

*Neo-Confucianism in History*. By Peter K. Bol. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008. Pp. xi + 366. \$49.95/£36.95.

Peter Bol's first book, *This Culture of Ours*,<sup>1</sup> changed the way we understand the crucial intellectual and social changes from the Tang to the Song. That book ended with Cheng Yi 程頤 and the rise of *Daoxue* 道學 (or Neo-Confucianism). One purpose of his new book is to pick up the story where *This Culture of Ours* left off, now explaining the intellectual and social factors that led Neo-Confucianism to become a successful movement—a movement that ultimately played a major role in shaping late imperial Chinese history. This is already an ambitious goal, and one that Bol fulfils in impressive fashion. But he is also stalking a more elusive target, namely the significance of Neo-Confucianism. Bol wants us to see that it is not an ideological justification for a stagnating and evermore autocratic state, but rather a constructive, even radical response to dramatically changing times. More than this, he concludes the book by saying, “I am convinced that Confucianism is much more than a historical subject; it remains a resource for thinking about the present” (p. 278). Bol therefore aims to balance a discussion of philosophical ideas with social and political context in order to present what he calls “an inquiry into Neo-Confucians’ engagement with the world” (p. 4). As the author of the recent *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy*,<sup>2</sup> I was immediately intrigued by Bol's approach. Bol is neither apologist for Neo-Confucianism nor naïve consumer of their “internal” justifications and histories. He is a critical scholar using the full range of contemporary historiography, but he is also committed to the notion that to understand the place of Neo-Confucianism in history, we must do our best to understand how their ideas made sense and were attractive to people of their time—and even, perhaps, to people today.

Let me begin with a brief summary of the book's structure. Chapter 1, “The New World of the Eleventh Century,” sets the stage for the appearance of Neo-Confucianism by emphasizing the many ways in which Chinese society has changed since the height of the Tang dynasty. From foreign relations, to the comparative role within China of northern and southern regions, to urbanization, commercialization, and changes within the structure of élite society: much was in flux and the significance of these changes was the subject of extended debate. These debates frame Chapter 2, “Searching for a New Foundation in the Eleventh Century.” In some ways this chapter revisits issues Bol discussed in *This Culture of Ours*, but now he relies on a topical organization centred around the challenges that were being mounted to the “Tang model of antiquity.” Chapter 3, “The Neo-Confucians,”

<sup>1</sup> Peter K. Bol, *“This Culture of Ours”: Intellectual Transitions in T'ang and Sung China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen C. Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

completes the first part of the book with a thematic and chronological summary of the nature and history of the Neo-Confucian movement. Bol defines “Neo-Confucian” as referring to:

people who identified themselves as participants in the intellectual streams that emerged from the philosophical teachings of the eleventh-century brothers Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao [程顥]; to the doctrines on human morality, human nature, and the cosmos developed from that foundation; and to the social activities that linked adherents of these views together and allowed them to put their ideas into practice. (p. 78)

He argues (convincingly, to my mind) that there are various advantages to using this modern, foreign term in lieu of one of the various Chinese terms that Neo-Confucians used to refer to themselves, and also suggests that we can “see the Neo-Confucians as participants in a broadly construed ‘Confucian tradition’ without having to accept their claim to define its true essence” (p. 80). In addition, Bol nicely articulates the tensions, but also the usefulness, in the Neo-Confucians’ dual emphasis on history and genealogy, on the one hand, and claims to universal truth, on the other. By presenting themselves as both culture and as philosophy, the Neo-Confucians were able to position themselves against both the traditions of literati culture and against Buddhism and Daoism (p. 103).

The book’s final four chapters examine the substance of Neo-Confucian thought and practice through the lenses of politics, learning, belief, and society. Each of these chapters has a rough chronological organization, showing how these “recurring dispositions” were reinterpreted and transformed from Northern Song to Southern Song, Yuan, early Ming, mid-Ming, and late Ming. A major theme of these chapters is the way in which Neo-Confucian “belief” and practice, as undergirded by its theory, endeavoured to provide voluntary alternatives to many state-sponsored institutions and values. One of Bol’s key explanations for the consolidation and influence of Neo-Confucianism is the fit that emerges among three factors: the wealth and population of southern China, the lack of state ability or determination to control or co-opt everything (especially in the wake of the demise of Wang Anshi’s 王安石 New Policies), and Neo-Confucian ideas about local improvement on the basis of individual mastery of Neo-Confucian learning. Southern Chinese literati funded private Neo-Confucian academies; they developed lineage and communal institutions for economic mutual aid; and in general provided both audience and wherewithal to pursue Neo-Confucian ideas of governing without governing. The efforts of early Ming emperors to legislate many of the values and institutions favoured by the Neo-Confucians is, as Bol sees it, something of a setback for Neo-Confucian vitality, but by the mid-Ming, Neo-Confucian localism and individualism has returned. The Qing dynasty can be seen as a reprise of the early Ming, with the state seeking to take over the role of moral leadership. In many ways this represents a continued influence of Neo-Confucianism, but Bol argues that it never recovers as a dynamic intellectual movement.

With this sketch of the entire book in hand, I turn now to more detailed engagement with Bol on some specific topics. All will agree that an assessment of the relation between Neo-Confucianism and the state is critical to any determination of Neo-Confucianism's historical significance. It is commonly asserted both that Neo-Confucianism represents an "inward turn," away from engagement with public politics, and also that Chinese governance became more "autocratic" through the later imperial era—and perhaps even that this move toward autocracy was ideologically sanctioned by Neo-Confucianism. Bol argues, to the contrary, that by offering an approach to the relation between ruler and officials that was quite different from the early imperial model, Neo-Confucianism encouraged local literati to "see themselves as part of politics and public life." In fact, he suggests that:

Neo-Confucianism contributed to a transformation of the political system comparable to that in Europe between the sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries. That is, the early imperial vision of a powerful ruler who commanded the populace and kept nature on course, a ruler who mediated between heaven and man and was the center around which all revolved, whose rituals had the power to move heaven and humanity, lost credibility. Instead, the ruler became a more human figure, who was expected to cultivate himself through learning in the style of the literati and whose ability to maintain the support of the populace depended on his success in managing the government so that it served the common good. (p. 119)

Two keys to Bol's argument are distinguishing between institutional centralization and autocracy, and between the efforts of particular rulers to maintain power and the institutionalization of autocratic rulership (p. 295, n. 28). Bol develops his case with considerable subtlety, drawing both on primary sources and on secondary scholarship in Chinese, Japanese, and English. (It is worth mentioning that Bol's mastery of the primary sources and of all three of these secondary literatures is on display throughout the book.) At the core of his position is the Neo-Confucian articulation of a standard independent of the government to which all, including the emperor, are beholden: "universal coherence (*tianli* 天理)." Not only does the idea of "coherence" enable a (partial) shift from imperial to literati authority over the proper direction of the polity, but it also sanctions the multiple ways in which local, voluntary activism emerges as a in important force in Chinese public life. An individual whose cultivated perception of coherence showed him how to act in a local context did not need a government position—or even guidance from the government—in order to pursue the proper path. This is an excellent example of the way in which the content of Neo-Confucian views (in this case, the idea of "coherence," about which more in a moment) helps to explain and justify significant shifts in social and political practice. On this topic, I have only two things to add to Bol's account. First, it would have benefited from bringing on board the concept of "middle-level institution"

that Matthew Levey develops in his 1991 University of Chicago dissertation.<sup>3</sup> Bol covers all the right institutions with great care, but the social space they occupy and the Neo-Confucians' insight into the need for this type of institution is somewhat under-theorized. Second, in light of Bol's closing words about the relevance of Confucianism today, it may be relevant that in my efforts to articulate and extend the philosophical significance of Neo-Confucianism, only when I came to political questions did I find it necessary to move beyond the Neo-Confucians in a substantial way. I agree with the "New Confucian" Mou Zongsan's 牟宗三 critique of all previous Confucian positions that they leave politics vulnerable to being "swallowed" by individual claims to moral insight, and thus leave us too vulnerable to despots.

Having touched on the idea of "coherence (*li* 理)," we should pause to consider more carefully Bol's interpretation of this central Neo-Confucian concept and his proposal to translate it as "coherence." Let me put my cards on the table: based on my own reading of Neo-Confucian texts, as well as on the influence of Willard Peterson and of Brook Ziporyn's as yet unpublished manuscript on the pre-Neo-Confucian concept of *li*, I have also argued, in the book referenced above, that *li* should be translated as "coherence." Of course, "coherence" is just an English word; everyone will agree, I think, that no single English word maps perfectly onto *li*. So the important issue is arriving at what *li* means, and then choosing a term to express that meaning in English as best as possible. I have argued that *li* means "the valuable and intelligible way(s) that things fit together," and it seems to me that "coherence" does a good job of capturing this meaning. Both in his discussion of the theory and in his elaboration of the ways Neo-Confucians deployed *li* in practical contexts, Bol develops a case for an understanding of *li* that I find extremely congenial. He says, for example, that "seeing the coherence is seeing the associations, correlations, relationships, and links that tie things together, that make the phenomena in question a coherent whole" (p. 174). Crucially, Bol recognizes that coherence can be perceived at different levels, sometimes quite explicitly nested within broader coherences (p. 175). He also articulates the type of causal role that *li* plays, *vis-à-vis* the *qi* 氣 that makes up all things: *li* expresses the structure of *qi*. Bol quotes Chen Chun 陳淳: "*li* is in *qi* and acts as its pivot" (p. 164). There is certainly much more to say about all this, not to mention some significant differences among the Neo-Confucians themselves; interested readers should look to Bol's text, as well as to the second chapter of my *Sagehood* book.

On two related issues, though, I would suggest that Bol has not said quite enough. First, as part of his elaboration of the way that *li* structures reality at different levels, Bol writes, "*Li* is of the essence for Neo-Confucians because it provides a way of saying how things should be, but it is also problematic because it involves making choices about how

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Levey, "Chu Hsi as a 'Neo-Confucian': Chu His's Critique of Heterodoxy, Heresy, and the 'Confucian' Tradition" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1991).

we want to see things: is a tree to be seen as part of an ecosystem or as a source of charcoal for smelting iron?" (p. 165) Bol renders this issue all the more intractable when he says, "The correctness of Neo-Confucian doctrine rested on a scientific claim and a historical claim. The scientific claim is that Neo-Confucians had a correct understanding of how the human as a biological being is integrated into the physical universe" (p. 204). The problem is that Bol is focused on only one dimension of *li*, namely the way in which it expresses the intelligibility of our world. Equally vital for Neo-Confucians is the way in which *li* expresses the value of our world. (In fact these two dimensions are not really separable, since one of the things we value is intelligibility.) We are not merely biological beings; we are caring, valuing beings. *Li* captures the ways that things make sense and are valuable to us. Science only provides a partial explanation (e.g., in terms of floatation) for the *li* of a boat. It also matters that boats are things that can transport human-sized individuals across water, which is valuable to us. Ultimately, this coherence contributes to what the Neo-Confucians call the unceasing creation and re-creation of life (*sheng sheng bu xi* 生生不息). *Li* does not offer us a "choice" to see a given tree as either part of an ecosystem or as a source of charcoal; both are aspects of the *li*, yet when we see a given tree rightly—that is, in light of all the relevant human purposes and biological interdependencies—our reaction to the tree will have the feeling of necessity, not choice.

The second issue is the sense in which, as Bol puts it, "all *li* are one *li*" (p. 163). This is, admittedly, one of the most vexed issues in Neo-Confucian metaphysics, and some of what Bol has to say is quite helpful. For instance, he explains that things differ from one another, notwithstanding the fact that their *li* are all ultimately identical, because of the ease with which different things can "access" different aspects of the totality (p. 167). Bol is less successful when he steps away from his model of "coherence" and says that "each thing receives the totality of principles" (*ibid.*). The only way he can make sense of this is on a generative model: if a single seed could generate the *li* for the entire universe, and every single created thing had that seed, then everything has all the *li*. But what could this mean? Bol does not explain, nor does he show us any Neo-Confucians explaining the identity of *li* via such a seed metaphor. I think that what has gone wrong has its roots in Bol's resistance to a significant relationship between Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism. He downplays the influence of Buddhism on Neo-Confucianism several times, for instance noting that Neo-Confucianism's philosophical borrowings were "more accidental than purposeful"; certain ideas were Buddhist in origin but had become shared assumptions by the Song era (pp. 104, 164). There is certainly truth in this, and I would also grant that exploring the influence of Buddhism is less important for Bol's purpose than it is for someone like P. J. Ivanhoe, who is concerned to argue for a difference between Classical Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism.<sup>4</sup> Still, if we understand the way

<sup>4</sup> See Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mengzi and Wang Yangming*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002).

in which Hua Yan 華嚴 Buddhists believed all *li* were ultimately identical, we will have a good starting point for understanding the Neo-Confucian view—especially since Zhu Xi 朱熹 and others explicitly cite Hua Yan metaphors and examples. Roughly, the idea is that the thorough-going interdependence of all things means that each thing is constitutive (though not physically generative) of each other thing. Neo-Confucians put this in terms of *li* rather than things because they wanted to avoid the Buddhist conclusion that individual things are unreal. The coherence of any given thing, then, is ultimately made up of all the patterns of coherence that there are. An oar is an oar because of its relation to the boat, and to humans (and our purposes), and to water, and to trees, and so on and so on. Thus each *li* is ultimately identical to each other *li*.

I have dwelt on *li* for some time because I agree with Bol that if we can make some sense of Neo-Confucian beliefs, we can do a better job of seeing how Neo-Confucianism came to have the historical significance that it did. Indeed, Bol spends an entire chapter on the topic of “belief,” to which I now turn. He writes: “The core of the Neo-Confucian self is belief—a conscious commitment of faith—rather than a philosophical proposition or unarticulated assumption” (p. 195). What did Neo-Confucians have faith in? Bol’s answer is “unity.” If, however, things like *li* are simply the objects of a “commitment of faith,” then my emphasis on *li*’s making sense to us may appear wrong-headed. Why should we expect to understand? On the other hand, Bol also says that what the Neo-Confucians believed was “a *theory* about how to understand, cultivate, and realize in practice something that we humans can experience personally because we possess it innately” (pp. 157–58). Bol stresses the degree to which Neo-Confucian systematic “theory” was explicit and novel (pp. 158–60). This sounds quite different from faith: rather than being disconnected from evidence or reasoning, as we would expect from faith, we have systematic theory that rests in part on what we all can, and do, actually experience. Which is it?

In fact, I think that Bol has got things mostly right; he is led only a little bit astray by his choice of “belief” and “faith” as analytical categories. “Belief” is tricky because of its ambiguity, covering the spectrum from pure leap of faith (e.g., “I believe in God”) to well-justified empirical views (e.g., “I believe that photosynthesis is important to sustaining our ecology”). “Faith” strongly suggests that one does not need—and perhaps cannot get—any evidence for one’s view. It is different from another term Bol uses, “commitment,” because while we may commit ourselves to ideals or objectives without thorough evidence of their desirability, it nonetheless makes perfect sense to think of our commitments being strengthened (or undermined) by empirical feedback. So I would prefer to say that the Neo-Confucians have a commitment to seeing the universe as ultimately unified and amenable to harmonious coherence, rather than saying that they “believe” in this, or they have “faith” in it. According to the Neo-Confucians, our own feelings toward others, and our actual (even if limited) ability to perceive ways in which the world can become evermore coherent, are both sources of positive feedback that help us to deepen our commitment to unity. On a personal level, they encourage us to take up

and gradually deepen a commitment to becoming a sage. Certainly, there are beliefs involved in all this. Bol's emphasis on the role of explicit theory in Neo-Confucianism is insightful; the Neo-Confucians argue that understanding the world in the theoretical terms they have developed will enable "learning" to proceed further because it accurately and satisfyingly captures the way things are. One thing that we should be cautious about, though, is the issue of certainty. Bol asserts that a crucial claim made by the Neo-Confucians is that "it is possible for the mind to see the *li* of something absolutely, with total certainty" (p. 163). I have both interpretive and philosophical qualms about this. On the one hand, I do not find a concern with "certainty" to be a core Neo-Confucian issue. Its importance in the history of Western philosophy has to do with certain peculiar directions in which epistemological questions develop; Neo-Confucians are interested in different matters. Zhu Xi repeatedly stresses the importance of doubting one's understanding, and neither Zhu Xi nor Wang Yangming 王陽明 sees even "enlightenment (*wu* 悟)" experiences as enabling, once and for all, a kind of certainty. On the other hand, there are times when I believe that various Neo-Confucians lean more in the direction of an unquestioning certainty—and away from a kind of fallibilism—than I believe they should; no doubt, Bol's description of the Neo-Confucians as concerned with certainty derives from passages like these. Let me reserve further comment on the significance of "philosophical" concerns like this until my closing paragraph.

Returning to commitment and belief, it is significant that many Neo-Confucian practices are designed to support the deepening of individual commitment to sagehood and unity; in particular, Bol notes that some community compacts (*xiang yue* 鄉約) were explicitly designed for "students as men of 'common resolve' (*tongzhi* [同志])" (p. 249). Bol adds that such groups were an "alternative to the religious societies of the laity." It is natural to wonder, in fact, if Bol has shown that we would be better off understanding Neo-Confucianism as "religion" instead of "philosophy." Bol even mentions in passing that one criticism levelled against Neo-Confucians in the Southern Song was that "they formed a religious sect like Buddhists, Daoists, and Manicheans" (p. 140). Aside from this, though, he does not address the issue of Neo-Confucianism's religious status. My own view is that for different purposes, both the lenses of philosophy and religion can provide constructive perspectives on Neo-Confucianism. In defense of Bol's emphasis on "philosophy," it is critical to remember that "philosophy" need not be interpreted as narrowly as contemporary academic practice might suggest. For many centuries, philosophy in the West was understood as a "way of life," in Pierre Hadot's memorable phrase.<sup>5</sup> Commitments to transformative moral goals would not have been out of place.

<sup>5</sup> See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995).

One of the great strengths of *Neo-Confucianism in History* is that it is rich enough to be read and appreciated by scholars approaching the Neo-Confucians and their times from a wide range of perspectives. Bol has a great deal to teach us. The present review focuses on aspects of Bol's arguments that are most salient to a philosopher, and I would like to end with a few thoughts prompted by Bol's orientation toward the Neo-Confucians as philosophers. He writes: "Rather than investigate the substance of the Neo-Confucians' political proposals, I ask how they saw their relationship to political power and the state system. Philosophical thought was central to Neo-Confucianism, and I take their philosophy seriously" (p. 111). What this means, I think, is that rather than see Neo-Confucian ideas as simply a "black box" that serves particular (ideological) functions, Bol wants to understand the ideas and see how these particular ideas, and the Neo-Confucians' belief in them, had the particular historical consequences they did. I find this approach to be extremely commendable: it expresses a respect for these individuals' agency that is missing when one treats them in merely functionalist terms. This is not to deny the power of analyses that focus more on "cultural capital" than on the meaning of the ideas; these perspectives, too, can be enlightening. But an approach like Bol's has an important place at the table. In fact, it is possible to go even further. Rather than just take the philosophy seriously, as Bol has done, one can take Neo-Confucianism serious *as philosophy*, which means to treat it as a live philosophical tradition: full of insight, vulnerable to critique, with room yet to grow. When I said that Neo-Confucians should not have been friendly to an idea of unquestioning certainty, that was a tentative effort to speak from within such an open, contemporary Confucianism. I heartily endorse Bol's closing words about the potential value of Confucianism in the present and future, and thank him for all that his work has done to better position us to engage in dialogue with the tradition's Neo-Confucian masters.

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吳宣德：《明代進士的地理分布》，香港：中文大學出版社，2009年。xiv + 355頁。\$20.00。

數十年來，有關明清時期進士地理分布的探討，中外學界已累積了不少研究成果。本書作者吳宣德博士以明代為斷限，重新探討這個老問題，主要目標有三：一是對進士人數的統計問題詳加考訂，並提供比較完整準確的統計資料；二是透過對進士人數的詳細統計，梳理出明代進士分布的基本特點；三是通過分析影響進士地理分布的主要原因，探討進士資料在分析地域性文化發展上作用的限度，並對相關問題