Introduction

Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) would rank at the top of any list of the most influential people in China's history. For seven hundred years, from the thirteenth century to the early years of the twentieth, his particular version of the Confucian tradition was the one the political and intellectual elite regarded as "orthodox."* School children would study, indeed memorize line-by-line, the four texts in the Confucian canon that he believed constituted the core curriculum. And with those texts, they would read, and memorize, Zhu Xi's detailed interlinear commentaries on each, as these interpretations were expected to guide their reading and shape their understanding of Confucian beliefs and practices.

Given the growing prominence of his teachings, in 1313, the Chinese state designated these four texts, known now simply as the Four Books, and Zhu Xi's accompanying interlinear commentary on them, as the core texts of the influential civil service examination system. Candidates hoping to succeed in the examinations and gain official positions were required to memorize

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*Called *Daoxue* 道學, literally "Learning of the Way." This book uses the conventional English name of Neo-Confucianism for Zhu Xi's school of Confucianism.

and demonstrate mastery of these Four Books, as well as Zhu Xi's interpretation of them. It was thus supposed that Zhu Xi's teachings and commentaries on the dominant Confucian tradition would guide the imperial government and its officials in the administration of the Chinese realm.

Zhu Xi was born in 1130 in Youqi County in Fujian Province, shortly after the great crisis of the Song dynasty (960–1279)—the conquest of north China by the Jurchen people and the flight of the Song court to the south in 1127. His father, Zhu Song 朱松 (1097–1143), had moved the family to Fujian from Wuyuan County, Jiangxi, to take up the post of district sheriff. Zhu's early schooling was at home, under the supervision of his father. When Zhu Song died in 1143, the education of young Zhu fell to three of his father's acquaintances, an arrangement made by Zhu Song on his deathbed. Later in life Zhu Xi would remark that the three men were fond not only of Confucian teachings but of Buddhist teachings as well. We do not learn from him which Buddhist texts or teachings in particular he might have encountered, but he does tell us that at this time he frequented Buddhist and Daoist schools. His fascination with Buddhism continued for the next ten years or so.

The person credited with showing Zhu the error of Buddhist ways and bringing him firmly into the Confucian fold is Li Tong 李侗 (1093–1163). Li had studied under Luo Congyan 羅從彥 (1072–1135), a disciple of Yang Shi 楊時 (1053–1135), who, in turn, had studied under Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), regarded by Zhu as one of the four great Neo-Confucian thinkers of the Northern Song period (960–1127). Given this line of transmission, Zhu would claim that he had studied indirectly under Cheng Yi and considered him to be his spiritual master.

By 1148, Zhu Xi had already demonstrated his intellectual precociousness, having won the *jinshi* degree, the highest degree in

the country's competitive civil service examinations, at the age of nineteen (the average age of successful *jinshi* candidates at this time was mid-thirties). Success in the examinations led to his first official posting in 1153 as subprefectural registrar of Tongan county in Fujian, a position he held through 1156. There, his biography tells us, he supervised the local registrars, promoted education, built a library, strengthened city defenses, and reported on public morality. Upon leaving his post in Tongan, for the next twenty years he declined requests to serve in office. Instead he took up temple guardianships; these low-paying sinecurial posts enabled him to eke out a living while writing, teaching, and meeting with prominent thinkers of the day, such as Lü Zuqian 呂祖謙 (1137–1181), Zhang Shi 張栻 (1130–1180), and Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–1193).

In 1179, Zhu Xi accepted an appointment as prefect of Nankang County in Jiangxi. There, we are told, he continued his commitment to promoting education, evidenced perhaps most clearly by his efforts to revive the famous White Deer Grotto Academy, originally founded in the late tenth century. The "Articles of Learning" he compiled for the academy reflect his devotion to learning for the sake of moral improvement, not as a means to worldly success. These "Articles" would be extremely influential, serving as a model for academies throughout much of East Asia and into the twentieth century. Zhu's term at Nankang expired in 1181. He did accept further appointments as prefect of Zhangzhou in Fujian in 1190 and prefect of Tanzhou in 1194 but held each of these for less than a year. In total, Zhu Xi served in public office for only nine or so years, far fewer than might be expected of a man who lived for more than fifty years after receiving the prestigious *jinshi* degree.[1]

Zhu may have not dedicated his life to holding office, but his keen interest in the political order cannot be questioned. Not

only did he acquit himself with distinction in the offices he did hold, but he also engaged directly in contemporary political discourse: he submitted a number of sealed memorials to the throne (in 1162, 1180, 1188) and even went to the capital for personal audiences with the emperor (in 1163, 1181, 1188). And, in late 1194 he served briefly as lecturer-in-waiting at court, where he lectured Emperor Ningzong on the short Confucian classic, the *Greater Learning* (*Daxue* 大學).

Certain themes run through these memorials and audiences: the emperor, Zhu urged, must rectify his mind if the empire is to become tranquil and orderly; the military must be strengthened if the central plain—the traditional heartland of Chinese civilization, now under the control of the Jurchen Jin (1115–1234)—is to be recovered; and the emperor must establish sound and effective personnel policies and select only worthy and talented men for government service.

Still, teaching and writing were clearly dearest to Zhu Xi. In surveying the Chinese world of the twelfth century, he saw a country and a culture in crisis. The Confucian Way of the past was in decline. His hope was that through teaching and writing he might help restore this Way and ensure its transmission to later generations.

Since the beginning of the Song, foreigners had occupied territory traditionally belonging to the Chinese. First, in the mid-tenth century the Khitan tribespeople from Mongolia extended their control over sixteen northern prefectures surrounding Beijing. In the early years of the twelfth century the Jurchen tribes of Manchuria in turn extinguished Khitan power; but, not content with the northern prefectures of the Khitan alone, Jurchen forces continued south, eventually taking all of north China and establishing their own Jin dynasty there. Henceforth, from 1125 until the fall of the dynasty in 1279, Song control over China was

limited to the area south of the Huai River. Zhu, along with other officials of the Southern Song, expressed displeasure with this occupation of the north and, even more, with the government's decision during 1141 and 1142 to sue for peace with the Jurchen rather than to fight for repossession of land that was rightfully Chinese. His opposition would put him at odds with some of the most powerful officials at the court.

For Zhu, occupation of the north did not represent just a political and territorial threat to the Chinese people but a moral and cultural threat as well. Zhu shared the Confucian assumption that, when the true Way prevailed in China, those who came into contact with it would recognize its moral power and readily submit to it. That the Jurchen had in fact not submitted, but rather had thoroughly overrun north China, establishing their own rule over what had been Chinese territory, indicated that the great Way—the Way that set the Chinese apart from all other people—had all but disappeared in the Central Plain, the heartland of Chinese civilization. The question posed by the "barbarian" subjugation of the north, then, was not simply how to strengthen China's military forces but how to reinvigorate a greatly weakened cultural and moral tradition.

If the Way was in decline, much of the responsibility, Zhu maintained, fell on the shoulders of the emperor and the ruling elite. In memorials to the emperor and letters to acquaintances he berated rulers and the bureaucracy for their moral turpitude. And his refusals to accept offers of official position were often cast in the form of protest against a corrupt and immoral government. But as severe as he found some the ills of government to be, the cure for them, he was convinced, remained simple (and very much in accord with traditional Confucian beliefs): the ruler merely had to rectify himself. Once the ruler became rectified, his moral charisma would inspire those around him to follow his

moral example. They, in turn, would move others to the same course, until the entire realm achieved moral perfection and the great Way again prevailed.[2]

The continued popularity of Buddhist teachings was further evidence for Zhu that the times were out of joint. The Confucian Way had been losing ground to Buddhism, especially to Chan teachings. Zhu himself knew that these teachings were seductive, because, after all, he himself had engaged in study of them for more than ten years, beginning at age fifteen or sixteen. His writings and conversations evince a clear fear of Buddhism's allure for people of the day: "Be they adults or children, officials, farmers, or merchants, men or women, all enter the Buddhists gates."[3] He once remarked that although families might have the wherewithal to resist Buddhist teachings for a generation or two, after the third generation they were sure to be converted to them.[4] What especially worried Zhu Xi was the appeal Buddhist teachings had to the intelligentsia.[5] These were the men he counted on to keep the Confucian Way alive and well. If they surrendered to the foreign creed, whom could he depend on? "In the world there are but a few great men, and they have all been drawn into Buddhism—how detrimental!"[6] So attractive had Buddhism become that even disciples of the great Cheng Yi and his brother Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) had turned to it.[7]

Zhu Xi was most critical of Buddhism where Confucians had long been critical. To his mind, Buddhism's search for personal enlightenment promoted self-interest and undermined the long-standing normative five relationships of Chinese society—ruler and subject, parent and child, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and friend and friend. Additionally, in its belief that things have no abiding nature and that the world as we tend to view it is illusory, Buddhism reduces everything to empty annihilation. For Zhu Xi, of course, the world as we see

it is indeed very real and the Confucian imperative is to serve it and improve it.

Furthermore, the so-called Confucian learning of the day was not the right sort. Many of Zhu's conversations with students read as harsh indictments of the contemporary learning pursued by Confucians. To him their learning was nothing like that promoted by the great sages of the past. According to Zhu, the sages had taken as the express aim of learning "to understand moral principle clearly in order that one might cultivate one's person, and thereafter extend that perfection to others."[8] Drawing on the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), Zhu described this sort of learning as "learning for one's own sake" (為己之學).[9] But contemporary students seemed to have abandoned this sort of learning completely as they scrambled to achieve far less noble goals: reputation for profound thinking, literary renown, and wealth and official rank. They were engaged in what Confucius, and now Zhu Xi, called "learning for the sake of others" (為人之學).

Ironically, the gravest contemporary threat to true learning was posed by the very system meant to ensure the propagation of Confucian learning: the civil service examinations. The prospects for worldly success that they offered—prestige, official status, power, and great wealth—diverted students from the real aim of learning, "learning for the sake of one's self." Zhu Xi would write, "Today's students covet wealth and office, not the Way and righteousness. They want to be become men of high position, not good men."[10] While he welcomed the examination system as a reasonable means of recruiting capable officials, he felt strongly that the intense competition it bred had created an atmosphere in which students gave imbalanced attention to "learning for the examination," all but abandoning "learning for one's own sake."

In Zhu Xi's eyes, then, the Way was in decline and customs had degenerated. The Confucian learning of the day, tilted so heavily toward examination and worldly success, had not only

failed to solve the problems confronting society but also had become a problem itself. Yet, as discouraged as he was about the state of learning he found around him, Zhu never lost faith that ultimately, through education and learning, the Way would be restored and the tradition revived.

To restore the Way in crisis Zhu Xi dove deeply into the writings of the sages and worthies of the past. His life from 1160 until his death was dedicated to reflecting on the Thirteen Classics that constituted the Confucian canon, searching them for the dominant threads that gave abiding meaning and coherence to the Confucian tradition. The reader will see, in the translation that follows, that Zhu frequently based his arguments on his explication of passages from the Classics. He was aided in his deep reflection on the canon by the teachings of four Northern Song thinkers, in particular—Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073), Zhang Zai 張載 (1020–1077), and the Cheng brothers, Hao and Yi. The writings and records of conversations of these near-contemporaries would be a constant source of inspiration for Zhu Xi and did much to color his own reflection on the meaning of the canon. Indeed, Zhu's philosophical system is often characterized as an elaborate synthesis of the Confucian tradition, from the teachings of the sages and worthies of distant antiquity through those of his Neo-Confucian predecessors in the Northern Song.

If resuscitation of Confucianism was the purpose behind his lifelong reflection, it has to be said that this reflection reformulated rather than resuscitated. The philosophical system that resulted from Zhu's immersive reflection on the past represents, in fact, a major reshaping of the tradition. Perhaps most significantly, Zhu Xi argued for a change in the Confucian school's "core curriculum." For more than a millennium, since the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), the so-called Five Classics—the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), the *Classic of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經), the

Classic of History (*Shujing* 書經), the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋)—had been *the* authoritative texts in the Confucian tradition, the texts to be read before all others. This was the set of texts to be mastered by those competing in the civil service examinations. As Zhu Xi reflected on the canon, however, he found greater inspiration elsewhere. To be sure, the Five Classics, in his treatment, remained canonical—he wrote commentaries and essays on all of them—but Zhu believed that they did not capture the central message of the Confucian school as well as other texts in the canon did, especially the *Greater Learning*, the *Analects*, the *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子), and the *Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸). The *Greater Learning* and the *Mean*, originally chapters in the *Book of Rites*, had by the late eleventh century begun circulating as independent texts. In 1190 Zhu Xi published these four texts as a collection for the first time, together with his interlinear commentaries on them, under the title the *Four Masters* (*Sizi* 四子). And in 1313, the Chinese state declared these four texts, known by then as the Four Books (*Sishu* 四書), together with Zhu Xi's commentaries, to be the core texts of the civil service examination. The Four Books thus displaced the Five Classics as the authoritative texts in the Confucian tradition; they retained their privileged status in Chinese society through the early years of the twentieth century.

This shift to the Four Books marks an "inward" shift in the Confucian tradition. Although the Five Classics and the Four Books share a fundamental moral, social, and political vision, the two collections emphasize different parts of that vision. Interested mainly in human moral behavior in practice, the Five Classics illustrate Confucian moral virtues using specific examples and lessons from history; lay out ideal institutions and methods of governance drawn from the past; describe in detail how one should conduct oneself in various, concrete life situations; and prescribe the ritual practices essential to the maintenance of a

well-ordered society. From these texts the ruler learns how to rule, the minister learns how to administer the realm, father and mother learn how to parent, children learn how to express filial devotion, older and younger learn how to show mutual respect, and friends learn how to be friends. The Four Books tend to be less historical and less concrete. Concerned more with the inner realm of human morality, they deal with abstract matters like the nature of human beings, the springs or inner source of their morality, their path to moral self-realization, and their relationship to the cosmos.[11]

That such texts in the canon should appeal to Confucian thinkers in the Song is not surprising. By the late Tang and early Song, Confucian scholars had been compelled to ask new kinds of questions—partly as a result of the sorts of metaphysical questions being raised by Daoist and Buddhist thinkers. No longer could they restrict their interests to human relationships and the sociopolitical realm. The prevailing intellectual concerns of the day required that they reflect on matters of human nature, the mind and self-realization, and the place of human beings in the universe. As Confucian thinkers like Zhu Xi looked to their canon for inspiration, they found in the Four Books in particular texts deeply resonant with their philosophical interests. And Zhu's early study of Buddhist teachings may well have made him more open and receptive to the "inward" message these texts offered.

If this curricular shift represents a reshaping of the Confucian tradition, so too does the change in philosophical language and terminology that accompanies it. Zhu Xi, drawing on his Northern Song predecessors, places the moral predicament human beings face in a language of metaphysics that little resembles the language of classical Confucian thinkers like Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi. But that language would not be unfamiliar to Song intellectuals, who had begun to analyze and

describe the world around them—and the moral mission of human beings in it—in terms of *li* 理, "principle," and *qi* 氣, "psychophysical stuff."

Zhu explains that all things and affairs in the universe are possessed of principle, which he defines as both the reason why a thing is as it is and the rule to which a thing should conform. In human beings, this principle is identical to their originally good nature. The originally good nature, as the principle of humanity, is the same in all people. But every thing and every person is also born with an endowment of psychophysical stuff, the quantity and quality of which differs from one thing and one person to the other. Some stuff is purer than others, some clearer, some less dense, some less turbid, and so on. This endowment of psychophysical stuff accounts for individuation in things and in people. And not just physical individuation, but mental and moral as well. Our particular endowment of psychophysical stuff, depending on its clarity, density, and so forth, can permit our principle—which is one with our benevolent human nature—to become manifest. Or, it can obscure principle, preventing it from becoming manifest. The good news, in Zhu's understanding, is that this endowment of psychophysical stuff can be transformed and refined, enabling us in the end to give realization to our human nature and goodness within. This is where the self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身) process comes in. By investigating things (*gewu* 格物) and the principle in them—a crucial process in Zhu's program of self-cultivation—human beings can come to understand principle better, and thereby achieve moral perfection.

Arguably, it was by drawing on a language both more contemporary and more meaningful to his Song audience that Zhu was able to make the venerable but stagnant Confucian tradition contemporary and meaningful again. It should be emphasized, though, that by showing the metaphysical possibilities of the long normative texts in the Chinese tradition, Zhu at the same time

was giving added—and needed—legitimacy to the newly developing Song system of *li* and *qi* metaphysics. By integrating this metaphysics into his interpretation of the Classics, he brought new life to Confucianism, but he also lent the new metaphysical thinking the authority of the Confucian tradition.

To spread the Way, Zhu wrote prolifically. His most significant and influential writings were his commentaries on each of the Four Books, known together as the *Collected Commentaries on the Four Books* (*Sishu jizhu* 四書集注). It was largely owing to the powerful effect of these interlinear commentaries that the Four Books gained the attention they did and supplanted the Five Classics as the core texts in the tradition. But while elevating the Four Books, Zhu's admiration for the Five Classics never waned. He continued his study of them throughout his life and wrote commentaries on all of them, with the exception of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. He also wrote a commentary on the *Classic on Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝經).

History, too, was important. In Zhu's view, it documented the Way in operation. He produced several historical works, one on famous statesmen of the Northern Song period, one on the development of the Cheng brothers' school of Neo-Confucianism, and one a synopsis of the greatest historical work of the Song, Sima Guang's 司馬光 (1019–1086) monumental *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* (*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑).[12]

And, as part of his mission to transmit the Way, he was also eager to promote the teachings of his predecessors and their Song understanding of the Confucian tradition. He wrote commentaries on some of the most influential works of the Northern Song, and, in particular, Zhou Dunyi's *Diagram of the Great Ultimate* (*Taiji tushuo* 太極圖說) and Zhang Zai's *Western Inscription* (*Ximing* 西銘).[13] With his friend and colleague Lü Zuqian, he compiled an anthology of comments, 622 in all, by those predecessors he most admired—Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, Cheng Hao, and Cheng

Yi—to make their ideas, scattered about in voluminous writings and conversations, as accessible to students as possible. This volume, *Reflection on Things at Hand* (*Jinsi lu* 近思錄), and Zhu's frequently professed admiration for these four men, ensured that history would regard them as Zhu Xi's great intellectual forebears. Finally, he compiled editions of the Cheng brothers' conversations and the conversations of Xie Liangzuo 謝良佐 (1050–1103), a renowned disciple of the Chengs.[14]

Zhu Xi's letters, essays, poetry, postscripts, eulogies, and other prose works, written throughout his life, are found in the one hundred chapters of the *Collected Works of Zhu Xi* (*Zhu Xi ji* 朱熹). All of these texts showcase Zhu the scholar, writer, and editor. The collection titled *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu* (*Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類) showcases Zhu the teacher. Compiled and edited by Li Jingde 黎靖德 (fl. 1263) in 1270, seventy years after Zhu's death, it comprises 140 chapters of sayings and conversations with his pupils in the period from 1170 to 1200. In these conversations Zhu Xi explains, elaborates, clarifies, revises, and defends his central philosophical teachings; here he reflects widely on the sweep of the Confucian tradition, piecing together from his deep understanding of it a renewed Confucianism he hoped would ensure the Way's transmission well into the future. Remarks made to students in teaching point them—and us—to where he finds the Classics especially inspirational and relevant to the concerns of the day, enabling us to understand better where and how the canonical Confucian texts and his evolving philosophical ideals inform and enrich each other. In making the case to students for the superiority of his philosophical beliefs, he allows the reader today to observe him in ongoing debate with other important thinkers of his day. For all these reasons, the *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu* is the main source for this present book.

The *Classified Conversations* is essential reading for anyone interested in Zhu Xi's thought. It is also lively reading, as we get

to observe Zhu in the act of weaving together from earlier strands of the Chinese tradition—the Confucian Classics, especially the Four Books and Five Classics, the writings of the great early Confucians, the works of Confucians since the ninth century like Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, Cheng Hao, and Cheng Yi, and even Daoist and Buddhist texts—a philosophical system whose authority would now be dominant in China through the early years of the twentieth century.