

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 9 (1955)

Heft: 1-4

Artikel: The attenuation of a Chinese philosophical concept : "T'i-yung" in the nineteenth century

Autor: Levenson, Joseph R.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-145596>

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: 25.03.2026

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

THE ATTENUATION
OF A CHINESE PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPT:
“T’I-YUNG” IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY JOSEPH R. LEVENSON

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Beginning slowly in the 1840's, after the British show of technical prowess in the Opium War, and picking up speed by the end of the century, numbers of loyal Confucianists spoke out in favor of material innovation from the West. The most common apology of these traditionalists for their readiness to change the material culture of China was classically phrased, “*Chung-hsüeh wei t’i, hsi-hsüeh wei yung*,”^a by Chang Chih-tung (1837–1909); he suggested that the heart of Chinese civilization, its spiritual values, would be defended, not jeopardized, by Chinese “self-strengthening” in the merely practical spheres of life where the Westerners had their eminence. “Chinese learning for essence (*t’i*), Western learning for use (*yung*).”¹

This psychologically appealing formula failed to produce what it promised. No clean line could mark off a material segment of culture from a spiritual segment, and the modern *t’i-yung* dichotomy, for all its traditional Confucian pedigree, was really a cover for essential change and the waning of tradition.²

But it was not simply that traditionalists, with the best of Confucian wills, used *t’i-yung* to ease a catalyst, Western industrialism, into their world, and thereby prepared the way for iconoclasm; there was more

1. For discussions of the use of this rationalization in nineteenth-century China, see Hellmut Wilhelm, “The Problem of Within and Without, a Confucian Attempt in Syncretism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* XII, 1 (January, 1951), 48–60, esp. 59–60; and Ssu-yü Teng and John K. Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West*, Cambridge, 1954, I, 50 and 164.

2. I have discussed the social implications of modern *t’i-yung* thinking in “‘History’ and ‘Value’: the Tensions of Intellectual Choice in Modern China,” especially pp. 155–161, in Arthur Wright (ed.), *Studies in Chinese Thought*, Chicago, 1953.

to the paradox than that. For *t'i-yung*, in its nineteenth-century usage, not only had Confucian breakdown as an outer consequence but Confucian breakdown in its inner core. The Confucian formula which failed to contain industrialism also failed to express an authentic Confucianism. *T'i-yung*, as Chang Chih-tung invoked it, was a vulgarization of a Sung Confucian principle. The traditionalist tried to assure himself that Western machines were tame, but when the terms he used for reassurance were so strangely warped from their orthodox meanings, the ravages of Western intruders were exemplified, not belied.

In the Sung neo-Confucianism of Chu Hsi (1130–1200), which Chang Chih-tung implied he was perpetuating, *yung* might be described as the functional correlative of *t'i*. Both an essence and a function inhered in the single object; *t'i* and *yung* were two modes of identification of being, while the existing object of identification was one. This *t'i-yung* correlation was a fairly ordinary proposition, and one can find the sense of the neo-Confucian usage in non-Chinese philosophies. With perhaps differing degrees of stress, Goethe's definition of function as "existence conceived in activity",³ Whitehead's concept of functional activity ("that every actual thing is something by reason of its activity")⁴ were suggestions of *yung* as Chu Hsi understood it. And Aristotle and the great Aristotelians in effect decried *t'i* when they spoke of that which is present in an individual as the cause of its being and unity,⁵ or of a name – that which is signified in a definition,⁶ or of the object of intuition, the scientifically undemonstrable apprehension of the intellect alone.⁷

3. R. W. Meyer, *Leibnitz and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*, Cambridge, 1952, 51.

4. Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, New York, 1938, 26.

5. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1041 b.

6. *Ibid.*, 1071 b; Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* (M. Friedlander, tr.), New York, n. d., 178; Aquinas, *Concerning Being and Essence* (George G. Leckie, tr.), New York and London, 1937, 7.

7. W. D. Ross, *Aristotle's Prior and Posterior Analytics*, Oxford, 1949, 284, 660; Aquinas, *op. cit.*, 44. In connection with notes 5–7, cf. the following passage (XVI, i–ii) in the *Chung-yung, Doctrine of the Mean*, a classical text whose importance was greatly emphasized by Chu

A thing *is*, and it *does*. Essence, or substance – *t'i* – inexorably implies action, or function – *yung* –, and Aquinas gave us Chu Hsi's conviction when he wrote that a thing has a disposition towards an operation proper to the thing. "... no thing is lacking in its proper operation."⁸

Chu Hsi's similar sense of the correlation between the quiddity of a thing and its proper operation is apparent in his analyses of classical Confucian qualities. For example, interpreting in a dialogue with his disciples the *Lun-yü* phrases, "*Li chih yung ho wei kwei*,"^{b9} he treated the *yung* of the passage as establishing the functional tie of *ho*, "harmony" or Legge's "natural ease," to *li*, the principle of ordered human relationships. He held that *li* became manifest in the production of *ho*. The existence of *ho* was the outer test of the existence of *li* (the inner core of *li* was *ching*,^c "reverence"); if *li* was really in being, the operation of *ho* was naturally, necessarily implied.¹⁰

This absolute naturalness of the correlation between inner essence and outer manifestation was insisted upon by Chu Hsi. Where Mencius, in listing the attributes of the great man, used the phrases, "to dwell in the wide house of the world," "to stand in the correct seat of the world," and "to walk in the great path of the world,"¹¹ Chu Hsi gave as equivalents *jen* ("human-heartedness"), *li* ("propriety"), and *i* ("right conduct"), respectively, and continued:

Hsi (the translation is that of James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, Oxford, 1893, I, 397): "The Master said, 'How abundantly do spiritual beings display the powers that belong to them! We look for them, but do not see them; we listen to, but do not hear them; yet they enter into (*t'i*) all things, and there is nothing without them!'" The meaning of the passage is obscure; but one should note the suggestion of contradiction between *t'i* and objects of sense-perception. Used here in a verbal sense, *t'i* is implicitly identifiable with "that which makes a thing what it generically *is*".

8. Aquinas, *op. cit.*, 5.

9. *Lun-yü* I, xii; Legge, *op. cit.*, I, 143: "In practicing the rules of propriety, a natural ease is to be prized."

10. *Chu-tzu ch'üan shu* (Li Kuang-ti^d ed., 1714), 10. 37a–38a. Hereafter abbreviated CTCS.

11. *Mencius* III, ii, 3; Legge, *op. cit.*, II (1895), 265.

In the case of the first and second phrases, “dwelling in the wide house” is *t’i*, “standing in the correct seat” is *yung*. In the case of the second and third phrases, then “standing in the correct seat” is *t’i*, “walking in the great path” is *yung*. If one knows how to dwell in the wide house of the world, he naturally can stand in the correct seat of the world and walk in the great path of the world.¹²

The “naturally” (*tzu-jan*) in this passage underscores the necessity of the tie between *t’i* and *yung*, and in this case between *jen* and *li* and *i*, the first bringing the second two in its train, since a *yung* may be also a *t’i* and have its own *yung* inevitably as a correlative. In the Mencius passage, it would seem that these qualities were cumulating to make the great man, but in the *t’i-yung* thinking of Chu Hsi the qualities were considered unequivocally not as independent and added to one another, but as interdependent and expressive of one another, inconceivable without one another.¹³ Thus, *ai* (“love”), as an emotion (*ch’ing^g*), is the necessary projection into action – the *yung*, in short – of a human being’s innate nature or predisposition (*hsing*); the innate nature which points towards *ai* is *jen*. Or, *ai* is *yung* to *jen*, one of the functional correlatives which Chu Hsi saw as implicitly bound to this particular *t’i*.¹⁴

This authentically neo-Confucian interpretation of *t’i-yung* was still

12. CTCS 20. 76b.

13. Elsewhere (*Mencius* IV A, xxvii, 2), in a passage which Chu Hsi discussed approvingly more than once, Mencius seems to have defined essentials functionally – a *t’i-yung* interpretation without, however, the use of those terms. The translation of the passage is as follows (Legge, *op. cit.*, II, 313–314): “Mencius said, ‘The richest fruit (*shih^e*) of benevolence (*jen*) is this – the service of one’s parents. The richest fruit of righteousness (*i*) is this – the obeying one’s elder brothers. The richest fruit of wisdom (*chih^f*) is this – the knowing those two things, and not departing from them. The richest fruit of propriety (*li*) is this – the ordering and adorning those two things.’” See CTCS 10. 13 b and 21. 8 a. It is doubtful whether, at least for Chu Hsi’s interpretation, the translation, “the richest fruit,” gives the full functional force of *shih*; it implies here rather the concept of “bringing into practical being”.

14. CTCS 10. 13 b.

preserved in the thought of Tseng Kuo-fan (1811-1872), perhaps the ablest of nineteenth-century Chinese statesmen. Tseng was a powerful advocate of Western technical achievement for China, along the line of reasoning to which the *t'i-yung* dichotomy would soon be misapplied; but Tseng, still an early figure in the history of Chinese westernization, reserved this terminology for his "*li-hsüeh*,"^h an attempted synthesis of Chinese philosophies, and thus kept both concepts in the realm of "spirit" instead of allotting one to the realm of "matter". Tseng's *li-hsüeh*, which was designed to put an end to Chinese intellectual warfare, was a philosophy of wholeness, drawing together complementary pairs of classical concepts (*hsiu chi chih jen*ⁱ, *nei sheng wai wang*^j, *yu t'i yu yung*^k), all of them ancient expressions of a working dichotomy of "inner" and "outer". There were, first and foremost, *t'i* and *yung*, substance and function, what one is and what one does; and there were *sheng* and *wang*, the sage in spirit and the king in action, whose *t'i* was evinced in *hsiu-chi*, his inner cultivation of the self, and whose *yung* was evinced in *chih-jen*, the governing of men in the outer world. *Li* was the common noumenon underlying the self-nurturing, world-pacifying sage-king's being and activity; without *li*, from the standpoint of the inner there was no *tao* or *te*, metaphysical truth or rightness, and from the standpoint of the outer there was no *cheng-shih*,^l no governing.¹⁵

For Tseng Kuo-fan, then, *t'i-yung* was still an orthodox, neutrally equivalent substance-and-function, not a normatively differentiated

15. Hsiao I-shan^m, *Tseng Kuo-fan*, Chungking, 1944, 37, 46. The parallel to Chu Hsi is striking: cf. *CTCS* 13. 2 b-3 a, where *wai-mien*, "outside," identified as the sphere of *yung*, is juxtaposed with *hsin-chung*, "within the mind," and it is maintained that the establishment of outer equilibrium is necessarily correlated with the existence of an inner equilibrium. Chu defines functionally the inner quality, *jen*, as that which perfectly regulates the *t'ien-hsia*, the outer world.

Cf. also a passage from a classic very important to Sung Confucianism, *Ta-hsüeh*, 4 (Legge, *op. cit.*, I, 357): "The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue (*ming-te*) throughout the kingdom first ordered well their own states (*chih ch'i kuo*) . . ." This, the beginning and end of a famous circular chain of scorites, seems more comprehensible from the point of view of *t'i-yung* logic than from any other; good government is the necessary external manifestation of illustrious virtue, an essence; *ming-te* is that which is evidenced in *chih-kuo*.

end-and-means. The idea that *yung* was *merely yung*, as means are *merely* means in relation to a cherished end, was Chang Chih-tung's ominous note of departure from the neo-Confucian world in which Tseng had still lingered. Western technology, something useful for the material defense of the home of Chinese spiritual values, was the *yung* that Chang accepted for the sake of superior *t'i*. Chu Hsi would never have recognized it.

For Chu Hsi had a word for such an instrument, a means, not end – and the word was not *yung*, but *ch'i*.¹⁶ Commenting on *Lun-yü* II, xii (“The master said, ‘The accomplished scholar [*chün-tzu*] is not a utensil [*ch'i*]’”),¹⁶ Chu Hsi said that a *chün-tzu* had *te* (“virtue”) as his *t'i* and *ts'ai* (“talent”) as his *yung*. Man fell short of being a *chün-tzu*, and hence remained a mere utensil (*ch'i*), when the *t'i* appropriate to a *chün-tzu* (i. e., *te*) was only approached, so that its *yung*, or manifestation in action, was incomplete.¹⁷ With Chu Hsi, then, in this example, it was not the existence of *yung* but the *incompleteness* of *yung* that made an object, seen under these categories of *t'i* and *yung*, a utensil, means, or instrument. *Yung* here was clearly a different concept from what Chang Chih-tung made of it; it was not an equivalent of “instrument,” but a necessary antidote to instrumentalization.

Chang Chih-tung, seeking a material shield for spiritual values, told Confucianists more conservative than he that *t'i* and *yung* belonged together. To that extent, he sounded like Chu Hsi, who had once condemned the Buddhists for allegedly defending “empty stillness” (*k'ung-chi*), or “*t'i* without *yung*,” i. e., complete abstraction.¹⁸ Chang might see himself as deriving from Chu in his activist insistence that *t'i* was not enough, that the classics *and* railroads were needed in China, but when he seemed to suggest that *t'i* and *yung* were where one found

16. Legge, *op. cit.*, I, 150.

17. CTCS 12. 24a.

18. CTCS 22. 37a–37b. This particular discussion of *t'i-yung* developed from *Mencius* VI, xi, 1 (Legge, *op. cit.*, II, 414): “Mencius said, ‘Benevolence is man’s mind, and righteousness is man’s path.’”

them, and that he found *t'i* in Chinese learning and *yung* in Western, he showed how little the neo-Confucian logic met his case. For Chang's sum of a *t'i* from here and a *yung* from there never added up to be Chu Hsi's indivisible entity, a *t'i-in-yung*, or *yung-in-t'i*. Chang was pleading for a coupling of concepts on the authority of an imprecise analogy with an earlier dichotomy, which had really referred to an internal symbiosis, not an externally-contrived aggregation.

In short, Chang Chih-tung, without any conscious acknowledgment of what he was doing, changed the significance of the *t'i-yung* dichotomy in a very important way. Chu Hsi's emphasis had been metaphysical: *t'i* and *yung*, substance and function, jointly defined the one object. But Chang Chih-tung's emphasis was sociological. He was concerned really not with the character of things but the character of cultures, and *t'i* and *yung* were separate in nature (as they were not for Chu Hsi) and fused only in mind. Man, that is, had something (Chinese) for *t'i* and something (Western) for *yung*; while according to Chu Hsi, all "some-things" had both *t'i* and *yung*.

Such, then, was Chang Chih-tung's use of an orthodox formula to characterize his effort, by a Sino-Western syncretism, to preserve orthodoxy. It betrays a traditionalists' contribution to the wearing away of tradition. In fact, orthodoxy was not preserved by Chinese action taken under cover of the *t'i-yung* sanction; and an orthodoxy had to be mishandled so that, in fancy, a belief in its preservation might be entertained.

As an easy, conventional conceit in Chinese thinking, the prescription of Chinese spirit plus Western matter has never quite lost its appeal since Chang Chih-tung expressed it in his *t'i-yung* terminology. But in more rigorous, formal thought, the self-destructive implications of a *t'i-yung* defense of Chinese culture were soon exposed. There were thinkers who came to hold that if there was any *t'i* involved in combination with the *yung* of Western applied science, it was Western pure science, and Western philosophy, literature, and art, not their Chinese counter-

parts. Or, in a further refinement, the applied science and industrialism which were *yung* from the standpoint of scholarship were *t'i* from the standpoint of general social reform.¹⁹ This was how the catalytic power of science and industrialism, which Chang had ignored when he asked them in to protect his spiritual heritage, came to be recognized; and the very recognition of that power was one of the latter's subversive effects.

19. Fung Yu-lan^P, *Hsin shih lun*^Q (Discussions of new issues), Changsha, 1940, 50-51.

a	中學為體西學為用	g	情	m	蕭一山
b	禮之用和為貴	h	禮學	n	器
c	敬	i	修己治人	o	空寂
d	李光地	j	內聖外王	p	馮友蘭
e	實	k	有體有用	q	新事論
f	智	l	政事		