

The Three Steps of Social Development

The complete text of the *Great Learning* has the following paragraph at its conclusion: “From the Son of Heaven [the emperor] down to the common people, they all as one take cultivating the person to be the root. How could it be that the root be disturbed and yet have the branch remain undisturbed? Never should the important be treated as trivial; never should the trivial be treated as important.” Zhu Xi explained that the word “important” in this final sentence should refer to the “family.” The preceding cultivation of the person was then linked directly to the social identity and influence of a given person in the family and tied to the health of the family. Because all people in the Confucian state should practice the first five steps of personal cultivation, and because their luminous virtue would then be visible in their lives, everyone would treat his kinsmen as kinsmen, everyone would treat his elders as elders — so that throughout the empire all would be tranquil.

Step Six: Regulate the Family

The advanced kind of empathy called “similarity in kind” is precisely the basis on which cultivation of self can also become regulation of the family. Zhu argued that the love of a parent could be extended to all people, and he illustrated the point using the sixth of the Eight Steps: “When he understands how to be humane to people, he will extend this feeling, on the basis of similarity in kind, to loving all things, for being humane to all people and loving all things are similar in kind. . . . For example, cultivation of the person will extend to regulation of the family; regulation of the family will extend to ordering the state. It is just one completed step, then another step.”¹ Clearly Zhu’s notion of regulating the family is something other than ruling with an iron fist. What is the connection between “regulating” and “loving”?

Confucius himself was once asked rather insistently to define how an exemplary person (*junzi*) would cultivate himself.

“He cultivated himself so as to become fully attentive,” was his answer.

But the student continued: “This and nothing more?”

Confucius then added, “He cultivates himself so as to ease the lot of others.”

“This and nothing more?” was the student’s response a second time.

Finally Confucius ventured, “He cultivates himself so as to ease the lot of all people. Even [the legendary] Yao and Shun would have found this difficult.” (*Analects* 14.42)

For Confucius the notion of a morally exemplary person presumed a laudable level of self-cultivation, and the extension of one’s inherently relational self was natural as self-cultivation developed.

It is from one’s affection for one’s parents that self-cultivation initially extends one’s love and respect to older siblings and to all other family members. Because these family connections are reciprocal, respect for others builds one’s self-respect. Neo-Confucian educators insisted that the interrelationship between parent and child should be consciously acknowledged as the source of mutual respect in all relationships. Citing the *Record of Rites* as excerpted in his *Elementary Learning*, Zhu made the following point: “There is nothing the exemplary person does not reverence. And reverence for the self or person is the greatest of all. He is in his person a branch of his parents — can any son not have this self-respect? If he is not able to respect his own person he is wounding his parents.”² The carefully calibrated terms of address in Chinese society for designating the variety of uncles and aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces, and other descendents — all terms of respect that are stronger the closer the blood distance from oneself — naturally socialized a young person into the graded levels of loving respect that orders or regulates family relationships.

In his *Elementary Learning* manual Zhu also chose a poignant quotation from the Han dynasty *Classic of Family Reverence* when discussing parents: “Parents gave one life; no bond could be stronger. They watch over their child with utmost care; no love could be greater.

Therefore to love others without first loving one's parents is to act against virtue. To reverence other men without first reverencing one's parents is to act against propriety."³ In addition, Zhu recommended to students certain sections of *The Classic of Odes* as a valuable resource in beginning self-cultivation, because those sections dealt with matters of personal cultivation and regulation of the family.

Mencius understood what evolutionary biology now confirms—that humans are born with the predisposition to acts of reciprocal altruism among kin. The Neo-Confucians accepted the family as the structural core of social organization, and their rituals reinforce kinship categories. More supernatural beliefs remained diffused, with no independent personnel and organization of their own, but they served to add awesome power to the secular social institutions into which they were diffused. Ancestor worship, for example, accompanied filial piety, and the souls of departed ancestors were allowed to play a role in the perpetuation of the family. The social networks like the community compacts promoted by Neo-Confucians were understood to be based upon the family and to provide services and protection in local society below the perimeter of state power.

Zhou Dunyi, one of the Five Masters of the Northern Song and Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian predecessor, argued that creating harmony in an extended family was actually more difficult than governing any political entity. Still, Zhou stated, it is crucial to see that one is an extension of the other: "In order to see how a ruler governs his empire, we observe the government of his family. In order to see how he governs his family, we observe how he governs himself. To be correct in one's person means to be sincere in one's heart" (*Reflections* VIII.1). The logic is a chain analogy or a sorites: the heart is to the person as the person is to the family as the family is to the empire. Song-period Neo-Confucians anticipated that the model provided by rulers would be emulated by the ruled. This is the logic of the *Great Learning* text.

In general, the elders in traditional China were entrusted with the responsibility to oversee communal ceremonies that preserved common social norms. Young people were exposed to teachers and other mentors outside the family who confirmed the worthwhile values taught at home. Elders oversaw life-cycle rituals that would inform the unavoidable transitions along the way from youth to old age. Ide-

ally, elders, as preservers of tradition, were both personal models and repositories of wisdom regarding what acting humanely with consistency would be like.

In the Song period, girls commonly underwent a coming-of-age initiation called pinning, when they were engaged to marry. This ceremony commonly occurred by age fifteen, although boys came of age in a capping ceremony somewhere between ages fifteen and twenty. Zhu outlined a model of both ceremonies in his manual, *Family Rituals*.

In the girl's case, at dawn on the day of the pinning ceremony the young girl combed her hair into a topknot, then called on her elders. Many relatives and elders assembled, and the mother of the girl acted as the presiding female for the pinning ceremony. Some three days before the ceremony, the mother had selected a female relative who was considered wise and decorous to serve as a sponsor for the pinning of the girl. The initiate put her hair in two topknots for the ceremony itself and wore a gown, then stood facing south in a room off the main hall. When the sponsor arrived, the mother invited her to enter the hall where the ceremony took place. As a sign of her formal initiation into adulthood, the sponsor would beckon to the initiate to go to a mat on the floor, then placed a cap on the initiate's head and inserted a pin in her hair. The initiate then went back to the side room to don a jacket that had been prepared by the family. At that point the girl was told ceremonially some variation of the following by the sponsor: "On an excellent day of an auspicious month, you wear head gear for the first time. Set aside your childish ideas and comply with the virtues of womanhood. Then your years will be blessed, and your fortune will be great." The initiate then offered wine in ritual sacrifice, at which point the sponsor formally gave the initiate her adult name. After the naming ceremony the sponsor was entertained as an honored guest of the girl's family.

For a young man's initiation into adulthood, as Zhu recommended it, a presiding man who was probably the head of the family reported the event to an offering hall three days before the ceremony and then personally invited a prominent male friend well versed in ritual to be the sponsor at the ritual. The sponsor then ceremonially recited the same words used in a girl's pinning ceremony to the male initiate regarding the setting aside of childish ideas and complying, in the boy's case, with the virtues of manhood. But new garments, beginning with

a cap, were put on in three ceremonial kneelings that concluded with the young man donning either an official's or a scholar's robes. The sponsor continued,

Sponsor [praying]: The fine wine is pure. The excellent offerings have superior flavors. Receive them with a bow and offer them in sacrifice to affirm your good fortune. May you receive Heaven's blessings and longevity.

[The initiate bows twice and receives a bow in response from the sponsor. The young man then kneels. He offers wine in sacrifice, stands, and kneels in the opposite direction. He bows twice facing south, and the sponsor bows in reply. Finally, a bow from the initiate to an assistant in the ceremony is answered by a bow from the assistant.]

Sponsor: The ceremony is now completed. On this auspicious day of this excellent month, I pronounce your adult name (*zi*). May this name be greatly honored, may you be a gentleman and gain eminence, act correctly, and achieve greatness. Preserve forever what you are receiving.

[The sponsor then calls him by the term of address indicating his sibling order in his family.]

Initiate: Although I, [so-and-so], am not quick, I dare but reverently obey your instructions morning and evening.⁴

Following the ceremony, the newly initiated man went out in public to be presented to his father's friends and local elders.

Such rituals for both young men and women were reciprocal in the sense that the older generation acknowledged that the young initiates would thereafter be treated as adults and assume adult responsibilities. For the initiated, their adult status meant that they would observe the basic Confucian loyalties and reverence in relationships: the filial duties of a son or daughter, the authority of his or her older siblings, his or her loyalty as a subject under the ruling officials, and his or her recognition of the veneration required of all persons of the older generation. These were foundational Confucian virtues, and each initiate acknowledged them as he or she entered adult society through the capping or pinning ceremonies.

Step Seven: Order the State

Classical Confucian texts addressed how the extended family could become a natural basis for social and political order. The *Mean* stated,

If one cultivates one's person, the Way will be established therefrom; if one esteems those of superior character, there will be no confusion; if one treats one's kin as kin, one's many uncles and brothers will harbor no ill will; if one respects the high ministers, there will be no deception; if one is inclusive of the whole assembly of ministers, the scholar-officials will repay one's courtesies two-fold; if one treats the common people as one's children, the various clans will be much encouraged; if one attracts the various artisans, [the] materials and the skills needed to use them will be sufficient; if one is tolerant of those from afar, people from distant quarters will flock to one; if one cherishes the various nobles, the world will hold one in awe. (Chapter 20)

Although it was common to accept these values in principle, Neo-Confucians complained that society's leaders did not implement these ideas in practice. The impediment to implementation often originated with corrupt power brokers at the village level. The equity of taxation, for example, was frequently compromised by landlords who falsified the correct registration of the boundaries of their fields. Officials at the provincial or prefectural level had to be ever vigilant to prevent malfeasance. Zhu Xi had firsthand experience as a local official and attributed public misconduct to personal failings: "The reason why the world's affairs are never completed is simply because we suffer from being lazy and selfish. Consider [the ancient practice of] marking boundaries." Zhu knew that classical Confucians such as Mencius had already addressed this critical point about the equity of land taxation when the latter gave advice to a duke: "Now benevolent government must begin with setting field boundaries. If the field boundaries are not straightly set, the well fields will not be equal, and the grain income will not be even. For this reason cruel rulers and corrupt officials are necessarily lax about setting the field boundaries" (*Mencius* III.A.3). Zhu continued, "If it is not done, how can we be completely free of corruption. Still, if there are ten parts corruption we must get rid of nine parts. . . . But today people would rather suffer the ten parts

of corruption. . . . Clearly [we live in] this world, and [in] this country, yet no one is willing to look on it as they do their own family.”⁵

The Neo-Confucian idea of a compact made by several families to create a community organization on a scale about the size of a hamlet or a small clan village was one innovation in the traditional social structure designed to meet the difficulties in extending moral conduct beyond the family. Such a community organization would be independent of the official power of the state and could establish a mutual agreement to promote an ordered ritual framework beyond each family’s internal kinship organization. Zhu drew from existing precedents of extended-family compacts to create a model that was voluntary and appealed to the families’ self-interests, largely because it added security and diminished some causes of social and economic strife.

The major characteristic of the community compact Zhu promoted was a ritual communal practice joined to an ethical code. Ritual took the form of a monthly meal together, including enjoyable activities after the meal; the code of ethics consisted of four general injunctions that all members were to follow. The first injunction was to admonish each other to behave virtuously — including not evading taxes; the second was to correct each other’s (unspecified) wrongs; the third was to agree to be reverent and follow established customs in public interactions with one another; and finally, the families were to assist one another in times of illness or crisis. In addition, Zhu’s original draft of the Community Compact also singled out six precepts for moral behavior that were more specific. Variations of this agreement appear in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties that followed.

During the early fourteenth century, for example, the Ming dynasty’s peasant-monk founder and first emperor, Ming Taizu, added an idea to the formulation of compacts that allowed the transmission of the essential principles of Zhu’s community covenant, including the six initial precepts, to the nonliterate majority. The privileges of membership would then be open to a more inclusive and egalitarian population than just the intelligentsia. The first emperor of the Ming promoted the following.

In each village and *li* [local grouping of families] a bell with a wooden clapper shall be prepared. Old persons, disabled persons unable to function normally, or blind persons shall be selected and

guided by children to walk through the *li* holding the bell. If there are no such persons in the *li*, then they shall be selected from other *li*. Let them shout loudly so that everyone can hear, urging people to do good and not violate the law. Their message is: "Be filial to your parents, respect elders and superiors, live in harmony with neighbors, instruct and discipline children and grandchildren, be content with your occupation, commit no wrongful acts."⁶

That last sentence lists the Six Precepts from Zhu Xi's original Community Compact. Socially motivated Neo-Confucians such as Wang Yangming and his reform-minded followers during and following the Ming period continued to foster community compacts as one aspect of the transition between step six of the Eight Steps, regulating the family, and step seven, the order of the state, as outlined in the *Great Learning*.

However, a broad adoption of the compact model did not take effect as hoped. The increasingly despotic power of the Ming and then Qing emperorships forced the community compacts slowly into the service of state power. By the Qing takeover in the 1600s, the compact had been co-opted into formal public meetings that addressed only the standards of harmonious social interaction that the ruling Manchu conquerors expected from a docile populace. Local notables spoke in villages on the first and fifteenth of each month, publicly stating ten new precepts added to Zhu Xi's original six, as a reminder to the people that the state demanded their obedience. This sixteen-provision Sacred Edict of the Emperor of the Qing instructed citizens to be moral, frugal, and diligent, to resolve their differences in a civil way without litigation, and to cooperate for mutual protection. Such a self-serving and didactic series of lectures was a far cry from the voluntaristic community organizations that Zhu had promoted, which were antithetical to indoctrination. Transformed from its original structure into a means of institutional enforcement of government rules, these lectures from the state were no longer community compacts developing out of bloodline family organizations in local hamlets.

In addition to voluntary compacts, other attempts were made to use Neo-Confucian teaching to order the state. In the 750 years of Confucian society preceding the fall of the last dynasty in 1911, semi-private academies of higher education emerged to become influential places

to study the classics. The general statement of moral and intellectual goals written by Zhu Xi for his White Deer Grotto Academy (discussed in chapter 2) became the template for a multitude of later academies all the way through the nineteenth century. Incoming students at each of these semi-private schools usually recopied for themselves these Neo-Confucian precepts of self-cultivation and social interaction so that they would have their own copies. The Neo-Confucian aim of learning as self-development prevailed in the curriculum, but the state did not neglect its interests either.

Both state bureaucrats and Neo-Confucian scholars were interested in promoting moral order in society, but the state's interest in Confucianism usually involved power and maintaining order, which involved controlling behavior, and which commonly recognized ethical norms helped to accomplish. From the official bureaucracy's point of view, order in society was all the clearer if it meant moral order. Many major academies were officially funded by the state during most of the final two dynasties, and those official academies were often located in centers of administration such as provincial capitals. Many other academies, however, were quasi-public, as local literati contributions were important in their budgets. Confucian academies were designed to be character-building institutions, but their potential for organized dissent made officials interested in monitoring them. And county magistrates had to maintain order.

The lowest-level administrator in most Chinese dynasties was the county magistrate, and it was common for him to be responsible for hundreds of villages in his county. (In the 1600s the average county population was around three hundred thousand.) To county magistrates, the value of a Confucian education in promoting social order was reflected in the manuals written for their use. *A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence: A Manual for Local Magistrates in Seventeenth-Century China* is a seventeenth-century example.

In former times department and district magistrates considered the promotion of education and economic welfare their prime responsibility. Tax collection was next in importance, followed by the administration of Justice. If education is neglected, the people will not know the principles of filial piety, brotherly love, propriety, and virtue, and all manner of antisocial and disruptive behavior

will occur. When economic welfare is overlooked, the people will find it hard to support their families and will worry about having to leave their native place to make a living elsewhere. Under such circumstances, no amount of flogging can compel them to pay their taxes. The meek will suffer in silence, while the strong will take a chance and rebel. It is obvious, therefore, that the promotion of education and economic welfare should be the first priority in local administration.⁷

Attempts to foster moral order in the state took on myriad forms, including community compacts, the role of humane elders in life-cycle rituals, and socialization of the Confucian elite in quasi-public academies. In many periods these organizations and customs were, unfortunately, manipulated to serve the more immediate needs of ruling bureaucrats. All, however, had character-building dimensions that Neo-Confucians supported. As social activists in the literate class, Neo-Confucians actively shaped local communities, kept them decentralized, and volunteered to play leadership roles in these communities.

Step Eight: Bring Peace to All

The elimination of internal strife and disunity in government is the focus of the final step in the Eight-Step program. One passage in the *Classic of Documents* often cited for this purpose criticizes high officials who were jealous of talented people and who therefore hesitated to allow their advancement: "Let me have but one minister, sincere and devoted . . . who, upon finding sage-like men, loves them in his heart more than his speech expresses, truly showing himself able to accept them."⁸ This is the crux of employing self-cultivation in service to the state: to bring about peace through promoting humane civil servants. Another guideline referred to an official who learned from what he had despised when he was a subordinate. As the *Great Learning* commentator Zengzi put it, rather simply, "In leading those behind you, do not practice what you hate in those ahead of you."⁹

A good monarch was easy to describe; the *Classic of Odes* provides the text: "What the people love he loves; what the people hate he hates. This is called being father and mother to the people."¹⁰ Zhang Zai took up this advice in *Reflections on Things at Hand*.

Please tell the officers at court: It is not enough to remonstrate with a ruler for the wrong employment of ministers or to blame him for the mistakes in government. If they can enable their ruler to love the people in the world as his infants, the virtue of his rule will be daily renewed, people presented to serve the government will be talented scholars, the way of ancient kings and emperors will be fulfilled without going astray, and both the learning of the way and the methods of government will be achieved without a divided mind. (VIII.25)

The compassion of a sage-like ruler would, ideally, reach down through all levels of the social hierarchy to the young and even orphans—in fact, to anyone not fully able to take care of him or herself. Such a ruler would also respect the elders in his family, and thus his example of filial piety would serve as a model for how elders throughout the society should be respected. To the extent that this imperial example is emulated, then, the aged population, much like orphans, would be cared for by the rest of society. Examples of this conduct in the imperial family were noticed and pointed out by officials, and Confucian analysts assumed that the reputation of such a benevolent ruler would eventually spread throughout that state. A truly compassionate monarch would not think of neglecting his own family's support, and therefore, by extension, neither would he neglect the economic well-being of the entire populace in his state—who should be conceived as related to the monarch like children to a parent. The acquisitive monarch, on the other hand, would watch idly as unity in his state, like a family in disarray, dissolved into selfishness. As Zengzi's commentary on the *Great Learning* perceptively noted, "When wealth is gathered [plundered] the people disperse; when wealth is dispersed the people gather [in trusting loyalty]."¹¹ The Neo-Confucians reasserted the same point with even broader implications.

Cheng Hao once had an audience with the emperor who reigned from 1068 to 1085 CE and minced no words with him: "To exercise one's selfish mind and to depend on a partial application of humanity and righteousness is the way of the despot. . . . If one pretends to be humane and righteous . . . one becomes [despite appearances] despotic. The two ways are quite different. One must clearly examine their starting point." The opposite path, Cheng pointed out, had international

implications. "If Your Majesty will examine the words of ancient sages, realize that the [legendary] Way of Yao and Shun is all complete in yourself, examine yourself and be sincere, and extend this to reach all the four seas [which surround China], the next ten thousand generations will be very fortunate indeed" (*Reflections* VIII.2).

Neo-Confucians of the Song era and later believed that if a unified state emanated force of character, the surrounding peoples would treat it with trust, and no strife would be easily visited on that state. The argument presumed that the truly humane leader would naturally generate peaceful relationships with others. The tranquility of a state, according to this view, depended on the quality of the humane character emanating from its government. The humane behavior traits of a ruler who was considerate were assumed to generate friends rather than enemies, to nourish the well-being of the people, and thereby to sustain the ruler as well as his subjects.

For Zhu Xi the final three steps in the Eight-Step program encompassed the social phase. Zhu felt that these three steps implemented the dictum from the first sentence of the *Great Learning* that says "renewing the people" is a cardinal component of true learning. This idea of renewal is illustrated in the commentary on the section attributed to Zengzi, which cites passages from the *Classic of Documents* and the *Classic of Odes*. Zhu interpreted these historical references as proof of the successful self-cultivation of former kings that allowed them both victory over bad rivals and the ability to extend their virtue to the people.