



Book Reviews

Johanna Lidén: *The Taizhou Movement: Being Mindful in Sixteenth Century China*. Doctoral thesis, History of Religion, Stockholm University, 2018, 289 pp.

Discussions of Chinese philosophy and religion far too often repeat stereotypical images of Confucian strictness vs Daoist spontaneity and Buddhist meditation vs the social engagement of Confucians. This book is an exception. It discusses a group of Neo-Confucians whose strictness is moderated by an emphasis on joy, and whose social activism is combined with a strong interest in meditative practice.

The group is the Taizhou movement of sixteenth-century China, in particular its founder Wang Gen (1483–1541), as well as Yan Jun (1504–96), Luo Rufang (1515–88), and He Xinyin (1517–79), who may all indirectly be considered followers of Wang Gen. One of the book's main arguments, however, is that the so-called Taizhou movement was not named as a separate group until a century later, when the scholar Huang Zongxi singled them out as a group and blamed them for social ills of which other Neo-Confucian groups had been (in Huang's mind wrongly) accused, including ultimately the fall of the Ming dynasty.

Lidén's book is sobering reading for anyone who believes in a Confucian society based on harmonious coexistence. Neo-Confucian thinkers and practitioners were by no means

immune to punitive action by the ostensibly Confucian authorities. Two of the four main characters discussed in the book were thrown into jail. Yan Jun was accused of theft, heavily fined, fiercely beaten, made to starve for seven days in prison, and then exiled to Southeast China. He Xinyin was jailed for his teaching activities and killed in prison. His killer is unknown. Although these two Taizhou practitioners may have been considered overly liberal and therefore to have incurred the wrath of more orthodox Neo-Confucians, it was by no means safer to be on the conservative side. In 1525 more than 230 conservative officials knelt outside the imperial palace in protest against certain ritual reforms. A large number were beaten so fiercely with bamboo canes that seventeen died, and 134 were imprisoned.

This latter incident is considered one of the reasons for the strong emphasis on 'self-protection' in Wang Gen and other Taizhou practitioners. The book does not always make clear to which Chinese characters the word 'self-protection' refers, vacillating between *bǎo-shēn* 保身 'protecting the body [= the self]' and *ān-shēn* 安身 'calming the body [= the self]'. In either case the focus is not only on the body as a physical entity (although that was certainly part of the story) but on the mind and ultimately the Way (*Dào* 道). The idea is that protecting oneself is necessary if one is to help and protect others. There is a similar

emphasis on 'self-respect' as a necessary condition for respecting others and even 'self-love' as a precondition for loving others.

The interplay between self and others may be seen as a parallel to the emphasis on meditation on the one hand and social activism on the other. Meditation is said to bring clarity of mind and ultimately to help the practitioner achieve an experience of personal enlightenment. Lidén suggests Wang Gen, Yan Jun, and Luo Rufang all claimed to have had such experiences and value them highly. At the same time, the social activism of the Taizhou practitioners included charitable works, community compacts, a strong emphasis on friendship and mutual protection, an equally strong opposition to the dumbing of the mind involved in rote learning for government examinations, the creation of private academies of joyful learning built on discussion, drinking ceremonies, singing, and poetry recitation, ideas about the equal distribution of land, and plans for the establishment of utopian societies for social welfare and schooling.

Since the Song dynasty (960-1279), the tension between book learning and meditative experience had been a hallmark of Neo-Confucianism, the most conservative groups arguing for the study of the classics and attacking interest in meditation as a Buddhist deviation and threat to orthodoxy. The Taizhou practitioners clearly came out on the experiential side, though mostly without references to Bud-

dhism. Luo Rufang took meditation to its extremes and needed help from his teacher Yan Jun to overcome the resulting mental problems. Yan maintained Luo spent too much time suppressing his desires, which would not bring him closer to enlightenment. Yan Jun's liberal attitude to carnal and material desire became another point of attack against his person, though even he sought to eliminate desire, albeit not by suppressing it.

The Taizhou movement's negative attitude to book learning partly reflected the background of many of its members as uneducated merchants rather than literati and government officials. Of the four main characters Lidén's book discusses, only Luo Rufang held a government post, and both Wang Gen and especially Yan Jun were often criticized for their lack of learning and bad writing style. Like other Neo-Confucians, they read the classics but focused on books such as Mencius with what they conceived of as an affirmative view of feelings and desires. They insisted that the commoner was, at least potentially, a sage. They also held in high regard the notion that the classics were but footnotes to one's own mind. This penchant for interiority and meditation lies behind the subtitle of Lidén's book: 'Being Mindful in Sixteenth Century China'.

Some of Lidén's discussions pertain to general and theoretical issues, especially the distinction between the 'religious' and the 'secular' and between a highly institutionalized

'school' and a loosely organized 'movement'. These discussions portray the Taizhou practitioners as a largely secular and informal movement that combined social activism with a charismatic, emotional, meditative, transcendent, and in this sense, religious orientation, partly directed at individual enlightenment. As the author concludes, however, ideas about the 'religionization' vs 'philosophization' of Confucianism are not very helpful, and these are not the book's strongest parts.

Lidén's book is much stronger in its close historical-philological reading of a wealth of primary sources from the Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as modern secondary sources. This is most obvious in the section on Wang Gen's ideas of protecting and respecting the self, and the one on Yan Jun's ideas and practice of meditation. In these sections, among many others, Lidén takes the required time to thoroughly explore her object of study and bring the reader close to the ways of thinking of the individuals in whom she is interested. In many other parts of the book this patience is lacking, and a wealth of scattered material is thrown at us in an often bewildering way.

A strength of the book is its broad and rich presentation of the Taizhou movement and its historical, cultural, social, and individual background. Since the Taizhou movement has not often been studied in detail in English, this is very welcome. At the same time, it makes

the structure of the book quite confusing. Beyond the concern with the Taizhou movement, it is difficult to discern a thematic approach, far less an overarching argument.

The book ends with a discussion of the demise of the Taizhou movement. Was it due to the arrest and subsequent exile of Yan Jun and the arrest and killing of He Xinyin? Or the criticism of them by other late Ming scholars? Or, as Lidén argues, the prohibition of private academies in 1579, which had been so central to the movement's activities? All these explanations may be part of the truth, but other factors may also have been at work. A loose organization built on charisma and emphasizing individuality may be unlikely to survive for many generations. Finally, since the movement was not in its own day singled out as a separate group, one may indeed doubt that it ever existed, in which case we can hardly speak of a demise at all. Lidén does not mention these two possibilities, but she provides us with the material upon which we can base such arguments. That in itself is no small achievement.

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