

The Bulletin

of

Sung ~ Yuan Studies

Number 18

1986

OTHER REVIEWS

Hsieh Shan-yüan, *The Life and Thought of Li Kou (1009-1059)*. San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, Inc., 1979. viii & 228 pp.

The Northern Sung has long been regarded as something of a watershed in the history of Chinese political thought, primarily because it was during this period that the major thinkers of the philosophical school which later became known as Neo-Confucianism lived. During the 11th century, however, many competing interpretations of the Confucian tradition circulated among the educated elite, and the wide range of ideas which were explored gave to the period much of its peculiar excitement and significance. Some thinkers, such as those who contributed most importantly to the metaphysical system known as *li-hsüeh* 理學 (later brought into an overarching synthesis by Chu Hsi in the Southern Sung and achieving status as "orthodox" Neo-Confucianism) concentrated essentially on problems of pure thought. Others, among whom two of the most important were Li Kou 李覲 and Wang An-shih, concentrated on practical problems and have been placed by the late, authoritative scholar Hsiao Kung-ch'üan 蕭公權 under the rubric "utilitarians" (see his *Chung-kuo cheng-chih ssu-hsiang shih*). According to Hsiao, Li's significance lay in his appreciation of the importance of institutions and laws in governing the state, and his denigration of what he considered to be overly abstract philosophizing by Confucian moralists. Li's approach was exemplified in his singling out the *Chou-li* 周禮 for special attention. One of the most important characteristics of this classic is its emphasis on a positive government role in solving practical problems and the use of legal sanctions in enforcing Confucian principles.

The publication of this book on Li Kuo by Professor Hsieh Shan-yüan is a welcome addition to our knowledge of the Northern Sung period. The volume is divided into seven chapters and includes also an introduction and conclusion. Treatment of the historical background in the first chapter is followed by a biography of Li Kou in the second, tracing his humble origins as the son of a farmer and his unsuccessful attempts to pass the civil service examinations. After his failure in the qualifying exams in 1041, Li devoted his energies entirely to writing and to cultivating ties to potential patrons. In 1049 he was given low honorary rank, and after 1050 he supported himself and his family with a modest income derived from teaching. Finally, in 1057 he was appointed a lecturer at the National University (*T'ai-hsüeh shuo-shu* 太學說書)

and in early 1059 was designated acting director when Hu Yüan 胡瑗 retired. Shortly thereafter, in the summer of that same year, he returned home for a visit where died at the age of 51.

After the brief survey of Li's writings provided in Chapter Three (including a graph listing the works, their length in terms of words, etc), Chapter Four deals with Li as an eclectic thinker. Here the author argues that after 1039 Li gradually became more sympathetic to Legalist theories in his approach to practical problems. In Chapter Five Li is treated as "a refiner of traditional Confucian political theory;" but it is also asserted that his most innovative works was done before he was 21. Quick and simple calculation leads one, as a result, to the conclusion that Li thus came to his Legalist period only after his most original work was already behind him. Does Professor Hsieh, whose emphasis has been on Li's utilitarianism and ability to draw on the Legalist tradition, grasp the implications of his argument? One's doubts are certainly not dissipated by the fruits of this chapter which appear to confine Li's innovations to a "systematization of the five moral and intellectual virtues" (p. 123) and which remain on a very high level of generality. The tendency toward vagueness of expression which runs throughout the book is most to be regretted because the topic demands precision of language. When the author says that Li's review of "the evolutionary process of civilization" clarified "the nature of rituals" such that it amounted "to an affirmation of the cumulative human achievement in history" and "confirmed what human beings had collectively done in the past" (p. 104), he has not really enhanced the reader's understanding of what was taking place. Professor Hsieh even goes on to depreciate Li's political ideas, concluding that early on Li "gradually lost the theoretical curiosity which he seemed to have possessed and which, if fully developed, might have made him an outstanding thinker" (p. 124). So much for Li's political thought.

The author clearly believes that Li is most important as a social critic, the topic of the sixth chapter. Here he deals with Li's proposals regarding political, financial and social problems. Throughout the chapter, however, no proposals are turned up which differ from those made by contemporary scholar-officials by no means inclined toward Legalist notions, e.g., Ou-yang Hsiu and Fan Chung-yen. At the end of the chapter Professor Hsieh summarizes the problems which Li addressed in the following way (pp. 157-158):

Li Kou considered that the society of his time had numerous problems. The ruler and the royal family were spending too much money. Officials were not dedicated to their duties. The number of soldiers had to be reduced and the military and civil organization coordinated. The relationship between the ruler and his generals had to be improved and the

manufacturing of weapons supervised by responsible officials. Government expenditures should be kept within the limit of revenues. All available land ought to be cultivated and the burden of requisitioned services equalized. Moreover, the people's love of luxury had to be surtailed and the number of vagrants reduced.

This is hardly a Legalist blueprint, and although the author mentions (p. 156) that Li's models were Kuan Chung and Shang Yang, there is very little attempt to tie those models in with Li's practical proposals. To praise the hegemon of the Ch'un-ch'iu period for keeping out the barbarians (p. 156) does not *ipso facto* mean an admiration for Legalism.

The last chapter is devoted to a discussion of Wang An-shih, apparently on the assumption that Li's true claim to fame rests on the influence his ideas might have had on the great statesman. Much is made of the question whether the two men ever met or not, regardless of the degree of influence exerted. In fact, no resolution of the latter question is reached and the reader is left to draw his own conclusions.

In his conclusion, the author, quoting Hu Shih to the effect that Li was "a great thinker of the Northern Sung," chooses not to render final judgment on the grounds that he "has not surveyed enough of the collected papers of other Northern Sung writers" (p. 205). Whatever the value of such modesty, a book-length study of an important figure ought to make some attempt at an evaluation of his comparative significance, especially when some one-fifth of the book is devoted to a discussion of another thinker (Wang An-shih). Hu Shih's comment should be pursued and evaluated, not mentioned and then ignored. In fact, much of the pertinent secondary material, both general on the period and particular relating to Li Kou, is not cited. Though Hsiao's book is listed in the bibliography, the author does not mention his specific treatment of the subject; a similar circumstance obtains for James T.C. Liu and his book, Reform in Sung China. Aside from his failure to come to grips with current, well-known interpretations, the author fails to pursue other important questions. For example, what is the general significance of the Chou-li, frequently cited here, for Sung thought and Chinese thought in general? What about the controversy over the proper roles of the king and the hegemon (the wang-pa question)? How does Li's thought bear on the broad question of political authority or on the question of the primacy of institutions or of men in governance? Even Legalism, it must be admitted, is treated in a haphazard and incomplete fashion.

Though a disappointment, the book is not without its uses. It will not take many readers as far as they would hope to go, but it is a good point of departure for gaining some familiarity with Li Kou and the thought of

Northern Sung. It is a great convenience to have the characters incorporated into the main text, and typographical errors have been kept to a minimum. One would only hope that in the future Professor will choose to address himself to the questions that he chose not to take up here.

Alan T. Wood
Whitman College

Songshi yanjiuhui 宋史研究会, Songshi yanjiu lunwen ji 宋史研究论文集
Shanghai: Guji Publishing Co., 1982.

This conference volume was produced by the Society of Sung History, a new non-official professional organization of the affiliated scholars themselves, upon its founding and the first meeting in the fall of 1980. The size of this meeting, not only unprecedented since 1949 as noted by some newspaper publicity, was also the largest ever held in this field. With more than sixty contributors from every part of China, this volume truly represents a national cross-section. While a clear desire for international communication is revealed by the presence of an English title and table of contents, the papers do not show much awareness of what has been going on in the field elsewhere. Indeed, they seldom cite secondary works of any sort, Chinese or foreign. Reference is, therefore, made almost exclusively to primary sources, which is fine as far as it goes but which does not reveal as much about the state of the field in China as we would like. Still, the appearance of this volume marks a major step forward in this direction and is to be welcomed.

An attempt to evaluate the papers one by one would take much too long and might prove tedious besides. The editors themselves perhaps found the task of tying the contents together daunting since they have provided no synthetic introduction and have only grouped the papers under broadly common topics. This grouping does provide some guidance, though, and I shall employ it to review some of the work found here.

Household registration by the government engages the attention of several scholars. Matters dealt with are the definition of households of official status and privileges, the property criteria of the five-fold classification of rural households, and the crucial in-between position of the middle-grade households. Equally significant is the problem of the nature of the so-called "guest households" or tenants in rural areas. Two articles survey the regional variations and the complexity of their "feudal" bonds. They agree that these bonds became looser under Song, thus generating greater productivity. Another article goes yet farther, making a distinction between "sharecropping tenancy" among poor peasants and "rental tenancy" among peasants who owned

enough resources -- draft animals, farming implements and seeds. It was among the latter tenants that the "feudal" bonds were first weakened.

The sale of land reflected another momentous change in the Song economy. While transactions still suffered some restrictions, as one article points out, they became thoroughly commonplace. The government itself repeatedly sold its garrison lands, camp lands and other official holdings. The problem here lay in the exploitation of such sales by prestigious and influential families who discouraged anyone else from bidding or conspired with the clerks in charge to falsify the bids submitted. Another article shows the extent to which private landownership was institutionalized by Song times by demonstrating the presence of property and inheritance rights in concrete legal proceedings. This is a direct refutation of the hypothesis that the state was the ultimate landowner in "feudal" China under which the legal concept of private ownership remained weak, a hypothesis put forth and developed by Professor Hou Wailu.

Unfortunately, the volume contains only one article on the complicated system of requisitioned services. It appears that more attention has been paid to services in the cities and to urban developments in general. Articles here treat commercial taxes, the guild system, the binary currency system (shifting from coins and silk to coins and paper money), the phenomenal rise of the Jiangsi region, economically and culturally, and the trade at Canton in spices and medicines. But China was so huge in size and uneven in development that none of these advances had any impact on the border regions. For example, the Guochang and the Uighurs remained in "feudal" conditions.

The reformer Wang Anshi never fails to attract attention. One article eloquently outlines Wang's long-range objective of replacing conscripts with recruits from the bao jia militia who, rather than being branded by a contemptible tattoo, would be encouraged by an appeal to duty and by better treatment. Another paper takes up the errors in the encyclopedia Wenxian tungkao in the matter of Wang's horse-breeding program and reaches a more positive assessment than a colleague had in a 1980 article. Another author revisionistically rejects the traditional bias against Lu Huiqing, Wang's right-hand man, and adopts a more positive line.

A few articles treat military matters, such as the economic objectives behind the campaigns undertaken to found the Song and resistance to the Mongols in Sichuan. Perhaps of more significance is the treatment of the long neglected triangular relationship among Song, the Mongols and the Chen regime in Vietnam or the demonstration in another paper that from late Northern into Southern Song the most troublesome security problem within the country was not peasant revolts but soldiers' mutinies. Archaeology is put to good use

in identifying the site of the headquarters of Yang Yao during his revolt and the sites of the successive lake battles.

The volume is relatively rich in social sciences approaches and thin on the side of the humanities. Treatments of the thought of Zhang Jing and of Ou-yang Xiu's historical learning are not especially lively or fruitful. Textual criticism focusing on works such as the Mengqi bitan and the Xu zizhi tongjian changbian is helpful but limited in range. One intriguing paper does attempt to show how literature was affected by the political struggles of Northern Song. It suggests that emphasis on the "way" (dao) reached its climax during the era of the Wang Anshi reforms to be supplanted soon afterwards by an emphasis on "culture" (wen) which was associated with Su Dongpo.

Having surveyed the main areas treated in this collection and several of the papers individually, one might add a general observation or two. It is notable that the influence of any doctrinaire ideology is absent from these studies. Ideology has probably pointed much of the research in particular directions, such as rural life and economic developments; but, as we have seen, fruitful work has resulted so long as a solid foundation of research was laid. It seems evident too that some pre-1949 interests have survived and are now revived. What is clearly needed more than anything else is greater contact between Chinese scholars and those from other parts of the world and cross-fertilization in their work. The prospects for this appear most encouraging.

James T. C. Liu
Princeton University