

Original Paper

An Inquiry into the Relationship Between Nature and Emotion from the Perspective of Li Ao's Theory of Recovering Original Nature

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Abstract

In Fuxing Shu, Li Ao expanded upon the doctrine of the orthodox Confucian lineage in an attempt to revitalize the Confucian learning of nature and destiny. The text focuses on the relationship between nature and emotion, aiming to propose a theory of moral cultivation centered on "eradicating emotions to restore original nature" (quqingfanxing 去情反性). In his discourse on "nature" (xing 性), Li Ao was deeply influenced by, yet not confined to, Mencius's doctrine of innate goodness. Incorporating ideas from Daoism and Wei-Jin Metaphysics, he characterized "nature" as inherently tranquil. Furthermore, by drawing on the concept of cheng (sincerity 誠) from The Doctrine of the Mean, he sought to elevate "nature" to an ontological level. Li Ao's exposition on "emotion" is multi-layered. Generally, he views emotions as deviant and opposed to nature. However, to reconcile this contradiction, he introduced the concept of "virtuous emotions" to resolve issues concerning the nature-emotion relationship and the sage's engagement with the world. Li Ao's ultimate objective was to establish a Confucian theory of moral cultivation grounded in his doctrine of nature and emotion, thereby illuminating the path to sagehood. However, due to the absence of a robust Confucian ontology, his cultivation theory ultimately lapsed into a state of Buddhist-like emptiness and quiescence, detached from concrete reality. Despite his repeated reaffirmation of the Confucian ideals of self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and universal peace, he essentially relied on Buddhist methods to forge the Confucian "sage".

Keywords

Fuxing Shu, Nature, Emotion, Li Ao, Eradicating Emotion to Restore Nature, Sage

1. Introduction

The theoretical development of Confucianism had long been neglected. Confucian scholars similarly lacked self-reflection, leaving the tradition confined within the framework established by Han scholars and struggling to achieve theoretical breakthroughs. In contrast, Buddhism and Daoism—particularly Buddhism—developed sophisticated theories of mind and human nature. These doctrines not only gained widespread popularity among the populace but also offered solace and hope to scholars in distress, prompting many to turn to Buddhism for spiritual liberation.

Unlike Buddhism and Daoism, Confucianism does not advocate renouncing the world; its ultimate goal is to govern the state and bring peace to the world. Governing the state requires governing the people, which inevitably entails addressing the issue of human good and evil. Since good and evil stem from human nature itself, the focus of Tang Confucians naturally shifted to the study of human nature and the mind. Previously, Confucianism addressed such issues through the institutional framework of rites and music. However, amid social turmoil and the collapse of traditional rituals, merely emphasizing rites and music failed to practically correct public behavior, rendering the transformation of Confucianism an urgent imperative.

As representative Confucian scholars of the Tang Dynasty, Han Yu and Li Ao explicitly opposed the flourishing of Buddhism, attempting to create a favorable intellectual climate for the revival of Confucianism (Han, 2020). Yet, ideologically, their thoughts remained deeply entangled with Buddhist doctrines. Specifically, Han Yu pioneered the doctrine of the Confucian orthodoxy (Daotong 道統) to counter the patriarchal lineages of Buddhism and Daoism. However, his theory of the "Three Grades of Human Nature" remained confined within the boundaries established by Han Confucians. Li Ao, building upon Han Yu's legacy, significantly developed the theory of nature and emotion, critically transcending the "Three Grades" theory. This paper examines Li Ao's theory from three perspectives: human nature, emotion, and moral cultivation. It aims to clarify the internal stratification of nature and emotion and their interrelationship in Li Ao's thought, elucidate the specifics of his theory of moral cultivation, and analyze the influence of Buddhist thought on his theoretical framework.

2. Human Nature Is the Mandate of Heaven

The exploration of nature and emotion constitutes the core theme of Fuxing Shu. Li Ao's focus on this subject was primarily influenced by the prevailing intellectual currents of Buddhist theories of mind and nature. Simultaneously, it served to enrich the doctrine of the Confucian orthodoxy, which he regarded as the transmission of the Confucian "Way of the Sage." In his discourse on "nature," he drew primarily from Mencius, yet deliberately advanced an ontological interpretation of the concept, thereby infusing his thought with distinct characteristics of pre-Qin Daoism and Wei-Jin Metaphysics.

Li Ao's discourse on nature aimed to enrich his doctrine of the Confucian orthodoxy with the learning of mind and nature, thereby countering the orthodox lineages of Buddhism and Daoism. Drawing upon classics such as *The Doctrine of the Mean* and Mencius, he constructed a lineage of transmission from

Yao, Shun, Confucius, and Mencius down to himself. He placed particular emphasis on the teachings of Zisi, asserting that Zisi "inherited the Way of his ancestor." Fuxing Shu opens with the explicit assertion: "That which makes a person a sage is nature; that which obscures one's nature is emotion 人之所為聖人者，性也；人之所以惑其性者，情也" (Li, 2021, p. 13). This establishes nature as the foundation of sagehood, positing that sagehood is achieved solely by virtue of one's nature. Regarding the origin of this vital nature, Li Ao traced it to "Heaven," stating, "Nature is the mandate of Heaven; the sage receives it and is not confused 性者，天之命也，聖人得之而不惑者也" (Li, 2021, p. 13), thereby tracing the source of the sage back to Heaven. Fuxing Shu frequently quotes The Doctrine of the Mean, which offers a parallel formulation regarding the origin of nature: "What Heaven confers is called nature." It is evident that Li Ao adopted this perspective, elevating nature to a status equal to Heaven and even treating the two as a unified entity. This underscores his view that human nature is innate rather than acquired.

In elucidating human nature, Li Ao engaged with the relationship between Heaven and humanity, a perennial focal point in Chinese philosophy. In Li Ao's view, the sage is precisely the one who has fully realized their nature, serving as the epitome of the unity of Heaven and humanity. He further described the sage as "tranquil and unmoving, arriving without traveling, achieving spiritual efficacy without speaking, radiating brilliance without dazzling, participating in the creative processes of Heaven and Earth, and harmonizing with the transformations of Yin and Yang 寂然不動，不往而到，不言而神，不耀而光，製作參互天地，變化合乎陰陽" (Li, 2021, p. 13). This not only elevates "Heaven" to the supreme concept in his philosophy but also expands the sage's capabilities, portraying them as one who can master the generation and transformation of Heaven and Earth.

While "Heaven" is the source of nature in Li Ao's thought, he employs the concept of *cheng* from The Doctrine of the Mean—"Only the most sincere in the world can fully develop their nature"—to describe nature itself. He characterizes it as "tranquil and unmoving, vast and clear, illuminating Heaven and Earth, responding and immediately penetrating the affairs of all things under Heaven, with no action, rest, speech, or silence that fails to attain the ultimate 寂然不動，廣大清明，照乎天地，感而遂通天下之故，行止語默無不處於極也" (Li, 2021, p. 14). Furthermore, he posits that "the Dao is ultimate sincerity," indicating that, to some extent, the four concepts of "Dao," "Heaven," "nature," and "sincerity" are interchangeable in Li Ao's thought. However, explaining nature solely through "sincerity" is overly abstract. Regarding the specific characteristics of nature, Li Ao further advances the view that "the sage knows that human nature is entirely good". "At birth, humans are tranquil; this is the nature endowed by Heaven; nature is the mandate of Heaven 人生而靜，天之性也；性者，天之命也" (Li, 2021, p. 20). He summarizes its characteristics into two key points: "tranquility" (*jing* 靜) and "goodness" (*shan* 善). The latter had already been discussed by pre-Qin Confucians. Proceeding from Li Ao's doctrine of the orthodox lineage, which venerates Mencius as a sage and ideologically inherits Mencius's doctrine of innate goodness, it is unsurprising that he describes nature as "good." Conversely, the view that nature is characterized by "tranquility" bears distinct Daoist undertones, with

clues traceable to pre-Qin Daoism and Wei-Jin Metaphysics.

In Wei-Jin Metaphysics, Wang Bi advocated "valuing non-being" (guiwu 貴無), positing non-being as the fundamental reality. He employed the dialectics of root and branch, substance and function, and the universal versus the particular to elucidate the relationship between the Dao and the myriad things, as well as between non-being and being. Influenced by pre-Qin Daoist thought, this perspective elevates emptiness and tranquility to the ontological ground of all existence. Li Ao's characterization of nature as "tranquil" reveals a clear intellectual lineage tracing back to Daoism. Historically, this alignment is unsurprising: living in an era when Buddhist doctrines flourished and the Tang imperial house venerated Laozi as its progenitor, Daoism thrived. As a member of the imperial Li clan, Li Ao expressed his aspiration "emulate the spirit of Chisongzi and Zhang Liang," demonstrating his openness to Daoist thought (Li, 2015). However, Li Ao also stated, "To know that the origin is devoid of thought, to transcend both movement and stillness, and to remain tranquil and unmoving—this is ultimate sincerity 知本無有思，動靜皆離，寂然不動者，是至誠也" (Li, 2021, p. 19). By positing a state of "quiescence" that transcends the duality of movement and stillness, he distinguishes his conception of "tranquility" from that of Wang Bi or classical Daoism. Here, Li Ao seeks an ontological foundation capable of unifying and transcending this apparent opposition. Beyond "tranquility" and "goodness," Li Ao asserts, "The nature of the common people does not differ from that of the sage 百姓之性與聖人之性弗差也" (Li, 2021, p. 13). This echoes Mencius's proposition that "everyone can become a Yao or a Shun," establishing the ontological equality of human nature between sages and ordinary individuals as a foundational premise for his theory of sagehood. Thus, to a significant extent, Li Ao's concept of nature inherits the Mencian doctrine of innate goodness. Yet, a crucial divergence lies in his assertion that nature is inherently complete and eternally quiescent from the outset. The sage's task is merely to return to this original nature. Conversely, ordinary individuals fail to achieve sagehood because their nature is obscured by emotions. Consequently, the exposition on "emotion" becomes the focal point of Li Ao's philosophy of mind and nature.

3. Emotions may Manifest as either good or not good

Understanding the nature of "emotion" (qing 情) in Li Ao's theory of nature and emotion is one of the focal points of academic debate. Generally, the relationship is framed by the proposition that "nature is good, while emotion is deviant" (xing shan qing xie 性善情惡). However, this interpretation generates an irreconcilable contradiction. In reality, Li Ao's conception of "emotion" is not simply deviant; rather, it exhibits rich layers and is deeply imbued with reflections on how the sage responds to things (yingwu 應物).

"Joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hatred, and desire—these seven are all manifestations of emotion 喜、怒、哀、懼、愛、惡、欲七者，皆情之所為也" (Li, 2021, p. 15). Inheriting his teacher Han Yu's classification of emotions, Li Ao identifies these seven as the expressions of emotion. The defining characteristic of emotion is that it obstructs the full realization of nature. Thus, although nature is

inherently clear and bright, the continuous arising of emotions obscures it, thereby creating the distinction between the sage and the ordinary person. Li Ao further illustrates the relationship between the two using the metaphors of water and mud, and fire and smoke: water becomes unclear due to the turbidity of mud, and fire becomes dim due to the obscuration of smoke, which has nothing to do with the inherent nature of water and fire themselves. As mentioned earlier, Li Ao considers nature to be good and tranquil. In contrast, he refers to emotion as "the deviance of nature" and states, "Emotion is inherently deviant and illusory." The absolute opposition between deviant emotion and good nature has led to the fundamental conclusion that "nature is good and emotion is deviant" in Li Ao's theory. Regarding the origin of emotion, Li Ao posits that emotion originates from nature, while nature also requires emotion to be manifested, thereby forming a quasi-dialectical unity between the two.

However, given the premise that "nature is good and emotion is deviant" and that emotion originates from nature, Li Ao's discourse on their relationship appears to generate irreconcilable contradictions. Zhang Yue summarizes these contradictions into three points: First, since the Heaven-endowed nature and emotion are "inseparable," yet emotion "obscures nature," does the sage possess emotions that obscure nature? Second, how can emotions initiated and determined by a good nature be deviant? Third, since "nature is not nature by itself; it is made manifest through emotion," can the inner nature manifested by deviant emotions still be considered good? (Li, 2021, p. 132). Regarding the third point, in light of the original text, Li Ao is actually referring to the metaphor of clear water and mud. Nature is like clear water; if there were originally no mud in it, it would be like "non-existence," making its presence imperceptible. It is precisely because of the turbidity of the mud that people realize the distinction between clear and turbid, bright and dim. Therefore, the sage is called the "first to awaken," and what they awaken to is the clear and bright original nature of humanity. Li Ao does not explain nature and emotion in a purely ontological sense; rather, he elucidates them from the perspective of the identity and difference between the opposing sides of a contradiction.

As to how a good nature can produce deviant emotions, Li Ao seems to have been aware of this contradiction himself. To address it, he quotes The Doctrine of the Mean: "Before the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused, it is called the Mean (zhong 中); when they are aroused and all attain their due measure and degree, it is called Harmony (he 和)喜、怒、哀、樂之未發謂之中，發而皆中謂之和" (Li, 2021, p. 23). Drawing on his teacher Han Yu's description of emotion, he further notes, "The grades of emotion are three: upper, middle, and lower. That which constitutes emotion is seven: joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hatred, and desire. The upper grade, in responding to these seven, moves while maintaining the Mean; the middle grade, in responding to these seven, may go to excess or fall short, yet seeks to accord with the Mean" (Han, 2000, p. 148). Both passages essentially convey the same idea: the expression of emotions is not inherently deviant; rather, it must be evaluated based on the manner of its expression. If the expression accords with the Mean, it can be termed "Harmony," for "Harmony is the universally valid Dao under Heaven." As for the exact factor that causes emotions to turn deviant, Li Ao frankly admits it is "without cause" (wuyin 無因). However, Li Ao also

explicitly asserts that "emotion is originally deviant" (qing ben xie ye 情本邪也). The use of the character ben (originally/fundamentally 本) seems to indicate that he indeed posits emotion as the opposite of nature, regarding it as inherently deviant. In the original context, however, this statement is made to answer the question of "whether the sage will once again be obscured by emotions and desires." Li Ao replies, "He will not be obscured again. Emotion is originally deviant and illusory; deviance and illusion are without cause, and ordinary people cannot return to their nature." Since emotions are originally deviant, ordinary people fail to return to their original nature. Yet, once the sage realizes their original nature, they abide in a state of clarity and brightness, no longer obscured by emotions. Thus, the ben in "emotion is originally deviant" should be interpreted as "originally" rather than "essentially."

Therefore, returning to the initial question of whether the sage possesses emotions, Li Ao posits, "As for the sage, how could he be without emotions? The sage... although possessing emotions, has never been governed by them 聖人者，豈其無情邪？聖人者.....雖有情也，未嘗有情也" (Li, 2021, p. 13). This demonstrates that the sage does possess emotions, but they are not deviant. In conjunction with the notion that "emotions can be good or not good," Chen Ruoshui argues that the "good emotions" Li Ao refers to "likely denote the mental state of the sage when engaging with the world through 'nature'." Li Ao's affirmation that the sage possesses emotions is essentially an attempt to resolve the contradiction between the "quiescent" sage and mundane reality. He seeks to elucidate "how to become a perfectly sincere sage in the real world by relying on a quiescent nature" (Chen, 2009, p. 299).

Li Ao was not alone in his discussion on whether the sage possesses emotions. When tracing the intellectual origins of Li Ao's thought on nature and emotion, Chen Ruoshui highlights the debate between He Yan and Wang Bi on this very issue during the Wei-Jin Metaphysics period, arguing that "Wang Bi's theory of 'nature governing emotion' (xing qi qing 性其情) is particularly close to the statements in Fuxing Shu regarding how the sage engages with the world" (Chen, 2009, p. 317). From the perspective that "sage virtue models itself on Heaven," He Yan argued that the sage is devoid of emotions. The "Heaven" in this context refers to the natural Heaven (Nature 自然); since Nature is devoid of emotions, the sage, modeling itself on Nature, is likewise devoid of them. Furthermore, influenced by the Han Confucian dichotomy of good nature and evil emotion, pushing this paradigm to its logical extreme also yields the conclusion that the sage is emotionless (Gao, 2020). Although Wang Bi similarly maintained that "the sage embodies non-being" (sheng ren ti wu 聖人體無), he argued that the sage cannot remain entirely unresponsive to external things. As an example, he cited the joy and profound grief of Confucius as recorded in the Analects. In Li Ao's doctrine of the orthodox lineage, Confucius is presented as a sage. Had Li Ao adopted the stance that the sage is devoid of emotions, he would have confronted the very same dilemma.

Fuxing Shu indeed addresses similar issues. Citing Yao and Shun as examples, Li Ao argues that their actions were not indulgences of emotions and desires, but rather expressions of striking the proper mean (zhong yu jie 中於節). This demonstrates the "good emotions" of the sage and fulfills the purpose

of "establishing teachings for the world." In this sense, the sage in Li Ao's view is not an emotionless recluse who renounces the world. On the contrary, as the "first to awaken," the sage must "establish rites to regulate emotions and create music to harmonize them," actively assuming the role of educating the masses. It is worth noting that Wang Bi advocated "taking non-being as the fundamental" and "the non-duality of substance and function." From an ontological perspective, he equated the sage with "non-being" and endowed the sage with a special wisdom termed "spiritual illumination" (shenming 神明). It is precisely by virtue of this wisdom that the sage can respond to things without being entangled by them—a concept that inherently involves the relationship between the universal and the particular. Seeking to articulate a similar point, Li Ao extracted the concept of cheng from The Doctrine of the Mean and provided it with an ontological interpretation. However, when attempting to advance this framework further, he characterized cheng as "tranquil and unmoving, vast and clear"—a description evidently borrowed from Buddhism (Zhang, 1994, p. 136). This not only exposed the ontological shortcomings of Confucianism at the time but also inevitably led Li Ao's formulation of moral cultivation theory down a Buddhist path.

4. Eradicating Emotion to Restore Nature

The theory of moral cultivation constitutes the final and crucial component of Li Ao's Fuxing Shu. However, the elaborate cultivation theory he painstakingly constructed inadvertently exposes the inherent flaws in his theoretical framework. While it superficially aligns with the traditional goals of Confucianism, it bears distinct Buddhist undertones and, in essence, devolves into the Buddhist state of emptiness and quiescence. Li Ao quotes Zisi: "If a man can fully realize the nature with which he is endowed, he can fully realize the nature of other men. When he can fully realize the nature of other men, he can fully realize the nature of all things. When he can fully realize the nature of all things, he can assist in the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth. When he can assist in the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth, he can form a trinity with Heaven and Earth 能盡其性，則能盡人之性，能盡人之性，則能盡物之性，能盡物之性，則能贊天地之化育，可以贊天地之化育，則可以與天地參矣" (Li, 2021, p. 14). He further states, "To follow the source and return to one's nature is the Dao. The Dao is ultimate sincerity. Ultimate sincerity is the Dao of Heaven. Sincerity is stillness (ding 定) and immovability 循其源而反其性者，道也。道也者，至誠也。至誠者，天之道也。誠者，定也，不動也" (Li, 2021, p. 20). Both passages unequivocally assert that the Way of the sage to attain ultimate sincerity lies in returning to one's original nature. This "Dao" is not only the Way of nature and destiny (xingming 性命) and the path to sagehood, but more importantly, the path to the revival of Confucianism, which constitutes the ultimate purpose of his writing the book of restoring original nature (Fuxing Lun 復性論).

Li Ao's theory of moral cultivation for restoring original nature is built upon the theoretical foundation of his doctrine of nature and emotion. He posits that everyone possesses the same nature; the distinction between sages and ordinary people lies in whether one's nature is obscured by emotion. He

further reduces this to the distinction between obscurity and clarity. To transform from an ordinary person to a sage, and from obscurity to clarity, one must eliminate the influence of emotion on nature. The ultimate state to be achieved, the so-called "ultimate sincerity" (zhicheng 至誠), is a state of being "steadfast and unmoving," which is the state of "quiescence" (jiran 寂然) mentioned earlier. His method of cultivating and restoring nature is essentially an internal, subjective self-cultivation, specifically divided into two levels: The first is "no deliberation and no thought" (fu lü, fu si 弗慮、弗思). Li Ao argues, "Emotion is the deviance of nature. Knowing it as deviance, one realizes that deviance inherently does not exist; the mind becomes quiescent and unmoving, and deviant thoughts naturally cease 情者，性之邪也。知其為邪，邪本無有，心寂不動，邪思自息" (Li, 2021, p. 19). Since deviant emotions arise precisely from thought and deliberation, restoring nature first requires achieving a state of stillness by preventing the arising of emotion through the cessation of thought. This level is called "fasting and purification" (zhaijie 齋戒). However, reaching this level does not constitute true restoration of nature, because the mind in this state of fasting and purification is still trapped within the realm of movement and stillness. Here, Li Ao views the relationship between movement and stillness through the lens of mutual transformation, believing that the stillness achieved by halting thought will react to movement, thereby generating more movement. As he states, "Where there is stillness, there must be movement; where there is movement, there must be stillness. When stillness and movement do not cease, that is emotion 有靜必有動，有動必有靜，動靜不息，是乃情也" (Li, 2021, p. 19). Li Ao contends that true restoration of nature should be a state of quiescence that transcends the changes of movement and stillness, which is the unmoving state referred to by "sincerity".

Overall, "no thought and no deliberation" serves as the specific practical method of Li Ao's theory of moral cultivation. The division into two levels is intended merely to illustrate the required degree of attainment through this practice, without involving any other special techniques. Zhang Yue argues that the state of quiescence Li Ao sought to achieve is a "mysterious spiritual state transcending time and space" in Buddhism, rendering "human nature and the Buddha-nature in Buddhism indistinguishable." Furthermore, the essence of his cultivation theory is "treating human introspection as the sole path to return to human nature" (Zhang, 1994, p. 136). As mentioned earlier, when explaining nature, Li Ao attempted to posit an ontological foundation above movement and stillness. Applied to the two levels of his cultivation theory, he explicitly distinguishes "quiescence" from "stillness" (jing 靜) as two distinct entities and contrasts the two levels. He posits that the former merely stops the mind from having thoughts, while the latter goes a step further by realizing that there were never any thoughts to begin with, thereby eliminating the deviance that arises from thought. This division into two levels is akin to the famous Buddhist verses of Huineng and Shenxiu in the Chan tradition. Shenxiu still retained the action of wiping the mirror, whereas Huineng directly dismissed the very concepts of the Bodhi tree and the bright mirror. One must dismiss again and again, to the point where even the thought of becoming a Buddha is eradicated; otherwise, it is merely "using emotion to suppress emotion," which would only breed even greater emotion.

Although Li Ao posited "quiescence" as the ultimate state achieved through the restoration of nature, his theoretical framework remained fundamentally anchored in the Confucian paradigm. Had he focused solely on "quiescence," his thought would have entirely capitulated to Buddhism. Consequently, in the debate over whether the sage possesses emotions, Li Ao—much like Wang Bi—affirmed that the sage does possess emotions, thereby preventing the sage from being reduced to a non-human entity. Furthermore, to address the issue of how the sage engages with the external world, he asserted, "When things arrive, his mind is luminously clear and discerning, yet he is not swayed by them 物至之時，其心昭昭然明辨焉，而不應於物" (Li, 2021, p. 20). Because the sage has achieved enlightenment, he can engage with external things without being entangled or burdened by them.

Li Ao's theory of moral cultivation reveals an inherent tension between Buddhist and Confucian elements. Although his path to sagehood relied on an inward-looking approach, his fundamental pursuit as a Confucian scholar remained intact. He articulated the classical progression: "When knowledge is extended, intention becomes sincere; when intention is sincere, the mind is rectified; when the mind is rectified, the self is cultivated; when the self is cultivated, the family is regulated; when the family is regulated, the state is well-governed; when the state is well-governed, the world is at peace 知至故意誠，意誠故心正，心正故身修，身修而家齊，家齊而國理，國理而天下平" (Li, 2021, p. 20). This demonstrates that the ultimate objective of Li Ao's restoration of nature was to return to the Confucian ideal of "inner sage and outer king" (neisheng waiwang 內聖外王). Nevertheless, in evaluating Li Ao's thought, Zhu Xi remarked that "when it comes to expounding principles, it resembles Buddhism 至說道理，却類佛". Li Ao attempted to utilize Buddhist theories to refine Confucianism but inadvertently slipped into the Buddhist paradigm. In his pursuit of sagehood, he adopted a method of subjective introspection and mental cultivation, thereby neglecting its connection to Confucian patriarchal and ethical institutions. Even though he ultimately constructed an image of the sage connected to mundane reality and returned to the path of "inner sage and outer king," he essentially relied on Buddhist methods to achieve Confucian ends.

5. Conclusion

Although Tang Confucianism did not develop a systematic theoretical framework, it served as a crucial prelude to the Confucian revival, pointing the way for subsequent generations. As Feng Youlan noted in his *History of Chinese Philosophy*, "The foundation and outline of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism (Daoxue 道學) were already established by Han Yu and Li Ao in the Tang Dynasty" (Feng, 2021, p. 230). This assertion can be examined from two perspectives.

On the one hand, following the An Lushan Rebellion, the loosening of the traditional social structure prompted Confucian scholars to re-evaluate the issue of nature and emotion. Mid- to late-Tang scholars, such as Han Yu, Liu Zongyuan, and Li Ao, broke free from the rigid constraints of Han Dynasty classical studies (Jingxue 經學). To articulate the relationship between nature and emotion, they actively shifted their scholarly focus to foundational texts like *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the*

Mean, and Mencius. Following the collapse of the Tang Dynasty, early Northern Song Confucian scholars, much like Li Ao, engaged in prolonged explorations of Buddhist and Daoist theories. The fundamental reason for this was the lack of adequate resources within the prevailing Confucian canon to fully address the complexities of mind and nature. It was not until the academic climate shifted in the Northern Song, and scholars began to boldly question the classical texts, that the path of Confucian revival initiated during the Tang was successfully resumed.

On the other hand, Tang Confucian scholars prioritized countering Buddhist and Daoist doctrines while simultaneously absorbing their theories of mind and nature, as exemplified by Han Yu's formulation of the orthodox lineage and Li Ao's distinctive doctrine of nature and emotion. Although later Neo-Confucian scholars keenly recognized the Buddhist elements in Li Ao's thought, and his cultivation theory of "eradicating emotion to restore nature" and "seeking quiescence inwardly" did not exert a profound influence on the subsequent evolution of Confucianism, the internal contradictions left in Fuxing Shu—particularly the dilemma of "how a good nature can produce deviant emotions"—were sufficient to prompt Confucian scholars to engage in critical self-reflection. This, in turn, drove them to consciously assume the responsibility of constructing and perfecting Confucian ontology and epistemology (Shao, 2021).

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