Week 18: The Neo-Confucianism Movement

Section 1: Introduction to Neo-Confucianism – Context and Claims

1. Introduction to Neo-Confucianism: Context and Claims

We've talked now about efforts to reform government in the 11th century with the idea that government ultimately bore responsibility for the state of society. And we looked carefully at the new laws or new policies of Wang Anshi and the way in which Wang Anshi is somebody who went back to antiquity and the classics, had a vision of integrated social order in which government would lead and transform society. We looked at Sima Guang, the historian, and his view of very limited government, a very conservative view of how to create a stable and lasting social political order. But again, it was an order created by government. And we looked at Su Shi, who thought in terms of the cultivation, the cultural cultivation that was needed to be an official, and who also opposed the new policies from his very relativistic standpoint, where there was no one system, no one dogma that could be truly universal and applied to everything.

But I didn't tell you about a fourth person who was also a leader of a faction, who together with Sima Guang and Su Shi formed the opposition to Wang Anshi and the new laws.

2. The Neo-Confucians

There was a man named Cheng Yi. Now Cheng Yi was contemporary of Su Shi, was, in his own times, known but not extremely influential. He would become, however, regarded as one of the greatest philosophical thinkers in Chinese history.

In the 12th century, his work and the work of his brother, Cheng Hao, and of one of his teachers, Zhou Dunyi, and his cousin, Zhang Zai-- all people who thought about moral philosophy-- would be interpreted and revised and packaged by Zhu Xi, one of the greatest-- probably the single greatest intellectual entrepreneur in all of Chinese history. And this movement that would emerge would become-- came to be called Daoxue, the learning of the way. I'm going to refer to it as Neo-Confucianism.

It rejected Wang Anshi's new laws. It had its doubts about Sima Guang's statist model. And it certainly rejected Su Shi's literary relativism. It made a claim, however, to being the authentic and correct and true and lasting and universal interpretation of the teachings of Confucius and Mencius.

Its audience was, in the first place, the literati. And it was the one group that said to the literati, of the three things we expect of all literati, that they be responsible for government, that they must be responsible for culture, and that they be responsible for ethics and morality. That third thing is what we have figured out. We know how it's possible to be responsible for morality.

Now the Neo-Confucian movement has come to be seen as a revival of Confucianism. I would prefer to say that-- since I think Wang Anshi was a perfectly good Confucian, and Su Shi was as well-- that, in fact, it's a successful reinterpretation of Confucianism. It's one that's successful. It becomes part of the examination system. It's something that every literate, well-educated person will know, basically, from the 13th, 14th
century on to the beginning of the 20th century. And for people who are Chinese philosophers today, they pay particular importance to the Neo-Confucian philosophers.

Now to talk about this-- traditionally, this notion of Neo-Confucianism as a revival of Confucianism is presented as a revival of Confucianism in response to the Buddhist challenge. It is clearly anti-Buddhist. And in various ways we can talk about their claim that the world out there is not an illusion, but is substantial and real, as being one-- from their perspective-- of the fundamental differences between them and Buddhists.

But they share with Buddhists a concern for internality-- for what goes on in the mind, and for the way in which we as individuals possess the potential to become enlightened, to become sages. In fact, it's the Neo-Confucians who make the claim that sages-- it's true that people may be born sages, but in fact, you can learn to be a sage. And they see themselves as offering an alternative not just to Buddhism, but also to the very idea that government should organize society.

In the 11th century, one of the most famous literati figures of the day, active in the first half of the 11th century, a man named Fan Zhongyan had proclaimed that literati all ought to feel responsibility for the world, that they should be the last to enjoy the world's pleasures and the first to worry about the world's worries. That all literati should yi tian xia wei ji ren, should take the world as their responsibility.

But we also know there was an examination system, and we'll be coming-- speaking more about that later. But the examination system failed the vast majority of literati. And it's to this literati world that the Neo-Confucians speak, or they bring a message that says you can become a sage. Even if you don't pass the examinations, even if you don't become an official, you can be responsible for the world. There are ways of being responsible that do not require service in government and, in fact, are more effective than service in government. Even though government is necessary, and it's good to become officials, and it's good that officials should be Neo-Confucians.

Well in this sequence, we're going to be spending a lot of time talking about particular texts. And we'll be reading texts with you and discussing them. And so I'm going to try to cut down the amount of video lecture you're seeing and turn, instead, to a discussion of texts.

But I should begin by giving you, first, some general ideas about Neo-Confucian philosophy, and also some sense of Neo-Confucianism as a social movement. As well as, of course, mentioning something about Cheng Yi’s ideas and Zhu Xi’s ideas.

Section 2: Core Neo-Confucian Philosophical Ideas

1. Core Neo-Confucian Philosophical Ideas

Now if you say that the Classics contain a system that we could infer by reading, as Wang Anshi did, you have to write a commentary to explain it. And the fact of the matter is that lots of people in the 11th century were writing commentaries. So that means that since their views were different from one another that if they wrote commentaries they were in fact saying that the meaning of the Classics depends upon my understanding.

And if we try to figure out what was the right way to do things on the basis of history, then we would be talking about institutions and whether the institutions were good or bad and the consequences they had. We wouldn't be talking necessarily about how people behaved as individuals in their own lives. And if we
looked at culture and if we said it's through cultural knowledge and learning and seeing the cultural
tradition that we know how to act today, we're really leaving things entirely open to individual subjectivity,
or so they thought.

The Neo-Confucians say we have an alternative. There is a real foundation for morality. That foundation is
part of the natural order of things. It's in the world. It's part of what are called tiandi wanwu, heaven and
earth and the 10,000 things. It's nature, what we would call nature itself. That world is a world we are part
of as biological beings. We are cultural beings, and we are biological beings.

If we can imagine that the world is an integrated order-- the natural world, the universe is an integrated
order-- then we as biological beings can also conceive of ourselves as integrated orders, just as much part
of the natural world as the sun and the moon and the plants. But humans uniquely in contrast to plants and
animals have been able to translate this consciousness of an orderly world, of orderly system, of the
coherence of things into social life. And that's what the sages did. And if the Classics are true, it's because
they represent the world and the words created by people who had realized their own internal nature as part
of an integrated universe, a coherent universe. That's in essence a Neo-Confucian message.

But there's more to it than that, and to talk about that I need to introduce two words. One is the word qi,
which you've heard of before, and the word li, which is translated variously as pattern, principle, or
coherence. Let me explain what we mean. Now recall that as we've talked about before that qi constitutes
everything, or everything is constituted by qi. The air we breathe is highly rarefied qi. A stone is qi as well,
highly dense qi. Qi is always in flux. We may not see the stone changing, but ultimately it does change. So
qi is moving.

Let's take an example. And I'll ask you to grant me three propositions. And we'll think of a tree. Well here
you have an example of a tree. And a tree has, you would grant me, a structure that is their roots, there's a
trunk, their branches, their twigs, their leaves. And from the roots to the leaves, everything is connected. It
has a structure. You've granted me that.

Now you could say that's true of everything in the world, couldn't you? Not just the tree. It's true of your
computer. It's true of the chair you're sitting on. It's generally true. Neo-Confucians, of course, want to say
it's also true of affairs and events and the way we behave towards others and human relationships, but we'll
get to that a bit later. So my first proposition was that everything has a structure.

My second proposition is that everything has a particular pattern or process of change. That is, if we look at
that tree again, we can see that the tree in spring is going to be different from the tree in summer, fall, and
winter. Over the course of a year, the tree changes in a regular and predictable fashion. And we can also say
that it changes during the course of a day, and it changes during the course of a lifetime. And that's true for
us as beings, as well. We grow, we mature, we die, we wake up in the morning, we sleep at night, and so
on. That's the second proposition I ask you to grant that things have a process of development.

There's a third aspect to this. Not a process, but a third aspect of this, which I want you to grant. That
everything has a function. A tree has functions that can be defined in terms of the ecosystem it's part of.
The tree could be used by somebody sitting under it as shade. It can be cut down for firewood. It could be
used to make baseball bats. And you know that you use hickory for a wooden baseball bat but not oak,
because oak will split. So different trees will have different functions.

So everything in the world-- everything-- has its function. Boats go on water. Carts go on land. They're
different functions. They both convey things, but they work differently. So that's the third thing you have to
grant. Now you shouldn't grant that third thing. You can grant the first two, but the third one in fact
involves us agreeing on what the function of something should be. Is the egg meant to become a chicken, or
is it meant to become part of an omelette? That's something that we as individuals must decide. And how
we decide is an important matter.
Well, let's go back now to our three propositions: structure, process, and function. What gives anything its structure, process, and function? Cheng Yi's answer to this question is its li. It's principle, it's pattern, it's coherence. The coherence of a thing is the integration of structure, process, and function. And to understand something is not just to look at it and describe it. It's to understand its li.

And what is human nature? Human nature is nothing but the li, the coherence of the self, of the body and of the mind. What is the Dao, The Way? The Way is nothing but the coherence of the universe itself.

So Cheng Yi has taken this term li, which is out there in the world. He says it's as real as real can be. And has said that this is what gives things their reality and coherence and their meaningfulness. And to understand, to learn, is to learn the coherence of things.

Now Cheng Yi doesn't really care too much about trees. But he is interested in human relationships. How humans behave relative to each other. And we might think about the relationship between a parent and child and how that develops over time. It has a structure. It has a development over time. And it has a function in holding the family together and holding society together.

And when the li of the parent-child relationship is understood, we call it filial piety, or so the Neo-Confucians would say. Which is not only how children should take care of their parents and respect their parents and obey their parents, but also involves the counterpart, which is how parents are going to act towards their children. And this is a relationship that evolves from infancy all the way through old age.

2. Some Implications

Human nature is the coherence of the self. We have this Li in us, and what do we as humans, what are we going to become? Do we become mere tools of another, servants of another, or should we in fact try to fully develop awareness of our own coherence, our own nature, and principle within us? The very principles that give us the possibility of integrated universe, and act according to those principles?

For if we can, then we can bring about a world that's a truly moral world by beginning from our own actions, and our own understanding.

The acorn contains, in some sense, all the Li of the oak. But it's not yet an oak. It has to be nurtured, it has to grow. Our human nature is, in a sense, the acorn. We have to expand our consciousness of it, it's awareness has to grow, our awareness of it has to grow. And to be aware of things outside of ourselves, to study the classics now, to study the histories, is in fact, to be conscious of what we already have.

From a new Neo-Confucian prospective, the hermeneutic circle is a good thing, because we already have all these Li within us. All these principles with us. In our nature, it's part of us. We just have to realize it.

Now, let's turn to some texts and examine this in a bit more detail.


Zhou Dunyi lived in the 11th century, and briefly taught the Cheng brothers. He is going to illustrate for us the point that I was just making, that the Neo-Confucians want to make a connection between the natural world-- heaven and earth, and natural processes-- and human morality. They want to give it a foundation.
And the way Zhou Dunyi does it, in this piece, is to pick up this diagram that came down to him, and explain it as something that moves from non-being-- you see that in the very circle at the top? Through the Supreme, or the Great Ultimate-- which Yin and Yang are operating-- to the Five Phases of Change, to the ways of male and female and procreation, down into the realm of Sagehood.

In fact, his text-- which we'll look at now-- explains a bit more-- although it's not always free of obscurity. Let's look at the text. So what I want to draw our attention to here is this notion that the Great Ultimate-- this term that he uses for something beyond which we cannot go-- that is what generates yin and yang. yin and yang, in turn, generates the Five Phases of Water, Wood, Fire, Metal, and Earth. The Five Phases, thus, he says, are one system of yin and yang and yin and yang constitute one Great Ultimate. And that itself is fundamentally the ultimate of non-being.

He goes on, using the Qian and Kun from the two first hexagrams-- the heaven, or male, and Kun, the female or earth hexagram from the Book of Change, to get the notion of procreation generation. The 10,000 things, the myriad things, produce and reproduce as he says.

And then, man comes into the picture. It is man alone, he says, who receives the material forces in their highest excellent. Man alone. Man who is most intelligent. Physical form, his spirit, moral principles of his own human nature are aroused and react to the external, and engaged in activity. And when they engage in activity, good and evil are distinguished.

And what is the best man of all? The best human of all? The sage. He settles all of these affairs through the principle of the Mean, correctness, humanity, and righteousness. This is a way of the sage, Zhou Dunyi says. This superior man cultivates these moral qualities and enjoys good fortune, and so on.

But all of this is part of this one system. And Zhou Dunyi is tracing it back to the Book of Change. A system in which the human and the moral is grounded in nature itself. It has a real foundation.

Now, Zhou Dunyi has something else to say. And a book that he writes-- this one chapter, a very famous chapter, from comprehending the Book of Change, it's called. And actually, you may recall that we already saw exactly this passage in calligraphy by Dong Qichang when we were talking about Confucius.

And Zhou Dunyi is, of course, talking about how to be a sage. How to be a Confucius yourself. And he's asked, in a dialogue that he makes up,

Sheng ke xue hu? Yue: Ke.

"Can one become a sage through learning?" "Yes." "Is there any essential way?" "Yes."

The idea, then, that you can become a sage through learning, that you don't have to be born one, that it's not a matter of being a king, or receiving Heaven's mandate, but one can be a sage through learning, is one of the central ideas of Neo-Confucianism.

4. Zhang Zai’s Western Inscription

We wanted to talk about Zhang Zai's Western Inscription, and this is, it's called Ximing, right?

Ximing.

Ximing. From this book called "Correcting Youthful Ignorance."
Zhengmeng.

Zhengmeng. OK. And so I have a claim to make. It seems to me that these first 2 paragraphs, first 2 sentences, in fact, that what he's doing by saying, "Heaven is my father, Earth is my mother," is to say, well, I am the product of the natural world, heaven and earth. And because I am, and then second paragraph, all of us who are born of heaven and earth, all of us who are part of the natural world biologically, are all equal. We're all brothers and sisters.

Well, this is a pretty radical statement -- to say we're all equal. Because if we're all equal, then do we need to have government? Do we need to have families? Do we need to have a society?

Or do you want to say, do you need a social order?

Yeah. Sure. And it seems to me that what he's saying in the third paragraph is -- well, no, I'm not saying that we don't need a social order. I'm not saying we don't need politics, the ruler. Yes, there is a ruler, but I can accept him as my elder brother. There are parents, there are the aged. I can accept that, too. Sages and worthies, I might have a way of defining what makes some people better than others. And I recognize that people who need help.

So the fact that he's used this sort of family metaphor, based on the notion of heaven and earth, to recognize responsibilities and to link themselves to the social order. But in fact, there's a tension between the equality and egalitarianism of the first two sentences with this third paragraph. That's what I think.

Well, I think you're right in your explanation of the first two paragraphs, but I actually don't see such a strong tension between the first part and the third paragraph. I think in a different way. And my understanding is that in the first two paragraphs, Zhang Zai established certain philosophical foundation, and then drawing on these 2 claims about heaven and earth and about all people being my brothers and sisters. And he made a claim here that, given this, then in the real world, where we have a lot of different social roles and social hierarchies, we should, therefore, treat the rulers, the ministers, and different groups of people in a more caring way, or see them as fundamentally tied to each other.

And tied to us.

Tied to us, as well. So I actually see a continuity.

And where I want to see tension.

Yes.

And sort of a rupture when Zhang Zai tried to hold a notion of equality and universality on one hand, and a recognition of a social order and political order which is differentiated on the other hand. Well, what are we going to do?

Perhaps we can ask our students or viewers to continue reading the following passages. And decide what they think Zhang Zai was talking about.

Good. Let's do that.

5. Cheng Hao to Zhang Zai
Let's take a look at a very important letter that Cheng Hao writes, or one that is frequently read thereafter, where he writes to his cousin Zhang Zai. Now, Zhang Zai has a problem, and I thought, Wen, I'd ask you what you think Zhang Zai's problem is?

So, it seems that Zhang Zai is bothered by the fact that it's hard for him to avoid any influence of the external things.

True, but why is that a problem? Is it just simply that he wants to reach this state where he feels totally settled internally, and fully calm? Is that his goal? Seems to me that what he's looking for, at least according to Cheng Hao, that what he's looking for is that permanent-- not a permanent state but to reach a state of total calmness, total settledness, and he can't reach it, and he's bothered by the fact he can't reach it, and he's blaming it on external things. So what's wrong with that? Why would Cheng Hao object to that?

I think, for Cheng Hao, if the goal is to exclude influence of external things, then that will lead to a Buddhist position--

Of cutting oneself--

Of cutting oneself off from the external world.

So in that case then, Cheng Hao has to come up with a solution to this problem and say, somehow you can be interactive with external things--

While having maintained--

A certain calmness, internal stability.

Yes, but how would that happen--

How would that happen? Right. Well, it seems to me that one way he's going to talk about it is down here in the second paragraph, when he talks about the constancy of heaven and earth, is that their mind is in all things, and yet they have no mind of their own. So taking again, taking heaven and earth as a model for humans. But how do you do that?

Look at the second sentence. One way of doing that is to make sure that your emotional responses are in accord with all kinds of external things.

So, in the sense that heaven and earth have no biases, right? And if you could have no biases, you just respond to things as they come.

Yes.

Aha. Well, so that's a kind of a neo-Confucian solution. It's not really explained, but the idea is certainly there, that to be a sage, to reach a sort of settled state, to be confident and calm, and yet to be responding to things, is the goal.

Yes.

Not to cut oneself off from the world.

Yes, and that's hard.
That's hard, but that's what learning is all about. Let's move on, and let's look at what Cheng Yi has to say.

6. Cheng Yi on Cheng Hao

The Cheng brothers-- Cheng Hao, the oldest, and Cheng Yi-- set the real foundation for Neo-Confucian philosophy. They had studied briefly with Zhou Dunyi. Their cousin was Zhang Zai. They lived in Luoyang, a center of conservative opposition to Wang Anshi's new policies. Known to Sima Guang, for example.

Cheng Yi’s brother Cheng Hao dies in 1085. And Cheng Yi commemorates him in the most extraordinary fashion. And here we see part of the funerary inscription that Cheng Yi wrote for his brother. And he makes the following claim-- that after the Duke of Zhou died-- remember that would be early in the beginning of the Zhou dynasty-- the way of the sages was no longer practiced. But when Mencius died-- when Mencius died the learning of the sages was no longer transmitted.

Now as you read this, you'll see that Cheng Yi is making a distinction between the way of this sages as something that government does, and the learning of the sages, something that Confucians do-- true Confucians. But now whether the learning of the sages survives or not does not depend on government, because government could still be on the right track and the learning of the sages might not be transmitted. When there were no true Confucians, he says-- when there were no true Confucians everyone was lost and did not know where to go. In other words, when people do not understand the learning of the sages, they were lost. And that's the claim he makes for his brother.

The gentleman, referring to his brother, was born 1400 years later-- 1400 years after Mencius. And yet he apprehended that learning that had not been transmitted through history in the classics. He discovered-- rediscovered if you will-- the way of learning. That claim that they are the first in history since Mencius to understand the right way of learning is the revolutionary claim they make. For it expunges from history-- it rejects and negates the previous 1400 years of thought.

7. Cheng Yi on Principle (Li)

You know, one of the things I've always found most fascinating about Cheng Yi is his sense of how different antiquity was. At various points, he says things like the ancients were larger than we were, taller, bigger. Their clothes wouldn't fit us anymore.

But here, it seems to me he's saying something even more interesting. When he looks and says for the ancients, for the ancients, learning was easy. What made it easy? They could go to school. Well, what did they learn in school?

Well, "there were decorations to nurture their sight, sounds to nurture their hearing, majestic ceremonies to nurture their four limbs, song and dance to nurture their circulation." All these things that we would call culture were in fact forming them. And that's why learning was easy, because they were just being formed by their surroundings.

But it seems Master Cheng posed a question here. But today we don't have that surroundings in the environment anymore. And these are all lost.

And what then? So then at that point, it's moral principals have to nurture our lives. But what this makes is that there's really a profound difference between antiquity and the present. And in the present, we have to think. And learning's hard. We can't just rely on our environment to form us.
Well, so I got really interested in this problem of this notion that there are principles with which to nurture our mind. And so I have some more quotes that deal with this. So this is my first one. So people fear they become entangled by affairs and they won't be able to think well. Why? Because, he says, they haven't apprehended the essentials.

Well, what does that mean? The essentials? The essentials lie in clarifying the good. Well, what does that mean? You have to realize the principles in things.

And we've been talking about that in the lecture, about principles being in things and having to see that. Because then, he said, well, if you can fully realize the principles in things, then you can clarify the good. So the good is going to be dependent on that. And if you can fully realize the principle of a thing, then gradually-- this is the part that I really like but seems to me very strange-- it will be "to fully reach all things under heaven. They are a single principle."

This sounds pretty bizarre to me.

Why?

So look at this quote. "For every thing there is a principle, you must fully realize its principle."

OK.

And then we can see there's in many different realms of life, we have to realize its principle. But then how could it be true that on one hand you have so many different things for which you need to realize their principles, but on the other hand, every principles are actually just one single principle?

Let's go and see what else he has. Well, here we go. Are we to only fully realize a single thing and seeing this one thing then we see the many principles?

This troubles me. How could it be possible?

Right. So here he says, no, in fact you have to seek everything, right?

Yeah.

One item today, one item tomorrow, as he says down here, right?

Yeah.

One cumulative practice. Then, as if released, there will be a point where all is coherently connected.

How could all the principles be connected?

How can all this be true, right?

Yeah.

So it seems to me that there are two ways of thinking about this. One is sort of the idea of a web, that everything in the universe is somehow connected to each other. They're all generated out of yin and yang, the five phases, things like this. And so everything is somehow connected to each other in some way. From any one point, you can get to every other point through this web and through this network.
But it seems to me there's another possibility, which is really, really very intriguing. And it has to do with how the mind works. Let's suppose for a moment that what principle means is to see how something is unified, integrated, coherent, how its parts go together. And we don't have a lot of quotes here on this, but the Chens are very interested in the notion of unity. So let's suppose, then, that when you are looking at the world, you're thinking in terms of how do these things fit together.

Yes.

And so the quality of fitting together, what we might call coherence, is the nature of principle itself.

OK.

And I'll give you two examples. When you figure out a math problem, what happens when you figure it out? What does your mind tell you?

That all the puzzles disappear and it seems every part of the problem set fit together.

OK. How about if you read a poem and you figure out the poem?

I start to realize what it means to tell me. And then I would have some similar feelings that every part seems to be fitting.

So in both cases-- clearly a poem is not a math problem. They're different. And each has its own principle. But its principle is the same principle, in the sense that in each case we've had this moment of experiencing the coherence of the object.

Or our own mind.

And our own mind, because it's in our minds.

Yes.

And Zhu Xi at one point says that the reason why we can see coherence in the world is because it's in our own minds to begin with.

Fascinating.

Yeah. So well, we'll go on now. And I think you'll learn something about Zhu Xi. You'll learn something more about what the neo-Confucians are up to. And we can see how this makes sense.

**Section 3: Zhu Xi’s Views of the Mind, the Individual, Politics and the Way**

1. **Zhu Xi’s Views of the Mind, the Individual, Politics and the Way**

When we come to Zhu Xi in the 12th century-- who is not a student directly of the Cheng's but knew people who had been-- Zhu Xi looks at the world and looks at the self and begins to make an argument about the
mind as having, in some sense, two kinds of consciousness available to it. Consciousness of one's physical body, of one's being, and consciousness of moral principles within the mind. Moral principle as sort of the unity of moral principle. Consciousness of the physical body, our sensory perception and engagement with the world, very often leads to selfish desire as we think about what we want, what I want, versus what might be good if everybody was thought of together.

But the other kind of consciousness, moral consciousness, the consciousness of what he calls heavenly principle, that consciousness is very subtle. It's hard for the mind to grasp, but grasp it we must, cultivate it we must, if we are to overcome the constant battle for selfishness.

So let me give you an example of what this might mean. Suppose you've been out running, playing. It's been a hot day. You're sweating. You've come into a room, and there's an elaborate set of food and drink set on the table. No one is in the room, but you know the room was prepared for the elders of your family or a group of friends or a group of people to come and enjoy but not for you. But you're very, very thirsty. And at that moment, you start to salivate. Your body instinctively reacts. You're thirsty. You're hungry. You want to eat.

What do you do? Your mind, Zhu Xi would say-- or I think he would say, since this is my example-- your mind is aware of your physical desires, which happened instinctively, no matter what. But you might also pause and reflect and say, but, at the same time, I know that to take this food, to break this banquet that's been planned, to disturb the ritual that is about to happen is wrong. And you desist. Your mind's awareness of moral principles, of heavenly principle, of the unity and coherence of principle has won out over selfish desire.

Now, this is an important point for Zhu Xi. He talks about it in the preface to one of his commentary on one of the Confucian classics or one of the things he's making a classic.

2. Zhu Xi’s Preface to His Commentary on the Doctrine of the Mean

One of the most important texts by Zhu Xi is his preface to his commentary on the Doctrine of the Mean, one of the Four Books. And it begins with the introduction of a number of very terms. One is the idea of learning of the Way. That this book was meant to ensure that the transmission of learning of the Way-- Daoxue in Chinese-- would not be lost. And further, that there was a transmission of the tradition of the Way-- the Daotong. When the divine sages of antiquity, Zhu Xi says, continue the work of heaven and established the ultimate standard.

So the claims that he's making is that there's a way of learning that had to be transmitted. But also that there's a transmission of the tradition of the Way-- the Daotong-- in which the sages continue the work of heaven. And thus, in some sense, nature's work was taken over by man-- by humans in the person of the sages.

And he goes on to make the following argument. That there was one phrase that comes from the classics, hold fast to mean, which is the basis of it all. The basis of the whole Confucian tradition. The fundamental meaning of Confucianism, if you will. For then he goes on, hold fast the mean would be elaborated into four sentences. The mind of-- the human mind is precarious. The moral mind is subtle. Have refined discrimination and singleness, thus to hold fast the mean. So that, in fact those first three lines are explaining what thus to hold fast the mean is.

And that the great sage emperor Shun gave this to you, just as the great sage emperor Yao-- and remember we've talked about him in a module on origin stories-- gave Shun his successor, the line hold fast the mean. What Zhu Xi does with this, however, goes far beyond these four sentences.
But Yu Wen-- and I think you were telling me before that, there are some problems with these four sentences, at least for later scholars.

Indeed, so for Zhu Xi, he thinks this four sentences, this message is actually real in the sense that it's from the antiquity. But later for many Qing scholars, this is not the case. And they also demonstrated that actually, these four sentences were from some books that were written much, much later.

I see. But for Zhu Xi, they're absolutely central. In fact they are the core message of the Confucian tradition. And, not only the core message of the Confucian tradition, but everything really is an elaboration on that.

And we see that in this paragraph, where he talks about the fact that the mind-- the mind as the pure intelligence of consciousness is one and only one. True enough, he says. Zhu Xi makes this distinction between the human mind, and the moral mind-- The renxin and the daoxin. But what's this distinction about? We have one mind, but somehow there are two sources of consciousness feeding into it. What is the human mind?

Human mind-- so first the human mind is something that everyone has. It is based on the material force, which is qi. And it is our desire--

Is it powerful? Can it overpower us? Can it have effects on us?

Yes. Definitely, yeah.

What's an example? Can you give me an example of that?

For instance, when I see great food and I feel desire of having it.

You are hungry. Or you listen to music.

I listen to music I feel touched and moved.

Or you look at art.

I look at art, I feel attracted.

Oh, OK. So this is all something that happens more or less spontaneously.

Yes.

But Zhu Xi offers us an alternative, right? Although there in the square inch of the heart, we also have access to what he calls the moral mind.

Yes.

And that mortal mind-- these two minds, as he says, are mixed in the square inch of the heart.

Yes.

If we do not know how to manage them, what's precarious will become ever more precarious, and what is subtle will become ever more subtle.
What is the human mind that is so subtle? It seems to me that what he's trying to get at is, we have the ability to become conscious of what he's calling tianli-- Heaven's Principle, or Heavenly Coherence, or the Unity of all Things, right?

Yes.

And we want that to overcome what he calls the selfishness of human desires.

Yes.

If we can make that-- overcome-- then we'll always find the right way. So the assumption here must be that we have the capability of becoming conscious of Heaven's Principle of what's right. It's within us.

It's in us, but it doesn't mean that without effort we can acquire it.

So it's, we have to cultivate ourselves.

Yes.

And that gives us the whole neo-Confucian program of learning.

But you know when you read this-- and read this whole piece, and we'll leave it up to you to read-- think about what Zhu Xi is worrying about. He's worrying about a world in which things are not transmitted, where they come apart, where the truth is lost, the Way is lost. And he's placing himself at a moment in history, when the Cheng brothers and Zhou Dunyi, they've rediscovered the right Way. And he's trying to make sure it's preserved. And yet even after the Cheng brothers die, their disciples go off in the wrong direction. So Zhu Xi is trying to make this point that in this book, the Doctrine of the Mean, we're going to find an understanding of the right Way-- of Daoxue, of the learning the Way, but also the very possibility of having authority based on the Dao and the transmission of the Dao.

Yes.

Good. Well, we'll leave it up to our colleagues out there.

And the viewers.

The viewers look at this and judge for themselves.

OK.

3. The Individual and Politics

But there are some other implications to this. If knowing what is right depends upon me knowing it in the first place, then this is not a matter of relying on law. It is not a matter of relying on government.

And this brings me to a point that I think is very important that often is misunderstood. We suppose that Confucians generally knew Confucians, of course, because they're Confucians. They say their followers are Confucius and Mencius. Think in terms of government. They think government has the responsibility to tell people about how to act, and they want to become officials so they can tell people how to act.
I think this is, in fact, not the case. Government is important. The example, the ruler, the emperor sets is important, but, ultimately, individuals must learn how to behave, and they have the potential within them to know how to behave, to know what's right, and that doesn't depend on anyone else except them.

Zhu Xi talks about learning at one point, and he quotes a line from Confucius in the Analects, and he says, the important thing about learning is not to learn for the sake of others by which it means to please others. Learning should be learning for oneself. Learning for oneself. It's a sentiment, I think, that many today would still agree with.

Now, he also brings up another idea that has great political implications, and this is one that his followers in particular pay attention to. And that is the notion that the people who have understood the true way, who have understood how to learn, who have understood the nature of morality, the grounds of morality, who have understood how the mind works and the mind's ability to become conscious of principle, of our own natures, conscious of its own coherence, that those people have authority in the world.

And he offers the idea of what is called daotong, the transmission of knowledge or authority to pronounce upon the dao, the way. And that is given not to rulers, but to scholars. It doesn't mean rulers couldn't have it if they cultivated themselves and followed the learning of the way. But the fact is that they don't.

And Zhu Xi does not think that any ruler since antiquity, since the Zhou Dynasty, has had true understanding of morality or acted out of a moral mind. But Confucius did. And Mencius did. And Cheng Yi and his brother Cheng Hao did. And Zhou Dunyi did. And Zhu Xi's students are sure Zhu Xi did.

This notion, then, that the transmission of The Way is superior to the continuity of government is an extraordinary and revolutionary notion. But we find people saying it, which is not to deny the importance of government or the reality of government, it's to say that authority over how government should act and what government should do should reside with people who have true understanding of The Way.

Section 4: Neo-Confucianism as a Social Movement

Neo-Confucianism was a way of learning, a philosophy of learning, in a way, and a philosophy of the self and a philosophy of the natural world. But it was also-- in some sense, we could refer to it as a set of ideas, a position that somebody could take. But it could also be an identity. That is, for people who decided to pursue this seriously, could begin to see themselves as people who had taken on a new set of ideas and a new set of practices. And when those people join together, it can become a social movement.

And, in large part thanks to Zhu Xi, Neo-Confucianism becomes a social movement in the 12th century of people who have made this their identity, as scholars, as literati. It is very much a literati movement, and that's important to keep in mind.

It involves a social program. It creates institutions or adopts institutional forms and promotes them, that it believes, or that Neo-Confucians believe, will help both promote Neo-Confucianism and give people who become, who, in some sense, convert to the Neo-Confucian position a chance to work together, to meet together, but also to do good for others.

So we see the rise of the private academy. In the Northern Song in the 11th century, schools were almost entirely state schools. In the Southern Song in the 12th, 13th century, we see the appearance of private academies, privately funded schools that prepare people for learning and for the examinations.
Neo-Confucians adopt the idea of private academies, but not so much for examination learning, but to promote their way of learning, to do what they call jiangxue, discoursing on learning, where teachers and students talk together about Neo-Confucian ideas, Neo-Confucian interpretations of the classics, Neo-Confucian views of history, Neo-Confucian views of family rituals, Neo-Confucian views of how the local community should guide itself.

They start to build shrines to Neo-Confucian masters. Out in the world, the Buddhists have shrines. The Daoist have shrines. There are shrines to local gods. Neo-Confucians build shrines to earlier Neo-Confucians and offer them sacrifices and worship them, in some sense. They create community covenants where fellow people who share the faith, people who call themselves sometimes tongzhi, people who have a common will can make agreements to monitor each other and their behavior, to try to bring about a moral society through their own actions.

And interestingly, these community covenants cross family boundaries. They include people from different families, breaking away from the notion that the relationship is between government and family. They now have interposed another level-- community-- community guided by local people.

They encouraged the building of charitable granaries where local wealthy people will, in fact, put in money to create relief granaries so farmers don't have to go to the government to borrow money, to borrow grain in spring for spring planting. They set up new rituals for the family.

In all of these ways, Neo-Confucians are positioning their institutions between, on one hand, government institutions and government rules and, the other hand, local religious rules, particularly Buddhist ones. Because Buddhists, after all, also had institutions and schools and community covenants and community associations and charitable practices.

Neo-Confucianism is also an intellectual movement with an intellectual program. It offers a new vocabulary. We've been talking about the word li, principle. But they start to have various definitions of philosophical terms which remain fairly constant in which they understand what they mean, that they introduce the notion of a philosophical vocabulary, a shared philosophical vocabulary. And books get written showing what these terms mean and citing various texts.

They have shared ways of teaching. I've talked about discoursing on learning, the back and forth between teacher and student often recorded in records of conversations, sometimes in the vernacular, in fact. They have sets of texts that they particular favor and that they compile, so we have a great collection of teachings by Neo-Confucian masters put together the 12th century by Zhu Xi and one of his colleagues, Lu Zuqian, called Reflections on Things at Hand, or in Chinese, Jinsi Lu, which is, in fact, a collection mainly of the oral teachings of Cheng Yi divided up into new categories. And above all, they defined the goal of learning as sagehood, being a sage oneself.

One result of Neo-Confucian teaching is a redefinition of the significance of the classics. Up until this point, the classics, by and large, referred to what are called the Five Classics, the text of antiquity. Neo-Confucians create a set of texts that come to be known as the Four Books. They take two chapters out of one of the classics called the Liji, the Record of Rites, a chapter called The Great Learning, the Daxue, and a chapter called The Doctrine of the Mean, usually, Zhongyong, and they say, these books, together with the Mencius and the Analects of Confucius, constitute the Four Books. And the way you should study them is you begin with The Great Learning, and you end with The Doctrine of the Mean.

What makes these four books so special? Why are they so crucial? More important than the Five Classics, in fact. It's because they talk about the individual and individual life, the way in which an individual acts in the world rather than the state.
Section 5: The Transformation of Neo-Confucianism in the Ming – Wang Yangming

1. The Transformation of Neo-Confucianism in the Ming: Wang Yangming

In Zhu Xi's commentaries on the Four Books, he pays particular importance to the great learning and one particular passage in the great learning, which, following Cheng Yi, he understands to mean the thorough fathoming, coming to full consciousness, of li, of principal coherence. Now this term in Chinese is called gewu. It's understood by Zhu Xi to mean something like the investigation of things, as it's commonly translated.

It's not clear that this is what the original text meant. But this is how the Neo-confucians have used it. And we are in fact looking at the way in which Zhu Xi understands that text and seeing the various steps and relationships that lead from the individual's investigation of things to attain knowledge and extend their knowledge, all the way to bringing peace to the world, to ordering the country and bringing peace to the world.

Zhu Xi's understanding is one that focuses we might say on the intellectual side of life, that treats the process of learning as cumulative, that although it involves quiet self-reflection, sometimes quiet sitting as he put it, it is still a cumulative process that does not involve one big sudden enlightenment. There's no one final goal that's a breakthrough and attained. Rather it's a series of small incremental steps that expands the universe of your knowledge, your horizons, your understanding, expands your horizons.

Now after Zhu Xi died, his followers promote his teachings. And they start to spread through the literati community, so that in the 13th century the government begins to recognize their authority. And in 1315, some 40 years after the Mongols have conquered the Song, the examinations are restored. And with the restoration of the examinations, they make a decision that the first part of exams will test the Four Books with Zhu Xi's commentaries. And that's why from that point forward literate people who prepare for the exams, in other words, the literati elite of China, all know the Four Books of Zhu Xi's ideas.

But the fact that they read them didn't mean they had to believe them. And it didn't mean they understand them in the way that Zhu Xi understood them necessarily, although Zhu Xi tried his best to make his understanding clear. And it's in the Ming Dynasty in the late 15th and early 16th century that a shift starts to take place among a certain number of Neo-confucians who wants to go back and emphasize the individuality and the personalness, the personal experience, of understanding, of using the mind to understand coherence, to understand principle, and to reach moral conclusions. And the person who is most famous for that is Wang Yangming.

Wang Yangming, also from the southeast, in this case from northern Zhejiang province, takes that notion of investigating things that Zhu Xi had and said, no. That misses the point. You shouldn't spend your time and your mind on looking at things out there.

The source of moral action is in you. What you need to be doing is rectifying the ideas that come up in your mind about how you're going to respond to things out there in the world. The problem is with you, not with things. What need to be rectified are your thoughts before you can act on the world.

Wang Yangming brings up the notion that everyone possesses the innate ability to know what is good. After all, he says, it's not that human nature is the coherence of the mind. The mind in operation is coherence itself.
As long as you can block out selfish desire and as long as you can recognize and believe or remain committed to the idea that you are one or that you form one body with heaven and earth and the 10,000 things, there's a fundamental unity, in other words, to all of creation, which you are part of. As long as you can recognize that and keep selfish desire at bay, your mind will instinctively know what is good. And then the problem simply is one of acting.

But you can't know, he says, and not act. You can't act without knowing. If you think that you can know what's good, but then you say I can't do it, then you actually don't know it. Just like you can't know the taste of food until you eat it, you can't know what is moral, you can't know what is right, until you are doing it. So the unity of knowledge and action is just as important as having the sense or making the sense operate of your innate ability to know what is good in any situation.

Now the later Wang Yangming school will include people who take one of Wang Yangming's dictums called the Four Axioms-- and we'll treat that in a minute when we discuss some of his texts-- and it leads them to the conclusion that there is no good and no evil at all, that good and evil are not real. They're relative judgments made by people, and that in fact we are totally free to pronounce upon the world as we see fit.

Others disagree sharply. There's great division that emerges within Neoconfucianism, not so much between Wang Yangming and Zhu Xi, although that's part of it, but between Wang Yangming's notion that all you have to do is activate your innate ability to know what's good and the need to be aware and pay attention to the things outside to gain positive knowledge about the things outside of you.

We often talk in China, in Chinese studies, about Neo-confucianism as an orthodox. And to the degree that Neo-confucianism is part of the examination system, that Zhu Xi's commentaries continue in the examination system, Neo-confucianism is a state orthodoxy. But when we look at late Ming, we find that those same examinations where people read Zhu Xi's commentaries include quotes that Wang Yangming favors, where he says Zhu Xi got it wrong and people are writing essays that subscribe to Wang Yangming's ideas.

It strikes me that what we have in the Chinese case is multiple claims to orthodoxy. Wang Yangming is sure that his interpretations are right. Zhu Xi was sure that his interpretations are right. Other people have their claims. And in fact, they all agree that there should be an orthodox, but there is pluralism in practice.

### 2. Wang Yangming’s Four Axioms

We've been talking about Wang Yangming. And I mentioned that he had this teaching called The Four Axioms. And the way it happened was that he was at this place called Tianquan Bridge. And he's talking with his two leading disciples, Wang Ji and Qian Dehong. And he gives four statements. And Wang Yangming's two leading disciples read these statements very differently.

But let's go and look at what these so-called Four Axioms are. The first, it's a series of claims. "Having no good and no evil is mind-in-itself." So remember, Wang Yangming is really shifting attention from the notion of human nature to the notion of the mind working, to the working mind, the operating mind, that when freed of selfish desire can somehow see instinctively what's good.

Now, we have two translations here. The first in larger type is I think a more interesting one. The second you'll find in Sources of Chinese tradition.
And the first claim seems to be that the original state of the mind-- in the original state of the mind, there's neither good nor evil. So where does good and evil come from? And there, having good and evil is the activity of the will. It's only when you start to have intentionality and focus on something that you're making choices. And in those choices, the possibility for good and evil emerges. But it's not inherent in the mind-in-itself.

Then we go to the Third Axiom, and we see innate knowing is knowing that good and evil in the activity of the will. So that's sort of in brackets, that's what we call an interpolation. This is what we think Wang Yangming meant.

But he has this notion of innate knowing, which sometimes I've called innately knowing the good or the innate ability to know the good. Chinese is liangzhi. And what does it mean to know?

Well, you said before that this notion of li, which Wang Yangming brings up in some ways, this notion of li is that it's in the mind. In fact, this is exactly what Wang Yangming says. Li is in the mind. Li is the mind. Li is the mind working.

So there's no distinction actually between li and mind.

No. Right. And for the mind to know instinctively, to know innately, is really to know what is good and what is bad in the activity of the will, in a sense in your own motivations, in your own purposes, that that's the one thing you can know for certain. What other people mean, what's in their hearts, hard to say. But I can always know, he says, what's in my heart and what's in my will, what I intend. And that again, if we think back to what we were talking before about Zhu Xi talking about the renxin and the daoxin, the human mind and the mind of the way in each one of us, begins to remind me a little bit of that as well.

And then the last part is the conclusion. He says, well, since you can know what's in your own will, in your own heart, and what you're intending, what does it mean to do good, to rectify actions?

So it seems if we compare this last message with Cheng brothers' claim, then what Cheng brothers mean by realizing the principle of things becomes rectification of actions here.

Yeah. I think that's right. And in fact, if you look at the old translation, which is trying to be close to the Chinese and consistent, it's the investigation of things, which is exactly what the Chens mean by fully realizing the principles--

The principles of things.


And here it becomes to do good and to remove evil.

Remove evil by--

Rectifying--

Your own actions.

--one's actions.
Because you have already been able to see what's coming up in your mind. And thus performing good and getting rid of evil is what it means in a sense to rectify actions. So it's all really, really self-centered, it seems to me.

Yes.

Well, in any case, the upshot of this is that Wang Ji reads this and says, aha. Having no good and no evil in the mind-in-itself. So there is no good and evil. There's no good and evil anywhere. There's just the mind working. And good and evil are totally irrelevant.

Yes.

And the other disciple says, whoa. Stop. You can't say that. If you say that, you're going to let people loose. They'll go everywhere.

Yes.

And so he says-- this is the other disciple, Qian Dehong says, no, no. It has to be gradual. It has to be gradual. You have to start with getting rid of evil, performing the good. And gradually you can get to the point where you realize that the mind-in-itself has neither good nor evil.

And then Wang Yangming looks at them. And you know what he says? They say, master, who's right? Who's right? You know what he says? Would you like to guess?

I think he acknowledged both.

Exactly. That's what he does. He says, well, you're both right. Work it out. That's leaving us with that conundrum.

Yes.

But it does make me think that Wang Yangming is really still very much part a part of the Neo-confucian tradition.