A GREAT CONFUCIAN CALLED ZHU XI

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On an ordinary day in 1130, Zhu Xi was born in Youxi county, Fujian Province. In ancient China, it is common for the ancestry of great people to be shrouded in mystery. For example, there are still many uncertainties regarding Confucius' family. However, Zhu Xi's family is unambiguous.

In the book "Textual Research of Zhu Xi's Achievements" written by Gao Yinling, Zhu Xi's ancestors migrated from Shandong to Fujian. According to Mr Gao's research, Zhu Xi's early ancestors from the Spring and Autumn period lived in a small country named "Zhu", which is located between big countries such as "Qi" and "Lu" at the time. Their descendents then traveled and lived in Shandong, Jiangsu, Anhui Province and finally settled down in Fujian province when Zhu Xi was born. Although there is no serious comparison between Zhu Xi and Confucius, there is little doubt that besides Confucious and Meng Zi, Zhu Xi left the third biggest impact on Chinese social thinking. Zhu Xi was thought to be the greatest philosopher throughout Song, Yuan, Ming, Qing dynasty. The article below is a brief introduction to Zhu Xi and his philosophical thoughts.

Facing hills and Reading books

Zhu Xi's father, Zhu Song, was born to a landlord family in Jiangxi Province. However, his family's circumstances were already in decline when he was born. Even when he later achieved the rank of lieutenant, and was deployed to You Xi county, Nanjian State and Fujian Province, he was still disregarded by his colleagues. Fortunately, Nanjian district was the hometown of Yang Shi, who was the student of another great Confucian, Cheng Hao. Yang Shi spent all of his time teaching in his hometown in his old age, which turned the Nanjian district into a center of Neo-Confucian thinking led by Cheng. Zhu Song had once been taught by Luo Congyan, who was a student of Yang Shi. He was thus keen on Neo-Confucianism and remained in close contact with local moralists. This home environment surely had a profound impact on Zhu Xi. Though Zhu Song preferred Zhu Xi to be a soldier rather than a Confucian, the Zhu family was famous for Confucianism and they eventually would trained Zhu Xi to become a Confucian. Even as a child, Zhu Xi was very clever. When he was 4 years old, his father Zhu Song pointed to the sky, and said "this is the Heavens". Zhu Song was surprised when Zhu Xi asked, "What is in Heaven?". At that time, moralists were very interested in whether the Heaven is bounded and in his autobiography, Zhu Xi had once fallen ill thinking about the question. By the age of 8, Zhu Xi could read Classic of Filial Piety, and one day wrote "If I don’t honour my parents, I would rather die" to encourage himself.
Zhu Xi wrote an antithetical couplet and engraved it on the wall as his motto in his old age. It said that he would abide his father and master's word. Throughout his life, he always abided by the motto. Zhu Xi's father, Zhu Song, died when Zhu Xi was at the young age of 14. Zhu Xi followed his father's will and moved to Liu Ziyu's home, Chong An county, with his mother. He began learning from Hu Xian, Liu Mianzhi, Liu Zihui and under their influence, became deeply interested in Cheng's Neo-Confucianism and Buddhist idealism. In 1153, Zhu Xi met moralists Li Dong on the way to Tongan county, and this meeting made a big difference on Zhu Xi's world view. Li Dong advised Zhu Xi to give up Buddhism, but Zhu Xi refused. However, when Zhu Xi met Li Dong five years later, he took greater interest in Li's sayings, perhaps because of his experience as chief of records in Chong An. Based on the quotation of Xie Liangzuo, who was another follower of Cheng Yi, Zhu Xi started to collect books written by moralists in Northern Song Dynasty. In 1160, Zhu Xi decided to learn from Li Dong. However, Zhu Xi still remained rooted in Buddhist teachings and Li Dong asked him to read Classical Confucianism. After reading numerous Confucianism books, Zhu Xi began to understand Li Dong's words. He agreed with Confucianism and saw that there were shortcomings in Buddhism. Zhu Xi then began to create his own idealist system based on Confucianism. However, instead of abandoning Buddhism completely he integrated it into his idealist system. In a letter to Luo Bo, Li Dong happily boasted that Zhu Xi studied very hard, which was rare in their party. He talked with him that day and felt pleased. As history later showed, Li Dong was right about his student. Zhu Xi not only inherited Li Dong's theory, but also greatly surpassed him.

In the book "Zhu Xi's Historical World" written by Yu Yingshi, it is said that Zhu Xi's historical world started forming from this point forth. Due to Zhu Xi's political career and the common misunderstandings about his political affiliations, it's necessary to give a brief account on how Zhu Xi's historical world began.

First, the political culture of the Song dynasty traces back to the beginning of the “Three Generations”, which was during a period before the Han and Tang Dynasties. The three generations are the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasty. Most Confucians in Song dynasty looked down on Han and Tang, but highly praised the three generations. Hence, the political reform in Xining was spurred by this view. Scholars eventually painted "The three generations" and the Han and Tang dynasties as opposing political concepts, which displeased Chen Liang and sparked his famous debate with Zhu Xi regarding the tyranny of the king.

Second, the political status of scholars was greatly enhanced in Song dynasty for many reasons. For example, Song's policy to desist from military activities and encourage culture and education; the first emperor's testament to refrain from killing scholars etc. These have been explicitly stated in Yu Yingshi's book. It's worth noting that the ideas of serving society, and the phenomenon of scholars joining the Emperor's national government had been universally accepted. These ideas never existed before the Song dynasty.
The idea of “making society one’s personal responsibility” is still praised nowadays and this can actually be traced back to the time of Confucius, which was also the time when the ancient Chinese Scholar class was formed. Since then, scholars started to view benevolence as every individual’s responsibility and became advocates of ethics. However, there is a distinction between benevolence and serving society. The former mainly focuses on the bearer of a value system, while the latter reflects an entitlement to participate directly in political and social affairs, which can be widely seen throughout the Song dynasty. The idea of serving society spurred the movement for intellectuals to join the emperor in national governance. It was during this historical period that Zhu Xi began his political career and he aspired to govern the nation in a way similar to the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties. (abbreviated to Three Dynasties’ Governance). However, although Zhu Xi believed that the way of Three Dynasties’ Governance could not be applied on a national scale, he also thought it would be applicable on a localized scale. As the representative of scholars then, he showed a great sense of social responsibility by designing a new system to re-establish the traditional Confucian order. He made great efforts to apply his model of governance to a local area and this resulted in the emergence and enforcement of local institutions, such as the Free Estate’s Family(家) and Local treaties(田). 

In 1167 AD, when Zhu Xi took up office in Fujian, the Chong An district was struck by floods and Zhu Xi travelled round Chong An and analyze the situation. He suggested setting up social warehouse and Wufuli to solve food supply problem. In 1190, Zhu Xi was posted to Zhang Zhou, where land annexation was very rampant. Landlords were buying peasants’ land but leaving the tax liability with the peasants. Farmers were also cruelly exploited. To solve this problem, Zhu Xi came up with “boundary survey”, and proposed that tax liability follows land, which damaged the interests of the big landlords. However, the landlords fought strongly against his policy and refused to cooperate with him, causing the implementation of these ideas to fail. Zhu Xi was so angry that he resigned in protest.

Deny self and return to propriety

Zhu Xi’s philosophy extended to five main areas. These were the Liqi theory, Movement and stillness opinion, the theory of Extending Knowledge by Investigating Things, theory of “Heart-Nature” and the Aesthetic Thought. The mention of Zhu Xi’s philosophy used to invoke thoughts of “Upholding justice and annihilating desire” and “Starving to death over forfeiting loyalty”. It would also invoke the image of feudalism’s keeper because the idea of “upholding justice and annihilating desire” was widely thought to be inhuman due to the use of feudal moral principles to restrict people’s desire. Hence, this view was attacked by the critic, Tang Zhongyou, as soon as it was presented and even led to the case of Yan Rui. Furthermore, the celebrated scholar, Lu Xun, also made some sarcastic remarks about Zhu Xi.
However, as a matter of fact, Zhu Xi’s idea to uphold justice and annihilate desire referred to undue desire. What is this undue desire? For example, a person who is stuffed but still wishes to eat bird’s-nest has undue desire; a person who already has a wife but still wishes for more wives also has undue desire. Such a view is connected with his theory of “Heart-Nature”.

To avoid misunderstanding Zhu Xi, it is necessary for us to put his saying into its specific historical context. Zhu Xi’s theory of human nature was actually an elaboration of the theory of Zhang Zai and Cheng Yi on “nature and temperament”. According to his theory, nature specifically refers to “being”, which is perfect itself. Temperament refers to the mixture of being and temperament, which is not completely good, but coexists in humans. Neither one is dispensable. Related to the nature is the theory of moral mind and human mind. In Zhu Xi’s opinion, “moral mind” stems from the nature principle, which inherently incorporates the faith in humanity, justice, etiquette, wisdom and develops into a consciousness of compassion, shameful, humility, and the concept of right and wrong. On the other hand, the “human mind” stems from the human instinct, such as hunger for food and thirst to drink. Hence, although even sages cannot do without the human mind, they place an emphasis on the moral mind rather than the human mind. Zhu Xi thought that the moral mind and human mind were contradictory, yet related to each other. He felt that the moral mind achieves stability through the human mind, but that the human mind should be subjected to the moral mind.

Hence, Zhu Xi reached his view of the nature principle and the human mind through the Mind-nature theory. He considered that the human mind is selfish, which makes it weak. In contrast, the moral mind stems from nature, which makes it subtle. Thus, when he proposed the idea of “Upholding justice and annihilating desire”, he was affirming the normal desires of material life and objecting to the Buddhist view of completely removing desire. In his saying, Zhu Xi was actually referring to the undue desire which exceeds the basic human material desire.

The main reason why Zhu Xi’s theory had evolved into an extreme point of view was because the rulers of the time had exploited his saying and driven such extreme thoughts deep into the people’s hearts. This, unfortunately, sometimes led to tragedy when his view was misinterpreted to mean “Keep one’s chastity rather than starve to death”.

The sun and moon are the eye of the earth,

More and more reading is the way to be a sage

This antithetical couplet, written by Zhu Xi, on the door of the White Deer Grotto Academy, seems to indicate his path in life. Although Zhu Xi was mistaken during and after his lifetime, his articles and thoughts lasted forever. What mattered more was his diligence throughout his lifetime, and his devotion to building the college. Today, though the premises are empty and the conviction of young learners has faded, the college seems to have surpassed immeasurable time. It now awaits future generations who may continue the river of culture and the tradition of learning to be a sage.

We have mentioned that Zhu Xi’s life in politics only lasted for seven years, most of which was spent on researches, writing articles and imparting knowledge. According to relevant history records, it is seen that Zhu Xi often asked for leave. A part of the reason might have been due to personal affairs, such as his mother’s death, but the biggest reason was because he wanted to devote more time to his research and teaching. In 1162, Zhu Xi was ordered to “LinAn” — the capital city of the time — to make a proposal to the emperor. He proposed that the top priority for the government should be to teach and create a
scheme to assign worthy people. The proposal is known as “Ren Wu Feng Shi (仁物風士)”, and it contains forward-looking strategies similar to today’s strategy of rejuvenating the country through science and education. The difference between these two proposals is that the former did not attract the emperor’s attention and was thus not implemented at all.

Even in his short political career, Zhu Xi had been aware of the importance of education. In 1178, Zhu Xi received another opportunity to enter politics when he was ordered to assume the office of “Zhi Nan Kang Jun (致南康軍)” However, during his time in office, he never forgot his mission as a scholar. He thus established the White Deer Grotto Academy in the historical site of Li Bo, poet of Tang dynasty, and formulated a set of studying norms in the academy.

Below are some excerpts:

“There should be affection between fathers and sons, affiliation between monarchs and courtiers, distinction between husbands and wives, order between seniors and juniors, and trust amongst friends.”

“Study extensively, inquire prudently, reflect carefully, differentiate things clearly, perform consistently.”

“Speak honestly, behave politely, abstain from anger, restrict undue desire, amend wrongs and strive to be kind.”

“Act for the common good instead of personal interests, work according to the moral principle instead of individual benefit.”

“Treat others as you would like to be treated, seek the cause in oneself instead of somebody else.”

The White Deer Grotto Academy is one of the four biggest and most famous academies in Chinese history. Its study norms have become the paragon of other academies with a great influence on the latter generations.

Besides his contribution to the education, Zhu Xi also strived to make his theory of Confucianism the ruling thoughts of the then government. However, as a new thought, his theory of Confucianism had little impact on the contemporary society. Moreover, due to his upright character, he often offended the powerful ministers, which led to the disastrous political consequences. In 1195, Zhao Ruyu—the central government official who supported Zhu Xi—was forced out by another powerful official, Han Tuozhou, who was favored by the emperor. As a result, Zhu Xi was dragged into the conflict as he had once attacked Han Tuozhou. Hence, Han Tuozhou radically attacked Zhu Xi’s Confucianism. In 1196, Ye Zhu—proponents of Han signed a petition asking the emperor to destroy all the books written by the moralists and to bar any candidate who upheld Cheng Zhu Confucianism in the imperial examinations from being admitted. To make matters worse, the then monitoring censor, Shen Jizu, accused Zhu Xi of ten crimes, and asked the emperor to kill him. Zhu Xi’s star pupil Cai Yuanding was also arrested and sent to Dao Province. Cheng Zhu Confucianism was completely discredited and scolded false theory by the Song government. Accordingly, Zhu Xi was also lambasted as the teacher of the false theory. At that time, Zhu Xi was 69 years old and was deteriorating physically. He lost the support of Emperor Ningzong, and was prohibited from being a government official. In the fall of that year, Zhu Xi moved to Wu Fu Li, Chong An, and finished his work “Chu Ci Ji Zhu”. During this tough time, he exchanged letters with then
famous Ci writer, Xin Qiji, and encouraged each other using the idea of “self-denial” and “letting propriety show through one’s words and actions”. On November 3, 1200, he passed away in his home at the age of 71. According to historical records, he had amending his work “Da Xue Cheng Yi Zhang” till his death, once again showing his enthusiasm to build up his theory of Confucianism.

During the most depressing times when Zhu Xi was beaten by his opponents and his version of Confucianism was forbidden by the government, it is touching to know that he thought fondly of Confucius. He signaled his with regret that Confucius died in 479 B.C, and lamented the following words, “it’s 1670 years up to now”. This clearly show that Zhu Xi was eerily reminiscent of Confucius and that he was proud to be a successor of the Confucian orthodoxy of Confucius and Meng Zi.

In Chinese culture, when we admire someone, we often described the nobility of his character to be as high as the hills, as long as the rivers, and of lasting influence. Zhu Xi is such an intellectual who deserves our respect.

Some Terminologies:

- Being
- desire
- moral mind
- human mind
- nature principle
- human desire
- Humanity, Justice, Etiquette, Wisdom and Faith
- mind-nature theory
- Uphold justice, annihilate desire
- Cheng-Zhu Confucianism
- deny self and return to propriety
- internal sage and external king
- The Confucian orthodoxy of Confucius and Menzi
- Moral
- Kernel
- the Free Estate’s Family Yi-zhuang
- local treaties
為問天半觀
有渠光畝書
源那雲方感
頭得影塘興
活清共一
朱水如徘徊
熹來許徘徊
觀書感興　朱熹

半畝方塘一鑑開，
天光雲影共徘徊。
問渠那得清如許，
為有源頭活水來。
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