

ZHANG Zai's Theory of Vital Energy

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ZHANG Zai 張載 (1020–1077), one of the so-called Five Masters of the (Northern) Song period,¹ has long been regarded as a forerunner of Learning of the Way (*dao*xue 道學) movement. He lived at a time when Lao-Zhuang Daoism, Huayan Buddhism, and Confucian thought interacted, competed, and were integrated. Confucian intellectuals attempted to revive classical Confucian thought within these vibrant cultural and historical conditions. In particular, Confucians faced strong criticisms from Huayan Buddhism, which enjoyed wide social popularity. Consequently, Confucians took a profound interest in cosmological, ontological, and metaphysical questions, all for the sake of responding effectively to the challenges posed by Buddhist beliefs. ZHANG Zai's philosophical work can best be understood within this broader context. Although ZHANG Zai's philosophy contains a wealth of ideas, two issues stand out most important: the relationship between the Ultimate Void (*taixu* 太虛) and *qi* (氣); and the relationship between heaven as a moral authority and human beings as transformative moral agents, analyzed through an integrated account of human nature. Both of these issues center on the discussion of *qi* and help to illuminate one of the fundamental philosophical problems in the Chinese tradition, namely the connection between condition/state (*ti* 體) and function/application (*yong* 用).

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part provides a brief account of the historical and cultural background of ZHANG Zai's life and the development of the concept of *qi* in Chinese history up to ZHANG Zai's time. The second part discusses the two issues just raised, the relationship between *taixu* and *qi*, and the relationship between human beings and heaven. The chapter concludes with some general comments on the challenges of studying the thought of ZHANG Zai.

¹ The other four are ZHOU Dunyi (1017–1073), SHAO Yong (1011–1077), CHENG Hao (1032–1085), and CHENG Yi (1033–1107).

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ZHANG Zai's Life and Work

ZHANG Zai, whose given name is Zihou 子厚, was born in 1020 in Fenxiang county, near the ancient capital of Xi'an, in the vast plain then known as the Guanzhong region. In his teenage years, Zhang was fond of military affairs and even discussed organizing a military attack. At age 21 he met the famous statesman and literatus FAN Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989–1052). Fan encouraged him to read the *Zhongyong* 中庸: "You can find a great joy in the powerful teachings of Confucianism. Why bother being involved in military affairs (*bīng* 兵)?" (Zhang 1978: 385).² Zhang followed Fan's advice, but unsatisfied he turned to Daoist and Buddhist texts. These texts still did not provide Zhang with the fulfillment he sought so he began to read and lecture on the Six Classics (*liu jing* 六經). His teaching took place in a town called Hengqu 橫渠, where he grew to be very popular, earning the nickname, Master of Hengqu.

Later in life, Zhang embarked upon a political career. After passing through the civil examination system, he was appointed as a county magistrate. At age 49 he was recommended to serve at the imperial court, but due to both conflicts with chancellor WANG Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086) and illness he resigned and moved to a remote village under the Southern Mountain (near Xi'an) (Zhang 1978: 386). According to his biography in the *History of Song*, during this period Zhang devoted himself completely to writing. He lamented what he saw as the decline of Confucianism, claiming that "there have been no true Confucians since the time of Mencius, in a fifteen hundred year span" (Zhang 1978: 368). He famously devoted his life to four vital purposes: "For heaven and earth, to establish heart/mind; for our people, to establish the *dao*; for sages who have gone before, to continue studies that have been cut off; and for all future generations, to initiate great peace" (Zhang 1978: 376). He died impoverished in 1077.

Zhang wrote extensively yet three of his works achieved the most recognition: "Western Inscription" ("Ximing" 西銘), *Rectifying Ignorance* (*Zhengmeng* 正蒙), and *Thesaurus of Principles for the Study of the Classics* (*Jingxue liku* 經學理窟). The "Western Inscription" is a short essay yet is one of "the most celebrated essays in Neo-Confucian literature" (Chan 1963: 495). Originally it was written on the western wall of his classroom. There was also an inscription on the eastern wall, naturally called the "Eastern Inscription" (*dongming* 東銘). These inscriptions were meant to encourage and inspire Zhang's students to engage in the pursuit of learning and they constitute the final chapter of his *Rectifying Ignorance*. The "Western Inscription" was much treasured by ZHANG Zai's two distant nephews, CHENG Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) and CHENG Yi 程頤 (1033–1107). CHENG Hao placed it on the same level as *Mencius*: "The 'Western Inscription' shows that principle is one but its manifestations are many (理一而分殊), which former sages had not expressed. This accomplishment

² All translations of Chinese texts in this essay are by Robin R Wang.

is the same as Mencius' theory of the goodness of human nature; since the time of Mencius nothing like it has been seen."³

ZHANG Zai took the phase *zhengmeng* (rectifying ignorance) from the *Yijing* as the title of his most important work. WANG Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692), a prominent Confucian in the Ming Dynasty, praised the work and even wrote a detailed commentary on it. According to Wang, ignorance is the beginning of knowledge and correcting ignorance is the task for sages. He explains the value of ZHANG Zai's vision as follows:

Although the Yangists and Mohists were popular during Mencius' time, in order to show that Yang and Mo were wrong, Confucians (*ruzhe* 儒者) remained unwilling to allow our *dao* to be wronged. For this reason, they adopted the view that although the Yangists and Mohists could be guided, in order to show that it was necessary to obtain personal insight into Confucian teachings, the import of the teachings was not explicitly developed. Since the Han and Wei dynasties, however, Confucians have acted completely without restraint. . . . This is why *Rectifying Ignorance* had no choice but to be different. (Wang 1978: 407–408)

WANG Fuzhi proclaimed that the greatest accomplishment of *Rectifying Ignorance* is to guide travelers onto a correct, smooth, and broad path, avoiding dangerous traps:

It is like the ink line for the carpenter or the full draw of the bow for the archer. Although one's strength has not reached its limit and one's cultivation has not yet matured, and one sees that ascending to heaven is difficult and cannot be reached, it is the case that if one's aim is set on it then it can be reached and if one's aim is not set on it then it can never be reached! Cultivating away from ignorance is the self-determined goal of sages. The excessive poisons of perverse theory can not distract them from it. This is known as rectifying ignorance. (Wang 1978: 410)

Although ZHANG Zai's *Thesaurus of Principles for the Study of the Classics* is a collection of teaching notes from his early years, it is a crucial guide to Zhang's thought. This work reveals the development of his ideas and lays out the fundamental basis for his thought. Unfortunately, this book has often been overlooked.

During ZHANG Zai's time there were three rival philosophical schools: *Xinxue* 新學 (New School), *Guanxue* 關學 (School of Guan), and *Luoxue* 洛學 (School of Luo) (ZHANG Dainian 1978: 10). *Xinxue* was led by a political reformer, WANG Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086), who promoted a new interpretation of the Classics. His teaching was directed toward reform of the Song political system. As a result, the philosophical notion of transformation (*bian* 變) had great importance in his teaching. *Guanxue* refers to ZHANG Zai's teachings. The term "Guan" 關 is simply a geographical designation for the Guan region where ZHANG Zai came from. *Luoxue* defines the teachings of the Cheng brothers. Like the word Guan, Luo 洛 refers to the region of Luo where the Cheng brothers lived. These three schools share many similar concerns yet they differ on some basic understandings of the world and society. ZHANG Zai was much more sympathetic to WANG Anshi's New

³ Zhang (1978: 387).

School than the Cheng brothers were, particularly on the issue of change and transformation. Historically there were many stories about the sweet and sour relationship between the School of Guan and the School of Luo. The former was more interested in astronomy, medicine, and practical ritual systems. The later was more interested in conceptual cultivation and meditation (ZHANG Dainian 1978: 12). Some of these conflicts are documented in ZHU Xi's work, particularly in his *Reflections on Things at Hand* (*Jinsi lu* 近思錄). The schools represent two fundamental constructions of the universe. For the Guan School, *qi* has primacy in all existence and is the foundation of all beings; for the Luo School, *li* 理 (principle) is the ultimate being animating all existence. This difference is represented in the so called debate between *qi* and *li*, one of the central debates in Neo-Confucian philosophy.

Qi in Historical Context

ZHANG Zai's philosophical thought has been characterized as "Qi Learning" (*qixue* 氣學), and his original contributions to Confucian thought are rooted in his understanding and application of the concept of *qi*. Through a construction and articulation of this centuries-old concept, ZHANG Zai helped to bring classical Confucian thought to a new stage of development and to defend to against the challenges from Daoism and Buddhism.

Qi is one of the most important and widely interpreted concepts in Chinese intellectual history. As a shared notion underlying all schools, *qi* is believed to be a dynamic, all-pervasive, and all-transforming force animating everything in the universe. The air one breathes, the force that drives the flow of blood, the food one eats, the strength of one's mind, the flow of one's thoughts, the deepest urges of one's heart—all of these are understood in terms of *qi*. Thus *qi* extends across realms that might otherwise be divided in the spiritual, mental, or physical. According to John Major, "*qi* is both process and substance and comes into being as the concrete manifestation of spacetime" (Major 1993: 27).

The graph for *qi* can be traced back to oracle bone inscriptions, but it functioned as a verb and adjective in its earliest usages, not as a noun. The structure of the character for *qi* consists of three parallel lines, just like the Chinese numerical word, "three" (三). It may have been grounded in the observation of morning dew transforming into the lines of steam under the sun. As the image of *qi*, it captures the appearance of flowing clouds. The early second century dictionary, *Explaining Simple and Analyzing Compound Characters* (*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字) defines *qi* as the movement of clouds. However, the meaning and function of *qi* developed over time.

There were three waves of *qi*-usage from pre-Qin to Song times.⁴ During the Qin-Han period, the first wave focused on the classification of *qi* through

⁴ Li (1990) defines these three aspects as a logical development.

discussions of the cosmos. In the Wei-Jin period, the second wave explored the causality of *qi*, which arose from debates on basic ontological questions. During the Song and Ming dynasties, the third wave clarified the metaphysical articulation of *qi* through the relationship between *qi* and *li* (principle). ZHANG Zai represents this third wave.

The first wave of *qi*-usage attempted to classify categories (*lei* 類) of *qi*. The question was the relationship of *qi* to *dao*, *tian*, and particular aspects of human life. At this stage, *qi* was most often used in the discussion of cosmology based on observation. *Qi* was considered the most basic element in the universe of which all existence is formed. In the *Zuo Tradition* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳), *qi* has six manifestations (*liu qi* 六氣): *yin*, *yang*, wind, rain, dark, and bright (*Zuozhuan* 1991: 1053). These *qi* are the *qi* of the sky or seasons and are one of many observable natural phenomena.

Qi also offers an intelligible explanation of events. In *Discourses of the States* (*Guoyu* 國語) there is a description of earthquakes that took place in the region of the Jing 涇, Wei 渭, and Luo 洛 rivers during the second year (780 BC) of the reign of King You 幽 of the Western Zhou. Senior Zhou minister, BOYANG Fu declared that the Zhou was doomed to collapse and explained why:

The *qi* of heaven and earth cannot lose their order. If their order vanishes, people will be disoriented. *Yang* was concealed and could not get out, *yin* was trapped and could not rise, so an earthquake was inevitable. Now earthquakes around the three rivers are due to *yang* having lost its place and being pinned down by *yin*. *Yang* is forsaken under *yin* and the source of the rivers has been blocked. If the fountainhead of the rivers is blocked, the country will definitely collapse. If water and the land lack nourishment then the people will lack resources for use. If the Zhou is not to be destroyed, what else might be relied upon? (*Guoyu* 1994: 22)

Although this passage explains a natural occurrence, it also highlights an intrinsic relationship between nature and political systems.

The concept of *qi* did not take a prominent role in classical Confucian texts such as the *Analects* or *Mencius*. However, *qi* is closely associated with a person's moral disposition as a part of cultivation. Moral cultivation, more accurately *xiushen* 修身 (cultivation of the body), consists in nourishing a three-dimensional interconnected network or system of *xing*, *qi*, and *shen*: one must pay attention to what is happening in one's physical bodily parts (*xing* 形); to where *qi* is flowing from or to; and to one's spirit (*shen* 神), which involves one's thoughts, emotions, and behavior. *Qi* is able to unite all three; it fills or energizes the bodily form and is directed by *shen*. *Xiushen* is, above all, the physical cultivation and moral expansion achieved through the refinement of *qi*.

The word *qi* appears in the *Analects* six times. The most important usage is in the combination of the word *xue* 血 (blood) with *qi*. According to the earliest received medical text, the *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor* (*Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經), *xueqi* is the spirit of a human being yet it also has a material and corporeal foundation. According to the *Analects*, *xueqi* permeates human life differently at different stages:

There are three things which a gentleman is on his guard against. In his youth before his *xueqi* has settled he is on his guard against lust. Having reached his middle age, when the *xueqi* has finally hardened, he is on his guard against strife. Having reached old age, when *xueqi* is already decaying, he is on his guard against avarice. (*Analects* 16.7)

Obviously guarding against lust, strife, and avarice—all caused by the impact of disordered *qi*—has moral implications. The movements of bodily *qi* have an important bearing on one as a moral agent.

The *Mencius* describes a special kind of *qi* which is: “the greatest and the strongest; if it is nourished in rightness without any obstacle, it fills the space between heaven and earth.” This *qi* is immense and vigorous, so it is described as flood-like (*haoran* 浩然). This flowing *qi* has the capacity to regulate thoughts, intentions, words, and actions. Hence it must be refined in accordance with rightness. There is a threefold dynamic bond in one’s moral aptitude: the heart/mind (*xin* 心), the intentions (*zhi* 志), and *qi*. This bond forms one’s interior life: the *qi* mediates heart/mind and intentions. To secure its quality, the *qi* must come from the heart/mind, but it must also be amassed in sufficient quantity to ensure it has the physical strength to motivate one’s intentions. When this flood-like *qi* originates from the heart/mind and fills the whole body, one’s intentions are ready to engage in moral action, including having courage. “*Qi* is what pervades and animates the body and intention is the commander of *qi*” (*Mencius* 2A.2).

Qi is a prime mover in both one’s moral and physical life. One interesting assumption in classical Confucian teachings is that a human being is a flexible and transformative creature in its anatomy. It is *qi* that makes this transformation possible. If *qi* is a basic element of every existence and its dynamic function manifests in *qi*’s transformation, then *qi* in human life should also be cultivated and refined to its fullest. This seed of taking one’s moral life as a life of *qi* transformation grew in Confucian teachings during the Han and Tang dynasties and reached its fruition in Neo-Confucian philosophy, especially in ZHANG Zai’s thought in the Song.

Qi is also the ultimate force for living things. *Qi* gives life: when *qi* declines one will become sick; when *qi* is lost, one will die. *Qi* is a complex of different energies, each animating and controlling various aspects of human life. This is how the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 depicts it:

Human beings are able to see and hear with discernment and are able to protect their own bodily parts. Human beings can bend and stretch their one hundred joints. In their discrimination they are capable of distinguishing white from black and beautiful from ugly. In their intelligence they are capable of distinguishing similarity from difference and clarifying right from wrong. How can human beings do so? This is because *qi* fills their body, and spirit (*shen* 神) is in command. (*Huainanzi* 1998: 36)

The second wave of *qi*-usage emerged from ontological debates in the Wei-Jin and Tang periods. *Qi* was taken as a way of explaining cause and effect (*yinguo* 因果). The question was whether *qi* could be the reason for all existence. In his commentary on the *Daode jing*, WANG Bi 王弼 (226–249), an early figure associated with Profound Learning (*xuanxue* 玄學), interprets *wu* 無 (not-having

[characteristics]) as the foundation of *you* 有 (having [characteristics]) which is then further extended to all things. WANG Bi comments on Chapter 42 of *Daode jing*: “The myriad things and myriad forms all return to one. By what do they return to one? By not-having . . . there is one, there is two, and these then generate three, from not-having to having. . . . Hence, I know what controls the generation of the myriad things. And although they have myriad forms, they are all equally infused with *qi*” (Wang 1991: Chapter 42). In this progression, *qi* falls in the realm of having and so is distinct from not-having. WANG Bi's theory elevates *qi* to an ontological level. The issue of *qi* is no longer simply the explanation of observable natural events or the processes of the cosmos but rather the basic nature of existence and the universe. WANG Bi also treats *qi* as the subject of motion (*dong* 動) and rest (*jing* 靜). This articulation had a profound impact on how later thinkers described the movement of *qi*.

GUO Xiang 郭象 (d. 312), also a major Profound Learning figure, inherited WANG Bi's interest in discussions on not-having and having and developed it into a more coherent and detailed argument. For GUO Xiang, if *you* comes from *wu* then where does *wu* come from? He maintained that *wu* and *you* are not in a relation of linear generation or sequence such that *wu* gives birth to *you*; rather they are together in a state of transformation. In other words, *wu* and *you* are always intertwined in all beings. GUO Xiang makes use of *qi* to establish this bond between *wu* and *you*. It is because of *qi* that things exist in myriad forms yet this *qi* can lead to change, so that *wu* can become *you*. He states, “There is one *qi* but myriad forms; there is change and transformation but no death or birth.” *Wu* is not nothing because it still contains *qi*. He explains, “Even though the changes and transformations constantly replace each other, their *qi* originally is one” (Guo 1961: 629, 951). Clearly *qi* is the reason for the existence of *you*; nevertheless *qi* is also the cause for *wu*. In other words, *qi* explains both the coming into and going out of existence of particular beings. In this second wave, *qi* gained an ontological function as the ground for all things.

However this account of *qi* brought out a moral enigma, especially for Confucian teachings. The interjection of *qi* into the moral field raises a predicament. If a human being is nothing but the movement of *qi*, then is there any constancy in one's moral life? What about the Confucian teachings on the reverence for the continuity of tradition and ritual? These questions were left to the Confucians in Song Dynasty.

The third wave of usage of *qi* emerged in discussions of the relationship between *qi* and *li* 理 during Song and Ming dynasties. *Qi* was formulated within the attempt to “clarify principle” (*mingli* 明理). The question was how *qi* could be the ultimate source of the universe and human minds, especially in relation to moral cultivation. This understanding of *qi* theory is an integration of Qin-Han cosmology and Wei-Jin ontology through an interplay between Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. ZHANG Zai's “theory of *qi*” lays out the foundation for this new paradigm for the articulation of *qi*.

ZHANG Zai's Metaphysical Construction: *Qi* and *Taixu*

Qi had already gained a vital role in understanding the universe and in interpreting classical texts well before ZHANG Zai's time. However, Buddhist thinkers, such as Zongmi 宗密 (780–841), the fifth of the five masters of Huayan Buddhism,⁵ critically questioned whether *qi* could properly explain the pre-Qin intellectual spirit and how *qi* could provide a solid foundation for moral theory and practice. These objections applied to the basis of Confucian moral cultivation: what are the ontological and metaphysical grounds which Confucian moral teachings rest on? In other words, the Buddhist perspective challenged the Confucians to justify their vision of moral cultivation at a much deeper level, appealing to ontological and metaphysical grounds. This is the historical and conceptual task that confronted ZHANG Zai. Although this context is often only implicit in his writings, he does occasionally explicitly single out Buddhism (as *shijia* 釋家 or *futu* 浮屠) and Lao-Zhuang 老莊 Daoism (Zhang 1978: 8, 26).

ZHANG Zai's philosophical investigation makes a connection between *tian* (heaven) and humans. He employs the notion of Ultimate Void (*taixu* 太虛) to characterize *tian*. The term "*taixu*" is ambiguous. It perhaps originated in *Zhuangzi* and refers to absolute existence without any forms. It can even loosely be seen as space itself. *Taixu* is a specialized expression in ZHANG Zai's works. It operates in multiple ways hence its meaning has generated a complex debate in current scholarly research in China (Ding 2001, 2002).

Understanding *taixu* is the key to understanding ZHANG Zai's thought. In the opening chapter of his best-known work, *Correcting Ignorance*, he claims "From *taixu* there is the name *tian* (heaven); from the transformation of *qi*, there is the name *dao*. Combining Void and *qi* there is the name *xing* (nature/disposition); combining *xing* and consciousness, there is the name *xin* (heart/mind)" (Zhang 1978: 9). This passage articulates a process that moves from heaven to *dao*, to nature/disposition, and then to heart/mind. In this conceptual framework, *taixu* comes first in the construction of human beings and their world.

Zhang asserted that *taixu* is the ultimate and absolute. This is in line with traditional views on the Ultimate Void, even those that are Buddhist and Daoist, but Zhang said, "*taixu* has no form and is the fundamental condition of *qi*" (ibid.: 7). He objected to Daoist and Buddhist portrayals of emptiness and not-having and insisted that *taixu* is not a state of complete absence but rather is replete with *qi*. This view echoes Guo Xiang's ontological concern, but Zhang disagreed with Guo's claim that *taixu* produces or generates *qi*. ZHANG Zai's view also goes against Laozi's view of the myriad things coming from *wu*, such that one gives rise to the other in a liner sequence. According to Zhang: "The Void (*xukong* 虛空) is *qi*. It is having and not-having, hidden and manifest,

⁵ The other four masters are Dushun 杜順 (557–640), Zhiyan 智儼 (602–668), Fazang 法藏 (643–712), and Chengguan 澄觀 (738–839). For some of Zongmi's criticisms, see Zongmi (1990: 342–346).

numinous and transforming” (ibid.: 8). Zhang asserts that *taixu* contains *qi*. He is thus opposed to the Daoist and Buddhist equation of *taixu* and literal nothingness and emptiness, an equation he regarded as the “hole in the net” of their arguments. This is how he makes a case to contend with both teachings: “If it is said that the Void (*xu* 虛) can generate *qi* then it implies that the Void is infinite and *qi* is finite. This is the separation of fundamental state/condition and function (*tiyong* 體用). It plunges one’s understanding into Laozi’s naturalist view that ‘something comes from nothing,’ and fails to recognize the amorphous oneness of having and not-having” (ibid.). The problem with Laozi’s belief is that it devises two distinctive realms: the Void and the myriad things. For Zhang, the Void and things have different abilities: “things have their own form and the Void has its own character. Myriad things and the Void, heaven and human beings are not constantly interdependent. This belief tumbles one’s understanding into the Buddhist trap, that mountains, rivers, and earth are all illusions” (ibid.). For Zhang, the problem with the Buddhist view is that it does not really comprehend the *dao* and is unable to see that all things are the functions of *dao*, and so ultimately separates fundamental state (= *taixu*) and its function (= *qi*). As Ira E. Kasoff correctly points out, Zhang chose this term to “undercut Buddhist and Taoist [Daoist] notions of void and non-being” (Kasoff 1984: 37).

The key to grasping *taixu* is its relationship with *qi*. The question is whether *taixu* and *qi* have the same quality (*tongzhi* 同質) or if they have different qualities. If *taixu* has the same quality as *qi*, then *taixu* is only another manifestation of *qi*. If *taixu* and *qi* are different in kind then *taixu* is bound to possess a special power beyond *qi*. Thus the central problem for ZHANG Zai is that *qi* and *taixu* can neither be completely identical nor completely different.

According to Zhang, “*Taixu* has *qi*, therefore it is not a nothing. Hence sages contemplate the ultimate nature and heaven and understand the changes and transformations” (ibid.: 9). *Taixu* contains *qi*, yet it is not equal to or identical with *qi*. This is a central assumption of his ontology and moral teaching, and it enables Zhang to provide a metaphysical and ontological account of the myriad things. When *qi* coalesces, the myriad things begin to exist; when *qi* disperses, the myriad things disappear. This is analogous to the way water freezes when cold but evaporates when heated. These physical changes express a metaphysical necessity: “Ultimate Void cannot exist without *qi*; *qi* must coalesce to form the myriad things; the myriad things must disperse to return to the Ultimate Void” (ibid.: 7).

The key point is that *taixu* is in both the dispersion and the coalescence of *qi*. ZHANG Zai illustrates the interlocking of *taixu* and *qi* by again using the comparison of water and ice. Ice is solid or coalesced water just as *taixu* is coalesced *qi* (ibid.: 8). On a conceptual level, this bond exemplifies one object but two states (*yi wu liang ti* 一物兩體). *Taixu* necessarily permeates *qi* yet it is not equal or identical to *qi*. From a naturalistic point of view, *taixu* and *qi* are the same because they both can be employed to explain the existence of concrete things. Zhang maintains “*Taixu* has no form but is the fundamental state (*benti*

本體) of *qi*. The coalescence and dispersal of *qi* give rise to change in, and the form of, the myriad things” (ibid.: 7). *Qi* is the source for diversity and transformation in the universe. This interdependence of *taixu* and *qi* is an interface of the ultimate with concrete and multitude phenomena. This position enabled ZHANG Zai to resist the Buddhist view that the myriad things are only illusions, a view he thinks follows from an inability to integrate emptiness and concrete things (or state and function), resulting in the reduction of concrete things to mere nothingness:

Buddhists are preposterous and arrogant to discuss only the nature of heaven but do not know the vast field of heaven’s functions. Accordingly they even use six roots (*liugen* 六根) to describe the cause of heaven and earth. Yet meanings cannot be explained in this way so they falsely charge that heaven, earth, sun and moon are all delusions. (Ibid.: 26)⁶

As a result, ZHANG Zai thought that Buddhism weakens one’s will in ethics and renders one unable to apprehend the full greatness of *taixu*.

From a moral value point of view, *taixu* is quite different from *qi*. ZHANG Zai ascribes a moral importance to *taixu* as heavenly virtue (*tiande* 天德): “Heaven and earth take *xu* 虛 (the Void) as virtue. The perfect goodness is the Void. The Void is the source of heaven and earth. Heaven and earth come from the Void” (ibid.: 326). *Taixu* exists in all tangible beings through *qi* yet *taixu* is beyond all perceptible reality including *qi*. In other words, *taixu* is raised to become the metaphysical source and ontological basis for Confucian moral cultivation; in this aspect, *taixu* is beyond all kinds of *qi*, existing as a constant and transcendent being. This metaphysical and ontological footing validates the Confucian value system, supports its moral position and responds to the Buddhist objections.

ZHANG Zai still needed to explicate how an ontological being, *taixu*, relates and interacts with *qi*, a fluctuating and diversified existence, in order to give an inclusive account of this Confucian moral ground. To carry out this maneuver, he drew on the *Yijing*, specifically three interrelated notions, *dao*, the numinous (*shen* 神), and *yin* and *yang*. He writes: “The numinous is the virtue of *tian*; transformation (*hua*) is the way of *tian*. Virtue is its state (*ti* 體) and *dao* is its function (*yong* 用). These are united through *qi*” (ibid.: 15). The implication is that because heavenly virtue is numinous, therefore if *taixu* is heavenly virtue, then *taixu* is numinous. Again referring to the *Yijing*, he writes, “*Qi* has *yin* and *yang*. Their gradual progressive movement is transformative; their coming together as one, the outcome of which cannot be predicted, is numinous” (ibid.: 16). The numinous quality described here is the result of the movement of *yin* and *yang*. In this sense, *taixu* is numinous because it contains *qi*. For ZHANG Zai, the numinous quality relates to *qi* and the transformative quality relates to *qi*’s movement.

⁶ The “six roots” refers to the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and intention (*yi* 意).

According to the *Yijing*, “One *yin* and one *yang* are called *dao*” (一陰一陽謂之道). ZHANG Zai explains this statement through a detailed interpretation of the properties of *yin* and *yang*. *Qi* has two modes of existence: *yin* and *yang*. *Yin-yang* has three properties: *dongjing* 動靜 (motion and stillness); *qushen* 屈伸 (contraction and extension); *jusan* 聚散 (coalescence and dispersal). We can consider the properties of *jusan* as an example. The nature of *yin* is *ju* (coalescence) and the nature of *yang* is *san* (dispersal). These two are in constant interaction. The disposition of *yang* is to spread and disperse; the disposition of *yin* is to coalesce and concentrate. When *qi* coalesces, things begin to exist; when *qi* dispenses things disappear. This understanding is also evident in *Zhuangzi*, *Liezi*, and *Huainanzi*. However it is the association of the movement of *yin* and *yang* with the moral concepts of *xing* 性 (the nature) and *ren* 仁, and *yi* 義 that is new to ZHANG Zai's interpretation. “*Yin-yang* as the way of heaven completes the images of things (*xiang* 象); soft and hard as the way of earth provide models for emulation; humaneness and rightness as the way of human beings establishes the nature.” (ibid.: 48) These comments relate to how the *dao* moves in patterns.

Although there are a few different meanings of *shen* in ZHANG Zai's thinking, this notion is intrinsically connected with transformation (*hua*). According to Kasoff's interpretation, Zhang departed from the traditional meaning of *shen* as spirit and used it in the sense in which it is used in the *Book of Change*: to refer or describe the inscrutable. (Kasoff 1984: 61). The notion of *shen*, like the notion of *hua*, relies on the following presuppositions:

- (i) The myriad things are different (*shu* 殊);
- (ii) These differences are bound to generate resonances (*gan* 感) between things;
- (iii) The resonances between things lead to unity (*he* 合);
- (iv) Unity is possible because things all come from one (*taixu*).

Two interesting views emerge from these claims. First, “Although the myriad things are many, in fact, they are the same thing. There is nothing but *yin* and *yang*. Hence it is known that the changes of heaven and earth are these two starting-points and nothing more” (ibid.: 10). Second, there is the necessity of resonance between different things and the necessity of unity as the result of this resonance. These two points exhibit a concurrence between one and many, planting the seed of ZHU Xi's phrase, “one principle yet multiple manifestations” (理一分殊).

For Zhang, *taixu* as state (*ti*) reveals its function (*yong*) through the transformation of *qi*. This *ti* and *yong* dynamic correlates with the idea of the unity of *taixu* and *qi*. On the one hand, the movement of *qi* as the explanation for all transformation is only a function of Ultimate Void; hence *qi* implies the existence of a constant, eternal, and absolute ground. On the other hand, *taixu* as the state or condition (*ti*) of all existence is always still heavenly virtue. *Taixu* is not a value-free, pure, absolute existence: it possesses a moral value and authority. This construction forms the basis allowing Confucian moral theory to wrestle with Buddhism. One shared effort unique to Neo-Confucians is that they connected

historically naturalistic terms, such as *yin-yang*, with ethically normative concepts. In his commentary on ZHANG Zai's work, WANG Fuzhi claims that "the numinous quality of a person is the manifestation of sageliness. Harmonizing *yin-yang* with unity, going forward and backward, living and dying at the right time, these are natural heavenly principle. Human beings have to apply movement and rest, hardness and softness, humanity and righteousness, to measure it. This is the numinous quality of a sage" (Wang 2000: 151).

ZHANG Zai's *Qizhi* (Quality of *Qi*): A Confucian Project for Moral Transformation

ZHANG Zai's metaphysical articulation of *qi* has a clear mission: elevating and developing Confucian moral teaching to meet the demands of his time. Consequently his reflection on *taixu* turns toward explaining human nature, or the way of human beings (*rendao* 人道). According to ZHANG Zai, human beings are necessarily endowed with heavenly nature (*tianxing* 天性). This view of heavenly nature presupposes at least two aspects of human beings. First, this heavenly nature is shared by heaven and earth, and, more importantly, it is given as ethically good and virtuous. Secondly, this heavenly nature exists prior to any particular human physical form. This is a similar view to the Daoist notion of primordial *qi* (*yuanqi* 元氣). The concept of heavenly nature in human beings supplies ZHANG Zai with a foundation on which to build a Confucian theory of human nature and ethical transformation.

Zhang uses an analogy to demonstrate the universality, particularity, and diversity of heavenly nature: "Heavenly nature is present in human beings just like the nature of water exists in ice. Although water and ice differ, they are one thing. It is like light; because its level is strong or weak, bright or dim, the light functions differently" (Zhang 1978: 22). This highlights an important division. On the one hand, human beings are endowed with heavenly nature, a good and universal property; on the other hand, human beings are so diverse, just like light, some are strong and bright, and others are weak and dim. The reason for this divergence is the psycho-physical nature (*qizhi zhixing* 氣質之性). This is a key term through which Zhang elucidates the myriad differences between human beings in their varying physical constitutions and the pressing need for following the Confucian project of moral transformation. This concept was particularly valued by ZHU Xi. According to Kai-wing Chow, it is "crucial to the Neo-Confucians response to Buddhism," since, "it is this notion of psycho-physical nature that made it possible for the neo-Confucians to reconcile ontological universalism and the Confucian doctrine of social hierarchy based on morality" (Chow 1993: 203–204).

What is the psycho-physical nature? Why is it so central to Confucian teachings? This notion has two meanings: one is "the natural endowments of the individual," the other is "the socially conditioned patterns of these natural

endowments, which is the aggregate that constitutes the character of a person and psychological makeup” (Chow 1993: 207). Confucians, especially Mencius, believe that to be ethical one must conform to one's proper nature (*xing*) which is endowed by heaven. The human body is carefully formed not by a directionless process, but rather as the natural endowment from heaven. However, it is unclear how Mencius relates the heavenly endowment of the “four sprouts” (*si duan* 四端) to his teaching of “flood-like *qi*” (*haoran qi* 浩然之氣). This puzzle was resolved by ZHANG Zai. When *taixu* is manifested in an individual human being it takes two forms: the nature (*xing*) bestowed by heaven and earth (*tian di zhi xing* 天地之性) and the psycho-physical nature: “When human beings have physical form they are bound with psycho-physical *qi*. If they practice goodness they preserve the nature of heaven and earth. Therefore sages transform their psycho-physical *qi*” (Zhang 1978: 23). In this fashion, human nature contains two specific components, the nature of heaven and earth that is universal and corresponds to the heavenly principle and the psycho-physical nature particular to each individual, providing the basis for the uniqueness of individual character, temperament, and abilities. The word *zhi* 質 (basic or raw quality) refers to one's natural and innate disposition and basic stuff which needs to be cultivated and refined. ZHANG Zai describes the *qizhi* as follows: “The psycho-physical is just like what people call the *qi* of the nature. There are various sorts of *qi*: hard and strong; soft and weak; slow and fast; clear and turbid. The *zhi* (quality) is the raw material (*cai* 才)” (ibid.: 281). Zhang further presumed that all living things, such as grass and plants, have *qizhi*, yet “only human beings are able to control themselves and make changes, transforming the nature of past habits and properly managing past customs” (ibid.: 281).

This distinction between these two features of *xing* is what accounts for the presence of diversity and multiplicity, and more significantly, morally good or bad habits and behaviors. ZHANG Zai advanced the pre-Qin debate on the goodness or badness of human nature by linking *xing* (human nature) with the notion of *qi*. It relocates the common dichotomy of good and bad (*shan e* 善惡) in pre-Qin thought to the metaphysical level of *xing* 性 versus *qizhi* 氣質 (nature and *qi*). For ZHANG Zai *qi* can be fast or slow, hard or soft, muddy or clear. Variations in these components create differences in character, temperament, and talent (ibid.: 281). The view that *qi* has different qualities enables Zhang to argue at a metaphysical level that *qi*-quality is the explanation for good and evil, and right and wrong in human beings. The one who has the purest, clearest, and most harmonious *qi* becomes a sage. The most depraved are those who have the most disordered *qi*. According to ZHANG Zai:

Hardness and softness, rashness and calm, talent and the lack of talent are due to the variations of *qi*. If one can be aligned with heaven and not unbalanced, cultivating *qi*, returning to the root and being centered, one will protect his or her nature and be one with heaven. If one's nature is not perfected, then goodness and badness are mixed. If one can accumulate goodness and continue this goodness, then one can become good. Accordingly one can get away from badness and complete *xing*. If virtue (moral

power, *de*) cannot conquer *qi*, human nature and will be commanded by *qi*; if virtue can conquer the *qi*, then human nature will be commanded by virtue. If one can exhaust principle and fully realize one's nature, one's nature will be the virtue of heaven. (Ibid.: 23)

Goodness is a result of the nature of heaven and earth endowed in a human life, but it can be blocked by a low quality of *qi*. The sage will cultivate *qi* with the intention of transforming his own personal *qi* into the *qi* of heaven and earth. Sages are eminently talented and virtuous, as their hearts connect with their bodies that are in turn united with heaven and earth. There is, however, a constant tension within ordinary human beings, that is, the struggle between virtue and *qi*. Virtue has to manage, control, and finally to conquer *qi*.

The logical implication of ZHANG Zai's *xing-qi* alliance is the importance of managing one's quality of *qi*. In his work, *Understanding of the Conceptual Foundation of Yijing*, there is a special chapter devoted to the quality of *qi*. It declares that the quality of *qi* can and should be modified, altered, and rectified. For Zhang, the Confucian tradition of moral self-cultivation is in essence the cultivation and transformation of this *qi*. He provides three justifications for his position. First, "Transforming the *qi*-quality" follows Mencius' proposition of "inhabiting the transforming *qi* and cultivating the transforming body" (ibid.: 265). "If one resides in moral virtue and adheres to rightness then one's heart/mind will be in harmony and the body will be strong. If one's heart/mind becomes harmonious then *qi* will be harmonious; if the heart/mind is rectified then *qi* will be rectified. The transformation of *qi*-quality and rectification of heart/mind are mutually complementary" (ibid.: 275). This transformation/rectification results from the removal of past improper behavior, submitting to rituals, and succeeding in perfecting the quality of *qi* over time.

Second, various *qi* qualities, such as beautiful and ugly appearance, noble and lowly social status, and brevity and longevity of one's life, are a result of one's natural endowment. They have fixed limits (*dingfen* 定分) in both quantity and quality and cannot be altered. Nonetheless, the bad *qi*-quality can be transformed and changed through learning. Most people are driven by crude *qi* and do not learn to refine it, and so they cannot become sages. In antiquity people sought to achieve pureness of the quality of their *qi* through the teachings of masters. Zhang explains this through the reciprocal relation between *qi* and intention: "This is what Mencius claims: 'if *qi* is unified then the intention will move.' The meaning of 'move' refers to transformation. If the intention is unified then *qi* can be transformed. Then learning will understand heaven, and human nature will be completed" (ibid.: 266). Zhang deepens the Confucian emphasis on learning by setting for it a single content and goal: transforming the *qi*. "The most important benefit of learning lies in the transformation of the quality of *qi*. . . so the very first thing for learners is to transform their *qi*-quality" (ibid.: 275). Mature learners also avoid the condition of "deficient intentions and shallow *qi*" (*zhixiao qiqing* 志小氣輕). "Deficient intentions easily lead to changing paths, making no progress in learning. Shallow *qi* will take empty as full, small as great, non-existence as existence, and not knowing as knowing"

(ibid.: 287). This learning is not about conceptual understanding or formulation of absolute truths but rather it concerns improving one's character, disposition, and overall integrity as a person.

Third, the body like other things is a material object (*wu* 物). *Dao* influences the body just as *dao* influences the other myriad things. At the same time, human beings should be given greater consideration: "Priority should be given to cultivating the body and then followed by managing the things around it. There is the sequence between intimate and distant, close and far, first and second. This is proper ritual and rightness" (ibid.: 288). He relates that all living things, such as grass and trees possess varying qualities of *qi*, but only human beings have the capability to change their *qi*-quality.

For Zhang, to be ethical is to transform the *qi* in oneself and to craft the *qi*-quality to fit with the greater flowing *qi* of heaven and earth. Human virtues and heaven-and-earth are united in one *qi*. Cultivation of *qi*, which includes mental and physical refinement, has a great significance in one's ethical life: "If human nature possesses bad *qi* then one will be sick; if *qi* is learned through bad habit it will be harmful. Consequently, one should intensively learn to triumph over bad *qi* and debauched habits" (ibid.: 330). Zhang not merely opens an interior path to join human nature with the presence of heaven, but he also shows that one should actualize, expand, and complete this heavenly-endowed nature in one's spirit, heart/mind, and character, and also in one's flesh and blood. He asserts: "Oneness is the root of *qi*; attacking and taking 攻取 (*gongqu*) are the desires of *qi*. The mouth and stomach want food; the nose and tongue can distinguish malodorous smells. These are manifestations of the nature of attacking and taking. One who knows virtue will recognize repulsive things and not allow desires to burden the heart/mind or let small things destroy the big by losing the root" (ibid.: 22). There is no clear separation between mental *qi* and corporeal *qi*. There are only differences of degree. The cultivation of *qi* involves the wholeness of *qi*. The same *qi* permeates and unites one's body and mind, world and cosmos. For Zhang "understanding the body and other things is the basis of *dao*. If the body can manifest *dao*, this is what makes humans significant. Consequently if *dao* can be manifest in the body, the body becomes noble and valuable; if *dao* cannot be manifest in the body, the body is petty and trivial" (ibid.: 22). This *xing-qi* 性氣 connection had a great influence on later Neo-Confucians, especially ZHU Xi, who stated that "any discussion of *xing* without reference to *qi* will be incomplete; discussion of *qi* without reference to *xing* will be unclear" (Ouyang 2005: 309).

Conclusion: ZHANG Zai's Historical Position and Contribution to Confucianism

What is ZHANG Zai's place in Neo-Confucian philosophy and what is his unique contribution to Confucianism? Historically speaking, ZHANG Zai is a transitional and groundbreaking figure. First, he created an effective and

comprehensive conceptual basis to attack Buddhism and Daoism in defense of Confucianism. This is entrenched in his portrayal of *taixu* and its connection with *qi*. His efforts reveal a divergence between and integration of three dominant thoughts and traditions: Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. Many later Confucians, especially Ming Confucians, did not even bother to debate with Buddhists any more because they were convinced that the Buddhist flaws had been refuted by ZHANG Zai and there was nothing left for them to clarify.

Second, ZHANG Zai re-activated the classical Confucian concern with ultimate transcendence and its implications for human morality, paying particular attention to heavenly endowment in human beings and the transformation of their quality of *qi*. Mencius asserted that knowing one's true nature is the way to know heaven. This bond between heaven and human beings starts within the cultivation of the four sprouts and then reaches out to heaven. ZHANG Zai criticized the Confucians from the Han to Tang periods for overlooking this Mencian approach to knowing heaven: they only "know human beings and not heaven; they seek to be educated but not enlightened." They lacked the lofty desire for the pursuit of the transcendent. Yet he also analyzed the problems of Buddhist and Daoist views which separate the transcendent from the immanent, and state (*ti*) from function (*yong*). Zhang proposed a union between human beings and heaven on a much larger and more inclusive scale. What is from heaven or *taixu* comes down to human beings through the functioning of *qi*. ZHANG Zai's philosophy "proceeds from the existence of the objective universe to the problem of human life" (Tang 1956: 114). This secures a close tie between state and function, cosmological formation, and moral transformation. It delivers a solid structure for the unity of heaven and human beings and differs from the Cheng brothers' position that *xing* (human nature) is *li* (principle).

Third, ZHANG Zai presents a critical element, *qi*, for constructing and sustaining a system of Confucian thinking. His theory of *qi* supplies the resources for conjoining ontological and cosmological concerns with Confucian moral cultivation and justification. Although ZHU Xi listed ZHANG Zai's thought after the Cheng brothers' theory of *li*, Zhu's theory of *li* has a close intangible link with ZHANG Zai's *qi*. For ZHU Xi, there is an interrelated and co-existing connection between *li* (principle) and *qi*. His famous analogy of *li* and *qi* as rider and horse clearly exhibits ZHANG Zai's influence:

The Supreme Ultimate (*taiji*) is *li*, and motion and rest are *qi*. *Qi* moves and then *li* moves too. They constantly rely on each other and never separate. The Supreme Ultimate is like the horse rider and motion and rest are like a horse. The horse carries the horse-rider and the horse-rider rides the horse. (Zhu 1986: 2376)

In this analogy, the Supreme Ultimate is joined with *qi* just like horse and rider, yet the Supreme Ultimate has a priority over *qi* as the rider is more important than the horse. This view was challenged by Ming dynasty Confucians, such as LUO Qinshun 羅欽順 (1465–1547), WANG Tingxiang 王廷相 (1474–1544), and WANG Fuzhi. These thinkers concurred with ZHANG Zai's view, according to

which *qi* is primary and the ultimate reality. This initiated an internal change from the school of *li* to the school of *qi* in Ming Confucianism. Any reader of the Ming Confucians will recognize the significance and impact of ZHANG Zai's *qi* theory on the philosophical history of Neo-Confucian thought.

ZHANG Zai's contribution to Neo-Confucian philosophy in particular, and to Chinese philosophy in general, has often been misconstrued in two ways. Traditional understanding of his thought has often been based on the interpretations of the Cheng brothers, yet their interpretations were often tailored to serve their own theories, resulting in a relative neglect of ZHANG Zai's *qi* theory. Furthermore, due to ZHU Xi's assessment of the Cheng brothers as superior to ZHANG Zai, historians and literati are inclined to hold that the Cheng brothers had a strong influence over ZHANG Zai. In Zhang's biography there is a story known as "taking away the tiger skin" which relates that ZHANG Zai always sat on a tiger skin to give lectures. One day the Cheng brothers came to visit and discuss some weighty philosophical issues with him. The next day, they discussed the *Yijing* and Zhang realized the two Cheng brothers possessed much deeper knowledge of *Yijing* than he did, so he took away the tiger skin, indicating that he quit teaching. After they talked about the essence of *dao* teachings, ZHANG Zai attained another revelation about himself: "I am content and sufficient with my own *dao*; there is no need for me to seek outside ideas" (Zhang 1978: 386). These stories are questionable because they tend to exaggerate the influence of the Cheng brothers on ZHANG Zai's thought. Having adduced several historical examples as evidence, Kasoff concludes: "The fact that Chang's [Zhang's] philosophy became absorbed into the Ch'eng school has obscured that fact that Chang [Zhang] was an independent thinker, one of the founding fathers of Neo-Confucianism" (Kasoff 1984: 147).

In contemporary times, scholars in China have labeled ZHANG Zai a materialist as opposed to an idealist (ZHANG Dainian 1978: 5). This not only oversimplifies Zhang's multifaceted and complex thought but also ignores the importance of his metaphysical concerns. Zhang had a profound appreciation for human being's ambition, need, and ability to search for the transcendent. He shared a view with other Confucian thinkers that the universe is itself not amoral or ethically neutral. On the contrary, it is filled with moral values, sometimes expressed in the terms used in *Yijing* as originating growth (*yuan* 元), prosperous development (*heng* 亨), advantage (*li* 利), and correct firmness (*zhen* 貞), and sometimes expressed in Confucian moral terms as humaneness (*ren* 仁), rightness (*yi* 義), ritual propriety (*li* 禮), and wisdom (*zhi* 智) (Tang 1956: 114). ZHANG Zai's *qi* theory makes the linkage between this moral universe and the moral ought that enables human agency: "The *Change* has three aspects: *yin* and *yang* are *qi*, so they refer to heaven; hard and soft are quality (*zhi* 質), so they refer to earth; humaneness and rightness are virtue, so they refer to human beings" (Zhang 1978: 23). The existence of *qi* in human beings not only offers an explanation of the origins of goodness and badness in the human world it also discloses an opportunity for human beings to connect to an ethical ground which transcends their individual material body (Ding 2000).

ZHANG Zai remains little known in the West. There is only one monograph in English and fewer than five journal essays on ZHANG Zai written since the 1950s. It goes without saying that the appreciation of Neo-Confucian philosophy cannot reach a satisfactory level without due attention to his thought. ZHANG Zai's great concern for transcendent and practical excellence was not just historically significant and decisive in the legendary Neo-Confucian disputes between ZHU Xi and Lu Xiangshan in the Song Dynasty and between WANG Yangming and WANG Fuzhi in the Ming, it also embodies original and momentous insights into how the transcendent can blend with an ever-changing universe of myriad things.

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