

Joseph A. Adler, *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao: Zhu Xi's Appropriation of Zhou Dunyi*. SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014. x, 331 pp. Bibliography, Index, Figures, Tables

Zhu Xi is widely accepted as the second most influential thinker in Chinese history, after Confucius himself. As the leading scholar of the School of Order (*lixue* 理學) in the Song, his appropriation of texts was largely accepted in China; his ruling of the lineage of sages who transmitted the Confucian Way, with Zhou Dunyi as the first true Confucian since Mencius, is regarded as common knowledge; he is considered the most influential rationalist Confucian in the Song, with colossal contributions to Chinese philosophy, including the synthesis of Confucian concepts, the special significance he assigns to the Four Books (*Sishu* 四書) and his idea of the investigation of things (*gewu* 格物). In this outlook, Zhu Xi's appropriation of Zhou Dunyi has been treated by interpreters as part of his philosophical statement. In his book, Adler seeks to shift this accepted perspective and place Zhu Xi's ideas in the context of his life story and religious practice. Doing so, he does not just suggest a broader context for understanding Zhu Xi's ideas and new interpretations of some major concepts in his thought: for the first time he calls on scholars of neo-Confucianism to see Zhu Xi as a practitioner of the Way from a religious and more personal perspective.

The book is arranged in two parts. Part I has four chapters, and Part II introduces translations of Zhou Dunyi's major works and Zhu Xi's commentaries, with detailed discussions. The first two chapters give the necessary background for Adler's main argument later on. Chapter 1 introduces the visions of the Way during the Song as a joint effort for a renewal of the Confucian Way and the reestablishment of its superiority to competing visions, with new terminology. According to Adler, the Way as understood by Zhu Xi was the underlying moral order of the cosmos, and the norm for human personal and socio-political behavior. However, it did not prevail in the world: social institutions were corrupt, rites were not practiced, and the loss of the north to the Jurchen was taken as evidence of the disaster (p. 16). Zhu Xi concluded from the inimical historical events that, while social aspects had been emphasized in Northern Song, personal moral cultivation, which later characterized Southern Song, was neglected; so Zhu Xi's choice was to turn inward to cultivate the Way. The idea of "filling" the inner self through moral cultivation led Zhu Xi to criticize Buddhism from both a moral and a metaphysical perspective. One important example, according to Adler, is the Buddhist understanding of human nature (*xing* 性) as "empty awareness," while for Confucians it is a "concrete principle" – that is, even when awareness is empty it is "filled" with moral principle. Hence Zhu Xi's life's work was to teach literati (*shi* 士) the Confucian Way in learning and practice, and to revive the moral and cultural backbone of Chinese

civilization. Doing so, he distinguished the Confucian Way as opposed to both Daoist philosophy and religious practices of the Way, as well as to the Buddhist “Eightfold Path” (pp. 16–20). Adler then returns to the Neo-Confucian revival in the Tang dynasty, starting with Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) who considered Mencius the last Confucian until his own time, and described the Confucian Way in cosmic universal terms, before moving on in history to Zhou Dunyi (pp. 23–36).

Chapter 2 opens with Zhu Xi’s crisis, after which he went back to Zhou’s texts. This historical detail acquires immense significance in the next chapter. Adler explores Zhu Xi’s idea of the succession of the Way (*daotong* 道統), paying special attention to his changing the accepted line of transmission from Confucius and Mencius to his own time, by predating Zhou Dunyi – hitherto a minor figure – to the Cheng brothers by almost a century (pp. 49–61). Adler discusses Zhu Xi’s elevation of Zhou as problematic from the outset, identifying sectarian, philosophical and historical problems in that regard (pp. 67–75). Zhu Xi’s problematic choice of Zhou, which has never enjoyed a satisfactory explanation despite the problems it raises, appears to be a major and interesting incentive for Adler’s present theory.

Chapter 3 tackles the problem by setting out the main argument for Zhu Xi’s choice. Unlike earlier scholars who explain Zhu Xi’s ideas on philosophical grounds, Adler maintains that Zhu Xi was motivated by a spiritual crisis, which he overcame through religious practice, more especially through his method of self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身) and becoming a sage (*shengren* 聖人, p. 77). The idea that inspired this understanding lies in Zhou’s *Taijitu shuo* 太極圖說, namely his understanding of the interpenetration of activity and stillness (*dongjing* 動靜) as the first manifestation of *taiji*, applicable to both the cosmos and the human mind (pp. 100–106). In this way, the diagram presents a single nonlinear process in which *taiji* is embodied in activity and stillness, *yin* and *yang*, the five phases, and the myriad things, of which the sage’s mind is its utmost manifestation. By choosing Zhou as the “pioneering” Confucian teacher of the Song, Zhu was able to present cultivation of the mind as mirroring the natural order. According to Adler, the philosophical rather than the religious perspective on Zhu Xi originates only in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China, when the distinction between “philosophy” and “religion” was introduced by translators of Western texts, while it made no sense in Zhu Xi’s time (p. 139). Adler’s point of introducing Zhu Xi’s crisis as personal and religious sheds light on his choice of Zhou Dunyi as the first philosopher of the Song, on the religious perspective of his thought, as well as on the close connection between philosophy and religion in his time.

Chapter 4 focuses on the idea of *taiji* 太極, translated and explicated by Adler as “Supreme Polarity” rather than its accepted translation as “Supreme Ultimate,” and the same for its correlate *wuji* 無極 as “Nonpolar” (p. 113). Adler affirms that there is no denying the

idea of *taiji* as farthest, highest, extreme or ultimate. Still, he opines that Song Confucians did not think in linear terms but in terms of *yinyang* dynamics, where the farthest point is never the “last stop on a one-way line” (pp. 122–125). According to Adler, only with this understanding can the term *taiji* make sense as equated with order, pattern or principle (*li* 理) that in some sense generates *qi* 氣. Adler distinguishes a logical priority of *li* over *qi* from a temporal co-existence of *li* and its manifestations. Given this crucial distinction, from the human perspective the Diagram necessitates ongoing practice in order to reveal *li* as the logical source that is temporally exposed together with its practical manifestations (pp. 114–116). Adler concludes that “*taiji* is primarily the unitary principle that contains the possibility of differentiation and change” (p. 136); in particular it is manifested in personal change through practice. As for Zhou's place in the lineage, it allowed Zhu Xi a reaffirmation of the Mencian idea of exploring the mind as exploring nature, and exploring nature as knowing Heaven (*Mencius* 7A.1); or as Adler states, “Zhu Xi’s construction of the figure of Zhou Dunyi was also the reconstruction of the Confucian *dao*, which Mencius had called the Way of the sages” (p. 143).

The second part of the book deserves special words of praise as the impressive outcome of an ongoing process of hard and meticulous work over long years. Indeed, many of us have been consulting Adler's fabulous translations since the 1990s. Both Zhou's *Taijitu shuo* and *Tongshu* 通書 with Zhu Xi's commentary have been posted freely by Adler on his web homepage, as work in progress for consultation and comment by scholars (<http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/adler.htm>). Thanks to Adler, it also appeared later in the Chinese Philosophical E-text Archive of Song through Qing texts, a part of the Wesleyan College Confucian E-text project (<http://sangle.web.wesleyan.edu/etext/song-qing/song-qing.html>). Working in this way has contributed to Adler's ultimate accomplishment and to the community of Song scholars. The expanded translation and commentary uses as its main source *Zhou Lianxi xiansheng quanji* 周濂溪先生全集 (Complete Collection of Zhou Lianxi's [Dunyi's] Works) compiled by Zhang Boxing 張伯行 (1652–1725) in 1708. Adler uses three different editions of Zhang's compilation and consults Chen Keming 陳克明. The collection (*Zhengyi tang quanshu* 正誼堂全書) includes all Zhou Dunyi's surviving works, Zhu Xi's published commentaries on them, selections from *Zhu zi yulei* 朱子語類 (Zhu Xi's Classified Conversations) and his *Hui'an xiansheng Zhu wengong wenji* 晦庵先生朱文公文集 (Collected Papers) and various other texts on Zhou.

Although not always easy reading, the challenging ideas put forth in this rich volume necessarily lead to new considerations regarding Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian project. The book

is well edited, Chinese characters for every term appear wherever needed, versions of the *taiji* diagram and beautiful text figures accompany the reading, and an extensive bibliography and useful index supplement the book. Some minor typos and inconsistencies of translation can be confusing at times. For example, the sentence *jiran budong, gan er sui tong* 寂然不動，感而遂通 is translated “quiet and inactive; when stimulated it then penetrates” (p. 86). However, in the same chapter *jiran budong* 寂然不動 appears to be “the state of total stillness without movement” (p. 91); “absolutely quiet and inactive” (p. 94); and “silent inactivity” (p. 100). *Gan er sui tong* 感而遂通 (translated on p. 86 “when stimulated it then penetrates”) appears later as “when it is acted upon and immediately penetrates all things” (p. 94); “penetrating when stimulated” (p. 100). Nevertheless, in a project of this scope these slips are probably unavoidable.

This rich book is a fascinating and innovative contribution to Sinologists, to Neo-Confucian researchers, to experts in Chinese philosophy in general, and to those who wish to understand the various senses of Chinese religion.

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