A Modern Intellectual Controversy: How to Assess Dai Zhen (1724–1777)

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Dai Zhen (1724–1777) may now be universally recognized as an important figure in the history of Chinese philosophy, but this has not always been the case. The road that today opens up a broad perspective on his contribution to the development of thought took many twists and turns over the last hundred years. This paper attempts to interpret differing and contradictory positions in the 1940s and 50s regarding Dai Zhen's historical status, looking at the political and cultural factors that moulded these views, with particular reference to the controversy between Nationalist scholar Hu Shi and Communist Party historian Hou Wailu. Two basic standpoints on the "materialist" significance of Dai's thought are revealed, corresponding to the "left" and "right" aspects of Chinese politics.

It is not the intention of this paper to evaluate Dai Zhen's contribution to the development of philosophical thought in the Qing dynasty but merely to examine the grounds of the mid-twentieth century dispute and the process by which differing interpretations were then reached.

THE GROUNDS OF THE CONTROVERSY

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Neo-Confucian moral and religious system permeated familial structures, schools, law courts and government offices. The Chinese state was apparently prosperous but the splendour of the court masked widespread disruption of the traditional fabric of society. The White Lotus rebellion had left large parts of the rural economy in ruins. Social injustices and economic misery disturbed many thinking people but few dared openly criticize the government or its ideological base. Dai Zhen,

almost alone, spoke in support of ordinary people. He criticized official excesses and attacked logical inconsistencies in state-supported Neo-Confucian teaching. As a philosopher, he attempted to find a system that offered some solution to contemporary problems. He returned to what he believed to be a fairer and purer tradition, the original ethical system of the ancients, Confucius and Mencius, drawing on the findings of the schools of empirical research (*kaozheng xue*) and Han Learning (*Hanxue*), popularized by philologists such as Gu Yanwu (1613–1682).

Dai Zhen, also known by his *zi* as Dai Dongyuan, was born in 1724, the first year of the Qing dynasty Yongzheng reign period, and died in 1777, the forty-second year of the Qianlong period.[1] He was a native of Xiuning in present-day Anhui province, and born into a family of modest means. In previous centuries, a scholar would only have been able to take up a life of intellectual pursuit if he had been supported by income from rents or official emoluments, but during the eighteenth century professional employment opportunities had expanded. Dai Zhen supported himself financially during most of his working life through income from teaching. He was also engaged by provincial officials to work on historical and scientific records.[2]

At an early age Dai developed an interest in mathematics, phonology and philology. It has been suggested that this interest in mathematics was a response to a perceived challenge from European science that had been introduced into China by the Jesuits in the previous century, but evidence to support this claim is slim.[3] In general, Chinese scholars did not pursue mathematical and scientific research as ends in themselves but as subordinate to the study of canonical works of Chinese history and philosophy. Dai obtained the *juren* degree in 1762, but he sat for the *jinshi* examination six times without success. He was eventually allowed to become *jinshi* by special decree, and appointed to the Hanlin Academy. His work on mathematics and hydrology and his critical studies of ancient texts from the Imperial Yongle Library were brought to the attention of the Qianlong Emperor. Dai became acquainted with Ji Yun, the chief compiler of the Library, and other scholars in Beijing while he was studing there for the *juren* degree. In 1773 he was invited to join the editorial team of the Imperial Manuscript Library (*Siku quanshu*). This project brought together scholars from what was loosely known as the "School of Empirical Research".

Dai published an *Annotated Edition of the Book of Water* on waterways, the *Shuijing zhu*, based on a superior previously unused text from the Library. The work was praised by the Qianlong Emperor but provoked heated controversy. Some claimed that it was tarnished by plagiarism and made with unauthorized and unacknowledged use of a text edited by Zhao Yijing. The academic community attached to the Court closed ranks around Dai Zhen and the editorial board of the Library, and his chief critic was summarily dispatched to a minor provincial post, an extreme action designed to stop him from spreading his views.

In later life, Dai wrote two philosophical works, *An Evidential Study of the Meaning of Terms in the Mencius* (*Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*), published between 1769–1772, and *The Origin of Goodness* (*Yuan shan*), published in 1776, the year before his death. Both these works have been translated into English and are readily available to the Western scholar (this article uses these translations).[4] Dai uses the tools of the Empirical Research school, and his work is in the tradition of the Han Learning school, which made historical, philological and literary attacks on the dominant Neo-Confucian school. Whereas Neo-Confucian scholars treated the classic works of Confucian thought as sacred texts teaching the path to moral rectitude, Han Learning scholars such as Yan Ruoju (1636–1704) opened them up for critical study and questioned their basic tenets. (When Yan's

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1 Fang Chao-ying in A. W. Hummel (ed.), *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period (1644–1911)*, 2 vols (Washington, D.C., 1943), pp. 695–700, editorial note by Hu Shih, pp. 970–82. (Dai Zhen's second *zi* name is Zhenxiu, and *hao*, Gaoxi.)

2 Zhou Fucheng, "Dai Dongyuan de zhexue", *Zhexue yanjiu*, 3 (1956), 79.

3 Benjamin Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Harvard University Press, 1984) p. 63.

4 Sources for the study of Dai Zhen's philosophical work include: Cheng Chung-ying, *Tai Chen's Inquiry into Goodness: a Translation of the Yuan Shan, with an Introductory Essay* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1971); Ann-ping Chin and Mansfield Freeman, *Tai Chen on Mencius: Explorations in Words and Meaning* (Yale University Press, 1990); Dai Zhen, *Dai Zhen ji* (Shanghai: Guji, 1980; includes *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*, *Yuan shan* and *Nianpu* by Duan Yucai); Dai Zhen, *Dai Zhen wenji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980); Dai Zhen, *Dai Dongyuan xiansheng quanji*, in *Anhui congshu* (hereafter AHCS), sixth series, 1936; Dai Zhen, *Dai Zhen quan shu* (Huangshan shushe, 1994–95); Hummel, *op.cit.*, pp. 695–700; Mansfield Freeman, "The Philosophy of Tai Tung-yuan", *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 64 (1933), 50–71.

pioneering study *Inquiry into the Authenticity of the Shangshu, Shangshu guwen shuzheng*, was published in 1745, it created a furore among the literati because it demonstrated that the central chapters of this work had been forged probably during the Eastern Jin period, thus casting doubt on the authenticity of many received classical records.)

Dai made extensive use of the opportunities presented by the tools of textual criticism, and went further than Han Learning scholars because he broke away from many orthodox Neo-Confucian philosophical positions. His unstated aim was to set up an alternative philosophical framework that was related to current social needs. His exegetical studies of Confucian classics on the surface were standard philosophical texts, in the usual form of philosophical dialogues, but unlike similar works by Han Learning scholars, contained trenchant criticism of contemporary bigotry, corruption and moral faults.

At the heart of Dai's belief system set out in the above-mentioned two works was a new proposition concerning human nature and the spiritual powers and a new interpretation of principle (*li*). Principle was defined by Neo-Confucians as a kind of inner light implanted in the human breast by an all-powerful Heaven. In their view, it gave rise to righteousness and contributed to good social order, and human nature and desires without the regulation of principle were essentially evil. Dai rejected this theory. In his new system, psychological phenomena stemmed from breath (*qi*), which was the basic constituent of the physical universe. In other words, human beings should be understood simply as part of the world of nature, not as agents of a supernatural power. Borrowing from Daoism something of its understanding of the mutability of breath, Dai suggested that human beings, like the rest of the universe, were in a state of constant flux. Principle described merely the internal structure and function of things. An ideal society was one where human desires and emotions were fulfilled and expressed in an orderly way.

Dai Zhen's works were collected as *A Posthumous Collection of the Works of Dai Zhen* (*Daishi yishu*), published some time between the year of his death, 1777, and 1779.[5] A more complete edition was published in volume 6 of *Collected Works of Anhui Province* (*Anhui congshu*) in 1936, republished in 1980. His complete works were also included in the authoritative collection *Sibu beiyao*. There have been several recent editions of his work, including *The Origin of Goodness*

[5] Liang Qichao, "Dai Dongyuan zhushu zuanjiao shumu kao", *Yinbingshi wenji*, XIV, pp. 78–110.

and *An Evidential Study of the Meaning of Terms in the Mencius* in one volume in 1956, and separate editions of *An Evidential Study of the Meaning of Terms in the Mencius* in 1961 and 1982. Duan Yucai (1735–1811), who formally became Dai's disciple in 1766, wrote a chronological biography (*nianpu*) of his teacher some years after his death, which is included in the *Collected Works of Anhui Province*.[6]

In his lifetime Dai Zhen established a reputation as a philologist, historian and scholar but as a philosopher opposed to the dominant Neo-Confucian school, his was a lone voice. He had no disciples to continue his philosophical work and cannot be said to have founded a new school. His most significant work was completed shortly before his death and published posthumously, so attracted little attention from his contemporaries. One famous contemporary scholar, historian and gazetteer, Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801), was familiar with Dai's work and praised his scholarship. The two met on several occasions, but according to Zhang's accounts, they differed on several key issues and it seems that they did not get on.[7] Zhang later stated that Dai had betrayed his own Neo-Confucian teachers by criticizing their teaching and its social consequences. He saw this as a moral failing on Dai's part.

A CENTURY OF CONTROVERSY REGARDING DAI ZHEN'S STATUS

During the remaining years of the Qing dynasty, Dai Zhen's contribution to the development of Chinese philosophy was largely overlooked, or he was remembered only as a philologist and a somewhat quirky thinker. When nineteenth century scholars began to grapple with questions of political and social reform and "Westernization", they overlooked the philosophical leads he offered.[8] In the first decade of the twentieth century anti-Manchu views spread throughout China, particularly from journals published in the relative safety of foreign enclaves. One of the most outspoken patriots and polemicists of this time was Zhang Binglin (1868–1936), who wrote for the *Kiangsu Journal* (*Su bao*), a Shanghai newspaper disseminating reform ideas. Reviewing the history of thought in the Qing dynasty, Zhang noted

[6] Duan Yucai, *Nianpu* (originally published in 1814), AHCS, VI; see also *Dongyuan ji*, *Sibu beiyao* ed.

[7] See Chin and Freeman, *op.cit.*, pp. 19–21; Zhou Shaomao, *Dai Zhen xin tan*, pp. 163–4; Yu Yingshi, *Lun Dai Zhen yu Zhang Xuecheng* (Hong Kong: Lungmen, 1976).

[8] Cf. Fang Dongshu, *Hanxue shangdui* (preface date 1826).

the significance of Dai's ideas and said he had offered an opportunity to move away from orthodox philosophical positions although his contemporaries had not followed his lead. Zhang was one of the first to ascribe an important place in the history of Chinese philosophy to Dai Zhen. At a time of political chaos, he emphasized Dai's independent philosophical position and praised his refusal to accept the orthodox system that propped up Manchu hegemony. According to Zhang, Dai "obliterated the distinction between Chinese and barbarians" and "attacked the false distinction between principle and desires and between heterodox and true learning".[9]

A contemporary of Zhang Binglin who also admired Dai Zhen was Liu Shipei (1884–1919), an important figure in the introduction of Western philosophy into China.[10] The writings of Liu and Zhang were influential during the May Fourth movement and established Dai Zhen's reputation in the history of Chinese philosophy. Their views were supported by Liang Qichao (1873–1929) whose review of historical trends in Qing philosophy placed Dai Zhen on a par with other thinkers such as Wang Yangming who had introduced new ideas and ways of thinking.[11]

Two leaders of China's "Literary Revolution", Liang Qichao and Hu Shi (1891–1962), sponsored a conference in Beijing to mark the two-hundredth anniversary of Dai Zhen's birth In January 1924. A new edition of Dai's works was published. Hu Shi headed the editorial committee of a special edition of the Peking University National Studies Journal (*Guoxue jikan*) devoted to Dai Zhen, published in late 1925, with contributions from Liang and other scholars.[12] From this time on, most Chinese scholars affirmed Dai's progressive views,[13] although there were a few exceptions, such as Qian Mu (1895–1967) and Wang Guowei (1877–1927) who was renowned for his work on

9 E.g. Zhang Binglin, "Taiyan wenlu chubian", j. 1, *Shuolin*, shang 80b; *Dao Han weiyan*, 32b; in *Zhang Taiyan quanji* (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1982).

10 Liu Shipei, "Dongyuan xue'an xu", *Zuoyan waiji*, j. 17 (1937); see also Zhou Shaomao, *Dai Zhen zhexue xin tan* (Hefei: Anhui renmin chubanshe, 1997), pp. 167–8.

11 Liang Qichao, *Qingdai xueshu gailun* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1921). Translated as *Intellectual Trends in the Ch'ing Period*, by Immanuel Hsu (Harvard University Press, 1959); Liang Qichao, "Dai Dongyuan zhushu zuanjiao shumu kao", *Yinbingshi wenji*, XIV (Shanghai: Zhonghua, 1936).

12 Hu Shi (ed.), "Dai Dongyuan de zhexue", *Guoxue jikan*, 2.1 (1925).

13 E.g. Rong Zhaozu, "Dai Zhen shuo de li ji qiu li de fangfa", *Guoxue jikan*, 2.1 (1925).

early Chinese scripts, including Dai Zhen's *Annotated Edition of the Book of Water*.[14] Wang attacked Dai's edition of the *Book of Water* (see below), and both Wang and Qian also played down the value of his philosophical work which they placed simply in the Han Learning tradition, denying that it had made any philosophical breakthrough in interpretation of the classics.

Hu Shi was a well-connected scholar who later became Nationalist China's ambassador to the United States. At one time it was rumoured that he was being groomed to take over leadership from Chiang Kai-shek. In China's first thorough study of Dai Zhen's thought, he hailed him as a pioneer of progressive, materialistic and scientific thinking and a leader of what he called the Chinese Renaissance. He praised his spirit of extending knowledge and pursuing the reasons for things, drawing a distinction between his "precipitous mountain road of principles and knowledge", which he said represented a more Western or scientific approach compared with the intuitive Neo-Confucian school which was only interested in the inner life and spiritual civilization.[15] Later, while resident in the United States during and after the second world war, Hu Shi continued to take an interest in Dai Zhen. He reviewed the controversy surrounding Dai's edition of the *Book of Water*, publishing a long essay in Chinese and a lengthy note in English on the subject for the biographical dictionary *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*.

From the time of the Northern Expedition on, a deep political rift opened up between Left and Right and scholars too became aligned with either the Nationalist Kuomintang or the Communist Party and other minor parties sympathetic to its cause. Somewhere between the two camps stood Feng Youlan (1895–1994) arguably the most famous historian of Chinese philosophy in the twentieth century. He completed his *History of Chinese Philosophy* (*Zhongguo zhexue shi*) in Beijing before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war[16] and continued teaching during the war in Kunming, where he wrote some important studies of classical philosophy. Feng returned to Beijing after the Communist victory in 1949 but he was never fully trusted by

14 Wang Guowei, *Guantang ji lin*, no. 12, *Shi lin* 4; Qian Mu, *Guoxue gailun* (Changsha: Shangwu, 1931), vol. 2, pp. 90–110.

15 Hu Shi, "Dai Dongyuan de zhexue", *Guoxue jikan*, 2.1 (1925), 122. See also Hu Shi, *Dai Dongyuan de zhexue* (Shanghai: Shangwu, 1927).

16 Feng Youlan, *Zhongguo zhexue shi* (Hong Kong: Taipingyang, 1961); translated by Derk Bodde as Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 1953).

the Party. He retired from public academic debate for a number of years while his political credentials and links with "bourgeois" intellectuals and supporters of the Nationalist government were investigated. During the Cultural Revolution he was placed under house arrest on the grounds of Peking University. His work may be seen as uncomfortably occupying the middle ground in the left-right struggle that characterized work on intellectual history in the mid-twentieth century.

Feng Youlan's work contrasts with that of the leading left-wing historian of philosophy, Hou Wailu (dates unknown). In 1932 Hou was imprisoned as an anti-Japanese activist and a member of the League of Left Wing Teachers in Beijing. In 1933 after his release from prison he translated Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* into Chinese. He then applied Marxist theory to the study of ancient Chinese history. In 1938 he edited a Communist Party magazine called *Sino-Soviet Culture* (*Zhong-Su wenhua*) from Chongqing. In 1941 he wrote *Studies of Chinese Classical Society* (*Zhongguo gudian shehui shilun*, later renamed *Zhongguo gudai shehui shilun*) and in 1942 *History of Chinese Early Enlightenment Thought* (*Zhongguo zaoqi qimeng sixiang shi*).[17]

Hu Shi was the internationally recognized representative of Nationalist-Party-supported scholarship on Chinese history and culture. A Communist Party United Front campaign was therefore launched against him as part of a wider campaign to influence public opinion at home and abroad, paralleling the civil war that succeeded the uneasy truce during the two parties' campaign against Japan. Hou Wailu's evaluation of Dai Zhen must be seen against this background. Since Hu had praised the work of Dai Zhen and promoted the value of his philosophical work, even defending his editing of the *Book of Water*, left-wing intellectuals such as Hou, wishing to consolidate their Party credentials, took up cudgels not so much to attack Dai Zhen as Hu himself.

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, comprehensive rules and regulations and guidelines for research and

[17] This work was later revised and republished in 1947 and 1956 as the fifth volume of *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi* (A general history of Chinese thought). Later volumes were written with other collaborators, although Hou retained editorial control; this volume is probably entirely the work of Hou. See Hou Wailu, *Chuanshan xue'an* (Chongqing: Sanyou, 1944); Hou Wailu, *Zhongguo zaoqi qimeng sixiang shi* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1956); Hou Wailu *et al.*, *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi*, 5 vols (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1957, 1959).

publication were set out by the Party, deterring independent thinkers such as Feng Youlan.[18] Hou Wailu assumed the pre-eminent position in intellectual history studies. In the 1950s he coordinated the compilation of *History of Chinese Thought* (*Zhongguo sixiang shi*), which became the standard reference on the history of Chinese philosophy in mainland universities. In this work he elaborated on the negative appraisal of Dai Zhen's work that he had made in 1941. At that time he had claimed in his *History of Chinese Early Enlightenment Thought* that Wang Fuzhi's thought was more liberated than that of Dai even though he predated him by half a century (see pp. 29 ff). This evaluation was connected with his application of Marxist theory to the periodization of Chinese history and the emergence of the early stage of capitalism in Chinese society at the beginning of the Qing dynasty (see pp. 31 ff). Departing from what was then virtually a universally positive assessment of Dai Zhen among Chinese intellectuals, Hou wrote in the early 1950s:

> By May Fourth, when there was an internal rift in the united cultural front, Marxism was disseminated in China and the Chinese Communist Party was formed, and this made the bourgeois cultural and political leaders lose their status, while the right-wing bourgeois ran to the curio heap and bit by bit proclaimed utilitarianism. These people relied on Dai Zhen to oppose Marxism.[19]

Hou's views did not entirely carry the day. In 1957, during the "Hundred Flowers" period, philosopher Zhang Dainian boldly described Dai as an "outstanding materialist" in his *Brief History of Chinese Materialist Thought* (*Zhongguo weiwuzhuyi sixiang jianshi*), and stated that both Dai and Wang Fuzhi had been "progressive thinkers" in their respective times.[20] In the same brief period of relatively open intellectual debate, historian Zhou Fucheng published a study of Dai Zhen, describing him as a Chinese materialist philosopher of the eighteenth century.[21] Again, in the early 1960s, several mainland historians, including Yang Xingshun, Du Guoxiang and Yang Xiangkui, gave generally positive assessments of Dai, but they did not absolutely disagree with Hou Wailu, choosing rather to elabo-

[18] Cf. Feuerwerker and Cheng, *Chinese Communist Studies of Modern Chinese History* (Harvard University Press, 1961) p. xiii.

[19] Hou Wailu, *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi*, V, p. 459.

[20] Zhang Dainian, *Zhongguo weiwuzhuyi sixiang jian shi* (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian, 1957), pp. 119, 125.

[21] Zhou Fucheng, *Dai Zhen—shiba shiji Zhongguo weiwuzhuyi zhexuejia* (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1957), p. 1.

rate points he had already established. In 1962 there was a lively discussion at a conference on Dai Zhen organized by the Philosophical Society of Anhui province, with several different points of view being advanced.[22]

These "after-shocks" may be related to the political uncertainties of the "Socialist Education" campaign period preceding the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" of the mid-1960s. Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong used this campaign to re-establish his political control. The consequent chaos closed universities and research institutes across China and disrupted work by scholars and intellectuals who were assigned to menial manual labour, imprisoned or persecuted to death. For ten years there was no academic research work or scholarly publication. The trauma of the Cultural Revolution continued to affect productive activity throughout the 1970s, while, lacking advice and encouragement from established scholars, the younger generation took time to reach its full potential. Serious work on philosophy and history can be said to have resumed fully only in the 1980s.

In 1980, work on Dai Zhen recommenced with the publication, in Dai's native province, Anhui, of a major new study by Wang Mao.[23] This was followed by several other works from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and US-based scholars. Two major conferences in China were convened concerning Dai's philosophical and scholastic achievements. Since the 1990s, the Chinese Communist Party has no longer exerted the rigid control over research and publication that it did in the 1950s and 60s. Within newly-defined limits, Chinese scholars now have more latitude to express personal points of view. There are more opportunities for travel abroad and for exchange of ideas with international scholars. This new freedom has been reflected in Chinese analysis and comment on Dai Zhen and his contribution to the development of Chinese philosophy. The greater variety of views recently expressed has extended to conjecture that Dai might have been influenced by Western philosophical and scientific concepts, a subject overlooked earlier during periods of more strident nationalist feeling. Nevertheless, mainland scholars tend to frame their opinions of Dai in Marxist terms and this is still a limiting factor in their work.

In spite of this, at last the work of Dai Zhen and other great figures of Chinese intellectual history can be judged mainly on their merits without being prejudiced by contemporary political considerations. Chinese historical writing however continues to use the past as a mirror to reflect the present and to predict the future. Even at the beginning of the new millennium, Dai Zhen's work serves as a reflecting surface in which Chinese readers and writers observe their contemporary society and its chaotic progress towards modernity.

Wang Fuzhi, the Alternative Candidate

Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692) lived one century earlier than Dai Zhen. An eclectic thinker, he drew on a wide variety of Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist sources. His work was a reaction to Neo-Confucian dualism which drew a sharp distinction between principle and the breath of the material world. His holistic system was built on the primacy of breath, which he regarded as the motive force for growth and development throughout the universe.[24]

Wang Fuzhi's philosophical work was not widely known during his lifetime. However, his strongly anti-Manchu views found an audience after the publication of his collected works in 1842. As a native-born Hunanese, he was then espoused by the Hunanese reform statesman, Zeng Guofan (1811–1872). Wang's views also appealed widely to patriotic scholars who saw the need for social and political reform in China. In the early twentieth century, Zhang Binglin praised Wang's contribution to political philosophy and Liang Qichao said that Wang had advanced several new interpretations of philosophical points. Hu Shi on the other hand said Wang had failed to build a new system to replace the one he criticized. According to Hu, only Dai Zhen achieved a real intellectual breakthrough that led to the eventual overthrow of orthodox Neo-Confucianism.[25]

Mainland scholars generally regarded Wang Fuzhi as the pre-eminent thinker of the early-Qing period. This was not unconnected

22 Yang Xingshun, "Lun Zhongguo zhexueshi zhong de weiwuzhuyi chuantong", *Zhexue yanjiu*, 4 (1956), 100; Yang Shangkui, *Zhongguo gudai shehui he gudai sixiang yanjiu* (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1962); Du Guoxiang, "Pizhe 'jing yan' waiyi de zhexue—du Dai Dongyuan de 'Mengzi ziyi shuzheng'", *Du Guoxiang wenji* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1962); Zhou Fucheng, "Dai Dongyuan de zhexue", pp. 79–105; "Guanyu Dai Zhen zhexue sixiang de taolun", *Guangming ribao*, 31 May 1963.

23 Wang Mao, *Dai Zhen zhexue sixiang yanjiu* (Hefei: Anhui renmin chubanshe, 1980).

24 Frederic Wakeman Jr, *History and Will: Philosophical Perspectives of Mao Tse-tung's Thought* (University of California Press, 1973), pp. 83–6. Wakeman points out that some of Wang's statements sound uncannily like Marx and Engels.

25 Liang Qichao, *Qingdai xueshu gailun*, pp. 33–4.

with Wang's Hunanese origin and the fact that Mao Zedong was also born in Hunan province. Mao was certainly familiar with and interested in Wang's work. An institute for the study of the work of Wang Fuzhi, *Chuanshan she*, had been founded in Changsha in 1915. This published a journal, *Chuanshan xuebao*, over several decades, and a chronological biography of Wang Fuzhi in 1935–36. When Mao was studying or working in Changsha around 1920 he probably attended lecture meetings at the institute and became familiar at least in a general sense with the writings of Wang Fuzhi.[26]

Even if it was not a suggestion from Mao Zedong himself that Chinese historians should take up the study of Wang Fuzhi, the Hunan connection would not have escaped Hou Wailu and others. In the tradition of Chinese scholarship, family connections and geographical origins create obligations and links to local schools of learning so that scholars frequently promote the work of people from their own locality. Thus, the Anhui Philosophical Association promoted study of the work of Dai Zhen and Hunanese scholars fostered study of the work of Wang Fuzhi.

Hou Wailu published his first study of Wang Fuzhi's thought in 1944. In this work, he described Wang's use of terms in the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), referring to the original substance of the universe, as "generative forces" and said this was close to the philosophical concept of matter. Hou said Wang's theory of the continuous changes of breath indicated he believed in evolution. Wang was therefore a progressive thinker. After 1949, other left-wing historians, such as Ji Wenfu and Lu Zhenyu, likewise described Wang as an early materialist and an opponent of the idealist Wang Yangming.[27] Feng Youlan described Wang Fuzhi as a materialist and dialectician.[28] Wang Fuzhi's work was extensively promoted by the Communist Party, although controversy regarding the progressive nature or otherwise of Daoism complicated assessment of his work.

26 Li Rui, *Mao Zedong tongzhi de chuqi geming huodong* (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian, 1957), pp. 12, 16, quoted in Wakeman, *History and Will*, p. 83.

27 Ji Wenfu, *Wang Chuanshan xueshu luncong* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1963); Lu Zhenyu, *Zhongguo zhengzhi sixiang shi* (Beijing: Sanlian, 1955), pp. 590–1.

28 See for instance, Guan Feng, "Wang Fuzhi de Zhuangzi tong", *Qiuxue ji*, pp. 138–50; Ren Jiyu, "Weiwuzhuyi de Wang Fuzhi weishenme fandui weiwuzhuyi de Laozi?", *Guangming ribao*, 21 February 1962; Feng Youlan, "Wang Fuzhi de weiwuzhuyi zhexue he bianzhengfa sixiang", *Zhongguo zhexue shi lunwen ji*, II, pp. 416–17.

The "Chinese Enlightenment" and Periodization Debate

During the 1930s, Chinese scholars became generally aware of Marxist theories of social evolution and assumed that the model of European society in these texts applied universally to all countries and cultures, including their own. They drew on Marxist reference works to re-appraise their national history, motivated by feelings of shame and humiliation because of their country's experience under foreign colonial powers. They were particularly reluctant to admit that Chinese society had to pass through colonialism before it could develop into a socialist economy, as Marxist theory dictated and sought out a compromise construct that satisfied Party tenets while "saving face" for China. In an influential statement in 1939, Mao Zedong, reviewing China's social and economic development, said Chinese feudal society could have developed slowly towards capitalism of its own accord, even if China had not been influenced by foreign imperialism and been subjected to colonialism, because it already had a type of commodity economy which carried within itself the embryo of capitalism.[29]

Hou Wailu was undoubtedly aware of Mao's views on Chinese history when he embarked on his study of the development of Chinese society and philosophy in the early 1940s. Hou proposed that the development of capitalism in Chinese society had taken place in the seventeenth century, that is during the last years of the Ming dynasty and the transition period leading to the Qing dynasty. He noted that in those years there had been rapid development of agriculture, handicrafts and domestic trade, particularly in the Yangtze River basin. Urban workers and peasants had launched a series of campaigns against the feudal order, culminating in the peasant uprising that brought the Ming dynasty to an end. Hou's work fitted in with Marxist analysis of the early development of capitalism in Europe and his model of social development appealed to patriotic readers, allowing them to feel pride in their national history because, at that crucial stage of development three hundred years earlier, Chinese social development had not lagged behind Britain, France or other "advanced" countries.[30]

29 Mao Zedong (1 September 1939), "*Zhongguo geming he Zhongguo gongchandang*" (The Chinese revolution and the Chinese Communist Party), *Mao Zedong xuanji*, 4 vols (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1965) II, p. 620; translated as *Selected Works*, 4 vols (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965) p. 309.

30 Hou Wailu, *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi*, V, pp. 3–26.

In setting the first stage of Chinese capitalism in the seventeenth century, Hou was joined by other scholars such as Shang Yue, but their views were later strongly contested, sparking a lively debate in mainland academic journals in the 1950s. The main alternative thesis proposed was that the transition from feudal society came only in the nineteenth century, as the result of penetration by foreign capitalism. The debate concerning the periodization of Chinese history was enlivened by the addition of another topic of discussion concerning the significance of the classical novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng*). This was discussed in terms of the picture it drew of Chinese society and the decay of feudalism. Mao Zedong encouraged and joined in this debate and regarded it as a significant step in revolutionizing intellectual and scholarly attitudes and opinions.[31] The periodization debate was for many Chinese scholars the first time they had been exposed to systematic study of Marxist theoretical works.

Hou Wailu proposed that the philosophy of the transitional period between the Ming and Qing dynasties typified the Chinese "period of enlightenment", and could be compared with the same transitional period in the West that had been described by Lenin. According to Hou, representative figures of this period included Fang Yizhi (1611–1671), Wang Fuzhi, Gu Yanwu (1612–1682), Huang Zongxi (1610–1695) and Yan Yuan (1635–1704), all marginalized by the main body of Neo-Confucian thinkers at the time but dreaming of a new world and comforting themselves with this hope during a time of national subjugation. According to Hou, they based their ideology on Confucian classical writings, just as the philosophers of the European enlightenment had returned to Greek texts.[32]

Hou Wailu's patriotic or even chauvinist approach to the periodization of Chinese history was demonstrated by his attitude towards the seventeenth century Chinese philosopher, Xu Guangqi (1562–1633). Xu had certainly been influenced by Jesuit missionaries who introduced elements of Western science and logic into China, but Hou denied that these imported ideas had any progressive significance.[33] Not until the 1980s, during the period of China "opening to the West", were Chinese scholars able to admit that these early contacts

31 See Feuerwerker and Cheng, *op. cit.*, pp. 181–9; Jian Bozan, *Lishi wenti luncong* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1962), pp 117–93.

32 Hou Wailu, *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi*, V, pp. 27–30, 34.

33 *Ibid.*, IV.2, pp. 1203–5. For a discussion of the work of Xu, see Pierre Demiéville, "The First Philosophic Contacts between Europe and China", *Diogenes*, 57 (Summer 1967), 75–103.

with European culture and learning had a positive influence on Qing philosophy.

Liang Qichao had placed the work of Wang Fuzhi and his cohort in the tradition of Ming philosophers such as Wang Yangming, although they rejected some of Wang Yangming's terminology. Liang had said that Qing philosophy made a definite break with tradition only later. Hu Shi had largely agreed with this view. Feng Youlan likewise identified Yan Yuan as a mainstream thinker and said Wang Fuzhi was basically in agreement with him. Therefore when Hou Wailu labelled Wang Fuzhi and his group "early enlightenment thinkers", he was taking a bold step away from what was then an established position on China's intellectual history.[34]

"MATERIALIST" CONCEPTS IN DAI'S WRITING

The controversy regarding Dai Zhen's contribution to the development of Chinese philosophy depends mainly on whether his use of classical Chinese philosophical concepts can be interpreted as proving that he was a precursor of Darwinism, scientific experientialism or Marxism. In this section I review the gloss placed by historians and philosophers such as Hu Shi, Feng Youlan and Hou Wailu on some of Dai Zhen's basic concepts which they defined as "materialist". I do not propose a comprehensive overview of Dai Zhen's philosophical system, but only compare their analyses of terms such as principle *li*, the Way *tao* and human nature *renxing*. This exercise will show that neither the political left or right has been able to claim victory in this controversy but both have strained the truth to suit their purposes.

The concept of materialism reached China in the nineteenth century, coming from Europe where it had emerged as a reaction to the doctrine of idealism as enunciated by Hegel and Kant. Contemporary scientific discoveries seemed to cast doubt on the existence of the human soul and even the mind. Justus von Liebig (1803–1873) for instance suggested that the "spark of life" (body heat) was due to combustion and oxidization. Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894) pioneered the theory of the conservation of energy, calling into question the existence of non-material spirit. These and other European scientists engaged with philosophers in lively debates concerning the nature of self-consciousness and perception and the existence of mechanical laws governing the material world. (Their opponents,

34 Liang Qichao, *Qingdai xueshu gailun*, pp. 6–8; Feng Youlan, *Zhongguo zhexue shi*, pp. 975, 990.

defending belief in non-material verities, were provoked into speculation concerning mesmerism and communication with spirits through mediums.) Lyell and Darwin relegated man to the status of an advanced primate, calling into question the connection between social ethics and a belief in a deity.

The work of Friedrich Paulsen (1846–1908), who regarded ethics as a branch of the natural sciences, claiming that it was concerned with relations between facts that might be established by causal connections and by experience, was introduced into China by Cai Yuanpei (1867–1940) and read by a generation of scholars eager to participate actively in the modernization of China, including the young Mao Zedong.[35] Darwinism in translation was also widely accepted by Chinese intellectuals. It was a shock, not so much to religious belief as to the traditional mindcast which saw the universe as basically benign towards human beings. Looking for a rationale for new goals for the development of Chinese society, philosophers such as Li Shicen (1892–1935) developed an ethical system based on the survival instinct of mutual aid. (Li, who moved from a sentimental philosophy, influenced by the Buddhism-inspired Mere Consciousness School, to something approaching socialism, felt that his work was in the heterodox tradition which harked back to Dai Zhen.[36])

The political ideas of Mao and other communists were shaped by their participation in revolutionary activities as much as by formal study. Most had no leisure to study recently-translated theoretical works until they settled in Yan'an at the end of the Long March. Li Da's *Outline of Socialist Theory* (*Shehuixue dagang*) and Li Ji's *Criticism of the Polemic on the History of Chinese Society* (*Zhongguo shehui shi lunzhan pipan*) were then widely read and debated and lively exchanges between Ye Qing (Ren Zhuoxuan), Ai Siqi and Chen Boda created an intellectual climate similar to that in the Soviet Union in the 1920s during the extended battle between Nikolai Deborin and Georg Lukacs. Mao, participating in this debate in 1938, wrote, "The history of science furnishes man with proof of the material nature of the world and of the fact that it is governed by

[35] Friedrich Paulsen, *A System of Ethics*, translated by Frank Thilly (New York: Scribner's, 1908), pp. 6–7, quoted in Wakeman, *op. cit.*, pp. 194–6.

[36] Dylan Anthony Kelly, "Sincerity and Will: The Existential Voluntarism of Li Shicen (1892–1935)", Ph. D. thesis, 1981, University of Sydney, p. 160.

laws and helps man to see the futility of the illusions of religion and idealism and to arrive at materialist conclusions."[37]

Liang Qichao, Hu Shi and their contemporaries were interested in Dai Zhen's philosophy because they believed it contained elements akin to Western "materialism" or "scientific spirit" and this was fundamental to technological innovation and the emancipation of Chinese society from rigid structures imposed by orthodox Confucian tradition.

In the following section I look in more detail at some of the fundamental terms Dai used and show how modern scholars attempted to demonstrate the progressive and modern, or superstitious and backward, character of his work.

The Way

The most fundamental concept in Dai Zhen's system is the Way (*dao*). In *An Evidential Study of the Meaning of Terms in the Mencius*, Dai wrote:

> In heaven and earth the transformations of breath flow like a stream, producing life without ceasing. This is called the Way. In men and all things, all reproductive acts are also like the never-endingness of the transformations of breath. These are called the Way.
>
> The Way is a type of motion *xing*. The transformations of breath flow like a stream, producing life without ceasing. This is why it is called the Way (i.e. a path/way). The *Book of Changes* says, "The alternation of *yin* and *yang* is called the Way." The "Hong fan" says, "The five elements: the first is named water; the second, fire; the third, wood; the fourth, metal; the fifth, earth." Motion is an alternative name for the Way.... If one mentions *yin* and *yang*, one includes the five elements, for the *yin* and *yang* embody the five elements. If one mentions the five elements, one includes *yin* and *yang*, for the five elements each possess *yin* and *yang*.[38]

Hu Shi explained this as a kind of naturalism, based on his understanding of the *Book of Changes*, the main point of reference for Han Learning scholars who interpreted it in Daoist terms. Hu said Dai's concept of the Way was basically materialist because he identified the

[37] Mao Zedong, *Weiwuzhuyi bianzhengfa* (Dialectical materialism), translated in Schram, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 124.

[38] Dai Zhen, *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*, j. xia, *Gu zhi* (1956) edn, 47, AHCS, 6a.

Way with the elements of the physical world: water, fire, wood, metal and earth. Mainland scholars such as Zhou Fucheng and even Hou Wailu agreed with Hu on this point. Hou said that Dai's reference to the production of life without ceasing reinforced his materialist concept of ever-productive matter.[39] Hou however failed to mention other references in Dai Zhen's work to moral qualities being expressions of the Way, and to the Way also being embodied in "real entities and real acts" and "human relationships and daily usage".[40]

Hou Wailu suggested that Dai Zhen had reached his conclusion about a link between the Way and the transformations of breath from his study of astronomy and mathematics. He quoted with approval Dai's reference to the "ordering and patterning of things" (*tiaoli*).[41] Yang Xingshun said that Dai foreshadowed Darwinian evolutionary theory since he believed that the existence of the everlasting world was not decided by human consciousness, and moreover this everlasting world was in everlasting movement, with the result that new things and new phenomena were constantly being produced. Yang said that Dai Zhen believed that all changes were the natural law of the Way.[42] While Hu Shi and Hou Wailu also claimed that this passage demonstrated Dai's belief in materialism, they both overlooked other passages where the "production of life" was identified with moral qualities such as humanity (*ren*), propriety (*li*) and righteousness (*yi*). Again, Zhou Fucheng said that Dai's view of the natural world was that it was "primary existence" and that nothing in the world transcended the "transformations of breath", so that he concluded that principles were synonymous with these transformations. In other words, Zhou claimed Dai was a materialist philosopher.[43] Only Feng Youlan, straddling the gulf between right-wing Hu and left-wing Hou, drew out the links Dai made between the Way, the transformations of breath and moral behaviour.[44]

39 Zhou Fucheng, "Dai Dongyuan de zhexue", pp. 81–2; also *Zhongguo zhexueshi cailiao xuanji, Qingdai zhi bu*, p. 323; Hou Wailu, *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi*, V, p. 431.

40 E.g. Dai Zhen, *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*, 6b–7a.

41 Dai Zhen, *Yuan shan*, j. shang, *Gu zhi*, 3–4, AHCS, 1a–21. Cf. Translation by Cheng, *op. cit.* pp. 68–70 *passim*.

42 Yang Xingshun, *op.cit.* p. 100.

43 Zhou Fucheng, "Dai Dongyuan de zhexue", pp. 79–105.

44 Feng Youlan, *Zhongguo zhexue shi*, 993.

Breath

Hu Shi considered that the philosophical system which Qing dynasty philosophers derived from the *Book of Changes* represented a more scientific or materialist philosophical tradition than the spiritualism of Buddhism, religious Daoism and Neo-Confucianism. In his view, the Neo-Confucianists had mistakenly drawn a distinction between principle and breath and Dai Zhen made a breakthrough when he stated that the divination hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* should be distinguished from the underlying basic principle of existence (*taiji*). Dai disagreed with the Buddhist view that the individual was divided into a physical body and a basic spirit-like consciousness and said that this spirit was the underlying cause of heaven and earth. According to Dai, Buddhist philosophers sought for something without form and trace, which they regarded as reality, while they regarded what had form and trace as illusory, and Song Neo-Confucians thought both the physical body and the spirit-like consciousness were the source of selfishness but principle was derived from heaven, distinguishing between principle and breath and regarding the former as true reality while what had form and trace was merely coarse. Their views, he said, were quite similar to the Buddhists, only they used different terms.[45]

Hou Wailu agreed with Hu Shi that Dai Zhen had made a powerful criticism of the Song Neo-Confucian views on breath, but said his world-view had still not been systematically worked out. It failed to explain the reasons for natural laws, or for his theory of the "transformations of breath", to show the relationship between the Way and the breath of natural phenomena, or to discuss change as a historical process. In these respects Hou believed that Wang Fuzhi's system was superior.[46]

These differences of opinion about breath and the materialist base of Dai Zhen's philosophy resurfaced during the conference on Dai Zhen convened by the Anhui Philosophical Society to mark the 250th anniversary of his death. Some participants said that Dai's theory of breath was very thorough, while others highlighted its defects, since

45 Dai Zhen, *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*, j. zhong, *Gu zhi*, 50, AHCS, 4a–5a; translated in Chin and Freeman, *op. cit.*, pp. 110–11; Hu Shi, *Dai Dongyuan de zhexue*, p. 20.

46 Hou Wailu, *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi*, V, pp. 433–5.

he had acknowledged that there was a higher category than breath in the universe.[47]

Hu Shi said that Dai Zhen's theory of breath could be considered as scientific in terms of eighteenth century knowledge. Dai was versed in mathematics and astronomy so he understood that heavenly bodies followed constant, regular and calculable motions. Hu said Dai's world-view had a scientific hue, although it was not expressed in detail, and when Dai insisted on the primary character of breath he was influenced by Tycho Brahe, who believed the atmosphere kept the universe together and prevented people from falling off the earth.[48]

Human Nature

When he wrote about the elements of human nature, Dai Zhen drew a distinction between "blood and breath" on the one hand and the "knowing mind" on the other. Human nature was composed of both these elements. He wrote:

> By "an allotment from the Way" is meant an allotment from the *yin* and the *yang* and the five elemental forces. "A particular form" means that this allotment is limited from the beginning, thereby resulting in inequalities in completeness or incompleteness, thickness or thinness, clearness or turbidity, darkness or brightness; that each follows its own allotment in assuming a particular form and each completes its own nature.[49]

Liang Qichao believed there were fundamental differences between Chinese and Western philosophy. Westerners were more curious about metaphysical questions, so Western philosophy split into differing schools over questions such as materialism and idealism, atheism, monotheism or pantheism. Chinese people, by contrast, originating from the great plain of the Yellow River basin, had developed in extremely practical and ordinary directions. This was why the question of human nature (*xing*) was crucial in the development of Chinese philosophy, he said.[50]

47 *Guangming ribao*, 31 May 1963, "Guanyu Dai Zhen zhexue sixiang de taolun".

48 Hu Shi, *Dai Dongyuan de zhexue*, 21–2; cf. comments by J. R. Levenson, "The Abortiveness of Empiricism in Early Ch'ing Thought", *Far Eastern Quarterly*, XIII.2 (February 1954), 155–66.

49 Dai Zhen, *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*, j. zhong, *Gu zhi*, 51, AHCS, 6a; translated by Chin and Freeman, *op. cit.*, pp. 113–14.

50 Liang Qichao, *Dai Dongyuan zhexue*, pp. 67–8.

In Hu Shi's view, Dai Zhen's theory of human nature was materialist monism. He contrasted it with Song Neo-Confucian theory which put principle and breath in opposition to each other, endorsing only the principle nature and condemning the breath nature as evil. Hu said that Dai Zhen identified the one nature of blood, breath and the knowing mind, all comprised in what the Neo-Confucians called the breath nature.[51]

By contrast, Hou Wailu said Dai's theory was erroneous. It reflected a static view of human nature compared with the more flexible approach of Wang Fuzhi. According to Hou, the creative processes of nature and the nurture of mankind were totally separate and their confusion by Dai was a grave shortcoming, as reflected in passages such as the following:

> The Way of sustaining and maintaining life finds its key in desires; the Way of sympathy and deep understanding finds its key in feelings. This is because desires and feelings are the signs of the natural (*ziran*). When these two are well-regulated, a man is able to preserve and promote the orders of things under heaven.
>
> The ears, the eyes and all the bodily organs desire those things on which our physical nature depends for nourishment. The so-called desires of human nature originate from the process of the formation and transformation of Heaven and Earth. Therefore, in the case of Heaven, they form the Way of Heaven; in the case of man, they are rooted in human nature and find expression in his daily affairs.[52]

Dai Zhen wrote extensively about the links between human nature and intellectual capacities or potential (*cai*). On this topic Hu Shi and Hou Wailu were basically in agreement, quoting with approbation:

> Potential is defined as follows: man and the hundred species of living things, each according to its own nature, assume form and characteristics, and as a result their perception and ability become differentiated. Mencius referred to it as "the potential conferred by Heaven". Man and other animals are produced by the transformation of breath When we speak of their decrees, we have in mind the limitations placed on their lives by the allotment of breath they received. When we speak of their natures, we have in mind what they were originally. When we speak of their potentials, we have in mind their actual properties. Because natures are different, potentials and properties are also different.

51 Hu Shi, *Dai Dongyuan de zhexue*, p. 22.

52 Dai Zhen, *Yuan shan*, j. shang, *Gu zhi*, 6, AHCS, 4b–5a; 5b; translated by Cheng, *op.cit.* pp. 75; 76.

> Potentials and properties are what nature reveals (about itself). Except through its potentials, how can we see what the nature is like?[53]

Hu Shi interpreted this as an attack on Neo-Confucian dualism, as did Feng Youlan. The Neo-Confucians regarded human nature as good but limited by capacity which was base. According to Hu, Dai identified nature with capacity, and believed that all gifts of human nature were good. In an attempt to square this interpretation of Dai's views with a Paulsen-type scientific approach to education and morality, Hu said Dai equated goodness with intelligence, which was the distinguishing characteristic of human beings compared with animals.[54]

It is ironic that Dai Zhen's commentary on Mencius' theory of the goodness of human nature looked back to a supposed golden age of Chinese civilization but two centuries later, his views were re-defined in terms of class struggle. Praising Dai as an early revolutionary, the unnamed authors of a Communist-Party-authorized reference work on classical Chinese philosophy wrote:

> Dai Zhen believed that the goodness of human nature was expressed through actual capacity and so it was not something predetermined. Ultimately he pointed out emphatically that those rulers in office, in their cruel plunder of the people, were no different from brigands, while the revolt of the people was nothing to do with the badness of their nature, but entirely the result of oppression by the rulers.[55]

Hou Wailu approved of Dai's theory of human nature because he identified goodness (*shan*) with wholeness (*quan*). Hou commented that Dai used potential (*cai*) to denote the real factors (or deciding conditions) of human nature, and nature to refer to possible factors (or necessary conditions). Hou said Hu Shi had failed to understand Dai's true meaning. He particularly attacked Hu's annotation of the text of the opening chapter of *The Origin of Goodness* where Dai discusses the wholeness and crookedness of human nature. According to Hou, Hu in fact doubted Dai's theory of the goodness of human nature but dared not criticize it, merely saying that Dai had been grammatically

53 Dai Zhen, *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*, j. xia, *Gu zhi*, 65, AHCS, 1a; translated by Chin and Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

54 Hu Shi, *Dai Dongyuan de zhexue*, pp. 27–9; Feng Youlan, *op. cit.*, pp. 991–2.

55 *Zhongguo zhexue shi cailiao xuanji* (*Qingdai zhi bu*), p. 323.

incorrect. Hou accused Hu Shi and those he described as "bourgeois idealists" of offering false praise to Dai.[56]

This disagreement over Dai's theory of human nature resurfaced in the 1963 Anhui symposium. One group of participants reportedly said Dai was materialist since he defined human nature as blood, breath and the knowing mind, that is as natural qualities. Another party said that Dai was in fact idealist, since he admitted there were innate qualities in human nature.[57]

Natural and Necessary

Dai Zhen believed that man could proceed from what was natural (*ziran*) to achieve an understanding of what was morally necessary (*biran*). Virtuous conduct flowed from this understanding of what was morally necessary. Feng Youlan said this was a new philosophical position. Others including Zhou Fucheng said Dai's theory was a unification of moral law and natural order.[58] Hu Shi and Hou Wailu both referred to the following passages:

> What distinguishes man from other animals is that man comprehends the necessary while other beings follow what is natural.
>
> What is the natural and what is the necessary are not two separate things. Thus, when what is natural is completely understood without the slightest mistake, **that** is the necessary. If (a person has approached what is necessary) in this way and there is no regret but only contentment afterward, this means (that he has attained) what is natural in the highest degree. If he allows his natural tendencies to lead him into error, then he has lost what is natural. What he has gotten is not what is natural. Therefore, by returning to what is necessary a person completes what is natural.[59]

Dai Zhen here added his commentary to passages from Mencius concerned with the innate springs of moral action. Hu Shi regarded Dai as a prototype of a modern scientist and equated his use of these terms with the natural and the necessary. He said this principle

56 Hou Wailu, *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi*, V, pp. 439–40; Hu Shi, note on *Yuan shan* in appendix to *op. cit.*, p. 10; Dai Zhen, *Yuan shan*, j. shang, *Gu zhi*, 7, AHCS, 6b; translated in Cheng, *op. cit.*, pp 67–82.

57 *Guangming ribao*, 31 May 1965.

58 Feng Youlan, *op. cit.*, p. 1000; Zhou Fucheng, "Dai Dongyuan de zhexue", pp. 97 ff.

59 Dai Zhen, *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*, j. shang, *Gu zhi*, 42, 45, AHCS, 20a, 23a; translated in Chin and Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 96, 100.

contained scientific significance.[60] Hou Wailu in this respect followed Hu's interpretation, but, looking for evidence of the eternal verity of Marxist theory, also commented that Dai had said if freedom were uncontrolled and one did not grasp the necessary and take possession of the natural, then mankind would be the slave of nature and not its master, so losing freedom.[61] Hou also took Dai to task for failing to emphasize the role of experiment and struggle in the search for knowledge.

Principle

The Neo-Confucian concept of natural order, principle, is certainly not the same as Western natural law, although some Chinese philosophers used the term in the sense of pattern or organization. In the absence of a divine lawgiver, Confucian scholars held that the universe was maintained by internally consistent principles from which natural law was derived. When, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Jesuit missionaries introduced the idea that mathematical principles might be independent of human or social structures, Chinese scholars did not extend this ideological framework to social and historical phenomena. Only in the late nineteenth century did reform-minded Chinese such as Kang Youwei (1858–1927) point out that the fundamental difference between Western and Chinese philosophy was that the West had a system of external absolute natural law by which the real world could be evaluated. Kang spurned Neo-Confucianism in favour of the Han dynasty *yin yang* and "five agents" school and found inspiration in the writings of the eclectic Wang Fuzhi rather than Dai Zhen.[62]

The first section of Dai's study of Mencius includes the passages quoted above concerning the natural and the necessary and is devoted to an exposition of principle. Its comprehensive attack on the orthodoxy of the time had been considered very compelling by reform scholars such as Zhang Binglin. Hu Shi also hailed its political and philosophical significance, saying that Neo-Confucian scholars had made their theory into heaven's principle and forced men to follow it. While they talked about preserving heaven's principle and eliminating human desires, they actually demonized the concept of desire and

60 Hu Shi, *Dai Dongyuan de zhexue*, appendix p. 70.
61 Hou Wailu, *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi*, V, p. 445.
62 Kang Youwei, *Ta-t'ung shu* (*Writings on the Great Harmony*) translated by Laurence Thompson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1958), pp 64–5.

set up inhuman rules of propriety based on a system of principle. In a famous passage, Hu Shi said that for more than eight hundred years, principle had been the weapon by which parent kept down son, mother-in-law kept down daughter-in-law, man kept down woman and ruler kept down the people, creating an inhuman, unfeeling and lifeless China.[63] Hu Shi and Liang Qichao both regarded Dai Zhen's theory of principle as his greatest contribution to philosophy. Zhou Fucheng said it was a fatal blow to the Cheng and Zhu school of idealism.[64]

Like the Neo-Confucians, Dai Zhen acknowledged the existence of principles in the world, but he denied that these principles could be present in human nature. What he proposed to substitute for the Neo-Confucian view is not clear and provoked considerable debate among later commentators. Dai wrote:

> The word "principle" is a name assigned to the arrangement of parts of anything which gives the whole its distinctive property or characteristic, and which can be observed by careful examination and analysis of the parts down to the minutest detail. This is why we speak of the principle of differentiation. With reference to the substance of things, there are such expressions as the principle governing the fibres, the principle governing the arrangement between skin and flesh, and pattern.... When proper differentiation is made, there will be order without confusion. This is called "order and arrangement".
>
> After describing Confucius' teaching as a "complete concert", Mencius went on to say, "Initiating an orderly arrangement is the work of wisdom, Carrying this orderly arrangement to completion is the work of sageness." Sageness and wisdom reached perfection in Confucius, yet Mencius in this passage used only the words "orderly arrangement" to describe his achievement.... What the ancients called principle was never the same thing as what latter-day scholars call principle.[65]

> The word "principle" does not often appear in the Six Classics, in the works of Confucius and Mencius, or in commentaries or in other historical records. But today even the stupidest of men, when boorish and brutal, will often appeal to principles whenever he makes a decision or argues with another person. Since the Song the practice of

63 Hu Shi, *Dai Dongyuan de zhexue*, p. 34.
64 *Ibid.*, p. 31; Liang Qichao, *Dai Dongyuan zhexue*, p. 65; Zhou Fucheng, "Dai Dongyuan de zhexue", p. 92; see also D. W. Y. Kwok, *Scientism in Chinese Thought 1900–1950* (Yale University Press, 1965).
65 Dai Zhen, *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng.*, j. shang, *Gu zhi*, 30, AHCS, 1a–1b, translated in Chin and Freeman, *op. cit.*, pp. 69–70.

> learning from each other has made it customary for people to think of principle as if it were a thing acquired from Heaven and endorsed in the heart-and-mind. As a result, personal opinions are taken to be principles. Thus, those who rely on their imposing manners, who take advantage of their position of authority, and who, in addition, are clever in speech are able to promote their (version of) principle while those who are weak, irresolute, and incapable of arguing convincingly have to yield their (version of) principle. Alas! Little do people realise that to regulate affairs or men in this manner is not in accordance with principle.[66]

Hu Shi said Dai Zhen's theory of principle derived from earlier Qing scholars such as Yan Yuan and Li Kong, but only Dai Zhen was able to turn it into a weapon to attack Neo-Confucianism and make it the basis for a new philosophical system.[67] Dai believed principle was the pattern existing in all phenomena. Later commentators on Dai's work mostly agreed with Hu that this theory was intended to provide an alternative model to that of the Neo-Confucians. Hou Wailu admitted that Wang Fuzhi and Dai Zhen both stood on the same ground regarding principle (a tradition he said they inherited from Zhang Zai).[68] Hou said he recognized Dai's materialist theory of "being and thinking", which made existent objects regularized matter and was related to his concept of the "necessary" (see above). Hou referred to the following passage:

> A thing is an affair or an event. When we speak of an event we do not go beyond the ordinary activities of daily life such as eating and drinking. Principles arrived at without reference to such things are not what the ancient sages and worthies understood as principles.[69]

On this point Hou Wailu and Zhou Fucheng basically agreed with Hu Shi. All three saw in Dai's theory a disposition towards a scientific or materialist view of the world, drawing on the views of Rong Zhaozu, who had said in 1925 that when Dai Zhen spoke about principle, he did not regard it as something obtained from heaven and

66 Dai Zhen, *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng.*, j. shang, *Gu zhi*, 30, AHCS, 4a–4b, translated in Chin and Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

67 Hu Shi, *Dai Dongyuan de zhexue*, p. 33.

68 See Feng Youlan, *Zhongguo zhexue shi*, pp. 994–5; *Zhongguo zhexue shi cailiao xuanji*, *Qingdai zhi bu*, p. 345; Zhou Fucheng, "Dai Dongyuan de zhexue", p. 97; Hou Wailu, *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi*, V, pp. 443–4.

69 Dai Zhen, *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*, j. shang, *Gu zhi*, 29, AHCS, 3a; translated in Chin and Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

present in the mind (the Neo-Confucian concept) but rather as something abstract, the pattern of things, and as something that was so of necessity, or scientific law.[70]

Dai Zhen rejected any proposition that the human mind was the receptacle of divinely inspired truth. In his view, the mind was only a specialized organ that happened to be capable of thought. He wrote:

> The act of thinking is a capability of the mind. The clarity of the mind sometimes becomes fogged so that ideas cannot be adequately comprehended. When it is not fogged, there is no lack in the mind's comprehension, then it may be characterised as having divine percipience.
>
> All things of blood-and-breath have perception, but perception differs in degree. This is like the flame of a fire that lights up objects. When the flame is small, it can light up only nearby objects, but what it does light up is revealed in all its true aspects. What it does not light up is subject to doubts and mistakes. When there is clarity, principle is said to have been acquired. A large flame lights up greater distances and enables one to perceive principles more often than not. A flame is not only measured by the distance its light can reach but also by the degree of its intensity; therefore, sometimes it illuminates things clearly, and sometimes not. Those things it can illuminate clearly are revealed in their true aspects, whereas other things it cannot illuminate clearly will still be subject to doubts and mistakes.
>
> With doubts and mistakes present, the principles are lost. He who cannot grasp the principles is limited by his benighted nature, which we call "ignorance". Only through learning can one make up for such deficiencies and advance to wisdom and continue to correct these deficiencies to the utmost. It is like the brilliance of the sun and moon lighting up every cranny. [When there is illumination] one then becomes a sage.... Therefore, principle is nothing more than what is illuminated and discerned without distortion or mistakes.[71]

Feng Youlan said this view of the human mind drew on Xunzi. Like Xunzi, Dai believed the mind was simply a bodily organ. By expanding knowledge, a man could improve himself until he perfected his moral state. Xunzi had not, however, discussed any principle existent in the world either outside or inside the human mind. In Feng's view, Dai's achievement was to state that men had to strive to

70 Rong Zhaozu, "Dai Zhen shuo de li ji qiu li de fangfa", *Guoxue jikan*, p. 158; Zhou Fucheng, "Dai Dongyuan de zhexue", pp. 83–4.

71 Dai Zhen, *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*, j. shang, *Gu zhi*, 31–2, AHCS, 6b–7a; translated in Chin and Freeman, *op. cit.* p. 77. Author's preferred translation is, "Principle *and righteousness* are nothing more than what is illuminated and discerned without distortion or mistakes."

obtain this principle, implying that there was a physical or psychological foundation for this search within human nature. Feng Youlan considered that, in this sense, Dai Zhen was closer to the orthodox Neo-Confucian belief in principle existent within the individual than he was to Xunzi who said that moral and intellectual development were determined absolutely by external circumstances.[72]

Epistemology

Dialectical materialism reached China through translated texts from the 1930s on. Writing from Yan'an, Mao Zedong had drawn on Engels, who emphasized that correct perception of social and natural forces was the basis of reformative action, when he discussed the tension between subjective perception and objective reality. Mao believed that Chinese society and history were particular phenomena demonstrating the universal truth of general laws so that correct understanding allowed truth to be derived from the study of history, rather than being imposed on it from outside.[73] This approach to knowledge has been termed epistemology by Marxist scholars. Right-wing scholars may not have used this term, but also paid much attention to the related process of scientific methodology.

Both Rong Zhaozu and Hu Shi had discussed Dai Zhen's theory regarding the apprehension of principle. Rong noted Dai's utilitarian approach demonstrated in the passage quoted above. Hu Shi said Dai advocated what modern philosophers and scientists would call analysis and generalization. He noted that Duan Yucai, in his chronological biography of Dai Zhen, had quoted the following comment from his teacher:

> We need always to comprehend Mencius' "orderly principle", and must grasp this orderly principle to which he refers. If we first combine (*he*) and then divide (*fen*), or first divide and then combine, then there will be nothing impossible.[74]

Hu Shi said this showed Dai's contemporary scientific spirit. He identified many examples in his work of what he called experimental

72 Feng Youlan, *op. cit.*, pp. 1006–9.

73 Frederick Engels, *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Dühring)*, translated by Emile Burns (New York: International Publishers, 1939), p. 131; Mao Zedong, "Rectify the Party's Style of Work (1 February 1942)" in *Selected Works*, III, p. 40.

74 Duan Yucai, *Dai Dongyuan xiansheng nianpu*, AHCS, 45b; *Dai Zhen ji*, pp. 453–91.

verification and scientific hypothesis. Dai said that things could "become a standard for the world and ten thousand generations". Hu read the verb "become a standard" as if it were transitive, that is, that things could "extend (their principles) to all places and all times and obtain what is correct". On this reading, Dai might have advocated experimental verification methods of scientific proof. Hu praised the following passage which he said expressed the object of science:

> With regard to Heaven and earth, men, things and affairs, I have never heard of any principle which cannot be talked about. This fact is borne out by the line from the Book of Odes, "Since there are things, there are specific principles.." The word "thing" refers to concrete objects and concrete affairs. The word "principle" refers to its purity and its centrality and correctness. Concrete objects and affairs are what is natural, but by returning to what is necessary, the principles of Heaven, earth, men, things, and affairs are realised. The universe is vast, and men and things are numerous; affairs are tortuous and complex, but they have distinct strands. Only if they are in accord with their principles as straightness is in accord with a plumb line, levelness with water, roundness with a compass, squareness with a square, do they then become a standard for the world and ten thousand generations.[75]

Hu Shi's interpretation of Dai as a pioneer of scientific methodology is difficult to defend. Hou Wailu, without naming Hu Shi, warned against exaggeration of Dai's thinking. Hou pointed to Dai's belief in general truth, or abstract principles unchanged since ancient times, which contradicted Marxist epistemology. Before Marxism was introduced into China, no Chinese philosopher had access to general truth, Hou said. Moreover, there were no unchanging principles in the world, even in science. Dai's epistemology therefore could not be said to be scientific. According to Hou, Wang Fuzhi and Yan Yuan were both more advanced in their thinking than Dai Zhen, since both developed theories of relative truth. Nevertheless, Dai did possess a type of empiricism.[76]

Several commentators also noted Dai Zhen's interpretation of the term "weighing" (*quan*). Dai devotes one whole section of his commentary on Mencius to this concept. One key passage runs:

75 Dai Zhen, *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*, pp. 38–9, AHCS, 15a; translated in Chin and Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 89. Hu Shi, *Dai Dongyuan de zhexue*, pp. 39–45, 65–6.

76 Hou Wailu, *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi*, V, pp. 447–9.

> As Mencius said, "Holding the mean without weighing the circumstances is like holding to one particular thing. "Weighing is the way to distinguish the important from the unimportant. This is to say that when the lucidity of the mind reaches the point at which one can accurately distinguish between things, it is called "weighing". When learning comes to this, there is a thread running through (all levels of understanding), and the biases of personal opinions consequently are eliminated.[77]

Hu Shi said this showed that Dai had a scientific attitude to the evaluation of principle. Hou Wailu disagreed. He pointed to the loose way Dai used the term "weighing", either in the sense of adaptation (*quanbian*) or weighing/considering (*quanheng*). Further, he said Dai's theory of an unchanging principle of truth was at odds with his theory of constant transformation in nature. This was why he proposed the term at the end of his *Evidential Study of the Meaning of Terms in Mencius*, he said, in order "to stop up gaps in his system".[78]

Ghosts, Spirits and Other Matters

The topic of Dai Zhen's attitude to ghosts and spirits seems to have been introduced only by the Anhui Philosophical Association at its conference in 1963, as I cannot find any reference in the studies of Hu Shi and other earlier commentators. According to the brief summary report of the 1963 symposium, some participants considered Dai's explanations of stories of ghosts and spirits were based on a materialist outlook. Some also noted his use of the term "pure breath" (*jingqi*) to explain divinity or spirit. Others objected that Dai's theory was not pantheism and nothing more than natural theism.[79]

Many other related topics in Dai Zhen's philosophical system were discussed by twentieth-century commentators. Liang Qichao, for instance, enlarged on how Dai dealt with the question of desires, which the Neo-Confucians had denounced as evil. Hu Shi endorsed Dai's utilitarian views on society, saying he clearly desired the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Hou Wailu thought some aspects of Dai's work were utopian and should not be underestimated. In particular, he thought that Dai's use of the term propriety (*li*) referred to a relationship of equality between people, so he looked forward to a future society based on equality between classes.[80]

77 Dai Zhen, *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*, j. xia, *Gu zhi*, 83, AHCS, 23a; translated in Chin and Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 171.
78 Hu Shi, *Dai Dongyuan de zhexue*, pp. 65–6; Hou Wailu, *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi*, V, p. 450.
79 *Guangming ribao*, 31 May 1963.

HOW TO ASSESS DAI ZHEN

It would be hard to exaggerate modern Chinese intellectuals' feeling of humiliation because of their country's colonial past. Real and imagined insults have become part of shared consciousness. From the early years of the twentieth century, those who believed that traditional culture was bankrupt and obsolete thought that China's salvation depended on achieving the twin goals of science and democracy (generally equating modernization with Westernization). China's economic weakness added to national feelings of inadequacy. Japan was held up as an example of an Asian nation that had strengthened itself by absorbing and integrating Western culture and technology.

On the other hand, the inchoate desire to identify and quarantine from change values that carried an essential Chineseness or national identity had lain behind discussions of substance (*ti*) and application (*yong*) in the 1860s. Since that time, debate has continued regarding what is Chinese and what is foreign, overlaid with recognition of the necessity for political and economic change. The writings of historical figures such as Dai Zhen, who tried to break away from orthodoxy, and whose views reflected a historic desire for change and progress, have been mined in an attempt to find an alternative tradition of national values that might be maintained and promoted for present-day use.

Torn between the political imperative of change and the social imperative to maintain respect for tradition and values inculcated by teachers and family elders, scholars have combed the vast sweep of Chinese history to identify what jewels might be salvaged. Among the ashes of the firestorm of revolution, they have gathered precious items that meet current social needs and can be interpreted in language acceptable to politicians and people. Even today, this exercise continues, as demonstrated by the promotion of concepts such as socialism with Chinese characteristics or freedom with Chinese characteristics. There is a deep ambivalence in the coexistence of Chinese revolutionary fervour and traditional culture. Like a geological fault line, this from time to time throws up movement between tectonic plates, most

80 Liang Qichao, *Dai Dongyuan zhexue*, pp. 65–7; Hu Shi, *Dai Dongyuan de zhexue*, p. 44; Hou Wailu, *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi*, V, pp. 453–4.

savagely and dramatically in the so-called Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.

During the evolving political situation of the 1940s and 50s, scholars of Chinese history adopted terms of reference and language appropriate to their particular situation. At a time of increasing rivalry on the international stage between the two parties, both of which were lobbying to be considered the legitimate government of China, scholars' positions were determined by whether they were pro-Communist or pro-Nationalist. At this period when political divisions were deepest, partisan views of history became most entrenched. Even regional loyalties to historic figures from one province or another were subsumed into the political agenda.

Historians working in the framework of Marxism applied ideological concepts to their studies in a simplistic fashion due to their imperfect understanding of theoretical texts. For instance, they considered materialism to be a characteristic of the proletariat and the oppressed classes throughout history, so they emphasized the struggle significance and party nature of those they categorized as progressive thinkers, and, where they could demonstrate that historical figures foreshadowed Marxist-Leninist-Maoist tenets, they praised them for their historical significance and excused lapses into idealism or superstition as being due to historical conditions or the impossibility of anticipating the revelation of the gospel according to Marx. The arguments in the 1940s and 50s over the periodization of Chinese history and the significance of Dai Zhen's philosophy illustrate the impossibility of applying Marxist theory holus-bolus to the complexities of Chinese history.