THE CONFUCIAN IMPACT
ON EARLY T’ANG DECISION-MAKING *

BY

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I. THE PROBLEM

As research has advanced our understanding of traditional China, the notion of a temporally seamless and monolithically “Confucian” state, with a “Confucian” government dominated by “Confucian” bureaucrats who were guided in their policy-making and political behavior by a uniform “Confucian” ideology has been judged excessively simplistic. Not only did Confucian doctrine undergo substantial changes and shifts of emphasis over the centuries, but officials who served at any given time in the name of Confucianism were by no means agreed on all aspects of its interpretation or how it was to be practically implemented in the administrations they served. Indeed, it has been widely observed that polarities and basic tensions existed in Confucian thought.

*) Abbreviations


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that tended to divide nominal Confucians into fairly well-defined bureaucratic types: "tender-minded" and "tough-minded," "Taoist-Confucians" and "Legalist-Confucians," "reformists" and "modernists," "soft" and "muscular," "romantics" and "realists," "self-cultivators" and "administrators," "idealists" and "pragmatists," and so on 1). Essentially what distinguished these bureaucrats was their attitude toward self and state.

Simply and crudely put, the first type of Confucian (if I might add yet another category to the already considerable nomenclature, the more value-neutral Type I) stressed moral self-cultivation and scrupulous adherence to ritual (li) and accepted as an article of faith the efficacy of moral example (especially that of the ruler and ruling class as a whole) and moral education in curing the ills of society. Practicing frugality on a personal and state level, curbing martial activities and territorial expansion (because they were in the long run ruinously expensive and disruptive of the social order), and refraining from unnecessarily interfering with the livelihood of the peasantry (by levying burdensome taxes and excessive corvée) would, Type I Confucians believed, secure an economically healthy society that was at the same time peaceful and harmonious. Type I Confucians grudgingly recognized the managerial role of the state in various economic, technical, and self-maintenance activities, but for them such a role was always subordinate to its moral role. The other type of Confucian (Type 2) saw the state more as an instrument of power than of morality. Type 2 Confucians looked to professional statecraft as the primary means of ordering the world, stressed the improvement of institutions and laws and the positive utilization of the bureaucratic machinery. They were sensitive to the advantages to be gained by maximizing the economic and military power of the state at home and abroad. They were far less seduced than their Type I counterparts by the notion of a Utopian past whose moral, social, and economic order provided a blueprint for curing contemporary ills. Finally, they were far less apt to profess their Confucian-ness than