

**PREFACE TO THE GREAT LEARNING BY CHAPTER AND PHRASE**  
By Zhu Xi

**Introduction**

“Neo-Confucianism” is a general term used to refer to the renaissance of Confucianism during the Song dynasty following a long period in which Buddhism and Daoism had dominated the philosophical world of the Chinese and also to the various philosophical schools of thought that developed as a result of that renaissance. Neo-Confucianism had its roots in the late Tang, came to maturity in the Northern and Southern Song periods, and continued to develop in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods. As a whole, Neo-Confucianism can best be understood as an intellectual reaction to the challenges of Buddhist and Daoist philosophy in which avowedly Confucian scholars incorporated Buddhist and Daoist concepts in order to produce a more sophisticated new Confucian metaphysics.

The Southern Song philosopher and official Zhu Xi (1130-1200) is known for his synthesis of Neo-Confucian philosophy. However, his concerns went far beyond the abstractions of philosophy; his purpose was to change (and improve, from his point of view) family life, society, and government. To this end, Zhu Xi was active in the theory and practice of education and in the compiling of a practical manual of family ritual.

The document excerpted below is the preface to his commentary on two classic texts, *The Great Learning* and *The Mean*. In this excerpt, Zhu Xi discusses education.

**Document Excerpts with Questions** (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 722-725. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

***Preface to the Great Learning by Chapter and Phrase***  
By Zhu Xi

In the flourishing days of the Three Dynasties [Xia, Shang, and Zhou] ... everyone, from the king's court and feudal capitals down to the smallest lane or alley, had schooling. At the age of eight all children of the king and dukes, on down to the common people, started their elementary learning, in which they were instructed in the [social] disciplines of sprinkling and sweeping, responding to others, and coming forward or withdrawing from [the presence of others] [as recorded in *Analects* 19:12], and in the polite arts of ritual, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and arithmetic. Then at the age of fifteen, starting with the heir apparent and other princes, and down through the legitimate sons of the dukes, chief ministers, grandees, and lower aristocracy to the talented sons of the common people — all started their higher learning, in which they were taught the way of self-cultivation and governance of men through the fathoming of principle and rectifying of the mind. ...

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on  
PREFACE TO THE GREAT LEARNING BY CHAPTER AND PHRASE, BY ZHU XI**

**Questions:**

1. What distinction does Zhu Xi draw between people when he lays out his ideal program of education?
2. What are the purposes of education for all children, from the nobility to commoners in the lanes and alleys?
3. What are the purposes of the “higher learning” that Zhu Xi describes?
4. Do you think that the system that Zhu Xi describes as being typical of the “Three Dynasties” actually existed? If not, why should Zhu Xi say that they did? Does it matter whether such a system really existed in the past?
5. Compare the purposes of learning as described here with the purposes of learning as seen in earlier Chinese texts (such as the *Confucian Analects* and the *Xunzi*) and in the texts of other civilizations.

**Longer Selection**

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 722-725. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

***Preface to the Great Learning by Chapter and Phrase*  
By Zhu Xi**

The Book of the *Great Learning* comprises the method by which people were taught in the higher learning of antiquity. When Heaven gives birth to the people, it gives each one, without exception, a nature of humaneness, rightness, ritual decorum, and wisdom. They could not, however, be equal in their physical endowments, and thus they do not all have the capacity to know what that nature consists in or how to preserve it whole. Once someone appears among them who is most intelligent and wise, and able fully to develop his nature, Heaven is sure to commission him as ruler and teacher of the myriad peoples, so that, being governed and instructed, they may be able to recover their original nature. This is how Fu Xi, the Divine Farmer, the Yellow Emperor, and [the sage kings] Yao and Shun succeeded to [the work of] Heaven, establishing the norm [for all to follow], and how they came to set up the post of Minister of Education and the office of Director of Music.

In the flourishing days of the Three Dynasties [Xia, Shang, and Zhou] their institutions were steadily perfected until everyone, from the king’s court and feudal capitals down to the smallest lane or alley, had schooling. At the age of eight all children of the king and dukes, on down to the common people, started their elementary learning, in which they were instructed in the [social] disciplines of sprinkling and sweeping, responding to others, and coming forward or withdrawing from [the presence of others] [as recorded in *Analects* 19:12], and in the polite arts of ritual, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and arithmetic. Then at the age of fifteen, starting with the heir apparent and other princes, and down through the legitimate sons of the dukes, chief ministers, grandees, and lower aristocracy to the talented sons of the common

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on  
PREFACE TO THE GREAT LEARNING BY CHAPTER AND PHRASE, BY ZHU XI**

people — all started their higher learning, in which they were taught the way of self-cultivation and governance of men through the fathoming of principle and rectifying of the mind. This is also how the distinction was made in the gradations of elementary and higher instruction in schools.

Thus widely were schools established, and thus precisely defined was the art of instruction in the details of its sequence and itemized content! As to the reasons for providing this instruction, they followed naturally from the superabundance of the ruler's personal attention to the practice of virtue and did not need to go beyond the constant norms that govern the people's livelihood and everyday needs. This being the case, there was no one without learning in those times, and as to the learning itself, no one would be without an understanding of what was inherent in his individual nature or what was proper to the performance of his individual duties so that each could exert himself to the fullest extent of his energies. This is why, in the great days of high antiquity, good government prevailed on high and beautiful customs below, to a degree that later ages have not been able to attain.

With the decline of the Zhou, sage and worthy rulers no longer appeared, and the school system was not well maintained. The transformation of the people through education became eclipsed and popular customs deteriorated. At that time the sage Confucius appeared, but being unable to attain the position of ruler-teacher by which to carry out government and education, he could do no more than recite the ways of the sage kings and pass them along, in order to make them known to later generations. Thus, for instance, there were such pieces as the *Ritual Matters (Quli)*; *Lesser Ceremonials (Shaoyi)*; *Norms for the Household (Neize)* [chapters of the *Record of Rites*] and *Duties of the Disciples (Dizi zhi)* [from the *Guanzi*], which were only the remnants and byways of the original elementary learning. There was, however, this piece, the *Great Learning*, which followed up what had been accomplished in elementary learning with a view to setting forth the lucid teaching methods of the higher learning. Thus for outward emulation there would be a model great enough to serve as the highest standard of perfection, and for inner cultivation something detailed enough to spell out in full its sequence and contents.

No doubt, among the three thousand disciples of Confucius, none failed to hear his teachings, but it was only Zengzi who got the essential message and wrote this commentary to expound its meaning. Then, with the death of Mencius, the transmission vanished. This work survived, but few understood it. Thereafter came the vulgar Confucian scholarship [of later times], stressing memorization and literary composition, which took double the exertion of the elementary education but was of no real use, and the quietistic and nihilistic teachings of the deviant doctrines [Buddhism and Daoism], which were loftier even than the higher learning (*Great Learning*) but lacked solid substance. Besides these there were the stratagems of expediency and the tactics and calculations [of the so-called Strategists and Realists], all the other theories aiming at worldly power and success, as well as the teachings of the Hundred Schools and myriad splinter groups that confused the world and misled the people, blocking the way to humaneness and rightness. All these were mixed together in great confusion, so that

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on  
PREFACE TO THE GREAT LEARNING BY CHAPTER AND PHRASE, BY ZHU XI**

gentlemen [rulers], alas, could no longer hear the essential teachings of the Great Way, and lesser men were no longer so fortunate as to enjoy the beneficial effects of the ultimate in good government. There were obscurity and obstruction; with the compounding of evils, everything became incurably diseased, until the disorder and destruction reached its extreme in the Five Dynasties [tenth century C.E.].

Yet Heaven's cycle goes on turning, and nothing goes forth without returning [for a new start]. The virtuous power of the Song Dynasty rose up, and both government and education shone with great luster, whereupon the two Cheng masters of He'nan appeared and connected up with the tradition from Mencius [that had been long broken off]. The first truly to recognize and believe in this work, they expounded it to the world and further rearranged the fragmented text so as to bring out its essential message. With that, the method whereby the ancients taught men through the *Great Learning* with the guidance of the classic text of the Sage [Confucius] and the commentary of the Worthy [Zengzi], was once again made brilliantly clear to the world.

Although I am not very clever, it was my good fortune through indirect association [with a teacher among the followers of the Cheng brothers] to hear about this. Considering that the work still suffers some damage and loss, I overlooked my own unworthiness and ineptitude, and went ahead to gather up the fragments, rearrange them, and insert my own ideas here and there to fill in for what was missing and then await the judgment of later gentlemen. Realizing full well how presumptuous this is of me, I know there is no way to escape the blame [for what I have done], but I thought it might not be without some small benefit to our country in educating people and improving customs, and also to scholars as a method of "self-cultivation for the governance of men."

Sixteenth year of Chunxi (1189)  
Second month, *jiazi* day (February 20)  
Zhu Xi of Xin'an [Anhui]