

Document 6.3: Excerpt from letter by Zhu Yixin in response to the Self-Strengthening Movement, late 1800s

Zhu Yixin (1846–1894) withdrew from government service to teach and study classical works. He was a strong Confucian, who had no interest in adopting anything from the West.

I have heard of “daily renovating one’s virtue,” but I have never heard of daily renovating one’s moral principles. The scholars of the [eighteenth century] regarded moral principle as something one should not talk about. Now, in order to rescue us from the degeneration and loss [that resulted] you do not seek a return to fixed principles, but instead you talk about changing principles. The barbarians¹ do not recognize the moral obligations between ruler and minister, parent and child, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife.² There is your change in principles. Do you mean that the classics of our sages and the teachings of our philosophers are too dull and banal to follow, and that we must change them so as to have something new? Only if we first have principles can we then have institutions. Barbarian institutions are based on barbarian principles. Different principles make for different customs, and different customs give rise to different institutions. Now, instead of getting at the root of it all, you talk blithely of changing institutions. If the institutions are to be changed, are not the principles going to be changed along with them?

The manufacture of instruments by the workers involves techniques, not principles. As the minds of the people become more and more artful, clever contrivances will daily increase. Once started, there is no resistance to it. Why, therefore, need we fear that our techniques will not become sufficiently refined?

Now, because our techniques have not yet attained the highest level of skillfulness, it is proposed that we should seek to achieve this by changing our institutions as well as our principles.... Is this not like rescuing a person from being drowned by pushing him into a deep abyss? Is this not going much too far?

Source: de Bary, William Theodore, and Richard Lufrano. *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Volume 2: From 1600 Through the Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. 277–278.

¹ foreigners

² relationships of respect, responsibility, and obedience considered among the most important elements of Confucian beliefs