CHAPTER 5

The Relationship between Modern Neo-Confucianism and Marxism on the Mainland Following 1949

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Abstract

The relationship between modern Neo-Confucianism and Marxism on the mainland following 1949 can be divided into three schools. Adherents of the first, represented by Feng Youlan and He Lin, discarded their Neo-Confucian thinking and identified with and accepted Marxism, some going so far as to join the Chinese Communist Party (He Lin, for one). Adherents of the second, represented by Liang Shuming, maintained the fundamental thinking of Neo-Confucianism while also accepting the influence of Marxism, at the same time using and Confucianizing Marxism (particularly Mao Zedong Thought). Adherents of the third, represented by Xiong Shili and Ma Yifu, maintained their Neo-Confucian thinking and fundamentally did not identify with or accept Marxism.

Keywords

modern Neo-Confucianism – Marxism – Feng Youlan – Liang Shuming – Xiong Shili

After the founding of New China, most of the first generation of modern Neo-Confucians—with a few exceptions—stayed in mainland China. Those in whose thinking the academic world has remained primarily interested for a long time include Feng Youlan, He Lin, Liang Shuming, Xiong Shili, Ma Yifu, and others, yet not enough attention has been paid to their relationship with Marxism following 1949. To date, nobody has published a work dedicated to this subject. This essay will attempt to make an initial exploration into the topic.


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After the founding of New China, Feng Youlan made an earnest introspection into his past new rational Confucian thinking and his research into the history of Chinese philosophy. He proceeded to write several self-criticizing articles, including “A Self-review of New Rational Philosophy [Xin li xue],”1 “Speaking to the Differences Between Old and New Philosophy From ‘A Self-review of New Rational Philosophy,’”2 “A Self-criticism of Former Work in the History of Philosophy,”3 etc. as well as a book titled A Look Back on Forty Years [Sishi nian de huigu].4 In those writings, he thoroughly examined his past academic work and thinking and rejected it all, while at the same time clearly expressing his complete faith in the standpoints, perspectives, and methods of Marxism.

From the late 1950s to the early 1960s, he published two volumes of A New History of Chinese Philosophy [Zhongguo zhexue shi xinbian], three volumes of Essays on the History of Chinese Philosophy [Zhongguo zhexue shi lunwenji], Draft Historical Data of the History of Chinese Philosophy [Zhongguo zhexue shi shiliao xuechu gao], etc. Using Feng’s own words from the foreword to A New History of Chinese Philosophy, he wrote these works “using the standpoints, perspectives, and methods of Marxism.”5

He Lin was another major figure in modern Neo-Confucianism. After the founding of New China, he not only abandoned the academic standpoints of modern Neo-Confucianism and identified with and accepted Marxism, but in his late years also joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In his book Mr. He Lin as I Knew Him [Wo suo renshi de He Lin xiansheng], Zhang Dainian wrote, “in the 1950s, some Chinese philosophers, such as Mr. Jin Yuelin, Mr. Feng Youlan, Mr. Tang Yongtong, and Mr. He Lin, all sided with materialism, reconsidering all manner of academic questions using the perspectives

4 Feng Youlan 冯友兰, Sishi nian de huigu 《四十年的回顾》 [A Look Back on Forty Years], (Scientific Press, 1959).
5 Feng Youlan 冯友兰, Sansongtang quanji, di 8 juan 《三松堂全集》第 8 卷 [Collected works of San Song Tang Vol. 8], (Henan People’s Press, 2000), 3.