

On Translating *Taiji*

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Translations of texts and terms, especially across the great linguistic and cultural divide between Chinese and English, should always be subject to critical reevaluation and revised when necessary. The thesis of this chapter is that the time has come to jettison "Supreme (or Great) Ultimate" as a translation of Zhu Xi's concept of *taiji* and to replace it with a more meaningful term: "Supreme Polarity." The latter has the advantages of (1) conveying more specific content than "Supreme Ultimate" and thereby making more sense of Zhu Xi's discussions of *taiji*; (2) shedding light on Zhu Xi's understanding of *li* (pattern, principle, order), which he equated with *taiji*; and (3) linking these central philosophical terms with Zhu's personal history and religious *praxis*. Furthermore, this reinterpretation of *taiji* (4) helps to explain Zhu's otherwise surprising choice to elevate Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073) to the position of first true Confucian sage since Mencius, thus making Zhou a pivotal figure in Zhu Xi's construction of the "succession of the Way" (*daotong*), which eventually came to define both the canonical texts of the Cheng-Zhu "learning of the Way" (*daoxue*) and the Confucian orthodoxy endorsed by the state. This chapter will cover the first two of these points.¹

¹ I have discussed points (3) and (4) in "Zhu Xi's Spiritual Practice as the Basis of his Central Philosophical Concepts," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 7, 1 (March 2008): 57-79. For earlier discussions of *taiji* in English see Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, 2 vols., trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 2:435-38, 454-58, 534-42; Carsun Chang, *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought*, vol. 1 (New York: Bookman, 1957), 142-52, 258-60; Wing-tsit Chan, "Chu Hsi's Completion of Neo-Confucianism" (1973); rpt. in Chan, *Chu Hsi: Life and Thought* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1987), 113-19; Siu-chi Huang, "The Concept of *T'ai-chi* (Supreme Ultimate) in Sung Neo-Confucian Philosophy," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 1 (1974), 275-295; Yu Yamanoi, "The Great Ultimate and Heaven in Chu Hsi's Philosophy" and Teng Aimin, "On Chu Hsi's Theory of the Great Ultimate," both in *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism*, ed. Wing-tsit Chan (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986); Wing-tsit Chan, *Chu Hsi: New Studies* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), ch. 10; Julia Ching, *The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch. 2; Zhang Dainian, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Edmund Ryden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 179-89.

Zhou Dunyi's connection with Zhu Xi's use of the term *taiji* is well-known. The first half of Zhou's "Explanation of the *Taiji* Diagram" (*Taijitu shuo*), beginning with a supremely enigmatic exclamation, reads as follows (divided into sections for later reference):²

[A] Non-polar and yet Supreme Polarity (*wuji er taiji*)!

[B] The Supreme Polarity in activity generates *yang*; yet at the limit of activity it is still. In stillness it generates *yin*; yet at the limit of stillness it is also active.

Activity and stillness alternate; each is the basis of the other. In distinguishing *yin* and *yang*, the Two Modes are thereby established.

[C] The alternation and combination of *yang* and *yin* generate water, fire, wood, metal, and earth. With these five [phases of] *qi* harmoniously arranged, the Four Seasons proceed through them.

[D] The Five Phases are unified in *yin* and *yang*; *yin* and *yang* are unified in the Supreme Polarity; the Supreme Polarity is fundamentally Non-polar. [Yet] in the generation of the Five Phases, each one has its nature.³

[E] The reality of the Non-polar and the essence of the Two [Modes] and Five [Phases] mysteriously combine and coalesce. "The Way of *Qian* becomes the male; the Way of *Kun* becomes the female;"⁴ the two *qi* stimulate each other, transforming and generating the myriad things.⁵ The myriad things generate and

² Zhou Dunyi, *Taijitu shuo*, in *Zhou Lianxi xiansheng quanji* (Complete Collection of Master Zhou Dunyi, ed. Zhang Boxing (1708, hereafter cited as *Zhou Lianxi ji*), in *Zhengyi tang quanshu* (Library of Zhengyi Hall), Baibu congshu jicheng edition, 1:2a. All translation from this work are my own. See my full translation in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 673-76.

³ In other words: seen as a whole system, the Five Phases (*wuxing*) are based on the *yin-yang* polarity; the *yin-yang* polarity is the Supreme Polarity; and the Supreme Polarity is fundamentally non-polar. However, taken individually as temporal phases, the Five Phases each have their own natures (as do *yin* and *yang*).

⁴ *Yijing* (Scripture of Change), *Xici* (Appended Remarks), A.1.4; in Zhu Xi, *Zhouyi benyi* (Original Meaning of the *Zhou Yi*) (Taipei: Hualian, 1978), 3:1b. All translations from this work are my own. *Qian* and *Kun* are the first two hexagrams, symbolizing pure *yang* and pure *yin*, or Heaven and Earth, respectively.

⁵ Paraphrasing *Yijing*, *Tuan* commentary to hexagram 31 (*Xian*): "The two *qi* stimulate and respond in mutual influence, the male going beneath the female.... Heaven and Earth are stimulated and the myriad things are transformed and generated" (*Zhouyi benyi* 2:1a-b).

regenerate, alternating and transforming without end.⁶

Putting aside for the moment the difficulty of the first line, the gist of this philosophical cosmogony has been generally agreed upon since the twelfth century. It depicts a universal creative principle or force (*taiji*) that unfolds or evolves into a bipolar state of creative tension, which in turn further differentiates into the multiplicity of the phenomenal world, each particular entity of which is said to contain in full the original creative principle. The remaining portion of the text claims that human beings are endowed with the finest and most potent form of the fundamental psycho-physical-energetic stuff of the cosmos (*qi*), and that the "sage" represents the highest perfection of this moral, anthropocosmic potential. In Zhou's other major work, the *Tongshu* (Penetrating Writing, or Penetrating the *Yi*), he continues this line of argument by further developing the moral psychology of the sage, with important references back to the cosmology of the *Taijitu shuo*.⁷

The usual explanation for Zhu Xi's interest in the *Taijitu shuo* hinges on his claim, which he probably learned from his teacher, Li Tong (1093-1163), that "*Taiji* is simply a word for *li*."⁸ He takes great pains to stress also that *taiji* is not a thing: "*Taiji* is simply the principle of two *qi* and five phases; it is not a thing on its own."⁹ This means that *taiji* belongs to the realm "above form" (*xing'er shang*); it is metaphysical. The two modes of *qi* (*yin* and *yang*) and the Five

⁶ Cf. *Xici* A.5.6, "Generation and regeneration are what is meant by change (*yi*)" (*Zhouyi benyi* 3:6a).

⁷ Zhu Xi claimed that the original title of *Tongshu* was *Yitong* (Penetrating the *Yi*), and this has been accepted by most scholars because the text relies extensively on the *Yi*. Wing-tsit Chan, for example, translates *Tongshu* as "Penetrating the *Book of Changes*" (*A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963], 460). For Zhu Xi's argument see "*Zaiding Taiji Tongshu houxu*" (Postface to Revised *Taijitu shuo* and *Tongshu*), in *Hui'an xianxheng Zhu wengong wenji* (Master Zhu's Collected Papers, hereafter cited as *Wenji*), in *Zhuzi quanshu* (Zhu Xi's Complete Works; hereafter cited as *Zhuzi quanshu*), 27 vols., ed. Zhu Jieren, Yan Zuozhi, Liu Yongxiang (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 76: 3652. Zhu also argued that the *Tongshu* was essentially an expansion and explanation of the *Taijitu shuo*; see *Zhou Lianxi ji* 5:1a, 4a; and *Zhuzi yulei* (Master Zhu's Classified Conversations, hereafter cited as *Yulei*), comp. Li Jingde (1270), in *Zhuzi quanshu*, vol. 17, *juan* 94:3144. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the *Wenji* and *Yulei* are my own.

⁸ *Zhuzi yulei* (Master Zhu's Classified Conversations, hereafter cited as *Yulei*), comp. Li Jingde (1270), in *Zhuzi quanshu*, 1:114. For the connection with Li Tong see A. C. Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers: Ch'eng Ming-tao and Ch'eng Yi-ch'uan* (London: Lund Humphries, 1958), 163.

⁹ *Yulei* 94:3116.

Phases, which are also modes of *qi*, belong to the realm "within form" (*xing'er xia*); they are physical. But the two realms are linked by Zhou Dunyi's statement that "*Taiji* in activity generates *yang*." This, according to Zhu Xi's interpretation, means that *li* in some sense generates *qi*: "*Taiji* generates *yin* and *yang*; *li* generates *qi*. Once *yin* and *yang* are generated, then *taiji* is within them. And *li*, likewise, is within *qi*."¹⁰

The claim that *li* generates *qi* presents something of a philosophical problem for Zhu Xi, because he also repeatedly stresses that *li* and *qi* are never separate; *qi* is always ordered by *li*, and *li* cannot exist on its own apart from *qi*: "In the world there is never *qi* without *li* and never *li* without *qi*."¹¹ So how can *li* generate *qi*? Doesn't the act of "generation" (*sheng*, literally "giving birth to") imply that *li* exists temporally before *qi*? The issue can be solved by asserting that *li* has *logical* priority over *qi*, but not *temporal* priority. As Zhu Xi says, "There being this principle there is then (*bian*) this *qi*, but the principle is the basis (*ben*), so because of (or "from," *cong*) the principle we can speak of *qi*."¹² In other words, we can conceive of *li* without *qi* in the sense that we can think about patterns and principles apart from their instantiation in things; but we cannot conceive of *qi* without *li*, or completely chaotic matter-energy, because even a homogeneous mass of unspecified stuff has some characteristics, such as density. Therefore, according to this interpretation, "*Taiji* in activity generates *yang*" means that *yang qi* exists *because of* the principle of activity that is part of *taiji*; hence the logical priority of *li*.¹³

This, according to the consensus of scholars, is the key to Zhou Dunyi's importance to Zhu Xi. Zhou Dunyi's depiction of *taiji* provides Zhu with the critical link between the metaphysical realm of *li* and the physical realm of *qi*. *Taiji* is thus the linchpin holding together the two halves of Zhu Xi's entire philosophical system: *li* and *qi*, human nature (*xing*) and

¹⁰ In *Zhou Lianxi ji*, 1:7b.

¹¹ *Yulei* 1:114.















¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ Fung Yu-lan says that *li* does not *exist* (*cunzai*) apart from *qi*, but it does *subsist* (*qianzai*); see Fung, *History*, vol. 2:535. (My copy of the original Chinese text, in one volume, is a pirated Taiwanese version dating from the years when mainland books were prohibited in Taiwan, so it has no publishing information, but this passage is on p. 896.) The relevant definition of "subsist" is "to be logically conceivable as the subject of true statements" (*Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. [Springfield, Mass., 2003]).

feelings/dispositions (*qing*), moral mind (*daoxin*) and human mind (*renxin*), heavenly principle (*tianli*) and human desire (*renyu*).

The first appearance of *taiji* in an extant text is in the *Xici* (Appended Remarks, also called the *Dazhuan* or Great Treatise) appendix of the *Yijing* (Scripture of Change), which probably dates to the fourth century B.C.E. and was the most important *Yijing* appendix for the Song Confucians.¹⁴ It primarily discusses the philosophy of change underlying the *Yijing* as a divination system.¹⁵ The *Xici* passage reads:

Therefore in change there is *taiji*, which generates the Two Modes. The Two Modes generate the Four Images, and the Four Images generate the Eight Trigrams.¹⁶

The Two Modes are the single undivided line  (called "firm" and symbolizing *yang*) and the divided line  (called "yielding" and symbolizing *yin*). The Four Images are the four two-line combinations of firm and yielding:  (younger *yang*),  (elder *yang*),  (younger *yin*), and  (elder *yin*). The Eight Trigrams are all the possible three-line combinations:  (Qian, Heaven),  (Dui, Lake),  (Li, Fire),  (Zhen, Thunder),  (Sun, Wind),  (Kan, Water),  (Gen, Mountain), and  (Kun, Earth). So the passage describes a cosmogony,

¹⁴ However, it is possible that the word *taiji* was a later interpolation. This is the only appearance of *taiji* in the "traditional" text of the *Yi*, which is that of Wang Bi (226-249 C.E.), who wrote an extremely influential commentary on it. See *Zhouyi Wang-Han zhu*, Sibu beiyao ed.; and Richard John Lynn, trans., *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). In 1973 a collection of texts written on silk was discovered in a tomb at Mawangdui (near present-day Changsha, Hunan province), which was sealed in 168 B.C.E. It included a version of the *Yijing* that has been dated to around 200-190 B.C.E., over four hundred years older than Wang Bi's version. And in the Mawangdui version of the *Xici* the word *taiji* does not appear; the line reads, "This is why the *Changes* has great constancy (*daheng*)" (trans. Edward L. Shaughnessy, *I Ching: The Classic of Changes* [New York: Ballantine, 1996], 198-99). The Mawangdui text also differs in the sequence of hexagrams and has different names for about half of them—including the first two, Qian and Kun (ibid., 16). The names of the pure *yang* and pure *yin* hexagrams in the Mawangdui text are *Jian* ("The Key") and *Chuan* ("The Flow"), in Shaughnessy's translation (ibid., 17)

¹⁵ See Gerald Swanson, "The Concept of Change in the Great Treatise," in *Explorations in Early Chinese Cosmology*, ed. Henry Rosemont, Jr. (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984); and Willard Peterson, "Making Connections: 'Commentary on the Attached Verbalizations' of the Book of Change," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42 (1982): 67-116.

¹⁶ *Zhou Yi, Xici* A.11.5 (Zhu, *Zhouyi benyi* 3:14b). In most translations the opening phrase is "In the *Changes*...", referring either to the scripture itself or to the system of change underlying it. This passage was also the basis of Shao Yong's (1011-77) philosophy.

based on the fundamental principle of *yin-yang* bipolarity, unfolding from the unitary *taiji*, which is inherent in the cosmological process of change and transformation. It is worth noting here that *change* is the fundamental state, which does not need to be explained—exactly the opposite of Platonic metaphysics, in which *being* is more real than *becoming*.

Taiji occurs in the *Zhuangzi*, *Huainanzi*, *Shiji*, *Chunqiu fanlu* (once in each), eight times in the *Han shu*, and once in the *Hou Han shu*.¹⁷ After the Han it became a standard term in Daoism. That is the most relevant context for this study because Zhou Dunyi most likely received the *Taiji Diagram* from Daoist circles, as was claimed by Zhu Zhen (1072-1138).¹⁸ Isabelle Robinet has thoroughly examined the Daoist meanings of *taiji* in this period.¹⁹ According to Robinet, *taiji* was the name of one of the Daoist heavens,²⁰ and thus was prefixed to the names of many Daoist immortals, or divinities, and to the titles of the texts attributed to them. It was sometimes identified with Taiyi, the Supreme One (a Daoist astral divinity), and with the pole star (*jixing*).²¹ From this it came to be associated with the idea of the heart or center

¹⁷ According to *Chinese Text Project*, <http://chinese.dsturgeon.net>, accessed 5/12/09.

¹⁸ Zhu Zhen (no relation to Zhu Xi) claimed that the *Taijitu* was transmitted to Zhou Dunyi by Mu Xiu (979-1032), a student of the famous Daoist priest and *Yijing* expert Chen Tuan (d. 989). See Zhu Zhen, *Jin Zhouyi biao* (Memorial presenting the *Zhouyi*), in *Hanshang yizhuan* (Zhu Zhen's commentary on the *Yi*), Tongzhitang jingjie ed. (1680; rpt. Taipei: Taiwan Datong shuju, 1969), vol. 1: 425. On Chen Tuan see Livia Kohn, *Chen Tuan: Discussions and Translations* (Cambridge: Three Pines Press, 2001) and Bent Nielsen, *A Companion to Yi Jing Numerology and Cosmology* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 29. Zhu Zhen—a student of Xie Liangzuo (1050-1121), who had been a student of the Cheng brothers—was especially interested in the "images and numbers" (*xiangshu*) approach to the *Yijing* (Nielsen, *Companion*, 344-45). Julia Ching summarizes the theories of the Daoist origins of the *Taijitu* in *The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 235-36.

¹⁹ Isabelle Robinet, "The Place and Meaning of the Notion of *Taiji* in Taoist Sources Prior to the Ming Dynasty," *History of Religions* 23: 4 (1990), 373-411. See also her entry on "*wuji* and *taiji*" in *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 2 vols., ed. Fabrizio Pregadio (London: Routledge, 2008), 1057-59.

²⁰ See also Fabrizio Pregadio, *Great Clarity: Daoism and Alchemy in Early Medieval China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 47.

²¹ Yu Fan (164-233), a Han dynasty *Yijing* expert in the "images and numbers" (*xiangshu*) tradition, said, "*Taiji* is *Taiyi*, which divides into heaven and earth, thus generating the Two Modes" (quoted in Nielsen, *Companion*, 229, 315-17), echoing *Xici* A.11.5. Zheng Xuan (127-200), another *xiangshu* expert, identified *Taiyi* with the pole star (ibid., 229, 333-34). For more on *Taiyi* as a divinity see Isabelle Robinet, *Taoist Meditation: The Mao-shan Tradition of Great Purity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 134-138.

(*xin*).²² But its primary associations were with Daoist cosmogonic schemes, where it usually denoted a stage of chaos later than *wuji* ("unlimited"),²³ a state in which *yin* and *yang* have differentiated but have not yet become manifest. It thus represented a "complex unity," or the unity of potential multiplicity. It carried connotations of a turning point in a cycle, an end point before a reversal, and a pivot between bipolar processes. In Daoist *neidan* meditation, or physiological alchemy, it represented the energetic potential to reverse the normal process of aging by cultivating within one's body the spark of the primordial *qi*, thereby "returning" to the primordial, creative state of chaos from which the cosmos evolved. The *Taiji* Diagram in Daoist circles, when read from the bottom upwards, was originally a schematic representation of this process of "returning to *wuji*" (*Laozi* 28), i.e. returning to the undifferentiated state.²⁴ As Robinet summarizes it, "The *taiji* is the limit and the juncture between the two worlds, the noumenal world that 'antedates Heaven' [*xiantian*] and the phenomenal world that is 'after Heaven and Earth' [*houtian*]."²⁵

This dual characterization of *taiji*—as the limit and the juncture—are central to my argument. They both derive from the literal meaning of the word *ji*: the "ridgepole" of a house. The ridgepole is, of course, the highest point of the structure, and therefore the vertical limit of the space within. It is from this image that the colloquial meaning of *ji* is derived: the furthest point, the extreme, the endpoint, the ultimate point. This is the meaning that is captured by the standard English translation of *taiji* as "Supreme (or Great) Ultimate." But the ridgepole also divides the roof into two complementary parts. My contention, therefore, is that the idea of "juncture" needs to be more explicit in a translation of *taiji* in order to accurately convey the

²² Cheng Yi affirmed this in his discussion of the *Xici*; see *Er Cheng ji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), *Jing shuo*, 1:1027.

²³ *Wuji* is an almost exclusively Daoist term that is found in *Laozi* 28, *Zhuangzi* 6, and *Liezi* 5. In Daoist texts it came to denote a state of primordial chaos, prior to the differentiation of *yin* and *yang*, and sometimes equivalent to *dao*. This more developed sense is consistent with its usage in *Laozi* 28, and with the more general sense of *wu* in *Laozi* as the state of "non-existence" that precedes "existence" (*you*, e.g. ch. 40) and/or is interdependent with it (ch. 2).

²⁴ See Judith A. Berling, "Paths of Convergence: Interactions of Inner Alchemy, Taoism and Neo-confucianism," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 6 (1979), 128-131; and Chang Chung-yüan, *Creativity and Taoism* (New York: Julian Press, 1963), .

²⁵ Robinet, "*wuji* and *taiji*," 1058.

meaning of *taiji*, especially as Zhu Xi understood it.

The nearly universal use of "Supreme/Great Ultimate" by scholars writing in English in the past forty years has undoubtedly been due to the influence of Wing-tsit Chan, whose *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, published in 1963, is still a well-respected resource (deservedly so) for English translations from Chinese philosophical texts. Chan translated *taiji* as "Great Ultimate," although "Supreme Ultimate" is also widely used by scholars, probably to preserve the distinction between *da* (great) and *tai* (greatest, extremely).²⁶ Carsun Chang, in *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought* (1957), had earlier used "Supreme Ultimate." Derk Bodde, translating Fung Yu-lan's *History of Chinese Philosophy* in 1953, had also used "Supreme Ultimate," as had J. Percy Bruce (*Chu Hsi and His Masters*) in 1923. Following is a list of all the major Western-language translations I have found of the *Yijing* (only those that include the *Xici* appendix) and the *Taijitu shuo*, with their terms for both *wuji* and *taiji* (I have also included a few influential scholars who have not translated either of these works entirely):

	<i>Wuji</i>	<i>Taiji</i>
Jean Baptiste de Régis (d. 1738) ²⁷		summus terminus
Thomas McClatchie (1876) ²⁸		Great Extreme
Georg von der Gabelentz (1876) ²⁹	Ohne Prinzip	Urprinzip
Angelo Zottoli (1880) ³⁰		summum terminum

²⁶ Actually, both the Mawangdui and the traditional Wang Bi versions of the *Yi* use *da* instead of *tai* in the *Xici* A.11 passage (Mawangdui: *daheng* [see note 14 above], Wang Bi: *daji*). Zhu Xi, in his commentary on the (Wang Bi) *Yi*, says that *da* should be read as *tai* (Zhu, *Zhouyi benyi*, 3:14b), as did Wang Bi's follower Han Kangbo (332-380) (*Zhouyi Wang-Han zhu*, 7:9b).

²⁷ P. [Jean Baptiste de] Régis, trans., *Y-King: Antiquissimus Sinarum Liber Quem ex Latina Interpretatione*, ed. Julius Mohl. 2 vols. (Stuttgart and Tübingen: Sumptibus J.G. Cottae, 1834), 2, 514. For Régis' date of death see Nicolas Standaert, *The Interweaving of Rituals: Funerals in the Cultural Exchange Between China and Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 277, n. 71.

²⁸ Rev. Canon [Thomas] McClatchie, *A Translation of the Confucian Yijing or the "Classic of Change"* (1876; rpt. Taipei, Ch'eng Wen, 1973), 322.

²⁹ Georg von der Gabelentz, *Thai-kih-thu, des Tscheu-Tsi: Tafel des urprinzipes, mit Tschu-Hi's commentare nach dem Hoh-pih-sing-li* (Dresden: Im commissions-verlag bei R. v. Zahn, 1876), 31.

³⁰ P. Angelo Zottoli, S.J., *Cursus Litteraturae Sinicae*, vol. 3: *Studium Canonicorum* (Shanghai: Ex Typographia Missionis Catholicae, 1880), 579.

	<i>Wuji</i>	<i>Taiji</i>
Paul-Louis-Félix Philastre (1885) ³¹		extrême origine
Stanislas Le Gall (1894) ³²		grande extrême
Charles Joseph de Harlez (1897) ³³		premier principe
James Legge (1899) ³⁴		Great Extreme, Grand Terminus
J. Percy Bruce (1923) ³⁵	Infinite	Supreme Ultimate
Alfred Forke (1938) ³⁶	Prinzip des Nichtseins	Urprinzip
Henri Maspero (1940?) ³⁷	Sans-Faîte	Grande-Faîte
Richard Wilhelm (1924) ³⁸		großen Uranfang
Derk Bodde (1953) ³⁹	Ultimateless	Supreme Ultimate

³¹ P.-L.-F. Philastre, trans., *Le Yi: King, ou Livre des Changements de la Dynastie des Tsheou*, 2 vols. (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1893), 2:523.

³² Stanislas Le Gall, S.J., *Le Philosophe Tchou Hi: Sa Doctrine, Son Influence* (Shanghai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1894), 32-34, 99-119. This is not a translation of either the *Yijing* or the *Taijitu shuo*; Le Gall translates *juan* 49 of Li Guangdi, ed., *Zhuzi quanshu* (Zhu Xi's "Complete Works") (1714; rpt. Taibei: Guangxue, 1977), which is a classified compilation of passages from Zhu's *Yulei* and *Wenji*. The second section of the chapter is on *taiji*.

³³ Charles Joseph de Harlez, *Le Yi-King: Traduite d'après les Interprètes Chinois, avec la Version Mandchoue* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1897), 117.

³⁴ James Legge, trans., *The I Ching: The Book of Changes*, 2nd ed. (1899; rpt. New York: Dover, 1963). Legge inexplicably uses "Great Extreme" in his Introduction (p. 12) and "Grand Terminus" in the text of the *Xici* (p. 373).

³⁵ J. Percy Bruce, *Chu Hsi and His Masters* (London: Probsthain, 1923), 24-25, 30, 126-155; also Bruce, trans., *The Philosophy of Human Nature* (a translation of *juan* 42 of *Zhuzi quanshu*): 291-295.

³⁶ Alfred Forke, *Geschichte der Neueren Chinesischen Philosophie* (Hamburg: Cram, de Gruyter, 1938), 48.

³⁷ Henri Maspero, *Le Taoïsme et les Religions Chinoises* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 86. Maspero defines *taiji* as "nom de l'union du *Li* et du *Qi*; Grande-Faîte" (p. 639). Although Maspero did not translate either the *Yijing* or the *Taijitu shuo*, I include him here because of his influence on later scholars. Chow, for example, cites him as an authority (*La Philosophie Morale*, 154, n.1).

³⁸ Richard Wilhelm, trans., *I Ging: Das Buch der Wandlungen* (1924; rpt. Düsseldorf: Eugen Diederichs, 1970), 295. Cary F. Baynes' English translation of Wilhelm's German is "Great Primal Beginning." Richard Wilhelm, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., trans. Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 318.

³⁹ Fung, *History*, 435. In vol. 1 (2nd ed., 1952) Bodde uses "Great Ultimate" (p. 384).

	<i>Wuji</i>	<i>Taiji</i>
Chow Yih-ching (1954) ⁴⁰	Sans-faîte	Faîte Suprême
Joseph Needham (1956) ⁴¹	That which has no Pole	Supreme Pole
Carsun Chang (1957) ⁴²	Ultimate of Nothingness	Supreme Ultimate
Wing-tsit Chan (1963) ⁴³	Ultimate of Non-being	Great Ultimate
A.C. Graham (1958) ⁴⁴	ultimate of nothing	Supreme Ultimate
Wu Jing-nuan (1991) ⁴⁵		Great Axis
Richard John Lynn (1994) ⁴⁶		great ultimate
Richard Rutt (1996) ⁴⁷		Ultimate Limit
Edward Shaughnessy (1996) ⁴⁸		great extreme

As is evident from the table above, only four of the twenty-two translators listed have followed the "juncture" thread of *taiji*'s meaning: Henri Maspero (1940?), Chow Yih-ching (1954), Joseph Needham (1956), and Wu Jing-nuan (1991). One of the primary meanings of the word "faîte" used by Maspero and Chow is "ridgepole," so it is the most literal translation of *ji*. Chow explains that it is "the summit of a building, the furthest point above which one cannot climb. In philosophical language this word therefore figuratively indicates the first principle or

⁴⁰ Chow Yih-ching, *La Philosophie Morale dans le Néo-Confucianisme (Tcheou Touen-yi)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), 41-72, 154-162.

⁴¹ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 2: *History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 460-67.

⁴² Chang, *Development*, 1:142.

⁴³ Chan, *Source Book*, 463. Chan used "Great Ultimate" consistently in his many other writings on Neo-Confucianism.

⁴⁴ Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*: 153-156. See also his note on *wuji*, p. 172, n.19.

⁴⁵ Wu Jing-Nuan, trans., *Yi Jing* (Washington. D.C.: The Taoist Center, 1991), 271.

⁴⁶ Richard John Lynn, trans., *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 55, 65.

⁴⁷ Richard Rutt, trans., *The Book of Changes (Zhouyi): A Bronze Age Document* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996), 418.

⁴⁸ Shaughnessy, *I Ching*, 330, n. 83.

the first cause."⁴⁹ So, while Chow preserves the imagery of the ridgepole, he still wants to extend it to the more abstract notion of principle. Needham maintains the concrete imagery with "Supreme Pole," explaining that *ji* is "not merely any boundary, but a polar or focal point on a boundary.... *ji* was from of old the technical term for the astronomical pole. Around the Pole Star all man's universe revolved."⁵⁰ But "Supreme Pole" is problematic, because Zhu Xi repeatedly insists that *taiji* is not a thing. So "pole" will not do, but "polarity" is consistent with Zhu's equation of *taiji* and *li*, or principle/pattern/order.

As we shall see, the great preponderance of evidence from Zhu Xi's writings supports the idea that *taiji* is the principle or pattern of polarity. As Zhu clearly states in his commentary on the *locus classicus* of *taiji* in the *Xici*, "Change is the alternation of *yin* and *yang*. *Taiji* is this [or its] principle (*li*)."⁵¹ It is called "supreme" (*tai*) because it is the most fundamental ordering principle of the entire cosmos. As for the other key term in the opening sentence of Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu shuo*, *wuji* as "non-polar" follows logically from *taiji* as polarity. *Wuji* means undifferentiated; *taiji* is the simplest principle of differentiation or ordering, the *yin-yang* polarity. (We shall return later to Zhu Xi's interpretation of Zhou's first sentence, "*Wuji er taiji*").

Before setting out the positive evidence for this argument, let us first examine the justification for translating *taiji* as "Supreme/Great Ultimate." The following passage from Zhu Xi's *Classified Conversations*, in Wing-tsit Chan's translation, is sometimes used to illustrate or justify this interpretation:

The Great Ultimate is similar to the top of a house or the zenith of the sky, beyond which point there is no more. It is the ultimate of principle. Yang is active and yin is tranquil. In these it is not the Great Ultimate that acts or remains tranquil. It is simply that there are the principles of activity and tranquillity. Principle is not visible; it becomes visible through yin and yang. Principle attaches itself to yin and yang as a man sits astride a horse. As soon as yin and

⁴⁹ "Le faite est le sommet d'un bâtiment, le point extrême au-dessus duquel on ne peut monter. En langage philosophique ce mot figuré indiquerait donc le principe premier ou la cause première" (Chow, *La Philosophie Morale*, 155 n. 1).

⁵⁰ Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 2, 464.

⁵¹ Zhu, *Zhouyi benyi*, 3:14b.

yang produce the Five Agents, they are confined and fixed by physical nature and are thus differentiated into individual things each with its nature. But the Great Ultimate is in all of them.⁵²

The words translated by Chan as "top" and "zenith" in the first sentence are both *ji*. Hence we have here again the dual connotations of "limit" and "juncture" mentioned by Robinet: the highest point in the house but also the division between the two halves of the roof; the highest point in the heavens but also the pole star around which the heavens revolve.⁵³ But here the former meaning, that of the ultimate limit, is emphasized by the additional phrase, "beyond which point there is no more."

The idea of an ultimate limit fits with the colloquial usage of *ji*, both in the Song and today, in the adverbial sense of "very" or "most": for example, *ji hao* ("very good" or "the best"), *ji da* ("the biggest"). This colloquial connotation is the governing image in the translations "supreme ultimate" and "great ultimate." It is a linear image: the point beyond which there is no more; the highest, greatest point on a linear scale; the last stop on the line; the final frontier; the highest, best principle. As Zhu Xi says, "*Taiji* is simply the extreme utmost (*jizhi*), but it has no location. [It is] the highest (*zhigao*), the most mysterious (*zhimiao*), the most essential (*zhijing*), the most spiritual (*zhishen*), [but] with no location."⁵⁴ "*Taiji* is simply the finest and best moral principle;"⁵⁵ "the perfectly pure and good nature (*xing*) is what is meant by *taiji*."⁵⁶ Therefore there is no denying the idea of the highest or the furthest as *part* of the meaning of *taiji*.

However, the Song Confucians did not necessarily think as much as we in the West in *linear* terms. For them, the governing image was that of *yin-yang* circulation or complementarity. Therefore, we must be careful not to impose a foreign way of thinking on their words. As Roger Ames has written, "... our existing formula of terms for translating the core

⁵² Chan, *Source Book*, 641; quoting Li, *Zhuzi quanshu*, 49:13a. The passage comes from *Zhuzi yulei*, 41:3126.

⁵³ To be precise, of course, the pole star is the highest point in the sky only at the North Pole.

⁵⁴ *Yulei* 94: 3120.

⁵⁵ *Yulei* 94: 3122.

⁵⁶ *Yulei* 94: 3140.

[Chinese] philosophical vocabulary is freighted with a cosmology not its own, and thus perpetuates a pernicious cultural reductionism."⁵⁷ In our case, to ignore the non-linear aspect of the "ridgepole" image obscures the fact that the furthest point is also the *center* of a bipolar and/or circulating pattern. The furthest point is not the last stop on a one-way line; it is one extreme of a bipolar pattern or process of alternation. As Cheng Yi's student Yang Shi (1053-1135) put it, nicely combining the two aspects of the image:

Centrality (*zhong*) is the utmost extreme (*zhiji*) of the Way. Therefore centrality is called *ji* [here "the ultimate" would be an appropriate translation]. The ridgepole of a house is also called *ji*, because it is both the center and highest part."⁵⁸

Applying this insight to Zhu Xi's understanding of *taiji* clarifies a great deal (as we shall see) and adds meaningful content to what can be a rather empty place-holder of a term. For what exactly does "supreme ultimate" mean? How can "the ultimate" be modified? Does it imply an "inferior ultimate"? Scholars explaining Zhu Xi's concept, following his equation of *taiji* with *li*, typically say something to the effect that *taiji* means "the principles of all things."⁵⁹ Fung Yu-lan, for example, says, "The Supreme Ultimate, therefore, consists of the Principles or *li* of all things in the universe, brought together into a single whole (*tiandi wanwu zhi li zhi zonghe*)."⁶⁰ He draws this conclusion from the following dialogue in Zhu Xi's *Classified Conversations*:

Zhonglü said: *Taiji* is the utmost principle of the human mind.

⁵⁷ Roger Ames, "Translating Chinese Philosophy," in *An Encyclopedia of Translation: Chinese-English, English-Chinese*, ed. Chan Sin-wai and David E. Pollard (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1995), 731. For another useful collection of articles on translation issues (not all concerning Chinese), see *Translation East and West: A Cross-Cultural Approach*, ed. Cornelia N. Moore and Lucy Lower (Honolulu: University of Hawaii College of Languages, Linguistics and Literature and the East-West Center, 1992).

⁵⁸ *Yang Guishan xiansheng quanji* (Complete writings of Yang Shi) (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1974), 14:8b.

⁵⁹ Chan, *Source Book*, 639. A decade later Chan wrote that *taiji* is "the highest principle of each and every thing" and "at once the one universal principle and the sum-total of all principles" (Chan, "Chu Hsi's Completion," 114, 115). "The one universal principle" is consistent with my interpretation. **He also says here**, coming close to my interpretation, "Chu Hsi always saw the Great Ultimate, or principle in its ultimate state, as embodying *yin* and *yang*, that is, the operation of myriad things" (115). But he doesn't follow through on this observation, and in fact there is a difference between "embodying *yin* and *yang*" and actually being the principle of *yin* and *yang*.

⁶⁰ Fung, *History*, 2:537 (Chinese version p. 899).

Reply: Everything has this *ji*, which is the extreme utmost of moral principle.

Jiang Yuanjin said: For example, the humanity of the ruler and the reverence (*jing*) of the subject are this *ji*.

Reply: This is the *ji* of one thing. The principle of all things in heaven and earth (*zong tiandi wanwu zhi li*) is *taiji*.⁶¹

Note that Fung (accurately translated here by Derk Bodde) refers to "the Principles [plural] or *li* of all things." But in Zhu Xi's remark, *zong* more likely modifies "things in heaven and earth" than "principle." Elsewhere Zhu Xi says,

Taiji is not a separate thing. It is *yin-yang* and is within *yin-yang*. It is the Five Phases and is within the Five Phases. It is the myriad things and is within the myriad things. It is nothing but one principle (*yige li*). Since it is the extreme utmost [i.e. the ultimate, most fundamental principle] we call it *taiji*.⁶²

So we are talking about a single principle, not a collection of principles; the single, most fundamental ordering principle. And that principle is *yin-yang* bipolarity.

Turning now to the positive evidence for the claim that *taiji* means "supreme polarity," I will focus first on Zhu Xi's most prominent, published comments on the term, accompanied by further statements on those comments from his conversations and letters. We begin with his published commentary on the *locus classicus*, the *Xici* appendix to the *Yijing*, which was quoted above ("Therefore in change there is *taiji*, which generates the Two Modes..."). Zhu Xi's comment on this in his *Zhouyi benyi* (Original Meaning of the *Scripture of Change*) is:

One always generates two; this is a natural principle. Change is the alternation (*bian*) of *yin* and *yang*. *Taiji* is this [or its] principle.⁶³

This is a straightforward statement that clearly says more than "*taiji* is principle;" it says that *taiji* is a *specific* principle: the principle of *yin-yang* polarity. Discussing the *Xici* passage in a letter, Zhu Xi wrote:

⁶¹ *Yulei*, 94:3127.

⁶² Hu, *Xingli daquan shu*, 26:6b.

⁶³ *Zhouyi benyi* 3:14b.

"Change' (*yi*) is alternating change (*bianyi*),"⁶⁴ combining the meanings of the "alternation of activity and stillness"⁶⁵ and the expressed (*yifa*) and unexpressed (*weifa*) [phases of mind].⁶⁶ *Taiji* is the mystery of nature and feelings, the principle of the alternation of activity and stillness and the expressed and unexpressed. Thus "In change there is *taiji*" means that activity and stillness, "closing and opening,"⁶⁷ always has this principle.⁶⁸

Although *taiji* became a very common term in Daoism during the period from the Han through the Song, as we have seen, the next significant text for Zhu Xi was Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu shuo*, the relevant section of which has already been quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Before turning to Zhu Xi's commentary on it, it is worthwhile first to summarize Zhou Dunyi's own interpretation of the term. Most scholars agree that Zhou's concept of *taiji* seems to have been strictly cosmological, not metaphysical. That is, *taiji* for him was something like undifferentiated *qi*, as it was for Zheng Xuan (127-200) and Zhou's contemporary Liu Mu (1011-64).⁶⁹ Zhu Xi, as we have noted, claimed that *taiji* is just another name for *li*. This was a major breakthrough, enabling him to philosophically link the cosmological discourse of those Northern Song thinkers who drew inspiration from the *Yijing* and its associated diagrams with the new discourse of the Cheng brothers.⁷⁰ Yet, as was mentioned above, it was problematic.

Granting that Zhou Dunyi's concept of *taiji* differed importantly from Zhu Xi's, it seems to me significant that the second sentence of the *Taijitu shuo*—where one would expect there to be a clarification of the enigmatic opening exclamation—immediately discusses the bipolar

⁶⁴ Quoting Cheng Yi's preface to his *Yi zhuan* (Commentary on the *Yi*), in *Er Cheng ji*, 689.

⁶⁵ *Xici* A.5.1, in *Zhouyi benyi* 3:5a.

⁶⁶ *Yifa* and *weifa* are key terms in *Zhongyong* (The Mean in Practice) 1 and were central to Zhu Xi's theory of self-cultivation (de Bary and Bloom, *Sources*, 334). The *Zhongyong* was another important source for Zhou Dunyi's *Tongshu*, particularly the concept of authenticity (*cheng*).

⁶⁷ *Xici* A.11.4, in *Zhouyi benyi* 3:14a.

⁶⁸ Letter to Wu Huishu, in *Wenji* 42:1909.

⁶⁹ Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 155, 163. See also Chan, *Source Book*, 639. For Liu Mu see Nielsen, *Companion*, 160-61.

⁷⁰ See Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 159-60, 168.

relationship of activity and stillness ("Taiji in activity generates yang; yet at the limit of activity it is still ..."). In other words, the polarity model of *taiji* makes it clear in what way the second sentence actually clarifies the first. The English translations of the "Supreme Ultimate" sort fail to clarify the logical connection between the two sentences. Furthermore, in the *Tongshu* (section 16) Zhou says flatly, "Yin and yang are *taiji*."⁷¹ And later in the *Taijitu shuo* we read, "The Five Phases are unified in *yin* and *yang*; *yin* and *yang* are unified in *taiji*; *taiji* is fundamentally Non-polar." Just as the Five Phases are a further developmental stage or unfolding of *yin* and *yang*, so too *yin* and *yang* are the natural expression of bipolarity, and bipolarity itself is an integral, unified concept. In these passages we have (1) the direct equation of *yin* and *yang* with *taiji* and (2) the implication that the "dual" nature of *taiji* / bipolarity is somehow also *non-dual*.

What does this mean in terms of Zhu Xi's interpretation, based on the equation of *taiji* and *li*? Zhu Xi's published commentary on the enigmatic opening sentence of the *Taijitu shuo* (A above) reads as follows (using our tentative translations for *wuji* and *taiji*):

The operation of Heaven above has neither sound nor smell," and yet it is the pivot (*shuniu*) of the actual process of creation and the basis of the classification of things. Thus it says, "Non-polar and yet Supreme Polarity!" It is not that there is non-polarity outside of the Supreme Polarity.⁷²

Just as *taiji* is not a thing, neither is *wuji*; it simply indicates the "unitariness" of principle.⁷³ But what is most significant here is the word "pivot," especially given its prominent location in the first sentence of Zhu's published commentary on the *Taijitu shuo*. "Shu" is also the word used by Zhuangzi, in the second chapter of his work, where he refers to "the axis of *dao*" (*daoshu*), the central point where "'this' and 'that' no longer find their opposites."⁷⁴ Zhu's

⁷¹ Zhou Lianxi *ji*, 5:34a.

⁷² Zhou Lianxi *ji* 1:5a.

⁷³ Zhu makes this point repeatedly in conversations; see, for example, *Yulei* 94:3116.

⁷⁴ Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 40; *Zhuangzi jijie* (Collected Explanations of the *Zhuangzi*), ed. Wang Xianqian (Taipei: Taiwan Commercial Press, 1980), 10. Recall that "center" (*zhong*) was one of the traditional meanings of *ji*.

first sentence here means that the creative principle and ground of being—what he elsewhere calls the "principle of Heaven" or "natural principle" (*tianli*)—is characterless or undifferentiated and yet contains within it the potential for change and differentiation. Like a pivot point, it is dimensionless yet constitutes the central axis of change and differentiation. This is the paradox that Zhou attempts to express (according to Zhu) with the enigmatic "*Wuji er taiji*."⁷⁵ Zhu expands on the notion of "pivot" in the following statement from his *Classified Conversations*:

Originally, the word *ji* was taken from from the meaning of *shuji* [axis-pole, or pole star]. The Sage [Confucius] called it *taiji* to indicate the basis of heaven and earth; Master Zhou followed this and also called it *wuji* in order to emphasize the mystery of what "has neither sound nor smell."⁷⁶

He also says:

"*Wuji er taiji*" simply means formless principle. *Taiji* is simply the principle of two *qi* and Five Phases; it is not a thing on its own.⁷⁷

Zhu's published comment on the next few sentences of the *Taijitu shuo* (B) reads as follows:

That in Supreme Polarity there is activity and stillness is the flowing forth of what is given (*ming*) by Heaven. It is what is meant by "the alternation of *yin* and *yang* is called the Way."⁷⁸

Here he is specifying the content of *taiji* as activity and stillness. In a further conversation on the same passage he says:

Within Heaven and Earth, there is only the bipolar (*liang duan*) activity and stillness, in an endless cycle; there is absolutely nothing else. This is called change. And since there is activity and stillness, there is necessarily the principle

⁷⁵ One might draw an analogy here with the Judeo-Christian-Islamic paradox of God as the unmoved mover, or uncreated creator.

⁷⁶ *Yulei* 94:3117. The reference to Confucius is based on Zhu's erroneous belief that Confucius wrote the "Ten Wings" or appendices of the *Yijing*, where *taiji* first appeared (in the *Xici* appendix).

⁷⁷ *Yulei* 94:3116.

⁷⁸ *Zhou Lianxi ji* 1:6b, quoting *Yijing*, *Xici* A.5.1, which is also quoted in Zhou's *Tongshu*, 1.

of activity and stillness. This is called the Supreme Polarity.⁷⁹

This is one of his most explicit statements that *taiji* is the principle of activity and stillness. The third sentence, by the way, is how Zhu Xi resolves the dilemma of having a metaphysical principle as the cause of physical change. *Taiji* itself does not act, but it contains the principle of activity (and stillness). Whether this argument holds water philosophically would be a topic for another study (I suspect it does not).⁸⁰ The point here, though, is Zhu's clear statement that *taiji* is the principle of activity and stillness, or the principle of bipolar change.

Zhu's comment on section C of the *Taijitu shuo* is:

With the Supreme Polarity there is the alternation of activity and stillness, and the Two Modes are distinguished; with *yin* and *yang* the alternation and combination of the Five Phases are set.⁸¹

This clearly implies that the alternation of activity and stillness is the first or most fundamental manifestation of *taiji*. If *taiji* meant the sum total of all principles, why would activity and stillness be singled out?

And finally, an exchange on section E of the *Taijitu shuo* and the key term *weifa* (unexpressed [mind]) from the *Zhongyong* :

Li asked: Are "the reality of the Non-polar" (*wuji zhi zhen*) and "the centrality of the unexpressed" (*weifa zhi zhong*) the same or different?

Reply: The reality of the Non-polar includes activity and stillness; the centrality of the unexpressed refers only to stillness. *Taiji* is simply the extreme utmost (*jizhi*), but it has no location. [It is] the highest (*zhigao*), the most mysterious (*zhimiao*), the most essential (*zhijing*), the most spiritual (*zhishen*), [but] with no location. Lianxi feared that people would say that *taiji* had form, so he said "*wuji*

⁷⁹ Zhou Lianxi ji 1:7b.

⁸⁰ The premise seems to be that if a principle exists (or subsists; see Fung, *History*, vol. 2: 535, 539) the corresponding thing must exist—a reversal of Cheng Yi's dictum, "Where there is a thing there must be a principle" (*Henan Chengshi yishu* 18, in *Er Cheng ji*, 193; cf. Chan, *Source Book*, 563). Even Wing-tsit Chan, for whom Zhu Xi was the highest exemplar of Chinese philosophers, admitted, "As to how the Great Ultimate can produce the two material forces (yin and yang), Chu's answer is vague" (Chan, *Source Book*, 639).

⁸¹ Zhou Lianxi ji 1:11b.

er taiji." Within this *wu* there is the principle of the utmost extreme (*zhiji zhi li*). It is like *huangji* ("royal perfection"),⁸² which is the hub of the universe but has no location. It is neither here nor there; it is only at the center, where everything comes together. He then pointed to the peak of the house (*wuji*) and said: It's not even there.⁸³

It is tempting to suspect that in the last sentence Zhu Xi was actually speaking tongue-in-cheek, by pointing to the very object (the ridgepole) that gave *taiji* its root meaning.

Zhou Dunyi's other major work, the *Tongshu*, contains one mention of *taiji*, in the important section (16) entitled Activity and Stillness (*dong jing*):

The *yin* of water is based in *yang*; the *yang* of fire is based in *yin*. The Five Phases are *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* are the Supreme Polarity.⁸⁴

Here again is a direct equation of *yin-yang* and *taiji*, in a section whose main point is that activity and stillness, *yin* and *yang*, operate not only in cyclical alternation but also in interpenetration (*yin* within *yang* and vice versa). In section 1 of the *Tongshu* Zhou Dunyi quotes a line from the *Xici* (A.5.1): "The alternation of *yin* and *yang* is called the Way." In a conversation on this line Zhu again says, "'The alternation of *yin* and *yang* is called the Way' is the Supreme Polarity."⁸⁵ In these passages, *taiji* is clearly defined as the principle/pattern of activity and stillness or *yin* and *yang*. In section 22 of the *Tongshu* Zhou Dunyi says, "The manifest and the subtle: without intelligence one cannot perceive them." Zhu Xi's published comment on this line is:

This discusses *li*. *Yang* is bright and *yin* is dark. Were it not for the perfect intelligence of the Supreme Polarity of the human mind, how would one be able to discern it?⁸⁶

This requires a bit of interpretation. The Supreme Polarity of the human mind is the principle or

⁸² A term from the *Hongfan* (Great Plan) chapter of the *Shujing* (Scripture of Documents).

⁸³ *Yulei* 94:3120.

⁸⁴ *Zhou Lianxi ji*, 5:34a.

⁸⁵ A comment by Zhu from the *Classified Conversations* (*Yulei* 74:2523), appended to his commentary on the *Tongshu* (*Zhou Lianxi ji* 5:5b).

⁸⁶ *Zhou Lianxi ji* 6:1a.

order inherent in the mind that enables it to apprehend principle or order in external things. The fact that Zhu associates the manifest and the subtle with *yang* and *yin* suggests that this is the specific principle inherent in the mind that enables one to know the manifest and the subtle.

Section 22 of the *Tongshu* also contains this passage:

The two [modes of] *qi* and the Five Phases transform and generate the myriad things. The five are the differentia (*shu*) and the two are the actualities (*shi*); the two are fundamentally one. Thus the many are one, and the one actuality is divided into the many. Each one of the many is correct; the small and the large are distinct.

Zhu Xi's comment on it:

... The two [modes of] *qi* and the Five Phases are that by which Heaven bestows the myriad things and generates them. From the product (*mo*) we can deduce the origin (*ben*); thus the differentiation of the Five Phases [as product] is the actuality of the two *qi* [as origin], and the actuality of the two *qi* [as product] in turn is based on the polarity (*ji*) of the unitary order/principle (*yili zhi ji*) [as origin].⁸⁷

What Zhu is saying here is that the Five Phases are a further differentiation of *yin-yang qi*, and *yin-yang qi* is a manifestation of the unitary principle of bipolarity. The latter step (and perhaps the former) is an example of the doctrine Zhu Xi adopted from Cheng Yi, "Where there is a thing there must be a principle."⁸⁸ In the last sentence, it would make no sense at all to translate *ji* as ultimate, extreme, or some such. The actuality (*shi*) of the two *qi* is the principle of bipolarity, not some vague ultimacy, all-inclusiveness, or finality.

The next major statement by Zhu Xi on *taiji* is his essay, "Discussion of *Taiji*" (*Taiji shuo*). As far as I know this was not published, but it was undoubtedly circulated to his students (who numbered in the thousands over the course of his lifetime) and his friends.

"Activity and stillness have no starting point; *yin* and *yang* have no

⁸⁷ Zhou *Lianxi ji* 6:11a.

⁸⁸ Note 79 above.

beginning;"⁸⁹ this is the Way of heaven. Beginning in *yang*, completing in *yin*, rooted in stillness, flowing in activity; this is the human Way. But as *yang* returns to its root in *yin* and stillness returns to its base in activity, [human beings'] activity and stillness also have no starting points, and their *yin* and *yang* also have no beginnings. So humans are never separate from heaven, and heaven is never separate from humans.

"*Yuan* and *heng* are the penetration of authenticity" is activity; "*Li* and *Zhen* are the recovery of authenticity" is stillness.⁹⁰ *Yuan* (originating) is the starting point of activity, rooted in stillness. *Zhen* (being correct) is the material of stillness, which is expressed in activity. The alternation of activity and stillness (*vidong yijing*) is an endless cycle. And yet *zhen* is the how myriad things achieve their ends and achieve their beginnings. Thus, although humans cannot be inactive, "establishing the peak of being human (*renji*)" requires "emphasizing stillness."⁹¹ Only by emphasizing stillness can their expression in activity always be measured and never lack their fundamental stillness.

Stillness is how the nature (*xing*) is established; activity is how the endowment (*ming*) proceeds. But in fact stillness is the cessation of activity. Therefore the alternation of activity and stillness is always the procession of the endowment, and its procession through activity and stillness is the reality of the nature. Therefore [the *Zhongyong*] says, "What heaven endows is called the nature."⁹²

The unexpressed feelings are the nature; this is what is called

⁸⁹ Quoting Cheng Yi, in *Er Cheng ji, Jing shuo*, 1:1029.

⁹⁰ Quoting Zhou Dunyi, *Tongshu* 1. *Yuan heng li zhen* is the hexagram text of Qian, the first hexagram of the *Yijing*. Zhu Xi's commentary on the two sentences in the *Tongshu* is: "*Yuan* is originating, *heng* is penetrating, *li* is carrying out, *zhen* is being correct: the Four Virtues [characteristic powers] of Qian. 'Penetration' (*tong*) is just at the point when it appears and is bestowed on things, the 'issuing' of goodness. 'Recovery' (*fu*) is when each one receives it and stores it within, the 'fulfillment' of the nature" (*Zhou Lianxi ji*, 5:3b).

⁹¹ These two phrases both come from the second half of the *Taijitu shuo*.

⁹² *Zhongyong* 1.

"equilibrium/centrality (*zhong*), the great root of all under heaven."⁹³ The expressed nature is the feelings; when they are all measured they are called "harmony (*he*), the pervasive way of all under heaven."⁹⁴ This is all the natural [Way] of heaven. The wondrous virtue of the nature and feelings is the mind/heart (*xin*). What brings about equilibrium and harmony, establishes the great root, and makes the pervasive Way proceed is the rulership (*zhuzai*) of heavenly principle.

Being still and lacking any impropriety is the equilibrium of the nature; this is "silent inactivity" (*jiran budong*).⁹⁵ Being active and in equilibrium is the feelings being expressed correctly; this is "penetrating when stimulated."⁹⁶ That which is always aware in stillness and always stopped (still) in activity is the mystery of the heart/mind: silent and yet stimulated, stimulated and yet silent.⁹⁷

The remarkable thing about the "Discussion of *Taiji*," of course, is that *taiji* is not even mentioned; it is all about the bipolar interactions of activity and stillness, *yin* and *yang*, and several other parallel layers of Zhu Xi's system of thought and practice. The essay shows how the human being is an integral part of the natural world, reflecting the Way of heaven. The terms activity and stillness, which are the first manifestations of *taiji* according to Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu shuo*, are woven throughout the essay, linking together other key terms from the *Tongshu* and the *Zhongyong*. The real point of the essay concerns Zhu's mature theory of self-cultivation, which is beyond the scope of this chapter.⁹⁸ For our purposes here, the significant point is that the

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ See *Tongshu* 4, quoting *Yijing*, *Xici* A.10.4.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *Wenji* 67:3274.

⁹⁸ I am referring to Zhu's "spiritual crisis" of the late 1160s, which he resolved by seeing that the *interpenetration* of the mind's activity and stillness (as in the last paragraph of the essay) was the key to the full understanding of *li* and realization of the nature (*xing*). In my article mentioned in note 1 above I argue that this discovery led him to elevate Zhou Dunyi to the position of first sage of the Song, because both of Zhou's major texts emphasize the interpenetration of activity and stillness as natural principles; hence they enabled Zhu Xi to philosophically ground his method of self-cultivation. This argument will be further developed in my book in progress, *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao: Zhu Xi's Appropriation of Zhou Dunyi*.

meaning of *taiji* for Zhu Xi concerns the alternation and interpenetration of activity and stillness as the fundamental cosmic pattern (*li*).

Zhu Xi understood *taiji* to be the most fundamental cosmic ordering principle, which is, to be specific, the principle of *yin-yang* polarity. In other words, the simplest, most basic ordering principle in the Chinese cosmos is the differentiation of unity into bipolarity (not duality). *Wuji er taiji*, then, means that this most fundamental principle, bipolarity—despite its evident "twoness" and its role as the ultimate source of multiplicity—is itself, as a rational ordering principle, essentially *undifferentiated*. And since any concrete instance of differentiation or polarity embodies this integral, non-polar principle, the two—non-polarity and ultimate polarity—themselves have a non-dual relationship. Hence every concrete thing embodies both polarity (as its order or pattern) and non-polarity (as the unity of that principle), or differentiation and undifferentiation, or multiplicity and unity.

I have focused here on Zhu Xi's published commentaries on the *Yijing* and Zhou Dunyi's two major works, along with his conversations with students about those works and commentaries, and his essay on *taiji*. Many other quotes can be found in Zhu's writings and conversation in which *taiji* is specifically identified as or associated with the principle of *yin-yang* polarity; just about every time the subject of *taiji* comes up the conversation concerns activity and stillness and/or *yin* and *yang*.⁹⁹ Translating *taiji* as "Supreme/Great Ultimate" fails to account for this. But Zhu Xi's students and followers understood, and continued to propagate their Master's views. For example, one of Zhu's prominent disciples was Chen Chun (1159-1223), who wrote (in Wing-tsit Chan's translation):

The Great Ultimate simply means principle. Why is principle called *ji*? *Ji* means reaching the ultimate, because it is in the center serving as the axis (*shuji*).

Huangji (supreme principle governing the empire), *beiji* (the North Pole), etc., all have the meaning of being in the center. But *ji* should not be understood as the center. The greatest extent of anything is always in its center. Things from all directions reach their ultimate point here and cannot go any further. Take the

⁹⁹ See Yulei 94 and Li, *Zhuzi quanshu* 49.

ridgepole of a roof. It is called the *wuji*¹⁰⁰ (terminus of a building). It is simply the converging point of all building materials from the various directions, reaching their terminus at this center.¹⁰¹

Chen Chun here clearly emphasizes the meaning of *ji* as juncture or center—not in spatial terms (hence his caution that *ji* should not be understood as the center) but in terms of the principle of polarity, like the ridgepole of the house and the pole star. And Rao Lu, a student of Zhu Xi's son-in-law and leading disciple, Huang Gan,¹⁰² wrote:

The term *taiji* expresses the majesty of natural principle (*tianli*). The word *ji* means axis or pivot (*shu*), knot or node (*niu*), root (*gen*), or basis (*di*); as we say in common speech, *shuji* [axis], or *genji* [root].... The word *tai* means so great that nothing can be added, and expresses the fact that it is the Great Pivot and the Great Basis of the universe. All things, however, which bear this name, such as the North (celestial) Pole, the South (celestial) Pole, the ridge of a house, the Capital of Shang, or the four compass-point directions, have visible forms and locations to which we can point, but this *ji* alone is without form, and has no relation to space. Master Zhou therefore added the term *wu* (*wuji*), expressing the fact that it is not (confined to) any form such as that of a nodal pivot or a basic root, yet nonetheless is really the Great Nodal Pivot and the Great Basic Root of the universe.¹⁰³

To recapitulate, translating *taiji* as "Supreme/Great Ultimate" does express its colloquial meaning ("great extreme"), but it completely misses the significance of the term as it was used in the Daoist tradition and in the Cheng-Zhu school of Confucianism. Supreme Polarity and its correlate for Zhou Dunyi's *wuji*, "Non-polar(ity)," convey the crucial idea that *yin-yang* polarity

¹⁰⁰ This *wu* means "house," not "non-." See also the passage quoted at note 82.

¹⁰¹ Wing-tsit Chan, *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 117. Original in *Jinsilu jijie, Beixi ziyi*, ed. Yang Jia (Taipei: Shijie, 1962), *Ziyi* B:10a (p. 35).

¹⁰² Rao Lu was also known as Rao Shuangfeng. See Huang Zongxi and Quan Zuwang, comps., *Song-Yuan xue'an* (Scholarly record of the Song and Yuan dynasties), 2 vols. (Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1971), chs. 63, 83.

¹⁰³ Translation by Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 2, 465, slightly modified.

is the most fundamental ordering principle or *li*, according to Zhu Xi and his followers, and is first manifested as the polarity of activity and stillness. This interpretation *includes* the colloquial meaning of the term: polarity is the "ultimate" principle in the sense that one can go no further in explaining a phenomenon. It is the first ordering principle and therefore the last step in an explanation. This is why we do occasionally find the language of finality or ultimacy in Cheng-Zhu discussions of *taiji* (for example, Chen Chun's above). But the crucial point is that *taiji* is primarily the unitary principle that contains the possibility of differentiation and change. Like the literal image of a supreme ridgepole, *taiji* is both the highest, furthest point and (more significantly) the pivot or axis of the Way.

Confucian thought of the Song, Yuan, and Ming periods (commonly called "Neo-Confucianism") is often considered to be complex and abstruse. In my opinion, the standard use of terms like "Supreme Ultimate" has needlessly contributed to this image among scholars and students relying on English translations of the Chinese texts. Chinese readers, on the other hand, probably have some familiarity with the root meaning of the word *ji* (as in *beiji*, "north pole") and therefore bring more to an intuitive understanding of *taiji* than native speakers of English. For the latter, "Supreme Ultimate" is either a meaningless term or positively misleading, as it conjures up an image of linearity and finality that Song Confucians like Zhu Xi did not share. As our understanding of traditional Chinese thought deepens and becomes more nuanced, a willingness at all times to reevaluate standard translations in light of what we have learned will feed back into our studies in enlightening ways.