

Neo-Confucian Political Philosophy in the Song Dynasty: A Perspective from Wang Anshi's Reforms

Jinpeng Ma

*College of Arts & Science, New York University, New York, USA
jm9681@nyu.edu*

Abstract. This article takes Wang Anshi's reform as its analytical point of entry and examines how Northern Song Neo-Confucian thinkers—represented by Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi—constructed a metaphysical foundation of tianli (Heavenly Principle) and, from an ontological perspective, subsumed the pre-Qin Confucian moral psychology of ren (humaneness), yi (righteousness), li (propriety), zhi (wisdom) and xin (trustworthiness) under a unified cosmic principle. By grounding political legitimacy in tianli, Northern Song scholar-officials reconceptualized themselves as inheritors and transmitters of Confucian orthodoxy, thereby occupying a morally authoritative position independent of imperial power. As bearers of Confucian orthodoxy, they were able to articulate a relatively autonomous moral and normative standpoint beyond the authority of the throne and to participate in politics through remonstrance, consultation, and criticism, thus contributing to the Northern Song ideal of "co-governing the state with scholar-officials."

Keywords: Li (Principle), Confucian Orthodoxy, Political Orthodoxy, Neo-Confucian Political Philosophy

1. Introduction

From the perspective of Song-dynasty Neo-Confucians, tianli (Heavenly Principle) constitutes the highest and universally valid law of the cosmos. Only by grounding political legitimacy in the independence and universality of tianli can the legitimacy of political orthodoxy (zhengtong) be properly justified. The inheritors of Confucian orthodoxy (daotong) must necessarily be those who truly comprehend tianli; however, those who inherit political authority do not necessarily possess such understanding of tianli or daotong. As the Cheng brothers pointed out, Confucius was a person with great virtue but no official position. Precisely because they fully understood tianli, the scholar-officials and Confucian thinkers who carried on the Confucian Way and held no political power had to take the universal principles of the cosmos as their basic stand. In this way, they could guide the finite monarchical authority, and hold it back when it was needed. They did all these things to stop the rulers from abusing their power. So the people who passed on the true Confucian ideas thought of themselves as the bearers of truth. They put forward a kind of moral idealism. The ideal was to guide the rulers to practice wangdao, instead of letting political rule be driven only by people's limited experience or the logic of power that belongs to hegemonic domination. The scholar-officials in the Song Dynasty were a morally self-disciplined intellectual group. So they formed a special

relationship with the rulers: they cooperated with the rulers and also restrained their power at the same time. Both sides worked together toward the same goal, which was to make moral principle and political order a reality [1].

This study offers useful historical facts and theoretical ideas about the tension in modern societies. On one side are individualism and instrumental rationality, and on the other side are the traditional communal structures based on family ethics and ritual norms. In Plato's Republic, there is an idea that governing the state is just like cultivating the self. This idea is very close to Confucian thought. Confucianism holds that a person can only achieve moral completion if he or she does sincere self-cultivation and fulfills their proper role well. And only through self-cultivation can one regulate the family, govern the state, and finally bring order to the world. It is the same in both Plato's thoughts and Confucian philosophy. The foundation of their political thought is not mainly in institutional design. Instead, it is in a basic understanding of reason, virtue, and human nature. This understanding finally leads people to pursue cosmic order and the highest good. So the most important inquiry of politics is actually an inquiry into the moral quality of the people who do political work. Just like the highest human pursuit is, in the end, an inquiry into human nature itself.

2. The political environment in Song Dynasty from the perspective of Confucianism Orthodoxy

2.1. Tianli and the construction of political order

By exploring tianli (Heavenly Principle), the Cheng brothers brought back together the once separated parts of moral virtue—ren and yi—and political ethics. They put all these things into a metaphysical framework that takes tianli as the core. People saw tianli as the absolute truth that all things in the cosmos come from. In a static and analytical way, "Heaven" (tian) and "principle" (li) act as abstract and final origins. They do not include specific things or clear moral values at this level. But the running of the Heavenly Way is the inner active force that connects Heaven and human beings: the movement of tian creates laws and fixed patterns, and the changes in the natural world become the outward signs and marks of this cosmic movement. Humans find out what li is by watching and thinking about these marks carefully. By combining tian and li together, the Cheng brothers built a connection between Heaven and humanity. This connection also gave the ontological structure of the cosmos the meaning of moral standards. They further attributed moral qualities to tianli, understanding moral value itself as an expression of universal cosmic principle. In their view, human beings, as one among the myriad things, likewise exist and operate in accordance with tianli. As famously stated, "Where there is the Way, there is principle; Heaven and humanity are one." Accordingly, all political principles governing human society must ultimately be traced back to their essential grounding in tianli. Social distinctions such as ruler and subject, father and son, emerge naturally from humanity's conformity to its inherent nature and thus constitute social norms in accordance with Heavenly Principle. As the Cheng brothers put it, "This principle is the Mandate of Heaven; to follow and accord with it is the Way." [2]

At the same time, they maintained that individuals must exert sustained effort in jing (reverence) and cheng (sincerity) in order to remain aligned with tianli; even slight negligence risks allowing the mind to lapse into unrestrained impulses. Although tianli manifests itself through moral virtues such as benevolence and righteousness, it is not exhausted by them. Human nature and ethical norms represent only finite expressions of the infinite Heavenly Principle within social life. If individuals abandon their inherent nature and allow their endowment of qi to govern conduct unchecked, moral order and social harmony will inevitably deteriorate. Since humans are born with varying endowments of qi, some pure and others turbid, only through sustained self-cultivation can one

refine virtuous qi and prevent base tendencies from obscuring one's original nature. Thus, in the Cheng brothers' view, adherence to the human nature endowed by tianli constitutes a necessary condition for ethical order, social stability, and harmonious governance [2].

Relying on their understanding of the independence and transcendence of tianli, Song-dynasty Neo-Confucians examined the political conditions of the Northern Song. Because tianli possesses moral significance in the empirical world, and because this moral significance is universally valid, it furnished scholar-officials with sufficient moral confidence to confront supreme imperial authority without fear, guiding and restraining it in accordance with righteousness and principle. It was precisely this metaphysical investigation of tianli that endowed Northern Song scholar-officials with the courage and responsibility to govern the realm jointly with the emperor. In the Cheng brothers' view, the legitimacy of any political regime does not derive from power or hegemony, but from its rational and moral coherence. From the perspective of governance, the foremost task lies in establishing correct ends; only then can these ends be realized through the cultivation of reverence and sincerity. For this reason, the Cheng brothers consistently resisted utilitarian modes of thought. Concrete achievements and material benefits were not fundamental; to prioritize them was to abandon what is essential in favor of what is secondary. Although the rise and fall of the state and the ruler's accomplishments are not insignificant, the principle remains that "if names are not correct, words will not be coherent." When rulers pursue hegemonic domination or utilitarian gain, all political meaning is ultimately undermined—an assessment that constitutes one of the central philosophical reasons for the Cheng brothers' opposition to Wang Anshi's reforms [2].

2.2. Confucian orthodoxy and political orthodoxy

The concept of Confucian orthodoxy was first systematically articulated by Han Yu. In *On the Origin of the Way* (Yuandao), Han Yu describes a lineage transmitted from Yao, Shun, and Yu, through Confucius and onward to Mencius, and he maintains that Confucian orthodoxy was broken after the death of Mencius [3]. Nevertheless, the actual existence of Confucian orthodoxy predates Han Yu's conceptualization of it. Its intellectual origins can be traced at least to Confucius's account of the abdication between Yao and Shun in the *Analects*: "Yao said, 'Ah, you Shun! The succession of Heaven rests upon you; hold fast to the mean. If the four seas fall into distress, the Heavenly mandate will come to an end.' Shun in turn transmitted the charge to Yu" [4]. In the chapter "Yao yue" of the *Analects*, Confucius clearly delineates the transmission of Confucian orthodoxy among the Two Emperors and the Three Kings. On this basis, he sums up the ways that the ancient sage-kings ruled the world: building up ritual and music, acting with justice, and putting the people's living needs first. This shows that the passing on of Confucian orthodoxy has always been closely connected with the handover of political power. But Confucius himself was a person who had great virtue but no official political position. He went to many different states, hoping that rulers would accept his political ideas. Still, he never got the chance to put those ideas into practice. After this, virtue and official position gradually became separate things: people with virtue did not always hold political power, and those who held power often lacked virtue. Since Han Yu's time, Confucian thought has developed more and more towards moral metaphysics and the study of moral life. Its theoretical focus has moved more to inner sageliness (neisheng), and it has never given up the political ideal of outer kingship (waiwang) at the same time. Cheng Yi also points out further that the real core of Confucian orthodoxy is the "Way of the Great Mean" [5].

In the Cheng brothers' opinion, tianli (Heavenly Principle) is the same as the Dao, and the Dao itself is the same as the Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong). Zhu Xi, who took over the Cheng brothers' thought and made it more systematic in a further way, explains this point clearly. He says

that the "hidden core" passed on in Confucian orthodoxy is the well-known "sixteen-character transmission of the mind": "The mind of the Way is subtle; the human mind is precarious. Be refined and single-minded, and firmly hold to the mean." Zhu Xi makes this explanation: "Zhong means not leaning to the front or the back, not going too far or being insufficient; yong means what is ordinary and unchanging." [4] For Zhu Xi, this idea of "not leaning to the front or the back" does not mean a simple compromise or just being moderate. Instead, it stands for a unity of "the reason why things are as they are" and "the standard of what things should be like". In other words, people see tianli as the combination of the inner structural nature of all things and the normative state that they ought to be in. On this basis, Confucianism uses the universal principle of "firmly holding to the mean" to explain ethical and political relationships, like the relationships between father and son or ruler and minister. By doing this, it tries to guide the politics of the Song Dynasty back to the ideal kingly governance order of the Three Dynasties. Because of this, the Neo-Confucians in the Northern Song Dynasty took the attitude of "guiding outer kingship through inner sageliness". They kept having a moral influence on the political field, and this influence is just like the influence of the Pole Star.

Nevertheless, a persistent structural tension and contradiction remained between the Confucian orthodoxy constructed by Neo-Confucian thinkers and the political orthodoxy of actual governance. Neo-Confucians placed great emphasis on the moral character of the ruler and on non-utilitarian motivations and attitudes in administration. What they pursued was a form of kingly governance grounded in ren and yi, and Northern Song Neo-Confucians in particular examined political reality from the elevated standpoint of tianli. Yet what confronted them was an irreconcilable tension between morally ideal political order and the profit-driven practices of real-world politics. Scholar-officials who had immersed themselves in the teachings of Confucius and Mencius from an early age, and who had endured the intense competition of the civil service examinations to enter officialdom, often discovered that their ideal of "bringing great peace to the world" was far from sufficient to withstand the temptations of concrete political interests. Confucianism has long held self-cultivation and moral building as the base of kingly governance. Following this tradition, the Cheng brothers put forward tianli as a metaphysical value standard. It goes beyond utilitarian calculation and acts as the final standard for political judgment. Cheng Yi says: "Principle throughout the world is but one principle; when extended to the four seas it remains valid, and it must be verified against Heaven and Earth and examined through the unchanging principles of the Three Kings." He also states clearly: "Heaven possesses this principle; the sage follows and acts upon it—this is what is called the Way." [5]

This shows that tianli acts as a guiding direction for real political practice. Rulers should direct their governance towards this standard. As inheritors of Confucian orthodoxy, Confucian scholar-officials stood at a moral high position. From there, they could criticize and restrain imperial authority. From a Confucian view, the final meaning of Heaven, Earth and the cosmos is the basic foundation of both politics and human life. This spiritual goal is not only the ideal part of Song Neo-Confucian thought, but also reflects scholars' clear sense of responsibility. They take this responsibility when they take part in governing the family, the state and the world [2].

But Confucian theory often ignores a key political fact: ultimate power is always in the monarch's hands. From the ruler's side, Confucian teachings often only act as tools to keep political order. So the basic structure of Chinese politics is still marked by the pattern of "outer Confucianism and inner Legalism." The tension between Confucian orthodoxy and political orthodoxy still exists. Confucian orthodoxy is in a structurally subordinate position, because the final authority belongs to political power. Thus Confucian constraints on imperial authority are mostly limited to advice and moral criticism. They cannot truly get involved in how sovereign power runs. In the event of Wang Anshi's

reform, the Cheng brothers were totally against the new policies. They criticized the policies for putting li (profit) first and ignoring yi (righteousness). Based on the Cheng brothers' principles of kingly governance, "the Way is higher than the ruler, the fundamental is higher than technique, and righteousness is higher than profit." But for Emperor Shenzong, "strengthening the state and enriching the military" and getting clear political gains were the most urgent things to do. In the end, scholar-officials' influence on imperial authority was only limited to advice and moral criticism. They could not play a decisive role in how sovereign power was actually used [2].

3. The political-philosophical practice of Wang Anshi' reforms

3.1. The political-philosophical origins of Wang Anshi's reform

In Wang Anshi's view, the Dao is the universal principle that all things in the cosmos must follow. It exists everywhere and includes everything, and it is just as he said that "the Dao is vast and boundless, yet nothing lies beyond its limits." [6] All the phenomena in the universe work and change according to certain fixed patterns, and there is no kind of existence that has no regular rules to follow. On this basis, Wang Anshi argues that the social order that Confucianism supports—"let the ruler be a ruler, the minister a minister, the father a father, and the son a son"—also belongs to the scope where the Dao works. Wang Anshi also holds that Heaven and Earth themselves must follow the moral order. Precisely because he believes that "even Heaven must obey objective principles," he makes a strong criticism of the Han-dynasty doctrines of the unity of Heaven and humanity and Heaven-human resonance that Dong Zhongshu put forward [7].

In his analysis of human nature, Wang Anshi also does not follow the opposition from the pre-Qin period between Mencius's doctrine of the goodness of human nature and Xunzi's doctrine of its evil. Instead, he stands more closely with Confucius's position that "human natures are similar; it is practice that makes them different." Wang Anshi argues that good and evil are not the inborn traits of human nature, but just the results of people's learning and the habits they form in daily practice. As long as a person keeps "practicing goodness" all the time, he can become a gentleman and even a sage later. This understanding of the relationship between the Heavenly Way and human nature provided the theoretical base for Wang Anshi's later focus on cultivating talents who have deep learning of classical works and are able to govern the world. In this way, he made the evaluation of government officials no longer only depend on people's limited moral experience alone [6].

Also, Wang Anshi holds that truly having both virtue and talent needs a balance between moral integrity and the ability to manage official affairs. The real talents that a country needs are those who can carry out the state's policies according to the basic institutional logic behind them, tell what is more important in specific situations, and deal with practical political problems in a flexible way. In Wang Anshi's view, such people are exactly the kind of officials good at statecraft that a country needs for effective governance, not just those officials who have good moral character but lack the ability to govern the country [8]. About the relationship between righteousness (yi) and benefit (li), Wang Anshi does not treat the two as totally opposite things, as traditional Confucianism often does. Instead, he argues that the two can be combined and they should be combined indeed. Wang Anshi clearly explains state finance from the perspective of yi, and he shows a clear understanding of how important a country's financial ability is for political stability and the people's livelihood. On the contrary, in his view, blindly following "the ancestral laws", refusing to carry out economic reform, and pursuing the superficial form of righteousness without thinking will certainly cause the decline of the state. He calls this kind of wrong act "taking minor righteousness while abandoning greater righteousness." [9]

Confronted with the bloated civil bureaucracy of the Northern Song and the conservative insistence on preserving "the ancestral laws," Wang Anshi presented Emperor Shenzong with two core principles: "governing according to principle without personal sentiment" (ren li er wu qing) and "the ancestral laws are not sufficient to be followed." The former notion originates in Laozi's conception of the sage, yet for Wang Anshi it signifies that the ruler must uphold the highest political principle—the Dao—rather than sacrificing governance principles in order to placate officials or preserve the nominal authority of inherited institutions. What appears on the surface as "lack of benevolence" or "lack of emotion" is, in fact, intended to realize a higher form of benevolence and moral concern [7]. Accordingly, Wang Anshi contends that the fundamental problem of the dynasty lies in the failure to understand fa—that is, institutional norms and modes of governance. The success of reform, however, ultimately depends on the ruler. Wang Anshi therefore placed his hopes in Emperor Shenzong, asserting that "all things are accomplished through human effort," which requires both superiors and subordinates to abide by the law. Given that traditional Chinese legal thought regards "law as issuing from the ruler" as orthodox, the effective implementation of the New Policies demanded that the emperor himself set an example by obeying the law. To prevent obstruction from an overgrown bureaucracy, Wang Anshi established the Bureau for the Implementation of Financial Regulations (Zhizhi Sansi Tiaoli Si) to oversee legislation, while centralizing judicial authority in the hands of the emperor and the chief councilor [8].

3.2. Philosophical conflicts in the practice of reform

In the view of the Cheng brothers, li as a universal principle pervading the world is all-encompassing and leaves nothing outside itself; the essential nature of human beings is likewise contained within li. The virtues of ren, yi, li, zhi, and xin that constitute human nature are all manifestations of and responses to tianli [2]. By contrast, Wang Anshi's understanding of the Heavenly Way was influenced by Daoist thought, particularly that of Laozi. At a fundamental level, Wang Anshi and the Cheng brothers had the same understanding of the Dao. They both saw it as the ultimate principle that all things in the universe must follow. But their difference lies in one key point: Wang Anshi did not view the Dao as a metaphysical entity that exists on its own. From the perspective of the Dao itself, being and non-being support and rely on each other. In fact, these two form a single and unified whole [7].

The difference between the Cheng brothers and Wang Anshi becomes even more obvious when it comes to the relationship between yi (righteousness) and li (benefit). First of all, in its classical use, yi is the same as the "yi" in renyi (also written as yi 谊). They share the same pronunciation and meaning, and the word refers to "that which is fitting for human nature." In the Cheng brothers' view, ren, yi, li, zhi, and xin all belong to the highest goodness of human nature. And this human nature itself is based on tianli. So what yi considers "appropriate" finally points to the metaphysical principle of tianli. When people understand yi from the perspective of tianli, they are no longer limited by narrow moral rules that are based on real experience. This explains why Confucius and Mencius put forward different requirements for yi in different situations [10]. Here, yi is no longer a fixed moral norm with a narrow meaning. Instead, it is a kind of practical judgment that people make when they face moral dilemmas. This ability to judge things in a flexible way exactly comes from the Cheng brothers' idea of tianli. They see tianli as a principle that goes beyond the limits of real experience. So when a person follows the universal tianli, the rigidity seen in the real world has its root in the failure to truly understand the integrative and comprehensive nature of tianli. This rigidity can be seen either in the unprincipled pursuit of what seems "appropriate" or in the blind adherence to fixed rules [2].

To act according to yi is to act in accordance with tianli. Since tianli is universal, it is inherently public rather than private. Acting through yi to attain li is therefore acceptable and even commendable. However, to introduce yi through li—that is, to act from private desire and then justify it as righteousness—is impermissible, even if the action outwardly conforms to moral norms. On this basis, the Cheng brothers were, in general, supportive of political reform in the Northern Song, and did not simply adhere blindly to ancestral precedents as conservative figures such as Sima Guang did [5]. They proposed the principle of "taking the public interest of the world rather than the self, seeking what is right rather than what one desires," in order to distinguish genuine reform aimed at benefiting the people and eliminating abuses from short-sighted, profit-driven fiscal extraction. Reform, in their view, should not focus solely on immediate gains, but must instead address more fundamental issues of moral orientation, social ethos, and institutional structure—tasks that cannot be accomplished through rapid or aggressively utilitarian strategies [2].

By contrast, Wang Anshi's goal of "enriching the state in order to enrich the people" sought to expand the tax base through state intervention in the economy without increasing the formal tax burden, thereby concentrating wealth within the state and achieving the ideal of "no additional levies on the people while state revenues abound." The policies of Green Sprouts, Labor Exemption, Equitable Transport, and Market Exchange were all formulated according to this guiding principle. Wang Anshi asserted that "managing finances is what is meant by righteousness," interpreting state fiscal policy itself as an expression of yi. In doing so, he demonstrated a keen awareness of the importance of fiscal capacity for political stability and the livelihood of the people [9]. From the standpoint of traditional Confucianism, however, this approach appeared to contradict the ideal of "sacrificing life for righteousness," and amounted in practice to introducing yi through li. In the view of the Cheng brothers, yi and li are not absolutely opposed, but only benefits that arise from public-minded intentions are acceptable. Wang Anshi's reforms, by contrast, were perceived as using the "private interest" of the state to justify righteousness, and were therefore deemed unacceptable. Cheng Hao thus warned: "As ministers who promote profit advance day by day, the ethos of valuing virtue gradually declines—this is by no means a blessing for the court." [5]

4. Conclusion

The Confucian spirit of ritual order (li) still has great contemporary meaning in republican political systems that are based on social contract theory. In the public sphere, citizens give part of their rights to the state. The state holds legislative and executive authority, and it takes coercive legal measures to deal with all kinds of violations. Law mainly works by means of deterrence and fear, though, and its ability to guide the whole society toward moral improvement is still very limited. So moral cultivation through ritual education is still absolutely necessary in families, communities, schools, corporations and all kinds of social organizations. If a society connects civil society with the help of ritual norms (li) and governs the public sphere by law at the same time, it can not only raise people's individual moral awareness but also offer institutional support for maintaining social order. For the state, the cohesion of the private sphere can act as a buffer. It keeps individuals from having direct confrontations with state power, and it also serves as an effective way to restrain the excessive expansion of state authority. But the rebuilding of ritual norms must be guided by the state's intention. This can be achieved by setting up Confucian ritual institutions and organizing regular ritual activities, which can spread step by step from communities, villages, schools and enterprises to the national level. Through the rites of capping, marriage, and mourning, ethical relations among parents and children, siblings, spouses, and friends are enacted and cultivated. The masses strive toward them, the virtuous practice them, and the sages embody them; thus one may

order oneself, one's family, one's state, and ultimately the world [5]. The final aim is to attain the ideal state described by Confucius: "to bathe in the Yi River, enjoy the breeze at the Rain Dance Altar, chant, and return." [11]

To truly grasp tianli does not consist in abstract theorizing alone, but requires a sustained and arduous process of moral cultivation, through which both inner desires and external temptations are eliminated, culminating in the state of sincerity (cheng). In this regard, the Cheng brothers proposed a path described as "forgetting both the interior and the exterior"; the core aim of this practice is to prevent the human mind from being blinded by selfishness and to restore clarity to one's understanding of the mind [12]. This state may be understood precisely as ren. Only through establishing firm moral resolve, sincerity, reverence, and vigilant self-reflection (shendu), can one gradually eliminate impure qi and genuinely recognize the direction toward which one's nature is oriented. Grounded in tianli as its ontological foundation, Neo-Confucianism possesses strong normative force and persuasive power in shaping moral and ethical life in real societies. Ethical relations between parents and children, spouses, siblings, and teachers and students all originate from tianli and are regulated through ritual norms. Ritual, therefore, is not an external legal system centered on punishment, but an internal moral order rooted in human nature itself.

However, in modern liberal societies shaped by the European Reformation and the Enlightenment, doctrines such as "Christ is present in the faith itself" and "God became [hu]man so that human might become God" have encouraged an excessive reliance on individual reason and granted individuals expansive freedom of choice to pursue what they regard as the right way of life [13]. In reality, however, most individuals remain obscured by interests and private desires, and the degree to which their inner lives resonate with God or with what Confucianism understands as human nature is in fact quite limited. Modern societies frequently invoke rational freedom and the dignity of human nature as moral justifications, while in practice allowing desire to dominate action. Both in Western Christian societies and in China, this tendency has continually eroded the ritual and religious constraints that once governed communal life, undermining the most genuine forms of human relationship and reducing individuals to beings driven by reputation and profit.

Once boundaries are ultimately transgressed, individuals are left to confront the cold and rigid coercion of state law directly, with no remaining space for mediation or moral reconciliation. While both Eastern and Western traditions affirm the sacredness of human nature, becoming a sage is not a spontaneous process. It requires the rigorous training cultivation (gongfu) emphasized by Neo-Confucianism in order to achieve genuine moral self-discipline and inner freedom. For this reason, the re-propose of ritual norms grounded in human nature, and the reconstruction of community and ritual life, have become matters of pressing urgency.

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