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THE NEO-CONFUCIAN CONCEPT OF BODY AND ITS ETHICAL SENSIBILITY

“How could we abandon our life energy and physical bodies
and look somewhere else for the principles of righteousness?”

Feng Congwu (1556-1627)

In the *Great Learning*, one of the Confucian classics, we read, “from the son of the Heaven down to common people, all should take *xiu shen* as their ultimate concern” (*Da Xue*, Preface). *Xiu shen* is also one of the key terms in a cluster of Neo-Confucian language.¹ Throughout history, the term *xiu shen* has been interpreted as “self-cultivation,” the “cultivation of person (*ren*),” the “cultivation of morality (*de*),” and the “cultivation of the mind (*xin*^a) and spirit (*shen*^b).” In Chinese language, *xiu shen* means literally “the cultivation (*xiu*) of the human body (*shen*^a).” Here, we see several possible meanings imbedded in the concept of self-cultivation. This lack of a fixed, univocal conceptual terminology of *xiu shen* may sound quite odd to many Westerners who are trained in the line of the Western philosophy, yet it is the polyvalence in words and concepts that well characterizes the unique nature of the classical Chinese philosophy.

Yet I am by no means suggesting that body is mind or vice versa in traditional Chinese thought because I am fully aware of a hermeneutic sensibility when we attempt to pin down precise English terms for the Chinese word “body,” which in Chinese can be *shen*^a, *ti*^a, and *xing*. The difficulties of representation have often been coupled when we try to employ Western philosophical language such as the body-mind unity (or dichotomy) to explicate Neo-Confucianism where a pure clarification of concepts such as body and mind is not often an issue. Nevertheless, we can still explore the Neo-Confucian mode of ethical reasoning in light of the conception of body and its moral implications, and examine how through the notion of *xiu shen* the Neo-Confucians maintain the endowment of body as an indispensable qualification for personal and social existence. Also, we can examine how the idea of body and the perception of life-experience embedded in body are closely related to the fundamental Confucian teaching that “the Dao (the Way, the Virtue) is not far off from humanity (*dao bu yuan ren*).”

As a syncretism of traditional Confucianism (that is, the teachings of Confucius and Mencius), Daoism, and Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism (despite a divergence of teachings among Neo-Confucian philosophers themselves) has perpetuated the basic Confucian tradition with its passionate moral inquiry and a strong sense of social obligations. But at the same time, Neo-Confucian philosophers also search for metaphysical transcendence in terms of self, society, Heaven, and Principle. Through the tenet of *xu shen*, they attempt to trespass the boundaries between the Nature of Heaven and the principle of life, between the noumenal One and the phenomenal many, between eternity and temporality, between “what is above the shape” and “what is within the shape,” and between the process of humanization and the journey of spiritual realization.

I. THE ONTO-COSMOLOGICAL BODY AND THE PERSONAL BODY

For most Confucians the human body, like the body of any other being in the world, should not be seen as an autonomous entity since the human being is part of the natural world, which comprises the totality of Heaven-Earth (*tian di*), humanity (*ren*), and myriad things (*wan wu*). This integrated **one** body is also called the Dao, which embraces both ontological and ethical implications. According to the Confucian onto-cosmology, the human body in its constitution is inseparable from the body of the cosmos, for the human body shares the flowing course of nature through the life-energy (*qi*) from Heaven. More specifically, the human being is an embodiment of the basic five elements (*wu xing*); that is, water, fire, earth, metal, and wood. These five elements have, in Chinese tradition, become a cultural mythos infused into everything in Chinese thought, from onto-cosmology to the explanation of various physiological, pathological, social, and moral phenomena. It is believed, for instance, that when the five elements are out of balance in the human body, one experiences sickness; when the five elements are out of balance in the human mind, one experiences moral decay; and when the five elements are out of balance in society, the society experiences chaos. For Confucian thinkers there is an internal mutual connection between the onto-cosmological body and the physical bodies of both human beings and human activities. In other words, the onto-cosmological body can constrain the way the physical body is perceived, and at the same time, the physical body can constantly modify the onto-cosmological body.

One of the best examples of the extension from onto-cosmology to human activities can be seen in the correspondent relations indicated in the following table where we can find a plethora of physiological relationships between the five elements (*wu xing*) and other things in the world. They cover the full range from the five directions (*wu xiang*) to the five colors (*wu se*), the five flavors (*wu wei*), the five sense organs (*wu guan*), the five body parts (*wu ti*), the five internal organs (*wu zang*, or *wu zhu*), the five grains (*wu gu*), the five inclinations (*wu zhi*), the five sounds (*wu sheng*), the five classics (*wu jing*), the five constant virtues (*wu chang*), and the five constant relationships (*wu lun*).

five elements	wood	metal	fire	water	earth
five directions	east	south	west	north	center
five colors	blue	yellow	red	white	black
five flavors	sweet	sour	bitter	pungent	salty
five sense organs	ears	eyes	lips	nose	tongue
five body parts	head	left arm	right arm	left leg	right leg
five internal organs	heart	liver	spleen	lungs	kidney
five grains	rice	millet	sorghum	wheat	beans
five inclinations	anger	worry	pleasure	fear	thinking
five sounds	scream	laugh	cry	sing	moan
five Classics	<i>Book of Songs</i>	<i>Book of History</i>	<i>Book of Change</i>	<i>Book of Rites</i>	<i>Spring & Autumn</i>
five virtues	humanity	righteousness	loyalty	wisdom	sincerity
five relationships	ruler–ministers	father–son	husband–wife	the old–the young	friend–friend

Such a holistic view is also accepted by Neo-Confucian philosophers who regard the human body as both a biological organism and a life-energy by which man bears the principle of Heaven-Earth and links himself to other things in the world. The claim that “Heaven-Earth and I

are in the same body, and the myriad thing and I are in oneness" (*tain di yu wo tong ti, wan wu yu wo wei yi*) is a motto for many Neo-Confucians of the lixue School. Shao Yong (1011-77), for example, believes that the human body is that of the universe (Heaven-Earth, *qian-kun*), hence we should regard the universe as our own parents. "*Qian* is my father and *kun* is my mother," says Shao Yong, "my mind is *qian* and my body is *kun*" (*Huang chi ching shih*, 1962). Zhang Zai (1020-77) also maintains that Heaven is man's father, and Earth is man's mother. Cheng Yi (1033-1107), in the same manner, claims, "Taking something close like our bodies, the myriad things are all present and complete" (*Er Cheng Ji*, 1981, p.167). Wang Yang-ming (1472-1529) a Neo-Confucian of the Ming Dynasty and an admirer of Shao Yong, holds the view that a man with virtues regards Heaven and Earth and the myriad things as one body.' It follows that self-cultivation is, for Neo-Confucians, not only to realize Heaven's humanity in oneself, but also to extend it to actual human circumstances, as what is said in the *Great Learning*, "To regulate the state, one needs to regulate one's family; To regulate one's family, one needs self-cultivation" (*Da Xue*, Preface).

This integrated oneness of the Heaven-Earth, humanity, and oneself is further reinforced when Neo-Confucians employ the conception of the "Supreme Ultimate" (*tai ji*) to the classical Confucian understanding of Heaven and Nature. Zhou Dun-yi (1017-73) in his *tai ji* schema places the human being in the pivotal position of the system of *yin* and *yang*, and maintains the internal unity between the forces of the natural world of Heaven-Earth and the forces of human beings. Furthermore, he sees the emanation of the life-energy in the human body as the manifestation of the "Supreme Ultimate" that calls for recognition in the living ambience. It follows that for Zhou Dun-yi and other Neo-Confucians, the "Supreme Ultimate" becomes an onto-existential energy-resource upon which one understands the world and humanity. The "Supreme Ultimate" also suggests the internal link between one's body and one's mind. In other words, a person is a **living** body that encompasses one's whole being, including human desires in the world. According to Confucianism, a mind with no body is not real and a body with no mind is just a "walking corpse and running flesh." Therefore, in order to understand human nature and its relation to other beings, we should approach the human body holistically.

It is in the connection of body and mind as a whole being that Neo-Confucian philosophers see the role of "self" in building an ethical

system. For Neo-Confucians the self is psycho-physical and includes a body-image (a particular personal body vis-à-vis other bodies) as well as a spiritual self that feels and wills. Accordingly, *shen* is a “body-person,” or a “personal body” that not only responds to the myriad things but also contemplates about itself and its relation to others.³ Thus self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-examination become an inevitable stage in the process of *xiu shen*. Shao Yong, for example, employs the notion of “self” (*shen*^a, or *wo*) to his idea of “reflective perception” (*fan guan*) by which one realizes the inner self through an understanding of the totality of the self, Heaven-Earth, and myriad things. He sees this understanding of the self and its relation to things as “self-awareness” (*guan xing*). Shao Yong divides the process of understanding into three steps: 1) sensing, 2) thinking, and 3) knowing. In the third stage, the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity no longer exists.⁴ Here, it should be noted that self-awareness for Neo-Confucians differs from the Cartesian *ego cogito* since the self involves the entire body and mind of a person, and self-cultivation involves work on both self-knowledge (i.e. the particular self) and no-self (the universal self).

Zhu Xi’s concept of “reflective examination” (*xing cha*) suggests similar meanings as does Shao Yong’s when he regards thinking as a form of reflective examination of the self. For Zhu, one should keep examining the self in order to obtain the Principle of Nature and enter the sage-hood because to become a person with humanity (*ren*, that is, a high moral principle) requires the process of transforming the physical self by developing a heightened awareness of the self-body (feelings and intentions). Zhu also maintains that self-actualization or self-exemplification of humanity is a foundation for a moral society as a whole. He argues, “whenever and wherever humanity flows and operates, righteousness will fully be righteousness and propriety and wisdom will fully be propriety and wisdom” (Chan, 1963, pp. 632-33). As such, the self in Neo-Confucian teachings does not necessarily mean to be isolated or alienated from society. Rather, it is self-cultivation qua cultivating others because every human being has a potential to be a person with virtue. For Neo-Confucians, there is no distinction between the internal sage-hood and external kingship. This is why Neo-Confucians maintain that the purpose of cultivation is to bring virtue back to society, back to what Tu Wei-ming calls “the community of the selfhood” (Tu, 1979, p.13). A cultivated person, then, is an exemplar of human virtue who can exert a transforming influence on society.

One point needs elaboration. *Xiu shen* in Neo-Confucian teachings conveys a notion of self-power vis-à-vis other power in other traditions. Neo-Confucians insist that the principle of Heaven-Nature exists in human mind, and that the Dao is identical with the nature of man. So there is essentially no distinction between sage (*sheng*) and man (*ren*). Through self-efforts and self-power, anyone can enter into the inner sagehood. This perfectibility of human beings through self-effort marks the fundamental difference between Confucianism and other traditions that posit the other-power through God, or other supernatural agents. The non-theistic view of Confucian philosophy determines its emphasis on the natural order of nature rather than the grace of God. In the Heaven-Man unity, a Neo-Confucian sees the power in everything, including in oneself, while in theistic views one generally sees the power in nothing but in God. This fundamental difference between Heaven and God is difficult to reconcile.

II. SELF-CULTIVATION: THE HARMONIOUS FIT BETWEEN *SHEN* AND *XIN*

In the Western intellectual tradition, the word "body" as associated with "container" images is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *bodig*. The Old High German word *bota* means a cask, a brewing tub, or a vat. The imagery suggested by the word basically indicates the material being, that is, the corporeality of body and, as such, body is viewed as the opposition to the word "soul" or "spirit." This interpretation of the human body leads to a dualistic concept of a corporeal and corruptible body that needs to be "ensouled," or "resurrected" in the Western theological/philosophical discourse.

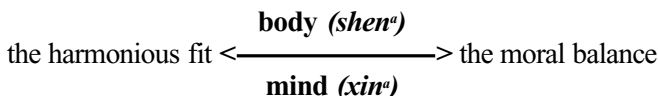
The word *Shen* in Chinese philosophy, on the other hand, is often used not simply as the human physique in its corporeality; rather, it is used to refer to an entire physic-psyche person. As such *shen* is frequently used with the term *xin*^a, which, different from the word "mind" employed in the Western philosophical tradition, often entails both the meaning of physicality (because *xin*^a basically means "heart") and the meaning of spirituality. It follows that a human being is regarded as an integrated whole (*shen*^a and *xin*^a) rather than something bifurcated into mind and body.

In the Chinese tradition, though we have such expressions as “to sacrifice body for the sake of benevolence” (*sha shen qiu ren*), body as a whole is not seen as an entity that is in contrast to soul or spirit. With its complex and organic life-energy, *shen*^a embraces both a material force and a spiritual force. Accordingly, we find that *shen*^a is sometimes defined with its other two homophones: *shen*^a with a hand radical means “to extend,” or “to stretch out,” and *shen*^a with a heart-mind radical means the inner spirit. The extension here suggests a correlative relationship between *shen*^a (the physical) and *xin*^a (the spiritual). Therefore, we have the Neo-Confucian argument that by guiding “pure breath” (*qing qi*) through the body, a person brings in pure mind (*qing xin*). This extension of meanings from the physical to the ethical can be also observed in many other expressions in Neo-Confucian terminology. For instance, *dao* means both a physical path and moral virtue; *ti*^a signifies both shape and substance; *li*^a indicates both the texture and principle of things; and *feng gu* suggests both a natural phenomenon and a moral virtue. Such analogies between the physical and the spiritual are abundant in Chinese philosophical discourse.

Since body and mind (or *da ti* and *xiao ti* in the Mencius’ terms) are not regarded as separate entities in any essential way, the negative connotations toward the body are rarely present in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. To most Confucians, both body and mind possess material forces and the inner energy, and there is a close connection between bodily life and ethical life. Therefore, in Confucian teachings, the “cultivation of body” (*xiu shen*) and the “rectification of mind” (*yang xing*) are often used interchangeably. Furthermore, the unity of body and mind is expressed by the notion of a harmonious fit (*he*), or the balance of the *shen-xin*. The idea of *he* indicates a harmonious balance between the human body and the human mind, between one’s medical condition and one’s moral conduct. Hence, Neo-Confucians contend that disrupted harmony is the fundamental cause of disease in both one’s physical endowment and moral character. Cheng Hao (1032-85), for instance, relates the paralysis of hands and feet (*shou zhu*) to the impairment of the mind because he believes that when one is paralyzed, the life-energy is blocked, which in turn can block the moral energy?

For Neo-Confucians the activities of learning (*xue*) then should not be limited to a pure mental training, or confined to what in the West is called “mind,” since the activities of learning are meant to be both spiritual and physical. Therefore, despite their differences in many other philosophical

arguments, both Zhu Xi and Wang Yang-ming regard learning as that which involves the entire body and mind. Zhu Xi sees learning as a mediating method that links body and mind and, as such, “in reading books, one’s body and mind must enter inside each paragraph” (Smith, *et al.*, 1990, p181). In the same fascicle, Wang Yang-ming insists that the “learning of body and mind” requires a correlative operation of *shen^a* and *xin^a* in the learning process. For Neo-Confucians, the sage is a person whose body and mind are both composed of clear energy (*qi*). To become a sage, then, is a matter of cultivating one’s energy. Hence xiu shen is both a physical and a spiritual training in the process of cultivation. The cultivation of body and mind can be shown in the following diagram:



In doing so, Neo-Confucians have established a profound relation between *shen^a* and *xin^a*, a relation with both physical and mental/moral dimensions. As one’s mind and body become a integrated oneness, the internal process of self-cultivation also becomes one and is integrated with the spirit-matter of heaven and earth. This oneness of body and mind is, according to Neo-Confucians, back to the true nature of human beings. Therefore, for Neo-Confucians the balance of *shen-xin* or the harmonious fit, include a process of dieting, internal cleansing, exercising, and guided meditating. The cultivation of the body is required in order to reach the “spiritual goal,” that is, the moral balance. In Neo-Confucianism the practice of “quiet sitting” (*jing zuo*) or seated meditation, for example, offers a paradigmatic interpretation of the role of the body in our understanding of the body-mind coagulation In Neo-Confucian discourse. The relationships between the body and the mind, between the exterior world and the interior world can be established in a particular body posture. The whole process of closing one’s eyes (*ming mu*), isolating oneself (*bi guan*), cross-legged sitting (*fu zuo*), breath-control (*tiao xi*) is designed to control one’s mind (including controlling emotions) through controlling one’s body *via* breathing exercises.⁶ The purpose of breathing exercises is to “empty one’s mind” so that the clear energy can pervade the whole body from the head down to the toes and finger-tips. This notion of emptying one’s mind resembles the Daoist theory of sitting and forgetting, which also aims at a correlative relationship between the

movements of the body and those of the mind. Zhuang Zi, for instance, contends that the mind of a perfect man "is like a mirror."⁷ Yet "quiet sitting" in Zhuangzi somehow suggests a kind of detachment from social and ethical obligations, whereas "quiet sitting" in Neo-Confucianism is more ethically oriented.

It should be noted that Neo-Confucianism is often regarded as a form of rationalism because of its critique of human emotionality (*qing*) and self-desire (*si yu*).⁸ Excessive emotions and self-desire, as Neo-Confucians see them, obscure one's mind and lead to immoral conduct. Zhang Zai, for instance, argues that "He who understands virtue allows (his body) to have sufficiency of (drinking and eating) and no more. He neither enchains his mind with sensual desire, injures the great with what is small, nor destroys the root with what is peripheral" (Fung, 1953, p. 490). However, the harmonious fit of body and mind is meant to be moderate, rather than ascetic, because for most Neo-Confucian thinkers *xiu shen* is not a cultivation of virtue at the expense of man's basic physical nature. In the Confucian tradition, the physiological needs and desires of man - which include eating and drinking and sexual activity - have never been denied. Nevertheless, Confucians do believe that by virtue of cultivating one's mind, one's body can also be properly nourished. They contend that a moral person is able to prevent his inner spirit (*shen*) from scattering and, as such, keeps his body intact. As Mencius puts it, "Virtue fosters the body" (*de run shen, Da Xue*, 6).

The Neo-Confucian concepts of equilibrium (*zhong*) and harmony (*he*) can help us to understand their critique of emotions and self-desires. Neo-Confucians do not deny the human emotions per se, merely inappropriate emotions; that is, the excess of desires and passions. Their critique is in the similar vein of Laozi's rejection of an excessive indulgence in the five colors, the five sounds, the five tastes, and an excess of hunting (*Laozi*, 12). According to Neo-Confucians, the harmonious fit requires balance: It is a middle-way of neither deficiency nor abundance. Here, the notion of *zhong he* in Neo-Confucianism is related to the idea of the mean (*Zhong yong*) presented in the *Doctrine of the Mean* in classical Confucianism. *Zhong yong* signifies the perfect equilibrium and harmony at the plane of both the physical and moral well-being. Therefore, Confucius says, "The superior man (*jun zi*) exemplifies the virtue of the means, the inferior man (*xiao ren*) acts contrary to the virtue of means" (Chan, 1963, p.98). Self-cultivation, therefore, should be the cultivation of both bodily and

spiritual strength so one can find the middle path, without inclining to either extreme position.⁹

It is important, here, to remember that equilibrium and harmony (*zhong he*) are crucial concepts in Neo-Confucianism to which Zhu Xi attaches great importance. For Zhu, *zhong he* functions as both a critique of the excessiveness of passions and desires on the one hand and the Buddhist asceticism on the other. Buddhism, as Zhu understands it, renounces the family and, as such, renounces social responsibility. The notion of *zhong he* also leads to Zhu's critique of the excessiveness of human emotions (*qing*), that is, the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy (Chan, 1963, p.601). Here, despite the fact that Zhu Xi is often labeled as a rationalist, like most other Neo-Confucian thinkers, he believes that there is nothing wrong with emotions *per se*; what matters is the excessive use of emotions, which turns out likely to interfere with one's practice of learning. It is Zhu's belief that the excess of emotion will decay the mind just as the overindulgence in meat, wine, and grains will clog up and decay the body.

On the other hand, the harmonious fit in terms of equilibrium and harmony also entails ethical embellishment regarding the differentiation between right and wrong. For a cultivated person, the ethical judgment is not a matter of correspondence between observation and things being observed, but a matter of coherence and harmony among things. It is in this sense that we say the Neo-Confucian concept of righteousness (*yi*), or moral rightness, is "fitting" or "suitable" rather than "true" or "false." What a cultivated person seeks is what is suitable in a given situation. And as such he is fully aware of the possibility of flexibility and contingency in any moral decision, and he is capable of keeping a balance between unwarrantable skepticism and all-embracing dogmatic certainty.

III. THE TEMPORALITY OF HUMAN BODY

Though the awareness of death is not absent in Neo-Confucianism, death and the life after death have never been central themes in Neo-Confucian discourse. In fact, there is a lack of any form of metaphysical account of death or life after death in Neo-Confucian philosophy. Zhang Zai's well-known statement that "in life I shall serve unresistingly, and when death comes, I shall be at peace" (Fung, 1953 p.497) typically represents the Confucian attitude toward life and the temporality of the human body.

The most important question for a Neo-Confucian thinker is: How can we live our body in our current and everyday mode of existence?

In fact, the "temporality" of the human body is a relative term for most Chinese. According to Chinese belief, the human body is produced by Heaven through Heaven's life-energy (*qi*) no matter whether the body is condensed or dispersed, aggregated or separated. "Condensed, (the *qi*) forms my body; dispersed, it still forms my body," therefore, "life does not entail gain nor death losses" (Fung, 1953, p.497). Such a view of the body also leads to a rejection of the dissection of the human body in the traditional Chinese society. Nevertheless, there is a sense of the temporality of human life in Confucianism, and the temporality of human existence is explicated through an emphasis on the "now" and "here," that is, the body's existence in the world. Like Confucius who was not interested in God or spirits in general, Neo-Confucians are also not very attracted to the idea of "ghosts and spirits" (*gui shen*). In his defense of Confucianism, Zhu Xi, for instance, repeats what Confucius says, "People should be properly reverent towards ghosts and spirits, and yet keep them at a distance" (*Lun Yu* 6:20). Consequently, Zhu criticizes those who believe in and serve the Buddha since they, as Zhu sees it, fail to keep the spirit at a distance.

Very often, the temporality of the body is expressed by Confucians in terms of the phases of season. Tu Wei-ming points out, the change of the body as budding (spring), growing (summer), withholding (autumn), and preserving (winter) "symbolizes longevity as the pattern of human flourishing which honors the natural process of maturation rather than the artificial imposition of any discrete (for example youth) as an abstract ideal" (Tu, 1992, p.89). In the same vein, Confucians also understand the alternation of life and death as phases of the incessantly producing process of nature. Shao Yong, who regards death as "hiding away" (*cang*), contends that the life cycle has four stages including birth, growth, maturation and death. Therefore, "when one is born, one's nature is of heaven. When one is completed, one's form is of earth . . . this is the dao of change" (Birdwhistell, 1989, p.117). This cyclical view of life and death resembles of the Daoist interpretation of the life circle where we have: 1. receiving breath, 2. being in the womb, 3. being nourished, 4. birth, 5. being bathed, 6. assuming cap and girdle, or puberty, 7. becoming an official, 8. flourishing, 9. weakening, 10. sickness, 11. death, and 12. burial.¹⁰ This interpretation of the life cycle is basically accepted by Neo-Confucians. For them the transformation of life, that is,

“becoming and perishing,” characterizes human life and existence, therefore, a person should not worry too much about death.

Though Confucians speak about “nourishing the life” (*yang sheng*) to prevent one from sickness and un-natural death, they do not advocate extreme means intended to forestall old age. When death comes, one should regard death calmly, as a natural event, especially when it is a natural death (*shou zhong zheng qin*). It follows that Neo-Confucian thinkers refute both the Buddhist concept of immortality *via* Nirvana and the Daoist practice of immortality. The former speaks of life (generation) and death (extinction) in terms of “transmigration” (i.e. from human to animal to other forms of life), and the latter looks for immortality (*chang seng bu si*) *via* extraordinary medical means. For Neo-Confucians, what matters most is not whether one lives a long life, but whether one lives a meaningful life, that is, a life with virtue and dignity. Therefore, Zhang Zai tells us, “Perform each day the duties belonging to that day, serene in the consciousness that the coming of death merely means our returns to the Great Void from which we came” (Fung, 1953, p.497). This traditional Confucian ethos has remained basically unchanged throughout history.

Strictly speaking, the goal of *xiu shen* is neither immortality in a pure physical sense, nor in the sense of the Platonic immortality of the soul. Rather, the goal of *xiu shen* is to immerse the human mind-body into the mind-body of Heaven-Earth, where one’s inner energy can be transformed into perceptions and values. The nourishment of the body and the cultivation of the mind are interdependent facets of a single activity rather than two separate concepts external to each other. Thus, *xiu shen* is an activity deeply rooted in the human world as an embodiment or a transformation of true humanity expressed by a fulfillment of the duties of man and the accomplishments in this world.

According to Confucianism, a person (alive or dead) is always connected to other things in the world. Therefore, when Confucians do speak of immortality, their conception of immortality is associated with blood (producing offspring) or with virtue. The former refers to the importance of marriage and reproduction, whereas the latter refers to importance of moral character exemplified by those who have shown virtue or those who perform great virtuous acts. Generally speaking, Confucians are not too concerned with any quest for a life beyond this world. Compared with the Buddhist conception of immortality, the

Confucian understanding of immortality is ethically oriented rather than metaphysically oriented.

IV. BODY AS A LIVING EXPERIENCE

According to Neo-Confucian teachings, the body is not only a physical entity where the mind dwells but also brings the Dao into practice (*xing qi dao*) by means of an embodiment of the true humanity (*ti ren*). The notion of practice (*xing*), then, becomes a crucial theme in the Neo-Confucian philosophical tradition. As such, we can find a plethora of expressions connected with the body and bodily actions, such as *ti hui* (to experience through body), *ti cha* (to observe through the body), *ti yan* (to verify through the body), *ti ren* (to comprehend through the body) and *shen ti zi xing* (to practice through the body). Hence such activities as experiencing, observing, and understanding are not limited to being purely mental activities. In other words, for Neo-Confucians interiorization is dependent upon exteriorization, and morality, which includes concrete humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, is essentially moral practice (*de xing*). The Dao in Confucianism, therefore, is no longer an abstract concept, but a process of acting and performing. Accordingly, *xiu shen* means that only through practice can one put into effect one's knowledge, for cultivation is not simply a matter of spiritual nourishment but a behavior, a conduct, and an action.

Zhu Xi has observed that "in reading books, instead of simply looking for the patterns of the Dao (*dao-li*) on the page, one should come back and investigate one's own self... Knowledge and practice require each other... The effort of knowledge and practice should be exerted to the utmost" (*Chu-tzu Ch'uan-shu* 6:18b; 3:8a; 3:8b). For Zhu, Principle (*li*) - a concept he sometimes employs to replace the *dao* or *dao-li* in classical Confucianism - should be the unity of the moral patterns of Heaven and the moral characteristics of human beings, and it is demonstrated through practice qua body experiences, that is, physical involvement. Zhu maintains that learning is bodily experiencing that requires participation in the phenomenal and the concrete (*shen ti li xing*). Only in such a way can the effort of both knowledge and practice be exerted to the utmost.

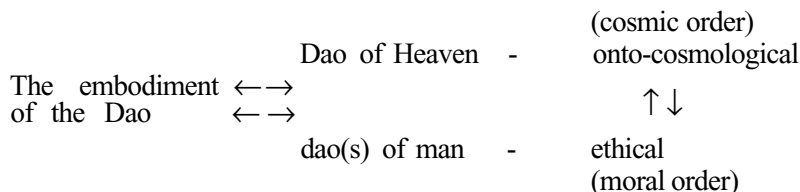
In Confucianism, we have the argument that "filial piety and brotherly respect are the root of humanity" (*Lun Yu*, 1:2). Hence, humanity in Confucian teachings is not just a principle that one tries to learn and

understand, but concrete human relationships that one has to experience, including the relationship between ruler and ministers, between father and son, between husband and wife, between old and young, and between friend and friend (Legge, 1970, p.252). It is quite natural, then, for most Neo-Confucians to maintain a view regarding the inseparable relationship between learning and ethical conduct. For them morality is not simply a form of language played out in terms of pure theories; rather it is a process of an actualization of those theories through proper conduct of humanity. As Tu Wei-ming points out, the Confucian concept of *cheng* conveys not only the idea of "sincerity," but also the connotation of "completion," "actualization," and "perfection" (Tu, 1978, pp. 97-99). The ethical conduct itself is the embodiment of the highest idea of sagehood. Here again, we find a strong sense of performance and action.

This emphasis on morality with practical affairs also leads Neo-Confucian thinkers to argue that the body is both substance (*ti*) and function (*yong*).¹¹ From Zhu Xi's "investigating things" (*ge wu*) to Wang Yang-ming's "unity of knowledge and practice" (*zhi xing he yi*), we find a dynamic process of transformation in which the activity of self-cultivation becomes real experience rather than an abstract concept. The linkage between knowledge and experience characterizes the process of humanization. Therefore, for most Neo-Confucian philosophers, antiquity should not be seen as providing closure for the teaching of human virtue and values. Sages like Confucius and Mencius have set good moral examples, yet their teachings should not be taken dogmatically.

With respect to the role of the body in performance and action, Roger T. Ames has made an interesting point when he delineates the element of physicality in the Confucian ritual practice. Ames considers ritual practice or propriety (*li*) as "an action embodiment or formalization of meaning and value that accumulates to constitute a cultural tradition."¹² This observation corresponds to Tu Wei-ming's claim that *li* in Neo-Confucianism is the "externalization" of morality (*ren* or *de*) in concrete social circumstances. Therefore, through the "performance" of the body, one does not simply learn the past (the "heuristic or pedagogical function" of *li*) but transforms reality via *xiu shen*, that is, by cultivating the original human nature. Here, by seeing *li* as a "physical rendering" of moral meanings or a "moral process" of "actualizing *ren*" rather than a subordination to dogmatic doctrines, both Tu and Ames attempt to resolve the tension between the ritual practice and self-cultivation in Confucianism in general and Neo-Confucianism in particular.

In the Neo-Confucian vocabulary, the Dao, Heaven, the Supreme Ultimate, Principle, the Heavenly Principle, and Nature basically entail the same meaning, which, to most Neo-Confucians, represents a “fullness of being and goodness.” The oneness of Heaven and man (*tiun ren he yi*), therefore, is both an onto-cosmological argument and an ethical experience. From a Neo-Confucian perspective, to approach the Dao, to understand the Heavenly Principle, or to enter the sage-hood is to know how to live in the world, and how to effect harmony in human activities. The Dao or Heaven, then, is not only the undifferentiated world of the transcendent but also the differentiated world of concrete life itself. Hence the oneness of the Dao/Heaven, as Neo-Confucians see it, opens up to a realm that is not only onto-cosmological but also ethical. Therefore, we have:



As this diagram illustrates, the Dao is both the principle and the actualization of this principle. This explains why Neo-Confucians hold the view that the Dao is not far off; it is right here in one's body. The embodiment of the Dao (*daoti*) in Neo-Confucianism, then, indicates a mutual transformation between the corporeality of the dao and the essence of the Dao.

V. ABOVE THE SHAPE AND WITHIN THE SHAPE: THE BODY-MIND POLARITY

Another word used to represent the notion of body is *xing*. This also means the “form,” “shape,” or “appearance.” Neo-Confucians also equate *xing* with the concept of *qi* (which means instrument, not the same *qi* as life-energy). Both *xing* and *qi* refer to the physical things in the world. But how is this form or shape as body connected to the Principle of Nature as mind? Cheng Hao, for example, maintains that there is no principle apart from actual things and, as such, there is no distinction

between the metaphysical and the physical. "Fundamentally... what is within the shape are nothing but the Dao" (Fung, 1953, p. 511). While speaking about *xiu shen*, Cheng Hao argues, "The student need not seek afar. Let him take what is near his own person... Heaven and man are one in that they both have the Dao and Principle; there is no further distinction between them. The 'all-embracing force' is my own force, which 'being nourished without sustaining injury, filled up Heaven and Earth'" (Fung, 1953, p. 510). Hence the human being can comprehend the Principle as what is above the shape, so long as he is willing to cultivate himself with sincerity and earnestness, and to practice the Dao in everyday life. For Cheng Hao and many other Neo-Confucians the human body-mind embraces all principles and all principles are complete in its Oneness. Such a view is consistent with what we have discussed earlier.

On the other hand, however, we must admit that some Neo-Confucians do make a apparent distinction between what is above the shape and what is within the shape. Cheng Yi, for instance, rejects any corporeal aspects of the Principle or the Dao, maintaining that the Dao only belongs to what is above shapes, and what is above shapes remains hidden. For Cheng Yi, the physical things (i.e., *yin* and *yang*) in the world are functional and fluctuating, whereas the Dao is constant and eternal. Therefore, the practice of *xiu shen*, according to Cheng Yi, is characterized by an "exhaustive study" of is the true knowledge, i.e., the Principle. A similar view can also be observed in Zhang Zai's critique of the "petty knowledge of hearing and seeing" vis-a-vis "good knowledge" (*liang zhi*), as well as in Zhu Xi's critique of the Buddhist views on the physical ability of seeing, hearing, speaking, thinking, and acting.¹³

In fact, Zhu Xi's argument on the body as within the shape is quite ambivalent. On the one hand, he argues that Nature, or what he calls the "Principle of Nature" or "Principle," is metaphysical, abstract and in the state of quiescence and unity, hence it cannot be physically perceived. On the other hand however, Zhu posits that the physical nature is no different from the nature of Heaven and Earth, and that the nature of Heaven and Earth runs through physical nature. Thus Zhu also argues that the process of *xiu shen* involves not only the Principle but also the manifestation of the Principle in each concrete thing in the world. Though Zhu holds a hierarchical view of the mind-body relationship when he regards the mind as the master of the body, the body as a vehicle to the external world has never been denied in Zhu's argument. This point can be seen in Zhu's rejection of the "yoke-carriage" metaphor when he speaks of the internal

relation between “my mind” and “my body.” Zhu argues that the relation of body and mind is like the body using the arm and the arm using fingers without making a distinction of which functions first. For Zhu, the ears, eyes, mouth, nose, and four limbs are parts of body, but only through the human mind can one see, hear, speak, or act. Meanwhile, the human mind depends on the functions of the sensory organs, the mind feels, wills, and functions through the body. One could argue that Zhu Xi’s ambiguity mainly lies in his ambivalence toward the relationship between the mind and the Principle. When he equates the mind with an abstract notion of the Principle, he holds a mind/body duality, and looks for the Principle behind the body-shape. But when he separates the mind from an abstract notion of the Principle, he speaks of the interwovenness between the mind and the body, and emphasizes the possibility of transformation.

When asked how should we know the Principle, both Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi are back to what they call “investigation of things” through the “extension of knowledge.” Here we recognize a movement from Principle to external things, and from things to Principle. This movement suggests a kind of cyclic activity, like an Odyssean journey where one leaves home for the purpose of coming back home. For Neo-Confucians the Principle is still a form of “presence.” As Robert Magliola once indicated, “Confucianism, in effect the most ‘worldly’ of all major philosophico-religions, has also the most elaborate ‘theory of presence’ with each and every member of society related to each other and to Heaven, the Supreme Reality, in one glorious architectonic” (Magliola, 1984, p.90). In Neo-Confucian typology of the “above” and the “below”, we see the polarity between the Principle and the structure of external things in the following diagram:

Heaven-Principle	←	Dao Xin ^a	→	humanity-things
above the shape		↔		within the shape
Principle(lia)		↔		life-energy (<i>qi</i>)
substance (ti)		↔		instrument (<i>qi</i>)
universal		↔		concrete
nature		↔		yin-yang
quiescence (jingb)		↔		movement (<i>dong</i>)
unity		↔		multiplicity
mind		↔		body

In this Neo-Confucian distinction between “above” and “within” we find an attitude congenial to the reification and characteristic of totality of what we may call the “metaphysics of presence.” And also, we can find within the vocabulary of Neo-Confucianism terms that bear binary structures such as reason-emotion (*xing-qing*), body-mind (*xin-xing*), and Principle-ether (*li-qi*). However, it is misleading if we simply say Neo-Confucianism is a form of Platonic metaphysics, because many Neo-Confucians do maintain the dialectical relationship between the Principle and myriad things, between substance and function. Accordingly, the Principle is seen as both the primordial source and that which embraces all principles. In other words, “it is one but the manifestations are many” (*li yi fen shu*, Smith, al. 1990, p.174). This notion of many-in-one and one-in-many is also a key concept in Chinese Buddhism, especially in Hua Yan School, which has had a strong impact on the Neo-Confucian idea of the relationship between the Principle of Heaven-Earth and myriad things. If for Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, the One is still a name for the Principle world, the later Neo-Confucian thinkers after the *li xue* of Zhu Xi, such as Wang Fu-zhi (1619-93) and Yan Yuan (1635-1704), have replaced the One (the *Dao* or the Principle) with things in the world since they are more attracted to those that are “within the shape” in everyday affairs than were their predecessors. In his exposition of the relationship between the “above” and the “below” Wang Fu-zhi argues, “‘Above’ and ‘below’ are terms between which there is no fixed line of demarcation. ‘What is above shapes’ does not refer to an absence of shapes, but to the fact that there must be shapes before there can be ‘What is above shapes.’” If we probe into Heaven or Earth, man or other creatures, never, from antiquity until today, throughout all the myriad evolution, has ever been an ‘absence of shapes above’” (Fung, 1963, p. 643). In his modality of cosmology, Yan Yuan contends, “The two forces (*yin* and *yang*) and fours powers conform, oppose, combine, and penetrate one another; they mingle, interweave, influence, warm, transform, change, arouse, stimulate, condense, disperse, roll, and unroll” (Fung, 63, p. 638). Here again, we see a “fusion” of “above” and “within,” of the Principle (*li*) and things in the world (*xing*), although this fusion is articulated with a consciousness of difference. Therefore, the Neo-Confucian conception of “what is above the shape” is not simply a Platonic presence or a Cartesian *ego cogito* nor a merely corporeal body within the physical shape in a contemporary sense.

VI. CONCLUSION

As we have observed, *xiu shen* involves the physical well-being, ethical principles, and philosophical considerations. The Neo-Confucian discourse of *xiu shen* basically indicates a continuity of the Confucian understanding of the mind-body relationship in the light of human sensing, willing, knowing, and performing. The Neo-Confucian emphasis on *xiu shen* as a personal inner experience reinforces both the spiritual and pragmatic traditions in classical Confucianism.

Certain features in the Neo-Confucian concept of the body and its ethical sensibilities can be summarized as follows:

1. The human body is part of the onto-cosmological body that comprises the totality of Heaven-Earth, humanity, and myriad things;
2. The harmonious fit of one's body and mind is the goal of self-cultivation;
3. The temporality of the body requires the emphasis on every moment of existence and the fulfillment of one's duties in this life;
4. Experiencing and performing are the embodiment of the Dao;
5. The unity of the noumenal One to the phenomenal many is expressed in both the pattern of the Dao/Principle and its multiplicity implied in ethical principles in everyday life.

We should not be surprised if we find certain inconsistencies in Neo-Confucian thought because its immediate concerns and primary interests are ethical rather than logical. Though Neo-Confucians are attracted to such metaphysical inquiries as the Principle, the Supreme Ultimate, and internal cultivation, their fundamental concerns have never trespassed the realm of humanity. As Etienne Balazs, a French sinologist, once pointed out, "even when it [Confucianism] attempts to detach itself from the temporary world and arrives at some form of pure, transcendental metaphysics there can be no hope of understanding it without realizing its point of departure to which sooner or later it returns" (Tu, 1979, p.71).

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NOTES

- ¹ Confucianism refers to the teachings of Confucius (551-479 B.C.) and (Mencius 372-289 B.C.). Neo-Confucianism is also called the "learning of the Dao" (*dao xue*), or the "learning of the Principle" (*li xue*). The name itself suggests the linkage between the teachings of Confucius and Mencius and Neo-Confucian philosophy. In fact, Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism are virtually synonymous with traditional Chinese culture.
- ² Like Shao Yong, Wang Yang-ming claims, "The great man regards Heaven and Earth and myriad things as one body. He regards the world as one family and the country as one person." See Tu, 1979, p.80.
- ³ The term "body-person," or a "personal body," is a term coined by the Japanese philosopher, Ichikawa Hiroshi. See Shigenori Nagatomo, 1993, pp. 321-346.
- ⁴ For detailed a discussion, see Ann D. Birdwhistell's insightful interpretation in his
- ⁵ 1989.
- ⁶ See *Li Xue Zhuan Yao* by Jiang Bo Qian. Zheng zhong shu ju, Cheng Chung Book Company, 1982. pp.48-49.
- ⁷ Shao Yong's theories of eternal recurrence and quieting sitting are inspired by Buddhism. In fact, many ideas in Neo-Confucianism are influenced by Buddhism although some Neo-Confucian thinkers, especially those of the *lixue*, are quite reluctant to admit their connections to the Buddhist tradition.
- ⁸ The "mirror" is a symbol employed by Daoists, Chan Buddhists, and Neo-Confucianists. See Chan, 1973, p.207.
- ⁹ The *lixue* is also called a "rationalistic school" because of its strong critique of emotions. See Fung, 1973, Vol. 11, p.500.
- ¹⁰ The term *zhong yong* means literally "centrality and universality." It has been translated as the Mean, mean-in-action, moderation, the middle way, etc. The Doctrine of Means is an important philosophical work for Neo-Confucian thinkers. According to Zhu Xi, *zhong yong* indicates a position that should be neither one-sided nor extreme.
- ¹¹ In many aspects, the understanding of body and death in Daoist philosophy is similar to that of Neo-Confucians. In the Zhuang Zi, for instance, we read: "The universe carries us in our bodies, toils us through our life, gives us repose with our old age, and rests us in our death. That which makes our life a good makes our death a good also." See Fung Yu-lan's *Chuang-Tzu*, p.116.
- ¹² Later Neo-Confucian philosophers in the Qing Dynasty such as Wang Fu-zhi and Yan Fu prefer to use the terms "substance" (*ti*) and function (*yong*) to deploy the basic notion that Principle is one but also expressed by many. While *ti* signifies the intrinsic qualities of a thing, *yong* refers its extrinsic manifestations. In the realm of ethics, *ti* indicates the inner value of humanity (*ren*), whereas *yong* stands for its functions and practice (*yiyi*).

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