

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
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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
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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.