8 Later Transformations of Confucianism

In this chapter

This chapter picks up at the end of the historical survey of early Confucianism presented in chapter 2, telling the story of Confucianism in medieval and late imperial China (roughly third through nineteenth century). Its major focus is on a Confucian reform movement that emerged during the Song period (960–1279), which culminated in the grand Neo-Confucian synthesis formulated by Zhu Xi (1130–1200). This version of Confucianism became the official orthodoxy in late imperial China, a position it occupied until the early twentieth century, although there were other voices and alternative perspectives that challenged its preeminence.

Main topics

- Character and role of Confucianism during the medieval period.
- Reformation of the Confucian tradition by leading Neo-Confucian thinkers of the Song era.
- Zhu Xi's life and his creation of a comprehensive Neo-Confucian synthesis.
- Rewriting of earlier Confucian history.
- Formation of a new canon.
- Zhu Xi's articulation of a new program of Confucian learning and practice.
- The official examination system and its role in the perpetuation of Neo-Confucian dominance.
- Challenges to the hegemony of Zhu Xi's version of Neo-Confucianism.
- Impact of Confucian mores on the status of women in traditional Chinese society.

Confucianism during the Medieval Period

Conversional accounts of Confucian history typically gloss over the medieval period, largely dismissing it as a period of protracted decline, uncomfortably sandwiched between the purported glories of classical Confucianism—represented by Confucius and Mengzi—and the Neo-Confucian tradition that enjoyed centuries of institutional and intellectual dominance during the late imperial period. There is perhaps an element of truth in such summary evaluations, as there was a lessening or refocusing of Confucian influence on the various Chinese states and societies that rose and fell during the period of disunion (approx. third through sixth century). Traditional scholarship has argued that the usefulness and attractiveness of Confucianism as a state ideology noticeably declined during this era, amidst a lack of strong and stable imperial rule. That was especially the case in the North, which was predominantly ruled by non-Chinese dynasties that had fewer vested interests in upholding Confucian orthodoxy. The rulers of such dynasties were more prone to look elsewhere for the ideological underpinnings of their rule and were open to using alternative sources of political legitimacy, including Daoism and Buddhism. In reality, governments both in the North and the South continued to use Confucianism to justify their rule, and Confucianism was a core element of elite ideology and ritual practice. What was new during this period was that the various states and their elites became increasingly open to adopting other forms of legitimization as well.

Even though the medieval period was marked by the ascendancy of Buddhism and Daoism, Confucianism continued to play vital role in Chinese life—especially during the Tang period—and its exclusion from the discussion of this important historical epoch is historically unwarranted. A summary disregard of Confucianism in the study of medieval culture and society negatively impacts our understanding of some of the most interesting patterns of intellectual syncretism and religious pluralism that were ever to take shape in China (or the rest of the world, for that matter). Furthermore, by denigrating medieval Confucianism we are basically buying into questionable historical stereotypes, especially the selective retelling of history promoted by the Neo-Confucian tradition. As we will see below, Neo-Confucians elevated the status of their tradition and bolstered its legitimacy by creating a quasi-historical narrative of Confucian decline after the time of Mengzi. From their perspective, there was a tragic loss of orthodox Confucian learning, a protracted period of doctrinal confusion and lack of clear moral vision, until the true way was rediscovered by the great Neo-Confucian thinkers of the Song era.

Pertinent examples of the continued influence of the Confucian classics and the ideas presented in them come from the well-known Recondite Leaning (Xuanxue*;* sometimes also rendered as "mysterious learning," in the sense of "study of mysteries") movement, which was in vogue within elite intellectual and social circles, especially in the South, during the period of disunion. Although the Recondite Leaning movement is usually characterized as Daoist

in orientation—and it is therefore often referred to as Neo-Daoism—the study and reflection on the Confucian classics were major preoccupations among its leading figures. Within the ecumenical milieu prevalent at the time, thinkers such as the brilliant philosopher Wang Bi (226–249) creatively engaged Confucian as well as Daoist concepts and ideas, thereby establishing new philosophical paradigms and putting forward innovative ways of framing issues of ultimate purport. They introduced imaginative ways of looking at the Confucian heritage, thereby expanding its contours and bringing it into dialogue with other intellectual traditions, most notably Daoism.

Wang Bi and other thinkers associated with the Recondite Learning movement were also influential in the formulation or promotion of a distinctive philosophical vocabulary that had lasting influence on the subsequent development of theoretical discourses within Confucianism and Daoism. Examples of that include the concepts of "principle" (*li*) and "non-being" (*wu*), as well as the dichotomy of essence and function (*ti/yong*). This influence also extended to Buddhism, which by that time entered the intellectual scene and become an integral part of the constellation of philosophical systems and religious teachings that grew during the period of disunity. Such ecumenical framework fostered close interactions among diverse intellectual and religious traditions. Confucianism was very much a part of that multifaceted and ecumenical mix, even if that meant ceding some of the dominant position it came to enjoy during the Han era.

The importance of Confucianism grew markedly during the Tang dynasty, following the reunification of China and the establishment of a strong centralized state. The imperial state actively promoted classical scholarship and drew extensively on the ideological resources provided by the Confucian tradition, which legitimized its reign and helped consolidate the intricate structures of dynastic rule. The knowledge and skills of scholars trained in the Confucian canon proved to be indispensible to the Tang rulers in their organization of the government and the running of its institutions. Confucian teachings also provided key tools for the sanctioning of state power and royal prerogatives. Because of that, the imperial administration was a generous sponsor of canonical scholarship, most of which took place at official institutes and agencies in the capital.

One of the primary concerns of official Confucian scholarship was to provide authoritative and standardized editions of the canon, which were distributed throughout the empire. Confucian scholars also produced extensive commentaries on canonical texts, often accompanied with detailed sub-commentaries. While official scholarship tended to interpret the classics in terms of the perceived priorities and needs of the ruling dynasty, there was a tacit understanding that the canon was open to multiple interpretations that took into account changing historical predicaments. Accordingly, canonical exegesis was a cumulative scholastic enterprise that involved successive generations of academics and intellectuals.

Canonical scholarship was closely related to the codification of the imperial state's ritual program, which was largely based on precedents and models presented in the Confucian classics. The numerous ritual observances enacted at the royal court—some of which were monumental in scale and involved dazzling displays of imperial grandeur—were among the key foundations of dynastic power and prestige. They evoked a sense of cosmic unity by linking the ruling dynasty with Heaven and the unseen world. At the same time, they also reasserted existing stratified human relationships and fostered social harmony.

The Confucian canon also enjoyed a place of preeminence in the educational arena. Knowledge of the classics, along with related historical and philosophical texts, was taken as a given among the sociopolitical elites. The classics were central part of the curriculum at the official schools instituted by the government. Moreover, these schools were instrumental in promoting the cult of Confucius, who was worshiped as the supreme sage. Not surprisingly, mastery of the classics was tested by the most prestigious of the state examinations. As we will see later, these examinations were key conduits for the procurement of bureaucratic positions in the central government, which in turn were the main sources of high status and wealth in Tang society. Confucian scholars were also largely responsible for two additional state-sponsored undertakings: the recording of history and the compilation of literary anthologies and bibliographies. Their role in the writing of official history is especially noteworthy, as it helps explain the pro-Confucian bias of most of Chinese historical writing, even during periods of Buddhist dominance such as the Tang era (for more on Tang Confucianism, see McMullen 1988).

On the whole, during the Tang era Confucianism was seen as being complementary to Buddhism and Daoism. The basic formula used to describe the harmonious relationship among the three teachings was "Confucianism for the external (world)," while "Buddhism and Daoism for the inner (world)," although of course this was a general schematization and there were exceptions to it. In practical terms, it meant that scholars concentrated their energies on traditional concerns and established areas of strength in Confucian learning. That implied focus on the needs of the imperial state, especially its governmental structures, the educational system, and the dynasty's ritual program, as well as involvement with public morality and literary activities. On the other hand, Buddhism and Daoism were perceived as being primarily concerned with the inner or spiritual world, providing comprehensive paradigms of self-cultivation and pointing towards rarefied realms of detachment and transcendence.

Neo- Confucian Revival of the Song Era

Not all literati agreed with the prevalent cosmopolitan attitudes and ecumenical sentiments noted above, nor was everybody at ease with the pluralistic culture of Tang China. One of the most forceful voices to take up the Confucian cause and rally against the perceived dominance of Buddhism was the famous official and writer Han Yu (768–824), who was among the lead-

ers of a reform movement known as "ancient writing" (*guwen,* also referred to as "classical prose"). This movement called for return to the simple and unadorned writing forms evidenced in the early Confucian classics, which stood in contrast to the ostentatious and ornate literary style that was in vogue at the time. The reform of literary style was meant to go together with return to the authentic contents and central messages of the classics, especially their moral injunctions and proscriptions for self-cultivation. For Han Yu the classics contained the orthodox teachings of the true way, which he felt have been neglected since the time of Mengzi, with great detriment to Chinese culture and society.

Han Yu's advocacy for return to the genuine Confucian way was tinged with exclusivist sentiments. While he also criticized the Daoists, in his eyes the main culprit for the social decline and cultural contamination that supposedly engulfed China during his time was Buddhism. In his famous "Memorial on the Buddha's Bone" (compiled in 819), he linked Confucianism with the glorious reigns of the ancient sage-kings, while he critiqued the Buddha as a crude barbarian, ignorant of proper (i.e. Chinese) social norms and relationships. Echoing the early critiques of Buddhism (see chapter 5), Han Yu denounced it as a heterodox foreign faith that was unsuitable for the Chinese. He vehemently objected to the Buddha's relic entering the hallowed grounds of the imperial palace, which was the actual event that prompted him to compose his anti-Buddhist diatribe (see quote box). While some of Han's intolerant views and xenophobic sentiments were exceptional within the Tang context, his valiant stand in defense of the Confucian way won him many admirers among later generation of Confucians. Because of that, he is often identified as a precursor of the Neo-Confucian revival that blossomed during the Song era.

Han Yu's "Memorial on the Buddha's Bone"

Your humble servant submits that Buddhism is but one of the cultic practices of the barbarians, which filtered into China during the Later Han era. In ancient times there was no such thing here.... The Buddha was of barbarian origin. He did not speak the Chinese language and wore clothes of a different style. His speech did not accord with the words of the ancient kings, while his garments did not conform to their prescriptions. He did not recognize the proper relationship between a ruler and his subject, nor did he understand the sentiments connecting fathers and sons…. Now that he has long been dead, how can it be fitting that his decayed and rotten bone, his ill-omened and filthy remains, should be allowed to enter into the hallowed precincts of the imperial palace? Confucius said, `Respect ghosts and spirits, but keep away from them.' … I beg Your Majesty to turn this bone over to the officials so that they can throw it into water or fire, thereby cutting off for all times the root of this evil. That will free the empire from grave error and prevent the confusion of later generations.

Translation adapted from Reischauer 1955: 221–24

When applied to the tradition's early historical development, Neo-Confucianism is a general designation that encompasses the thought and writings of a number of thinkers. The actual label is of a relatively recent Western origin. The traditional Chinese terms that from early on were used to designate what we call Neo-Confucianism are "Study of the Way" (Daoxue) and "Study of Principle" (Lixue). The leaders of the Neo-Confucian movement during its formative period—five of whom retroactively came to be celebrated as the five great masters of the Northern Song era (see box)—were creative and reform-minded scholars that engaged in far-reaching rethinking of the ancient Confucian heritage. On the whole, there was a palpable purist or fundamentalist streak in their basic intellectual orientations and religious attitudes, in the sense of an overarching concern with getting back to the inimitable truths and timeless insights of the Confucian tradition, which they believed to have been lost for many centuries.

Five Masters of Early Neo-Confucianism

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

The refashioning of Confucian norms and ideas at the hand of the Song-era reformers was accompanied with overt critiques of the doctrines and practices of Buddhism and Daoism. The critiques towards Buddhism, which in the eyes of the Neo-Confucian reformers had for a long time exerted undue influenced on the minds and hearts of the Chinese literati, were particularly harsh. Some of the central critiques were directed towards principal Buddhist doctrines, especially the doctrine of emptiness, which was denounced as being nihilistic. Buddhists were also accused of being self-absorbed, other-worldly, and selfish, in contrast to the public-mindedness of the Confucians and their concern for the family and the good of the community.

While openly criticizing Buddhism and Daoism, the Neo-Confucian reformers were influenced by the ideas of the two competing religions, which most of them studied during their formative years. Much of their thinking and speculation about the nature of mind and reality, along with the manner in which they framed key philosophical issues, were shaped by their encounters with Buddhist—and to a smaller degree Daoist—teachings. In that sense, the rise of the Neo-Confucian movement must be placed in the context of its leaders' responses to the perceived dominance of Buddhism and their engagements with its teachings and practices.

Nonetheless, while the influences of Buddhism (and Daoism) are readily observable in the teachings propounded by the major exponents of Neo-Confucianism, it is important to note that they ultimately went back to the Confucian classics as their main sources of inspiration and guidance. They produced a comprehensive system of thought that explained the whole of reality, in all of its multifacetedness and complexity. While retaining fidelity to traditional Confucian concerns with governmental structures, public morality, and political involvement, the Song-era reformers substantially expanded and enriched the contours of Confucian discourse. Most notably, they reoriented Confucian learning towards metaphysical speculation about the structure of the cosmos and the nature of reality. At the same time, they made concentrated efforts to focus attention on the processes of spiritual cultivation that culminated in the perfection of sagehood. They thus covered the two key areas—metaphysical reflection and spiritual cultivation—that previously were dominated by the Buddhists and the Daoists. The

end result was a substantial broadening of the field of Confucian learning and the growth of new trends within it.

Initially the Neo-Confucian thinkers represented only one among several trends that participated in the revitalization of Confucianism that took place during the Song era. Ample examples of alternative perspectives on Confucian knowledge and values, some of them at great odds with the nascent Neo-Confucian notions about truth and orthodoxy, can be found in the writings of numerous influential officials and writers. For instance, the famous poet, intellectual, and official Su Shi (1037–1101) argued for the importance of artistic expression and opposed all form of dogmatic thinking. While arguing for the institution of benevolent government along traditional Confucian lines, Su Shi was also sympathetic to the doctrines and practices of Buddhism. Nonetheless, in the long run the Neo-Confucian reformers were successful in bringing about a gradual shift in intellectual interest away from Buddhism and towards Confucianism, with profound significance for the subsequent history of China. They influenced the protracted decline of Buddhism, as Buddhist leaders largely failed to provide compelling responses to the Neo-Confucian challenge. In the end, the eventual success of Neo-Confucianism was based on the appeal of its ideas among the literati, as well as on its ideological and institutional utility to the imperial state.

Each of the leading Neo-Confucian thinkers added unique perspectives and highlighted key philosophical concepts that came to be associated with the basic intellectual outlook of their movement. For instance, Zhou Dunyi made significant contributions to the formulation of Neo-Confucian cosmology, for which he drew extensively from the *Book of Change*. The central concept in his explanation of the origins and evolution of the universe was the Supreme Ultimate (*taiji*). Identified as the underlying origin of yin and yang, the five elements, and the myriad things, the Supreme Ultimate represents the unifying principle of reality. In contrast, Zhang Zai focused on the concept of *qi* (vital force or energy), which according to him is behind the origin of the universe and the endless changes that occur in it. According to him, all things in the world are constituted of *qi*, and thus share the same substance. But *qi* is also capable of assuming a variety of forms, which accounts for the individual characteristics of various things or phenomena. Within this overarching scheme of cosmic unity, human beings and all things in the universe partake of the same shared reality (see quote box).

Zhang Zai's "Western Inscription"

Heaven is my father and earth is my mother, and even such an insignificant being as myself finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body, and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.

Translation adapted from de Bary and Bloom 1999: 683

Especially important contributions towards the development of Neo-Confucian philosophy were made by the two Cheng brothers, Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi. They established the notion of principle (*li*) as the central element of Neo-Confucian philosophy, in a manner that encompassed both the cosmological and the ethical spheres. While the Cheng brothers asserted the singularity and absolute nature of principle, they also allowed for its manifold manifestations. In their teachings principle was transformed into a crucial concept that brought together all other key concepts and ideas. For instance, at the level of the individual, they equated human nature (*xing*) with principle. Eventually, all these ideas were brought together into a grad synthesis that was fully articulated in the lectures and writings of Zhu Xi (1130–1200), the most famous of all Neo-Confucian thinkers. Under his wide-ranging vision and strong leadership, what was initially a loose and informal fellowship of like-minded thinkers was transformed into a coherent Confucian movement, with wide-ranging ramifications for later Chinese history.

Zhu Xi's Grand Synthesis

Zhu Xi was an exceptional person, with many talents and varied accomplishments. A remarkable classicist, philosopher, educator, administrator, and writer, he created the grand Neo-Confucian synthesis that dominated Chinese intellectual and social life until the early twentieth century. Zhu Xi popularized and clarified the writings of his predecessors in the Neo-Confucian movement, which greatly enhanced their stature. He readily acknowledged his debt to the early Song thinkers, as he wove together their central insights into a coherent system of thought that was noteworthy for its comprehensiveness and exactness. He was especially influenced by the ideas of Cheng Yi, particularly his doctrine of principle, which he further refined and integrated with the other key elements of Neo-Confucian philosophy. Because of that influence, the main stream of Neo-Confucian thought is also known as the Cheng-Zhu school, from the names of the two philosophers. During Zhu Xi's lifetime his version of Confucianism

failed to receive official sanction, but subsequently he achieved such renown that for centuries he was regarded as one of the most important thinkers in the history of Confucianism, his stature approaching the exalted ranks of Confucius and Mengzi.

Born into a gentry family, the young Zhu Xi received classical education in preparation for the civil service examinations. During his formative years he was attracted to Buddhism and dabbled into the teachings of the Chan school. That gave him personal insight into the allure of Buddhism and its appeal to the literati, which he later perceived as a major treat to Confucian hegemony and tried hard to contest in his lectures and writings. He passed the highest of the official examinations, that of "presented scholar" (*jinshi*), at the extraordinarily young age of eighteen, after which he entered into governmental service. Most of his official appointments were of relatively low rank and in local administration, and for many years he occupied sinecures (the position of temple warden, for example).

During his tours of duty Zhu Xi dealt with a number of practical issues, such as agricultural production, famine relief, and educational reform. In his work on educational policy and reform he advocated on behalf of both public (official) schools and private academies. He argued for expansion of the educational system, which he wanted to develop down to the village level. Especially noteworthy were his efforts to revive or establish local academies, which became important centers for the study and propagation of Neo-Confucian teachings. These endeavors were epitomized by his restoration of the famed White Deer Grotto Academy on Lu Mountain (in Jiangxi). Zhu Xi's concern with practical issues also extended to life-circle rituals. To that effect, he wrote a manual of family rituals, in which he codified rites concerned with the coming of age, marriage, funerals, and ancestral sacrifices. The manual was written in a straightforward manner and was easy to read, which contributed to it being widely used throughout East Asia.

Notwithstanding the importance of Zhu Xi's practical proscriptions on education and social issues, he is best known for his theoretical writings and his views on philosophical questions, which are widely regarded as the doctrinal culmination of Neo-Confucianism. According of him, the whole of reality is constituted by intricate combinations of principle and vital force. The two are interlinked and complementary, never separate and always intimately implicating each other. The coming together and continued existence of all distinct things and events in the universe implies the seamless amalgamation of principle and vital force. Accordingly, there is no vital force without principle, and vice versa. Principle constitutes the universal pattern or singular norm to which each thing or individual conforms, while particular configurations of vital force endow them with their distinct forms and peculiar qualities. Nonetheless, within this metaphysical scheme Zhu Xi stressed the primacy of principle, which he characterized as belonging to the realm beyond forms and material objects. The existence of vital force, which underlines the material appearances of all things, is predicated on the prior actuality of principle, even though principle always needs vital force to adhere to (see quote box).

Zhu Xi on principle and vital force

In the whole universe there has never been any vital force without principle, or principle without vital force.

Question: Which has prior existence, principle or vital force?

Answer: Principle is never separate from vital force. However, principle exists prior to the constitution of physical form, whereas vital force exists after the constitution of physical form. Accordingly, when speaking about being before or after physical form, is not there a difference in terms of priority and posteriority? Principle has no physical form, while vital force is coarse and contains impurities. Fundamentally, principle and vital force cannot be spoken as being either prior or posterior. But is we want to trace their origin, we must say that principle is prior. Nonetheless, principle is not a separate entity. It exists precisely in conjunction with vital force. Without vital force, principle would have nothing to adhere to.

Translation adapted from Chan 1963: 634.

For Zhu Xi, the existence of all things can be traced back to the pivotal actuality of principle, which is the essential source of all of creation, in its infinite variety. Principle is the basic pattern or universal blueprint of reality. Underlying and inhering in all phenomena, principle constitutes the true nature of everything in the universe. It is the raison d'être for the existence of each thing and the ideal archetype to which it needs to conform. Fundamentally principle is one and indivisible, yet each thing, person, or affair has its own principle. To know the true natures of a butterfly or a bamboo, for instance, is to know their essential principles, which in turn can be linked to the one fundamental principle that underlies all of reality. This way Zhu Xi was able to highlight the essential unity of all things and events, while also accounting for their diversity.

The Supreme Ultimate is basically the essential pattern of reality, the principle in its purest form or ultimate modality, which inheres in each of the myriad things as a kind of primordial archetype. Furthermore, Zhu Xi described principle as being real and substantial, in contrast to the nihilistic vacuity he (wrongly) imputed to a Buddhist view of reality based on the doctrine of emptiness. When this kind of analysis of the basic pattern(s) of reality is applied to individual human beings, in his writings Zhu Xi follows Cheng Yi by equating principle with human nature. As we will see in the discussion of spiritual cultivation presented below, to know the principle within oneself is to know one's essential and true nature, which is fundamentally good and contains within itself all prime virtues.

Constructing Genealogy of the Way

The Song era Neo-Confucians created a comprehensive system of thought that entailed innovative perspectives and new points of departure in the history of the Confucian tradition. They introduced novel concepts and theoretical outlooks, many of them shaped by their encounters with Buddhist teachings and practices. In the process they opened a new chapter in the evolution of Confucianism. Nonetheless, Zhu Xi and his fellow Neo-Confucians primarily saw themselves as recovering an ancient tradition that went back to Confucius and his disciples, not as radical reformers bent on creating a new-fangled movement primarily concerned with articulating a set of responses to specific issues that epitomized their era. They did not think of their teachings as one of many potentially valid interpretations of the Confucian way, but as upholders of the only true and orthodox way, which they wanted to restore to its ancient glory. Accordingly, they asserted their authority and legitimized their reform program by forging close links with the ancient Confucian tradition and representing themselves as its true heirs. To that end, they constructed a new genealogy of the way (Daotong)—a concept developed by Zhu Xi— and focused attention to a reconstituted version of the Confucian canon.

Zhu Xi and his followers situated themselves in the large sweep of Chinese history by reconstituting and reimagining the entire historical narrative of Confucianism up to their time. The central component in their new and quasi-historical account was the notion of a lineage of sage-philosophers who transmitted the essence of the Confucian way. The fashioning of this kind of spiritual genealogy, centered on an orthodox line of succession, represented an innovative development within the annals of Confucianism. This idea was not entirely new, however, as it evoked parallels with the concept of patriarchal lineage in Buddhism, which at the time was an especially important element of Chan ideology.

According to Zhu Xi, the true way flourished during the time of Confucius and was transmitted to Mengzi, the greatest of all sages after Confucius. Then the orthodox way was then lost and its transmission was broken off for over a millennium, during which the heterodox doctrines of Buddhism and Daoism came to prominence. During this extended period of decline and confusion, even foremost Confucians such as Dong Zhongshu of the Han dynasty and Han Yu of the Tang dynasty failed to grasp the true way in its genuine purity and ultimate profundity. It was only during the early Song era that the true way was supposedly rediscovered by the prominent Neo-Confucian philosophers, especially Zhou Dunyi and the Cheng brothers. They then reinstituted its proper transmission, which led to Zhu Xi and his followers.

Revising the Canon

Another prominent part of the Neo-Confucian agenda was the revision and reinterpretation of the Confucian canon. Zhu Xi largely glossed over previous groupings of texts that constituted various versions of the canon, although he did study and comment on most of the ancient classics. That included the Five Classics of early Confucianism (see chapter 2), which until the Tang era were the most authoritative sources of Confucian learning. Instead, he promoted a streamlined version of the canon, represented by the so-called Four Books (see box). This new selection of primary texts for study reflected the intellectual agendas and religious predilections of Zhu Xi and his fellow reformers. An important aspect of that was the reorientation of canonical exegesis and philosophical discourse towards metaphysical speculation and moral cultivation.

The Four Books

- *Analects of Confucius*
- *Mengzi*
- *Great Learning*
- *Doctrine of the Mean*

The narrowing of the canon brought about sharpening of doctrinal focus and greater exegetical control. Much of the Neo-Confucian program was framed in terms of expanded commentary on the new canon. Zhu Xi wrote important commentaries on each of the Four Books, which collectively assumed the status of fundamental statements of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. During the late imperial period the Four Books, together with Zhu Xi's commentaries, were broadly disseminated and widely read, both within and beyond Neo-Confucian circles. They remained immensely influential until the early twentieth century, remaining the primary sources by which cultured Chinese approached and understood Confucianism.

Path to Sagehood

Zhu Xi's penchant for abstract philosophizing and his passion for ritual observances notwithstanding, in many of his writing there is an unmistakable prioritization of the quest for becoming a sage. That echoes an overall shift in priorities and a change in tenor within Song

Figure 8.1. Statue of Confucius, Confucian Temple, Nanjing

Confucianism. In contrast to the public-mindedness and overriding concern with the requirements of the imperial state that were characteristic of medieval Confucianism, within Zhu Xi's corpus the pursuit of sagehood often takes the center stage. In some instances, that even comes at expense of the pursuit of official career, especially during periods of political corruption and moral turbidity. During such troubled times, when in Zhu Xi's estimation the Way does not prevail in the realm and there is a pervasive sense of spiritual malaise, it might be advisable to avoid governmental service altogether in order to preserve one's moral purity and integrity.

For Zhu Xi, the main goal of Confucian learning was individual's moral improvement, not the acquisition of wealth and social status. Accordingly, his model of learning was primarily geared towards molding his disciples into committed students and preservers of the ancient way, rather than towards producing Confucian officials in a conventional mold. Echoing the salvific objectives of Buddhism and Daoism, Zhu Xi proclaimed that Confucian learning should first and foremost be concerned with moral cultivation and personal transformation, culminating in the attainment of sagehood. That kind of thinking was essentially religious in orientation, although he believed that individuals' realization of moral perfection would also lead to political stability and social harmony.

As was already noted, Zhu Xi equated human nature with principle, and he accepted Mengzi's dictum that human nature is fundamentally good (see chapter 2). The proclivity for filial piety inheres in the human mind, and individuals are intrinsically endowed with all prime virtues, including benevolence, propriety, righteousness, and wisdom. On the other hand, the human mind is also filled with selfish desires and emotional attachments, which foster unwholesome tendencies and behaviors. Just as principle always comes together with vital force, which can be of various degrees of purity, the imperfect domain of human desires and emotions is linked and interfused with the immaculate actuality of the true nature. But at its core, the human mind is identical with the universal mind of the Dao; consequently, the mind has the inherent capacity of knowing the basic principle of reality. By consciously cultivating the innate potential for moral perfection, each individual has the potential to refine one's thoughts and purify the mind, thereby realizing the principle within oneself.

Within Zhu Xi's philosophical scheme, the human mind is the locus or battlefield where a fundamental tension, between the true nature (principle) on one hand and self-centered emotions and desires on another, needs to be resolved. Accordingly, moral cultivation involves uncovering the essential goodness that inheres in the human mind/heart (*xin*). That necessitates gradual removal of all impurities and obstructions that prevent the true nature from becoming fully manifest in its resplendent perfection. Within the context of inner self-cultivation, for Zhu Xi that meant preserving the true mind or maintaining a reverential attitude towards the innermost nature. He also asserted that the process of spiritual cultivation can be enhanced by some forms of contemplation, in particular by the practice of "quiet sitting" (*jingzuo*).

While in his writings Zhu Xi addressed various issues related to the exploration of the mind and the inner world, overall he placed greater emphasis on the reflection and examination of the outer world of phenomenal appearances and concrete events. For him, principally the study of the Way consisted of "the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge" (*gewu zhizhi*). A concept that originally came from the *Great Learning*, the investigation of things became a focal doctrine closely associated with Zhu Xi's synthesis of Neo-Confucianism. For him the investigation of things—which included not only material objects but also human affairs and events—meant inquiry into their principles, leading to comprehension of the unitary principle that is manifest in all things. It was a process of extensive learning and reflection, primarily based on study and rumination on canonical formulations of timeless truths and essential principles.

The investigation of things was not an open-ended inquiry into empirical reality, certainly not as presently understood in the natural or physical sciences. It was primarily a study of the world of human affairs and social interactions, which were to be analyzed in terms of established conceptual templates and value systems. It meant apprehending the true principle of an ethical issue or a human predicament, for instance the proper pattern of interaction between parents and their children, or perhaps the intricate relationship between two spouses. By broadly investigating the principles of individual things and affairs, one gradually arrives at knowledge of the basic pattern that underlines them all. The extension of knowledge meant expansion of one's insight into principle, culminating in realization of the universal pattern of reality, which is imprinted in the human mind. Since the principle inhering in external things and events is the same as the principle present within the individual, theoretically the apprehension of either of them should lead to the same self-realization, although Zhu Xi placed more emphasis on the first.

For Zhu Xi, textual learning and intellectual inquiry were the primary means for bringing about moral rectification and far-reaching personal transformation. While principle might be manifest in all things and events, it is fully embodied and best articulated in the timeless volumes and precious records bestowed to humanity by the great sages of the past. The sacred classics therefore serve as main guides for the study of principle, which they encapsulate and convey in the clearest and most accessible way. They are indispensible tools in the pursuit of self-realization, and their assiduous study is a prime form of spiritual cultivation. This kind of cerebral orientation, with its emphasis on scholastic endeavors, marked Zhu Xi's approach to moral cultivation and gave it its distinctly intellectual character. This kind of scholastic focus on canonical learning and investigation of external things was perceived by some of Zhu Xi's critics as coming at the expense of inwardly-oriented reflection (see below). Nonetheless, this type of intellectualism was in tune with an established historical pattern, highlighting the importance of textually-oriented scholarship within the Confucian tradition. According to Zhu Xi and his followers, the intense study of principles, accompanied with conscious efforts at

self-cultivation, was meant to lead to a state of moral perfection, in which one's actual conduct would accord with the basic principle(s) that constitute metaphysical and social reality.

Civil Service Examinations

Zhu Xi had a number of dedicated students and was successful in constructing a comprehensive Neo-Confucian synthesis. Nonetheless, although his ideas attracted the attention and admiration of many of his contemporaries, in the intellectual and political worlds of the Southern Song dynasty his teachings were not widely accepted as an undisputed orthodoxy. In fact, towards the end of Zhu Xi's life the government proscribed his school's teachings, following accusations that they constituted false learning propounded by an outlandish group of self-righteous literati. The subsequent rise to unmatched prominence of Zhu Xi's version of Neo-Confucianism was a gradual process and was closely linked with its incorporation into the government's system of civil service examinations. That was an immensely important development, since during the late imperial period the examination system was one of the defining institutions of Chinese society. Zhu Xi's editions and commentaries on the Confucian canon were first officially integrated into the core curriculum for the civil service examinations in 1313 under the Yuan dynasty, when the Mongol rulers reinstituted the examination system after a hiatus that lasted for half a century.

While the official examinations were not that important under Mongol rule—on the whole, the Mongols did not have high regard for Confucianism—they regained their central role after the reinstitution of native Chinese rule in 1368 under the autocratic and nationalistic Ming dynasty. Within the Ming system of official examinations, Zhu Xi's version of Neo-Confucianism became firmly entranced as state-sanctioned orthodoxy, a position it held until the abolition of the examination system in 1905. That helped establish Zhu Xi as a towering figure and ensure the wide diffusion of his teachings throughout the Chinese realm. His influence also spread beyond China, especially to Korea, after the conservative Chosŏn (Joseon) dynasty (1392–1910) embraced Neo-Confucianism as its official ideology, in the process transforming Korea into the most Confucian society in East Asia. To a somewhat smaller degree, the teachings of Zhu Xi and other Neo-Confucian figures also became popular in Japan during the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), especially among the samurai elites.

The system of official examinations was instituted in order to recruit talented candidates for positions in the imperial bureaucracy. It had an ancient history, with its early precursors going back to the Han dynasty. The examination system became a major mechanism for the selection and staffing of governmental posts during the Tang dynasty, and its scope and importance were greatly expanded during the Song era. At its core, the examination system was based on an ostensibly egalitarian principle: the sociopolitical elite that ran the Chinese state was to be chosen on the basic of individual merits and accomplishments—demonstrated by the passing

of a sequence of demanding examinations—rather than according to birth and family status. In theory, the examination system was open to most males, including individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, who were to be judged on the basis of their demonstrated intellectual acumen, literary abilities, and mastery of the canon. However, the rigor and the scope of academic preparations needed for passing the examinations meant that the vast majority of successful candidates were scions of gentry families, who could afford to provide their sons with the best educational opportunities.

The official examination system encompassed a series of exams, usually held every three years. The prevalent three-tiered scheme involved the candidates' participation in a sequence of increasingly more competitive and prestigious exams. Taking place at the prefectural, provincial, and national level, the exams entailed cut-throat competition for a very limited quota of successful candidates. The final exam was held at the capital under the auspices of the emperor himself. Success at the highest level opened highly desirable employment opportunities in the officialdom, which carried great social prestige. In pre-modern China such official postings were fervently sought-after or desired by most individuals with advantaged backgrounds, as entry into the higher echelons of the imperial bureaucracy served as the main avenue for the acquisition of social status and political power, and even to economic prosperity.

Accordingly, during the late imperial period the examination system was at the center of a sociopolitical nexus that linked educational attainment, governmental service, social status, and economic opportunity. That largely accounted for the exceptional unity of China's elites, who were molded on the prevailing prototype of scholar-official who have mastered the whole range of learning required for success in the examination system. The dominant position of Neo-Confucianism for over half a millennium was therefore principally based on its virtual monopoly of the educational system, by virtue of its established role as government-approved standard for the official examinations. That greatly transformed the Neo-Confucian tradition, as the educational system, with its formulaic character and emphasis on rote learning, became increasingly identified with the pursuit of success in the civil service examinations and the worldly rewards that accrued from it. That led to charges of hypocrisy, as prevalent literati attitudes stood in contrast to the lofty ideals articulated by Zhu Xi. As we saw, Zhu Xi argued that genuine learning should be primarily undertaken for the sake of personal improvement and moral rectification, although he also endorsed the legitimacy and value of the examination system, and even made specific proposals for its reform.

The Confucian-based examination system embodied both the symbiotic relationship and some of the frictions between the imperial state and the social elites. On one level, it helped maintain the status quo and was a potent tool in the state's efforts at controlling society and literati culture. That was primarily accomplished by the methodical inculcation of specific values and ideas, which fostered the development of mind-sets attuned to imperial dominion. At the same time, the examination system also provided opportunities for the elites to acquire and maintain social status, accumulate wealth, and exert influence on public policy. These develop-

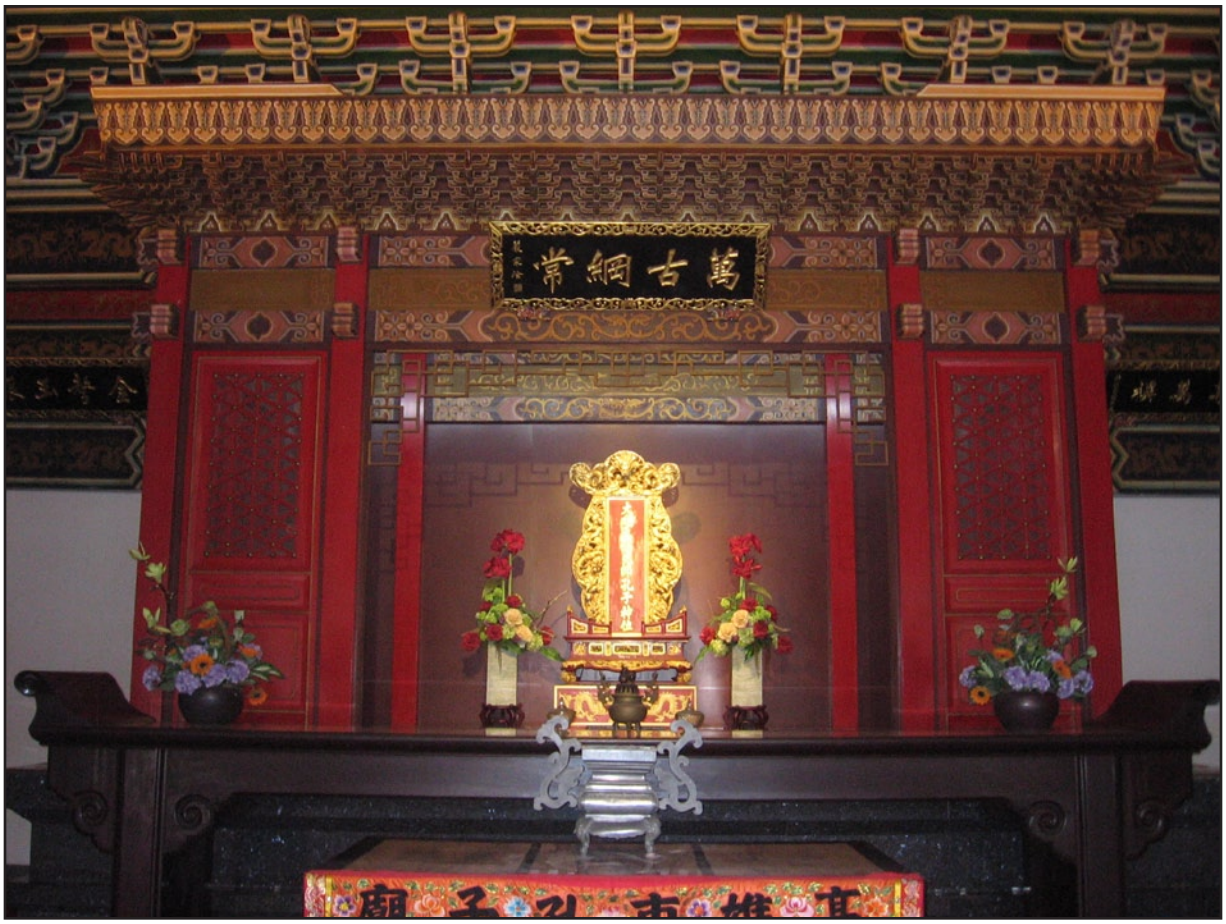

Figure 8.2. Shrine dedicated to Confucius, Confucian Temple, Gaoxiong, Taiwan

ments constituted a culminating chapter in the long-lasting marriage of convenience between Confucianism and Chinese imperial autocracy.

The infusion of Confucian ideals helped humanize existing social hierarchies and soften the exercise of political power and authority. At the same time, Confucianism was all too often used to legitimize inequitable—and at times openly tyrannical—systems of social stratification and exploitation, as well as buttress the foundations of the political institutions and cultural values that sustained them. Consequently, the imperial sanction of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy was linked with the prevalence of social rigidity and cultural conservatism, especially during the Qing dynasty. These traits were brought into sharp relief when China initially came in contact with the modern world during the nineteenth century, primarily via a series of uneasy encounters with colonial powers desirous of China's wealth and territory (for more on the examination system, see Elman 2000).

Dissenting Voices and Alternative Perspectives

Even as the examination system buttressed the preeminent status of the Cheng-Zhu brand of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, throughout the late imperial period its dominance was not complete and its tenets did not go unchallenged. Buddhism and Daoism, while not as vibrant as during their Tang heydays, continued to exert influence on Chinese culture and society. Among the literati who sat for the official examinations or occupied positions in the government many had diverse interests and affinities, as expressed by their patronage of Buddhist monasteries or interaction with Daoist clergyman. Moreover, there were some literati who contested the officially-sanctioned teachings from within Confucianism. Two prominent examples of such trends are the Neo-Confucian School of Mind and the School of Han Learning. Although adopting very different perspectives, they both offered compelling alternatives to a narrowly defined orthodoxy centered on the teachings of Zhu Xi.

The best-known representative of the School of Mind (Xinxue) is Wang Yangming (1472–1529; also known as Wang Shouren). He was the leading Confucian thinker of the Ming era and the principal challenger to the hegemony of Zhu Xi's thought. The basic ideas of the School of Mind—which is traditionally contrasted with Zhu Xi's School of Principle (Lixue)—go back to a strain of Neo-Confucian thinking that already existed during Zhu Xi lifetime, primarily associated with the ideas of his contemporary and main intellectual rival Lu Xiangshan (1139–1192; also known as Lu Jiuyuan). Lu argued that it is mistaken to focus one's energies on an external investigation of things or get bogged down in canonical exegesis. Instead, he taught that the mind of each person is identical with principle and is the fundamental source of all phenomena in the universe. Since mind and principle are inseparable, the quest for sagehood should revolve around reflection and illumination of the mind within, which leads to its purification and the elimination of selfish desires.

Building on Lu Xiangshan's ideas, in his philosophical discussions Wang Yangming placed emphasis on the mind as the fundamental locus of reality and highlighted the transcendental dimensions of Neo-Confucian spirituality. According to him, the mind of each person inherently possesses the capacity for intuitive knowledge of reality, and genuine wisdom is to be found within the mind itself. The quest for enlightenment should be based on inward-looking reflection and contemplation of the mind, not on intellectual study. Likewise, the attainment of sagehood, which entails extension and amplification of the inner goodness and the essential virtues that reside in each person, cannot be located anywhere else except within the human mind. These kinds of ideas clearly evoke similarities with Chan Buddhism, and Wang was taken to task by his critics as being tainted by Buddhist ideas. Another notable hallmark of his though was the notion of unity of knowledge and action. According to Wang, knowledge of reality and inner virtue cannot be separated from their concrete manifestation in actions undertaken by individuals who are attuned to the Way. Ideally, authentic knowledge should guide and inform all actions, and there should be no separation between the two.

Figure 8.3. Entrance to the Confucian Temple, Tainan, Taiwan

In contrast to the contemplative orientation of Wang Yangming's thought, the School of Han Learning (Hanxue) was firmly anchored in scholarly study and canonical exegesis. Also known as the School of Evidential Research (Kaozhengxue), this reaction to Neo-Confucian dominance became a prominent intellectual trend during the Ming-Qing transition (namely from the seventieth century onward). Its proponents were sharply critical of the Neo-Confucians' penchant for metaphysical abstractions and subjective opinions. For them, thinkers such as Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming had strayed away from the central tenets and concerns of Confucius and his early followers. The Song and Ming philosophers were also seen as being guilty of incorporating numerous Buddhist and Daoist accretions into Confucianism. On the whole, they were proponents of heretical learning and were not genuine followers of the way of Confucius and the Duke of Zhou. The correct response to their errors, according to the proponents of Han learning, was a return to the timeless truths of the classics.

The School of Han Learning was grounded in classical studies and had a marked philological orientation, while also branching into archeology and the study of ancient history. Its proponents argued for a different kind of Confucian learning, based on empirical analysis and historical research into ancient texts. By carefully employing scholarly methodologies, especially

newly developed techniques of philological study that involved detailed textual analysis and exhaustive comparisons of different manuscript, scholars associated with this school endeavored to uncover the true words of the ancient sages. In the process they uncovered the composite nature of the Confucian canon, which included a number of later additions and even outright forgeries.

Status of Women in Confucian Society

In previous chapters we already noted the relatively open attitudes and participatory opportunities afforded to Chinese women by Buddhism and Daoism, even if the two religions at times succumbed to prevalent social mores in their treatment of women and were not immune to occasionally manifesting misogynic sentiments. Let us end this survey of Confucianism by briefly looking into its impact on the status of women in traditional Chinese society. To a large degree, Confucianism defined prevalent Chinese attitudes and discourses regarding gender. Consequently, Confucianism is often reproached for its significant roles in the systematic patterns of gender inequity that were predominant throughout Chinese history. Confucian teachings were a major ideological source of norms and rationalizations that sustained an entrenched patriarchal system, in which men took precedence over women and dominated the domestic and public spheres.

When looking at larger historical patterns and trajectories, it is undeniable that Confucian ascendancy and increase in the influence of Confucian norms correlate with lowering of the status of women (e.g. the Qing era), while women enjoy higher status and increased opportunities during periods when Buddhism and Daoism are dominant (e.g. the Sui-Tang period). The contrasts between the artistic representations and visual imagery of Chinese women from different periods can be quite striking. On one hand, we find Tang women depicted as playing football or riding horses as members of hunting parties. On there other hand, there are the images of memorial arches for chaste widows and bound feet from the Qing era (although the custom of foot binding can be traced back to earlier periods).

It is of course unfair to place the whole blame for women's oppression at the feet of Confucianism, as there were other factors that contributed to perpetuation of the patriarchal system. Nor is it necessarily reasonable to judge harshly traditional societies from the vantage point of present-day (Western) norms and values. Nonetheless, indubitably Confucianism was a major influence on the essentialist construal of gender roles in China (and the rest of East Asia) that buttressed prevalent forms of patriarchy, even if women's confinement to the domestic sphere and the emphasis on strict gender stratification were meant to foster social stability and harmony.

Cheng Yi on female chastity

Question: According to principle, it seems that one should not marry a widow. What do you think?

Answer: That is correct. Marriage is a match (made by Heaven). If a man takes a woman who has lost her integrity to be his own match, it means he himself has lost his integrity.

Additional question: There are cases in which the widow is all alone and poor, with no one to depend on. May she remarry?

Answer: This notion has come about only because people have come to be afraid to starve to death. But to starve to death is a trivial matter. To lose one's integrity, however, is a very serious matter.

Translation adapted from Chan 1967: 177

As was noted previously, prevailing Confucian models of social hierarchies and interpersonal relationships bestowed an inferior status on women and placed them in subservient positions vis-à-vis men. From birth until death, women were expected to show respect and obedience to the men in their lives, especially their fathers and husbands, as conveyed by the so-called "three forms of obedience" (see box). The rise of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, with its absolutist attitudes and penchant for intransigent moralizing, further deepened and solidified deep-rooted patterns of gender inequity. A prime example of Confucian-influenced attitudes towards women is the cult of female chastity, which flourished in late imperial China with sanction from the imperial state. One of its core creeds was the stigmatization of female remarriage.

The stipulation that women must remain chaste and faithful to their husbands until death meant they should not remarry if they become widowed, even if that happened while they were still teenagers. In an oft-quoted passage, Cheng Yi states that it is preferable for a woman to die from starvation than lose her chastity by remarrying (see quote box). Striking symbols of such conception of femininity, and the cultural norms that underscored it, were the aforementioned memorial arches for chaste widows. These monuments to idealized notions of female purity honored women who had lost their husbands at a young age, and then choose to remain widows until their death many years later. They celebrated the chaste widow as a heroic figure and an exemplar of key cultural values.

Women's three forms of obedience

- To the father during one's early years.
- To the husband in one's marriage.
- To the eldest son after becoming a widow.

Without denying the impact of Confucian norms and ideals, as was already suggested we have to keep in mind that there were other social and cultural forces that shaped prevalent attitudes towards gender. There were also discrepancies between the rigid moralizing and seemingly oppressive mores propounded by noted Confucians on one hand, and the actual social practices and common modes of conduct on another. While famous Neo-Confucians such as Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi are often taken to task for their ostensibly harsh statements (see quote box), which might offend modern sensibilities, historical sources also tell us that in some instances they treated women well. We also learn that they were capable of showing moral flexibility when faced with the predicaments of individual women. Still, there is no way of going around the fact that Confucian teachings and mores were major factors behind the inferior status of women during much of Chinese history, even if we account for the checks and balances inbuilt into prevailing Confucian tenets and norms, which regulated the status and the interactions between the two genders.

Key Points

- Although in medieval China there was a relative decline in Confucian influence, in an age marked by the ascendancy of Buddhism and Daoism, Confucian learning continued to flourish within a cosmopolitan culture that fostered religious pluralism.
- There was a major reformation of Confucianism during the Song era, represented by the Neo-Confucian tradition that subsequently emerged as the officially-sanctioned orthodoxy.
- Zhu Xi, the best known and most influential of the Song-era reformers, created a grand Neo-Confucian synthesis that incorporated metaphysical speculation and spiritual cultivation.
- The emergence of Neo-Confucianism represented a creative response to the pervasive influence of Buddhism; although the Neo-Confucian thinkers were influenced by Buddhist teachings and practices, they offered trenchant critiques of the "foreign" religion.
- The concept of principle was central within the philosophical system formulated by Zhu Xi, which he paired with the ancient notion of vital force in his explanations of reality.

- The Neo-Confucians were involved in a radical recasting of earlier Confucian history, arguing that the true way was lost after Mengzi, only to be rediscovered by the great Neo-Confucian thinkers of the early Song era.
- Zhu Xi transformed the Confucian canon by focusing attention on the so-called Four Books, which came to be widely studied in light of his commentaries on them.
- The rise to supreme status of Zhu Xi's version of Neo-Confucianism unfolded gradually and was directly connected with the incorporation of his teachings into the government's system of civil service examinations.
- The hegemony of the Cheng-Zhu form of Confucian orthodoxy did not go uncontested, as evidenced by the rise of Wang Yangming's School of Mind and the School of Han Learning.
- The rise of Neo-Confucian influence during the late imperial period had largely negative impact on the status of women in Chinese society.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain the rise of Neo-Confucianism in relation to the extensive influence of Buddhism and Daoism and their appeal to the Chinese literati.

2. Describe Zhu Xi's interpretation of human nature and clarify how it influenced his views about spiritual cultivation.

3. Which were the main alternatives to the Cheng-Zhu version of Confucian orthodoxy in late imperial China, and what were the main points of disagreement between them and the teachings of Zhu Xi and his followers?

Further Reading

See also the reading suggestions for chapter 2.

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