


UNITED WISDOM

# Neo-Confucianism: Principle, Vital Force, and Investigating Things

Traditions and Worldviews

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# Neo-Confucianism: Principle, Vital Force, and Investigating Things

## Epigraph

> *“People are my brothers and sisters.”*

Zhang Zai, *Western Inscription*. Editorial English translation of our Russian rendering of a short passage from B. W. Van Norden’s 2006 translation, not a verified published English quotation. Cosmic kinship involves care and historical hierarchy, which must be distinguished below.

## About this article

We may know the rule for respectful conversation and still humiliate someone, or sincerely intend good and choose help that harms. In both cases something more complex than correct wording or good feeling is missing.

Neo-Confucian philosophy considers this gap through the world’s structure, human nature, and education. Its difficult terms—li, qi, gewu—connect with a simple but demanding question: how do we become people who see what is happening and respond appropriately?

We will examine why principle should not be pictured as a separate thing, qi as measurable physical energy, or investigating things as mechanical staring. We will follow cosmology’s connection with ethical education among Song thinkers, then consider Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming’s disagreement about knowledge and action. Contemporary examples designate our application, not ancient curricula’s contents.

## I. Returning to the classics became a new philosophical project

Neo-Confucianism names several currents, not one unchanging system. It developed through renewed Confucian thought in the Tang and Song periods and subsequent disputes. The IEP overview emphasizes returning to classical texts while responding to Buddhist and Daoist challenges. Zhu Xi’s synthesis became important to education and examination culture without eliminating other positions.

“New” expresses a historian’s viewpoint. The thinkers themselves might understand their work as restoring a Way already expressed by sages. A tension matters here: a new interpretation gains authority through fidelity to antiquity while changing how antiquity is read.



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Readers must distinguish three levels: an early text, a later commentary systematizing it, and a contemporary explanation of that system. Otherwise a concept developed centuries after Confucius appears to be Confucius's own ready-made term. The history of philosophical work disappears.

Renewal involved more than an abstract cosmic picture. Family, education, government, and character needed foundations: why be humane in a world of self-interest and conflict? How is education possible if virtue already exists in nature? Why does one ethical beginning appear so differently?

The movement cannot therefore become two camps—book lovers and lovers of inward illumination. Both debated forming an ethical person, differing on obstacles, their removal, and knowledge's role. Understanding the disagreement requires its vocabulary first.

## II. Li: principle discovered in the concrete

Li 理 means principle, order, or pattern. It differs from li 禮, ritual appropriateness, despite identical romanization. For Zhu Xi, li expresses the order of things, relations, and processes and should be sought in their concrete structure. The SEP article on Zhu Xi notes his images of wood grain, veins, and texture, which prevent li becoming an abstract framework detached from existence.

This changes "principle." We often hear a short formula: "Always act this way." A relationship's structure cannot be exhausted by one instruction. The same action may suit different cases for different reasons; outwardly similar situations may require different responses.

Our analysis distinguishes general direction and a case's specificity. Respect supplies a direction without automatically deciding whether to speak, remain silent, object, or ask for help. Appropriate action requires understanding participants, circumstances, and meaning. Empty appeals to principle can close this work.

Li cannot be reduced to an observer's arbitrary taste either. If everyone calls personal inclination the world's order, the concept loses explanatory force. The project requires learning to recognize order, not merely presenting desire as a norm.

Keep description and requirement distinct. We may describe a lasting social practice, but prevalence does not establish ethical justification. Neo-Confucianism links cosmic and ethical order more closely than contemporary science does. Readers may investigate that link's grounds while questioning whether existing hierarchy necessarily expresses rightful order.

Understanding li means hearing a question about a relationship's form fitting its meaning. Its answer must be developed, not borrowed from an attractive tree metaphor. Metaphor explains a concept without proving every ethical assertion subsequently made in its name.

## III. Qi: embodiment, differences, and change

Qi 氣 is rendered vital force, material force, or pneuma. In Neo-Confucian vocabulary it denotes becoming's dynamic material, not a separate store of bodily electricity. Li and qi let order and concrete realization be discussed together. The IEP account of Zhu Xi's metaphysics describes his synthesis of the Cheng brothers, Zhang Zai, and Zhou Dunyi, warning against treating the two as separately existing worlds.

Our analysis finds an important need in the distinction. General order alone struggles to explain diverse manifestations; change alone struggles to explain definite structure and intelligibility. The concepts retain both sides.

"Energy" misleads if readers silently add scientific units, instruments, and proven physiological effects. Familiar wording does not turn historical cosmology into physics. Its philosophy can be studied without declaring an ancient term an experimentally confirmed substance.

Nor should differences in qi become ready-made personality diagnosis. A tired person may concentrate poorly; this does not establish our ability to assess their qi and predict an ethical destiny. Such a move confuses a historical explanatory system with observations requiring other methods.

A modest reading conclusion matters: the ethical beginning is discussed in embodied beings with inclinations and circumstances. Development cannot be understood only through an abstract image of virtue. We need to explain why possibility did not become realization, where obstacles arise, and what changes them.

This retains equal ethical possibility without denying unequal conditions. Possibility does not promise identical outcomes. Constraints differ and education takes time. Calling every deficiency unwillingness to improve turns demanding education into blame of those facing greater difficulty.

The concepts' human connection includes xing, nature or tendencies, and qing, emotional states. The IEP overview treats heart-mind as their meeting place; emotions are not evil in themselves, but their one-sidedness and measure are concerns.

Our analysis avoids another translation error: ethical order need not require a person with nothing happening inwardly. Reject feeling altogether and humaneness's response to others' suffering becomes difficult to explain. Having an experience and realizing it in action differ.

Strong feeling acquires no automatic authority. Indignation may respond to injustice or defend personal advantage. Both are sincere experiences in ordinary language. Philosophical sincerity and appropriateness therefore need more than proof that an emotion was truly felt.

Education thus read should not falsify feeling. It should reveal feeling's object, measure, and connection with other duties. Order concerns both living response and reflection: they participate in one action, neither entitled to silence the other beforehand.

## IV. Cosmos and care: metaphysics has an ethical address

In *Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate*, Zhou Dunyi connects the world's becoming, polarities, and five phases with human nature and the sage's activity. The IEP discussion shows cosmology moving into human virtues: an account of the world becomes an account of rightful participation. This is not natural science separated from ethics.

The transition needs examination. A changing world does not obviously establish why I should help someone. The system does not simply append kindness to natural description; it understands ethics as expressing a broader order and creative process. Agreement requires philosophical premises, not merely watching seasons change.

Zhang Zai's *Western Inscription* offers another connection. The translation read names yang father and yin mother, people relatives, and living beings companions. It then turns toward care for the old, vulnerable, and unsupported. Bryan Van Norden's university translation also preserves hierarchy: the ruler as eldest son. Universal kinship here is not modern equal political rights.

Our reading may see a wider circle of responsibility. Another's misfortune is no longer outside my world. Yet wider care does not remove relational differences: identical action toward every being is not demanded. The question is whether anyone can be excluded completely.

This matters. Universal connection easily becomes beautiful feeling without an addressee. Care becomes checkable when it discovers those unable to demand it. Vulnerability and lack of support therefore do substantive work: the philosophical picture should appear in relations with the vulnerable.

Contemporary readers may accept this question without the entire familial model of the state. Name that step as our choice. The historical text then remains an interlocutor rather than convenient confirmation of existing politics.

## V. Investigating things: educating attention, not a cult of staring

Gewu 格物 is a disputed expression in the *Great Learning*, translated as investigating things; "things" may include affairs and situations. Robert Eno's teaching translation notes a textual gap and ambiguity. Eno does not fully adopt Zhu Xi's metaphysical framework, so his translation cannot become Zhu Xi's own voice.

For Zhu Xi, investigation involves discerning concrete order and ethical appropriateness. SEP describes this together with jing, reverent attentiveness. Knowing the case and the agent's condition are connected aspects of education.

External observation alone may collect information while preserving self-interest. Inner purity of intention alone may sincerely overlook important circumstances. Their combination asks about attention serving more than self-assertion.

In a hypothetical contemporary example, someone wants to help a relative study. They read a persuasive theory and impose a strict schedule without finding the difficult subject, previous attempts, or available time. Helpful intentions do not replace investigation. Conversely, detailed knowledge does not help when used to humiliate.

This is our application, not a reconstructed Song lesson. "Investigate things" does not mean collecting information alone. A question, discernment of relevance, and checking understanding are needed. Details differ in importance; not every prolonged gaze becomes knowledge.

Text can also be investigated. Careful reading requires context, words' meanings, and connected assertions. Study's discipline and openness to circumstances need not conflict. Conflict arises when text substitutes for a situation, or personal experience claims sufficiency without concepts and others' knowledge checking it.

## VI. Education and sincerity: from oneself to a shared world

In his *Great Learning* commentary's preface, Zhu Xi describes idealized ancient education: everyday behaviors precede higher study of nature, mind, and governance. Shared good nature connects with different embodiment and needed guidance. The Columbia excerpt shows this directly. His ancient universal school cannot become documentary statistics without further historical checking.

The sequence's meaning can be examined separately from historical accuracy. Elevated definitions alone do not make conduct ethical. Relationships form through repeated actions: answering, assuming roles, correcting mistakes, and participating. Philosophy must encounter everyday form.

The *Great Learning* connects levels through movement from knowledge and intention toward self-cultivation, family, and social order. In the passage read from Eno's translation, sincerity involves absence of self-deception, while liking and disliking can bias judgment.
Self-cultivation has social consequences.

Our conclusion must not be mechanical: a leader's good character does not guarantee a just organization. Rules, distributed powers, and criticism matter independently. Explaining every problem as deficient virtue can conceal arrangements rewarding harmful acts.

The reverse reduction is insufficient too. New rules do not abolish self-deception. Someone can use fair procedure to conceal favoritism. Sincerity asks a question surviving institutional reform: how closely do my explanations match my actual reasons for choosing?

Self-examination is not constant self-suspicion. It seeks a definite discrepancy. I claim to value shared work but tolerate delays only from my favorite participant, or claim to investigate while collecting convenient confirmations. Discrepancies can be named and corrected without making a person a final ethical diagnosis.

## VII. Wang Yangming: knowledge is tested in action

Wang Yangming develops the unity of knowledge and action and liangzhi, innate ethical knowledge. The SEP account explains its polemical point: verbal acknowledgment of goodness is not complete moral knowledge. It also considers objections: correct beliefs and appropriate motivation do not always guarantee performed action.

For comparison, ask what someone knows when they repeat a rule freely but act otherwise systematically. One answer permits a gap: the rule is known and will fails. Another strengthens "knowing": deep ethical understanding includes direction of action. A correct answer then only begins knowledge.

No single modern test resolves the distinction. Test whether someone names a norm and we selected the first meaning beforehand. Judge solely by conduct and actual obstacles risk becoming absence of understanding. The dispute requires specifying what we seek to cultivate and assess.

Our hypothetical case makes this concrete. Two people promised learners materials, which were not received on time. One preferred a convenient activity and did nothing. The other prepared delivery, found access blocked, and reported the obstacle. The expected result is absent in both, but actions differ. Assess understanding solely by outcome and the difference vanishes. Accept intention's assurance alone and actual steps become indistinguishable from attractive descriptions.

We therefore must define assessment's object: naming what is owed, choice's direction, performed action, or achieved effect? Transitions matter but are not automatic. The example neither disproves nor proves Wang's doctrine; it clarifies our objection. A general complaint about knowledge's distance from life becomes a definite question about what was unrealized and why.

Wang must not become a preacher of every impulse. “Inward” is not “whatever I presently want.” Convenient desire is not ethical knowledge. The polemic concerns separation of study and life, not abandoning discernment of self-interest and care.

Zhu Xi likewise should not be caricatured as permitting only reading and banning action until the world’s complete encyclopedia is known. That makes the dispute too easy. It concerns education’s structure and reliability’s source: what restores ethical clarity and strengthens it in concrete action?

Retaining both questions is more productive than naming a winner through a slogan. Circumstances must be known so intention does not become blind; action is needed so learning does not become endless postponement. Their grounds differ and should not be erased by convenient synthesis.

## VIII. The system disputed: is a cultivated person enough?

Disagreements concerned more than inward paths. Chen Liang challenged Zhu Xi’s synthesis as insufficient for complex public affairs and emphasized laws and common benefit. The IEP overview shows Song thought exceeding Zhu Xi’s chosen lineage of transmitting the Way.

Our analysis returns to the opening. Intention may not yield good results if a situation is misunderstood. Yet one ethical person’s accurate understanding does not automatically order relations among many. Relationships must allow participants to consider shared measures, learn consequences, and correct violations.

Personal virtue and social form then differ substantively. One concerns perception and choice; the other possibilities and constraints between participants. They can support each other, but “good” does not describe rules and “rule” does not characterize intention.

A system promising one foundation for everything gains explanatory power while risking blindness to what does not fit. Every discrepancy can be attributed to an individual deficiency, leaving the system unrevised. Complexity’s objection matters even to readers attracted by Neo-Confucian coherence.

Abandoning shared foundations is insufficient too. Practical adaptability may merely serve powerful interests. Whose benefit counts as common, and why is a convenient outcome justified? Neither elevated theory nor sober experience wins simply: each must answer what the other reveals.

Transmission raises a similar problem. Systems help learning: terms acquire links, texts order, questions sequence. Yet curricula should not conceal their construction’s history. Treat recognized predecessors as all existing thought and alternatives and real disputes disappear.

Contemporary reading needs two movements. Understand the system internally: why li and qi differ, how cultivation relates to knowledge, why classics guide. Then revisit what it may constrain: other thinkers, unequal circumstances, and application difficulties. The second does not cancel the first; without internal understanding, criticism easily contests our simplified picture.

This respects philosophical effort without promising one coherent worldview resolves every task. Mature reading names both a teaching's explanatory possibilities and an unanswered question. Tradition becomes thought's workplace rather than terms confirming our authority.

## IX. Cosmic order and right action cannot be joined through a similar word

Order, formation, and action meet in several philosophies, but connections have different grounds. Comparison helps where "principle" creates false sameness. What counts as order, how is it recognized, and why does it oblige?

The academic account of Spinoza's Ethics I permits comparison through separate existence's non-self-sufficiency. His single substance, however, does not translate li. Li describes concrete principle or pattern within another system. Name both a "single foundation" and almost everything remains to be learned: its function, relation to differences, and ethical consequences.

Wang opens another comparison. Epictetus's Enchiridion, §51, poses the philosopher's difficulty of understanding a norm's proof without applying it. This neighbors knowledge–action unity: what counts as learning achieved? It does not establish liangzhi or adopt Neo-Confucian metaphysics. Similar criticism remains substantive without a common definition of moral knowledge.

Plato's Phaedrus, 275d–276a, again distinguishes written words from living capacity to respond. A question relevant to classics and gewu appears: how does a preserved formula become understanding of a new case? Platonic dialogue is not Song commentary. Teachers and difficult reading do not make norms' origins or education's structure identical.

This map retains the opening gap. Someone can name a rule correctly and misread a case, or intend good while defending bias. Neither metaphysical breadth nor a quotation investigates on their behalf. One useful outcome does not establish interchangeable philosophical foundations either.

Mature comparison need not end in one system. It may end with a sharper question: what must be known for care to receive appropriate form? For Zhu Xi and Wang, this belongs to a

particular educational dispute. Comparison helps us hear it while requiring return to their texts, then to the action for which we are responsible.

## X. Conclusion: order does not relieve us of attention

Neo-Confucianism connects what we readily shelve separately: cosmic structure, human goodness's possibility, education, family, and public action. Its concepts demand patient reading because they work within that connection.

Li should not become a detached instruction, qi a scientifically measured reserve, or gewu pointless staring. Behind them lies understanding how a general ethical direction becomes a particular appropriate act. Zhu Xi and Wang dispute how this capacity develops; caricatures destroy the dispute's meaning.

Contemporary readers need not accept all cosmology beforehand to notice demands for attention and sincerity. Distinguish understanding a tradition from selecting what we take into life. That protects both historical thought and our question against easy answers.

A right word does not make action right. A good feeling does not establish a case understood. Work remains between them: see circumstances, notice vested interests, and respond so care receives definite form.

## What this means in practice

Begin with one situation where a correct formula did not lead to good action. Describe it without judging an entire character: help promised without discovering its content, or a known rule bypassed for personal advantage. These are hypothetical cases, not ancient textual propositions.

Separate questions. What did I consider owed? What actually happened? What circumstance went unchecked? What interest shaped the explanation? Distinguishing principle, realization, and investigation reveals an error's structure without requiring historical cosmology as science.

Next, investigate modestly. Ask a participant, read the actual agreement, clarify time or resource limits. Do not replace this with endless information gathering. Establish what could change a decision. If no observation could alter it, inquiry may merely decorate a predetermined answer.

Choose an action making intention visible: correct allocation, perform a specified portion of a promise, or acknowledge an inconvenient fact. Ethical development cannot readily be assessed through inward speech's depth. Someone may speak subtly of growth while leaving others the same burden.

Check consequences. Was action more appropriate for those affected? Was a boundary preserved? Did information emerge? Investigate again here. Action does not end learning forever; it supplies material for another distinction.

Finally, do not claim to explain another's personality through qi's quality. Practical discussion needs observable acts, conditions, and requirements. Historical language helps understand a tradition; contemporary decisions need grounds participants can discuss and check.

## Key quotation

> *"Making intentions wholly genuine means not deceiving oneself."*

*Great Learning*, commentary on sincerity of intentions, II.B.3, Robert Eno's teaching translation, 2016, printed p. 14. Editorial English translation of our Russian rendering, not a verified published English quotation. This is a classical passage in that version, not Zhu Xi's own words or historical Confucius's signature. Sincerity examines self-deception; confirming feeling's intensity is insufficient.

## Connections across traditions

These are our analytical comparisons. Shared questions and limits are shown; matching formulations alone establish no historical influence.

| Positions | Similarity | Boundary |
|---|---|---|
| Li/qi in Zhu Xi ↔ Spinoza | Isolated existence does not exhaust the picture. | Li and qi are not respectively Spinoza's substance and modes. |
| Wang Yangming ↔ Epictetus, §51 | Explaining a norm does not ensure right action. | Liangzhi and knowledge–action unity do not follow from Stoic criticism. |
| Gewu and jing in Zhu Xi ↔ Aristotle, II.6 | Appropriateness cannot follow a mechanically identical rule. | The ethical mean is not li; gewu is not choosing a portion. |
| Zhu Xi's education ↔ Plato, Phaedrus | Inherited words need acquired understanding. | Song education and Platonic dialectic differ in foundations and order. |
| Zhang Zai ↔ Zhou Dunyi ↔ Great Learning | Worldview and cultivation address human participation. | Cosmic kinship, becoming's diagram, and opposing self-deception connect them differently. |

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## Tags

Neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, Zhang Zai, Zhou Dunyi, Chen Liang, Cheng brothers, li, qi, gewu, jing, liangzhi, xing, qing, heart-mind, principle, pattern, vital force, investigating things, Great Learning, Western Inscription, unity of knowledge and action, sincerity, self-deception, ethical education, classics, cosmology, institutions, Spinoza, Epictetus, Plato, Aristotle, appropriateness

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