Searching for God in Neo-Confucianism

Richard Bowring

Anyone interested in the beginnings of Tokugawa Confucianism as an academic discipline, and in particular the influence of what we now call Neo-Confucianism, might well approach this section with considerable anticipation. 1605 is, after all, a very early date to find such a discussion in any context other than the closed one of a Buddhist monastery. Although it is true that the work of Bunshi Genshō 文之玄昌 (1555–1620), who was affiliated with a group in Kyūshū known as the Satsunan Gakuha 藩南學派 working on Song Confucian interpretations of the classics with the help of Chinese émigrés, was already producing results, 1605 predates by some margin the impact of such men as Fujiwara Seika 藤原惺窩 (1561–1619) and Hayashi Razan 林羅山 (1583–1657), who are usually identified as the founders of this tradition. To expect untapped riches here, however, would be to misunderstand Habian's intent. He was not interested in giving a detailed exposition of either Neo-Confucian ethics or the complexities of the metaphysics of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1528) or anyone else. He was mainly concerned to show that Neo-Confucianism could not possibly measure up to Christianity either rationally or in practice as a Way to pursue. Although he had praise for the effect of its stress on ethics and the role it could play in ensuring an ordered society, when it came to questions of the origin and nature of the universe Neo-Confucianism failed to pass muster. It lacked the concept of a single creator and did not, therefore, offer much in terms of salvation for the individual. In this sense, Habian saw it as an adversary of a different order to Buddhism and, of course, Shintō. But this is not to say that Confucianism could simply be ignored as irrelevant. For the Christian, Neo-Confucianism was more in the nature of an opaque obstacle, actively discouraging an exploration of the spiritual side of life, and containing deep within it a concept, that of universal qi 氣 (material force), which rendered the Christian idea of man as unique in the world extremely difficult to comprehend.

Habian begins with a problem of terminology, which has to be dealt with at the very outset:

In China they brand Buddhism and the like as heterodox and have an intense dislike of it, arguing that to follow such teachings is merely self-destructive. Instead they place great value on Confucianism, the Way of
Heaven. So what is this “Way of Heaven?” Does Christianity differ from Confucianism too?

What might be seen on the surface to be a slightly odd statement can be explained by the fact that the Way of Heaven (Tentō 天道) could, depending on context, be applied to both Christianity and Confucianism. To the uninitiated, therefore, this might lead to the conclusion that they were one and the same thing, or at least closely related. This is a misconception that Habian has to address immediately. Once this has been done, the way is then open for an analysis of what we might term the Confucian version of the Way of Heaven. At this juncture he introduces into his presentation a complex discussion of the relationship between the Way, the dao 道, and the Great Ultimate, taiji 太極. Laozi, he tells us, saw the Way as giving rise to the Great Ultimate, which in turn splits into yin and yang and begins the whole process of creation. [Neo-]Confucianism, on the other hand, disregards this first distinction, sees the Great Ultimate as the origin, and defines the Way quite differently, as the process of continuous creation itself.

As we have seen in his long treatment of Buddhism, Habian is nothing if not a man for detail. By way of explaining Neo-Confucianism, he plunges us straight into a passage from Zhu Xi's Collected Works, which discusses a crucial line from the Book of Changes (Yijing) in the light of an interpretation put forward almost a century earlier by the scholar Su Shi 蘇軾 (1036–1101). Habian spends considerable time on the details of this debate, showing among other things an excellent knowledge of the sources and a good grasp of the issues at stake.

The passage in question is well known: ‘One yin, one yang; that is what is called the Way’ 一陰一陽之謂道. Both Su Shi and Zhu Xi agreed that the Great Ultimate was the Way of Heaven, but Su Shi had understood this phrase as referring to the state of affairs before any interaction of yin and yang had taken place, in other words, before anything had come into being. For Su Shi, therefore, the Way of Heaven referred to ‘chaos undivided,’ the Void to which we should aim to return. Zhu Xi regarded this as a heresy that threatened to reintroduce Buddhism through the back door. He interpreted the phrase as ‘Now yin, now yang; that is what is called the Way,’ meaning that the process of constant interaction, the flow and flux of spontaneous generation, was in and of itself the Way. There was therefore no Great Ultimate to which one might return. This discussion was of particular interest to Habian, of course, because it clearly showed that orthodox Neo-Confucianism refused to entertain the idea of an origin that consciously created. For him, the Great Ultimate was merely another way of saying the Way, which signified process, not origination.