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## **Confucian Education: A Moral Approach**

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*Abstract: The revival of the shuyuan (academy) tradition during the Song dynasty was an important step in the neo-Confucian revival. Its leading exponent, Zhu Xi, taught that the health of society rested on moral and spiritual education. The author details Zhu Xi's prescriptions for literary study as a means of ethical development.*

Chinese intellectuals of the early twentieth century, under the influence of the Western spirit of science and democracy, severely criticized Confucian education as antiquarian, pseudoscientific and unable to meet the needs of modern society. Western scholars such as Max Weber and Joseph Levenson likewise decried Confucian education as aiming at nothing more than "cultivating a well-adjusted man who rationalized his conduct only to the degree requisite for adjustment." Confucian education, in this view, "sought to create a nonprofessional free man...of high culture, free of impersonal involvement in a merely manipulative system." (1) Despite these assaults, and despite the later attacks on the Confucian system during the Communist period, Confucian education never disappeared entirely, as evidenced by the presence of the Confucian *shuyuan* (academies) in various parts of Asia inside and outside of the Chinese mainland. (2)

During the last three decades, meanwhile, scholars in their assessment of education in general have argued that Confucian education has something to offer to modern education. Xinzhong Yao states:

*The purpose of Confucian education is not only to transmit and develop knowledge, but also to deliver and apply values. Confucian learning is seldom meant to be merely a scholarly exercise. It has a wide practical extension and employees tools to help students put into practice the doctrinal understanding of family, community and society: the core of values fostering a spirit of self-discipline, family solidarity, public morality and social responsibility. (3)*

In other words, Confucian education is moral education but one not devoid of scientific spirit. It leads the individual toward self-realization, which is to say, to becoming fully human through embodiment of the qualities of *neisheng* (inner sageliness) and *waiwang* (outer kingliness). For that reason, modern education could derive benefit from the still vital attitudes and values of Confucian tradition.

In exploring the potential benefit, it will be useful to review the career and educational philosophy of the neo-Confucian Zhu Xi [Chu Shi] (1130-1200), whose importance in the Confucian tradition ranks only after that of Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.) and Mencius (372-239 B.C.E.) I will begin with a brief overview of Zhu Xi's life (4) and his time to set the context before proceeding to a discussion of his influence on the revival of the shuyuan tradition. I will pay attention especially to his association with the Bailudong shuyuan (White Deer Hollow Academy), and his recommended method of study by

reading. I draw my view of Zhu Xi as an educator primarily from his *jieshi* (literally, “posted notice”) and the *Bailudong shuyuan* and from his *Zhuzi yulei* (*Conversations of Master Zhu, Arranged Topically*), Volume One, Chapters 10 and 11, which describe how students should study and the kind of mental preparation they should assume. (The *jieshi* are quoted below in full.)

### **Zhu Xi: The Man and His Time**

Zhu Xi was the most important figure in the revival of Confucianism during the Song dynasty (960-1279). He was born in 1130 into a poor family in Yuqi, Fujian Province, where his father served as district sheriff, a minor government post. Zhu, a precocious child, began his education at the age of five and subsequently spent more than ten years in various Daoist and Buddhist schools before returning to the Confucian fold. “From a Buddhist source we are told that when he went to take the [imperial] examination (5), he had in his traveling bag a book of collected sayings by the Buddhist priest Ta-Hui (1089-1163).” (6) Zhu’s early encounter with Daoism and Buddhism had, as we shall see later, a lasting impact on his own philosophy and on his educational methodology.

When Zhu was thirteen, his father died. On his deathbed, the elder Zhu expressed his wish that his son should study with three well-known scholars – Liu Zihui (1101-1147), Liu Mianzhi (1091-1149) and Hu Xian (1086-1162). Zhu honored his father’s wishes and made such a good impression on Liu Mianzhi that Liu subsequently offered Zhu his daughter in marriage. Zhu obtained his *jinshi* (presented scholar) degree, the highest a student could get in the imperial examination system, in 1148. Three years later he was appointed district keeper of records, a minor post, of Tongan County, Fujian. Zhu was a successful administrator. By the time he left this post in 1156, “he increased school enrollment to capacity, built a library, regulated sacrificial rites, enforced marriage ceremonies, strengthened the city’s defense, and built a memorial temple for a local worthy.” (7)

Beginning in 1160, Zhu also studied on a number of occasions with Li Tong (1103-1163), an authority on Confucianism. Li’s influence on Zhu was enormous; it was due to Li’s influence that Zhu abandoned his own interest in Chan (Zen) Buddhism and devoted himself to the study of Confucianism.

From 1148, when he received his *jinshi* degree, until his death in 1200, Zhu as a scholar-official held government office for only nine years. He spent only forty-six days at the imperial court, during which he lectured on the *Daxue* (*The Great Learning*), a book in the Confucian canon. In his lectures he repeatedly called upon the emperor to return to the Confucian Way, and he attacked some powerful officials for being corrupt. This was one cause of the termination of his political career in 1196.

Prior to 1196, however, government officials eagerly sought his service; yet Zhu repeatedly declined, claiming a foot ailment. Instead, he requested several times and eventually secured a temple guardianship – a sinecure from which he received a small stipend. The lack of an official position gave him time to teach, write and correspond

with many scholars. Zhu's action was highly unusual at the time when a government post ensured prestige and a substantial income.

Zhu was a prolific writer. He wrote, compiled and annotated almost 100 books in the fields of philosophy, religion, literature, history and biography, as well as epigraphs for some renowned Buddhist nuns and others. Among his works that continue to exert influence are the *Jiala (Family Rituals)* (8), which concerns the four basic Confucian rites of capping, wedding, funeral and sacrifice to ancestors; and the *Junsi lu (Reflections on Things at Hand)* (9), a neo-Confucian anthology compiled by Zhu and his friend Lu Zuqian (1137-1181), "giving in clear outline [neo-Confucianism's] doctrines of metaphysics, learning, ethics, literature, government and its evaluation of great men in Chinese history and of heterodox systems, notably Buddhism and Taoism." (10)

In his debates with other scholar-philosophers, Zhu the philosopher held on to his positions with tenacity and was unsparing in his criticism of opponents. Despite his formidable reputation, however, he always treated opponents with the deepest respect on a personal level. This was very much in evidence in his debate with his archrival Lu Xiangshan (1139-1193) at the Goose Lake Temple in 1175. They attacked each other's positions fiercely, yet, despite their disagreements, Zhu had deep personal respect for Lu throughout his life.

As a private person, Zhu had a lighter side. To the delight of his drinking companions and students but to the consternation of his friend Zhang Shi, Zhu would burst into song after a few cups of wine. Zhang advised him against this habit in a letter.

In 1196, four years before Zhu's death, an ongoing attack by government officials on neo-Confucianism in general, and on Zhu's teaching in particular, reached its apex. Officials sought to impeach him for what they called "false learning," and one, Yu Zhe, even petitioned the imperial court to have him executed. All efforts failed; however, the court granted Zhu's own request that his official title be removed, and he became an ordinary citizen. When he died in 1200, almost a thousand people attended his funeral. Nine years later the political situation changed, and "he was honored with the posthumous title of *wen* (culture). In 1230, He was given the title of State Duke of Hui, and in 1241 his memorial tablet was placed in the Confucian temple." (11)

Zhu entered the world at a chaotic time in the history of China. In 1127, three years before he was born, the Jurchens, a Turkish people of Central Asia, "swept over China proper without meeting much resistance." (12) At one point the invaders captured two important cities south of the Yangzi River, the present-day Nanjing and Hangzhou. However, the Song general Han Shizhong stopped the Hurchen advance in the early 1130s. In the meantime, a debate between two groups raged within the Song court. The so-called "Idealist" camp, composed of scholars, military commanders and students, argued for the continuance of war, while powerful politicians who belonged to the opposing "Realist" camp advocated negotiation for peace. In the ensuing struggle between the two camps, victory fell to the Realists, culminating in the execution of Yue Fei, an important Song general who had won many battles against the Jurchens. A new

peace treaty was negotiated. The Song court agreed to pay the Jurchens an annual tribute along with the cession of territories. Further, the Song court acknowledged the Jurchens “as its suzerain” and called itself a “vassal state.” (13)

With the subjugation of all of northern China by the Jurchens, the Song court was forced to move to Linan (now Hangzhou). The scholars were extremely unhappy with the foreign occupation of the north, and the government’s decision to sue for peace infuriated them all the more. While the Jurchen occupation represented a political and a territorial threat, for some, like Zhu Xi, the presence of the Jurchens also posed a more insidious cultural and moral challenge. (14) The Song court was weak and corrupt. Buddhism was challenging the Confucian Way. Zhu Xi believed that these pressures were evidence that China was in a state of “serious spiritual and moral malaise.” (15) Zhu Xi tried to find ways to remedy the situation by going directly to the throne. “In his three sealed memorials to the emperor in 1162, 1180 and 1188 and in the three audiences with the emperor in 1163, 1181 and 1188, he argued forcefully for political and moral reform.” (16) In response, the court summoned him to the capital and appointed him professor of the military academy. His efforts were, in the end, without success. Zhu Xi, however, “never lost faith that it was through education that the Way ultimately would be revived and customs reformed.” (17) To resuscitate the Great Way became his lifelong mission.

### **Zhu Xi and the Shuyuan Tradition**

The Chinese government’s involvement in establishing and maintaining educational institutions had a long history before the time of Zhu Xi. However, by the time of the Song dynasty, government support for local schools had declined drastically. Local schools, too, had failed to conform to the Confucian ideal in education. Thus when Zhu Xi was assigned as prefect to Nankang Prefecture (the present-day Zingzu County, Hiangxi Province) in 1179, he set out to revive the shuyuan tradition.

*Shuyuan* as a term first appeared in the eighth century. By the late Tang dynasty (618-906), private shuyuan had appeared all over China. But because the shuyuan were primarily private schools lacking sustained support and permanence as institutions, they too had declined by the twelfth century.

Zhu’s efforts in reviving the shuyuan tradition were closely related to his association with the Bailudong shuyuan, or White Deer Hollow Academy. Founded during Southern Tang (937-975), the academy was situated in a flat area on Lu Mountain in Jiangxi Province. Li Bo secluded himself there in retirement and raised white deer for amusement; hence the name. The White Deer Hollow Academy became one of the leading institutions on learning in Northern Song but was abandoned during the Southern Song (18). Shortly after he arrived in Nankang, Zhu sought out the original site of the academy and instituted an ambitious rebuilding program, which, for economic reasons, was scaled down later. In 1180, with five modest buildings, the academy opened its doors to students and scholars.

According to Wing-tsit Chan, the academy during the early Northern Song had “performed three functions, namely, teaching, preserving books, and sacrificing to Confucius and worthies” (19). Zhu Xi’s more ambitious program included instruction, collecting and preserving books, offering religious sacrifices, developing curricula, and engaging famous scholars to give lectures. Most important in establishing the influence of Zhu Xi and his academy in the revival of the shuyuan tradition was his *jieshi*, or proclamation, of what Chan has called the academy’s “Articles for Learning.” These articles, a compendium of quotations from ancient, largely Confucian, sources, read in full as follows:

*Between father and son, there should be affection.*

*Between ruler and minister, there should be righteousness.*

*Between husband and wife, there should be attention to their separate functions.*

*Between young and old, there should be proper order.*

*And between friends, there should be faithfulness (Book of Mencius, 3A:4).*

*The above are the items of the Five Teachings.*

*Study it extensively, inquire into it accurately, think it over carefully, sift it clearly, and practice in earnestly (Doctrine of the Mean, Ch. 20).*

*The above is the order of study.*

*Let one’s words be sincere and truthful, and one’s deeds be earnest and reverential (Analects, 15:5). Restrain one’s wrath and repress one’s desires. Move toward the good and correct one’s mistakes (Book of Changes, hexagrams 41 and 42).*

*The above are the essentials for self-cultivation.*

*Rectify moral principle and do not seek profit. Illuminate the Way and do not calculate on results (Tung Chung-shu, 176-104 B.C.E., in the Han shu [History of the Han Dynasty], SPTK ed., 56:12b).*

*The above are essentials for handling affairs.*

*Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you (Analects, 15:23). If you do not succeed in your conduct, turn inward and seek for its cause there (Book of Mencius, 4A:4).*

*The above are essentials for dealing with others (20).*

The articles were not meant to be rigid rules for students to follow. They were moral principles meant to guide students in self-cultivation. As such they were adopted by many other academies as their own. They express Zhu Xi’s belief that the aim of education should be the transformation and ultimate perfection of the self rather than mere preparation for the imperial examinations leading to the power and prestige of an official position. Here Zhu Xi followed Confucius, who remarked in the *Analects*, “Men of antiquity studied to improve themselves; men of today study to impress others” (21).

Zhu’s association with centers of learning, even before the revival of the White Deer Hollow Academy, had already been rather extensive. Now, “as a result of [his] efforts,

the shuyuan became a permanent feature of Chinese education, taking up the major responsibilities of local education” (22). The shuyuan also became centers for neo-Confucian learning, with a shared ideal and a coherent curriculum. Thus, the shuyuan and other centers of learning could also be viewed as tools which Zhu used to promulgate and implement his understanding of Confucianism.

### **Zhu Xi and Reading**

As a Confucian scholar and philosopher, Zhu Xi built his own thinking on the theory of *li* (principle), originally a Buddhist metaphysical concept. Li, according to Zhu, exists before heaven and earth and the myriad of things” (23). Through li and through material force, heaven and earth and all things, including human beings, come into existence” (24). This li is innate in human beings. “Hence what we called human nature is simply the Li of humanity that is inherent in the individual” (25). The heart/mind (*xin*), however, is not human nature. It is the embodiment of li and material force” (26).

There is a close relationship between Zhu’s ontological views—his understanding of principle (*li*), material force, the mind and human nature (27)—and his method of reading. This relationship underlies his practical recommendations for study through reading. Here I will highlight these recommendations as they appear in Chapters Ten and Eleven of the *Conversations of Master Zhu, Arranged Topically*.(28)

Chapter Ten opens with this statement: “Reading books is a secondary matter for students” (29). It “is of secondary importance” (30) because principle (*li*) is already inherent in humanity. Students need to read only because of their lack of experience and because books are records of experiences of the sages. Students should read in order to apprehend the *li* already in themselves, so that they will know how to conduct themselves in daily life. (31) In this way Zhu held that there was an intimate connection between intellectual activities and practical living.

Zhu Xi emphasized the importance of mental preparation for reading. Students must first establish a resolute will to learn: if they “do not have a resolute will, how can they [begin to] read?” (32) Next, the heart/mind must be calm; otherwise students will not be able “to see the principle [in what they read]” (33). To help students calm the heart/mind, he offered “quiet sitting,” a practice, though different in content, which Zhu probably inherited from his early experience with Chan Buddhism, which advocates sitting in meditation, and with Daoism, which teaches the practice of sitting and forgetting. He told Guo Deyuan, one of his students, to practice “a half day of quiet sitting and a half day of reading books” (34).

In reading, Zhu taught, it is also essential that students have an “open mind,” since preconceived ideas will prevent students from “seeing principle clearly” (35). One should “not allow one’s ideas to compromise the words of the sages and worthies” (36). To Zhu, “Reading is like asking about the affairs of another person. If you want to know what they are, you must ask the person in question” (37). Zhu also emphasized students’ willingness to deal with doubt. Credulous students should learn to doubt not only what

others have said but their own ideas as well. Skeptics, on the other hand, should get rid of their doubts. “When students arrive at this point, there is progress” (38).

Zhu did not stress quantity and speed in reading, but quality and thoroughness. Ideally, students should read the same book over and over. “There are differences between reading the book once and ten times” (39). He suggested that students should read “character by character, sentence by sentence, and section by section” (40) to ensure that they would comprehend thoroughly the explanations, the commentaries and the theories. He warned students not to neglect any commentaries on classic works; text and commentary he considered a single unit, and students must master them both to attain a thorough understanding. Further, students should pay attention to the context—what he called the “joints” and “cracks”—so that they would understand the thread of thought that runs through a text.

In stressing a deliberate pace, Zhu taught that students who could read “two hundred characters [a day]” should put their effort into reading only “one hundred” (41). In this way, individuals with a poor memory would thereby remember better what they had read, and those who knew few characters could take note of them” (42). He appeared to believe that all students, because all are endowed with *li*, could in due course master what they had read.

Furthermore, a slow pace would allow all students to think over what they had read. Zhu insisted that the meaning of the text would come only if students would “think if over after having read it, and would read it again after having thought it over” (43). In this regard he quoted Confucius: “One who learns from others but does not think will be bewildered. On the other hand, one who thinks but does not learn from others will be imperiled” (44). Zhu also advocated reading aloud in order to help students think through the text. But of students who only read the text out loud and would not think it through, he asked rhetorically, “How could they remember the finer points?” (45)

In advocating this method of reading, Zhu showed his displeasure with the reading habits of his contemporaries, whom he accused of skipping ahead and leaving books unfinished” (46). He likewise disdained the printing revolution, though he himself was engaged in the printing business in order to supplement the meager income from his temple guardianship. Because of the availability of books, he complained, students no longer took time to memorize texts. (Memorization, in the Confucian educational scheme, is not rote learning, because it leads to the internalization of a text, which in turn leads to the transformation of the self.)

Finally, Zhu Xi encouraged students to make a text “relevant to themselves,” (47) so that they could eventually embody its meaning. In this way, “they would get the meanings of the sages and the worthies...and the words of the sages and the worthies will no become empty talk” (48). Once they had become thoroughly conversant with a text, Zhu suggested that they read it less often but now repeatedly experience the text on a personal level in order to internalize it. Thus, Zhu suggested that before students began to read they set some boundaries and not desire immediate results, (49) since their proper goal in

reading should be the gradual accumulation of wisdom through apprehension of li, leading to self-realization. The reading of Confucian texts would be of no consequence if the li could not be comprehended. Once li was comprehended, books could be abandoned.

In order to help students as it were to capture li, Zhu laid out a comprehensive curriculum. He asked that students master first the Four Books (*Great Learning*, the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Doctrine of the Mean*) (50) in that order, before continuing to the five Classics (*Book of Changes*, *Book of History*, *Book of Poetry*, *Book of Rites*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*), the central authority in Confucian teaching. Once they had gained an apprehension of li and as a result an understanding of the Confucian way, students would be in a position to properly approach the study of history. Zhu recommended the *Records of the Grand Historian*, a work from the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.—20 C.E.), the *Zuo Commentary*, a commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government*, a work compiled by Zhu himself, and the dynastic histories.

Zhu Xi's prescription for the ailing empire, then, was a course of study that would ensure intellectual growth, vocational preparation, and above all the spiritual and moral development of the young. This conviction that moral education lay at the foundation of the health of society and the state became an article of faith for all Confucians. For Zhu Xi, only when self-transformation had occurred could social ill be remedied. When both private and public realms were in order, the Way would again be manifest within the anthropocosmic universe.

### Notes

- (1) *Xinzhong Yao*, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, p. 281.
- (2) *Ibid.*, pp. 276, 277.
- (3) *Ibid.*, p. 283
- (4) *The following are some of the best biographies of Zhu Xi: Wang Maohong, Zhuzi nianpu; Huang Gan, "Zhuzi xingzhuang," in Huang's collected work, Mianzhai ji; and Shu Jingnan, Zhuzi dazhuan, the most recent biographical work on Zhu Xi. For a brief account of Zhu's life, see Wint-tsit Chan, "Zhu Xi," in Wei Zhengton, ed., Zhongguo zhexue cidian dachuan. For an English account, see Wing tsit Chan, ed., Chu His and neo-Confucianism, pp. 595-600. (hereafter cited as Chu His.)*
- (5) *Zhu was then eighteen years old.*
- (6) *Wing-tsit Chan, Chu His: Life and Thought, p. 142. (hereafter cited as Life and Thought.)*
- (7) *Chu His, p. 595.*
- (8) *For the English edition of this book, see Patricia Buckley Ebrey, Chu His's Family Rituals.*
- (9) *For the English edition of this book, see Wing tsit-Chan, trans., Reflection of Things at Hand.*
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. ix.

- (11) Chu His, P. 600
- (12) *Dun J. Li, The Ageless Chinese, p. 217.*
- (13) *Ibid., P. 220.*
- (14) *Daniel K. Gardner, Chu Hsi: Learning to Be a Sage, p. 11. (Hereafter cited as Gardner.)*
- (15) *Ibid., p. 12.*
- (16) Chu His, p. 599.
- (17) *Gardner, p. 23.*
- (18) *See Life and Thought, Chapter 6, for details.*
- (19) *Ibid., p. 173*
- (20) *The English text is from Life and Thought, pp. 174, 175. For the Chinese text, see Bailudong shuyuan jieshi (Guan collection).*
- (21) *D.C. Lau, trans., Confucius: The Analects, Book XIV:2.*
- (22) *Thomas H.C. Lee, Government Education and Examinations in Sund China, p. 27.*
- (23) *For a detailed discussion of li, see Chu Hsi, pp. 116-137. see also Tomoeda Tyutaro, "The System of Chu His's Philosophy," *ibid.*, pp. 158-168.*
- (24) *Li Jingde, comp., Zhuzi yulei, vol. 1, p. 1.*
- (25) *Fung Yu-Lan, A Short History of Chinese Philosophy, ed. Derek Bodde, p. 301. See also A. C. Graham, "What Was New in the Ch'eng-Chu Theory of Human Nature?," in Chu His, pp. 138-157.*
- (26) *Ibid., p. 302.*
- (27) *See notes 22-25 for references.*
- (28) *For a partial translation of these two chapters, see Gardner, pp. 128-162.*
- (29) *Zhuzi yulei, p. 161.*
- (30) *Ibid.*
- (31) *Ibid., p. 162.*
- (32) *Ibid. p. 177.*
- (33) *Ibid*
- (34) *Life and Thought, p. 27.*
- (35) *Zhuzi yulei, P. 179.*
- (36) *Ibid., p. 185.*
- (37) *Ibid.*
- (38) *Ibid, p. 186.*
- (39) *Ibid, p. 168.*
- (40) *Ibid.*
- (41) *Ibid.*
- (42) *Ibid.*
- (43) *Ibid., p. 170*
- (44) *Ibid., p. 170 D. C. Lau, trans., Confucius: The Analects, Book II:15.*
- (45) *Ibid.*
- (46) *Ibid., p. 173.*
- (47) *Zhuzi yulei, p. 179.*
- (48) *Ibid.*
- (49) *Ibid., pp. 174, 164.*

(50) Since the Yuan dynasty these four volumes came to be collectively known as the Four Books. Both the Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean were originally two chapters in the Liji, the Book of Rites.

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