LUO QINSHUN (1465-1547) AND HIS INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

BY

YOUNGMIN KIM*
Bryn Mawr College

I. Introduction

Irene Bloom, who has presented what is practically the only study of the thought of Luo Qinshun’s羅欽順 in English,1 once pointed out that modern scholarship on Luo did not consider the full aspects of his ideas.2 Indeed, whether Luo’s thought is seen as representing a defense of Cheng-Zhu learning or a departure from it, one prevalent perspective in non-Marxist Chinese-language scholarship stands in sharp contrast to a representative perspective in

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1 For information on Luo’s life see Goodrich and Fang 1976, 972-974, and Bloom 1987, 2-6. The main texts for studying Luo’s thought are his Kunzhiji困知記 (Notes on Knowledge Painfully Acquired), and his correspondence with his friends. The Zhonghua shuju edition of the Kunzhiji (1990) includes philosophical letters between Luo and his correspondents, prefaces, colophons, an essay, and various biographies in addition to the Kunzhiji itself. The latter consists of six juan. The first two were completed in 1528 and the rest was added in 1531, 1533, 1538, and 1546, respectively. Irene Bloom’s English translation of the Kunzhiji (1987) includes the first two juan, a few excerpts from the rest, and Luo’s two letters to Wang Yangming. When quoting these portions of Luo’s writing I will use Bloom’s translation (with Wade-Giles Romanization converted to Pinyin). The remaining translations are my own.

2 Bloom writes, “There is also the question of whether and how Luo’s intellectual method, which was inherited from his Sung predecessors, was related to his philosophy of qi, which was quite unprecedented. Most interpreters have emphasized either the inheritance or the departure from his forebears in the earlier Cheng-Zhu school, rarely both” (1987, 23). John Dardess also deals with Luo to some extent in A Ming Society. For a concise review of existing Chinese and Japanese scholarship on Luo’s thought, see Bloom 1987, 22-47. In Korea, there is the book-length study by Choi Jin-deok (2000).

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Japanese scholarship. The former approach tends to view Luo as a devoted follower of the Cheng-Zhu tradition who was opposed to the ideas of Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529). Scholars sympathetic to such an interpretation often point out that Luo advocated an extensive investigation of the external world. They see him as having inherited the intellectualism of Cheng-Zhu learning and somehow anticipating Qing evidential learning. The second approach, by contrast, tends to view Luo’s revision of Cheng-Zhu metaphysics as having inaugurated the so-called qi philosophy, an important intellectual trend that started in the mid-Ming period, continued through the Qing and culminated in the thought of Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724-1777). In this interpretation Luo not only is not a defender of Cheng-Zhu learning, but instead represents a significant departure from it.

3 Early on, Yamashita Ryūji (1972, 2: 57-61) also noted a similar problem associated with the interpretation of Luo’s thought.

4 As Irene Bloom has remarked, the most notable expression for describing this aspect of Luo’s thought is Rong Zhaozu’s “latter-day stalwart of the Zhu Xi 朱熹 school.” See Rong 1966, 196. Also Chen 1991, 298. Rong contrasts Luo’s intellectual style, which stressed extensive investigation of the external world, with Wang Yangming’s more intuitive style. Luo’s reputation as a defender of Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy was established through his controversies with Wang Yangming and can be traced back to pre-modern interpretations of his thought. The authors of prefaces to Luo’s Kunzhiji or literary collection emphasized the point: see Luo 1990, 177-198. According to Yamashita Ryūji (1972, 2: 57-58), Japanese scholarship before World War II also adopted this viewpoint.

5 The attention to intellectual style is further developed in Yu Yingshi’s work. Yu further placed Luo in a dichotomous macro-framework of “intellectualism” versus “anti-intellectualism,” an inner logic that explains the flow of ideas from the Song to Qing. See Yu 1970, 2:27. This approach has the virtue of not confining itself to a particular thinker or period, providing instead a bird’s-eye view of the long-term flow of Chinese thought by tracing homologous intellectual methods through a long period of time. On the other hand, this kind of interpretive stance, searching for what are apparently similar ideas across several periods and gathering them together under one certain label, can be misguided inasmuch as it neglects the historical context in which each idea was produced.

6 Japanese scholarship takes Luo’s revised view of the relation of li 理 and qi 氣 as one of the primary substantive issues in his thought. In his 1951 study Yamanoi Yū argued for the first time that Luo was the first thinker to develop a “philosophy of qi” (ki no tetsugaku 氣の哲學). Abe Yoshio (1959) calls Luo’s philosophy revolutionary in this regard. See Bloom 1979, 76-77 and Bloom 1987, 27 on this point. As she has noted, Yamashita Ryūji, while differing with Yamanoi in many respects, supports his general conclusion. In opposition to the viewpoint of Japanese scholarship, Choi Jin-deok calls Luo’s thought a philosophy of li (2000, 51). I will try to argue that to define Luo’s thought as either a philosophy of qi or a philosophy of li is not very fruitful.