

NEW APPRECIATIONS OF NINE CLASSIC ARTICLES

Willard J. Peterson, “Another Look at *Li* 理,” *Bulletin of Sung-Yüan Studies* 18 (1986): 13–31.

This remarkable article came out in 1986, a time when the *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* was still the *Bulletin of Sung-Yüan Studies* and the publisher had to hand-write instead of machine-print Chinese characters. Nevertheless, this concise piece has become a classic. In the past four decades, it has remained at the center of scholarship on Neo-Confucianism, continuing to prompt discussions among generations of intellectual historians and laying the foundation for a recent wave of philosophical studies. Remarkably, “Another Look at *Li*” still inspires cutting-edge scholarship on Chinese thought across fields. The article has reached beyond its own times in advancing a paradigm shift in understanding Neo-Confucianism marked by a thorough departure from Western philosophical assumptions.

The concept *li* is at the heart of Neo-Confucianism, yet efforts to translate *li* into English prove difficult. While *li* represents a universal, it involves a series of claims which contravene universals in the Western philosophical tradition. “Law,” “form,” “pattern,” or “principle” might capture part of *li*, but none capture it all. “Coherence,” the translation Peterson proposes, has stood out as an accurate match with a comprehensive coverage of features particular to *li*.

Peterson elaborates on his translation by laying out eight propositions, which I regroup into four key philosophical features in the following summary. First, *li*—coherence—is both “one and many.” Each thing has coherence, in the sense of “the quality or characteristic of sticking together” (14). Coherence is unitary, because from a speck of dust to the largest entity under Heaven and Earth, all things possess coherence. Second, coherence is transcendent but also immanent, owing to its inseparability from *qi*, the energy-matter responsible for the materiality of the world. Third, *li* has value, and it combines the

descriptive and the normative. Coherence is that by which a thing is as it is. Each thing and everyone has a potential “ultimate” (*zhi* 至) coherence, making possible the aspiration to perfection and establishing a foundation for the discussion of morality. Finally, coherence is intelligible, and thus to “exhaust coherences” (*qiong li* 窮理) remains an epistemological mandate of Neo-Confucianism.

Compared with other translations, “coherence” avoids several possible Western misunderstandings. “Law” / “laws of nature” invites the unwarranted implication of a divine Lawgiver. An identification with Platonic “forms” imposes absolute transcendence and fails to convey the immanence of *li*. “Pattern” is insufficient to deliver the normative aspect, that *li* is not any pattern but a valued pattern. “Principle” is unable to demonstrate the one-and-many metaphysics associated with *li*.

Not only has the translation of *li* as coherence set the historical inquiry on Neo-Confucianism on the right track (e.g., Bol 2008, Fuller 2013, Zuo 2018), it has also inspired philosophers to put the idea into creative use in areas beyond Neo-Confucianism. Brook Ziporyn has written two monographs discussing the idea of coherence before the advent of Neo-Confucianism, calling coherence in Peterson’s exposition “a master key” able to unlock a whole unwritten history of Chinese thinking (Ziporyn 2012, 2013). Stephen Angle draws on coherence as a cornerstone to develop a progressive Confucianism for the contemporary world. The “one and many” characteristic of *li* confers authority on the people rather than on a select few (Angle 2012). “Another Look at *Li*” continues to stimulate new possibilities for research on Chinese thought in the twenty-first century.

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