Prefatory Comments by Interviewer Lu Xuekun

At the request of friends at the journal Legein, I interviewed my teacher on the eve of the International Conference on New Confucianism. Thinking of his familiar saying, that “philosophers must point the way for society,” I chose to ask the following three questions.

1. Please discuss the direction of the development of Chinese culture.
2. In a recent television interview with aTV, you said that Confucian thought is about “the constancy in human nature and the natural world” (renxing zhi chang, ziran zhi chang 人性之常、自然之常). Likewise, in your lectures you have said, “Confucian philosophy is a doctrine of practical wisdom, the guiding principle for individual living and also for social practice.” Would you speak, then, about what the responsibility of New Confucianism should be in modern times?
3. As even the Chinese mainland is seeking “opening and reform,” the relationship between Confucianism and modernization has become a hot topic. How should New Confucians respond to this question?

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The “meeting at Goose Lake” was a famous debate in 1175 between Lu Xiangshan, one of Mou’s heroes, and Zhu Xi, later the interpreter of record of the Neo-Confucian synthesis.

2 Ehu 鵝湖 (lit. “Goose Lake”). The leading journal of New Confucianism.

3 aTV 亞洲電視, a Hong Kong television station.

4 For an excellent historical review of this discussion, see John Makeham, Lost Soul, Chapters 1 to 4.
Mou: I will not take your questions one by one, for they amount to a single question. At the International Conference on New Confucianism two years ago, I gave an address which was a reflection on the old teachers of the previous generation, who despite their enlightening example, lacked objective understanding and hence could not meet the needs of the times. Today I will change to a different theme and speak on a couple of points as a response to your questions.

The Future of Chinese Culture is a Period of Great Synthesis

The rise of New Confucianism is a historical necessity, and so it has a historical mission to carry out. Today I will tell you about two points.

In the year of the July 7 incident, there was a Chinese philosophy conference in Nanjing which included a paper by Shen Youding. Shen was one of the smartest of the people doing philosophy, a genius not just with logic but also with philosophy. But he was not resolute and stubborn enough. The Doctrine of the Mean says, “Choose what is good and hold fast to it.” Whatever sort of gifts you have, for example in logic, if you hold fast you can become an expert logician and contribute something. Supposing you have a gift for philosophy, if you hold fast then you may even be able to contribute at the highest levels of Chinese and Western philosophy. Sadly, Shen did not have enough follow-through and resolve, but he did have some good ideas and a lot of insight. He may not have truly understood Chinese history and culture in a detailed and deep way, but he had a general understanding of the subject. And in his paper at that conference he said that Confucianism in the pre-Qin period consisted of Confucius and Mencius and later of the Song and Ming Neo-Confucians. And in the future, he said, the trend in Chinese history would be toward a period of great synthesis (da zonghe 大綜和). This great period of synthesis is certain to pick up from the Song-Ming Confucians and, from that stunted quarter, advance further and respond to the needs of the times.

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5 “Objective Understanding and the Remaking of Chinese Culture,” included as the first essay in this volume.
6 The Marco Polo Bridge Incident of July, 1937, a prolonged skirmish that is conventionally considered the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945).
7 沈有鼎 (1908–1989). Logician then teaching at Tsinghua (Qinghua) University.
8 A reference to the Doctrine of the Mean's definition of the sincere person: “Authenticity is the Way of Heaven... The sincere person is the one who chooses the good and holds fast to it” (誠者天之道也... 誠之者擇善而固執之者也) (Zhongyong 20).