teachings of Lu Hsiang-Shan and Wang Yang-ming.
Consequently, when scholars refer to something as "Neo-Confucian" they usually mean either, (1)
that it is related to one of the two schools of thought mentioned above or (2) that it uses the li-ch=i
(principal / material force) conceptual framework propounded by these schools.

Specifically, the Ch=eng-Chu Neo-Confucians tried to link humans with the cosmos by
constructing a metaphysics which posited *li*, a cosmic pattern or principle which was both natural
and normative, as the essence of human nature. The Lu-Wang school extended the linkage
between principle and human existence by equating principle with the mind, which was a broader
concept than human nature as it included the sphere of intentions and emotions.

The indiscriminate usage of the term "Neo-Confucian" to refer to Confucian schools of
thought after the Sung is symptomatic of a widespread neglect of the work of certain thinkers who
in one way or another seriously challenged key premises of the Neo-Confucian philosophical
system.¹ It is of course widely recognized that the Ch=eng-Chu school had serious critics during
the Ming and especially the Ch=ing periods. Nonetheless there is little recognition that some of the
most serious and systematic of the challenges to the Ch=eng-Chu system were launched in Japan
and Korea. The authors of these challenges were not content to simply question Chu Hsi=s
particular formulation of principle / material force metaphysics, but went on to challenge the