

Major Figures and Ideas of Neo-Confucianism

Song Dynasty (960-1279) Figures:

The “Five Masters” of the Northern Song (960-1127)

Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073)
Shao Yong (1011-1077)
Zhang Zai (1020-1077)
Cheng Hao (1032-1085)
Cheng Yi (1033-1107)

The “Great Synthesizer” of the Southern Song (1127-1279)

Zhu Xi (1130-1200)

Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) Figure:

The founder of the “School of the Mind”

Wang Yangming (1472-1529)

The movement we now call Neo-Confucianism began during the 11th century. At that time, bitter factional disputes among *literati* at the center of government pitted reformers, championed by Wang Anshi (1021-1086), against traditionalists, led by Sima Guang (1019-1086). Although originally a contest between high-minded philosophies and ideals of governance, the followers of these two Prime Ministers competed with increasing viciousness as the favors of the Song Emperors swung from one approach to the other. Disillusioned by the fierceness of personal vindictiveness, a small group of men withdrew from the arena of political partisanship, to live as semi-hermits, remote from urban society.

Five of these men (who were close relatives or friends, including two brothers and their uncle) became recognized as intellectual leaders of an alternative path for the Confucian tradition, one less concerned with issues of statecraft and more absorbed in metaphysical questions of the relationship

between the forces of the cosmos and the ethical realm of human beings. These men came to be known as the “Five Masters.” Although they drew on ideas of earlier medieval Confucian intellectuals, such as the great Tang writer Han Yu, their teachings form the earliest core of Neo-Confucianism.

The ideas of these five men were by no means alike in all respects, nor did they become influential in their own time. However, the intellectual and political confusion brought on by the loss of North China to Jurchen invaders in 1127 created an opportunity for the teachings of these men to come to the fore. An exceptional scholar named Zhu Xi (1130-1200) devoted himself to mastering these ideas, reconciling contradictions among them, and editing them into a new and coherent synthesis which became the basic structure of Neo-Confucian philosophy.

Zhu Xi’s system was initially resisted by power holders at the Southern Song court, and he himself was subject to political persecution. But a century after his death, his ideas had become so widespread that in 1313 the government of the succeeding Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) proclaimed them to be the officially orthodox interpretations on the basis of which Imperial civil service examinations should be evaluated. From that time until the nineteenth century, Neo-Confucianism displaced all earlier forms of Confucianism.

Zhu Xi’s synthesis spurred many others to draw out more fully the implications of Neo-Confucian ideas, and a variety of approaches emerged over time. All orthodox Neo-Confucianism, however, adopted the basic dualism that Zhu Xi had found in the works of some of the Five Masters, viewing the cosmos as the interplay of Tian-guided “principle” (*li*), and energy or “material force” (*qi*).

This Neo-Confucian orthodoxy came to be known as the “school of principle” (*lixue*). During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), a brilliant scholar and charismatic civil and military leader named Wang Yangming rejected major aspects of the orthodox approach, focusing far more on Confucian traditions of ethical self-discovery which held that moral imperatives were to be found through reflection on one’s own spontaneously ethical responses, endowed in all people alike by Tian. Wang’s ideas not only sought moral answers in the heart/mind (*xin*), in a radically “idealist” philosophical move, Wang claimed that *all* experience was ultimately a product of the mind, rather than an interaction between human consciousness and objective existence.

Wang’s eminence as a politician and general, as well as the excitement of his philosophical ideas and their resonance with many of the most engaging ideas of Chan (Zen) Buddhism, attracted many followers, and his “school of the mind” (*xinxue*) quickly became a major challenge to the “school of principle” tradition. While it never displaced Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism, its intellectual influence was very broad, spreading beyond China to Korea and, particularly, to Japan, where the teachings of Wang (known as Ō Yōmei in Japanese) became a dominant stream in Confucian thinking.

The following very brief selection of quotations from Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming is intended to convey some of the texture of Neo-Confucian discourse.

From Zhu Xi's Writings

A. The "Facts" of the Universe

Mankind has been generated as the finest product of the cosmos, its ultimate end: The Great Ultimate, through movement, generates the force of Yang. When its activity reaches its limit, it becomes tranquil and thus generates the force of Yin. By the transformation of Yang and its union with Yin, the Five Forces arise: Water, Fire, Wood, Metal, and Earth. It is man alone who receives them in their highest excellence. The five moral principles of his nature are aroused by, and react to, the external world, and engage in activity. Good and bad are distinguished and human affairs take their place.

The universe is a dualism; it is composed of "material force" (*qi*, close in meaning to "matter") and "heavenly principle" (the natural and proper contours of the cosmos and human affairs).

In the universe there has never been any material force that has not been guided by heavenly principle, nor has principle ever existed other than in material force. . . . Fundamentally, principle and material force cannot be spoken of as prior or posterior. But if we trace their origin, we are obliged to say that principle is prior.

Although material force in the universe integrates and disintegrates, attracts and repels in a hundred ways, nevertheless the principle according to which it operates has unerring order.

B. Linking the "Facts" of the Universe to Confucian Ethical Values

Human beings are a mix of heavenly principle (moral social nature) and impure material force (selfish desires).

Human nature is nothing but heavenly principle. . . . Our nature consists of concrete principle, complete with humanity (*ren*), righteousness, ritual, and wisdom.

One's nature comes from Heaven, whereas one's personal capacities come from material force. When a person is endowed with clear material force, his capacities will be clear. When a person possesses turbid material force, his capacities are impure.

The imperative for man is to perfect himself and return to his "heavenly nature."

The clarity of water is comparable to the goodness of human nature. As water may be turbid to a greater or lesser extent, so one's material force may be pure or impure to varying degrees. We cannot say that turbid water ceases to be water, and just so, although a man may be darkened by material force and degenerate into evil, his nature does not cease to be inherent in him. If one can overcome material force through learning, one can know this harmonious and unified nature.

This requires complete concentration of mind on the world, to the point of forgetting the “self.”

The essential path is to concentrate on one thing. This means having no desires. Having no desires, one is vacuous while tranquil and straightforward in action. Being vacuous while tranquil, one becomes intelligent and penetrating; being straightforward in action, one becomes impartial, and hence all-embracing.

The result is ren: the unity of self and other.

The man of *ren* forms one body with all things without any differentiation. Righteousness, ritual, wisdom, and faithfulness are all expressions of *ren*. As *ren* is nourished, self and other are identified.

Ultimately, the heavenly principle of the mind enters into a single body with the heavenly principle that “flows” through all things in the universe.

The sage regards everything in the world as his own self. The mind that leaves something outside itself is not capable of uniting with Heaven.

In the end, the practice of the Neo-Confucian sage is none other than the realm of human interaction (the roles of the Five Relationships) and the Confucian classics and histories.

There is no better way to penetrate principle to the utmost than to pay attention to everything in our reading of books and handling of affairs. Although there may not seem to be substantial progress, nevertheless after a long period of accumulation, without realizing it, one will have become saturated with principle, and achieve harmony and understanding.

From Wang Yangming’s Writings

The key to understanding does not lie in the world outside the mind.

People fail to realize that the highest good is in their minds and seek it outside. As they believe that every thing or every event has some specific aspect of principle, they search for the highest good in individual things. Consequently, the mind becomes fragmentary, isolated, broken into pieces; mixed and confused, it has no definite direction.

The outside world has no existence at all, independent of man’s mind.

The innate knowledge of man is the same as that of plants and trees, tiles and stones. . . . Even Heaven and earth cannot exist without the innate knowledge that is inherent in man, for at bottom, Heaven, earth, the world of things, and man form one body.

A friend pointed to flowering trees on a cliff and said, “You say there is nothing under heaven external to the mind. These flowering trees on the mountain blossom and drop their blossoms of

themselves; what have they to do with my mind?” The Teacher said, “Before you look at these flowers, they and your mind are in a state of silent vacuity. As you come to look at them, their colors at once appear clearly. From this you can know that the flowers are not external to your mind.”

People need to eliminate any belief that separates the idea of knowledge from engaged action. Knowing in itself disposes us to action, as we can observe from examining our spontaneous responses.

There have never been people who know but do not act. Those who are supposed to know but do not act simply do not know. Therefore, the *Great Learning* makes visible for us this link between true knowledge and action when it says, “It is like loving a beautiful color or hating a bad odor.” Seeing beautiful colors pertains to knowledge; loving beautiful colors pertains to action – but as soon as one sees a beautiful color one simultaneously loves it. You don’t see it first and then make up your mind to love it! . . . People today distinguish between knowledge and action and pursue them separately, believing that one must “know” before one can act. . . . Consequently, to the last day of life such people will never act and also never know.

What we need to know (understand deeply) the world and act in it lies in our natural minds.

What emanates from the mind is the will. The original substance of the will is knowledge, and wherever the will is directed is a “thing” or “affair.” When the will is directed towards serving one’s parents, then serving one’s parents is the affair. When directed towards serving a ruler, then serving one’s ruler is the affair. . . . Therefore I say that there are neither principles nor things outside the mind. . . . The effort to make one’s bright virtue shine, described in the *Great Learning*, means nothing more than to make the will sincere and the work of making the will sincere is nothing other than “straightening out affairs.”

True enlightenment must be sought not in passive thought or in books, but in real-world action.

When I was young, my friend Qian and I discussed the idea that to become a sage or a worthy man, one must investigate all the things of the world. . . . [To begin], I attempted to investigate the principles in the bamboo in front of the pavilion. From morning till night, I was unable to find the principles in the bamboo. On the seventh day I became sick. . . . After I had lived among the barbarians for three years I understood what all this meant. There is really nothing in the world of things to investigate. The effort is only to be carried out with reference to one’s body and mind.

Meditation may yield insight, but divorced from engaged action it is harmful.

Formerly, seeing that students tended to become wrapped up in intellectual explanations and debate, which did them no good, I taught them sitting in meditation. For a time, this helped them see the true way and they achieved some results, but they gradually developed the defect of fondness for tranquility and disgust with activity, and they degenerated into lifelessness like dry wood.

The deepest insight into the nature of man and the universe is expressed in political action.

Knowing Heaven is the same as knowing the affairs of a district or a county, which is what the titles for prefect [literally: “knower-of-the-district”] and magistrate [literally: “knower-of-the-county”] mean. It is a matter concerning one’s role, and the phrase “knowing Heaven” means that in moral character one has already become part of Heaven.