Turning Classic Models into Utopias: The Neo Confucianist Critique

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ABSTRACT*

Confucian utopian models were reconstructed during the Sung dynasty. However, the transformative capacity of this utopian thrust was limited. It is claimed here that the roots for the understanding of the utopian thrust of the Sung are to be sought in the very process by which Confucianism was institutionalized and the kinds of tensions generated by this process. Two factors are raised to explain the limited impingement of the utopian thrust of the Sung upon Chinese society and polity: 1) The attempt to implement the reformulated vision within the very same institutional structure. 2) The structural characteristics of the Literati as a group.

I. Introduction

Chinese utopian visions and their emergence during the Sung dynasty (907-1279) represent an interesting intellectual challenge to the study of utopias. The challenge is two-fold: first, because the secular definition of the tension between the transcendental and mundane realms and the this-worldly emphasis on its resolution led to the analysis of Confucianism as adjusting to the world and lacking any critical attitude towards it; second, because despite the strong utopian thrust during the Sung, its transformative capacity was limited. The reformulation of the transcendental vision was not matched by a reformulation of the socio-political order. The aim of this paper is to deal with Chinese utopian visions in view of the above challenge.

Chinese utopian visions emerged in imperial China during the Sung dynasty and represent an attempt to uncover and recapture the original lore as posited by the founders of the Confucian vision. Most of them refer to an historical past—the time of the Duke of Chou (12-11th to 6th centuries BCE)—as the repository of the idealized models of society.

The idealized models of society can be described as an attempt to reconstruct the fiduciary community as depicted by Mencius in the Well Field System, or as the model presented in the Record of Rites under the name of

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the Great Community and the Lesser Tranquility. However, the above models were not the only ones. An alternative model, in the tradition inspired by the Chou-Li (Rituals of the Chou), also emerged. These two models implied different emphases in the Confucian-Mencian tradition. Whereas the fiduciary community in the Record of Rites and the Well Field System emphasized self-cultivation and the nurture of the individual's inborn morality as a means of cosmic and social harmony, the Chou-Li, sought for an institutional blueprint as a means of attaining Cosmic and Social Harmony. These alternative models stemmed from a different interpretation of the Confucian-Mencian tradition.

The attempt to reconceptualize and reconstruct the original lore during the Sung dynasty has been termed Neo-Confucianism. Within the wide intellectual movement characterized as Neo-Confucianism, idealized models of society were mobilized and reinterpreted in order to cope with current predicaments and tensions raised by the institutionalization of the Confucian vision. Neo-Confucian utopian visions represented an attempt to reorder the symbolic and institutional principles of Chinese society and polity (as formulated by Imperial Confucianism) and to bring them in line with the transcendental ideal of cosmic and social harmony as posited by the original Confucian vision.

It is our main contention that an understanding of the utopian thrust during the Sung dynasty is to be sought in the very process by which Confucianism was institutionalized, and in the kind of tensions generated by this process. However, the carriers of Confucian utopian visions, in their attempt to remodel society according to models attributed to the "Golden Past", were time and again exposed to the very tensions they tried to overcome. It was in the attempt to find a suitable way out of tensions and conflicts that the utopian thrust of the Sung should be understood.

II. The Main Symbolic Tenets of Confucianism

Pre-Han (6th-2nd centuries BCE) Confucian thought conceived of the cosmos as a metaphysical order. The underlying principle was the Tao, conceptualized as the Tao of Heaven. A deep abyss existed between the Tao of Heaven and the Tao of nature and society (Schwartz, 1975: 64).

The harmonization between man, society, and cosmos was contingent upon a system of ethical principles. The Confucian ethical system was organized around two axes, one pointing to the inner moral qualities of the individual and the other relating to the underlying principle of social organization. This ethical system, however, did not derive authority from supernatural revelation. Its legitimacy derived from the past in which true socio-political order and perfect human experience had already been realized (Mote, 1971; Schwartz, 1985; Eisenstadt, 1985, 1986; De Bary, 1960).

These principles emphasized the ideal qualities of men, their behavioral correlates and the framework of their realization and fulfillment. Thus, the original Confucian vision intended to relate to two different, but closely related