# Adler, Joseph A., *Reconstructing the Confucian* Dao*: Z*HU *Xi's Appropriation of Z*HOU *Dunyi*
## Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014, x + 331 pages

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Over the last three decades, many studies have been published on ZHU Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), who created the Cheng-Zhu 程朱 school of Song-Ming 宋明 Neo-Confucianism. These studies cover a wide range of topics including his philosophical quest, his contribution to classical studies, and his view on the literati's mission to order the world. We now know that he went through many upheavals in his life and changed his philosophical position several times in response to personal crises. Together these studies deepen our understanding of him as a thinker, a classicist, a social reformer, and above all, a sensitive soul trying to come to grips with life's challenges.

These new discoveries notwithstanding, one question remains unanswered: why did ZHU Xi choose ZHOU Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073)—a thinker who allegedly had strong interests in alchemy and Daoism—as a major source of his moral-metaphysics? For some scholars, this question may not seem important. They would remind us that in ZHU Xi's writings, he repeatedly stated that the line of transmission of true Confucianism in the 11th century had begun with ZHOU Dunyi, and then continued on from ZHANG Zai 張載 (1020–1077) and SHAO Yong 邵雍 (1011–1077) to CHENG Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) and CHENG Yi 程頤 (1033–1107). Furthermore, on many occasions, he openly admitted that he drew from the writings of these "Five Masters of the Northern Song" (*Bei-Song wuzi* 北宋五子) to build his own version of Confucianism, known today as the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism. Thus, if we read his writings carefully, it is evident that Zhu highly respected ZHOU Dunyi and regarded him—a Daoist or not—as a forerunner of his version of Confucianism.

However, as Thomas Wilson has pointed out, there is always an intellectual agenda behind any attempt to construct "the genealogy of the Way" (*daotong* 道統). Although the agenda may not be explicitly stated, "the genealogy of the Way" functions as a measure of inclusion and exclusion by privileging one group of thinkers over the

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others. In ZHU Xi's case, we need to ask ourselves at least two questions. First, what was Zhu's reason in picking Zhou as the head of his "genealogy of the Way"? Second, why was Zhu willing to risk honoring Zhou, whose Confucian identity was questionable?

In recent literature, these two questions are at the heart of a debate over the relationship between Daoism and Neo-Confucianism. To support their argument, critics use ZHOU Dunyi's commentary on *Taijitu* 太極圖 (*The Diagram of the Supreme Polarity*) and SHAO Yong's appropriation of *Xiantiantu* 先天圖 (*The Sequence of Trigrams according to Fu Xi* 伏羲) and *Houtiantu* 後天圖 (*The Sequence of Trigrams according to Wen Wang* 文王) as evidence of the Daoist influence on Neo-Confucianism (see articles in *Daojia Wenhua Yanjiu* 道家文化研究 [*Studies of Daoist Culture*], edited by CHEN Guying 陳鼓應, 11 [1997]). By highlighting Zhou's and Shao's links to Daoism (especially the Daoist, CHEN Tuan 陳摶, 872–989), these critics reopen a debate that started in the early Qing 清 when scholars (such as HU Wei 胡渭, 1633–1714) questioned the authenticity of a series of diagrams derived from the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經). Like the Qing scholars, the contemporary critics use these diagrams to demonstrate the Daoist origin of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism.

In contrast to these critics, Joseph Adler attempts to move the debate away from the dichotomy between Daoism and Confucianism. In the opening pages of *Reconstructing the Confucian* Dao, Adler lists the different options that Zhu had in constructing his "genealogy of the Way." For instance, he could have followed "the consensus of his colleagues" in honoring CHENG Hao, whose concept of *li* 理 (pattern) formed the foundation of the Cheng-Zhu School of Neo-Confucianism (5–6). Or he could have dropped the plan to create a "genealogy of the Way" and directly used concepts and passages from the *Book of Changes* to build his moral metaphysics. After all, there are plenty of passages from the Confucian classic to link the "cosmological discourse centered on *qi* [氣] (ether)" with the "metaphysical discourse centered on *li* (pattern)" (6–7). Either way, ZHU Xi could have achieved his philosophical agenda without taking any risk.

However, ZHU Xi did not take these easy options; instead, he took the bold step of honoring ZHOU Dunyi as the first Confucian sage since Mencius. In the first four chapters of *Reconstructing the Confucian* Dao, Adler traces the complex process by which Zhu came to appreciate Zhou's cosmology. He tells us that Zhu went through four transformative events from 1160 to 1169: a period of self-doubt (Chapter 1), an intense study of Zhou's writings (Chapter 2), a philosophical breakthrough on the interpenetration of activity and stillness of the human mind (Chapter 3), and an attempt to express his mature thought by publishing revised editions of Zhou's *Taijitu Shuo* 太極圖說 (*Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Polarity*) and *Tongshu* 通書 (*Penetrating the* Book of Changes) (Chapter 4). These events show that Zhu decided to adopt ZHOU Dunyi's cosmology after a long period of soul searching and deep thinking. In honoring ZHOU Dunyi, Zhu was concerned about his own philosophy, rather than making a statement on whether Zhou was a Confucian or a Daoist.

For Adler, Zhu's publication of revised editions of *Taijitu Shuo* and *Tongshu* in 1169 is extremely important. The publication signifies his commitment to a moral philosophy where no distinction is made between activity and stillness of the human mind. Hence, Zhu's decision to adopt Zhou's cosmology was a result of a "religio-philosophical" awakening. It expressed his mature thought on what constitutes the universe, what

characterizes the human mind, and what guides human beings to make decisions in everyday life.

In the book, Adler pays special attention to Zhu's "religio-philosophical" awakening. He argues that the long process of soul searching and deep thinking allowed Zhu to see the "interpenetration" (*tong* 通) between what is visible and what is invisible, what is external and what is internal, and what is intellectual and what is spiritual. This interpenetration of realms, Adler argues, helped Zhu resolve his intellectual crisis in which he was perplexed by the distinction between the active and inactive sides of the human mind. Finally, through practices, Zhu realized that the activity and stillness of the human mind are actually different ways that the human mind functions. To support his argument, Adler includes in the second part of his book translations of ZHOU Dunyi's and ZHU Xi's writings. The translation demonstrates that the two thinkers shared the view that "activity in stillness" and "stillness in activity" are interchangeable states of the human mind.

Throughout *Reconstructing the Confucian* Dao, Adler describes his understanding of ZHU Xi's decision as a "theory," implying that it is still a work in progress. However, for those who study Chinese philosophy, what Adler has found is ground-breaking and solidly substantiated. First and foremost, Adler breaks new ground in showing that "it is a mistake, therefore, to seek a purely philosophical explanation of ZHU Xi's selection of ZHOU Dunyi as the first Confucian sage of the Song" (138). This refusal to "seek a purely philosophical explanation" directs our attention to the concrete life-experience of ZHU Xi who, like everyone, had to struggle with competing claims and different choices. Certainly Adler is not the first scholar drawing attention to Zhu's life experience in understanding his philosophy (YU Ying-shih 余英時, for instance, shows the complexity of Zhu's political views in *ZHU Xi de Lishi Shijie* 朱熹的歷史世界 [2008]), but he succeeds in linking Zhu's spiritual crisis in the late 1160s to his appreciation of ZHOU Dunyi's cosmology. He proves that Zhu's creation of a "genealogy of the Way" was a result of "his dogged pursuit" to find a perfect method of moral cultivation (138).

Second, Adler gives us an accurate translation of ZHOU Dunyi's concept of *taiji* 太極, and therefore offers a more convincing explanation of why Zhu decided to honor Zhou as the first Confucian sage since Mencius. Conventionally rendered as "the Supreme Ultimate," *taiji* has been understood as the final cause that creates the universe. In Adler's hands, however, *taiji* is translated as "the Supreme Polarity" to underscore that *taiji* is not a thing but the principle, or the relationship, upon which *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 interchange and interact.

Years ago, Adler proposed this new translation of *taiji* when translating Zhou's *Taijitu Shuo* for volume one of *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. At that time, perhaps yielding to pressure, he still translated *Taijitu Shuo* as "Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Polarity." But he added a footnote where he explained why *taiji* should be rendered as "the *yin-yang* principle of bipolarity" or, simply, "the supreme bipolarity." He wrote:

> *Taiji* is usually translated as "Supreme Ultimate" and sometimes as "Supreme Pole," but neither of these terms conveys the meaning that both ZHOU Dunyi and ZHU Xi seem to have intended. For example, in both texts translated here, Zhou identifies the *yin-yang* polarity as *taiji*. … Thus, for both Zhou and Zhu, *taiji* is the *yin-yang* principle of bipolarity, which is the most fundamental ordering principle, the cosmic "first principle." (*Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1, 672)

Although in the note Adler addresses Zhou's two texts, *Taijitu Shuo* and *Tongshu*, his argument is based on an understanding of the first two circles of the *Taijitu* (the diagram appears in the cover of *Reconstructing the Confucian* Dao). The top circle is an empty circle symbolizing the universe as a whole. The round shape of the circle indicates that the universe is an organic entity which has no beginning and end. Like a bouncing ball, the universe is constantly in motion. The second circle contains three nested semi-circles with dark and light colors. The dark-colored semi-circles represent the *yin* cosmic force, and the light colored semi-circles represent the *yang* cosmic force. The arrangement of the semi-circles symbolizes the dynamics of *yin* and *yang* as one of bipolar complementarity. In their pushing and pulling, *yin* and *yang* provide the source of motion for the universe's self-regeneration.

In *Reconstructing the Confucian* Dao, Adler devotes the entire Chapter 4 to explaining the meaning of *taiji*. Based on a careful reading of Zhou's and Zhu's writings, Adler argues that the new translation corrects the mistake of presenting *taiji* as something higher than, or prior to, *yin* and *yang*. He points out that both ZHOU Dunyi and ZHU Xi did not take *taiji* to mean "the origin" or "the ontological ground" of the universe. Rather, they regarded *taiji* as the constant interchange between *yin* and *yang*. "Like a pivot point," Adler explains, [*taiji*] is dimensionless yet constitutes the central axis of change and differentiation" (129).

One of the contributions of Adler's new translation is that it suggests a different understanding of Zhou's cosmology. Rather than viewing it as an explanation of a mechanical process of the creation of the universe from what is invisible to what is visible, Adler sees Zhou's cosmology as a depiction of a dynamic interchange of forces that exists in every person and everywhere in the universe. Thus, for Adler, it was *taiji* as the *yin-yang* principle that made ZHU Xi realize the interpenetration of activity and stillness of the human mind, thereby helping him to resolve his philosophical crisis. It was also *taiji* as the *yin-yang* principle that convinced ZHU Xi to put ZHOU Dunyi as the head of his "genealogy of the Way," signifying a new beginning of Confucianism. In both episodes, ZHU Xi was not concerned about Zhou's possible links to Daoism and alchemy. What he was concerned about was finding "a satisfactory and philosophical justifiable method" of practicing moral cultivation (138).