



# Sources of Chinese Tradition

Second edition, Volume 1

WM. THEODORE DE BARY AND IRENE BLOOM, ED.  
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Back in the waning days of the late modern era (viz., the 1950s), a group of Asianists at Columbia University, led by Theodore de Bary, established basic paradigms for two generations of secondary and postsecondary teachers and their students: they compiled an “Introduction to Oriental Civilizations” consisting of “sourcebooks” on India, China, and Japan.<sup>1</sup> For those students, myself included, the nature and contents of “Chinese Tradition” were defined largely by this work’s original 1960 edition. College teachers accepted it as the definitive anthology of texts that embody the “civilization” of premodern and modern China.<sup>2</sup>

Now, in what some might call the waning days of the late *post*-modern era, de Bary has revised his China sourcebook, with assistance from Columbia colleagues and a variety of estimable contributors. However, in this new era, what we once took to be a trusty stallion now appears as something of a dinosaur. True, it is expanded, but mostly in ways that reinforce the interpretive paradigms of the original edition.

As in 1960, de Bary defines “Chinese tradition” as “open, articulate discourse (and not simply as unspoken custom)” (xxiii); and he admits to having privileged discourse pertaining “to society, civility, and practical affairs [rather] than to philosophy, religion, literature and aesthetics as such” (xxiv).<sup>3</sup> Such positions now seem much more problematic than they did forty years ago.

The new edition’s contents have been modified in ways that cannot be fully catalogued here. Naturally, it includes texts unknown in 1960 (like the “Huang-Lao Silk Manuscripts”), and some that were known then but ignored, like Shang-dynasty oracle-texts and a few texts of “Later Taoism.”<sup>4</sup>

Those of us raised on the first edition well recall its many contributions by such luminaries as Burton Watson and the late Wing-tsit Chan. Surprisingly, the “new” edition *still* boasts many translations by Chan, and even *more* by Watson. The title page lists a slew of new contributors, including many leading specialists.<sup>5</sup> Yet, some translations are from such *mid*-twentieth-century sinologues as Arthur Waley and J. J. L. Duyvendak. Unfortunately, de Bary never explains why such aged translations are better than fresh translations by today’s experts, or indeed why any particular translations were used.

This edition employs the *pinyin* romanization scheme, instead of the first edition’s Wade-Giles system. There is a conversion chart

buried in the book’s back matter. However, the index lacks essential cross-references, so teachers and students without pertinent expertise may not even recognize “Xunzi” as “Hsün-tzu,” and will search in vain for any mention of such familiar materials as the *Tao te ching* or Chang Tsai’s *Western Inscription*. Clearly, the practical needs of nonspecialist teachers and their students were not sufficiently pondered.

Other unexplained changes include such oddities as that “classical China” now, for some reason, *begins* in the Qin/Han period (i.e., ca. 200 B.C.E.). For forty years, users of the original edition had understood that “classical China” *ended* then. Hence, Confucius is now apparently to be understood as, in some unclear sense, “pre-classical.” Even teachers well-versed in Chinese history may be hard-pressed to respond meaningfully to students puzzled by such jarring new conceptualizations.

Other new categorizations are clearly sensible. For instance, the materials on what was long atrociously mislabeled “Neo-Taoism” are now, somewhat more reasonably, labeled “Learning of the Mysterious.”<sup>6</sup> However, the new overview of what the first edition called “Sectarian Buddhism” is now inexplicably labeled “Doctrinal Buddhism,” though neither label is very defensible. Moreover, the first edition’s misleading dichotomization of “Schools of Buddhist Doctrine” (chap. 16) and “Schools of Buddhist Practice” (chap. 17) is sustained. The sections on Chan (Ch’an/“Zen”) Buddhism include important new texts, but conceal the vital fact that Chan evolved through distinct historic phases, and they inaccurately frame the entire tradition’s content in terms of “seeing (one’s) nature.” Sadly, de Bary’s inattention to such historical and intellectual realities of Buddhism, Taoism, and even key elements of Confucianism, results in a serious bias in what students learn about the significance of those basic elements of China’s culture. Such facts also reveal a deeply anti-religious bias that pervades the entire project, distorting even the presentation of Confucianism.

Part Four, “The Confucian Revival and Neo-Confucianism,” is where this project’s ideological agenda becomes painfully evident. It constitutes *half the entire book*. That fact tells teachers and students that “Neo-Confucianism” (itself a problematic category) is *as important as all other elements of China’s civilization combined*, and that

from the late Tang into modern times, such other “high traditions” as Buddhism and Taoism played virtually no meaningful role in Chinese civilization. Unsurprisingly, the first edition’s minimization of medieval and modern Taoism remains enforced.<sup>7</sup> But more is at work here than a relentless Confucian bias. For instance, chapter 18, “Social Life and Political Culture in the Tang,” ignores the historical fact that Confucians and Taoists in that period honored each other, understood and valued each other’s traditions, and jointly supported the throne, in numerous compatible ways.<sup>8</sup> But it also conspicuously conceals the very existence of the late-Tang Confucian Li Ao, who is usually hailed as a *major* forerunner of “Neo-Confucianism.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, de Bary’s agenda not only “sanitizes” the history of Chinese tradition to favor Confucianism: it sanitizes the history, and contents, of “Confucianism” itself. And it does so according to a very clear paradigm—the paradigm established centuries ago by the Confucian thinker Zhu Xi (Chu Hsi, 1130–1200) and subsequently imposed upon Chinese society by its codification in the only educational curriculum tolerated by the oft-despotic regimes of the late-imperial periods.<sup>10</sup>

To be fair, de Bary—author of many works lauding Confucianism’s “positive values”—has made it his life-mission to combat the “modernizers” of China’s May Fourth era, who denounced Confucianism as the embodiment of everything that had been wrong in premodern China.<sup>11</sup> He sees much to love in the precise beliefs and values that the May Fourth modernizers had attacked—the “Cheng/Zhu orthodoxy” that had been a primary tool of late-imperial regimes, whose repression, the modernizers believed, had helped render China helpless to cope with the West. Thus, de Bary is, metaphorically, a convert to the Cheng/Zhu faith: he allied himself with its twentieth-century missionaries, most notably Wing-tsit Chan, and brought that faith into his academic activities.<sup>12</sup>

It is true, of course, that this same Cheng/Zhu Confucian agenda was quietly, and uncritically, perpetuated by most twentieth-century writers, in China and the West alike, and was an unexamined element of virtually all twentieth-century sinology.<sup>13</sup> Yet seldom has that agenda been carried out with such rigor as we see in the present project.<sup>14</sup> For instance, users of the first edition will recall the bifurcation of “Neo-Confucianism” into a “School of Principle or Reason” (chap. 20) and a “School of the Mind or Intuition” (chap. 21). But in this edition, the latter “school”—founded by an outspoken opponent of Zhu himself—*no longer even exists!*<sup>15</sup> And now, there is also an entire additional chapter on “Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucian Program” (chap. 21); another chapter on its institutionalization in later times (chap. 22); and another on “Neo-Confucian Education,” stressing related data. Here, Zhu Xi and his “program” simply *are* “Chinese Tradition.”<sup>16</sup>

It should also be noted that this very narrow vision of “Chinese Tradition” includes no women at all, except as subjects of a few highly ideological Confucian texts on “women’s education.”<sup>17</sup> The voices and activities of women through Chinese history—some of whom were accomplished writers, or played leadership roles in Buddhism or Taoism—remain utterly marginalized in this project, just as they were in the repressive society of late-imperial China. Women in imperial China, realizing that they were unwelcome participants in most Confucian activities, generally chose less-politicized genres—like poetry—and less-politicized activities—like religion—in which to express their personhood and contribute to society. Consequently, for de Bary to have acknowledged the socio-political importance of religion in late imperial China—in Buddhist, Taoist, or even Confucian forms—would have been to acknowledge the importance of women in those ages, and vice versa. By defining “Chinese tradition” in a way that excludes the fields of public activity

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## ESSAY BOOK REVIEWS

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in which women typically exerted themselves, de Bary has effectively silenced their voices.<sup>18</sup>

Like several related publications from de Bary and his Columbia collaborators, this volume is best understood not as a comprehensive anthology of China’s most important writings, but rather as a certain professor’s “course reader.”<sup>19</sup> That is, it was designed not just to introduce Chinese civilization, but also to instill students with specific interpretive paradigms. This volume was never really designed to serve the pedagogical needs of teachers at other institutions. Rather, it was designed to revive and promulgate an ideological agenda that undergirds “the Neo-Confucian faith.” By doing so, however, it gives teachers and students the *same* set of paradigms for understanding China’s traditions that the fourteenth-century Mongol conquerors, and their successors in Ming and Qing/Ch’ing times, historically imposed upon China’s schools in order to keep their Chinese subjects cowed by controlling their thoughts.<sup>20</sup> Since we are now presumably immune from the oppressive social realities of those eras, de Bary sees no threat in propagating an idealized version of that ideological agenda.

Most would agree that it is perfectly valid for an educator to produce a book that incorporates her/his own vision, at least provided he or she clearly labels it as such, and explains how and why that vision differs from other scholars’ perspectives. The problem with *Sources of Chinese Tradition* is that its interpretive biases are never acknowledged or explained, and most teachers and students do not have a sufficiently detailed knowledge of China’s history and culture to

recognize the book’s imbalances. The author does acknowledge his “editorial focus,” at least in thematic terms, by stating that his project’s conceptualization of “Chinese tradition” emphasizes social and political affairs. But like virtually all of us before the advent of post-colonialism, he seems unaware of being heir to a specific set of culturally constructed interpretive assumptions. For that reason, he appears unconcerned about the propriety of selling a vision of “what China was” that is trimmed and colored to show a “China” that does not fully conform to the known historical facts.

The project’s implicit agenda—which twentieth-century scholars were trained not even to perceive—resonates with certain other Orientalist perspectives. But it does so not merely by privileging the biases of the post-Enlightenment West—e.g., by assuming that the most important people in any culture were the (male) intellectuals who wrote theoretical and programmatic texts, which enable today’s (mostly male) intellectuals to construct definitions of that culture that often bolster their own values. Over and above *that* kind of Orientalism (which, to be fair, still pervades *much* of academia), de Bary unconsciously perpetuates the eight-hundred-year-old agenda of Cheng/Zhu Confucians and their autocratic patrons of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods. Educators who use this book to teach students about traditional China are thus unsuspectingly imposing upon the students of this generation, and the next, a very narrow vision of China’s past, one laden with assumptions that undermine all other visions of that past and effectively silence all alternative voices.

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This volume remains, in many ways, a valuable resource, especially because of the contributions of a new generation of scholars. Many of those scholars apparently worked to push beyond the rigid canons of de Bary's Neo-Confucian paradigm, to expand the vision of "Chinese tradition" inherited from the book's original edition. But the book's coverage remains shaped by the views of de Bary himself, which seem little changed from 1960.

Teachers of Chinese history and thought, especially at the advanced postsecondary level, will find much useful material here. But I would contend that in our post-Orientalist age, teachers should always think critically about the interpretive paradigms that we are giving our students, and about the assumptions and values that are implicitly imbedded in the readings that we assign to them. This sourcebook can certainly help students understand certain elements of "Chinese tradition." But teachers should critically analyze its implicit assumptions and should make sure that students can also perceive and appreciate different interpretive perspectives. Toward that end, teachers would do well to supplement the readings presented here with alternative materials—readings that more fully illustrate the roles played in Chinese "civilization" by women, Buddhists and Taoists, and those Confucians who rejected the "Neo-Confucian" orthodoxy that remains enshrined in this volume. ■

#### NOTES

1. Notably, "Oriental Civilizations" did *not* then include Thailand, Korea, Vietnam, Tibet, or other such Asian nations. Finally, in 1997, de Bary and colleagues discovered that Korea, at least, *did* have "civilization," and produced a sourcebook on "Korean Tradition." Apparently, however, they still perceived no "civilization" worth teaching about in regard to other Asian lands.
2. I cannot here fully critique the dubious modernist assumption that a culture and its heritage can best be explicated by gathering its "texts" and explicating their contents. The long-unexamined biases inherent in that "Great Books" model have barely begun to be addressed. For an ironically text-based "counterbalance" to the text-based Columbia sourcebooks, see the *Princeton Readings in Religion* series, and my review in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65 (1997), pp. 230–34.
3. Though Irene Bloom and others helped edit the volume, one imagines that the primary editorial decisions were made by de Bary.
4. It is not clear why certain entries in the first edition—like extracts from Han "rationalists" like Wang Chong/Ch'ung and Yang Xiong/Hsiung—are omitted from the new edition. True, they are not very "political," but neither are some of the new entries.
5. However, both in the table of contents and throughout the book, only contributors' initials appear, and there is no corresponding list; so one must labor to ascertain, e.g., that a translation attributed to "HR, SQ" must have come from Harold Roth and Sarah Queen.
6. Though this label is opaque to newcomers, it is at least an indigenous term that does not perpetuate the mistaken idea that the third-century intellectuals in question were the "true successors" of classical Taoism.
7. Chapter 14, mostly new, gives a mere 20 pages on "Daoist Religion," compared to 400 pages on "Neo-Confucianism." (See more fully my analysis posted at [www.daoiststudies.org](http://www.daoiststudies.org).) Moreover, this volume studiously excludes the abundant evidence that "Later Daoism" was of vital *political* significance in premodern times. Like his Neo-Confucian forerunners, de Bary trivializes both Taoism's contents and its social and political importance. For instance, the *primary* Taoist tradition of modern China—Quanzhen/Ch'üan-ch'en—is mentioned only in a footnote (394, n. 2). One might object that the volume was

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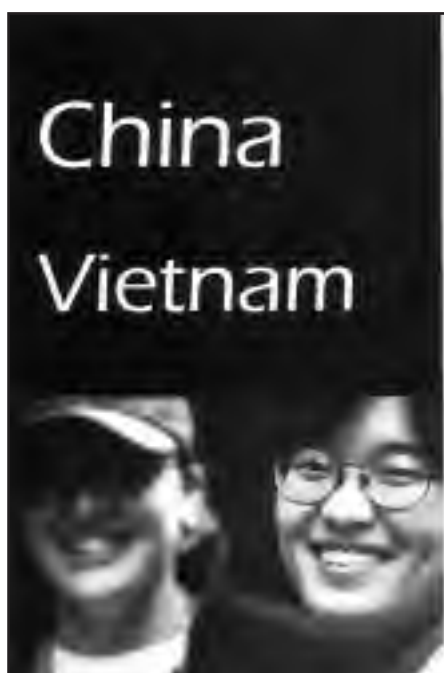
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## ESSAY BOOK REVIEWS

- intended to feature political traditions, not “religion per se.” But the book admits that “Northern Song (960–1126) rulers . . . increasingly turned to Daoism as a religion of state” (394). Yet, outside of that single line, nothing else is said, anywhere in the volume, about *how*, or *why*, such rulers did so, despite the fact that some of the volume’s new contributors have published widely on that subject, and have translated a variety of pertinent texts. The very fact that there was ever a “gentry Taoism” or “literati Taoism,” which played important roles in the social and political arenas that this book ostensibly emphasizes, is suppressed, for no defensible historical reason.
8. See, e.g., T. H. Barrett, *Taoism under the T'ang* (London: Wellsweep Press, 1996), and Livia Kohn and Russell Kirkland, “Daoism in Tang Times,” in Livia Kohn, ed., *Daoism Handbook* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 339–83.
  9. Li, duly acknowledged even in such deeply Confucian tomes as Fung Yulan’s *History of Chinese Philosophy* (1953) and Wing-tsit Chan’s *Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (1963), has now been studied by Timothy Barrett in *Li Ao* (Oxford, 1992). Yet, despite devoting roughly 700 pages here to Confucians of all periods, de Bary’s well-indexed volume mentions Li nowhere, not even in a passing comment.
  10. These facts, glossed over in the first edition, are documented in chapter 22 of this edition.
  11. I thank Peter Zarrow for drawing my attention to this perspective.
  12. Some might observe that it is easier for de Bary to find Cheng/Zhu ideas to be noble and uplifting than for most twentieth-century Chinese, because of his personal distance from, and consequent immunity from, the oppressive realities of late-imperial and twentieth-century Chinese society. Being non-Chinese, and living after the Communist takeover of the mainland (in a distant land where such events could not reach him), de Bary has always been in a “privileged,” and comfortable, position: since he never experienced the stifling effects of late-imperial “Confucianism” that the May Fourth intellectuals decried, his re-appropriation of “the Confucian legacy” as a virtual religious faith seems to him unproblematic. Some might also note that his position as a scholar/teacher helps explain why he, unlike most Westerners, chose to appropriate the tradition that had been the core of China’s educational system prior to the twentieth century. Most Westerners who attempt to appropriate an East Asian tradition turn to some idealized form of Buddhism or Taoism, for reasons that are only now beginning to be critically examined; see J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), and *The Tao of the West: Western Transformations of Taoist Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).
  13. A Russian colleague informs me that such is also generally true of Russian sinology.
  14. Like the Wing-tsit Chan anthology (which at least covers Li Ao), this one consistently excludes *any mention* of those late-imperial Confucians who taught the compatibility of “the Three Teachings” (like Lin Zhao’en/Lin Chao-en, 1517–98); those who practiced or taught meditation (like Gao Panlong/Kao P’an-lung, 1562–1626); or those who claimed to have had an “enlightenment experience,” which even Kang Yuwei/K’ang Yu-wei (1858–1927) did.
  15. What was formerly chapter 21 is now entirely gone, and a paltry five pages on Zhu’s adversary are tacked onto the end of chapter 20, following forty-five pages of writings from Zhu and other thinkers hailed by Zhu’s school as their founders.
  16. The Ming dynasty receives much more attention than in the first edition, including, unsurprisingly, much more thorough coverage of Cheng/Zhu thinkers. Meanwhile, their well-studied Ming “opponent,” Wang Yangming, receives a mere dozen pages (and his “school” ten more), showing them to be very “minor” indeed compared to Zhu’s school. It is telling that the volume closes with what de Bary hails as a “brief but moving” selection from a late-Ming Cheng/Zhu theorist.
  17. See pages 819–40, 896–9.
  18. A similar effect is involved in the book’s suppression of the centuries of writers (Confucians as well as Taoists) whose “discourse” included advocacy of ritual performance or meditational practices—practices fully as accessible to women as to men.
  19. See my review of the related work, Wm. T. de Bary and Ainslee Embree, ed., *A Guide to Oriental Classics*, 3rd ed., in *Journal of Chinese Religions* 18 (1990), pp. 188–92.
  20. Cf., e.g., page 776, and Frederick Mote, *Imperial China, 900–1800* (Harvard, 1999), p. 508.

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