

Chinese Historical Figures: 1966 - 1976

Feng Youlan (1895-1990)

Feng (courtesy name Zhi Sheng) is a philosopher, historian of philosophy and educator. He was born on December 4, 1895 into a scholarly family in Tanghe, Nanyang County of He'nan Province.

He began education at home by private tutors. In 1909, he passed exams and enrolled in Kaifeng Public School in Zhongzhou. He studied in the college preparatory class at the Chinese Public School of Shanghai in 1912 before majoring in philosophy at Peking University in 1915. After his graduation from Peking University in 1918, Feng returned to Kaifeng and held a teaching position at He'nan Preparatory School for Overseas Studies and the Provincial Normal School. Influenced by the May Fourth Movement, Feng and his friends published a magazine 'Voice from Heart' to promote new culture.

In 1919, Feng traveled to the United States and studied western philosophy at Columbia University. In 1924, He earned his doctoral degree in philosophy from Columbia University with his dissertation *A Comparative Study of Life Ideals*.

After his return to China, Feng took up teaching positions at He'nan Zhongzhou University, Sun Yet-Sen University, Yenching University, Tsinghua University and Southwest Associated University.

During this time, Feng affirmed his belief in pragmatism in his work *A Philosophy of Life*, which was adopted as the high school textbook in 1924. Later, he further combined pragmatism with Cheng-Chu Neo-Confucianism. While lecturing the history of Chinese philosophy at Yegching University, Feng published two volumes of *History of Chinese Philosophy* in 1931 and 1934 respectively. The books later were used as textbooks in the university.

In 1946, Feng traveled to the U.S. again and took up a post as a visiting professor at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1947, He taught as a visiting professor at University of Hawaii and received Honorary Doctorate in Literature from Princeton University.

Upon his return to China in 1948, Feng became professor and Chairman of University Council Meeting of Tsinghua University. He taught at Peking University from 1952 when the university was reorganized and kept the teaching post till his death in 1990. Feng also served as Member of Assessment Committee at Academia Sinica, Academic Committee, and Member of Standing Committee at Chinese Academy of Sciences as well as Member of Standing Committee of the State Council of People's Republic of China.

Feng has once concluded his academic achievement in six philosophical books that he had produced in the 1930's and 1940's, namely *New Rational Philosophy* (1937), *New Treatise on the Way of Life* (1940), *New Treatise on the Theory of Knowledge* (1940), *New Treatise on the Nature of Man* (1942), *New Treatise on the Nature of Tao* (1945), *New Treatise on the Understanding of Words* (1947).

His *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* was written in English in the 40's and it has been translated into different languages including French, Italian, Spanish, Serbo-Croatian, Czech, Japanese, Korean and Chinese. Over decades, this book has been a textbook in learning Chinese philosophy used in the universities around the world.

Feng's philosophical position is based on the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism in the 12th Century. He further developed and analyzed them using the tools of western philosophical reasoning. He is then able to construct a new philosophical system of rational Neo-Confucianism making him the most influential philosopher in his time.

After the establishment of new China, Feng repudiated Neo-Confucianism. He began to study Marxism and tried to fit it in the history of Chinese philosophy. Since 1959, Feng had started to adopt in his books and his research the Marxist ideas of the class struggle, materialism and idealism, dialectics and metaphysics.

During the Cultural Revolution, Feng was harshly attacked as "reactionary academic authority". He was purged and humiliated in big-character posters and in mass rallies. He was beaten to the ground. His house was seized and his salary was cut. At last, he was detained.

In 1968, under Mao's instruction, Feng was allowed to return and live at home.

In 1974, Feng, Zhou Yiliang and Wei Jiangong were appointed as advisers to the critic team of Tsinghua University and Peking University. They published articles and books criticizing Confucian and Lin Biao to fit into the ideology and political climate of the Cultural Revolution.

From 1977 till 1979, the critic team of the two universities was labeled as "counter-revolutionary" and was condemned. Being labeled as a "fence-sitter", Feng was again interrogated, attacked and humiliated.

In 1981, at the age of 86, Feng dictated and managed to finish his memoir, *San Song House of Philosophy Memo*. In the preface, he recalled his life of the past thirty years, "I had no intention to pursue truth. What I said was full of claptrap. I set up a model of hypocrisy, instead of authenticity."

Feng died of illness in Beijing on November 26, 1990, aged 95.