

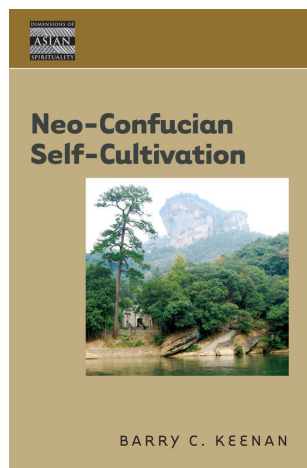
Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation

BY BARRY C. KEENAN

HONOLULU: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI`I PRESS, 2011

132 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0824835484, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Stephen J. Laumakis



It is not a question of whether Professor Keenan's new book is accessible for high school juniors and seniors—it is—in general. It is also not a question about whether the book is a good background for high school teachers who are interested in integrating Neo-Confucian-related content into history and/or literature classes—again, it is. The real question is whether students in this audience or students

in college entry-level courses are even marginally prepared or remotely interested in pondering deep philosophical questions about self-cultivation and how matters related to cultivating oneself are more broadly connected to social and political questions about how to help all humans flourish.

The reservations I have with respect to the book have nothing to do with the quality of its scholarship or its clarity of exposition and more to do with questions about whether late teens are even tangentially interested or intellectually qualified to ponder serious philosophical questions about how they might best pursue virtue, excellence, and humaneness. In the age of Facebook, Twitter, and other social media distractions, one cannot help but feel less than sanguine about the possibility of motivating even one's best students to study classical Chinese texts, write and keep reflective journals, and meet with teachers to discuss their interpretations of some very profound philosophical texts and ideas. Perhaps it is my own fatigue from twenty-plus years of trying to get freshmen interested in philosophy that makes me less than optimistic about the real world payoff of such a project, but at least Keenan provides those intrepid enough to try with a pedagogical plan that might work in at least a few situations with motivated teachers and receptive students.

As Henry Rosemont notes in his editor's preface, *Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation* is the sixth volume in the Dimensions of Asian Spirituality series published by the

University of Hawai`i Press. He praises the book as "a most timely" addition to the series because "it describes a scholarly and nontheological spiritual path of direct relevance to Western scholars and students, and thereby also provides a historic, philosophical, and religious background against which the many and varied patterns of intellectual and religious activities comprising the revival of Confucianism in the People's Republic of China (PRC) today might fruitfully be examined and analyzed" (xii).

In fact, he suggests, quite appropriately, I think, that Keenan's book can be fruitfully read by a broad range of scholars in both the PRC and the West whose interests include the study of classical and Neo-Confucian texts—in their own right and in relation to Western philosophy; the practice of Confucianism; the role of Confucianism as a state-sponsored "religion" and the reestablishment of Confucian academies and Chinese intellectual life today.

The book has three parts and follows the historical development of Neo-Confucianism from the Song dynasty (1000 CE) through the nineteenth century to the end of the Qing dynasty and the dynastic period in 1911. Part I has two chapters and is concerned with the historical background to Song dynasty Neo-Confucianism (chapter 1) and Neo-Confucian Education (chapter 2). The former focuses on classical and imperial Confucianism, the shaping of the Canon of Classics, and the development of Neo-Confucian thought and its metaphysical principles of self-cultivation. The latter explores the basic outline of Neo-Confucian education and the specific details of the project of cultivating the four lived moral values: *ren* (humaneness), *yi* (rightness), *li* (ritual), and *zhi* (wisdom).

Part II is the largest and most philosophically interesting part of the text. In this section, Professor Keenan skillfully unfolds the *Great Learning* and the "Eight Steps to Personal Cultivation" (chapter 3) and "Social Development" (chapter 4) with the engaging pedagogical clarity of someone who has taught the texts and the Neo-Confucian practices based on them to students for more than a decade in the classroom. I was particularly impressed with the lucidity of both his presentation of the text and its practices, and I could immediately imagine a number of helpful ways of employing the *Great Learning* and its practices in my own classes.

Part III focuses on "Self-Cultivation Upgrades via Reforms in Neo-Confucianism from the Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries" (chapter 5) and the "Nineteenth-Century Synthesis in Confucian Learning" (chapter 6). The book ends with a short consideration of the "legacies" of Neo-Confucianism, and a helpful appendix with a chronology of works and suggestions for further readings.

In addition to the clarity of its writing, the greatest pedagogical strength of Professor Keenan's book is the numerous salient examples he uses to explain and elucidate

the central ideas and concepts he discusses. These examples include: cocktail party conversations, the process of cultivating will power, the serious athlete vs. the weekend warrior, polishing a rough jewel, an architect using a T-square, developing an unused muscle, the connections between regular physical cleansing and regular moral cleansing, comparing physical exercise and spiritual exercise, and using Buddhist quiet-sitting as an aid in self-cultivation. Not only do these examples help clarify some difficult philosophical ideas, they also help enrich the conceptual context related to the discussion of self-cultivation.

Despite these obvious strengths, however, I think the book could have been improved with a glossary of key terms (i.e., *ren, yi, li, zhi, shu, zhong, jing, cheng*, etc.) with their English translations and definitions. One of the most basic and pervasive problems for students studying Chinese philosophy and religion is the language hurdle—and tracking the meanings of Chinese terms and their various translations. I also would have liked to hear more about Wang Yangming’s version of Neo-Confucianism—he is given significantly less consideration than Zhu Xi—but there may have been space constraints.

Aside from these minor criticisms, Professor Keenan does a masterful job explaining how Neo-Confucianism not only argued that humans are endowed with empathy and goodness at birth, but also showed how this innate endowment could provide the foundation for living morally—by following the *Great Learning* with its eight-step sequential process of personal development along with its connections to social order and well-being. As he notes in his “Legacies” discussion,

Neo-Confucianism is primarily a moral and spiritual practice. It doctrines unequivocally uphold the role of reverence in moral and spiritual life, just as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism do. The Neo-Confucian program for lifelong self-cultivation in this world makes reverence indispensable at every step of moral development. It begins in an empathy that reaches beyond one’s family and expands by observing civility in all of one’s relationships. Neo-Confucian ethics ends with a lived commitment to humaneness and moral self-restraint that sets a high standard for any society. For a Confucian practitioner, the first step in correcting the moral imbalance around one is not pressing one’s morality upon others, but practicing human living through considerate relationships with others. (111)

It is precisely this focus on what Keenan refers to as “relationship ethics” that contemporary students—living in the age of social media—may best be able to appreciate, understand, and apply in their own lives. At least, that’s my

hope! And it is for this reason that I highly recommend Keenan’s book—not only for what he teaches us about the Neo-Confucians and their project of self-cultivation, but also for what he and they—following Confucius—teach us about morality—that “the more one puts oneself in the place of another, the stronger one’s empathy, and ultimately humaneness, becomes” (112). Any student who grasps that simple but profound lesson would surely make Confucius proud.

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