

**Zeitschrift:** Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft  
**Band:** 11 (1957-1958)  
**Heft:** 3-4  
  
**Artikel:** The heresies of Ch'en Liang  
**Autor:** Wilhelm, Hellmut  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-145694>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 12.07.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# THE HERESIES OF CH'EN LIANG

BY HELLMUT WILHELM

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, SEATTLE

From among the strands which make up the flow of thought in Southern Sung times, the School of Pragmatists has been singled out for the most vehement criticism by the orthodox tradition. Ch'en Liang<sup>a</sup>, one of the foremost representatives of this school, was called "gross" and "wild" by his older contemporary Chu Hsi. Chu said about him, that "he got stuck in the varnish pot of profit and desire," and that his teachings were heresies<sup>b</sup>.

Ch'en Liang<sup>c</sup> came from a well-to-do rural family which had been settled for generations in the vicinity of Jung-k'ang in the prefecture of Wu<sup>c</sup> in Eastern Chekiang. In spite of their apparent wealth, none of his immediate ancestors showed any distinction in officialdom or scholarship. His great-grandfather, Ch'en Chih-yüan<sup>d</sup>, served in the army and fell in battle around the year 1126. His grandfather, Ch'en I<sup>e</sup> (1103-1167) first tried to promote his social position, without success, through the examination career, then, equally without success, through the military career, and in his frustration finally became a drunkard. His grand-uncle Ch'en Ch'ih<sup>f</sup> also tried the examinations in vain, but late in life received a low office through Imperial grace. The life of Ch'en Liang's father, Ch'en Tz'u-yin<sup>g</sup> (died 1174) was uneventful with the exception that he was once involved in a lawsuit and imprisoned. He married a girl from the prominent Huang clan, who was then in her 13th year.

Ch'en Liang was born in 1143, two years after the death of Yüeh Fei. He was thus the junior by thirteen years of Chu Hsi, by six years of Lü Tsu-ch'ien, by four years of Lu Chiu-yüan, by three years of Hsin Ch'i-chi, and the senior by seven years of Yeh Shih.

1. Biography in *Sung-shih* 436, T'ung-wen ed. 11-161; see also Yen Hsü-hsin *Ch'en Lung-ch'uan nien-p'u*<sup>1</sup> Com. Pr. 1940 and Teng Kung-san, *Ch'en Lung-ch'uan chuan*<sup>2</sup> Chunking 1944. His Collected Works, *Ch'en Lung-ch'uan chi*<sup>3</sup>, have been used in the Chin-hua-ts'ung-shu edition<sup>4</sup>.

When he was still in his teens, he attracted, through his literary brilliance, the attention of Chou K'uei<sup>h</sup>,<sup>2</sup> prefect of Wu-chou, served as his secretary, and followed him to the capital. From this time on, however, his life was beset with difficulties and frustrations. His time was divided between repeated sojourns at the capital, where he tried with consistent vigor to talk the Emperor into a more aggressive policy against the Chin,<sup>3</sup> and prolonged stays at home which he spent studying and writing, publishing and teaching. He was imprisoned several times and in one instance owed his life only to the intercession of Hsin Ch'i-chi; he went on occasional journeys to visit Chu Hsi or to explore the strategic configurations of Nanking and its surroundings, which at that time were a frontier district. Repeatedly he sat for the metropolitan examinations and repeatedly failed until he finally passed in 1193 when he was in his fifty-first year. Then he was selected by the Emperor personally as number one of the list and assigned to serve at the chieh-tu-shih's office at Chien-k'ang (Nanking). His death in the following year prevented him from assuming his duties.

Ch'en Liang's philosophy can be understood only if set off against the background of the prevailing political situation. For generations the Sung had accepted humiliation from the hands of the Chin.<sup>4</sup> Ch'en Liang's main, indeed his sole, aim was to work for a recovery of Chinese prestige and Chinese territory. What he wanted to help bring about was a complete restoration such as the one which had taken place at the time of Kuang-wu of Han and of which the so-called Sung restoration was only a weak and partial replica. Ch'en put all his talents behind this aim and the sole purpose of his political philosophy was to clear the road toward this destination.<sup>5</sup>

2. Biography *Sung-shih* 385.

3. For an extensive survey of Ch'en's writings submitted to the Emperor to further this task see *Sung-shih chi-shih pen-mo* ch. 76.

4. See O. Franke, *Geschichte des chinesischen Reiches*, 4 (1948) 255 for historical background.

5. See *Sung-Yüan hsüeh-an* and *Sung-Yüan hsüeh-an pu-i* ch. 56 for pertinent selections, criticism, and school affiliations. See further A. Forke, *Geschichte der neueren chinesischen Philoso-*

To achieve this task, Ch'en had on the one hand to fight the complacent attitude of the Court without offending the Emperor and on the other to construct an argument as to why and how the Chin could be beaten. His first and possibly foremost response to this task was an anthropocentrism which has probably never been stated as boldly in the entire history of Chinese thought.

Quoting Wang T'ung, he said: "Between Heaven and Earth there is nothing but Man; because Man can glorify the Tao<sup>1</sup> but Tao cannot glorify Man."

Or at another place: "The direction of great events of the world cannot be changed by Heaven and Earth, nor by the genii and the spirits; the one who changes it is Man."

Or more extensively: "The function of the human mind might be defective, but it can never be utterly destroyed. The form of the law might be incomplete, but it can never be utterly abolished. That Man forms the great triad together with Heaven and Earth is not because Heaven and Earth move in their eternal orbits independently and thus provide Man with his power<sup>1</sup>. If Man did not have this position, Heaven and Earth could not move independently; and if Heaven and Earth were discarded, then there would be nothing to be considered the Tao."

Applied to history, his anthropocentrism is expressed with regard to the restoration in Kuang-wu's time in the following way: "Even though it was a matter of the Heavenly Mandate, it was brought about by human counsel."

This is why he could say with regard to his own times: "In the world there are no lawless and cunning villains who cannot be restrained. The robbers (the Chin) do not have a power that is constantly on the rise and will not decline."

These quotations already take us into Ch'en's philosophy of history.

*phie* (1938) 265/66; T'ao Hsi-sheng, *Chung-kuo cheng-chih ssu-hsiang shih* <sup>w</sup> vol. 4 (1935) 197-208 and particularly Hsiao Kung-ch'üan, *Chung-kuo cheng-chih ssu-hsiang shih* <sup>x</sup> (1954) vol. 4, 461-464.

He knew his history well and studied it with a purpose. Already in his Cho-ku-lun<sup>k</sup> "Consulting the Past," which he wrote when he was still in his teens, he said, "In great matters, history can be consulted as to how to raise kings and in small matters as how to meet the enemy."

His philosophy of history is based on his conception of the unity and the continuity of the Tao, which he derived from his *I-ching* and *Ch'un-ch'iu* studies. He said: "What between Heaven and Earth is not the Tao?" And: "In the world there is definitely no affair extraneous to the Tao." In his correspondence with Chu Hsi he made it abundantly clear that to his mind the Tao worked in all periods of history, not just in those glorified by Chu, and in all institutions, not just in those raised as a model by Chu; that is to say, the principle operated in Han and T'ang as well as in the Three Dynasties, and in the Hegemon as well as in the King. This conception adds to Ch'en's aspect of history a dynamism which Chu Hsi lacked and a comprehensiveness which Chu Hsi fought.

A few words about Ch'en's scholarly antecedents may be in order. In certain respects his system definitely owed much to Wang An-shih, about whom he once said: "Wang An-shih took the teachings about achievement and benefit of the hegemon and put them into the adorned context of the Three Dynasties; he rectified the positions of the hundred officials, determined the functions of the offices, established militia, regulated government expenditures, and raised schools in order to cultivate the talent of the world." He also spoke with great reverence of the earlier Sung masters, especially Ch'eng I, Chang Tsai, and Hu An-kuo, whose works on the *I-ching*, *Chung-yung*, and *Ch'un-ch'iu* he republished. In specific matters he took suggestions from a variety of earlier writers such as Lin Hsün<sup>1</sup>. The most prevailing and thoroughgoing influence, however, seems to have been Wang T'ung, whose *Weng-chung-tzu* he edited in a systematized form.

On the other hand, he had little patience with the Confucianists of his time, both in and out of office. About these he said:

“The Confucianists of today, convinced of having grasped the teachings of rectifying the mind and sincerity of thought, are all paralyzed to a degree that they do not feel pain or itches. In a situation where the peace of the world depends on taking the great revenge for lord and father, they just raise their eyebrows and, hands in sleeves, talk about human nature and destiny, and they do not even know what human nature and destiny are really like ... The talented officials of today, convinced of having grasped the craft of making the nation rich and the army strong, are all wildly deluded and recklessly shouting; they do not take time out to investigate the essentials of establishing a state but just raise their eyebrows and with all their force discuss wealth and strength, and they do not even know what wealth and strength really mean.”

Or: “When the discussion is on recovery of the lost territory, they (the talented officials and wise scholars) talk about cultivating virtue and waiting for the right time. When the discussion is on wealth and strength, they talk about economy and sparing the people. When the discussion is on order, they talk about rectifying the mind; when the discussion is on political affairs, they talk about keeping the laws.”

Chu Hsi's main criticism of Ch'en is contained in the sentence:

“He acts on the principle of justice as well as benefit, and uses the way of the King as well as that of the Hegemon.”

Ch'en Liang proudly accepted this characterization and freely acknowledged that pragmatism formed part of his system. What has been translated here as “pragmatism” is *kung-li*<sup>m</sup>, that is achievement or merit and benefit or profit. He once argued his case in the following way:

“Subtleties about human nature and destiny, Tzu-kung did not get to hear and the Master rarely spoke about them.<sup>6</sup> That minor disciples of later days incessantly discourse about them, is this not a common occurrence? If Yü had not achieved merits, how could he have established

6. *Lun-yü* 5, 12. Legge p. 177; 9, 1. Legge p. 216.



government? If the hexagram *Ch'ien* did not have the attribute of the beneficial (the furthering), how could the four forces be completely provided? This being so, how can (the principles of achievement and benefit) be disregarded? With this in mind one has to explore the aims of K'ung and Meng, the great message of the Six Classics, and the reasons for the analyses and syntheses of the philosophers of the hundred schools ... Then only will one understand how the Saints and Sages managed the affairs of the world and why (Man) has been established as one of the three agents and can no longer be removed from this position. In all the great strategems of Emperors, Kings, and Hegemons, (these principles) were clearly conceived and easily executed."

A certain Wanganshihian ring in this argument is easily detected. For Wang An-shih, the function of literature was to help the generation<sup>n</sup>, and thus also Ch'en Liang considered that the value of scholarship lay in its applicability<sup>o</sup>. This pragmatic principle is consistently adhered to in Ch'en's writings and its workings are pointed out in a variety of historical situations. One example might suffice here:

"The achievement of the State of Ch'i in having put the world back on the right track by force is great indeed; and it is within the framework of achievement and benefit that the gentleman nourishes the Tao."

However, this position put Ch'en into opposition not only to the Sung Confucianists of his time but also to some of the basic tenets of the Classics, particularly those of the *Lun-yü* and the *Meng-tzu*. Ch'en did not shirk the issue. He clarified his attitude toward the *Lun-yü* in the following way:

"There is nothing in the book *Lun-yü* that does not concern practical learning. Scholars, in a vain search of what is called transcendence<sup>p,7</sup>, select those of its sayings which sound subtle and mysterious, distort them until in their own minds they appear superior, and based on this they pass sentence saying: this is the essence, the others just specialize

7. *Lun-yü* 14, 37. Legge p. 288.

on dregs. Alas, this is the reason why they read and reread the book all their lives, get entangled in thorns and brambles, and still pretend to have grasped (its import). Now, the Tao which acts in this world does not have roots and ramifications. It does not have a within and a without; how then could the Sage in his sayings raise up the one and disregard the other? If he had done so, the Sage would have split the Tao in two; what good then would come from the reading of the book *Lun-yü*? I say: apply your intelligence (clarity) within, exert unwary efforts in practical learning and strive for accordance in your own mind: profound merit will then be arrived at in force. Thus the transcendence of tomorrow will be nothing but the practical learning of today. In this way the reading of the book *Lun-yü* has to be based on an understanding of its being an interrelated whole and it has to be loved in this way. I personally take this book to be something that I want to learn from persistently throughout my life; only then would I be in a position to discuss with all those gentlemen the direction in which they are moving and to caution them with regard to their ways."

With regard to the *Meng-tzu*, he has the following to say:

"Once the foremost Confucianist had a saying: public interest is one, private interests are manifold. The minds of people are different, like their faces. This is their private (selfish) mind. Alas, once the private mind (selfishness) has sprouted, I would not know how it will exhaust itself. In the time of the former Kings, the rules of conduct were all-pervasive and social position was fixed, and thus the mind knew where to stop. Therefore the people of the world all were aware of their original minds, they loved their own parents and loved other people's parents, they were fond of their own children and were fond of other people's children. Their original minds were always in harmony. When the way of Chou deteriorated, the grace of kings was exhausted and it gained currency (to judge according to) advantage or disadvantage. Within the minds of people motives arose, and scheming was applied to outward affairs. In the beginning the planning concerned what was convenient



but finally it ended in rapaciousness, murder and poison, all around and incessantly. Meng-tzu was born into this time and he was moved by the fact that the world had come to this impasse. He was convinced that this trend could not be remedied except by unifying and rectifying peoples' minds; only thus would they follow their original (mind) and the world could be pacified. Furthermore: if a certain trend runs out it will change; once changing, to guide it in the right direction, why should that not be as easy as turning one's hand? Meng-tzu knew that the action of this principle was fast; however, the rulers of the time still believed it to be far off. That is why I know that it is not difficult that this way is trodden but that it is difficult to rectify the human mind. Thus, those who know how to read the book *Meng-tzu* have to understand that its main aim is to rectify the human mind; and those who are out for teachings on how to rectify the human mind will have to understand that its rigid distinction between justice and benefit was meant for the rulers only to apply generally."

Within the specific situation of his own time, Ch'en Liang's attitude led to a series of specific postulates. Of interest among them is his forceful plea for a greater freedom of expression. He even attacked the examination system as an instrument of thought-channelization. It will not do, he says, to tag the label of "heretic" to the teachings of certain statesmen and philosophers merely because they do not agree with the present (and faulty) stage of development of doctrinal tradition. No teaching is inherently heretic if studied in its own right and its own time situation; and so-called heretical teachings, dealing as they do with unusual situations, might provide guidance in unusual situations of later times.

Of equal interest is his running battle against overcentralization and for a proper position of officialdom. His ideas on this score were first developed in his "Essay on Restoration,"<sup>9</sup> which he submitted to the Emperor when he was in his mid-twenties; they were reiterated in his memorials to the Emperor and in almost all of his theoretical writings.

His claims were based on the conception of the common weal as the principle of the body politic which can be activated only by benefiting the people. Not only do the rulers owe their position to their acting in harmony with this principle; they owe it historically to a consensus of the people:

“In antiquity, when people were first created, they gathered according to their kind and separated into groups, each of which had lords and elders. The abler ones were recognized as leaders and their orders were obeyed. They were called August and Divine, as their talents and their character placed them foremost in their generation; those who had to obey orders did not resent not being of their number. When the generation changed and their (the leader's) character declined, (new) leaders were recognized from among those who were outstanding in talent and character and their orders were obeyed. When Heaven creates a generation of men, then there will certainly be superior people among that generation who can rule them. Why should one rely on succession in order to possess the world in eternity? When it came to the times of Yao, man-made circumstances had multiplied and national institutions had more or less been provided for. Rulers and officials had fixed positions and the obeying of orders had become an eternal rule; it was no longer given to the people to rule themselves.”

Or in another passage: “The so-called leaders, kings, lords, and dukes, have all been promoted and brought forward by the people of the world; they did not occupy their position on top of the people on account of their being venerated and considered to be extraordinary in their own right.”

From this social theory Ch'en did not draw the conclusion that the world should revert to its premonarchical stage. Once the position of the ruler was institutionalized, it had to stay that way. The principle of the common weal was, however, still active, supporting rulers and leaders whose aims were in accordance with it. No leader could achieve or maintain power by cunning and force alone. This was as true in Han

and T'ang as it was during the Three Dynasties. Selfishness in politics has never been and can never be the sole principle of power.

Altogether the proper distribution of power, including military power, and the recognition of the proper position and responsibility of officialdom was impressively argued by Ch'en in the context of the political situation of his time. According to Ch'en, this was a period in which, to achieve the major political aim, great activity was called for.<sup>7</sup> It was a period when the Way had to be reversed, which was possible only by activating policy. "When policy is activated, the minds of the people will agree. When the minds of the people agree, the cosmic season will become propitious."

Ch'en Liang discussed his ideas in an extensive correspondence with Chu Hsi. It is small wonder that Chu Hsi shuddered at the thought of the consequences to which these ideas might lead, particularly since Ch'en's influence had spread far in the scholarly world. Chu's judgment of Ch'en has then become an almost universally accepted verdict. Only a few thinkers who stood outside the orthodox tradition were able to appreciate the force and value of Ch'en's thought. Among them were Fang Hsiao-ju<sup>8</sup>, Li Chih<sup>9</sup> and Huang Tsung-hsi<sup>10</sup>. It is people like these who recognized in Ch'en the qualities which made a contemporary say of him: "He was a dragon among men and a tiger among writers."

8. 1357-1402, see Crawford, Lamley and Mann, "Fang Hsiao-ju in the light of early Ming society." *Monumenta Serica* 15, 2 (1956) 303-327.

9. 1527-1602, see O. Franke, *Li Tschih, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der chinesischen Geisteskämpfe im 16. Jahrhundert*. Ak.d. W. Berlin 1938.

10. 1610-1695, see W. T. de Bary, "Chinese Despotism and the Confucian Ideal, a seventeenth-century view," in: John K. Fairbank ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, Chicago 1957, 163-200, 378-387.

- |   |          |    |              |
|---|----------|----|--------------|
| a | 陳亮       | o  | 學以致用         |
| b | 怪論       | p  | 下學上達         |
| c | 永康, 婺州   | q  | 中興論          |
| d | 陳知元      | r  | 大有為之時        |
| e | 陳益       | s  | 顏虛心, 陳龍川年譜   |
| f | 陳持       | t  | 鄧恭三, 陳龍川傳    |
| g | 陳次尹      | u  | 陳龍川集         |
| h | 周葵       | v  | 金華叢書         |
| i | 弘道       | w  | 陶希聖, 中國政治思想史 |
| j | 氣        | x  | 蕭公權, 中國政治思想史 |
| k | 酌古論      | y  | 方孝孺          |
| l | 林勳       | z  | 李贄           |
| m | 功利       | aa | 黃宗羲          |
| n | 文者務為有輔於世 |    |              |