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Comparison of Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming on *chengyi* 誠意 and *zhengxin* 正心

1. Introduction

Both terms are derived from *The Great Learning*. This canonical text was composed by Zisi, the grandson of Confucius. At the beginning, *The Great Learning* is a chapter of *The Book of Rites*. However Zhu Xi had created *Commentaries on the Four Books with Annotations on the Chapters and Sentences*, *The Great Learning* came to occupy a central position within Confucian thought. Due to Emperor Ren of Yuan strong emphasis on Zhu Xi's commentaries on the Four Books, it as official examination materials for the imperial civil service examination.¹ Therefore, Zhu Xi's text had a great influence. As the influence grew, numerous scholars offered different interpretations and perspectives on the significance of the text. For example, there are some different interpretations about *chengyi* and *zhengxin* on the Song Neo-Confucianism scholar Zhu Xi and the Ming philosopher of the School of Mind, Wang Yangming. This article seeks to explore the continuities and divergences between Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming in their interpretations of *chengyi* and *zhengxin*, also there is a need for further investigation into what influenced them to hold differing views regarding these two terms.

2. Introduction to the background and characters

The Middle Tang Dynasty, as Buddhism came to China and Taoism became prevailing theory. The position of Confucianism has been challenged by these two disciplines. Meanwhile, the distinctions among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are blurred. Han Yu developed the Doctrine of Daoist Orthodoxy in his article 'The Original Way' 原道.²

¹ Chinese Text Project, Yuanshi 元史<<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=314915#p8>> [accessed 23 June 2025] The original text : 「用朱氏章句集註。其義理精明，文辭典雅者為中選。」 Using Zhu Xi's Collected Annotations as exam material, one can clearly understand the principles inside. The texts use classical allusions skillfully, and the writing style is elegant, not vulgar. Translated by myself.

² Chinese Text Project, Yuandao 原道<<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=453403#p3>> [accessed 23 June 2025] The original text : 「軻之死，不得其傳焉。」 After Mencius died, no one can inherit and continue the

On the other hand, Kong Yingda and other scholars jointly compiled the *Wujing Zhengyi* 五經正義. Many scholars mainly concentrate on exegesis and evidential scholarship. There is little emphasis on the interpretation of the underlying ethical concepts in classics. This has been mentioned in Huang Zongxi's *Song-Yuan Xue An* 宋元學案 (Studies on Song and Yuan Learning)³ As The material of *Wujing Zhengyi* is voluminous, it inhibits cultural propagation and progress. Based on this background, this laid the foundation for the development of Neo-Confucianism in the Song dynasty and the simplification from the Five Classics to the Four Books. Zhu Xi is a synthesizing scholar in Song dynasty. He combined the perspective of Confucius, Mencius and scholars of New Confucianism in the Northern Song Dynasty, he was especially aligned with the philosophical stance of the Cheng brothers. Until Ming Dynasty, the shortcomings of Zhu Xi's knowledge are gradually revealed. People study Zhu Xi's text just for imperial examination so their actions run counter to Zhu Xi's doctrines. His Neo-Confucianism thought turned into rigid doctrine gradually.⁴ At that time, when Wang Yangming was twenty-one years old, he implemented Zhu Xi's ideas used seven days in a row, but he did not succeed. Wang Yangming followed and further developed the thought of Lu Jiuyuan who is creator of The School of Mind.

3. Comparison on *chengyi* and *zhengxin* in two scholars

This paragraph examines the original definitions and what are their respective meanings in the perspectives of two different scholars.

3.1 The original definitions of *chengyi* and *zhengxin*

In *Shuowen jiezi*, the meaning of *cheng* 誠 is to speak with sincerity.⁵ Also, *yi* 意 means to understand someone's true intentions by listening to their words.⁶ Both words

Confucian tradition. Translated by myself.

³ Chinese Text Project , Songyuan xuean 宋元學案 <<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=258944#p28>> [accessed 23 June 2025] The original text : 若論闡發心性義理之精微，端數元公之破暗也。（元公：周敦頤）Zhou Dunyi developed the study of human nature and moral principle, breaking away from the long-standing era of textual criticism. Translated by myself.

⁴ Chinese Text Project , Mingshi 明史 <<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=899891#p4>> [accessed 23 June 2025]

⁵ Xu Shen 許慎 and Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 (Taipei: Hongye wenhua, 1999), p.92. The original text : 「言必由衷意。」

⁶ Xu Shen and Duan Yucai, *Shuowen jiezi zhu*, p.502. The original text : 「察言而知意也。」

convey the idea that one can understand the meaning someone thought to express from their speech.

In the dictionary of oracle bone script, the meaning of *zheng* 正 from *zhengxin* 正心 is to walk to another place and the meaning of traveling far away.⁷ The extended meaning also includes to rectify or amend, for example, a sentence from the *Analects*, close contact with virtuous people helps one correct their own faults.⁸ In the *Mencius* 孟子 (Meng Zi), Mencius states that the function of the mind lies in thinking.⁹ Consequently, Through analysis, *zhengxin* should be interpreted to signify to rectify human's inner thinking.

3.2 The interpretation of *chengyi* and *zhengxin* from Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming

Zhu Xi's interpretation of *Zhengxin* means the heart-mind manage the body. In this context, Shen denotes the entire physical body. *Xin* 心 is what rules the self.¹⁰

According to the translation by Ian Johnston and Wang Ping, *Xin* is translated into heart, or mind. However, in Oxford Dictionary, mind is defined as the part of a person that makes them able to be aware of things, to think and to feel.¹¹ Heart is defined as the organ in the chest that sends blood around the body, usually on the left in humans.¹² Via contrast, mind is the appropriate translation for *Xin* because *Xin* should be ideological dominance, not a single organ so *zhengxin* should be translated by 'rectify mind.'

Zhu Xi's interpretation of *Chengyi* means Cheng is equivalent to shi 實.¹³ Ian and Wang recommend translating *shi* as 'to make true, real, genuine' in this context but I think it would be better to translate it as honest because *shi* intends to convey more of always telling

⁷ Xu Zhongshu 徐中舒, *Jiaguwen zidian* 甲骨文字典 (Chengdu: Sichuan cishu chubanshe, 2014), p.146.

⁸ He Yan 何晏 and Xing Bing 邢昺, *Lunyun zhushu* 論語注疏 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), p. 12. The original text 「就有道而正焉。」

⁹ 孟子 Zhao Qi 趙岐 and Sun shi 孫奭, *Mengzi zhushu* 孟子註疏 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), p.369. The original text 「心之官則思」

¹⁰ Ian Johnston and Wang Ping, *Daxue and Zhongyong: Bilingual Edition* (Hongkong: THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2012), p.139. The original text: 心者，身之所主也。

¹¹ Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, Mind, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/mind_1?q=mind>[accessed 27 June 2025].

¹² Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, Heart, <[https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/heart_1?q=heart+](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/heart_1?q=heart+>)>[accessed 27 June 2025].

¹³ Ian Johnston and Wang Ping, *Daxue and Zhongyong*. p.139.

the truth, and never stealing or cheating.¹⁴ There are two English translations of “Yi” according to Ian and Wang, respectively thoughts, intentions. In the dictionary, thoughts means something you think and intentions means what you intend or plan to do. Within this framework, Zhu Xi intend to express “something you think” so I translate *Yi* to thoughts. Thoughts are what the mind sends forth. In making honesty what the mind sends forth, one wishes to become one with goodness and not deceive oneself.¹⁵ Hence, I translate *Chengyi* to “sincere thought.”

As for Wang Yangming, he gives an overall interpretation of *chengyi* and *zheng xin*. He think:

now the original mind-heart of the mind is human's nature. Human nature being universally good, the original mind-heart of the mind is correct. How is it that any effort is required to rectify the mind? The reason is that, while the original mind-heart of the mind is originally correct, incorrectness enters when one's thoughts and will are in operation. Therefore he who wishes to rectify his mind must rectify it in connection with the operation of his thoughts and will.^{16 17}

Concluding remarks: Zhu Xi's perspective is *Zhengxin* means to rectify human's inner thinking, *Chengyi* means being honest with yourself and don't deceive yourself. Wang Yangming's perspective is the mind itself is inherently good and does not require rectification but Thoughts include good and evil.

3.3 Comparison the interpretation in two scholars

Through above primary sources, it is evident that Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming have the following point in common: *Chengyi* means not deceiving oneself. To not deceive oneself is to be honest to oneself. To be honest oneself needs to put effort into self-cultivation when

¹⁴Dictionaries,Honest,<<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/honest?q=honest>>[access ed 27 June 2025].

¹⁵ Ian Johnston and Wang Ping, *Daxue and Zhongyong*. p.139. The original text: 「意者，心之所發也。實其心之所發，欲其一於善而無自欺也。」

¹⁶ WING-TSIT CHAN, *A SOURCE BOOK IN CHINESE PHILOSOPHY* (United States of America: Princeton University Press, 1963) ,p.664. Modification my myself.

¹⁷ Chen Rongjie and others, *Zhongguozhexue wenxianxuanbian* (Beijing: Beijing lianhe chubanshe, 2018), p.436. The original text: 「然心之本體則性也，性無不善，則心之本體本無不正也。何從而用其正之之功乎？蓋心之本體本無不正，自其意念發動，而後有不正。」

alone.¹⁸ This principle comes from the *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸. It can be seen that both scholars have the same opinion of reflecting on their own behavior and being honest with themselves. The reason why *the Doctrine of the Mean* can be used to interpret *the Great Learning* is that ever since Zhu Xi compiled the Four Books together, these four texts have been regarded as a unified whole, so they can be mutual interpretation for each other.

In contrast, they have different interpretations of *chengyi*. Zhuxi's opinion is the mind's rectification requires by cultivating external virtues (extend knowledge) Wang Yangming's perspective is the mind itself is inherently good and does not require rectification.

The third perspective is, from a broader view, we examine the roles of these two terms within the Eight Principles in their systems. There is a passage in Zhuzi Yulei which is as a person who has the clear character. They definitely understand the five steps respectively: investigating, extending, being sincere, rectifying. It shouldn't be missing any step.¹⁹

In text of *Da xue wen*, Wang Yangming indicated while each of them has its own place, they are really one thing. Investigating, extending, being sincere, rectifying, and cultivating are the task performed in the procedure. Although each has its own name, they are really one affair.²⁰

In Zhu Xi's opinion: Eight Principles should belong a systematic framework. He emphasizes that each step carries its own intrinsic meaning and must be followed in strict sequence. Only through this ordered progression can the ultimate goal be attained. He focus on process, steps and order so Chengyi and Zhengxin should be regarded as two stages. The process begins with external practice and, step by step, transitions toward internal cultivation. Chengyi is the one of steps but Zhengxin is the ultimate result.

In Wang's opinion: Eight Principles should belong a holistic framework because he emphasizes on holism, comprehensiveness, and the interrelation of principles.

If analyzed by percentage, each principle accounts for an equal percentage in Zhu's framework. Chengyi accounts for the largest percentage in Wang's framework since Wang once remarked Chengyi is the most important matter the sage highlights when guiding

¹⁸ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012), p.17. The original text: 「故君子慎其獨也。」 Translated by myself.

¹⁹ Wang Xiaonong and Zhao Zengtao, *Zhuzi yulei xuanze* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2018), p.341. The original text: 「所謂明之者，致知、格物、誠意、正心、修身，皆明之之事，五者不可闕一。若闕一，則德有所不明。蓋致知、格物，是要知得分明；誠意、正心、修身，是要行得分明。」

²⁰ WING-TSIT CHAN, *A SOURCE BOOK IN CHINESE PHILOSOPHY*, p.664. The original text:「蓋身、心、意、知、物者，是其工夫所用之條理，雖亦各有其所，而其實只是一物。格、致、誠、正、修者，是其條理所用之工夫，雖亦皆有其名，而其實只是一事。」

effortful cultivation.²¹ Chengyi is the root of all matters, focusing on one core element, and then people can understand how to cultivate in daily life.

No matter Zhu or Wang, their ultimate goal is to enable people to restore their original nature 本性 because Wang once said, my philosophical doctrine does differ from Zhu's, especially regarding the initial approach to study. that is why I am going to make a difference. Nevertheless, my mind remain consistent with those of Zhu.²²

4. Conclusion

Through the above materials, we can probably understand why they have different and similar interpretations of Chengyi and Zhengxin.

First, the reason of historical background, before the Song dynasty, existing texts and commentaries were overly complex, which led to the difficulty of the common people in learning Confucian. He simplified the complexity of people's reading.

Additionally, due to the earlier neglect by scholars and the intellectual developments of Neo-Confucianism during the Northern Song, he sought to redefine Confucian thought through development the of Neo-Confucianism. In the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Xi's doctrine declined, and people just regarded his book as an examination material, which could not be implemented well. It was at this time that Wang Yangming inherited and developed the School of Mind from Lu Jiuyuan, encouraging a return to the original mind. He advocated the innate goodness of human nature as a means to realize the teachings of the classics.

Secondly, because the two scholars viewed the same matter from different perspectives, they proposed different methods of self-cultivation based on their own experiences and learning measures. This is why they differ. However, they are also similar because they shared the same ultimate goal.

From the perspective of academic development, we need not only studies such as exegesis but also metaphysical elements to construct our world of thought. Therefore, the emergence of Zhu and Wang has greatly promoted the development of Confucianism, and they have made Confucianism valued, recognized and practiced.

²¹ Wang Shouren 王守仁 and Wang Xiaoxin 王曉昕, *Chuanxilu yizhu 傳習錄譯注* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2018), p.193-194. The original text: 「誠意之說，自是聖人教人用功第一義。」

²² Wang Shouren and Wang Xiaoxin, *Chuanxilu yizhu*, p.133. The original text: 「是有心求異，即不是。吾說與晦庵時有不同者，為入門下手處有毫厘千里之分。不得不辯。然吾之心與晦庵之心，未嘗異也。若其餘文義解得明當處，如何動得一字？」

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