

Joseph A. Adler. *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao: Zhu Xi's Appropriation of Zhou Dunyi*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2014. 331 Pp. Paperback, ISBN 9781438451572.)

The process by which Zhu Xi 朱熹 reconstructed the *daotong* 道統 (the Confucian succession of the Way), especially the question of why he elevated Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 to be the first Confucian sage since Mencius, is of great interest to scholars of Chinese philosophy and thought. The prevailing view set by Wing-tsit Chan is that Zhu Xi appropriated Zhou's concept of *taiji* 太極 (the Great Ultimate) in order to link the metaphysical realm of *li* with the cosmological realm of *yin-yang* and *qi*, and that explains why Zhu honored Zhou. However, Joseph Adler thinks there is more to the story. Expanding the findings of his 2008 article in *Dao*, "Zhu Xi's Spiritual Practice as the Basis of His Central Philosophical Concepts" (*Dao* 7: 57-79), Adler's new book, *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao*, adduces further evidence and offers a more systematic argument. He suggests the key lies in Zhu's understanding of Zhou's ideas regarding the interpenetrating modes of activity and stillness (*dong-jing* 動靜) in the *Taijitu Shuo* 《太极图说》 (the Supreme Polarity Diagram).

This book is divided into two parts. Part I consists of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. In the introduction, Adler argues that we should view Zhu Xi's spiritual crisis concerning the method and import of self-cultivation in terms of his personal religious practice. Zhu elevated Zhou Dunyi primarily because the latter's metaphysics and teachings in the *Taijitu Shuo*, essentially the idea of the "interpenetration of mental activity and stillness," provided him with the solution to his spiritual crisis: Zhu found

this particular solution to his spiritual crisis. This is the main argument of the book. The next four chapters unpack the arguments step by step. Chapter 1, “Zhu Xi, Zhou Dunyi, and the Confucian *Dao*,” introduces competing visions of the *dao*, and examines how Zhu Xi strove to revive the Confucian *dao* in the face of the thriving Chan Buddhism and Daoism. Adler astutely reminds us that Zhou Dunyi, the key figure of this book, was not famous during his lifetime and his later distinguished status owed much to Zhu Xi’s deliberate effort.

In chapter 2, “Zhou Dunyi’s Role in the *Daotong*,” Adler lists Zhu Xi’s writings on Zhou that were composed between 1169 and 1196 and describes the process of his placing Zhou before the Cheng brothers in the succession of the Way. Adler ably shows that from the sectarian, philosophical, and historical points of view, elevating Zhou was a problematic pursuit that did not always accord with the facts and realities. So why, then, did Zhu still tout Zhou as the first of the Song sages? Chapter 3 addresses this question. Adler details the spiritual crisis that Zhu Xi experienced in the 1160s. He was greatly vexed by the method of self-cultivation, wondering whether spiritual cultivation should proceed in the still phase or the active phase. He regarded that as the central problem of apprehending and realizing *zhong* (centrality) and *he* (harmony). Zhu went through three phases in his long-term effort to resolve his spiritual and existential crisis. At first Zhu learned from Li Tong and then came under the influence of Zhang Shi. Eventually, he got the answer to his spiritual crisis from his study of Zhou’s *Tongshu* and *Taijitu shuo*. He finally understood that the interpenetration of stillness and activity, based on the notion of the interpenetration of *wuji* and *taiji* in *Taijitu shuo*, was the ultimate basis for the pursuit of self-cultivation. On this score, Zhu actually synthesized Li Tong’s thoughts and the Hunan School’s ideas. Chapter 4, “*Taiji* as ‘Supreme Polarity,’” critically explores the English translation of the term “*taiji*.” The author asserts that “*taiji*” should be translated as “Supreme Polarity” rather than “Supreme Ultimate.” The translation of *taiji* as “Supreme Ultimate” mainly focuses on the meaning of “limit,” which is a linear image that ignores the nonlinear aspect and obscures the fact that the farthest point is also the center of a bipolarity. Adler enlists Zhu Xi’s words in the *Zhouyi Benyi* 《周易本義》 to clarify and highlight the connotation of polarity in *taiji*: “Change is the *bian* 變 (alternation) of *yin* and *yang*. *Taiji* is this principle.” *Taiji* is the principle of the *yin*/stillness-*yang*/activity polarity, and the translation of “Supreme Ultimate” loses this sense of polarity.

Part II is titled, “Translations of Zhou Dunyi’s Major Works and Zhu Xi’s Commentaries, with Further Discussions by Zhu Xi and His

Students.” Besides translating Zhou’s works, there are other translations related to Zhou Dunyi, such as Hu Hong’s “Preface to Master Zhou’s *Tongshu*,” Zhu Xi’s “Record of the Reconstruction of Zhou Dunyi’s Study in Jiangzhou” and Zhang Shi’s “Preface to Master Zhou’s Explanation of the *Taiji* Diagram.” This may be, to date, the most comprehensive collection of translations of texts by and about Zhou Dunyi. Because there has so little systematic and focused research on Zhou Dunyi in English, Adler’s does the field a great service by furnishing scholars with these resources.

While scholars of Zhu Xi and Zhou Dunyi in contemporary Chinese academic circles, including those in philosophy and history, do investigate the question of Zhu’s elevation of Zhou, few, unlike Adler, approach it from the religious perspective. Adler’s focus on Zhu Xi’s religious practice is a creative, innovative, and plausible answer to the question of Zhu’s unstinting admiration for Zhou. Nevertheless, some parts of this book leave something to be desired. First, Adler’s claim that the construction of Zhou’s premier status in the Cheng-Zhu School was completed by Zhu Xi could be strengthened had he taken into account others’ views. Adler mentions the influence of Hu Hong and Zhang Shi but does not quite give enough due credit to Li Tong’s impact. Li Tong, as Zhu Xi’s teacher, was familiar with Zhou’s thought and often discussed it with Zhu, which prompted Zhu’s own deep probing and creative understanding of Zhou. Moreover, it should be noted that besides Li Tong and Hu Hong, there were other scholars who lavished much attention on Zhou before and after Zhu. For instance, Su Pinxiao 粟品孝 has argued convincingly that the construction of Zhou’s supreme status was a gradual historical process and not the result and product of the endeavors of only a few people, including an array of varied scholars such as Kong Yanzhi 孔延之, Fu Qi 傅耆, Du Zheng 度正, Wei Liaoweng 魏了翁, and so on.¹ Second, Adler could have further stressed the ingenuity of Zhou’s metaphysical and cosmological thoughts that revolved around the central notion of *taiji*, which greatly impressed Zhu, so much so that he was impelled to bestow on Zhou seminal importance in the *daotong*. In brief, the genius of Zhou Dunyi was that he synthesized the *Zhouyi* and *Zhongyong* 《中庸》, by using the idea and ideal of *cheng* 誠 (earnestness/sincerity) to explain the *taiji* in his *Taijitu shuo*. In so doing, he successfully linked together ethics, cosmology, and ontology. Zhu found the meanings of *taiji* in Zhou’s works to be robust and rich, and thus suitable for integration into his own meta-ethical system.

All in all, while one wishes Adler had paid more attention to other scholars’ views on the main issue at hand, one must reiterate that fact

that his translations of the works by and related to Zhou Dunyi are most valuable, and his explications of the *daotong* and Zhu Xi's manipulation of Zhou's role in it from the religious perspective are innovative.

Li Lizhu

Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, SAR, China

ENDNOTE

1. “從普通士人到‘道學宗主’—周敦頤學術史地位的建構·程 (From Common Scholar to the Founder of Daoxue—the Process of the Construction of Zhou Dunyi's intellectual Status) in 嶺南宋史研究會第三屆年會論文集未刊稿 (The Proceedings of the 3rd Annual Conference of Lingnan Seminar on the History of the Song), 2012, unpublished.