

Part One

Introduction



A Brief Biography of Chu Hsi

There is not a Chinese thinker since Mencius (fourth century B.C.) who is better known than Chu Hsi (1130–1200) or who has had more influence on Chinese culture—indeed on East Asian culture—than Chu Hsi.¹ Drawing on ideas raised by his predecessors, Chu developed a systematic metaphysics that dominated the Chinese intellectual world until the early years of the twentieth century. Chu also wrote commentaries on the Confucian Classics, which in the fourteenth century the Chinese government declared orthodox: from then on all candidates for the prestigious civil service examinations, in answering questions on the Classics, were required to accord with Chu Hsi's interpretation of them. And since most Chinese with any education aspired to pass the examinations, most Chinese capable of reading read and tried to master Chu's commentaries. Although some of these people no doubt remained unconvinced by Chu's interpretations of the Classics, few could escape their influence altogether. Chu Hsi has thus cast a long shadow over the literate culture of China for the last eight hundred years.

Chu was born on 18 October 1130 in Yu-ch'i County, Fukien.

1. The following are among the most useful scholarly studies on Chu Hsi: Chan, "Chu Hsi's Completion of Neo-Confucianism"; Chang Li-wen, *Chu Hsi ssu-hsiang yen-chiu*; Ch'ien Mu, *Chu-tzu hsin hsüeh-an*; Fan Shou-k'ang, *Chu-tzu chi ch'i che-hsüeh*; Gardner, *Chu Hsi and the Ta-hsueh*; Morohashi and Yasuoka, *Shushigaku taikei*; Schirokauer, "Chu Hsi's Political Career"; and Wang Mou-hung (1668–1741), *Chu-tzu nien-p'u*. In preparing this biography, I have consulted most of these works, particularly the *Chu-tzu nien-p'u*.

The family's native home was Wu-yüan County (in present-day Anhui), but Chu's father, Chu Sung (1097–1143), had moved the family to Yu-ch'i to assume the post of subprefectural sheriff.

Chu Hsi entered elementary school in 1134 at the age of five. In 1140 his father, forced from office because of his outspoken criticism of Prime Minister Ch'in Kuei's (1090–1155) policy of appeasement toward the Jurchen Chin, began to instruct the young Chu at home. Here, for the first time, Chu Hsi was taught the ideas of Ch'eng I (1032–1107), the Neo-Confucian master of the Northern Sung, and the relatively brief canonical texts, the *Greater Learning* (*Ta-hsüeh*) and the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Chung-yung*), which later would become so central to his philosophical program.

When Chu Sung died in 1143, Chu Hsi, following his wishes, continued his studies with three of his father's close friends—Hu Hsien, Liu Tzu-hui, and Liu Mien-chih (whose daughter he would eventually marry). We do not know precisely what Chu studied with these men, but he would later complain that they had been fond of Buddhist teachings as well as Confucian ones, and, in fact, it was while studying under them that Chu began frequenting Taoist and Buddhist schools. According to his own comments, his fascination with Buddhist teachings continued for ten or so years, ending when he was twenty-six or twenty-seven. The degree to which his Neo-Confucian teachings may have been directly influenced by this exposure to Buddhist ideas remains problematic for scholars. But there is little doubt that the vigor with which he would later refute Buddhist teachings was affected by what he personally knew their allure to be. The man usually credited with showing Chu the errors of his Buddhistic ways and bringing him firmly into the Confucian fold is Li T'ung (1093–1163), a friend of his father who had studied under Lo Ts'ung-yen (1072–1135), a disciple of Yang Shih (1053–1135), who, in turn, had studied under Ch'eng I. Chu Hsi visited Li T'ung on four separate occasions (1153, 1158, 1160, and 1162), formally becoming his pupil in 1160.

In 1148, his commitment to Confucian teachings still not altogether firm, Chu Hsi, only nineteen years old, passed the *chin-shih* examination. That he received the degree at so young an age perhaps helps to explain his prodigious scholarly output. For Chu could devote those years that most literate Chinese spent preparing for the civil service examinations to independent scholarship. Hav-

ing passed the examinations, Chu was appointed subprefectural registrar of T'ung-an in 1151, a post he took up in 1153 and held until 1156. He conscientiously supervised the local registers there, promoted education, built a library, strengthened city defenses, and reported on public morality. After leaving this post, he maintained himself in sinecures for roughly twenty years; not until 1179 did he take up another important office.

This period from 1156 to 1179 was extremely productive for Chu the scholar. He wrote and edited about twenty works and, at the same time, developed close associations with the most prominent scholars and philosophers of the day. With Lü Tsu-ch'ien (1137–1181), a devoted friend, he compiled *Reflections on Things at Hand* (*Chin-ssu lu*) (1175), which would later become the primer of Neo-Confucian teachings. He carried on an extended exchange, in letter and in person, with Chang Shih (1133–1180) and Lu Chiu-yüan (1139–1193), largely over aspects of the self-cultivation process: with Chang he discussed the meaning of equilibrium and harmony (*chung-ho*) of the mind (first described in the *Doctrine of the Mean*) and how such states could be attained, and with Lu he debated, most famously at the Goose Lake Temple (1175), the relative importance in the self-cultivation process of “following the path of inquiry and study” (*tao wen-hsüeh*) and “honoring the moral nature” (*tsun te-hsing*). Chu and Lu would never reconcile their philosophical differences, Chu insisting that inquiry and study were essential in guiding the mind to moral rectification, and Lu that the mind is moral of itself and in little need of external guidance. The consequences of these differences were profound: Neo-Confucianism would later split into what has conventionally been characterized as Chu Hsi's school of principle (*li-hsüeh*) and Lu Chiu-yüan's school of the mind (*hsin-hsüeh*).

In 1179, Chu became the prefect of Nan-k'ang (in present-day Chiang-hsi). There his commitment to education continued, evidenced best by his efforts to revive the White Deer Hollow Academy. The “Articles of Learning” (*hsüeh-kuei*) he compiled for the academy reflect his zealous devotion to learning for the sake of moral improvement, not for the sake of worldly success. These “Articles of Learning” were to be extremely influential, serving as a model for academies throughout much of East Asia down through the present century.

The well-known invitation Chu extended to Lu Chiu-yüan to lecture at the White Deer Hollow Academy in the spring of 1181 points up Chu's interest in making the academy a place of serious intellectual reflection for students—after all, Lu was an outspoken philosophic rival of Chu's. In fact, so pleased was Chu in the end with Lu's lecture, which treated the distinction between righteousness and profit, that he asked Lu to write it down and later had it inscribed on stone.

Chu Hsi's term at Nan-k'ang expired in 1181. In 1182 he assumed the duties of intendant for ever-normal granaries, tea, and salt for Eastern Liang-che (present Chekiang), an area suffering from famine. To alleviate the suffering, he instituted the community granary (*she-ts'ang*), the purpose of which was to provide grain loans to peasants at low rates of interest. Unlike Wang An-shih's (1021–1086) more famous "green sprouts" program, the community granary system lent the peasantry grain, not money, and was to be managed voluntarily by prominent men on the village level, not by the state. It is difficult to know what success Chu might have had with the community granary system, for he had but brief opportunity to implement it. In 1182, having indicted T'ang Chung-yu (ca. 1131–1183), the prefect of T'ai-chou and a relative of the prime minister, for misconduct in office, he found himself an enemy of some of the most powerful men in the empire. Not only Chu but the entire school of thought with which he was associated, called Tao-hsüeh ("Learning of the Way") by contemporaries, now came under attack by high-ranking supporters of T'ang. Shortly thereafter Chu Hsi withdrew from office.

Chu would later hold, albeit briefly, two other important posts, serving as prefect of Chang-chou (Fukien) in 1190–1191 and prefect of T'an-chou (in present-day Hunan) in 1194. In late 1194 he was invited to become lecturer-in-waiting at court, where he lectured to Emperor Ning-tsung on the short Classic, the *Greater Learning*. This lectureship lasted a mere forty-six days, for Chu became embroiled in a conflict with the influential imperial relative Han T'o-chou (1151–1207) and returned to Fukien. The attack on Tao-hsüeh, as a result, now intensified. In 1195 political adversaries equated it with Wei-hsüeh, "false learning," and a year later the emperor himself proscribed the teachings of the school.

During his lifetime, Chu Hsi declined many more offices than he

accepted; he served in public office for only nine or so years, much of the rest of the time holding temple guardianships. Chu's apparent unwillingness to serve has been called the defensive reaction of an insecure person.² More likely, it was the considered reaction of a person who in his childhood had witnessed his father's abrupt and painful dismissal from office over a policy difference with a powerful statesman. Perhaps, too, Chu simply wished to avoid what he viewed as the corrupt and unethical politics of the day; to serve when the Way did not prevail might have compromised his moral purity. Moreover, Chu may have also calculated that he simply would be of better use to society transmitting the Way to others in classrooms and writings than in holding government office. In any case, by avoiding office Chu Hsi was no doubt able to devote a great deal more time to teaching and writing.

This, of course, is not to suggest that Chu had little interest in the political order. For not only did he acquit himself with distinction in the offices he did hold but he also submitted sealed memorials to the throne (in 1162, 1180, and 1188) and even went to the capital for personal audiences with the emperor (in 1163, 1181, and 1188). Certain themes ran through these memorials and personal audiences: the emperor, Chu argued, must rectify his mind and only then might the empire become tranquil; the military must be made strong so that the central plain, the traditional heartland of Chinese civilization, might be recovered from the Chin (1115–1234), who had settled there in the early twelfth century; and the emperor must establish sound personnel policies, selecting only worthy and talented men for government service. Finally, we should not forget that although Chu may have spent much of his life developing and teaching a highly elaborate program for the self-cultivation of the individual, his assumption and hope were that the moral cultivation of the individual would lead to social and political harmony.

Still, teaching and writing were clearly dearest to Chu. Throughout his life he exhibited an almost missionary zeal to pass the Confucian Way on to others. The numerous years he spent discussing Confucian teachings with students, the record of which is found in the *Conversations of Master Chu, Arranged Topically*, attest strongly to

2. Schirokauer, "Chu Hsi's Political Career," p. 188.

his commitment to transmitting the Way; so too do his voluminous writings, particularly his many commentaries on the Confucian Classics, which he hoped would help to illuminate the Way embodied in the sacred canon.

Of all his writings perhaps the most significant and influential were the commentaries on the Four Books—the *Greater Learning*, the *Analects* (*Lun-yü*), the *Book of Mencius* (*Meng-tzu*), and the *Doctrine of the Mean*—known collectively as the *Collected Commentaries on the Four Books* (*Ssu-shu chi-chu*).³ Convinced that the kernels of Confucian teachings were to be found in these four works, Chu spent much of his adult life reflecting on their philosophical significance and preparing commentaries for them. As a result of the great weight he gave them, a major shift in the Confucian tradition occurred: from Chu's time until the early twentieth century the Four Books would be the essential texts in the Confucian curriculum, replacing the long-authoritative Five Classics—the *Book of Changes* (*I ching*), the *Book of Poetry* (*Shih ching*), the *Book of History* (*Shu ching*), the *Book of Rites* (*Li chi*), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Ch'un-ch'iu*). It was the Four Books, together with Chu Hsi's commentaries, that would serve as the basis of the civil service examinations.

Indeed, one of Chu Hsi's most widely recognized achievements, the elaboration of a systematic metaphysics, derived largely from his reading of the Four Books. This reading, in turn, was influenced by ideas advanced by the great Neo-Confucian thinkers of the Northern Sung, men such as Chou Tun-i (1017–1073), Chang Tsai (1020–1077), Ch'eng Hao (1032–1085), and particularly Ch'eng I. The metaphysical synthesis worked out by Chu represented a new

3. Among the many books Chu Hsi wrote, edited, or annotated, in addition to those mentioned in this brief biography, were *The Surviving Works of Messrs. Ch'eng of Honan* (*Ho-nan Ch'eng-shih i-shu*), *An Outline for the Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* (*Tzu-chih t'ung-chien kang-mu*), *An Explanation of the Western Inscription* (*Hsi-ming chieh-i*), *An Explanation of [Chou Tun-i's] Explanation of the Diagram of the Great Ultimate* (*T'ai-chi t'u-shuo chieh*), *Records of the Origins of the School of the Two Ch'engs* (*I-lo yüan-yüan lu*), *Collected Commentaries on the Book of Poetry* (*Shih chi-chuan*), *Original Meanings of the Book of Changes* (*Chou-i pen-i*), *Lesser Learning* (*Hsiao-hsüeh*), *Collected Commentaries on the Elegies of Ch'u* (*Ch'u-tz'u chi-chu*), *A Commentary on the Chou-i ts'an-t'ung-ch'i* (*Chou-i ts'an-t'ung-ch'i k'ao-i*), and *Collected Commentaries on the Book of History* (*Shu chi-chuan*). His numerous essays, letters, prefaces, postscripts, tomb inscriptions, and other literary documents were collected together in the *Collected Literary Works of Master Chu*.

development in Confucian philosophy: it was an attempt to give the traditional aim of Confucian teachings—the moral cultivation of the individual—an ontological foundation. Man could become perfectly moral because the nature with which he was born was itself always moral; his endowment of psychophysical stuff, however, had the capacity—if it was turbid, dense, or impure enough—to obscure the moral nature, and thus it had to be refined if the moral nature was to become manifest. Chu Hsi's program of learning, at the heart of which lay the concept of *ko wu*, "apprehending the principle in things," was intended by Chu to be the means by which man would refine himself and connect with his originally moral nature.

Chu Hsi would continue to polish his commentaries on the Classics and elaborate his philosophical system until his death on 23 April 1200. Nine years later, after Han T'o-chou had passed from the scene and the attacks on Tao-hsüeh had run their course, Chu was honored with the posthumous title Wen. In 1230 he was given the title state duke of Hui; and in 1241 his tablet was placed in the Confucian temple. In the early fourteenth century Chu Hsi's thought was declared state orthodoxy and remained so until the early years of the twentieth century.