

Reconstructing the Confucian Dao: Zhu Xi's Appropriation of Zhou Dunyi. By Joseph Alan Adler. SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014. x + 331 pages. Hardcover. ISBN 978-1-4384-5157-2. US\$95.00. Paperback. ISBN 978-1-4384-5156-5. US\$26.95.

Joseph Adler's *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao* investigates a significant turning point in the teachings of perhaps the most famous and influential Confucian since Confucius himself. The book's main thesis argues that the Confucian synthesis achieved by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) in the mid to late twelfth century did not reach a mature form until the late 1160s, after Zhu had worked out a way to bring a relatively novel self-cultivation program into line with an already established set of philosophical principles. The crisis that Zhu Xi experienced in his late thirties hinged, according to Adler, on his inability to attune teachings on the personal cultivation of sagehood (*sheng* 聖) promoted by his teacher Li Tong 李侗 (1093–1163) with the more philosophical teachings on a singular natural and moral principle or order (*li* 理) established by earlier Northern Song Confucian masters like Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) (i.e., the Cheng brothers). Adler further contends that this crisis or impasse led Zhu back to the work of Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073), a teacher of the Cheng brothers, where he found a cosmological model that not only enabled him to reconcile a religious regimen involving both activity (e.g., book learning, social engagement, and moral conduct) and stillness (e.g., sleep, reverent composure, and quiet sitting) with the philosophical doctrines taught by the Cheng brothers, but also helped him distinguish his new Confucian way or *dao* 道 from other contemporary *daos*. In short, *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao* asks why Zhu Xi, despite great opposition, chose Zhou Dunyi “to initiate the revival of the Confucian *dao* after its long eclipse since the time of Mencius” (137). It argues that this choice was made because Zhou's work on the principle of *taiji* 太極 (“supreme polarity”; less succinctly, *wuji-taiji* 無極太極, “non-polar and yet supreme polarity”) enabled Zhu to align his cultivation practices with established philosophical theories. It also points out that although Confucian classics like the *Yijing* 易經 (Classic of Changes) could have been used to justify Zhu Xi's synthesis, the canon did not make explicit the kind of interpenetration of activity and stillness found in Zhou's writings, particularly in his *Taijitu* 太極圖 (The Supreme Polarity Diagram).

Part I of the book (3–150) deftly details Zhu Xi's crisis, his breakthrough, and the subsequent trajectory of his writing. It is divided into four chapters that introduce competing Song-dynasty notions of the *dao*, investigate Zhu Xi's concept of *daotong* 道通 (succession of the Way), explore Zhu's crisis and his turn to the work of Zhou Dunyi for a solution, and examine Zhu's subsequent

work, focusing on the crux of his solution, the principle of *taiji*. Part II (151–307) of the book features translations of Zhou Dunyi's three major extant works: *Taiji tu*, *Taijitu shu* 太極圖說 (Discussion on the Supreme Polarity Diagram), and *Tongshu* 通書 (Penetrating the Scripture of Change). Zhu Xi's published comments accompany each of these works, and his postfaces and additional notes are translated in the short final chapter.

The introduction to Part I of the book (3–14) starts with a short standard history of the development of Neo-Confucianism during the Song dynasty, revealing significant lapses and inconsistencies. It then highlights a discrepancy in the genealogy of sages accredited with the revival and transmission of the Confucian *dao* during the Northern Song dynasty. Cheng Yi and his many disciples claimed that Cheng Hao was the first Confucian sage of the Song, but Zhu Xi argued that the Confucian *dao* had already been revealed to Zhou Dunyi, a figure with questionable ties to Daoist traditions. Zhu Xi adopted this contested view, as the introduction convincingly argues, because Zhou Dunyi's work on the principle of *taiji* allowed him to claim that his ritual program mirrored established philosophical ideals promoted by the Northern Song Confucian masters with whom he had aligned himself. The first four chapters of *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao* set up, investigate, and defend Zhu's crisis, his solution to this crisis, and the subsequent trajectory of his work.

Chapter 1, "Zhu Xi, Zhou Dunyi, and the Confucian *dao*" (15–36), begins with comments on the Northern–Southern Song transition, the need for reform during this period, and Zhu Xi's early life. It then introduces a few competing notions of the *dao* during the Song, including teachings of the Buddha (especially Chan 禪 and Pure Land 淨土 teachings), teachings on the Dao (especially Quanzhen 全真 or Complete Perfection teachings), and earlier Confucian and literati *daos* that impacted Zhu Xi's development of the Learning of the Way (*daoxue* 道學). The remainder of Chapter 1 introduces early Confucian sages, the Cheng brothers, and the life and basic teachings of Zhou Dunyi, along with Zhu's reception of Zhou's works.

Chapter 2, "Zhou Dunyi's Role in the *daotong*" (37–75), introduces Zhu Xi's work after the 1169 resolution to his "spiritual crisis," highlighting his elevation of Zhou Dunyi in the "succession of the Way" and the revelatory nature of Zhou's status as the first Song Confucian sage. It also includes a very telling list of twenty-two pieces about Zhou Dunyi that Zhu Xi wrote between 1169 and 1196 (50–53). Adler selects comments from a few of these works and similar works written by other Song Confucians to reveal "a concerted campaign, begun by the Hunan school and continued by Zhu Xi and Zhang Shi 張栻 (1133–1180), to elevate Zhou Dunyi to the position of the first sage of the Song, contrary to the prevailing opinion at the time" (59). Chapter 2 also includes

sections on the philosophical and historical problems with Zhu Xi's appropriation and elevation of Zhou.

Chapter 3, "The Interpenetration of Activity and Stillness" (77–109), situates Zhu Xi's appropriation of Zhou Dunyi in the historical context of his life and religious practice (77). Adler argues that the practical and theoretical solution Zhu arrived at for his method of self-cultivation involved Zhou's teachings on "the interpenetration of activity and stillness (*dong jing* 動靜)" and was supported by the cosmology featured in Zhou's *Taijitu shuo* (78). Adler's defense includes discussions on why Zhu Xi claimed that the heart-mind requires intellectual and spiritual training and why he encouraged the interpenetration of stillness and activity in his program for self-cultivation. Particularly revealing in this chapter is Adler's outline of three stages Zhu Xi is thought to have gone through in the process of developing a satisfactory solution to his crisis (88–93). The first stage is said to have taken place over the course of several extended visits and exchanges of letters with Li Tong between 1153 and 1163. It was during this time that Zhu Xi became convinced of the importance of focusing on the mind in its still phase. The second stage is purported to have involved a re-realization of the importance of activity and the active mind as emphasized in the teachings of the Hunan school that Zhu discussed with Zhang Shi during an extended visit with him toward the end of 1167. The third and final stage allegedly took place over the next few years as Zhu Xi wrestled with the question of how to reconcile two seemingly opposite approaches to the cultivation of sagehood. Here, Adler contends that Zhu's solution involved a combination of Zhou's views on *taiji* and the substance-function (*tiyong* 體用) rubric in Chinese thought to establish "a Confucian brand of quietism that fundamentally entails activity" (109). In other words, stillness and activity, while logically distinguishable, were to ultimately be regarded as parts of a unified whole. The realization of their active interpenetration is presented as the key to self-cultivation, and the primary means of accomplishing this is said to involve the maintenance of "reverent composure" (*jing* 敬). According to Adler, Zhu Xi's notion of reverent composure implies both "activity in stillness" and "stillness in activity" (98); it refers to "a state of composure that remains unchanged by external stimuli and yet enables one to respond to them—a state of equipoise and fluid responsiveness" (108). Adler explains that by equating this method of self-cultivation with the principle of *taiji*, Zhu Xi was able to argue that activity-function and stillness-substance represented a unified whole.

In Chapter 4, "Taiji as 'Supreme Polarity'" (111–136), Adler further explores Zhu Xi's final resolution to his spiritual crisis. This chapter convincingly contends that Zhu's synthesis of the teachings of Li Tong and the Hunan school centered on the principle of *taiji* and is exhibited in Zhu's sudden and

unexpected turn to the work of Zhou Dunyi in and after 1169. A few classical and medieval occurrences of the term *taiji* found in Confucian classicist and religious Daoist texts are introduced (116–118), along with Western-language treatments and translations of the term over the last three centuries (119–126). Adler uses these materials to set up his justification of the translation “supreme polarity” for *taiji*, which he masterfully defends with a number of Zhu Xi’s own comments on the term, as well as remarks on how Zhu’s students and followers understood their master’s views on it. Chapter 4 concludes that even though Zhu’s perspective on *taiji* might have differed from that of Zhou, his discourse conveys “the crucial idea that *yin-yang* polarity is the most fundamental ordering principle or *li* ... and is first manifested as the polarity of activity and stillness” (135). *Taiji* is, in short, “the ‘ultimate’ principle” for Zhu Xi “in the sense that one can go no further in explaining a phenomenon” (136).

Finally, chapters 5–8 of *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao* (i.e., Part II) offer translations of Zhou Dunyi’s major extant works along with Zhu’s published exegesis on them. Superbly organized and introduced, Adler’s translations of these materials are clear, convincing, and well annotated. Specialists might have questions about a few of Adler’s translation choices (e.g., “earth” for the phase *tu* 土 [161]; “original ground” for *chuben* 初本 [176]; “given” for *ming* 命 [177]; “perfection” for *zhi* 至 [194]; “singing of the wind and moon” for *yinfeng nongyue* 吟風弄月 [219]; “product” for *mo* 末 [274]), but these perhaps overly functional renderings have little impact on the overall quality and reliability of his translations, which effectively capture and relate a slew of complex philosophical, cosmological, and religious principles.

Adler acknowledges that Zhu Xi’s crisis in the 1160s has been pointed out by many before him, but he argues that few have approached it as a *spiritual* crisis, few have studied Zhu as a *religious* figure, and none have adequately explored why Zhu declared Zhou Dunyi to be the first sage since Mencius or why he increasingly appropriated Zhou’s work after mid-1169. Adler’s treatment of Zhu Xi’s impasse as a spiritual crisis and his choice to approach Confucianism as a religious tradition are both brilliantly conceived and defended, but this reviewer was left wanting more, not only because this is such a significant and contested issue in the field of Chinese religions, but also because *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao* provides us with a rich variety of materials that can be used to further defend the approach that its author has so carefully chosen.

First, Adler argues that Frederick Streng’s definition of religion as “a means to ultimate transformation” is particularly relevant in his study (9) because Heaven (*tian* 天) symbolizes the ultimate and sagehood is the endpoint in the transformation promoted in Zhu Xi’s Confucian *dao*. However, he also contends that Zhu Xi was primarily interested in “facilitating the religious *practice*

of Confucian self-cultivation for himself and his many followers, not with building a philosophical ‘theology’ (138). While Adler might draw too sharp a divide between religious praxis and philosophical theory in his book, his major contention concerning the significance of religious praxis in Zhu Xi’s *dao* is well defended. Zhu Xi is also treated as a religious figure because of his views on the revelatory powers of Heaven: “His view of the appearance of sages such as Fuxi and Zhou Dunyi is...a Neo-Confucian analogue of *revelation*” (44). While Streng’s definition of religion is an almost perfect match for Zhu Xi’s teachings on self-cultivation, I would like to briefly mention a few other basic approaches to the study of religion that Adler could cite to further defend his approach. Pointing out that Adler has not done so himself should not be taken as a strong critique. I can think of a number of reasons why he might have deemed extended methodological reflections unnecessary or counterproductive in his work (e.g., matters of space; the contested and slippery-slope nature of these questions; the sacrifice of suggestiveness and straightforwardness), but given the context of the present review, additional comments on why Adler’s approach and findings are significant for the study of religion in Chinese society are in order.

In the conclusion to Part I of *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao* (137–144), Adler reminds us of the reluctance of scholars in the past to approach Confucianism as a religion. This reluctance is attributed to a number of different factors including “the Enlightenment preference for reason over religion,” Western imperialist biases about what religion entails, the Chinese modernist disdain for religion, and the fact that “the academic study of Confucianism ... has largely been the province of intellectual historians and historians of philosophy” (140–141). However, advances in the modern field of religious studies over the past few decades have opened up new doors and forced scholars to reassess this reluctance, leading to a number of studies that, like Adler’s work, approach Confucianism as a religious tradition focused on spiritual cultivation and practice, as well as ultimate things.

Reconstructing the Confucian Dao presents a great deal of evidence showing that the principle of *taiji* played a central role in Zhu Xi’s resolution of his spiritual crisis and in his appropriation of Zhou Dunyi. *Taiji* not only provided him with the basis for a cosmology, worldview, or means of “ultimate orientation” (91n17), but it is also explicitly equated with a number of different forms of ultimacy, including *dao*, *yi* 易 (change), Heaven, *li* 理, *yin* and *yang* 陰陽, and the occult/hidden/mysterious. Therefore, approaches to religion as “worldview” advanced in the work of scholars like Émile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, and Ninian Smart, as well as approaches that adopt Paul Tillich’s views on religion as “ultimate concern” (97), can also be used to help support Adler’s approach.

And, defenses of Confucianism as a religious tradition (and Confucius as a religious figure or object of cult) in pre-Song times aside, if one were to equate any of the “ultimates” in Zhu’s post-1160s work with occult, divine, or spiritual power (e.g., Heaven as a transcendent or imminent revelatory power; Supreme Polarity as a numinous power), anthropological and theistic definitions of religion featuring culturally constructed notions of divine power could also be used to defend Adler’s approach. They could also help promote a more polythetic understanding of “religion” based on the kind of combination of emic and etic that Adler so neatly presents in his initial approach to Zhu Xi’s views of sagehood as an ultimate transformation.

Adler primarily describes Zhu Xi’s crisis as *spiritual* because it was concerned with the internal, subjective, and emotional/experiential (psychological) dimensions of self-cultivation. However, the solution to Zhu’s crisis also involved claims of enlightenment (93, n53) and of revelation from an ultimate (and perhaps transcendent) power. And, while Zhou and Zhu frequently describe spirit as mysterious, unfathomable, and imperceptible, they also explicitly associated it with stillness (260, 268), which plays a central role in Zhu’s crisis and in his resolution of it. Because of these points, Zhu’s crisis and solution are both regarded as “spiritual.” In the introduction to *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao*, Adler warns us that there is no sharp distinction between spirit and body or mind in Zhu Xi’s *dao* (10). These entities, however, are logically distinguishable and readily apparent in Zhu Xi’s comments on cultivation, making it possible—and practical—for Adler to approach both Zhu Xi’s crisis and his *dao* as spiritual and religious.

Adler’s *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao* reintroduces the teachings of one of the most famous and influential figures in Chinese and East Asian intellectual history. It explains why Zhu Xi, against vehement opposition, regarded Zhou Dunyi as the first Confucian sage since Mencius, and it refashions Zhu Xi as a religious rather than a philosophical figure. While Adler’s translations and sophisticated description of Zhu Xi’s crisis and reconstruction of Song Confucianism constitute significant contributions to Song Confucian studies, his book’s approach to notions of religion, spirituality, and cosmology should also greatly interest scholars in the fields of Sinology, cultural studies, and religious studies.

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