Abstract  Modern neo-Confucianism is studied at two levels, one is at the historical level and the other at the academic level. Modern neo-Confucianism at the historical level was developed in the modern context, but its basic content belongs to the traditional Confucianism or the study of Confucian classics. Modern neo-Confucianism at the academic level recognizes both the deficiencies of the traditional Confucianism and rationality of western learning, and dedicates itself to the modernization of Confucianism. Though Ma Yifu’s moral philosophy is developed in the context of modern Chinese culture, it fails to deal with the problem of modern transformation of Confucian ethical values and its content still belongs to the traditional Confucianism. So it should be labeled as the modern neo-Confucianism in the historical sense. In this paper, the author makes a systematic exploration and an evaluation of Ma Yifu’s ethical thought.

Keywords  Ma Yifu, ethics, modern neo-Confucianism

Introduction

Chinese traditional philosophy has the characteristics of both the unity of the true with the good and the integration of epistemology with ethics; so does...
the learning of Ma Yifu, in which philosophy and ethics thread together. On the basis of the ontology of mind-nature (xinxing), and starting from the moral anthropological conceptions, he explored a series of moral ideas in traditional Confucianism and brought forward some theories of his own.

I Differentiation between human beings and animals

Differentiation between human beings and animals is an important theoretical problem in Chinese traditional learning, a problem that is mainly concerned with revealing the characteristics of human beings by comparing the characteristics of human beings with animals. The differentiation is different in approach from, but equally satisfactory in results with the discussion of human being’s ontological structure made by contemporary philosophical anthropology. The Confucian idea of the differentiation between human beings and animals mainly reflects the moral anthropological idea to treat morality as that which distinguishes human beings from animals, to describe human nature by morality. Ma Yifu inherited the moral anthropological idea of Confucianism and deems benevolence and nonbenevolence (benevolence here is benevolence as perfect virtues) to be the watershed for differentiating average people and sages (fan sheng), justice and benefit (yi li), foreigners and compatriots (yi xia), stability and turmoil (zhi luan), good ruling and tyrannizing (wang ba), and to be the dividing line between human beings and animals. (Ma 1996a, p. 191) In the article “Yanzi Suo Hao He Xue Lun Shi Yi (The Explanation on Yan Zi’s Preference of Learning)”, Ma Yifu discussed the problem of human nature. He says: “Heaven and earth store the essence of yin and yang and afterwards the myriad things sprout from them; among the myriad things human beings get the pith of the five elements (wu xing). Li Yun said: The human being is ‘the pith of the five elements and the heart (which means the most important part) of heaven and earth’. Taiji Tsu-shuo (The Theory of Taiji Diagram) said: ‘human beings integrate the authenticity of Wu Ji (limitlessness) and the essence of five elements.’ Yi (Book of Changes) said, the human being is the cohesion of qi; qi can be partial or complete, unblocked or blocked, dim or bright, clear or turbid; however, all things are born by qi. Zhu Zi said: the human being is ‘formed by qi and in which li (principle) is also contained’. Zheng Meng said, ‘everything on earth is born by the cohesion of qi, and then dies when qi is dispersed. But among myriad things, only human beings can be physically dead but mentally alive.’ This sentence first deals with myriad things, then it says that the most superb one of the myriad things is the human being. The origin of human beings is authenticity and peacefulness. When undeveloped, the
five elements of nature -- benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom and faith (ren, yi, li, zhi, xin) -- are already intrinsic in human beings. The origin is called the substance of mind that is constituted by li (principle). The original state with nothing added is called authenticity and the original silence is called peacefulness. Yue Ji says: ‘The human being is born to be silent, and that is a heavenly nature.’ Li is integrated and constant, and its essence lies in silence, hence it is also called ‘authentic and peaceful’. Five elements of nature mean five virtues inherited in human nature. Five virtues can be summed up as one nature, which is equally inherited in everyone.” (Ibid., pp. 64–65) He considers that although human beings and things are all born on the foundation of qi, human beings have got the pith of qi, therefore benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom and faith are inherent in them. These five virtues are owned solely by human beings. Obviously, describing human nature by virtues is in line with the ideas of moral anthropology.

On the basis of the concept of natural virtue (xing de), Ma Yifu discussed the problem of the identity of human nature and virtue. He identified virtue with nature (xing) to deepen his moral anthropological idea. He says:

The only comprehensive representative of natural virtue is benevolence; if the concept is divided into two, we have wisdom and justice; if divided into three, we have wisdom, benevolence and courage; if divided into four, we have benevolence, justice, propriety and wisdom; if divided into five, faith is added and we have the widely acknowledged Five Relationships (wu chang); if divided into six, then wisdom, benevolence, sage, justice, moderation and harmony are combined as six virtues. In the sense of its authenticity, it can be called “the highest sincerity”; in the sense of it’s being the highest principle, it can be called “the highest good”. Hence, this one virtue can be the basis for all actions, and no action can be sound without this one virtue. Within benevolence, wisdom is to know how to differentiate, courage is to be determinate, justice is to know how to make ethical judgments, propriety is to know etiquette and custom, faith means trustworthiness, sage means comprehensive understanding, moderation means impartial and unbiased, and harmony means well-adjustment. All these virtues are inherent in the human being. (Ibid., pp. 18–19)

We can use only one word, “benevolence,” to sum up natural virtues; also, we can use two, three, four, five or six concepts to explain “natural virtue” as mentioned above. In short, natural virtue in this sense is complete sincerity and goodness; it is such an intrinsic characteristic of human beings that it can be identified as human nature. Ma Yifu also discussed a series of concepts concerned with natural virtue, and the differences between “Dao (the way)”
and “de (virtue)” is also explored by him. In the article of “Shi Zhi De Yao Dao (The Explanation on the Dao to Achieve De)”, he says:

*De* is in your mind, and it turns into *Dao* of doing things when you act it out. *De* is intrinsic in human nature, and *Dao* is something one puts into practice. *De* is the conscience that is inherent in everyone, and *Dao* is the way that everyone should follow. To understanding *de* is to understand human nature, to follow *Dao* is to follow human nature, to achieve *de* is to achieve human nature, and to act in accordance with *Dao* is to be benevolent. So, *de* is identical to human nature and it is called *xing de*. So is *Dao* and it is called *xing* *Dao*, or *tian xing*, *tian Dao*, *tian ming*. When we mention *de* and action, *de* is internal and action is external; when we mention *Dao* and *de*, *de* is invisible and *Dao* is apparent; when we mention *xing* and *Dao*, *xing* is the substance and *Dao* is the function. There is no *li* (principle) outside *xing*, and there is nothing outside *Dao*. *Li* is only a hallucination if it is independent of *xing*; *Dao* is only an illusion if it is not related to a thing. In short, the instruction of “Six Confucian Classics” is always an instruction of *de* and the *Dao* of “Six Confucian Classics” is always *xing* *Dao*. (Ibid., pp. 220–221)

Here, Ma Yifu redefined some traditional concepts and set up a new banner concerning the relationship between “*de*” and “*Dao*”. Generally speaking, “*de*” is more universal and fundamental than “*Dao*”, for “*Dao*” is based on “*de*” and “*de*” is what “*Dao*” represents in human beings. Ma Yifu talks about “*de*” and “*Dao*” as internal and external and this seems to indicate that “*de*” is more fundamental than “*Dao*”.

II On benevolence

The word “benevolence” was first seen in the book *Shang Shu* • *Jin Teng*, in which “benevolent and filial” is referred to as good character. *Analects of Confucius* builds an ethical value system with the core as “benevolence”, in which benevolence is defined in different ways. With further illumination by later Confucians and manipulation by feudal powers, “benevolence” became the ethical core and one of the norms in the middle ages of China. It exerted a great influence on the formation of Chinese national cultural and psychological structures. In the new historical context, Ma Yifu further explained Confucian benevolence. From the point of view of the unity of heaven and man, he defined benevolence as the “complete virtue of mind”, and emphasized on the unification of benevolence and propriety and the feature of
unselfishness.

Ma Yifu says: "How do we witness the spirit of heaven and earth? To know it through the idea of goodness flashing into human mind ... The origin of goodness is the real principle of heaven and earth. When the seed of goodness is covered by earth, it grows up immediately. It can grow into the highest good, so that the person concerned becomes the perfect among people, hence his nature merges with the virtues of heaven and earth ... The spirit of heaven and earth is to create things and the mind of human beings is primarily compassionate ... The complete virtue of human mind is benevolence." (Ibid., p. 5) The spirit of heaven and earth is the real principle of heaven and earth, and it is consistent with the origin of goodness in human mind. The origin of goodness can be fully developed into perfection that equals with the virtue of heaven and earth. Benevolence is the complete virtue of human mind, something similar to Zhu Xi’s "great benevolence". Benevolence is the substance of virtue or the substance of value, "benevolence is the substance of mind and the whole of virtue." (Ibid., p. 33)

According to Ma Yifu’s opinion, benevolence and propriety are united. An action that is obedient to propriety meets the requirement of benevolence. In the article "Shuo Shi Ting Yan Dong (Saying, Seeing, Hearing, Speaking and Acting)”, he says:

Seeing, hearing, speaking and acting all belong to propriety, i.e., benevolence. Benevolence includes all natural virtues, and propriety is a branch principle of benevolence. This principle is in the qi which is everywhere, and human beings get the ability of seeing, hearing, speaking and acting from qi. Hence, this principle is the rule of seeing, hearing, speaking and acting. To follow this principle is to be benevolent, to be disobedient with it is unmerciful... Propriety is a principle or a rule. One has this propriety by benevolence and gets this virtue by nature. Natural virtues are in qi, which is seeing, hearing, speaking and acting. Pursue all the principles (qiong li) then you can develop your natural potential to the full. (Ibid., p. 72)

Instead of taking something unrelated to propriety as benevolence, Ma Yifu defined propriety by “li (principle)” and “ze (rule)” and considered speech and action that conform to propriety as benevolence. Here, he obviously treated propriety and benevolence as one and his idea is an inheritance of Confucian ethics.

Moreover, Ma Yifu emphasized the idea that benevolent people are selfless. "Benevolent people are selfless and those who are selfish degenerate to unbenevolence. There is no other way to be equivalent with heaven and earth
because heaven and earth are also selfless. Heaven and Earth bring their transformations to completion without intention, and the sages have intentions but do nothing. The doing-nothings (wu wei) do things by doing nothing, they do not refuse to do things. To do things without any intention of achieving selfish purposes is wu wei". (Ibid., p. 293) Heaven and earth are selfless; sages do things selflessly, hence they can be called “wu wei” as well; all people who are benevolent are unselfish, and those who are selfish are unbenevolent. Selfless means “not being concerned with oneself”, but being concerned with the lives of common people, just as Fan Zhongyan said, “we should care common people’s care in advance and enjoy common people’s pleasure afterwards”. Ma Yifu says, “benevolent people do not have any selfish idea, they care about common people: they take others’ hungriness as their own hungriness and they take others’ sufferings as their own sufferings”. (Ibid., p. 273) From these words, we can see his broadness and profoundness as a Confucian.

III On filial piety

Filial piety is a Confucian ethical norm. Confucius takes it to be the root of benevolence. Ma Yifu further developed this idea. He says:

When we follow filial piety, we would acquire the rituals, our original nature would come true, and we would be able to handle all kinds of situations successfully. ...Filial piety is the root of myriad things and the supreme end of Dao.

All virtues can be deduced from filial piety; therefore, filial piety is the root of virtues.

One should know that the “Six Confucian Classics” are all for moral teachings, and The Scripture of Filial Piety (Xiao Jing) is the root of the “Six Confucian Classics” and reveals the main points of the six classics. Therefore, benevolence represents the complete virtue and filial piety represents the Dao of doing things in accordance with benevolence. Filial piety is both the root and the aggregate of the six classics. (Ibid., pp. 263–264)

Here, Ma Yifu places filial piety in a very important position: Firstly, it has an ontological meaning, that is, “the root of myriad things and the supreme end of Dao”; secondly, it is the root of other virtues, all virtues and all rituals proceed from filial piety; lastly, it is the fundamental way to realize benevolence. All these ideas are illuminations and developments of the
Confucian conceptions of filial piety.

IV On a gentleman and a base person

The doctrine of a gentleman and a base person constitutes an important part of the Confucian theory of personality. It divides people into different levels by the criterion of virtue. A gentleman and a base person are the two most common levels. Ma Yifu inherited Confucian ideas and thought that the most important thing for a gentleman is to achieve virtue instead of being in reign, whereas the opposite is true for a base person.

Ma Yifu explains the Confucian idea on being a gentleman in the article “Junzi Xiaoren Bian (Differentiation on Gentleman and Base person)”: “There are two meanings of ‘gentleman’ according to Confucianism: one is the reputation of achieving virtue and the other is the title of reign. In the first sense, a base person has no virtue; and in the second sense, a base person can only be called a populace. But the ancients must firstly own virtues then be in reign, therefore those who are in reign can be named as gentlemen, and a gentleman must be so named by his virtue instead of his rank of nobility. In this sense, a gentleman is judged mainly by the reputation of virtue.” (Ibid., p. 33) The two meanings of “gentleman” are on two levels: one means people with virtue, which is compared to unscrupulous base persons; the other refers to people as officials, which is compared to the populace base persons. In ancient times, officials were called gentlemen mainly for their virtues instead of their rank of nobility. Therefore, Ma Yifu says: “Gentleman is the name for those with virtues instead of those in reign ... Though a gentleman has achieved the virtue of reigning, it is not necessary for him to be an official.” (Ibid., p. 30) A gentleman possesses the virtue and power of a governor; however, it is not necessary for him to become a governor. On the basis of this “rectification of name” for gentleman, Ma Yifu develops the idea of differentiation of gentleman and base person, that is, to distinguish “the Dao of gentleman” and “the Dao of base person”. The criterion of this differentiation is whether or not the virtues proposed by Confucians are substantiated. The virtues can be summed up as benevolence or be divided into benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom, etc. Just as Ma Yifu says: “The Dao of a gentleman is benevolence, and the Dao of a base person is unbenevolence” (Ibid., p. 30) “A gentleman is benevolent and a base person is unmerciful ... a gentleman is just and a base person is unjust ... a gentleman is wise and a base person is thickheaded ... a gentleman is courteous and a base person is discourteous ... The fundamental difference between a gentleman and a base person lies in their intentions, which can be distinguished
as benevolent or unbenevolent.” (Ibid., p. 35) Therefore, it can be said that a gentleman is unselfish whereas a base person is only concerned with himself. Just as Ma Yifu says: “Is a gentleman selfish? Is there anyone who is selfish and can be called a gentleman? Even if a gentleman makes some mistakes, we can learn his benevolent character from the mistakes. A gentleman is one with great virtues, how could such a person be selfish?” (Ibid., p. 660) “A benevolent person integrates himself with things, otherwise, one would be self-seeking and unbenevolent. In this sense, one would be a base person even if he takes a little concern of himself.” (Ibid., p. 30) “A gentleman is self-giving, thus he is considerate, charitable and loving others. A base person is selfish, thus he concerns only about himself and is always jealous and feeling suffering.” (Ibid., pp. 35–36)

V On moral cultivation

Taking the unity of heaven and man as the unity of nature (xing) and cultivation (xiu) or the unity of endeavor (gongfu) and substance (benti) in the field of moral cultivation, Ma Yifu developed his ideas of “advocating respect” (differentiation between respect and unscrupulousness) and of “pursuing all the principles” (pondering) to further develop the Confucian theory of moral cultivation.

Starting from his theory of the unity of heaven and man, Ma Yifu put forward the idea that nature and moral cultivation cannot be separated. Just as he says in the article “Zhi Neng” (Knowledge and Ability): “Nature equals to principle and cultivation equals to qi. If we know nature we would do good in moral cultivation. Therefore, knowledge and action are one and there is no difference between nature and cultivation; in other words, principle and business are in harmony.” (Ibid., p. 41) Ma Yifu here brings forth three pairs of corresponding concepts: “principle and business (qi)”, “knowledge and action”, and “nature and cultivation”. Principle means knowledge or nature, business means action or cultivation, and both sides are interrelated. Hence, “principle and business are in harmony”, “knowledge and action are one”, and “nature and cultivation are not different”. That “nature and cultivation are not different” also means that there is no difference between endeavor and substance. Just as Ma Yifu says: “Knowledge equals to human endeavor and natural virtue equals to substance. The man who pursues his true self (qie ji) is to reveal his substance by making serious endeavors. To pursue means to realize that the substance cannot be approached without endeavors and the true self means here one’s substance.” (Ibid., p. 623) Therefore, moral cultivation is closely related to the
mind-nature substance. It is absurd to talk about moral cultivation separated from mind-nature.

Ma Yifu’s “cultivation” means “change of temperament” or “breaking away from bad habits”, which is sufficient reason for returning to the original nature. Ma Yifu says: “The Dao of learning is to change temperament, and it should be known that change of temperament is cultivation.” (Ibid., p. 121) Once upon a time, disciples of Mr. Ma, Wu Yifeng, Zhang Limin and Wang Peide were sitting around the furnace with their teacher. Ma made a fire by clearing away the ashes and then he gave a hint to his disciples: “Just like charcoal fire, its flame is often buried by the ashes, human nature is usually hidden in bad habits. So you have to break away from bad habits then you can show your real nature, just as you clear away the ashes to see the fire. Learners should endeavor to break away from bad habits.” (Ma 1996c, p. 1127) In his opinion, human nature is always hidden in bad habits, just like fire is hidden in ashes. If you want to make the fire burn more strongly, you have to give the fire a poke. The effort of poking is something like “breaking away from bad habits”. We poke at the fire to make it stronger, and we break away from bad habits to bring ourselves back to human nature. In achieving this, one becomes a sage. But how do we “change temperament” or “break away from bad habits”? Ma Yifu explored the way of moral cultivation.

According to Ma Yifu’s opinion, moral cultivation should first start from oneself. “One should learn the words and deeds from the sages and know that the words of sages cannot be changed. One should proceed from his own body and mind. Firstly, one has to break away from old and bad habits, then he can strive for real liberation of humankind.” (Ma 1996b, pp. 843–844) To liberate the whole humankind, one should firstly liberate oneself. To liberate oneself, one has to start from his self-cultivation. Without one’s self-cultivation, any slogan of liberating humankind is just a castle in the air. The first step of self-cultivation is to make a resolution. He says, “If one makes no resolution, one has no ideas of his own”, and “If one makes a resolution then it cannot be changed”.

Ma Yifu mentioned various ways and methods for moral cultivation, including “loyalty, faith, sincerity and respect” (zhong xin du jing), “advocation of respect” (zhu jing), “to pursue all the principles”, “to read as much as possible” (bo wen), “to act persistently” (du xing), etc. As he says: “The way to make the country powerful is to make oneself powerful; the way to make oneself powerful is to act according to the rule of ‘being loyal and faithful in words and being sincere and respectful in deeds’. In daily life, everyone speaks and acts, and loyalty, faith, sincerity and respect are abilities and substance. Loyalty means genuine and earnest, faith means authentic and non-fraudulent, sincerity means profound and not being frivolous, respect
means scrupulous and careful.” (Ma 1996a, p. 58) He also says: “There are four characteristics of the right way for man to follow for life: to advocate respect, to pursue all the principles, to read as much as possible, and to act persistently. Respect advocation is essential for moral cultivation, principle pursuing is essential for acquiring knowledge, wide reading is essential for achievement, and persistent action is essential for moral enhancement. These four characteristics are closely related to one another and one promotes another. Anyone who wants to be a sage should first do things in accordance with these four characteristics.” (Ibid., p. 107) Nevertheless, Ma Yifu paid more attention to the characteristics of “advocation of respect” (zhu jing) and “pursuing all the principles” and put forth some of his own ideas.

First, differentiation between respect and unscrupulousness (advocation of respect).

Ma Yifu opined that differentiation between respect and unscrupulousness is one of the preconditions of moral cultivation. He says, “anyone who aspires after knowledge should first know the difference between respect and unscrupulousness. One is beyond redemption and self-abandoned if he speaks rudely.” (Ma 1996b, p. 1027) Both the differentiation between respect and unscrupulousness and the differentiation between justice and benefit are of great significance to the education of people and the formation of good social customs. In the article Chongxiu Shaoxing Wenmiao Ji (Record of Rebuilding the Temple of Shaoxing), he says:

The differentiation between respect and unscrupulousness and the differentiation between justice and benefit are the utmost fundamental ways to make people sincerely convinced. Obedience comes from respect and immorality comes from unscrupulousness. Justice would make people benevolent; benefit would seduce people to rob by force. Good or ill luck, stability or turmoil, survival or death are all determined by this. In ancient times, people are taught to be respectful; while, nowadays, people are taught to be unscrupulous. Scholars in the ancient times do things for justice; while scholars in today’s society do things for benefit. … However, today’s corrupted people are not greedy and unscrupulous by nature. If they are taught by respect and justice, then they can get rid of bad habits such as arrogance and turpitude. Virtues like respect and justice can be cultivated. Gentleman learns to moralize others and then form the favorable social customs. To moralize people is not to be moralized by people and to form customs is not to be influenced by customs. Anyone who understands this can make reasonable choices. (Ibid., p. 197)

The differentiation between respect and unscrupulousness and the differ-
entiation between justice and benefit are closely related to “stability or turmoil, survival or death”. Learning how to advocate respect and getting rid of unscrupulousness is the content of ancient moral education, whereas the situation nowadays is completely different. Greed and unscrupulousness are not constitutive parts of human nature and man could return to human nature when educated with respect. Furthermore, respect and unscrupulousness are the watershed of sages and swaggers, “the difference between a sage and a swagger lies only in the difference between respect and unscrupulousness.” (Ma 1996a, p. 109)

Ma Yifu put forward the theory of differentiation between respect and unscrupulousness to persuade people to be respectful instead of being unscrupulous. Therefore, he emphasized the importance of respect in moral cultivation. Ma Yifu says: “We should respect virtues and search for knowledge on the basis of moral cultivation. There is only one way to perfect our morality, which is to learn to be respectful.” (Ibid., p. 110) Respect is the only way of perfecting morality. “Moral education begins with respect and ends with respect. Therefore, it is said that respect is the first and the last factor in the process of moral education.” (Ma 1996b, p. 100) Respect penetrates moral cultivation and is the beginning and end of moral cultivation. “How do we build up a great ideal? Just to be respectful.” (Ma 1996a, p. 108) By being respectful man can then build up a great ideal. “Being respectful and then we would know our nature, afterwards we can develop our nature to the full extent, and at last we can realize our nature in practice. To respect in manner is obedient, to respect in speech is submissive, to respect in seeing is bright, to respect in hearing is acute, to respect in thinking is sagacious.” (Ibid. p. 347) Respect is the precondition of knowing our nature, developing our nature to the full extent, and realizing our nature in practice. Manner, speech, seeing, hearing and thinking are all connected with respect.

Second, the idea of pondering (trying to pursue all the principles).

Ma Yifu emphasized the importance of pondering in moral cultivation. Here, pondering includes moral experience but it mainly refers to rational thinking. Obviously, Ma Yifu’s moral theory attaches great importance to rationality.

Ma Yifu says that learning is rooted in pondering. “Learning is developed by pondering, therefore it is always said that learning comes from pondering.” (Ibid. p. 9) The learning mentioned by Ma Yifu includes mainly the “Six Confucian Classics”, which are primarily the learning of virtues. He says, “As I mentioned, learning is rooted in the ‘Six Confucian Classics’. The root of the ‘Six Confucian Classics’ lies in justice and principles in man’s mind. Though justice and principles are inherent in man’s mind, man cannot acquire them without pondering. In this sense, we can say that learn-
ing comes from pondering.” (Ibid. p. 54) “Only by pondering can we pursue the principles”. In the article Shi Xue Wen (An Explanation of Learning), Ma Yifu emphasized the significance of pondering by an illustration of learning and inquiring. He says: “There would be some omissions in knowledge for it is obtained from what we see and hear; there would be some partiality in ability for it is obtained from temperament; while learning must be experienced by heart personally and cannot solely depend on what one sees and hears; the temperament should first of all be changed and no partial ability should be favored. Knowledge and ability are the resources of learning instead of its achievements. Only by knowledge can we be virtuous; only by ability and moral cultivation can we make great achievements … to learn is to learn by oneself, and to inquire is to inquire of others … Learning should come first and then inquiring. One who is good at inquiring must be good at learning, one who is good at learning must be good at inquiring … Enthusiasm for learning and inquiring is a characteristic of sages, which cannot be easily acquired by common people … While nowadays, scholars learn techniques to become experts instead of all-round Confucians … they get special techniques while at the same time cannot be all-round persons, hence they do not do the real learning.” (Ibid. pp. 58–60) Ma Yifu distinguished the concepts of “knowledge”, “ability” and “learning”. He considered that learning should be experienced by oneself and the process of experiencing is also the process of pondering. Therefore, Ma Yifu emphasized that learning should depend on pondering and differentiating; just as he says: “One would get nothing by learning without pondering, one would be confused by inquiring without differentiating, and true learning should be based on both pondering and differentiating.” “We learn to pursue all the principles and we inquire to settle all the problems. Learning should come before inquiring and pondering is required after inquiring. Thereby, pondering is the most important factor in the way of learning, if we ponder we would learn it, if we don’t we would get nothing.” (Ibid. pp. 61, 62) It is always said that learning comes from pondering, but actually, there is an inner connection between learning and pondering, hence we should never do one thing and neglect the other. “To pursue all the principles means mainly to ponder, while to read as much as possible means mainly to learn… Learning and pondering can be compared to the two wheels of a cart, or the two wings of a bird, they have same functions but with different emphasis. No pondering, no learning, and vice versa.” (Ibid. p. 116)

The rationalist spirit in Ma Yifu’s moral cultivation is interrelated with his ideas of liangzhi liangneng (conscience and innate ability). He says: “The modern term of intuition is somewhat similar to that of conscience; the modern term of instinct is somewhat similar to that of innate ability. How-
ever, intuition is blind and it is originated from qi, while conscience is different. Instinct is also originated from qi, just as ‘diet’ and ‘sex’ which belong also to qi; while there are principles contained in innate abilities ... hence, we have to make comparisons. But if we talk about innate ability in the sense of sentience, with no principle contained in it, then we push it far away from its proper meaning.” (Ibid. p. 44) In Ma Yifu’s opinion, there are great differences between intuition and instinct on the one hand and conscience and innate ability on the other. Intuition and instinct belong to qi and are blind, whereas conscience and innate ability contain principles in themselves. Obviously, this idea of intuition is different from that of Liang Shuming’s, who insisted that intuition is equal to conscience and innate ability, both of which are opposite to rationality. Ma Yifu’s conscience and innate ability are anti-intuition and anti-instinct. Rationalist spirit is fused into his ideas.

It is because Ma Yifu emphasized rational factors in moral cultivation that he paid great attention to moral cognition. He says: “It is due to ignorance that common people make mistakes and don’t correct them. And the one who is ignorant does not know what is good, hence one would not know what is evil. To know the good is to know nature, and it is good to ‘dominate emotion by nature’ and bad to ‘dominate nature by emotion’”. “Pondering belongs to knowledge, endeavor belongs to action; no pondering, no endeavor; and knowing and acting are one. Knowing is to know what should be done, and acting is to act on what has been known; therefore, pondering should come before endeavor.” (Ibid. pp. 68–70) He thinks that it is very important to know the good; although knowing and acting are one, from the point of view of moral cognition, knowing comes before acting. “To be a virtuous person begins with knowing the nature and ends in exerting the natural potential to the full extent.” (Ibid. p. 743) Ma Yifu also discussed the way of pondering; he says that “there are two ways of pondering: one is to observe things, the other is to observe mind. In fact, there is nothing outside mind, hence, to observe things is to observe mind.” (Ma 1996b, p. 51) Though there are differences between observing things and observing mind, they are actually the same because things belong to mind.

VI  Brief analysis

(1) Basically, Ma Yifu’s theory of morality is in line with “complete cultural conservatism” and goes back to “traditional Confucianism”.

After shaking off the fetters of the “leftist” way of thinking, cultural conservatism has become a neutral word, and more and more people respect its
existence and its theoretical rationality. However, cultural conservatism is not as simple as it seems to be. There are three kinds of cultural conservatism: First, “complete cultural conservatism”. Its academic orientation is to reject western learning and to carry forward Confucianism. Second, “enlightened cultural conservatism”. It takes in some western learning to enrich Confucianism and Liang Shuming, and Xiong Shili are among the enlightened cultural conservatists. Third, “integrated cultural conservatism” or “transcendent cultural conservatism”. It builds up its own system on the basis of taking in both western and Chinese traditional cultures. Feng Youlan and He Lin are its representatives. Although there are differences among these three kinds of cultural conservatists, undoubtedly they all aim at carrying forward Confucianism or Chinese indigenous culture.

An evaluation of a thinker’s basic academic orientation should be based on his mature theories. In Ma Yifu’s early age, he had some good opinions on western classics and did some reflections on Chinese traditional culture, but all these opinions and reflections are superficial. After returning to Confucianism, Ma Yifu’s learning became more self-conscious. His rejection of western learning and obsession with Confucianism made him a complete cultural conservative. Generally speaking, Ma Yifu’s discussion on moral ideas goes back to the traditional Confucian ethical values. His ideas of the differentiation between human beings and animals, of benevolence, of filial piety, of a gentleman and a base person, and of moral cultivation do not surpass the boundaries of Confucianism. Hence, we can naturally come to the conclusion that all his learning has the characteristic of complete cultural conservatism.

A related topic is: in what sense does Ma Yifu’s learning belong to modern neo-Confucianism? As is known to all, Ma Yifu is honored by his disciples as one of the “three wagons” in modern neo-Confucianism (the other two are Liang Shuming and Xiong Shili). Surely, he is an outstanding representative of modern neo-Confucianism. However, the concept of “modern neo-Confucianism” can be analyzed in two senses, one is historical and the other is academic. Modern neo-Confucianism in the historical sense is traditional Confucianism developed in modern context. Modern neo-Confucianism in the academic sense takes traditional Confucianism as its basis but opens itself to western learning, admits deficiencies of traditional Confucianism and rationality of western learning, makes efforts in modernization of traditional Confucianism, takes in modern values of science, democracy, and individuality, accepts modern academic methods or commits itself to the analysis of Confucianism. If we understand modern neo-Confucianism in this sense, then Xiong Shili who dedicates himself mainly to give Confucianism a modern shape, Liang Shuming who understands deeply the
stands deeply the advantages of western culture and the disadvantages of Chinese culture, Feng Youlan who constructs “New Cheng Zhu Confucianism” (xin li xue) by using the method of logical analysis and He Lin who claims to assimilate western learning under the conditions of westernization can all be entitled to be identified as outstanding representatives of modern neo-Confucianism in the academic sense. Although Ma Yifu’s ethical thought is developed in the context of modern China, his main ideas all belong to traditional Confucianism and he fails to deal with the problem of the modern transformation of traditional Confucian ethical values. It indicates that Ma Yifu’s theory is in line with modern neo-Confucianism in the historical sense, hence his contribution to Chinese academic modernization should be given a second thought.

(2) Because Ma Yifu’s ethical thoughts and traditional Confucianism form an integral whole, our evaluation on Ma Yifu’s ethical ideas is related to the evaluation of Confucian ethical spirit. The Confucian ethical spirit proposed by Ma Yifu under the modern context of China is too idealistic; we can even say that it is a bit of pedantic, similar to the historical scene when Confucius first developed his theory. What is needed for modernization is the anti-Confucianist spirit instead of Confucianism itself. Therefore, in the process of modernization, both the traditional Confucianism and the new Confucianism can only stay at the edge of the society. Any expectation for Confucianism to be relocated at the logical center of the society is only a dream. However, an unavoidable problem is that the modernization process in China cannot follow the classic models provided by developed countries and is different from eastern Asian process of industrial civilization, but has specific features of its own. Furthermore, we are marching towards modernization under the condition that all kinds of deficiencies of industrial civilization have been exposed. This provides a chance for a combination, to a certain degree, of the spirit of modernization and the spirit of Confucian ethics. Can we simply say that the Confucian idea of unity of heaven and man is totally useless because of its historical deficiencies? Can we simply say that the Confucian idea of benevolence does not provide any inspiration to people striving in this utilitarian world due to its idealistic character? Wouldn’t the Confucian idea of filial piety contribute to the harmony of society and coziness of family if being based on an equal basis? … If reality is respected, we will not consider all ethical ideas proposed by Ma Yifu as historical contingencies and discard them altogether.

(3) Ma Yifu’s moral theories can be traced back to the traditional Confucianism in general, but there are some ideas of his own in the theories such as the differentiation between respect and unscrupulousness which is rarely seen in the traditional Confucianism. Different from Liang Shuming’s theory
of intuition, Xiong Shili's theory of "going back to one's mind and seeking internal testimony", Feng Youlan's "negative method" and He Lin's "perspective intuition" and "reflective intuition", Ma Yifu's advocacy of rational spirit in the process of moral cultivation weakens the mysteriousness of intrapersonal experiences and mind-nature integration and indicates a realistic direction for moral cultivation.

References