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# ZHU Xi's Spiritual Practice as the Basis of His Central Philosophical Concepts

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**Abstract** This article attempts to connect three aspects of ZHU Xi's 朱熹 (1130–1200) life and work: (1) the "spiritual crisis" he experienced in his thirties; (2) his identification of ZHOU Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073) as the first true Confucian sage since Mencius; and (3) his concepts of *taiji* 太極 and *li* 理. The argument is that (1) the spiritual crisis that ZHU Xi discussed with ZHANG Shi 張栻 (1133–1180) and the other "gentlemen of Hunan" from about 1167 to 1169, which was resolved by an understanding of what we might call the "interpenetration" of the mind's stillness and activity (*dong-jing* 動靜) or equilibrium and harmony (*zhong-he* 中和), (2) led directly to his realization that ZHOU Dunyi's thought provided a cosmological basis for that resolution, and (3) this in turn led ZHU Xi to understand (or construct) the meaning of *taiji* in terms of the polarity of *yin* and *yang*; i.e. the "Supreme Polarity" as the most fundamental ordering principle (*li* 理).

**Keywords** ZHU Xi · ZHOU Dunyi · *taiji* · spirituality

In this article, I attempt to connect three aspects of ZHU Xi's 朱熹 (1130–1200) life and work. They are: (1) the "spiritual crisis" he experienced in his thirties; (2) his identification of ZHOU Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073) as the first true Confucian sage since Mencius; and (3) his concepts of *taiji* 太極 and *li* 理. My hypothesis is difficult to squeeze into one sentence. Basically, I suggest that (1) the spiritual crisis that ZHU Xi discussed with ZHANG Shi 張栻 (1133–1180) and the other "gentlemen of Hunan" from about 1167 to 1169, which was resolved by an understanding of what we might call the "interpenetration" of the mind's

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stillness and activity (*dong jing* 動靜) or equilibrium and harmony (*zhong he* 中和), (2) led directly to his realization that ZHOU Dunyi's thought provided a cosmological basis for that resolution, and (3) this in turn led ZHU Xi to understand (or construct) the meaning of *taiji* in terms of the polarity of *yin* and *yang*; i.e. the "Supreme Polarity" as the most fundamental ordering principle (*li* 理).

The first of these items (the spiritual crisis) has long been well-studied, but has only peripherally been connected with ZHOU Dunyi.[1] The connection, in simple historical terms, is that Zhou's writings were preserved by HU Hong 胡宏 (1106–1161), ZHANG Shi's teacher. However, the fact that Zhu began writing his commentaries on ZHOU Dunyi's major works immediately after he came to the resolution of his crisis—after many conversations with ZHANG Shi—has not, to my knowledge, been interpreted as anything more than coincidence.[2] The second item—specifically the question why ZHU Xi declared ZHOU Dunyi to be the first sage of the Song—is a puzzle that has not, in my estimation, been fully solved.[3] The third item (the interpretation of *taiji* and *li*) is indeed a hoary one, but I was led back to it by the first two, which provide the context for a useful new way of understanding these fundamental terms in ZHU Xi's philosophy.

## 1 ZHU Xi's "Spiritual Crisis"[4]

The critical turning point in the development of ZHU Xi's philosophy was his resolution of a problem that had occupied him from about 1158 to 1169, a problem that fundamentally concerned the methodology of self-cultivation but necessitated a philosophical solution.[5] Thomas Metzger offers an illuminating discussion of the philosophical and spiritual context of this issue in his 1977 book, *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture*. The issue arises from Neo-Confucian theories of mind, which

[1] ZHOU Dunyi's main written legacy consists of three items: (1) the *Taiji* (Supreme Polarity) Diagram (*Taijitu* 太極圖), which originally came from Daoist circles; (2) the very short "Explanation of the *Taiji* Diagram" (*Taijitu shuo* 太極圖說), which puts it into a Confucian theoretical context; and (3) the *Tongshu* 通書, a text in 40 short sections commenting on the *Yijing* 易經 (*Scripture of Change*), certain concepts from the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (*Centrality and Commonality*), and various other topics. *Tongshu* literally means something like "Penetrating Writing," but ZHU Xi claimed that the original title was *Yi tongshu* 易通書 (Penetrating writing on the *Yijing*), and so it is customarily given as "Penetrating the *Yi*." See Adler 1999.

[2] ZHU Xi published an early version (no longer extant) of his commentary on the *Tongshu* in 1166. In the third month of 1169 he had the "realization" (*wu* 悟) of the solution to the crisis (see next section), and immediately proceeded to write and publish a commentary on the *Taijitu* and a revision of his commentary on the *Tongshu*, followed a few months later by a commentary on the *Taijitu shuo*. He continued working on Zhou's texts until 1187. See ZHANG Boxing's note to Zhu's preface to the *Tongshu* in Zhou: 5.2a and Shu 2001: 1. 406–412.

[3] A. C. Graham discussed the puzzling nature of Zhu's choice in his 1958 book, *Two Chinese Philosophers: Ch'eng Ming-tao and Ch'eng Yi-ch'uan*. Wing-tsit Chan offered a solution, which I think is inadequate for reasons that will be developed here, in his 1973 article, "Chu Hsi's Completion of Neo-Confucianism."

[4] The term "spiritual" here should not be construed as it generally has been in the Western religious and philosophical traditions, implying a categorical distinction from a "physical/material" realm. Confucian "spirit" (*shen* 神) should be understood as a form of *qi* 氣 (psycho-physical stuff), which comprehends the spectrum of matter-energy-spirit. See Adler 2004.

[5] This has been fully discussed by Qian: 2.123–182; Metzger: 93–99; Thompson 1985: 90–118; Levey 1991: 86–144; Tillman 1992: 59–64; Taylor 1997: 46–56; and CHEN Lai 2000: 157–193.

Metzger describes in terms of what he calls "the naturally given phases of the mind." Briefly, these phases are:

1. "total stillness," in which the mind has access to the "good cosmic force" represented by "Heaven" (*tian* 天); it is the aspect of mind that ZHU Xi calls the "moral mind" (*daoxin* 道心); or it is the principle (*li* 理) of the mind, which is human nature (*xing* 性);[6]
2. "sensation of an outer object" or stimulus (*gan* 感), necessarily preceding the following;
3. "imminent issuance," i.e. the point at which feelings and other responses to stimuli are "not yet expressed" (*weifa* 未發) and are in perfect "equilibrium" (*zhong* 中);[7]
4. "incipient issuance," or what I have elsewhere called simply "incipience" (*ji* ; Smith et al. 1990: 190–199; Adler 1998);
5. "accomplished issuance," i.e. the "already expressed" (*yifa* 已發) feelings and other mental activities, which should be but are not necessarily in "harmony" (*he* 和) with the still, unexpressed phases of the mind (Metzger 1977: 87).

ZHU Xi frequently used terminology from the *Xici* 繫辭 appendix of the *Yijing* 易經 to discuss the phases of mind, especially *Xici* A.10.4: "*jiran budong, gan er sui tong* 寂然不動, 感而遂通" (quiet and inactive; when stimulated it then penetrates; Zhu 1532: 67.3b; Zhu 1177: 3.12b; CHEN Lai 2000: 234–239). Although the referent in the text is the *Zhouyi* itself in its "spiritual" mode as an oracle, ZHU Xi comments, "The mystery of the human mind, in its stillness and activity, is also like this" (Zhu 1177: 3.13a). Under these headings, phase 1 is *jiran budong* and phases 2–5 are *gan er sui tong*. Alternatively, we can say that phases 1–3 are the "substance" (*ti* 體) of mind and phases 4–5 are its "functioning" (*yong* 用).

The problem of self-cultivation in terms of this schema—or more specifically the problem of "rectifying the mind" (*zheng xin* 正心) and "making one's intentions authentic" (*cheng yi* 誠意)[8]—is simply "how to bridge the phases" (Metzger 1977: 90); how to connect the substance of mind (phases 1–3) with its functioning (phases 4–5); or, as ZHU Xi put it, "how to make the principle of *zhong* [equilibrium] manifest in outer actions" (Metzger 1977: 94).[9] That is: how to ensure that one's experienced mental functioning and one's moral activity (*de xing* 德行) will authentically (*cheng* 誠) reflect the goodness that is inherent in the human mind in the form of its "principle," or the principle of being human, otherwise known as human nature (*ren xing* 人性). This is obviously the crux of the problem of self-cultivation, in

[6] An anonymous reviewer has suggested that "principles are inherently linguistic and fit into logical arguments, whereas *li* are never used in this fashion," and that "pattern" is a better translation of *li*. I agree that "pattern" conveys some of the Cheng/Zhu (CHENG Yi/ZHU Xi) sense of *li*, but I think it fails to capture its depth of meaning. For example, "the pattern of a boat" suggests its shape and structure, but the *li* of a boat is what makes it a boat (Kim 2000: 26). It is therefore closer (but not identical) to the Aristotelian concept of "form" (what that concept lacks is the sense of *li* as *dynamic*; see Levey 1991: 146–189). When *li* is used as a comprehensive term, as in CHENG Yi's claim, "*Li* is unitary, its manifestations are multiple" (*li yi fen shu* 理一分殊; Chan 1963: 550), "order" often works as a translation, conveying the sense of "the order of things," or "the natural order" (for *tianli* 天理) and "the moral order" (for *daoli* 道理). ZHU Xi's concept of *li* is metaphysical in the sense that it signifies the abstract order—or better yet, the ordering—of things, and is therefore categorically distinct from the *qi*-based existence of the things themselves. Yet *li* itself has no existence apart from things, unlike Plato's ideal forms.

[7] These terms and those in phase 5 come from *Zhongyong* 中庸 (*Centrality and Commonality*), 1 (Chan 1963: 98).

[8] Two of the "eight steps" of the *Daxue* 大學 (*Higher Learning*; Chan 1963: 86–87).

[9] Quoting ZHU Xi from Qian 1971: 2.152.

that one's Heaven-endowed moral potential (*de* 德) is the creative power to transform oneself into a sage and ultimately to transform or "pacify (balance) the world" (*ping tianxia* 平天下).[10] For someone as conscious as Zhu Xi of the *difficulty* of even this initial step in the process of gaining access to the inborn moral nature, given the opposing forces he saw in his day, it was a problem whose solution was critical to his entire project.[11]

For the purposes of this essay, "activity and stillness" are the key terms. They are, of course, the "Two Modes" (*liangyi* 兩儀) of the *Yijing*, the primary cosmological manifestations of the *yin-yang* 陰陽 polarity, whose oscillating flow is described in the opening passage of Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu shuo* 太極圖說 (*Explanation of the Taiji Diagram*; see below, Section 2).[12] The relationship of activity and stillness was a central cosmological and epistemological problem in Song Neo-Confucianism, with ramifications involving the methodology of self-cultivation and the self-definition of Confucianism *vis-à-vis* Buddhism and Daoism. For Zhu Xi, Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–1192), and many of their contemporaries, "stillness" (*jing* 靜) and its associated practice of "quiet-sitting" (*jingzuo* 靜坐; more on this below) were both fraught with the "danger" of slipping into Buddhism or Daoism, both of which were extremely popular among Song literati. It was precisely in this problematic space between traditional Confucian "activism" and Buddhist/Daoist "quietism" that Zhu Xi had to work out the solution to his spiritual crisis.

Song Confucian objections to Buddhism, although often based on caricatures of Buddhist thought, had both ethical and metaphysical grounds. While some were attracted by the Buddhist notion of self-perfection based on inherent Buddha-nature, with its obvious parallels to Mencian thought, they were repelled by Buddhism's alleged socio-ethical failings. Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), for example, repeatedly accused the Buddhists of selfishness in leaving behind social and familial relationships. Even though their teachings may be "lofty and profound," he said, they are essentially wrong because one simply cannot deny one's relationships even if one flees from them (Chan 1963: 555, 564).[13] In Zhu Xi's view, the popularity of Buddhism in the Song was a threat to Chinese culture because it undermined the traditional social-mindedness of the Chinese spirit. It did so ultimately on the basis of its highly sophisticated (and therefore attractive) theories of mind, ignorance, and human suffering, theories that denied the ultimate truth of cognitive categories and the socio-ethical values and institutions that were so central to the Confucian worldview. On the metaphysical questions, Zhu Xi said that the major difference between Buddhism and

[10] *Daxue* 1. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for the idea of *ping* as "balancing."

[11] These opposing forces would include, on the individual psycho-physical level, the clouding effect of one's psycho-physical nature (*qizhi zhi xing* 氣質之性); on the political level, the failure during the Northern Song, despite the best efforts of his predecessors, to put into effect a humane government (*ren zheng* 仁政); and on the social level the insidious popularity of Buddhism and Daoism during the Song.

[12] Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011–1077) also emphasized the stillness/activity polarity. In one of his diagrams he illustrates the evolution of stillness and activity into eight subdivisions, which Zhu Xi and his followers interpreted as *Taiji* unfolding into the Eight Trigrams. The diagram begins with *dong* and *jing*, which unfold into *yang*, *yin*, firm (*gang* 剛) and yielding (*rou* 柔), which in turn each divide into "young" and "mature" phases that clearly parallel the Eight Trigrams (Huang and Quan: 10.21b). The diagram is called the *Jingshi yan yi tu* 經世衍易圖, which might be translated as the "The *Huangji jingshi*'s diagram of the evolution of the *Yi*." *Huangji jingshi shu* 皇極經世書 (Supreme Principles for Governing the World) is the title of Shao's magnum opus, where the diagram originally appeared (although it is missing from the Sibu Beiyao 四部備要 edition). See Birdwhistell 1989: 240 and Wu 1969:17. It is also found in the *Xingli daquan shu* 性理大全書 (Great Compendium on Nature and Principle), a Ming-era classified compendium of the Song Cheng/Zhu school (Hu: 8.1b).

[13] This was also the theme of Han Yu's 韓愈 (768-824) critique of Buddhism (Chan 1963: 454–456).

Confucianism could be seen in their different interpretations of the first line of the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (Centrality and Commonality), "What Heaven imparts to man is called human nature" (Chan 1963: 98). Buddhists, he said, understand "human nature" (*xing* 性) as "empty awareness," while Confucians interpret it as "concrete principle" (Chan 1963: 616, 647–648). The Confucian interpretation meant, for ZHU Xi, that even when the mind is "vacuous" or unoccupied and peaceful it is "full" of moral principle, since every thing (including the mind) has a principle/pattern/order (*li*), and the *li* of the mind is the moral nature. "Principle" in Mahayana Buddhist theory refers to the principle that all elements of existence (*dharmas*/*fa* 法) are "empty" (*śunya*/*kong* 空) of "own-being" (*svabhāva*/*zixing* 自性); that is, they have no self-existent, knowable nature. Principle for Confucians has definite, intelligible, and ultimately moral content. Self-actualization, or the process of becoming a sage, requires knowledge and fulfillment of the "fivefold nature"—the nature characterized by the "five constant virtues"—not an "empty" Buddha-nature. As Mencius said, "He who fully develops his mind knows his nature; knowing his nature he knows Heaven. To preserve the mind and nourish the nature is the way to serve Heaven" (*Mencius* 7A1). Daoism did not receive as much Confucian criticism as did Buddhism, but terms such as "vacuity" (*xu* 虛) and "nonexistence" (*wu* 無) in the *Laozi* made many Confucians uncomfortable for the same reasons.

Quiet-sitting had a long pedigree in China, with some forms of meditation dating back at least to the late Warring States period; for example, Zhuangzi's "sitting and forgetting" (*zuowang* 坐忘) and fasting the mind (*xinzhai* 心齋), and the *Guanzi*'s "maintaining the One" (*shouyi* 守一) and "concentrating the mind" (*zhuanxin* 傳心; Watson 1968: 57, 90; Roth 1999: 82–83, 107, 155, 167).[14] Nevertheless, the incorporation of quiet-sitting into Song Confucian practice was almost certainly a response to the popularity of Buddhism, even though most Song Confucians took pains to distinguish it from Chan sitting-in-meditation (*zuochan* 坐禪, Japanese *zazen*; Okada; Taylor 1988). The fact that ZHOU Dunyi, CHENG Hao 程顥 (1031–1085), LUO Congyan 羅從彥 (1072–1135), and LI Tong 李侗 (1093–1163) had taught "quiet-sitting" as a Confucian alternative to or version of Chan "sitting in meditation" necessitated a careful and thorough examination of the correct Confucian use of quietistic techniques. According to ZHU Xi:

> Quiet-sitting should not be like entering *samadhi* in *zazen*, cutting off all thoughts. Just collect the mind and do not let it go and get involved with idle thoughts. Then the mind will be profoundly unoccupied and naturally concentrated. When something happens, it will respond accordingly. When the thing is past it will return to its [still] depth. (Zhu 1270: 12.345–346)

Despite the negative Confucian overtones of "stillness," ZHU Xi considered it essential to incorporate a theory of stillness/activity or equilibrium/harmony into his system, and most importantly to incorporate that theory into the practice of self-cultivation. His efforts to develop a satisfactory solution to the problem went through three stages, beginning with his visits to LI Tong (or LI Yanping 李延平) in 1158, 1160, and 1162.[15] Li was a student of LUO Congyan, who had been a student of CHENG Yi and later of Cheng's student YANG Shi 陽時 (1053–1135; Huang and Quan 2008: 15.1a–2a, 25.1a–b). It was through YANG Shi and

[14] It should be noted, however, that all we have of these early forms of meditation are textual references. While some scholars, such as Roth, believe that there must have been lineages of teachers who transmitted the actual practices, I know of no concrete evidence for them.

[15] One could also say that his thinking on the subject went through four stages, because before visiting LI Tong and adopting his views, he had accepted CHENG Yi's understanding of the matter, as he explains in his letter of 1169, quoted below. However, presumably at that stage he did not regard it specifically as a problem.

his student HU Hong that the writings of ZHOU Dunyi were preserved. The key doctrine that Zhu learned from Li was the view that stillness or quietude (*jing* 靜) was fundamental; associated with this was the importance of quiet-sitting in the practice of self-cultivation. Both of these, of course, were highly susceptible to the criticism that they were significant steps down the slippery slope to Buddhism and Daoism. Nevertheless, LI Tong, who was familiar with ZHOU Dunyi's writings, passed on to Zhu the idea of an "emphasis on stillness" (*zhu jing* 主靜), which Zhou had espoused in his *Taijitu shuo*. Quiet-sitting, which had allegedly been practiced by both of the Cheng brothers, was especially favored by LI Tong. It was through his influence that ZHU Xi came to the view that the mind's access to equilibrium (*zhong*), and hence to the mind's creative principle, had to be gained directly by practicing quiet-sitting and focusing on the mind in its still phase.

ZHU Xi held this view until 1167, when he first visited ZHANG Shi 張栻 in Tanzhou 潭州 (modern Changsha 長沙, Hunan), after corresponding with him for two years. Zhang had been a student of HU Hong, whose father, HU Anguo 胡安國 (1074–1138), is considered the founder of the "Hunan school" of Song learning.[16] Although ZHU Xi never met HU Hong personally, they exchanged letters on the subject of stillness and activity, and Hu criticized ZHU for his emphasis on stillness and equilibrium. The Hunan school supported the view that only in activity (both mental and physical) could the creative power of Heaven be experienced; stillness or equilibrium was to be found within the activity of daily life. For example, HU Hong, in a discussion with a student, cited Mencius' dialogue with King Xuan of Qi (*Mencius* 1A.7) in which they discuss the king's compassion for an ox about to be sacrificed: "When the King of Qi saw the ox and could not bear its being slaughtered, that was the sprout of the originally good mind seen in the midst of desire for profit." ZHANG Shi cited this comment in an essay he wrote in 1166 (Schirokauer 1986: 484).

ZHU Xi and ZHANG Shi discussed the stillness-activity/equilibrium-harmony issue in their correspondence, and they continued to do so during Zhu's 2-month visit with Zhang in the fall of 1167 (Shu 2001: 1.372–380). During that visit ZHU was convinced by Zhang's arguments. As Metzger describes it, Zhang

> suggested that accomplished issuance [*yifa* 已發] is all that exists, that it is an indivisible process, and that in its very indivisibility it comprehends the equilibrium of imminent issuance [the *zhong* 中 of *weifa* 未發]. To apprehend equilibrium, therefore, was to revise and broaden our understanding of accomplished issuance [*yifa*], looking in it, so to speak, rather than behind it for *zhong*. The advantage of this view was that by locating *zhong* in a completely manifest form of experience, it not only directed moral effort toward the proper Confucian business of "daily affairs," rather than to the unworldly realm of Buddhism, but also raised hopes that *zhong* could be more easily apprehended. (Metzger 1977: 96)

The implication of this position was that quiet-sitting and the effort to apprehend the mind in perfect stillness is misguided; thus it directly challenged what ZHU Xi had learned from his revered teacher, LI Tong.

A taste of ZHU Xi's spiritual practice at this time is conveyed by a letter he wrote to ZHANG Shi the following year (Zhu 1168):

> From the time one has life, one has some kind of knowledge. Affairs and things come into his life, and he responds to and is in contact with them without a moment's rest. His

[16] HU Anguo, who was originally from ZHU Xi's province of Fujian, had a nephew, HU Xian 胡憲 (1082-1162), who was one of the three men asked by ZHU Xi's father, ZHU Song 朱松, to become ZHU Xi's teachers after his father's death in 1143. ZHANG Shi became ZHU Xi's close friend and frequent correspondent.

> thoughts are changing continuously until he dies. Essentially this state of affairs does not come to a halt for even an instant. Thus it is for the whole world. Yet sages and superior men have spoken of what is called the equilibrium of imminent issuance (*weifa zhi zhong* 未發之中), and the state of total stillness without movement (*jiran budong* 寂然不動). How can we reasonably suppose that they regarded the concrete flow of daily affairs as accomplished issuance, and a temporary interruption of this flow, some point lacking contact with affairs, as the time of imminent issuance?
>
> When I tried to think of it in this way, I only found moments without awareness, during which false and dark notions would clog up my mind, hardly the substance of pure consciousness responding to things. Moreover, as soon as I became conscious of any feeling just at that subtle moment of incipience, then this consciousness itself was just a recurrence of accomplished issuance, not what is referred to as total stillness. One may say that the more I sought it, the less I could see it.
>
> So I withdrew from this course and looked for it by examining daily affairs. I considered the fact that any case of becoming aware of an object and empathetically pervading it with one's response, that is, any instance of becoming conscious of something after coming into contact with it, can reasonably be regarded as an indivisible whole. In its inexhaustibility, the process of responding to things is the concrete possibility in terms of which the will of heaven is realized and things come into being without end. Even as things arise and are destroyed ten thousand times a day, the ultimate substance of total stillness is never anything but totally still. What is called imminent issuance is simply like this. (Zhu 1532: 30.19a–b; trans. Metzger 1977: 96–97)

Thus Zhu at this point agreed with Zhang that it was pointless to seek a state of perfect stillness. Since the conscious mind can never be perfectly still (that is, the only possible perfect stillness is found in "moments without awareness"), one can only seek for one's moral nature in activity.

Soon after his visit with Zhang, though, Zhu began again to have doubts, and finally decided that the Hunan solution was lacking. The decisive issue seems to have been the failure of that solution to include a concrete *praxis*. It is all very well to say that stillness can only be apprehended in activity, but what does this mean in terms of actual practice? What does one look for or strive for in one's consciousness that reflects stillness in activity?

Zhu announced his final solution in his 1169 "letter to the gentlemen of Hunan on equilibrium and harmony" (Zhu 1532: 64.28b–29b, trans. Chan 1963: 600–602). Here he first explains that, before studying with LI Tong, he had accepted CHENG Yi's teaching that

> before there is any sign of thought or deliberation and prior to the arrival [stimulus] of external things, there is the state before the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused [*weifa*]. At this time, the state is identical with the substance of the mind, which is absolutely quiet and inactive [*jiran budong*], and the nature endowed by Heaven should be completely embodied in it. Because it is neither excessive nor insufficient, and is neither unbalanced nor one-sided, it is called equilibrium [*zhong*]. When it is acted upon and immediately penetrates all things [*gan er sui tong* 感而遂通], the feelings are then aroused. In this state the functioning of the mind can be seen. Because it never fails to attain the proper measure and degree and has nowhere deviated from the right, it is called harmony. (Chan 1963: 600–601)

Now, however, he says (skipping the intermediate points in the evolution of his thought, i.e. his periods of agreement with LI Tong and the very gentlemen to whom he is writing), he

realizes that "there are many incorrect points in Master Cheng's works." The identification of *weifa* with nature and *yifa* with mind is a false distinction; in fact, as CHENG Yi himself had said, "the mind is one," and it is never in a state of total stillness. As he had said in his earlier letter to ZHANG Shi, "any instance of becoming conscious of something after coming into contact with it can reasonably be regarded as an indivisible whole."

So far, the argument is still consistent with the Hunan position, but when he describes his own experiences of cultivation, he comes to the practical sticking point: the lack of any practical application of the Hunan position:

> Right along, in my discussions and thinking, I have simply considered the mind to be the state after the feelings are aroused, and in my daily efforts (*riyong gongfu* 日用工夫) I have merely considered examining and recognizing the clues [of activities or feelings] as the starting points [i.e. focusing on the beginnings of mental activity]. Consequently I have neglected the effort of daily self-cultivation [*pingri hanyang yiduan gongfu* 平日涵養一段工夫], so that my mind was disturbed in many ways and lacked the quality of depth or purity. Also, when it was expressed in speech or action, it was always characterized by a sense of urgency and an absence of reserve, and there was no longer any disposition of ease or profoundness. For a single mistake in one's viewpoint can lead to as much harm as this. This is something we must not overlook. (Chan 1963: 601–602, slightly modified)

So, if both *weifa* and *yifa* are phases of the active, functioning mind, how is it possible to gain access to the substance (*ti* 體) or principle (*li* 理) of the mind? The answer ZHU Xi found was also in CHENG Yi's writings: "In the final analysis what he said was no more than the word "seriousness" (*jing* 敬). This is why he said, "Seriousness without fail is the way to attain equilibrium" (Chan 1963: 601).[17]

*Jing* 敬 can also be translated as "reverence" or "reverent composure"; I shall henceforth use the latter. It was classically defined as the properly respectful and reverent attitude one should have when performing a sacrifice, but the Neo-Confucians extended it beyond that context. CHENG Yi said, "the effort to maintain reverent composure joins the states of activity and stillness at their point of intersection" (Metzger 1977: 98).[18] *Jing* thus functioned as a unifying concept, providing an attitudinal (not philosophical) foundation for self-cultivation. One could not actually experience perfect stillness while engaging in worldly activity, but one could experience a form of composure in both activity and stillness (e.g. quiet-sitting), so that this attitude would comprehend stillness and activity and allow for the possibility of orienting both phases, as a coherent whole, according to moral principle. As ZHU Xi continues in his letter to the gentlemen of Hunan:

> So long as in one's daily life the effort at reverent composure and cultivation (*hanyang* 涵養) is fully extended and there are no selfish human desires to disturb it, then before the feelings are aroused it will be as clear as a mirror and as calm as still water, and after the feelings are aroused it will attain due measure and degree without exception.

[17] Quoting *Henan Chengshi yishu* 河南程氏遺書, 2A.23b. The *Yishu* contains the bulk of the Chengs' teachings on *jing*, and ZHU Xi compiled the text in 1168, the year before this letter was written. It was Zhu's work on this text that therefore precipitated the resolution of his crisis. See Van Ess 2004: 295–298.

[18] Substituting "reverent composure" for "reverence." For more on *jing* see Graham: 67–73; Chan 1963: 522, 547, 593, 785; CHEN Chun: 100–104. See also Zhu 1270: 12.338; Qian: 2.298–335; Yoshikawa and Miura 1972: 115–119.

> This is the essential task in everyday life. As to self-cultivation when things occur and seeking understanding through inference when we come into contact with things, this must also serve as the foundation. If we observe the state after the feelings are aroused, what is contained in the state before the feelings are aroused can surely be understood in silence. (Chan 1963: 601)

In other words, the relationship between the stillness and activity of the mind, or the *weifa* and *yifa* states of the feelings, or equilibrium and harmony, can be described as *interpenetration*. That is, stillness and equilibrium can be found within harmonious activity, and harmonious or moral activity can be found in stillness—as long as one maintains the attitude of reverent composure. Stillness in the midst of moral activity can be understood as a sense of calm purpose combined with a sense of the ultimate significance (or ultimate concern, to use Paul Tillich's term) of one's engagement in the process of moral transformation. Activity in the midst of stillness can be understood in the sense that in a practice such as quiet-sitting, or even in sleep, one is nourishing one's Heaven-endowed moral potential. An example of this would be Mencius' description of the restorative effects of the "morning *qi*" in his famous Ox Mountain allegory (*Mencius* 6A8). In his commentary on this passage ZHU Xi quotes the *Yijing*'s statement (as quoted by CHENG Hao) that the noble person (*junzi* 君子) uses "reverent composure to straighten oneself internally" (*jing yi zhi nei* 敬以直內; Zhu 1190b: *Mengzi* 6b7).[19]

In ZHU Xi's view—or more precisely, his own personal practice—the attitude of reverent composure is the *experiential* common ground linking the still and active phases of the mind. This allows him to understand the still and active phases in a *non-dual* manner, seeing them as different but inseparably linked as phases of the one undivided mind.[20] Thus both quiet-sitting and active study and engagement in affairs are legitimate and necessary methods of self-cultivation, and *both* provide access to the creative, transformative power of Heaven.[21]

[19] The original text is in the *Wenyan* commentary on line two of the hexagram Kun 坤; see Zhu 1177: 1.12b. CHENG Hao's reference to the line is from Zhu 1168: 1.5b. See also Zhu and Lu *Reflections* 1175: 126, where it is mistakenly translated as "Seriousness [*jing* 敬] is to straighten the external life." It is correctly translated on p. 139, where CHENG Hao quotes the full line, "Seriousness is to straighten the internal life and righteousness [*yi* 義] is to square the external life."

[20] I use "non-duality" here in the sense of the *yin-yang* model: the difference between them is real, but they cannot exist separately and each implies the other. This differs from the *advaita* form of non-dualism found in Sankara (eighth century C.E.), which is really monism (all differences are illusory). It is closer to the later Vedantic philosopher, Ramanuja (eleventh century C.E.), whose philosophy is called *visistadvaita*, or "qualified non-dualism." See Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957: 506-555.

[21] This point raises an important question regarding the consistency of ZHU Xi's philosophical position: if *li*, in its instantiation as human nature (*xing* 性), is ontologically distinct from *qi* and the dispositional/affective aspect of mind (*qing* 情), how can the latter be transformed by the former? How can the mind unite and control human nature and the dispositions (*xin tong xing qing* 心統性情)? (This was ZHANG Zai's claim and was endorsed by ZHU Xi; Chan 1963: 517.) How can the "human mind" (*renxin* 人心) ever come to reflect the "moral mind" (*daoxin* 道心)? The claim that this is a fatal flaw in ZHU Xi's system has been made by MOU Zongsan and recently reiterated by Matthew Levey, who says, "CHU Hsi's program is unable to provide the means of attaining the kind of insight it seeks because the program operated only on the empirical level [of "investigating things," *gewu* 格物] and the goal was noumenal insight into the reality of the Moral Principles of human life" (Levey 2000: 247). I would argue that this view misinterprets ZHU Xi's non-dualism (as defined above) as an ontological dualism, and fails to take into account the claim that learning "transforms the psycho-physical endowment" (*bianhua qizhi* 變化氣質), another proposition of ZHANG Zai's that ZHU Xi endorsed (Chan 1963: 516). However, this is a complex issue that cannot be fully dealt with here.

## 2 Zhu Xi and Zhou Dunyi

The standard lineage of the *Daoxue* 道學 (Learning of the Way) or Cheng/Zhu 程朱 school has, for 800 years, placed Zhou Dunyi at the head, followed by the brothers Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), Zhang Zai 張載 (1020–1077), and, in a somewhat subordinate position, Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011–1077). Zhen Dexiu 真德秀 (1178–1235), one of the leading figures in the Cheng/Zhu school after Zhu Xi's death, summarized the prevailing view this way: "The Way of Confucius was rediscovered by Master Zhou [Dunyi], the Way of Master Zhou was further clarified by the two Cheng brothers, and the Way of the Chengs was brilliantly expounded by Master Zhu" (trans. de Bary 1981: 9).

Zhu Xi, the great systematizer of *daoxue*, was entirely responsible for Zhou Dunyi's retrospective place in this lineage. Until Zhu's reformulation of the *daotong* 道統 (succession of the Way) gained the dominant position after the 12th century, the prevailing view had been that the Cheng brothers were the forefathers of the Cheng/Zhu school. This view was well-founded. Zhou Dunyi was a very minor figure during his lifetime and for a century thereafter. For example, according to the *Song Yuan Xue an*, Zhou had only two students (the Chengs), while between them they had about thirty (Huang and Quan 2008: 11.1a, 13.1–2, 15.1–2; Tillman 1992: 115–119; Wilson 1995: 197–227). Nevertheless, Zhu was not the first to consider Zhou Dunyi as the first Confucian sage since Mencius. Zhou's writings had been preserved by the Hunan school, and it was Hu Hong who first credited him with reviving the *dao* in the Song.[22]

The problematic nature of Zhou Dunyi's position in this constructed lineage raised questions even during Zhu Xi's lifetime, notably by Lu Jiuyuan and his elder brother, Lu Jiushao 陸九韶, in their famous exchange of letters with Zhu Xi between 1186 and 1189.[23] While the Lu brothers' objections were on sectarian grounds—they strongly objected to Zhou's use of Daoist terminology and thought him unfit to be considered a Confucian sage—modern scholars have raised serious historical issues. While the claim that the Cheng brothers briefly studied with Zhou when they were teenagers is not disputed, it clearly fails to provide solid ground for the claim that the Chengs "received" the core of their ideas—indeed any of their ideas—from Zhou. Yet, this brief contact seems to be Zhu Xi's only basis for making that claim. In fact, it seems rather that Zhou was hardly known for his ideas at all during the eleventh century. While his writings were preserved by students of the Chengs (probably Yang Shi, from whom they could have passed to Li Tong and Hu Hong), it was not until Hu Hong that the claim was made that he was the source of the *dao* that the Chengs later developed.

A. C. Graham, in his first book, *Two Chinese Philosophers: Ch'eng Ming-tao and Ch'eng Yi-ch'uan* (1958), covers this ground quite thoroughly, arguing that the Chengs' philosophy based on *li*, which Zhou did not discuss systematically, was in an entirely

[22] Around the same time that Zhu Xi was developing this position, Li Yuangang 李元綱 published, in 1172, a diagram called *Daozhuan zhengtong* 道傳正統 (Legitimate succession of the transmission of the Way), in which the Cheng brothers were shown as the first sages since Mencius. This view never completely died out; even in a postface to Zhu Xi's own *Yiluo Yuan yuan Lu* 伊洛淵源錄 (Record of the sources of the Cheng school), a Qing dynasty editor would say that the two Chengs were the first to apprehend the *dao* after Mencius, although "their learning was received from Master Zhou" (Zhu 1190a: 14.1a).

[23] For a good analytical summary of this exchange see Tillman: Ch. 9.

different league from Zhou's. Among the points he adduces concerning the Chengs' possible philosophical debts to ZHOU Dunyi are these:

- The Chengs never spoke of *taiji* 太極,[24] which was the major concept that ZHU Xi adopted from Zhou; nor of the *Taijitu* 太極圖, which was Zhou's most famous contribution to the tradition.[25] In fact they did not discuss *any* of Zhou's doctrines.
- The Chengs referred to Zhou by his personal name, Maoshu 茂叔, yet CHENG Yi referred to his teacher HU Yuan 胡瑗 as Master Hu (Hu xiansheng 胡先生). Moreover, Zhou changed his name from Dunshi 敦實 to Dunyi 敦頤 in 1063 (to avoid an Imperial taboo), 16 years after the Chengs had studied with him. The second part of his new name (Yi) is the same as CHENG Yi's personal name, which would have been unlikely if Zhou had considered Cheng his disciple.
- CHENG Yi said that CHENG Hao had *independently* rediscovered the Way (in the Classics), in a memorial tribute to him, and this was the prevailing view at least up to the mid-twelfth century.[26]
- Zhou was said to have received the *Taijitu* from the Daoist MU Xiu 穆修, who got it through CHONG Fang 种放 from the famous Daoist priest CHEN Tuan 陳摶. ZHU Xi was, for the most part, rather hostile towards Daoism.[27]
- Zhou did not make much use of the concept of *li* 理 (principle or order), which was a central concept for the Chengs.
- The Chengs' immediate disciples never mentioned Zhou in their writings. No one seems to have claimed a significant role for Zhou in the Cheng school until HU Hong (Graham 1958 152–175; see also Qian 1971: 3.49–52; Zhang 1979: 31–32; and Wilson 1995: 197–227).

Given all these problems and the lack of historical evidence for any philosophical link between Zhou and the Chengs, why did ZHU Xi raise ZHOU Dunyi to such a position of prominence in the tradition? Why did he declare that Zhou, for the first time since Mencius, had, "without following a scholarly tradition, silently registered the substance of the Way" (Zhu 1532: 78.12b)—i.e. that he had apprehended the *dao* directly, without "hearing" it from any teacher (much like a *pratyeka-buddha*)? Why did he place Zhou at the head of the Daoxue 道學 "fellowship" in his *Yiluo Yuan yuan Lu* 伊洛淵源錄 (Record of the sources of the Cheng school)?

An argument could be made that, for different reasons, Zhu could not accept either of the Cheng brothers as independent revivers of the Way. First of all, as mentioned above, CHENG Yi had claimed that CHENG Hao had revived the way, so that would eliminate CHENG Yi. The usual explanation for Zhu's rejection of CHENG Hao is that he felt that Cheng's idea that "the humane person forms one body with all things" (Chan 1963: 523, modified) was

[24] Not counting an anonymous preface to CHENG Yi's *Commentary on the Yi* 易傳, which is not considered to be his.

[25] Zhu claimed that the *Taijii* Diagram and its Explanation were esoteric teachings that Zhou had revealed to the Cheng brothers, which they were unwilling to share with their own students (Ching: 39).

[26] CHENG Yi's tribute to CHENG Hao is partially translated in de Bary 1981: 3–4. In his 1189 Preface to the *Zhongyong*, Zhu mentions only the Chengs as Song revivers of the Way, not Zhou. According to Wilson, this was because he wanted to legitimize the Cheng brothers' authority specifically on the Four Books (Wilson: 198–199).

[27] He basically ignored this reputed Daoist origin of the Diagram, even when it was mentioned by opponents, such as LU Jiuyuan. In an important tribute to ZHOU Dunyi ("Commemoration of the Reconstruction of Master Lianxi's Library in Jiangzhou 江州重建濂溪先生書堂記," in Zhu 1532: 78.12b), he says that Zhou created the Diagram. For a good discussion of Zhu's relations with Daoism see Ching: Ch. 9.

too idealistic. However, could Zhu not have argued that CHENG Yi really was the one, and that Cheng had merely been respectful to his elder brother in giving him the credit? It was CHENG Yi, after all, to whom Zhu was philosophically most indebted. This would have presented much less of a problem than those listed above. So it is difficult to accept that Zhu had no choice but to nominate ZHOU Dunyi.

Since the twelfth century, much of the discussion of ZHOU Dunyi's role in the origins of *daoxue* has focused on ZHU Xi's arguments with the Lu brothers over the "Explanation of the *Taiji* Diagram" (*Taijitu shuo*). The prevailing view has been that it was Zhou's concept of *taiji*, and the use he makes of it in the *Taijitu shuo*, that attracted Zhu to Zhou and persuaded him to give Zhou the exalted status of sole founder of *daoxue* (Chan 1973). As is well-known, Zhu interpreted *taiji* as *li*—an equation he apparently learned from LI Tong. The equation of *taiji* and *li*—a rather forced one, as A. C. Graham cogently argues (Graham 1958: 162–165)—enabled ZHU Xi to forge a linkage between the metaphysical realm of *li* and the cosmological realm of *yin-yang qi*, which the *Taijitu shuo* claims is produced by *taiji*. This is a philosophical correlate of the linkage between *weifa* equilibrium and *yifa* harmony that he had established by means of CHENG Yi's concept of reverent composure. The key passages for this point comprise the first half of the *Taijitu shuo*:

> Non-polar and yet Supreme Polarity (*wuji er taiji* 無極而太極)![28] 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.
>
> 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. The Five Phases are simply *yin* and *yang*; *yin* and *yang* are simply the Supreme Polarity; the Supreme Polarity is fundamentally Non-polar. [Yet] in the generation of the Five Phases, each one has its nature.[29]
>
> The reality of the Non-polar and the essence of the Two [Modes] and Five [Phases] mysteriously combine and coalesce. "The Way of Qian 乾 becomes the male; the Way of Kun 坤 becomes the female;"[30] the two *qi* stimulate each other, transforming and generating the myriad things.[31] The myriad things generate and regenerate, alternating and transforming without end.[32]

[28] Readers are probably familiar with the more common translations of this non-sentence, including "The Ultimate of Non-being and also the Great Ultimate" (Chan 1963: 463), "The Ultimateless! And yet also the Supreme Ultimate!" (Derk Bodde's translation in Fung 1953: 435), and "It is the ultimate of nothing which is the Supreme Ultimate" (Graham: 156). My translation is closest to Joseph Needham's, "That which has no Pole! And yet (itself) the Supreme Pole" (Needham 1956: 460). Needham, however, concretizes the two terms in such a way as to miss the point that they refer to patterns or principles, not things. While ZHOU Dunyi is ambivalent, or rather noncommittal, on this distinction, ZHU Xi is very clear. See the following section for my reasons for translating *taiji* as Supreme Polarity. See also Thompson 1996: 156–158, 163, 169.

[29] In other words: seen as a whole system, the Five Phases 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*).

[30] *Yijing*, *Xici* A.1.4 (Zhu 1177: 3.1b). Qian and Kun are the first two hexagrams, symbolizing pure *yang* and pure *yin*, or Heaven and Earth, respectively.

[31] Paraphrasing *Yijing*, *Tuan* 彖 commentary to hexagram 31 (Xian 咸): "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" (Zhu 1177: 2.1a–b).

[32] Cf. *Xici* A.5.6, "Generation and regeneration are what is meant by *yi* 易 (change)" (Zhu 1177: 3.6a).

*Taiji* here is the generative source of the two modes of *qi* (*yin* and *yang*), the Five Phases (*wu xing* 五行), and the myriad things (*wan wu* 萬物). As ZHU Xi explains it, this means that *taiji*, as the fundamental order (*li*) of the cosmos as a whole, includes the principle of activity/stillness and is fully contained in every particular thing composed of *qi* (Zhou 1708: 1.7b).[33]

This claim—that *taiji* links the metaphysics of *li* with the cosmology of *yin-yang qi*—is the reason given by Wing-tsit Chan for ZHOU Dunyi's position in ZHU Xi's version of the *daotong* (Chan 1973/1987: 125–127). However, I would suggest that there was more to it than that. Given the centrality of the terms "activity" (*dong* 動) and "stillness" (*jing* 靜) in the problem of self-cultivation over which ZHU Xi "agonized for over a decade" (Metzger 1977: 93), I propose that we look at those terms in both the *Taijitu shuo* and ZHOU Dunyi's other major work, the *Tongshu* 通書, where they are the primary manifestations of *polarity*.[34]

## 3 *Taiji* 太極 and Polarity

However strong the Daoist influence may have been on ZHOU Dunyi, it is clear that his interpretation of the Taiji Diagram is basically Confucian, especially in the latter parts, where it places human beings at the center or apex of the natural world. In fact, if we can accept that the Diagram itself was used by Daoist practitioners prior to or during Zhou's lifetime, it is fair to say that he literally turned their interpretation on its head by reading the Diagram top-down rather than bottom-up. Nevertheless, we are still left with the question: What is the meaning of the enigmatic opening line, "*Wuji er taiji* 無極而太極"? The two key terms had been primarily (*taiji*) or exclusively (*wuji*) Daoist terms until Zhou's Explanation. Thus for our purposes we must address two questions: How did ZHOU Dunyi and ZHU Xi interpret them? I will deal here with both, bearing in mind that since Zhu's interpretations are much more accessible than Zhou's it may be difficult to disentangle them. Nevertheless, I shall argue that *wuji* and *taiji* are best translated as "Non-polar(ity)" and "Supreme Polarity" for both Zhou and Zhu. Without wishing to beg the question, I will continue to use these translations here.[35]

Of the two key terms, *wuji* had the stronger and more exclusively Daoist associations, appearing in the classical Daoist texts, *Laozi* 老子 (Chapter 28), *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Chapter 6), and *Liezi* 列子 (Chapter 5), where it basically means "the unlimited," or "the infinite." In later Daoist texts it came to denote a state of primordial chaos, prior to the differentiation of *yin* and *yang*, and sometimes equivalent to *dao* 道. This more developed sense is consistent with its usage in *Laozi* 28,[36] and with the more general sense of *wu* 無 in *Laozi* as the state

[33] In a somewhat different formulation, Zhu says, "Stillness is the substance (*ti*) of *taiji* and activity is the function (*yong*) of *taiji* (Zhu 1270: 94.8a; Levey 1991: 157).

[34] Zhu says that the *Tongshu* (Penetrating Writing, or Penetrating the *Yi*) and the shorter *Taijitu shuo* "complement each other," and that "each part of the *Tongshu* explains the Explanation of the [Diagram of the] Supreme Polarity" (Zhou: 5.1a, 4a). Accordingly, throughout his commentaries and discussions on the two texts he uses this as a hermeneutic principle; i.e. he assumes their consistency and uses them to clarify each other. As John Henderson has shown, this is a common strategy employed by commentators on "canonical" texts (Henderson: Chs. 4–5).

[35] The following three paragraphs are based primarily on Robinet and are adapted from my section on ZHOU Dunyi in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Adler 1999: 672–673).

[36] "If you are a model to the empire/Then the constant virtue will not be wanting/And you will return to the infinite" (trans. Lau 1982: 43).

of undifferentiation (perhaps undifferentiated *qi*) that precedes the existence (*you* 有, e.g. Ch. 40) of discrete things and/or is interdependent with it (Ch. 2).

*Taiji* was found in several classical texts, mostly but not exclusively Daoist. For the Song Neo-Confucians, the *locus classicus* of *taiji* was the *Appended Remarks* (*Xici* 繫辭), or *Great Treatise* (*Dazhuan* 大傳), of the *Yijing*: "In change there is *Taiji*, which generates the Two Modes [*yin* and *yang*] 易有太極, 是生兩儀" (A.11.5, in Zhu 1177: 3.14). *Taiji* here is the source of the *yin-yang* principle of bipolarity, and is contained or inherent in the universal process of change and transformation.

However, the term was much more prominent and nuanced in Daoism than in Confucianism. *Taiji* was the name of one of the Daoist heavens, 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* 太乙, the Supreme One (a Daoist divinity), and with the pole star of the Northern Dipper. It carried connotations of a turning point in a cycle, an end point before a reversal, and a pivot between bipolar processes. It became a standard part of Daoist cosmogonic schemes, where it usually denoted a stage of chaos later than *wuji*, a stage or 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. In Daoist *neidan* 內丹 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 "non-polar," undifferentiated state (Berling 1979; C. Chang 1963: 165–167).

Thus, in the major Confucian source of the term *taiji* (the *Xici*), and in the whole complex of Daoist ideas surrounding both *wuji* and *taiji*, the notion of polarity, based of course on the word *ji* 極 (the core meaning of which is the ridgepole of a house), is quite prominent. There is also a Confucian correlate to the Daoist symbolism of the pole star—*Analects* 2.1—which remains in place while the other stars circle around it. Even in the colloquial usage of *ji* as "very" or "ultimate," the idea of the end point or extremity *in a cyclical* (*or alternating*) *process* carries at least the potential connotation of polarity.[37] Since the *yin-yang* model does not shape our thinking as much as it did that of the Song Confucians, we may be mistaken in interpreting such ideas as "end point" and "extreme" according to a linear model.

How does an interpretation of *wuji* and *taiji* in terms of polarity help us to make sense of Zhou Dunyi's thought? The fact that the second sentence of the *Taijitu shuo*—where one would expect there to be a clarification of the problematic opening exclamation—immediately discusses the bipolar relationship of activity and stillness (The Supreme Polarity in activity generates *yang*; yet at the limit of activity it is still…) certainly makes sense with this model. In other words, the model makes it clear in what way the second sentence actually explains the first. None of the other English translations I have seen clarifies the logical connection between the two.

A few sentences later we read, "The Five Phases are simply *yin* and *yang*; *yin* and *yang* are simply the Supreme Polarity; the Supreme Polarity 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

[37] Joseph Needham says that a *ji* is "a polar or focal point on a boundary" (Needham 1956: 464).

concept. Here we have (1) a direct equation of *yin* and *yang* with *taiji* and (2) the further implication that the "dual" nature of *taiji*/bipolarity is somehow also *non-dual*.

This last observation leads to a crucial point for ZHU Xi. With Zhu, in contrast to Zhou, we have a much larger written *corpus* and a thoroughly worked-out system in which *taiji* plays a central role, in part through its identification with *li* (order, principle).[38] My hypothesis, in brief, is that ZHU Xi understood *taiji* to be the most fundamental cosmic ordering principle, which is, to be specific, the principle of *yin-yang* polarity. That is, 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 *un*differentiated. 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 principle of that order), or differentiation and undifferentiation, or multiplicity and unity.

What I am suggesting is that the solution to at least some of the difficulty of Neo-Confucian metaphysics—especially in the ways in which it is commonly translated into English—may be as simple and obvious as the concept of *yin* and *yang*.[39] Let us now check this hypothesis by examining some of Zhu's comments on the key terms.[40] First, his commentary on the enigmatic opening sentence of the *Taijitu shuo*:

> "The operation of Heaven above has neither sound nor smell,"[41] and yet it is the pivot (*shuniu* 樞紐) 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. (Zhou 1708: 1.5a)

The word "pivot" is important here, 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 Chapter 2 of his work, where he refers to "the axis of *dao*" (*daoshu* 道樞), the central point where "'this' and 'that' no longer find their opposites" (Watson 1968: 40; Wang 1980: 10). Zhu's 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. This is the paradox that Zhou attempts to express with the enigmatic "*Wuji er taiji*."[42]

[38] Although YU Yamanoi argues that *taiji* is "an alien element in Chu Hsi's theoretical system" (Yu 1986: 86), I take my argument here to be a refutation of his.

[39] I was earlier led to a similar observation by finding that ZHU Xi's commentary on the *Yijing* is almost entirely based on his attempt to retrieve the *yin-yang* meanings of the original lines of the hexagrams, which had for centuries been buried under multiple layers of numerological and socio-ethical interpretations. I found that ZHU Xi, the moralistic and devoted follower of CHENG Yi, had harshly criticized Cheng for ignoring this basic level of meaning in the *Yi* and imposing his own—albeit entirely excellent and praiseworthy—socio-ethical meanings on the text. See Smith et. al., Ch. 6.

[40] These comments are drawn both from his published commentaries on Zhou's two main texts and from his *Classified Conversations* (*Zhuzi yulei*). Both are found, compiled together, in ZHANG Boxing's *ZHOU Lianxi xiansheng quanji* (Zhou). Italicized portions are, of course, my emphases.

[41] *Zhongyong* 中庸 33 (last line), quoting *Shijing* 詩經, no. 235 (in Zhu 1190a: *Zhongyong* 24a).

[42] One might draw an analogy here with the Judeo-Christian-Islamic paradox of God as the unmoved mover, or uncreated creator. Philosophically, this again raises the potential fatal flaw in ZHU Xi's system mentioned above (note 21).

A more explicit statement is found in a conversation on the topic of the next few sentences of the *Taijitu shuo* (from "Supreme Polarity in activity generates *yang*" to "Two Modes are thereby established"):

> Within Heaven and Earth, there is only the principle of 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 of activity and stillness. This is called the Supreme Polarity.* (Zhou 1708: 1.7b)

The following passage from Zhu's commentary on a line in the first section of the *Tongshu*—"The alternation of *yin* and *yang* is called the Way" (quoted from *Yijing*, *Xici A.5.1)—combined with two comments from his Classified Conversations (Zhuzi yulei) on the same line, lead to the same conclusion:*

> "*Yin* and *yang*" are *qi*, that which is within form [i.e. physical]. That by which there is "alternation of *yin* and *yang*" is order/principle (*li*), which is above form [i.e. metaphysical]. "The Way" means the same as order/principle (*li*) (Zhou 1708: 5.3a).

Here the commentary defines *li* (not *taiji*) as bipolarity, and then equates *dao* with *li*. However, in conversation with his students Zhu brings *taiji* into the equation:

> "The alternation of *yin* and *yang* is called the Way" is the Supreme Polarity.[43]

> *Question on* "The alternation of *yin* and *yang* is called the Way": Is this Supreme Polarity? *Reply: Yin* and *yang* are simply *yin* and *yang*. The Way is *Supreme Polarity—that by which there is alternation of yin and yang*.[44]

In these passages, *taiji* is clearly defined as the principle/pattern of activity and stillness or *yin* and *yang*, or that by which (*suoyi* 所以) this alternation occurs. Finally, here is Zhu's published comment on the following line from Section 22 of the *Tongshu*:

> [Zhou:] The two [modes of] *qi* and the Five Phases transform and generate the myriad things. The five are the differentia (*shu* 殊) and the two are the actualities (*shi* 實); 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:]…"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* 末) we can deduce the origin (*ben* 本); thus the differentiation of the Five Phases is the actuality of the two *qi*, and the actuality of the two *qi* in turn is based on the polarity of the one order (y*ili zhi ji* 一理之極; Zhou 1708: 6.11a). [45]

[43] A comment by Zhu from *Zhuzi yulei*, appended to his commentary on the *Tongshu*, where the line from the *Xici* is quoted (Zhou: 5.5b).

[44] A question and answer from *Zhuzi yulei*, appended to Zhu's commentary on the *Taijitu shuo* (Zhou: 1.8a).

[45] On translating *li* as "order" see above, note 6.

In the last sentence, it would make no sense at all to translate *ji* 極 as "ultimate," "extremity," or some such. The actuality (*shi* 實) of the two *qi* is clearly based on the principle of bipolarity, not on some vague ultimacy, all-inclusiveness, or finality.[46]

To conclude thus far: I have tried to show that the best way to interpret *wuji* and *taiji* in both ZHOU Dunyi's and ZHU Xi's writings is by means of a model of polarity. The model is based on the literal or original meaning of the word *ji* 極 (the ridgepole of a roof), while the argument is based on the usage of the terms by both figures. Furthermore, this interpretation clarifies ZHU Xi's central concept of *li*, which in the most general sense is order *per se*, and in more specific senses refers to particular patterns or principles. The most basic of these principles is that of *yin*/*yang* bipolarity, called "Supreme Polarity" (or polarity *per se*),[47] which in its simplest manifestation takes form as activity and stillness (*dong-jing*), as in Zhou's philosophical cosmogony.

If ZHU Xi had simply wanted to use *taiji* to express the idea of the ultimate reality, he could easily have limited himself to the aforementioned line from the *Xici* appendix of the *Yijing* (in change there is *taiji*, which generates the Two Modes), whose Confucian authority was unquestioned (even if Confucius himself did not write it, as OUYANG Xiu 歐陽修 had argued). In this way he could have avoided the unpleasantness of relying so strongly on ZHOU Dunyi, with his dubious Daoist connections. As we have seen above, *taiji*'s linking function between the metaphysics of *li* and the cosmology of *yin* and *yang* was an important factor. However, it only works when *taiji* is equated with *li*, and that is a real stretch, given the context of the *Taijitu shuo*, where it is certainly more reasonable to interpret *taiji* as undifferentiated *qi*, as ZHENG Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200) and LIU Mu 劉牧 (11th century) had done (Graham 1958: 155, 163). Given ZHU Xi's ingenuity in creatively interpreting texts,[48] it is not difficult to imagine that he could have found some way of linking metaphysics and cosmology that would have spared him the difficulties ZHOU Dunyi presented—had that been his *only* reason for focusing on Zhou.

I am therefore proposing that the primary reason why Zhu could not do without Zhou was Zhou's elaboration of polarity in terms of the unquestionably Daoist concept of *wuji*; that it was the "interpenetrating" relationship of *wuji* and *taiji*, and more importantly the extension of that model to activity and stillness, that helped him work out the major spiritual–intellectual crisis of his career; and that this was the primary reason for ZHOU Dunyi's elevation to the position ZHU Xi gave him.

[46] Similarly, what Zhu means by "the differentiation of the Five Phases is the actuality of the two *qi*" refers to the "young" (*shao* 少) and "mature" (*tai* 太 or *lao* 老) phases of *yin* and *yang*, yielding four permutations corresponding to four of the five phases, with earth being the fifth, perfectly balanced one:

| | *yang* | | *yin* |
|---|---|---|---|
| mature | fire | | water |
| | | earth | |
| young | wood | | metal |

[47] "Ultimate Polarity" would be a better expression, since what it really means is polarity *per se*. However, this might be confusing, since *ji* is more commonly translated as "ultimate."

[48] The prime example, of course, is his "supplement" to chapter 5 of the *Daxue*. See Gardner 1986: 37, 55–56, 104–105.

## 4 Interpenetration

The relationship between activity and stillness is outlined by ZHOU Dunyi in the first section of the *Taijitu shuo* and in Section 16 of the *Tongshu*:

> *Taijitu shuo*:
>
> Non-polar and yet Supreme Polarity (*wuji er taiji*)! 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. (Zhou 1708: 1.2a)
>
> *Tongshu* 16: Activity and Stillness (*dong-jing*)
>
> Activity as the absence of stillness and stillness as the absence of activity characterize things (*wu* 物). Activity that is not [empirically] active and stillness that is not [empirically] still characterize spirit (*shen* 神). Being active and yet not active, still and yet not still, does not mean that [spirit] is neither active nor still. [Zhu's comment: *There is stillness within activity, and activity within stillness*.] For while things do not [inter-] penetrate (*tong* 通; i.e. they are limited by their physical forms) spirit subtly [penetrates] the myriad things.
>
> 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. The Four Seasons revolve; the myriad things end and begin [again]. How undifferentiated! How extensive! And how endless! [Zhu's comment: Substance is fundamental and unitary; hence "undifferentiated." Function is dispersed and differentiated; hence "extensive." The succession of activity and stillness is like an endless revolution. This continuity refers to (the relationship of) substance and function. This section clarifies the ideas of the Diagram, which should be consulted.] (Zhou 1708: 5.33b–34b)

The crucial idea for ZHU Xi is that the relationship of activity and stillness is not only temporal alternation, but also metaphysical interpenetration. That is, the nature of activity includes stillness and vice versa. Thus in other comments Zhu says:

> On *Taijitu shuo*:
>
> [*Wuji er taiji*:] Calling it "non-polar" correctly clarifies (*zheng* 正]) its non-spatial form. It exists prior to things, and yet at no time is it not established after the existence of things. It exists outside of *yin-yang*, and yet at no time does it not operate within things. It penetrates and connects the "complete substance"; there is nothing in which it does not exist (Zhou 1708: 1.5b).
>
> "The Supreme Polarity in activity generates *yang*" does not mean that after there is activity then *yang* is produced. Rather, once there is activity, this is classified as *yang*; and once there is stillness, this is classified as *yin*. The original ground (*chu ben* 初本) of the *yang* produced by activity is stillness. Likewise, for stillness there must be activity. This is what is meant by "activity and stillness without end." (Zhou 1708: 1.7b)
>
> Within the stillness of *yin* is the basis of *yang* itself; within the activity of *yang* is the basis of *yin* itself. This is because activity necessarily comes from stillness, which is based in *yin*; and stillness necessarily comes from activity, which is based in *yang*.

(Zhou 1708: 1.7b)

The material of water is *yin*, yet its nature is based in *yang*. The material of fire is *yang*, yet its nature is based in *yin*. (Zhou 1708: 1.12a)

[On *Tongshu* 16:]

*Question*: Things are limited by having physical form. But since human beings have stillness in activity and activity in stillness, how can we say that they are like the myriad things? *Reply*: Human beings are certainly active within stillness and still within activity, yet they are still called things. (Zhou 1708: 5.34b)

"Being active and yet not active, still and yet not still, does not mean that [spirit] is neither active nor still" refers to the metaphysical order (*xing'er shang zhi li* 形而上之理). This order is spiritual and unfathomable. *When it is active, it is simultaneously still*. Therefore [Zhou] says "no activity." *When it is active, it is simultaneously still*. Therefore [Zhou] says "no stillness." Within stillness there is activity, and within activity there is stillness. When still it is capable of activity, and when active it is capable of stillness. Within *yang* there is *yin*, and within *yin* there is *yang*. The permutations are inexhaustible. (Zhou 1708: 5.35a)

The idea of metaphysical interpenetration is a prominent doctrine in Huayan Buddhism, and it is quite possible that ZHU Xi was aware of it. The key Buddhist term is *wu ai* 無礙, or "non-obstruction"; the doctrines are *li shi wu ai* 理事無礙 (the non-obstruction of principle and phenomenon) and *shi shi wu ai* 事事無礙 (the non-obstruction of phenomenon and phenomenon; Gimello 1976: 454–510; G. Chang 1971: 141–171, 207–223). This means that since all phenomena are empty of "own-being," therefore each one fully manifests the ultimate principle (namely emptiness), and thus each thing fully contains the reality of every other thing (the principle of emptiness); hence their mutual "non-obstruction." The formal structure of this argument is basically the same as the argument I have outlined here for the interpenetration of activity and stillness.

ZHU Xi uses basically the same terminology of "non-obstruction" (*wu fang ai* 無妨礙) in reference to the relationship between *wuji* and *taiji*:

"Non-polar, yet Supreme Polarity" explains existence [polarity or differentiation] within non-existence [non-polarity or undifferentiation]. If you can truly see it, it explains existence and non-existence, or vice versa, neither obstructing the other (*dou wu fang ai* 都無妨礙) (Zhou 1708: 1.6a).

Zhu's use of the term "non-obstruction" in this context is very close to the Buddhist concept, and supports my contention that metaphysical interpenetration is the key to understanding the importance of *wuji* and *taiji* in his system.

The practice of self-cultivation was the purpose of ZHU Xi's entire philosophical and educational system. Everything in it should be understood in that light. He was not satisfied until he could establish a solid philosophical grounding for that practice. Accordingly, Zhu found in ZHOU Dunyi's discussions of the interpenetration of activity and stillness, based on the interpenetration of *wuji* and *taiji*, exactly the underpinning he needed for the methodology of self-cultivation that he worked out through his struggle with the problem of equilibrium and harmony. His statement in the 1169 letter to the gentlemen of Hunan, "If we observe the state after the feelings are aroused, what is contained in the state before the feelings are aroused can surely be understood in silence" (quoted above) is an example of this *praxis* that required a supporting *theoria*—preferably a cosmological theory, since like

all Confucians he believed that their ethics and moral psychology were grounded in the natural world. What he found in Zhou's *Taijitu shuo* and *Tongshu* fit that bill.

To conclude, it is useful to look at Zhu's comments on Section 20 of the *Tongshu*, which is entitled "Learning to be a Sage" (*shengxue* 聖學), where he integrates CHENG Yi's concept of "reverent composure" (*jing* 敬) with Zhou's concept of activity and stillness. The linchpin here is Zhou's notion of "unity" (*yi* 一), which Zhu relates to CHENG Yi's characterization of *jing* as a state of mind that "emphasizes unity" (Graham 1958: 68–70). ZHU Xi further applies CHENG Yi's concept of *jing* to ZHOU Dunyi's teaching on stillness in such a way as to minimize the latter's Daoist and Buddhist implications. The text reads:

> [Someone asked:] "Can Sagehood be learned?"
>
> Reply: It can.
>
> "Are there essentials (*yao* 要])?"
>
> Reply: There are.
>
> "I beg to hear them."
>
> Reply: To be unified (*yi* 一) is essential. To be unified is to have no desire. Without desire one is vacuous when still (*jing xu* 靜虛) and direct in activity (*dong zhi* 動直). Being vacuous when still, one will be clear (*ming* 明); being clear one will be penetrating (*tong* 通). Being direct in activity one will be impartial (*gong* 公); being impartial one will be all-embracing (*pu* 溥). Being clear and penetrating, impartial and all-embracing, one is almost [a Sage] (Zhou 1708: 5.38b).[49]

ZHU Xi claims that what ZHOU Dunyi meant here by "desirelessness" (*wuyu* 無欲) is the same as what CHENG Yi meant by *jing* 敬 or reverent composure—thus redefining in Confucian terms a proposition with obvious Buddhist resonances—because both terms were defined in terms of unity or unification.[50] Zhu discusses two senses of "unity" here. In metaphysical terms, he identifies unity with the Supreme Polarity inherent in the mind.[51] In terms of self-cultivation, he says that both Zhou and Cheng interpret "unity" of mind as a "clear-sighted unity, not a muddle-headed unity," and not "lumping everything together" (Zhou 1708: 5.39b). It is neither concentration on one thing to the exclusion of all else, nor concentration on unity and neglect of diversity. Both the one and the many are preserved.

ZHU Xi considered the state of mind described by the terms "unity" and "reverent composure" to be the spiritual basis of self-cultivation, including intellectual cultivation (investigating things and extending knowledge), moral cultivation (rectifying the mind), and moral activity (in the family, community, and state). It is a state of composure that

[49] Note the similarity of the term "direct in activity" (*dong zhi* 動直) to the important term in Section 14 of the *Platform Sutra*, "direct mind" (*zhi xin* 直心; Yampolsky 1967: 136, where it is translated as "straightforward mind").

[50] Although ZHU Xi, like the Buddhists, acknowledged the potential for evil (or suffering) in human desire (*renyu* 人欲), he taught that desires should be not eliminated but selectively cultivated and trained to accord with the Way. Only selfish desires (*siyu* 私欲) should be eliminated. The basic Buddhist approach was to extinguish desire or "thirst" (*tanha*).

[51] In his published commentary on the first line of Section 20 he says, "the truth of the Non-Polar (*wuji*) and the origin of the Two Modes and the Four Images are not external to this mind, and in the realm of daily functioning itself there is no separation from the power to use them" (Zhou: 5.39a). In his commentary on the first line of Section 22 of the *Tongshu* he says, "Were it not for the perfect intelligence of the Supreme Polarity of the human mind, how would one be able to discern it?" (Zhou: 6.1b).

remains unchanged by external stimuli and yet enables one to respond to them—a state of fluid responsiveness.[52] This condition is independent of the mind's content or activity at any particular moment. In the absence of stimuli the mind characterized by reverent composure is equable and poised; when stimulated it responds immediately, because it is not preoccupied with private motivations or with fixed concentration. Since it is not preoccupied with anything it cannot be disturbed. *Jing* provides an experiential, unchanging ground or orientation for mental activity.

> "Vacuous when still" [in *Tongshu* 20, above] means the mind is like a clear mirror or still water. There is not the slightest bit of selfish desire added to it. Thus in its activity everything flows out along with Heavenly principle, and there is not the slightest selfish desire to disturb it (Zhou 1708: 5.40a).[53]

> If things [i.e. incoming stimuli] come and get the better of it [the mind], then it is full. If it is full, it will be obscured; if obscured then blocked. Directness in activity is simply having absolutely no obstruction in its activity (Zhou 1708: 5.40a).[54]

Thus the quality of the mind in its still phase determines the quality of its activity—in particular its capacity for "directness in activity" or immediate, intuitive response to changing events. The purpose of "emphasizing stillness" is to "nourish activity" (Zhu 1270: 71.2855). In this way ZHU Xi, with the help of CHENG Yi, "saves" ZHOU Dunyi from Daoist and Buddhist quietism and establishes a Confucian brand of quietism that fundamentally entails activity. This was a middle ground between the "quietistic" application of Zhou's thought he had learned from his teacher, LI Tong, and the emphasis on activity and the active mind that was taught by the Hunan school. This was the solution to his spiritual crisis, and it may be the best explanation for his curious appropriation of ZHOU Dunyi and for the use he made of Zhou's ideas—in particular the concept of polarity as the key to understanding *taiji*.

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[52] For a discussion of responsiveness in Neo-Confucian discourse, see Adler 1998.

[53] This is a statement by a student to ZHU Xi, with which he agrees.

[54] This is part of ZHU Xi's response to the above statement.

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