

## Was Zhu Xi's Method of Personal Cultivation Fragmentary?

### On Learning in Zhu Xi's Philosophical System

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In 1175, the Goose Lake Monastery debate between Zhu Xi 朱熹 and Lu Jiu Yuan 陸九淵 revealed fundamental differences concerning their methods of personal cultivation, albeit having the same ultimate goal of attaining sagehood. Lu Jiu Yuan, in a poem expressing his insights on that matter, insinuated that Zhu Xi adopted a fragmentary approach that resulted in a thwarted understanding of the mind-heart. Criticisms directed towards Zhu Xi by later followers of the Lu-Wang School largely continued along the same line. Their accusations were mainly centered on Zhu Xi's skewed emphasis on 'inquiry and study' (*dao wenxue* 道問學), which seemed to them as relegating 'honoring the moral nature' (*zun dexing* 尊德性) to secondary importance. The implication was that they saw Zhu Xi as thwarting the process of attending directly to the mind-heart. Such a view became so deeply entrenched that it gradually came to be accepted as the defining and persisting distinction between the two schools in the neo-Confucian movement. Admittedly, Zhu Xi did accord great importance to textual studies, but this in itself by no means implies that he had neglected the aspect of 'honoring the moral nature.' In any case, my purpose is neither to examine their differences nor determine the correct way of cultivating the self. Instead, this paper shall discuss how Zhu Xi's method of learning, while paying attention to the external world, was in no way distracting to, or deviating from, the development and realization of the moral nature. In this way, I will argue that Zhu Xi's method of personal cultivation was not fragmentary.

To begin with, it is important to understand how the kind of learning that Zhu Xi propounded fitted in his philosophical system. Basically, his philosophical system is grounded in his theory of nature as principle (*xing ji li* 性即理). The Doctrine of the Mean (*Zhongyong* 中庸) opens with “Nature is that which is ordained (*ming* 命) by Heaven (*tian* 天)”. In other words, we may say that life is a command by *tian*. As Man came into form from endowed with *qi* 氣, principle is contained within him. The principle is *tian*’s principle, and Man’s nature is a shared feature derived from *tian*. However, due to the different endowment of *qi*, each person is unique. One’s personality is a manifestation of his or her physical nature, and the differences between each individual results in *tian*’s principle having varying expressions. Accordingly, it is such deviations from our common nature that lead to conflicts among people. In acting upon our nature, we are essentially following our own principle. In his commentary on the Four Books, Zhu Xi likens this to treading on our own pathways. Seen in this light, when these various pathways converge onto the main road, there must be a certain order in place to prevent accidents from happening. Therefore, what is meant by “To teach is to cultivate the *Dao* (修道之謂教)” is to ensure that there is a safety network in place on the road. Thus, implicit in the concept of *xing ji li* is a concern for resolving conflicts. The *Dao* symbolizes the appropriate functioning of human relations and interactions, and it can be cultivated by means of receiving instruction. This makes learning necessary, and in the canonization of the Four Books, we see that Zhu Xi intended it to be a systematic process, starting with the Great Learning (*Daxue* 大學) which contains the ancients’ method of higher learning to embark on the path of virtue, then proceeding to the Analects, Mencius, and finally *Zhongyong*, as it is deemed to be the most profound. This

sequence shows a gradual shift from the learning of concrete human affairs (*ren zhi dao* 人之道) to the comprehension of the abstruse Way of Heaven (*tian zhi dao* 天之道).

In positioning the *Daxue* as the first in the sequence, we must not forget to take into account the role of the Elementary Learning (*Xiaoxue*/小學) that precedes it. In fact, the titles of the texts is already a clear indication of their connection in terms of order. The preface to the *Daxue* states that:

“At the age of eight all children of the king and dukes, on down to the common people, started their elementary learning, in which they were instructed in the [social] disciplines of sprinkling and sweeping, responding to others, and coming forward or withdrawing from [the presence of others] [as recorded in *Analects* 19:12], and in the polite arts of ritual, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and arithmetic.”<sup>1</sup>

Hence, we see that it is from the age of eight to fourteen that children are engaged in *Xiaoxue*, and *Daxue* starts thereafter at the age of fifteen. Taking the age of fifteen as the watershed is in line with the traditional way of distinguishing childhood and adulthood. The question then inevitably arises: How did learning correspond with age? As recorded in the *Zhu zi yulei* 朱子語類, Zhu Xi explains that “*Xiaoxue* is about getting the affairs right; *Daxue* is about plumbing the principles.”<sup>2</sup> Simply put, when a child learns about affairs, he or she may only grasp the ‘how’, without knowing the ‘why.’ The purpose of plumbing the principles is then to comprehend the rationale behind it. Seen in this light, the difference between *Xiaoxue* and *Daxue* deals with the issue of understanding, which is directly related

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<sup>1</sup> Wm Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p.723

<sup>2</sup> *Zhu zi yulei* 朱子語類, (Beijing北京: zhong hua shu ju中華書局, 2011), *juan*卷7, p.124 「小學是直理會那事;大學是窮究那理」

to the cognitive capability of a person that increases throughout maturation. It has to be emphatically pointed out though, that there is no disjunction between the two. Both ‘affairs’ and ‘principles’ are simply two sides of the same thing for there cannot be affairs without principles. Principles simply reside within affairs. Although *Xiaoxue* focuses on providing behavioral norms and getting the children to put things into practice, its spirit of inculcating morality is no different from that of *Daxue*. In a word, *Xiaoxue* constitutes the preparatory effort (*gongfu* 工夫) for *Daxue*, whereas *Daxue* brings *Xiaoxue* into completion. Both children and adults need to fulfill their nature endowed by *tian* through learning. In this regard, the *Xiaoxue* and *Daxue* are continuous, which is what Zhu Xi meant by them being “a single matter.”<sup>3</sup>

The *Xiaoxue* was not meant to be a didactic or prescriptive formula. Instead, it aimed at stimulating the source of goodness<sup>4</sup> that is inherent in each child through the carrying out of every day activities. As mentioned above, in the case where the child still does not have the ability to grasp the ‘why’ of affairs, they should just be “made to follow,”<sup>5</sup> and not get ahead of themselves. Clearly, Zhu Xi prized practice (*li xing* 力行) over purely intellectual discussions in education. From the learning and practice of how to interact with others in a proper manner, this germinal goodness receives nourishment and begins to develop. Children are habituated to social etiquette and grow to have a decorous disposition. Habituation aims at naturalizing, such that certain responses and practices become innate. Such training in handling concrete affairs will accustom them to social conventions, and help them gradually

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<sup>3</sup> *Zhu zi yu lei* 朱子語類, *juan* 卷7, p.125 「只是一箇事」

<sup>4</sup> *Zhu zi yu lei* 朱子語類, *juan* 卷7, p.124 「古人小學養得小兒子誠敬善端發見了」

<sup>5</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹, *si shu zhang ju ji zhu* 四書章句集注, (Beijing 北京: zhong hua shu ju 中華書局, 2012), p.105  
子曰：「民可使由之，不可使知之。」

rid themselves of their *qi*-obscured nature. At the same time, this process evokes in them a sense of reverence (*jing* 敬)<sup>6</sup> both towards the self and the other, and serves as an indispensable foundation for *Daxue*. Zhu Xi likens the learning of *Xiaoxue* to forming the mould of a pottery, and *Daxue* to the embellishments of the final product.<sup>7</sup> Evidently, this metaphor shows the need for a point of departure for *Daxue*, without which the latter lacks a basis.

Having considered the role of the *Xiaoxue*, it is now fitting to turn to a discussion of Zhu Xi's view of learning in the *Daxue*. In his famous emendation to the *Daxue*, Zhu Xi states that:

“Surely there is no human mind whose active spirit possesses no knowledge; and all things in the world have their principles. Only when some principles have not been exhausted is knowledge not complete. Thus, when one begins to teach the *Great Learning*, [one] must cause the learner to approach all objective things in the world by exhausting their principles, basing himself on the principles that he already knows. In this way he can reach the summit of learning. When one exerts effort on this matter for a long time and, suddenly, holistically understands all things, there is nothing that one cannot understand inside and out, in whole and particular. There is nothing in the great substance and function of one's mind that is not illuminated.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Zhu zi yu lei* 朱子語類「小學多說那恭敬出，少說那防禁處。」

<sup>7</sup> *Zhu zi yu lei* 朱子語類, *juan* 卷7, pp.124-125 「古者，小學已自暗養成了，到長來，已自有聖賢坯模，只就上面加光飾」

<sup>8</sup> Donald J. Munro, *Images of human nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), p.87

Here, we find the explication to the doctrine of ‘investigation of things’ (*ge wu* 格物) and ‘extension of knowledge’ (*zhi zhi* 致知) that was placed at the very core of Zhu Xi’s teachings. *Ge wu* and *zhi zhi* are essentially two different descriptions of a single operation, with reference to the object of investigation and the knowing subject respectively.<sup>9</sup> What Zhu Xi meant by *ge wu zhi zhi* is to exhaustively investigate the principles in things and affairs in order to extend one’s knowledge to the utmost. It is, then, little wonder that Zhu Xi placed much emphasis in getting *Xiaoxue* right first. He reckons that the *Daxue* uses the term *ge wu* instead of *qiong li* 窮理 (plumbing principles) to highlight the fact that principles are concrete, and to be sought for in things and affairs. Just as a boat can only travel on water, and a carriage on land, one needs only experiment to see that principles are not vacuous and removed from reality.<sup>10</sup> Also, as mentioned in the emendation, *ge wu zhi zhi* is predicated on the presupposition that one’s mind-heart already possesses knowledge, such as humaneness (*ren* 仁), rightness (*yi* 義), propriety (*li* 禮) and wisdom (*zhi* 智), and the extension is to begin with what is already known. Zhu Xi cites an example from the Mencius whereby King Xuan of Qi could not bear to see the ox slaughtered and asked to change it for a sheep. Zhu Xi believes that such feelings of commiseration is the starting point (*duan xu* 端緒) of humaneness already present in the mind-heart that needs to be extended to reach its limit.<sup>11</sup> To investigate principles without tending to the mind-heart is therefore akin to Wang Yang Ming’s 王陽明 erroneous attempt at investigating bamboos, merely seeking principles from

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<sup>9</sup> *Zhu zi yu lei* 朱子語類, *juan* 卷15, p.292 「只是推致我所知，須要就那事物上理會。致知，是自我而言；格物，是就物而言。」

<sup>10</sup> *Zhu zi yu lei* 朱子語類, *juan* 卷15, 「今試以眾人之力共推一舟於陸，必不能行，方見得舟果不能以行陸也，此之謂實體。」

<sup>11</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹, *si shu zhang ju ji zhu* 四書章句集注, p.208

the outside. Therefore, according to Zhu Xi, the internal and the external mutually support each other.

In his lifetime and after, Zhu Xi had often been accused of advocating an ‘external’ oriented methodology of personal cultivation with his plumbings of principles, resulting in the complication and mistake of separating the mind and principle. However, from the above, it is apparent that while Zhu Xi acknowledged the distinction between the self and things external to the self, this was not incompatible with affirming their interconnectedness. In other words, principles investigated from things and affairs should be checked against what is already present in our mind-heart to ensure that they resonate. This implies that both the mind-heart and things external to it are intimately related. While Zhu Xi certainly counseled investigating as many principles in things as possible, it is not necessary to have plumbed all principles under the sun to achieve ‘integral comprehension’ (*huo ran guan tong* 豁然貫通). That would have been far too demanding and unlikely to be possible in any case. Instead, Zhu Xi also discusses using reasoning by analogy (*lei tui* 類推, *tui lei* 推類, *tui* 推) to make associations among principles. For instance, in knowing how to serve one’s parents, one can logically infer how to serve the emperor.<sup>12</sup> The *huo ran guan tong* that is to be achieved at the end of *ge wu zhi zhi* is a state with which principles in us and principles in things are unified, the possibility of which stems from the belief that individual principles are merely differentiations from a unified principle. These constituent principles arise only in the practice of everyday life. Thus, it is said that “the mind possesses a multitude of principles and responds to the myriad affairs”.<sup>13</sup> In a broader sense, *huo ran guan tong* can be construed

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<sup>12</sup> Munro, *Images of human nature*, p.91

<sup>13</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹, *si shu zhang ju ji zhu* 四書章句集注, p.3 「具眾理而應萬事」

as humanity being co-extensive with the cosmos (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一). From a modern perspective, we may say that the principles that Zhu Xi speaks of constitutes both those of a moral nature and scientific ones. In this sense, when natural principles manifest in the human sphere, and when principles in the human sphere penetrate the cosmos, oneness of Heaven and Man occurs.

In the book ‘Images of Human Nature,’ Munro notes that “The antidote for separation is knowledge and affection. Knowledge reveals that the principles of objective things have content and are linked to corresponding principles within the self. Affection solidifies the links.”<sup>14</sup> By affection, it means that learning takes on a very personal overtone. Indeed, Zhu Xi repeatedly speaks of learning as involving the learner personally relate to what is being learnt (*qie ji* 切己). Thus, he also stresses the importance of experiencing and recognition (*ti yan* 體驗, *ti ren* 體認, etc.) to make learning relevant to the self, which in turn helps to deepen one’s knowledge. In this manner, Zhu Xi definitely does not neglect ‘honouring the moral nature’ even while paying attention to ‘inquiry and study’. In fact, the latter was used as a means of achieving the former. He was perhaps the first neo-Confucian to propound an approach to book-learning.<sup>15</sup> In spite of his reverence for the tradition of Confucian scholarship, Zhu Xi never championed the primacy of scholarship. It was made very clear in his instructions that a learner is to take textual studies as a matter of second order.<sup>16</sup> It was central to his teaching only on a methodological level as the texts were deemed to encapsulate the principles that have already been discovered by the ancient sages. In this

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<sup>14</sup> Munro, *Images of human nature*, p.79

<sup>15</sup> Qian Mu 錢穆, *zhu zi xue ti gang* 朱子學提綱, (Beijing 北京: Sanlian shu dian 三聯書店, 2002), p.153

<sup>16</sup> *Zhu zi yu lei* 朱子語類, *juan* 卷10, p.161 「讀書乃學者第二事情。」

regard, studying became a critical part of *ge wu*. The knowledge gained from textual studies was used to guide one's actions in personal cultivation. One has to extend his or her knowledge to the utmost in order to act accordingly. Just as walking requires the use of both legs, knowledge and action should not be separated. One cannot endlessly pursue knowledge and cast aside the cultivation of moral practices. Needless to say, it was the moral relevance of textual studies that was of paramount importance. The order of priority which Zhu Xi recommended was to start with the Four Books, followed by the classics, and lastly the histories.<sup>17</sup> The criterion according to which this sequence was established was the relevance and helpfulness in moral cultivation. Obviously Zhu Xi strove to strike a balance and combine both erudition (*bo* 博) and essentialism (*yue* 約) in learning. He laments that scholars of his time (such as Lu Jiu Yuan) were fond of *yue*, not knowing that the authenticity of which has to be tested against a broad intellectual base. Therefore, it is evident that moral essentialism without intellectual base and erudition without moral focus were both undesirable to him.<sup>18</sup> The role of textual studies is then to build an intellectual foundation for morality.

In conclusion, learning in Zhu Xi's philosophical system finds its ontological basis in the mind-heart. While people of the Lu-Wang school may find it fragmentary, all of them ultimately shared the same focus of correcting the mind-heart. The approaches to learning that Zhu Xi expounded may appear to be mired in details, but he had actually provided systematic and concrete steps which the people at large could follow through in personal cultivation. On the contrary, his critic Lu Jiu Yuan's method in lacking directions for practical

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<sup>17</sup> *Zhu zi yu lei* 朱子語類, *juan* 卷11, p.195

<sup>18</sup> Yu Ying-Shih, "Morality and Knowledge" in *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism*, ed. Wing-tsit Chan, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), p.236

implementation, may prove to be deceptively simple. Perhaps in dispelling the misunderstanding we long have of Zhu Xi's views of learning, we ought to discuss the pragmatic and metaphysical aspects holistically, refraining from criticism from one end.

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