I. The Significance of the Historical Function and Contemporary Value of Neo-Confucianism

We generally believe that the ability to think is a basic human trait, and therefore we emphasize that thought and culture are of great significance and value to humanity, yet when analyzing and evaluating various ideological and cultural forms, we frequently adopt an attitude of snobbish utilitarianism. Using this attitude, rather than evaluate an ideological or cultural form according to its contents per se, we evaluate it based upon the rise or decline of its corresponding economic, political, and social forms. When the economy is prosperous, the state is strong, and the society is stable, people tend to think that the corresponding ideological and cultural form is both important and superior. When the economy is backward, the state is weak, and society is unstable, then people tend to think that the corresponding form of thought and culture is unimportant and degenerate. Since the modern era, the attitude adopted by the majority of Chinese people and foreigners toward traditional Chinese thought and culture is a typical example of this snobbish utilitarianism.

In the modern era, China has faced severe domestic and foreign troubles, and in the areas of science and technology, economics, and military affairs, it has lagged far behind Europe and the United States. While suffering humiliation and hardship, the Chinese people began to wonder about the reasons behind these negative circumstances. The people first believed that China was underdeveloped primarily

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1 “Neo-Confucianism” throughout this article refers specifically to lixue (理学), the main school of Confucian thought of the Song and Ming dynasties.
because little importance had been attached to technology and industry throughout Chinese history. Thus began the Qing Westernization movement (洋务运动). However, China’s loss to Japan in the 1894 Yalu River naval battle heralded the failure of this movement. Consequently, people thought that China’s key problem was its political system, and so in 1898 they started the political reform movement, known as the Hundred Days’ Reform. However, this reform movement ultimately failed, and the people then thought they had to undertake a political revolution, overturn the monarchy, and build a republic. This led to the 1911 Xinhai Revolution. Yet following the revolution, China’s situation did not change for the better. Instead, it grew worse. Consequently, people thought that the underlying problem must be Chinese culture. They thought that the fundamental reason for China’s backward status was that Chinese culture itself was backward. In other words, they believed that Chinese culture throughout history had been backward and degenerate, and that traditional Chinese culture was principally responsible for China’s present underdeveloped state. Furthermore, they believed that unless traditional Chinese culture was fully destroyed or fundamentally reformed, China was doomed. This viewpoint led to the May 4th Movement. In the hundred years since, the May 4th tradition has been upheld as orthodox, and its criticisms of traditional Chinese culture have been widely accepted.

Because Confucian thought occupies an important place within traditional Chinese culture, it borne the brunt of the tides negating traditional Chinese culture. Song and Ming dynasty Neo-Confucianism was once considered the orthodox school of late period Confucian thought, and moreover seemingly had a more direct relation to China’s underdeveloped state in the modern era. Therefore, it became a particular target of mass criticism. In the majority of modern commentary on Chinese history and culture, Neo-Confucianism is portrayed as worthless garbage or the source of all evil. As I discuss below, this criticism is to a large extent actually just emotional venting, not rational evaluation. Its argument principally relies on the underdeveloped state of science and technology, economics, and military affairs in modern China. Therefore, it is a typical attitude of snobbish utilitarianism. Interestingly, in recent years, following the rapid economic rise of East Asia, and especially the fast economic development of China, people’s attitudes toward traditional Chinese culture and especially their evaluations of Confucian thought, including Neo-Confucianism, have begun to ease. Even some positive affirmations have appeared.