
CHAPTER 1

Song Dynasty Neo-Confucianism

The intellectual movement known as Neo-Confucianism, begun in the eleventh century, developed one of the most sophisticated formulations of self-cultivation in the history of humanistic education. After looking at its historical background, I will treat the three components that made its doctrines new: (1) the reshaping of what constituted the Confucian canon of texts; (2) the metaphysical assumption that there are underlying principles existing independently of the knower, in all things, affairs, and our innately good human nature; and (3) an elaborated program of self-cultivation. The remarkable Song dynasty synthesis of these three components defining how to live humanely changed organically within the institutions of imperial China until the fall of China's last dynasty in 1911.

Historical Background: Classical and Imperial Confucianism

Confucius (551–479 BCE) witnessed the death throes of aristocracy in ancient China. His teachings called for an aristocracy of moral merit or talent to replace the anarchic feuding of small states that was beginning the Warring States Period (479–221). But instead the Qin (pronounced “chin”) state, which gave China its name in the West, gobbled up its competitors “as a silkworm consuming mulberry leaves.” The political philosophy of legalism that enabled the first emperor of Qin to force unification in 221 BCE explicitly rejected the system of aristocratic inheritance, but it was unlike Confucian doctrine in its reliance upon ruthless authority.

While politically chaotic, the Warring States Period was so culturally productive that it became informally called the Period of the One Hundred Schools of Thought. The political and social disruptions of the many contending states brought forward a number of thinkers, most of whom were wrestling with the confusion of a disintegrating

social order. Confucius himself never held office long enough during those unstable times to convince a potentate officially to implement his ideas in even one small state, but his seventy-two immediate disciples began a lineage of ideas that has not gone away. When Confucius died it appears he felt his life and work had been ineffective, and he seemingly had no sense that his analysis of human nature would be of such lasting value to individuals and rulers thereafter. Then, about one hundred years following China's forced unification in 221 BCE, Confucian ethics were stretched to become an imperial political ideology under the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), and dynastic governments thereafter found it useful to reassert this form of imperialized Confucianism down to the twentieth century.

Confucius taught any serious student, no matter his social background, during his long life, but the master-disciple relationships he established did not leave written texts from the hand of the Master. It is assumed that Confucius' most senior disciple, Zengzi (or possibly another protégé), began soliciting Confucius' sayings from other followers after his death, thereby preserving his teachings. This process did not end with the original disciples, and a composite text was expanded for some 150 years by the Confucian school in the Master's home state of Lu. Some of the exchanges recorded in the collection, called the *Analects* in English (taken from the Greek *analekta*, or selections), are between accomplished disciples. Zengzi was later credited with also writing a philosophic commentary on the short classic the *Great Learning*, which, over a millennium later, became the single most important work in Neo-Confucian education.

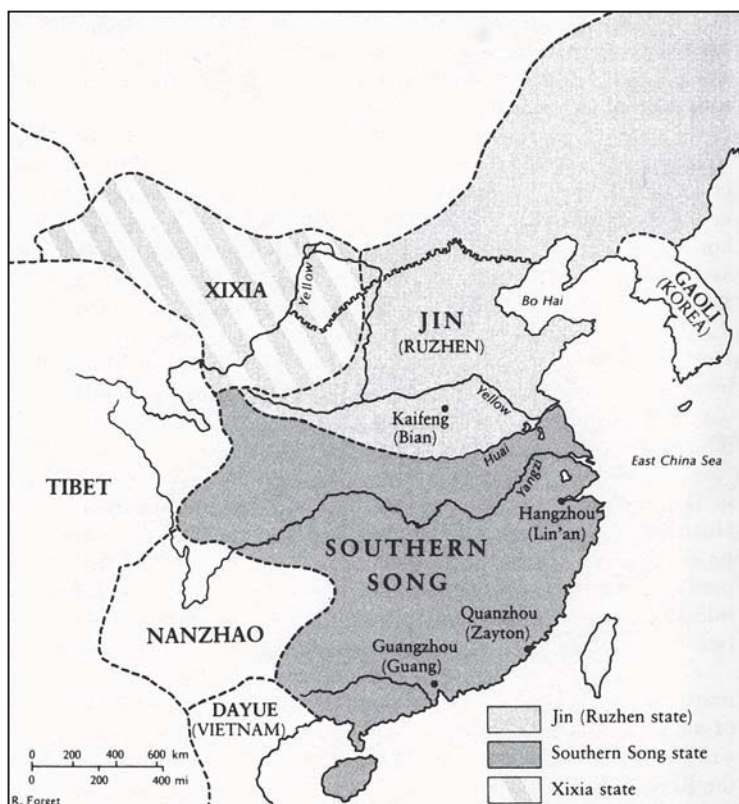
Zengzi also apparently took on the responsibility of educating Zisi (d. 402 BCE), Confucius' grandson, since Confucius' son had preceded him in death. The grandson was traditionally said to have led the continuing Confucian School in the third generation after the death of Zengzi. Newly excavated texts attributed to the grandson and his followers suggest a continuing connection directly to the great Confucian thinker Mengzi, who lived 150 years after Confucius. This systematic thinker, known as Mencius in the West, wrote a clear volume called *Mencius* that developed Confucian ethics and also became a significant source of inspiration for Neo-Confucians.

Imperial Confucianism as an official ideology in the Han dynasty

was formulated to both justify and make more functional the concentrated power of the empire's small elite. But to do so it added supernatural ideas to the largely personal ethics of Confucius that he himself would not have recognized. These changes were hoped to be useful in protecting bureaucrats from the despotic power of the royal family and the inner court attached to it, but the assumption that Heaven might send signs to indicate the justice or injustice of the emperor's policies was a political manipulation of original Confucian ideas. Despite such distortions, a lasting tradition began during the Han empire whereby a set of Confucian texts was used to prepare recruits to become officials. This formal training and selection of scholar-officials was reinforced again when the Sui-Tang (589–907 CE) dynastic unification reestablished the imperial state after a period of disunity. The first national civil service examination system based on a canon of Confucian texts was instituted in 606 CE. For the next thirteen hundred years the increasingly dominant means of social mobility in one dynasty after another was scholar-official status gained through the civil service examination system. This marriage of academic study and government service lasted until the abolition of the examination system in 1905.

Literati Enter Stage Right

What made the principled actors of the Neo-Confucian movement think they should have a role on China's national political stage? Zhu Xi's massive industry and intellect were indispensable in defining the movement, but let us note that he synthesized the philosophic accomplishments of five great Neo-Confucians who wrote during the one hundred years before Zhu's birth in 1130 CE. These five men were of the literati (*shi*) class and will be discussed further below. With no hereditary aristocracy making the transition from the Tang to Song society, many virtuous, learned men of the literati class took early opportunities to be heard solely on the merits of their ideas. But central government power soon intervened, and in the eleventh century the Five Masters found their writings proscribed by officials close to the emperor who attempted to institute a set of centralized reforms. These New Policies reforms, however, collapsed after only fifty years when a foreign people from the north, the Jurchens, overthrew the Song



The Southern Song and Jin (Ruzhen) empires in 1142. (Reprinted by permission of the publisher from *China: A New History*, by John King Fairbank, [Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press], 116, Copyright © 1992 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College)

dynasty in 1126, forcing the government's disastrous retreat from the Chinese capital of Kaifeng behind the protective moats of the Huai and Yangzi Rivers to Hangzhou (Lin'an) in the south (see map).

The court of the reestablished Southern Song felt forced to accept the Jurchen conquerors' claim to northern China, but this policy decision made many Neo-Confucian literati dig in their heels in resistance to the court's capitulation to the invaders. The Neo-Confucians were politically conservative in resisting the authority of the Southern Song because they based their opposition on a larger conception of the em-

perorship that had been in existence since the founding of the Song: Neo-Confucians saw Confucius' compilation of *The Spring and Autumn Annals* in his lifetime as proof that he believed informed moral learning should challenge and replace rule based on power alone. The *Annals* were read as demonstrating that Confucius believed the earliest states at the origins of Chinese civilization (preceding Confucius) had collapsed because sages were not in power. This line of argument, applied to the present, justified the leadership of virtuous literati as alternative voices to the absolute authority claimed by an emperor who, they added, had been justified solely on a presumed mandate from Heaven that was, in fact, simply hereditary rule.

This political position implied that all emperors were obligated to self-cultivate and attempt to reach sagehood for the good of everyone. Since most emperors in the past had not developed moral authority through self-cultivation and had illicitly claimed to possess a continuing mandate from the founder of their dynasties, they actually were more or less managers who received the support of the people according to their competence. Notice also that Neo-Confucian literati might well qualify for elite political status without office under this argument because of their personal moral development. The political position of the Neo-Confucians during the Southern Song was that scholar-official government should replace the imperial ideal and that effective social transformation should legitimately take place in strong local communities under literati leadership.

What Was New in Neo-Confucianism?

The Five Masters of the Northern Song (before the government was forced southward by invaders) — Zhou Dunyi (1010–1073), the brothers Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, their uncle Zhang Zai, and their close friend Shao Yong (1011–1077) — were scholars committed to personal learning over their own eminence in public office. Their teachings, which were consolidated by the great Southern Song sage and scholar Zhu Xi two generations later, were the basis of the three traits that typified the origins of Neo-Confucianism: (1) the reshaping of what constituted the canon of Confucian classics; (2) the philosophical doctrine that added metaphysical ideas to classical Confucian thought; and (3) an elaborated program of self-cultivation.

While Zhu's work in merging the Five Masters' positions, along

with his own teachings, influenced many literati of his generation to shift to the Neo-Confucian position, one acquaintance, Lu Xiangshan (1139–1193), differed with Zhu on important details of doctrine, and that difference perpetuated itself as a separate current within the Neo-Confucian mainstream (discussed below).

The Reshaped Canon of Classics

In defining which texts would constitute the orthodox Confucian canon, Neo-Confucian scholars added the Four Books as equal in importance to the Five Classics, which had been the voice of Confucian ethics for the preceding thousand years. The *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing*), the *Classic of Documents* (*Shujing*), the *Classic of Odes* (*Shijing*), the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*), and the *Record of Rites* (*Liji*) were considered authoritative statements of philosophy, history, poetry, and ritual. The four “new” classics — the *Great Learning*, the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Mean* — represented a shift away from values derived from ritualized social practice and toward an emphasis on the innate sources of human morality. The Four Books allowed, and even encouraged, a natural focus on the moral and spiritual development of a person. As systematized by Zhu Xi, the books were meant to be read sequentially, and he appended commentaries explaining the meaning of every important passage: a student should first read the *Great Learning*, then the *Analects*, then the *Mencius*, and finally the *Mean*.

The first of the Four Books, the *Great Learning*, had originally been tucked away as chapter 42 of the *Record of Rites* during the classical era. Only about one page long, this insightful text succinctly connected personal cultivation to good governance. By reading it first, students were able to learn the outline of how self-cultivation could lead to peace in the world. The original text as found in the *Record of Rites* had explanatory commentary on only six of the eight steps that connected personal cultivation to world peace, but Zhu boldly took guidance from the writings of Cheng Yi to add a chapter to the original commentary of Confucius’ disciple, Zengzi. Some Neo-Confucians at the time did not accept this elaboration on the text and commentary of an ancient classic because it altered the meaning of the text. But the *Great Learning* with Zhu’s additional commentary

nevertheless remained the touchstone for self-cultivation to most later Neo-Confucians.

In the *Analects*, the next book in the sequence, students found moral examples in dialogue form that were easily accessible by simply assuming the role of one participant in a conversation. Confucius adapted his advice to the learning styles of different disciples in a very personal way. For example, once, in giving contradictory answers to the same questions, Confucius explained, “Ranyou is diffident, and so I urged him on. But Zilu has the energy of two, so I sought to rein him in” (*Analects* 11.22). Students therefore could easily relate to these first-person stories of live interactions. Cheng Hao had taught in the Northern Song that Mencius’ brilliant statements could not serve the needs of novice ethics students as well as the personal stories in the *Analects* did — those stories demonstrated how Confucius’ disciples actually worked on self-cultivation each day.

Perhaps more importantly, the incisive comments of the Master to his students in the *Analects* made the book particularly appropriate for a personalized understanding by a new reader. As comments in the text were addressed to the moral development of disciples, student readers in any era could take the place of the original disciples, and the passages then applied to the new students. It was also true that the perceptive comments about human nature made by Confucius and his followers took on different meanings depending on the life experience a reader brought to the text. The humility clearly evident in Confucius himself provided a constant model for Neo-Confucian readers of how correctly to reveal one’s innate moral potential.

Within the pages of the *Mencius*, on the other hand, a student found political advice. Here Mencius actually interviewed kings in at least three of the Warring States about 150 years after the death of Confucius and sternly advised that humaneness and rightness, as built-in capacities of the human condition, are superior to profit or power and thus would develop into a more lasting strength for a political leader. Mencius argued that a selfish, power-hungry monarch would in turn model raw ambition and covetousness for lower officials, thus fostering disloyalty. Similarly, the monarch’s neglect of the needs of the people could lead to righteous rebellion. The autocratic first emperor of the Ming dynasty (r. 1368–1399) could not tolerate the criticism implicit in this

classic, so he censored eighty-five passages in the *Mencius* to remove them from view of his scholar-officials. Such an action worked for his reign, but the passages were restored some fifteen years after his death.

The *Mean*, the final book in the sequence, was more advanced than the other three books of the basic Neo-Confucian canon. Ideally, by the time students had applied the *Mean* to their lives, deceit or falsity should have been removed from their behavior. The *Mean's* perceptive use of metaphors makes it the most philosophically inspiring of the Four Books. The morally exemplary person is portrayed in the *Mean* as having realized his inner nature and having achieved a level of spiritual development in which that person is able to commune with nature. The *Mean* alone develops overarching issues such as the cosmic connections of Heaven and Earth to sage-like conduct.

Beyond the Four Books, there were two earlier classics considered important in Neo-Confucian training, the first being one of the above-mentioned Five Classics, the *Classic of Changes*. Its text marshaled the wisdom of former sages to help readers understand one's proper response to a specific situation. The second book, the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli*), was assumed in the Song era to be the actual composition of the Duke of Zhou, who was the brother of King Wu (the Zhou took over China in 1045 BCE) and who had selflessly mentored his nephew for seven years as heir-apparent when King Wu died. Various anthologies were also important in the process of Neo-Confucian education.

Neo-Confucian Thought

The addition of metaphysical ideas is the second trait defining Neo-Confucianism. Here a discussion of philosophy is necessary to clarify Neo-Confucian innovations. The reshaping of the classical Confucian canon was initiated by a group of eleventh-century scholars who advocated the Learning of the Way (Daoxue). According to Cheng Yi, it was his older brother, Cheng Hao, who first realized that the ancient classics revealed metaphysically real principles in the world, and it was their uncle, Zhang Zai, who analyzed the dynamics of material force and pointed out that the "principle" (*li*) embedded in matter could be revealed with careful investigation carried out by human learning.

The Neo-Confucian assumption regarding the existence of principle was simple: there is a reason why all things are as they are. Be-

cause every object, relationship, and political interaction can also have a reason for why it is as it is, the notion of principle exists everywhere in the universe. The pattern, or web, of principles underlying things and events constitutes a coherent and orderly whole, and that order in the cosmos is shared because all things have principles; while principle is one, its manifestations are many.

Mainstream advocates of the Learning of the Way provided a metaphysical underpinning to classical Confucian ethics, but the moral principles presumed to be innate in our natures were always embedded in *qi*, or material force. *Qi* can be conceived as matter that includes the energy contained within that matter. I do not mean to say that these thinkers were precursors of Albert Einstein's equation of energy and matter, but only that they saw in matter what can be called a dynamic or material force. The quality of the material force endowed in us at birth is different in each person, but it could be refined to make our innate moral principles more accessible. Moral learning and regular self-cultivation can increasingly put us in touch with the original nature in us all — the pure principle that we all share in our natures at birth.

Many of the formulators of Neo-Confucianism took seriously in their own lives the indigenous Chinese philosophic and religious school of Daoism, as well as the imported religion of Buddhism, which came from India to China about 100 CE. Modern scholars of philosophy have demonstrated that the earlier Daoist vocabulary used to translate Buddhist terms from Sanskrit into Chinese resulted in significant changes to Buddhism called Sinified Buddhism. In particular, the Indian Buddhist understanding of the ignorance that the "self" imposes on the illusory reality of things in the world did not survive being filtered through the Daoist vocabulary in China. One result was that the popular Chan (Japanese Zen) school of Chinese Buddhism in the Song dynasty assumed a very un-Indian conception of eliminating selfish and false understandings so that one might *reveal one's innate and perfect Buddha-nature* that lay within human nature.

The effect of this indirect Daoist influence on Confucianism was possible because of the popularity of Chinese Buddhism among Chinese intellectuals. Human nature in Neo-Confucianism was formulated as having two fundamental aspects: a pure and original mode of

the mind that Chinese Buddhists called one's Buddha-nature, and an adulterated mode of mind that Neo-Confucians called one's material nature, as opposed to one's original nature. Neo-Confucians reread the ancient Confucian texts in order to detect these newly added distinctions, so the task of self-cultivation became to refine one's material nature to recover the more pure form underneath.

Zhu Xi cited the "Counsels of the Great Yu" passage from the *Classic of Documents*, respected by his Northern Song mentors, to drive home the distinction between the mind of the Way (*dao xin*) and the human mind (*ren xin*). Zhu cited this sixteen-word formula in his "Preface to the *Mean*," even though he suspected that someone had forged the passage found in the Old Text version of the *Classic of Documents* that had supposedly been rediscovered in the fourth century. The passage clarified the new epistemology of principle.

The human mind is precarious,
The mind of the Way is barely perceptible.
Be discriminating, be one [with the mind of the Way,]
Hold fast the Mean!¹

While not specific in how to gain the more pure learning, the opening lines of the formula make clear that common apprehension through the human mind would not always expose the full nature of reality.

However, there was a prominent dissenter from Zhu Xi's philosophical position at that time. Lu Xiangshan, an awe-inspiring Neo-Confucian lecturer and acquaintance of Zhu, argued that the "Counsels of the Great Yu" passage reflected the influence of Laozi, the patriarch of Daoism, rather than Confucius. Lu maintained that the very idea of the mind-and-heart being split into adulterated and pure forms did not agree with the other ideas attributed to Confucius by his disciples. Lu did not reject the idea of principle; rather, he saw it simply as inherent in our functioning mind-and-heart (*xin*). He took the position that looking inward by "establishing the will" (or establishing resolve, *zhi*) would allow us to know principle without creating the epistemological dualism of somehow having two ways of knowing. His argument became an undercurrent that thereafter continued to tug at the ebb and flow of the tides of Neo-Confucianism.

Around 1500 Lu's position melded with Wang Yangming's Learning of the Mind-and-Heart school, which explicitly stated that principle

was not to be sought in things but in one's own mind. While endorsing the recovery model that conceived of moral goodness as inherent in us at birth, Wang differed from Zhu Xi on the nature of knowledge. Access to innate goodness, Wang believed, did not come from the cumulative investigation of the many principles in external things. A moral value like filial piety was, after all, in one's mind-and-heart instead of in external things, so focusing on the mind-and-heart was the way to find principle. The charismatic teachings of Wang Yangming (often then called the Lu-Wang school) spread through popular assemblies and public meetings attended even by farmers, who were of quite a different background from the Song-period literati. Before long the court closed academies promoting this popular movement because it threatened to become an alternative center of authority to governmental power.

Neo-Confucianism as a label defines a cumulative tradition built upon principles that were new in the eleventh century. The tradition was more elastic than the dominant Cheng-Zhu Learning of the Way (Daoxue) faction, and the Lu-Wang faction singled itself out by its new epistemology. However, the Cheng-Zhu faction remained the dominant interpretation of Neo-Confucianism as later dynasties made it orthodoxy, and its self-cultivation methods sought to locate the patterns or principles that exist independently of human intentions or even consciousness. It declared that after true ethical classics had been composed in ancient China, all literate people were provided with a means of tapping into the principles of moral knowledge that are part of our human nature; and people of later eras could access those principles through the Four Books and the Five Classics. One consequence of this argument was that the culture that existed when the ancient classics were written did not itself have to be replicated, as long as the classics, as part of the process of self-cultivation, gave people access to the moral principles innate in each of us.

Newly Excavated Texts. Recently, a new archaeological dimension to arguments has emerged regarding the influence of Chinese Buddhism, with its Daoist assumptions, on Neo-Confucian philosophy. The excavation from 1973 to 1993 of several lost Confucian texts dating from the classical era supports the indigenous presence in the classical era of some Neo-Confucian ideas. These entombed texts corroborate the

argument that in the late Warring States era Confucians described sages with access to atemporal natural patterns (*tiandao*) that could be parallel to the Neo-Confucian assumption of innate principles in human nature.

The director of the Institute of History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, Li Xueqin, argued in print from 1997 to 1999 that the excavated texts supported the claim that the *Great Learning* was written by Zengzi, the same senior disciple of Confucius whom Zhu Xi credits with authoring the *Great Learning* commentary. The institute director also claimed that the new texts confirmed that Zisi, Confucius' grandson, had authored the *Mean*. Both the *Great Learning* and the *Mean* were elevated to canonic status when Zhu included them among his Four Books in the founding of Neo-Confucianism.

It was Cheng Yi, a progenitor of Neo-Confucianism, who had argued that Zengzi alone stood out among the immediate disciples of Confucius and understood the inner meaning of the Master's message. Certain founders of Neo-Confucianism were made to look prescient by the excavated finds. Zhu Xi also celebrated the role of Zengzi in his preface to the *Great Learning* in the following way.

No doubt, among the three thousand disciples of Confucius, none failed to hear his teachings, but it was only Zengzi who got the essential message and wrote this commentary to expound its meaning. Then, with the death of Mencius, the transmission vanished. This work [the *Great Learning*] survived, but few understood it. . . . The virtuous power of the Song Dynasty rose up, and both government and education shone with great luster, whereupon the two Cheng masters of Henan appeared and connected up with the tradition from Mencius [that had been long broken off]. The first truly to recognize and believe in this work, they expounded it to the world and further rearranged the fragmented text so as to bring out its essential message. With that, the method whereby the ancients taught men through the *Great Learning* with the guidance of the classic text of the Sage [Confucius] and the commentary of the Worthy [Zengzi], was once again made brilliantly clear to the world.²

Further, several scholars of the excavated texts believe today that some of the tomb findings can be attributed to the school of Zisi even

though he may not have been the specific writer of those texts. One such text, titled *The Five Kinds of Action* (*Wuxing*), now appears to be one of the earliest known Confucian works; it could date from just after the earliest chapters of the *Analects*. A tomb that was closed in 300 BCE contained a copy of *The Five Kinds of Action*, and there is now broad agreement that the text predates the life of Mencius. As late as the Northern Song there existed a collection of writings attributed to Zisi that may well have contained *The Five Kinds of Action*. The late-Qing scholar Huang Yizhou (1828–1899) has shown that this collection disappeared during the Southern Song when Zhu Xi lived.

The set of ancient texts excavated from 1973 to 1993 addressed the mind-and-heart (*xin*) as well as the qualities that are inherent in human nature at birth (*xing*), two subjects that were heavily emphasized by the Song Neo-Confucians. This philosophically “inner” orientation was viewed in the eleventh century as a radical innovation in the thought of the Cheng brothers and later Zhu Xi, yet we now know it linked the brothers and Zhu with what appears to be one current of ideas in classical Confucian thought.

The following citation from *The Five Kinds of Action* connects not only to what Mencius would soon say in ancient China, but also to the similar points Neo-Confucians reasserted fifteen hundred years later. In these passages the encompassing fifth kind of action, sagacity, is not yet included in the discussion of the other four: humaneness, rightness, ritual, and wisdom.

- [16.1] To see [the exemplary person’s Way] and know it, is wisdom.
To know it and be settled in it is humaneness.
To be settled in it and apply it is rightness.
To apply and show respect is ritual.
- [16.2] Humaneness and rightness are that from which ritual is born.
- [16.3] This is harmonizing of the four kinds of action.
They harmonize and then they are made the same.
They are made the same and then there is goodness.³

The parallel later is clear. In the opening sentences of the preface to the *Great Learning* Zhu Xi cites Mencius, noting, “When Heaven gives birth to the people, it gives each one, without exception, a nature of humaneness, rightness, ritual, and wisdom.”

While there is still no conclusive proof that Zengzi wrote the com-

mentary to the *Great Learning*, three key ideas in the *Great Learning*—cultivating one's person (*xiu shen*), renewing the people (*xin min*), and vigilant solitariness (*shen du*)—also appear in the texts excavated from the two tombs between 1973 and 1993 and are now commonly attributed by scholars to Zengzi's student, Zisi. Given the Neo-Confucian focus on the *Great Learning*, the *Mencius*, and the *Mean*, it is not surprising that the new texts have stimulated renewed discussion and affirmation of the indigenous origins of some Neo-Confucian ideas.

These textual finds from classical China do not by themselves eliminate the possibility of Buddhist and Daoist influences on either the metaphysics or the epistemology of Neo-Confucians. However, the attribution of universals singled out by early Neo-Confucians to classical Confucian texts, and then the discovery of those ideas described as innate in newly excavated classical texts, raises the question of the indigenous origins of Neo-Confucian ideas to be further explored by future scholarship and perhaps future excavation.

Self-Cultivation

The third trait defining Neo-Confucianism is an elaborated program for self-cultivation. The *Mencius* text, established by Zhu Xi as one of the Four Books, claimed that inherent in human nature are the sprouts, or capacities, to develop into four lived moral values: humane-ness, rightness, ritual, and wisdom. But Zhu reread Mencius in his own way. Instead of a developmental model in which nurturing is necessary to make sprouts grow, Zhu claimed our "original nature" could release these same moral values or principles if the material force in which they were embedded could be refined in each of us. Self-cultivation through moral learning consistently clarifies the material force, *qi*, in which are embedded all principles of our original nature. Principle then can start to shine through our material nature.

The human capacity to transform our physical nature in this way is not shared by, for example, dogs or horses. Horses, bees, and other animals reflecting social behavior were considered by Zhu to have the same principle in their natures, but they were also assumed to have no way to refine the physical matter obscuring and blocking it. Without self-cultivation to refine their *qi*, other animals, unlike humans, are unable to reveal principle in their natural endowment.

Once we actually recognize principle in ourselves, Zhu felt, we also

activate that moral principle in our behavior. Zhu composed his own chapter of commentary explaining the recognition (or investigation) of things (*ge wu*) in the *Great Learning*, and that explanation became the starting point for the Eight-Step path of development for the morally exemplary person. These sophisticated steps to self-cultivation went beyond intellectual mastery of texts to include demonstrable changes in conduct and became a lasting legacy of Song Confucian thought. Even Qing dynasty Confucians (writing in the period from 1700 to 1900) who did not accept humaneness and goodness as ready-made in human nature still relied upon active training in self-cultivation to create personal actions that would build these qualities into our conduct.

Living with reverence for one another is essential to living a life of self-cultivation. Huang Gan (1152–1221), the disciple and son-in-law of Zhu Xi, stated that “abiding in reverence” was the basis of all self-cultivation. To Neo-Confucians the core meaning of reverence (*jing*) was single-mindedness, but it was easily generalized to mean moral seriousness, or what is inside us that allows respect to be expressed externally to others.

It should be noted that transformation through reverent interpersonal relationships extended explicit references to self-cultivation by other simple techniques in the passages of the *Analects*. Ritual, for example, had long been a key to self-cultivation among the immediate disciples of Confucius. The archaic written character that denoted ritual, or ritual propriety, *li* (禮), suggested what ancient shamans assumed to be a one-to-one response from the spirits in their religious ceremonies: an offering is over a fire, and on the left is the radical (or meaning unit) for spirits. But the meaning of the ceremonial word was clearly moral by the time Confucius used it, as any spirits and ghosts were kept at a distance in early Confucian teaching. The deep respect or reverence needed during the ceremony, for example, of an ancestral sacrifice became a virtue in itself. As Confucius worded it, “What could I see in a person who . . . in observing ritual propriety is not respectful, and who in overseeing the mourning rites does not grieve?” (*Analects* 3.26). The key to making rituals function effectively was always the presence of voluntary, self-generated respect. To the question “As for the young contributing their energies when there is work to be done, and deferring to their elders when there is wine and

food to be had — how can merely doing this be considered filial?” came the answer from the Master: “It all lies in showing the proper countenance (*Analects* 2.8).”

As a kind of case study, Neo-Confucians analyzed the incomplete journey toward sagehood of the Master’s favorite student in the *Analects*. It was clear that Hui (pronounced “whey”) had not gotten as far as he could have on his moral quest, yet he had been so promising that his premature death left Confucius distraught for over a year. One way that Neo-Confucians explained the student’s shortcoming was that, unlike Confucius, Hui had relied too heavily on external techniques of self-cultivation. What was missing, the Neo-Confucians assumed, was “getting it oneself” (*zide*); that is, Hui exhibited model behavior when among others, but he had not fully internalized the transformative power of moral values so that he could continue to develop spiritually.

The Neo-Confucians believed that self-cultivation should access one’s inner moral potential. Zhu Xi combined the exhaustive search for that potential with abiding in reverence in one’s relationships, and the most efficient way to recognize moral principle was serious study of the reshaped canon of classics. Reverential relationships and extracting moral principle from the classics defined a two-pronged program for self-cultivation, and the focus of both practices was the internalization of one’s increasing moral knowledge so it would be naturally externalized in one’s renewed behavior. This form of self-cultivation was preserved as the basic insight of Song Neo-Confucianism — even after nineteenth-century Confucians no longer highlighted the Neo-Confucian doctrine of metaphysical principles. As the program of self-cultivation is an essential component of Neo-Confucianism with a lasting legacy, it is the basic theme of the middle chapters of this book.

Song-period Neo-Confucians agreed that self-cultivation was essential to leading a moral life. Our moral action springs from a mind-and-heart that is clearly aware of principle. Moral principle itself is directly accessible from the lessons of the ancient sages and ethical worthies who composed the Four Books, and that study was one fundamental way to self-cultivate. The process of learning, however, should also connect everyday behavior to our innate goodness. Thus moral principle should also come through contact with the practical affairs of the world, and most immediately through respectful interac-

tion with other people. Realizing our moral potential as human beings means treating others humanely, doing what is morally appropriate, conducting relationships with the reverence of ritual propriety, and acting with the wisdom that distinguishes right from wrong. The life-long program of learning to realize this human potential begins and ends with a systematic program of Neo-Confucian education, which is the subject of the next chapter.