

Chinese Conceptions of the Self

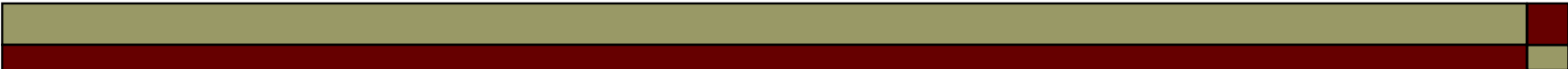
Lecture 8: The Self in Neo-Confucianism

Zhu Xi (Chu His) 朱熹 (1130-1200)



- Main Neo-Confucian thinker
- Systematized work of earlier thinkers
- Commentator of the Four Books (*Mencius*, *Analects*, *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*)

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- “The primary purpose of Neo-Confucian learning is ‘for the sake of one’s self’ (*wei-chi*). One learns to be human not to please others or to conform to an external standard of conduct. Indeed, “learning to be human” (*hsüeh tso-jen*) is a spontaneous, autonomous, fully conscious, and totally committed intentional act, an act of self-realization.” (Tu Wei-ming 1985: 131).
 - *Analects* 14.24: “The Master said, In the past men learned for themselves; now men learn for others.”
 - → purpose of acquiring a deep understanding of the self features in writings of all major Neo-Confucian thinkers

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- Neo-Confucian self is an ‘open system’, not private possession of an individual
 - Neo-Confucianism offers
 - an ontological justification for personal cultivation
 - an existential description of how to pursue self-cultivation
 - “*ethicoreligious*”: ethically based on human-relatedness and religiosity of quest for personal knowledge (through education)

Neo-Confucian metaphysics and ontology

- ❑ Metaphysical and ontological vision complements moral philosophy
- ❑ Inseparability of human nature and ontological reality (issue of *is* and *ought*)
- ❑ Metaphysical grounding of sagehood
- ❑ Example: Zhou Dunyi on “sincerity” (*cheng* 誠)

“It [Sincerity] is the foundation of the Five Constant Virtues (humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness) and the source of all activities. When tranquil, it is in the state of non-being, and when active, it is in the state of being. It is perfectly correct and clearly penetrating. Without sincerity, the Five Constant Virtues and all activities will be wrong. They will be depraved and obstructed.”

Yin and yang are represented by broken and solid lines: yin is broken (--) and yang is solid (—). Different constructions of three yin and yang lines lead to **eight trigrams** (八卦) namely, Qian (乾), Dui (兌), Li (離), Zhen (震), Xun (巽), Kan (坎), Gen (艮), Kun (坤).

The different combinations of the two trigrams lead to 64 hexagrams.

The following table numbers the hexagrams in King Wen order.

1 乾 (qián)	2 坤 (kūn)	3 屯 (zhūn)	4 蒙 (méng)	5 需 (xū)	6 訟 (sòng)	7 師 (shī)	8 比 (bǐ)
9 小畜 (xiǎo chù)	10 履 (lǚ)	11 泰 (tài)	12 否 (pǐ)	13 同人 (tóng rén)	14 大有 (dà yǒu)	15 謙 (qiān)	16 豫 (yù)
17 隨 (suí)	18 蠱 (gǔ)	19 臨 (lín)	20 觀 (guān)	21 噬嗑 (shì kè)	22 賁 (bì)	23 剝 (bō)	24 復 (fù)
25 無妄 (wú wàng)	26 大畜 (dà chù)	27 頤 (yí)	28 大過 (dà guò)	29 坎 (kǎn)	30 離 (lí)	31 咸 (xián)	32 恆 (héng)
33 遁 (dùn)	34 大壯 (dà zhuàng)	35 晉 (jìn)	36 明夷 (míng yí)	37 家人 (jiā rén)	38 睽 (kuí)	39 蹇 (jiǎn)	40 解 (xiè)
41 損 (sǔn)	42 益 (yì)	43 夬 (guài)	44 姤 (gòu)	45 萃 (cuì)	46 升 (shēng)	47 困 (kùn)	48 井 (jǐng)
49 革 (gé)	50 鼎 (tǐng)	51 震 (zhèn)	52 艮 (gèn)	53 漸 (jiàn)	54 歸妹 (guī mèi)	55 豐 (fēng)	56 旅 (lǚ)
57 巽 (xùn)	58 兌 (duì)	59 渙 (huàn)	60 節 (jié)	61 中孚 (zhōng fú)	62 小過 (xiǎo guò)	63 既濟 (jì jì)	64 未濟 (wèi jì)

八卦 Bāguà—The eight trigrams (Top bar is least significant binary digit)								
Trigram lines	乾 Qián	兌 Dui	離 Lǐ	震 Zhèn	巽 Xùn	坎 Kǎn	艮 Gèn	坤 Kūn
	111	110	101	100	011	010	001	000

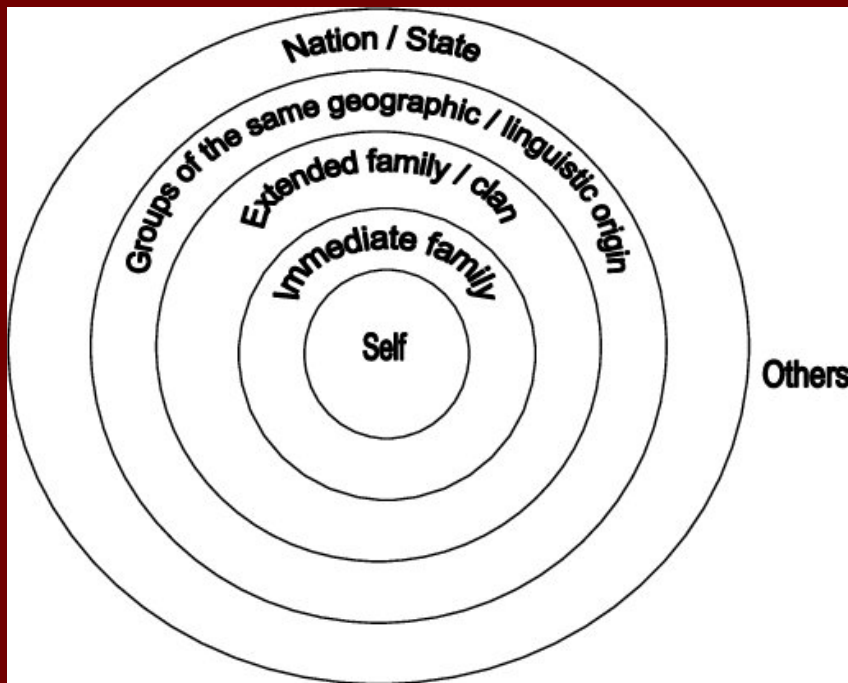
“The universe can be investigated through principles but not through corporeal forms. How can it be investigated through external observation?”

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- Human beings, like all other beings, are endowed with the reality known as *li* 理, ‘principle’ → humans are integral part of the *chain of being* (Heaven, Earth, myriad things)
 - Mind (*xin*) has the capacity ‘to embody’ (*ti* 體) the cosmos in conscience and consciousness → unlimited sensitivity of the mind accords humans godlike creativity
 - Being religious in Confucianism means being engaged in ultimate self-transformation as a communal act

Enlargement of the self

- Aim: the mind embraces Heaven, Earth and all things
- Bring to fruition the capacity of the mind to embody the cosmos
- Self as open system and dynamic process
- Centre of relationships
- Self is ethicoreligious idea
- Self is a lived reality → time and space provide an inalienable context for self-transformation → humans are inevitably contextualised → limitation but also environment for growth and source of creativity
- BUT: self in Neo-Confucianism cannot be determined by social roles
- Possibility to overcome one's structural limitations; the self is situated in sociality, but not enclosed or even enslaved; situations are always changing.

Enlargement of the Self



- The self is not a static structure but a dynamic process.
- Self is ethicoreligious idea
- Self-transformation is characterised by structural limitation (centrality of primordial ties) and procedural freedom (understood as dynamism)
- Context dependency needs to be actively acknowledged
→ source of nourishment and growth

“When the personal life (*shen*) is cultivated, the family (*jia*) will be regulated; when the family is regulated, the state (*guo*) will be in order; and when the state is in order, there will be peace throughout the world (*tianxia*).” (*The Great Learning*)

Deepening of the Self

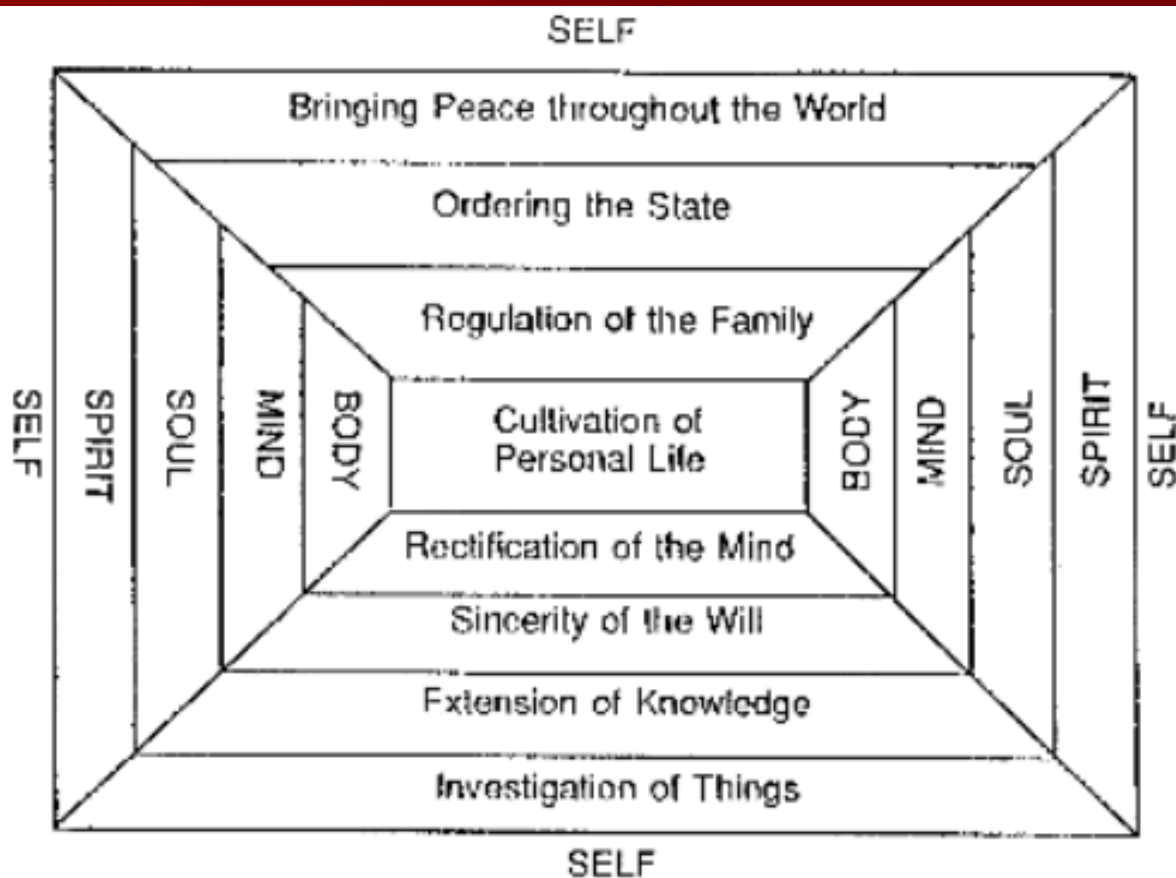


Figure 2.
The Deepening Process of the Self

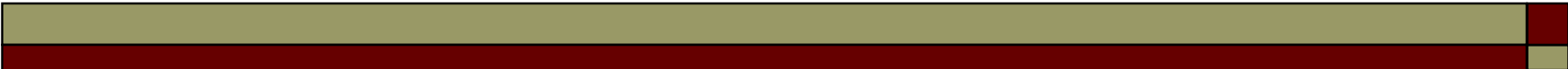
Transcendence

- ❑ Idea of going beyond the usual limits of one's existential self to become true to one's Heavenly endowed nature entails transcending one's experience here and now
- ❑ Self-transformation is predicated on the transcendent vision that we can be infinitely better than we actually are
- ❑ Social relations can be seen as only instrumentally important but lacking ultimacy
- ❑ Confucian religiosity: twofold process of deepening one's subjectivity and unlimited broadening of one's sensitivity

Paradoxes

- ❑ Cultivation of self involves mastering the self
- ❑ To realise the self's original nature, the self-centred structure needs to be transformed; we must work through families, communities to realise our self (while at the same time avoiding nepotism, parochialism, nationalism)
- ❑ To deepen one's subjectivity requires elimination of selfish and egoistic desire

“Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.” (Zhang Zai, *Western Inscription*)

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- ❑ *li yi fen shu* 理一分數 “principle is one but its particularizations are many”
 - ❑ Not undifferentiated “universal love”
 - ❑ Moral effort needs concrete analysis of a particular given situation
 - ❑ Idea of reciprocity, not one-dimensional dependency in relationships

Personality and self-cultivation

- An achieved state of moral excellence
- Natural disposition is referred to as *qi zhi* (氣質 (vital energy and raw stuff → physical nature → body); body is where deepest spirituality dwells
- Nature of *yi li* 義理, “rightness and principle”
- Human beings primarily defined by their “sensitivity”, only then by their rationality, volition, or intelligence → **experiential connection with another human being**