Zhu Xi's Exemplary Politics:
A Preliminary Interpretation Based on Zhu's Commentary on *Great Learning*

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This paper revisits the medieval Confucian tradition, specifically the branch Zhu Xi (1130-1200 A.D.) represents. I argue that Zhu's political vision, which I call "exemplary politics," is relevant to the contemporary world. My project departs from contemporary Confucians' concern with the relationship between Confucianism and democratic institutions. For example, scholars like Stephen Angle and Joseph Chan try to reconstruct Confucianism so that it can better compete with liberal democracy.[1] Angle (2009, chap. 11) recommends a participatory Confucian democracy while Chan (2013, chap. 5) proposes a perfectionist democracy with institutional protection of human rights. Although I appreciate these scholars' attempts to strengthen institutional checks and balances of power within Confucianism, which has been conventionally considered a fatal weakness in Confucian political thought, I want to reorient our attention to what Zhu himself would consider the proper way of politics. For Zhu, good politics stems not from good institutions but from political exemplars, i.e., statespersons whose ethical excellence arouses virtues in the populace, as the populace are attracted by these ethical examples to live a good life. As such, this paper is not concerned with the compatibility problem—that is, I do not ask whether or not Confucianism, as it was executed in imperial China, is still compatible with various forms of modern democracy. Nor do I discuss in detail how to design and enact policies for democracy in a Confucian spirit. Rather, I will argue that Zhu's Confucianism sheds light on an issue that tends to be overlooked in contemporary politics—that is, how statespersons can affect the populace by their *proper personal actions* in various relationships.[2] More broadly, I

[1] Angle (2009, 197) writes: "[M]y aim here is to outline a society that is different from existing models of liberal-democracy in certain ways—and that fulfills the promise of Neo-Confucianism all the better." Similarly, Chan (2013, 23) hopes that his reconstruction of Confucianism is "an attractive philosophical alternative to liberal democratic theory." Both Angle and Chan are just more recent political theorists who compare Confucianism with liberal democracy. In terms of ethics, Roger Ames (2011) and Herbert Fingarette (1972) both have promoted Confucianism against the liberal conception of the disengaged self.

[2] I use the term "personal" rather than "private" because the term "private" conveys a sense that certain behavior does not affect others and thus should be excluded from public evaluation. However, the key premise in Zhu is that no action of the statesperson is wholly private and without public ramifications.

consider Zhu's exemplary politics a valuable model of perfectionism, i.e., a good *method* of promoting virtue in politics, because it relies not on state action, be it coercive or not, but on statespersons' own virtuous actions.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section briefly introduces Zhu Xi. The second section surveys Zhu's metaphysics, politics, and ethics to illustrate his exemplary politics.[3] The third section explicates Zhu's exemplary politics in detail. In the fourth section, I advocate Zhu's exemplary politics as a desirable form of perfectionism in a pluralist democracy because it involves not state action but statespersons' self-presentation as a means for promoting virtue. I also address the problems of moral elitism and excessive moralization of politics, for which contemporary scholars have criticized Confucianism, by applying Zhu's exemplary politics to President Clinton's sexual scandal.

1 Background

Zhu Xi is the master and great synthesizer of medieval Confucianism (also known in the West as Neo-Confucianism).[4] Zhu's influence on the Confucian tradition is comparable to Aquinas's stature in the Catholic tradition. He is a key, if not the key, reference point in the second millennium of Chinese intellectual history. Indeed, the last two imperial dynasties of China, the Great Ming (1368–1644 A.D.) and the Great Qing (1644-1912 A.D.), established Zhu's interpretation of Classical Confucianism (the canon composed of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, all of whom lived in the same period with the ancient Greeks) as state orthodoxy and promoted it as the standard textbook for bureaucratic examinations.

[3] Given the space restraint, I am unable to provide a detailed treatment to Zhu's complex metaphysical system. My aim, therefore, is to provide enough so that Zhu's exemplary politics makes sense.

[4] Scholars tend to call medieval Confucianism Neo-Confucianism, which at times can be confused with more contemporary reconstructions of Confucianism by thinkers like Mou Zongsan, Xu Guanfu, and Tu Wei-ming in the 20th century. For a more accurate and precise reference, I shall call the tradition that Zhu inherited and reconstructed Medieval Confucianism, as it coincided with European Medievalism temporally.

Zhu's greatest innovation is his metaphysical reconstruction of Confucianism, which is built upon several of his Confucian predecessors such as Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, and the Cheng Brothers.[5] All of them were engaging with Daoism and Buddhism of their time. Because Daoism and Buddhism's metaphysics dominated the intellectual landscape of his time, Zhu tried to ground Confucianism in an elaborate metaphysical system and borrowed metaphysical vocabulary from his Daoist and Buddhist opponents.[6] Zhu hoped to revive Confucianism, which had fallen out of political favor compared to Daoism and Buddhism.

Aside from his metaphysical contribution, Zhu also edited and added four books—namely, the *Great Learning*, the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and the *Great Mean*, all of which were composed during the classical period (B.C.) of China—to the Confucian canon. Before Zhu's addition, the cannon consisted of the Five Classics—namely, the *Classic of Odes*, *Classic of Documents*, *Classic of Changes*, *Classic of Rites*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Zhu (2010b, 14:420) thought that, if a student became well-versed in the Four Books he recommended, the student would have the basis for a good understanding of the other classics. As such, he spent much of his life writing and revising his own commentaries on the Four Books, trying to guide students to an accurate interpretation of these Confucian books. The Four Books and Zhu's commentaries on them later replaced the Five Classics, standing out as the core of the Confucian canon for the second millennium of Chinese intellectual history. Accordingly, any exegesis of Zhu's thought requires attention to both the original texts of the Four Books and his commentaries on these texts. This paper follows this rule.

[5] For more on this subject, see Chan (1987, 47–56).

[6] Scholars have different opinions on whether or not Zhu's metaphysics has a basis in classical Confucianism. Ivanhoe (2000, 43) writes that "Zhu employed a set of concepts and a way of thinking that finds few if any parallels in the thought of early Confucians such as Mengzi." Yet, Huang (2014) believes that Zhu's metaphysics can be traced back to classical Confucianism. The eminent Zhu Xi scholar, Qian Mu, holds a similar opinion.

My preliminary reconstruction of Zhu's political vision will focus on three texts related to the book of *Great Learning*—namely, Zhu's *Commentary on Great Learning*, *Questions Concerning Great Learning*, and his own analects, *Conversations of Master Zhu*, especially the portion on Great Learning. The justification for this approach is simple: because Zhu (2010b, 14:420) himself asserts that, to cultivate a Confucian character, students must start with the *Great Learning*, for it teaches "the basic dimensions of self-cultivation and governance." To understand Zhu accurately, I would like to follow his own method as closely as possible.

For translations, I will partially rely on Daniel K. Gardner's English rendition of *Great Learning* and Zhu's *Commentary on Great Learning* in his book *Chu Hsi and the Ta-hsueh: Neo-Confucian Reflection on the Confucian Canon*. In addition, I will use my own translations of *Questions Concerning Great Learning* and *Conversations of Master Zhu* to support my arguments wherever appropriate.

2 Zhu's Political Mission: Restoring Humanity's Inborn Heavenly Pattern

In the preface to his edition of *Great Learning*, Zhu proclaims his perfectionist vision of politics based on his metaphysics. Politics for him is an ethical enterprise for recovering humanity's original perfection:

> This book, the *Great Learning*, explains the system by which people were taught in the school for greater learning in ancient times.
> Since heaven first gave birth to the people down below, it has granted them all the same nature of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. Yet their psychophysical [气禀] endowments often prove unequal; so not all are able to know the composition of their natures and thus to preserve them whole. Should there appear among the people one who is bright and wise, capable of fulfilling the capacity of his nature, heaven would certainly ordain him to act as the sovereign and instructor to the multitudes, commissioning him to govern and teach them so that their natures be restored.
> Thus, Fu Hsi, Shen Nung, Huang Ti, Yao, and Shun [all of whom were legendary sages] carried on for heaven and established the highest point of excellence; and there were the reasons for which the office of the Minister of Education and the

> post of the Director of Music were founded. (Gardner 1986, 77–9; Zhu 2010a, 6:13)

Deriving from his metaphysics, Zhu's vision of politics is restorative. For Zhu, humanity is composed of both an incorporeal pattern (理), a normative essence that defines and constitutes humanity as such, and a psychophysical materiality (气质之禀).[7] By their heavenly birth, all human beings possess the same perfect pattern, which is both their human essence and their normative standard for their self-cultivation and their relationships with others. However, because humanity is also a material being, its actual character is also determined by Qi (气), the concept sometimes translated as "energy-flow" in English. (Here I will translate Qi as material flow to emphasize its materiality.) For Zhu, pattern and material flow are inseparable because the former, being incorporeal, needs the latter to manifest itself in the actual world.[8] In this sense, material flow potentially actualizes heavenly pattern. Unfortunately, as Zhu suggests in his preface, such actualization is often imperfect. Material flow obscures many people's awareness of their inborn heavenly pattern and thus leads them to moral errors. Many no longer know the proper patterns underlying their various relationships. For example, they neglect the needs of their elderly and oppress those under their responsibility. The task of politics, according to Zhu, is to clear these material distortions of humanity and restore its original ethical perfection, i.e., to make humanity again fully human according to its inborn heavenly pattern. This political task, as Zhu (2010b, 14:431) comments in his conversation on China's legendary sages, can be accomplished not by heaven but by human exemplars,: "Heaven only gives birth to many people and things and grants you many principles. However, heaven cannot actualize them and thus

[7] My brief exposition of Zhu's metaphysics is based on the first six volumes of Zhu's own analects, *Conversations of Master Chu*. See Zhu (2010b).
[8] All beings for Zhu have both pattern and materiality. Humanity and non-human beings differ on the results of material flow and thus their different capacities to understand pattern, which is one and universal.

must rely on the sage to cultivate the way and to found the teachings for instructing and transforming the populace. This is the meaning of the saying: 'Tailor to the way of heaven and earth and aid the propriety of heaven and earth.' What heaven fails to accomplish, the sage must achieve for it." In short, Zhu envisions politics as the heavenly task that the sage assumes to restore humanity's original and perfect pattern.

Since all humanity needs ethical restoration, self-cultivation must be a universal way of life for all.[9] As the *Great Learning* teaches, no political hierarchy can exempt any person from this ethical endeavor:

> [The text of *Great Learning*] From the Son of Heaven [i.e., the emperor] on down to commoners, all without exception should regard self-cultivation as the root. It is impossible that the root be unhealthy and the branches healthy. Never should the important be treated as trivial; never should the trivial be treated as important.[10] (Zhu 2010a, 6:17)

Zhu offers two reasons why both the emperor and the commoners should focus on self-cultivation.[11] First, as the beginning of *Great Learning* indicates, the end of politics is the ethical restoration of all in the world [天下]. As such, it is impossible for Zhu that politics, the branch, could be healthy without ethical goodness, the root. Second, Zhu's metaphysics is unitary, i.e., all patterns embedded in various relationships point to the same heavenly pattern. As such, even though the emperor's political task may be different from that of commoners, they all manifest the same heavenly principle pattern in humanity. As Zhu comments in one of his conversations:

> The process, which goes from letting the inborn luminous virtue shine forth, to governing the country, and to bringing peace to the world [天下], is like the nine-

[9] As Gardner (1986, 51; 58) points out, Zhu departs from the traditional commentators such as Kong Yingda in his asserting this ethical universalism. Roughly six centuries before Zhu, Kong thought that *Great Learning* was reserved only for political elites.

[10] All block quotes from *Great Learning* consists of two parts. The first part is the original passage, which was composed by either Confucius or his disciple Zeng Zi. It will be in the standard fonts. The second part is Zhu's commentary on the passage. Zhu's commentary will be italicized.

[11] Later on, especially during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the requirements of self-cultivation would become an important bureaucratic tool for checking the emperor's power. See Bol (2010).

> eave pagoda that ascends from the bottom to the top around the same center. Although its four directions are multilayered, there is only one heart. The procession of ethical cultivation… has many stages but in fact revolves around one singular pattern [一理]. (Zhu 2010b, 14:497–9)

For Zhu, there is no fundamental distinction between the emperor and the commoner because they are all human. As such, politics and ethics belong to the same human realm. Statesmen and the populace are guided by the same heavenly pattern.

Since ethics and politics are integral to each other because of their metaphysical foundation in the same heavenly pattern, learning, as a matter of self-cultivation, must attend to both. Indeed, for Zhu, *Great Learning* is at once ethical and political from the very beginning:

> [The text of *Great Learning*] The way of greater learning lies in illuminating one's inborn luminous Virtue, in renewing the people, and in coming to dwell in perfect goodness. (Gardner 1986, 88–9; Zhu 2010a, 6:16)

> [Zhu's commentary] *Luminous virtue is what humanity [originally] receives from Heaven; his heart is not obscured and thus it possesses all patterns* (万理*) to deal with all matters. However, limited by materiality and concealed by human desires, [the heart] can sometimes be dimmed. Nevertheless, the light of the human nature itself is never extinguished. As such, the student should follow the [remaining moral] ember to illuminate his true nature so that it can be restored to its original state.*
> *Renewal [of the people] means to remove the old. Once the student has let his inborn luminous virtue shine forth, he should also extend it to others and thus enable them to remove old stains.*
> *Coming to dwell means that [the student] should arrive in perfect goodness and never stray away from it. Perfect goodness means [the attainment of] the proper and ultimate pattern of all affairs (*事理当然之极*). Both in keeping one's inborn luminous Virtue unobscured and in renewing the people, one ought to come to rest steadfastly in the place of perfect goodness.* (Gardner 1986, 88–9; Zhu 2010a, 6:16)

As Gardner (1986, 90) points out, Zhu considers perfect goodness not "a third and separate endeavor" but the complete fulfillment of illuminating the inborn luminous Virtue and renewing the people. For Zhu, a person becomes perfectly good only if he succeeds in understanding and following the heavenly pattern in all his interactions with others and the world. The student has

not attained perfect goodness, if the student only illuminates his own heavenly endowment without renewing others. That is, for Zhu, no one can fully cultivate himself without teaching others the same perfection. This universal ethical endeavor is possible because, for Zhu (2010b, 14:437), the light of luminous virtue always glimmers in all humanity, even in the most evil person. As such, all statespersons have a moral obligation to ensure the populace's engagement in self-cultivation. This is Zhu's ethical foundation of politics.

Therefore, self-cultivation is the root that supports the branch of renewing the populace. For Zhu, it is empty talk if the statesperson attempts to transform the populace without first cultivating himself. Indeed, as the *Great Learning* points out, all ancient sages such as Yao, Shun, and Yu, whom all Confucians honor as exemplars, started with the basics of self-cultivation before renewing the people:

> [The text of *Great Learning*] The ancients who wished to illuminate the luminous Virtue throughout the world put the governance of the country first; wishing to govern their countries well, they first regulated their households; wishing to regulate their households, they first cultivated themselves; wishing to cultivate themselves, they first set their hearts upright; wishing to set their hearts upright, they first ensured the sincerity of their intentions; wishing to ensure the sincerity of their intentions, they first extended their knowledge to the utmost; and the extension of knowledge lies in the investigation of things [格物]….[12]
> [Zhu's commentary] *To illuminate the luminous Virtue throughout the world means to enable all throughout the world to illuminate their inborn luminous Virtue.* (Zhu 2010a, 6:17; Gardner 1986, 91)

Commenting on another similar passage in *Great Learning*, Zhu writes the following:

> *Things investigated means that the ultimate pattern of all things has been reached. Knowledge extended means that the knowledge of my heart is never limited. Since knowledge is exhausted, intentions will have been sincere. Once intentions are sincere, the heart will have been set upright. What precedes self-cultivation* [in the procession of ethical cultivation] *is the matter of illuminating true virtue. What succeeds making the household orderly* [in the procession of ethical cultivation] *is the matter of renewing the populace. Once things are*

[12] This is of course a proximate order. Zhu does not expect people to follow this order rigidly because that would leave nothing done. Rather, all steps have to be taken simultaneously, though steps before self-cultivation should be the basis of later steps. See Zhu (2010b, 14:495).

> *investigated and knowledge extended, knowledge has come to dwell [in perfect goodness]. All that succeeds sincere intentions comes from this known order of such dwelling [in perfect goodness]*. (Zhu 2010a, 6:17; Gardner 2007, 4–5)

For Zhu, the foundation of ethics and, by inference, of politics, is the investigation of things according to this metaphysical motto: "Diverse manifestations from one unitary pattern [理一分殊]." That is, Zhu thinks that all beings and affairs have their unique patterns, and all patterns are the manifestations of one heavenly pattern.[13] Recall that, for Zhu, humanity in its original condition knows the heavenly pattern and all its manifestations. Unfortunately, it has lost such knowledge to material distortions and thus mistreats others and the world in its various relationships. For example, a father becomes too indulgent towards his children and the ministers too obsequious to their king. Obsession with food and sex is another example of material excess. For Zhu, to investigate all things, including all human relationships, is to make humanity again aware of its inborn heavenly pattern inside itself so that it could again interact with others and the world properly.

To be sure, the investigation of things is not like lab work. It is utterly practical and relational. As Zhu (2010b, 14:467) reminds his student Dou Congzhou, "The sage speaks only of investigating all things because he wants us to understand actual affairs and matters, extending from things as small as a single thought to all affairs and all matters and to all inactions and all actions. How to follow daily etiquette, how to dine, and how to speak are all affairs [of importance]. All these hinge upon *the choice between the heavenly pattern and the human desire*. We need to examine them one by one [emphasis added]." Here "the heavenly pattern" stands for the patterns proper to different relationships and "the human desire" for material obscurities. Since an obscured human mind cannot see the incorporeal heavenly pattern as such,

[13] For a brief exposition of this paramount principle of Zhu's metaphysics, see Chan (1987, 87–91).

humanity must start with the investigation of things to understand how the incorporeal heavenly pattern is truly materialized. Because all human relationships have their proper patterns, there is no detail too small for one's devotion. As Zhu (2010b, 14:469) says, "[The passages on] investigation of all things speak not of exhausting the [incorporeal heavenly] pattern but of investigation because, speaking of [the incorporeal] pattern, there is nowhere to grasp it and materiality sometimes leaves it detached, whereas speaking of materiality, [the proper] patterns will always be there [in materials] and cannot be detached [from them]." For Zhu, even though materiality often obscures humanity's understanding of the heavenly pattern, investigating all actual affairs and matters is still the necessary route through which humanity arrives at the heavenly pattern. After all, the heavenly pattern manifests itself differently in the material world and to comprehend it requires the investigation of human affairs and material things. As such, self-cultivation for Zhu must start and end with actual practices in this world.

The earthly character of Zhu's self-cultivation culminates in his vision of perfect goodness in a polity. For Zhu, this perfect goodness in which the sage dwells is the sum of the sage's perfect relationships with others in a polity:

> [The text of *Great Learning*] The Classic of Odes says: "The thousands-of-acre land around the imperial capital is where the populace come to dwell." [Zhu's commentary]*[This passage] means that all beings have their proper places to dwell.* (Zhu 2010a, 6:18)

> [The text of *Great Learning*] The Classic of Odes says: "The singing yellow bird [knows that it should] dwell on the verdant hill." The Master [i.e., Confucius] interprets: "Dwelling means knowing where one should dwell. [In this regard,] is it possible that the person knows less than the bird?" [Zhu's commentary] *Confucius means that the person should know where to dwell.*(Zhu 2010a, 6:18)

> [The text of *Great Learning*] The Classic of Odes says: "The sagely King of Wen [i.e., the sagely father whose son founded the Zhou dynasty during which Confucius lived] indeed inherits luminosity and knows what to revere and where to dwell!" As a king, one should dwell in benevolence. As a minister, one should

> dwell in reverence. As a son, one should dwell in filial piety. As a father, one should dwell in kindness. In interaction with the populace, one should dwell in fidelity.
> [Zhu's commentary] *The author quotes this passage to indicate that the sage always dwells in perfect goodness. These five relationships are the most important among the sage's guiding principles. If the student studies the subtle and fine profundity of these relationships and from them analogously deduces [the rest of sagely principles,] then he will undoubtedly know where to dwell among all affairs in the world [天下]*. (Zhu 2010a, 6:19)

Zhu's sage is an exemplar of all proper relationships. To be sure, relational propriety for Zhu is irreducible to persons involved in them. That is, even in a hierarchical relationship, the inferior owes no absolute obedience to the superior. When asked about proper relationships, Zhu (2010b, 14:507) answers: "[Perfect goodness] is on the proper boundary. For example, when a king who dwells in benevolence becomes submissive to and constrained by [his ministers] and too cowardly to make decisions, this is a fault, not benevolence. When a minister articulates what is good and prohibits what is evil [to the king], this is reverence. When the minister is too afraid to correct the king's errors, then this is a fault, not reverence." For Zhu, each person in a relationship needs to fulfill his proper duties, which are independent of, though not indifferent to, other parties, because such duties are derived not from the parties involved but from the relationship itself, or more specifically, the pattern proper to the relationship. There is a *proper* way of being filial to one's parents or being loyal to one's superiors, which means that, if warranted, the son must criticize his father's faults and the minister must correct his king's mistakes.[14] To tolerate the moral errors of one's superiors is to lose perfect goodness in the

[14] I stress the adjective *proper* because what is being practiced here is not blind obedience to one's parents or superiors but the rightful patterns that are embodied by and thus govern these relationships. See Zhu (2010b, 14:436, 507).

relationships. Zhu never endorses a relationship for its own sake but always wants the proper relational pattern to be followed.[15]

Since perfect goodness requires one to follow the proper pattern in each relationship, one must cultivate his ability to exercise impartial judgments, especially when attachments and emotions tend to be the material sources that obscure proper relational patterns. Zhu recognizes such natural biases, especially in familial relationships:

> [The text of *Great Learning*] The key of regulating the household lies in self-cultivation: humanity tends to be partial towards those whom it loves, towards those whom it hates, towards those whom it respects, towards those whom it pities, and towards those whom it belittles [敖惰]. Hence, there are few in the world who know the flaws of the persons they favor and know the goodness [美] of the persons they dislike.
> [Zhu's commentary] *These five sentiments are what one ought to have. However, humanity lets these natural sentiments run wild without examining them. Therefore, humanity will certainly indulge in one of them and then fail in self-cultivation.* (Zhu 2010a, 6:22)
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> [The text of *Great Learning*] As the proverb goes, "People know neither their sons' flaws nor the largeness of their seedlings."
> [Zhu's commentary] *Those who spoil their sons are unenlightened, those who are greedy are insatiable. This is the harm of partiality and why their household is not orderly.* (Zhu 2010a, 6:22)
>
> [The text of *Great Learning*] This is why the household cannot be made orderly without self-cultivation. (Zhu 2010a, 6:22)

For Zhu, humanity's natural sentiments never suffice as ethical guidance but must be regulated by proper patterns. Indeed, the key part of self-cultivation is to keep in balance one's natural sentiments arising from various relationships. As Zhu (2010b, 14:544) puts it, "Human sentiments are naturally biased. We love no one more than our parents. Yet when our parents deserve friendly criticisms, how could we forget to correct them because of our love for them? We revere no one more than our kings and fathers. Yet when they deserve blunt and forthright

[15] The trite attack against Confucianism in general is its overt, if not excessive, emphasis on obedience of many sorts.

criticisms, how could we only hold on to reverence and fear of speaking up?" Thus, a self-cultivated person knows how to check his natural sentiments without letting them bias his judgments. Such impartial judgments are particularly necessary within a household because Zhu knows that "within the doors of the family, affection often overrides righteousness" (Zhu 2010a, 6:535). Once we become biased, "with what can we defeat the selfish tendencies of loving feelings and close ties?" (Zhu 2010a, 6:535). For Zhu (2010a, 6:535), partiality stemming from sentiments illustrates his metaphysical point that materiality tends to obscure the heavenly pattern. Therefore, self-cultivation, with the efforts to investigate things, to exhaust knowledge, to ensure sincere intentions, and to set the heart upright, is the most other-regarding act, as it aims precisely at proper relationships. A cultivated child must point out his parent's flaws, despite his reverence; a cultivated parent must correct his children's errors, despite his affection (Zhu 2010b, 14:545). A well-regulated household needs self-cultivation because it is saturated with relationships that can easily distorted by natural sentiments. As we will see soon, Zhu thinks that the sage's orderly household will become the model for the country.

3 Zhu's Exemplary Politics

In contrast with Locke and Rousseau who think that politics requires a different set of relationships than family, Zhu promotes the regulation of the household because he considers the household an exemplar for the country. It is at this juncture that Zhu's political vision, a polity cultured by ethical exemplars' political influence, emerges. To start, Zhu believes that familial virtues are identical to political virtues:

> [The text of *Great Learning*] Governing the country well requires regulating the household first. There is no one who is unable to teach his household but is able to teach the populace. As such, the gentleman [君子] can succeed in *teaching the country without leaving his household*. Filial piety is the means for serving the king; fraternal respect [悌] is the means for serving the superior; and kindness [慈] is the means for commanding the populace [emphasis added].

> [Zhu's commentary] *Self-cultivation enables one to teach the household. Filial piety, fraternal respect, and kindness are the means first for self-cultivation and then to be taught in the household. Indeed, in the state, the ways for serving the king, serving the superior, and commanding the populace do not differ from these [familial virtues]. As such, when the household becomes orderly, [the country] will also become well-taught.* (Zhu 2010a, 6:23)
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> [The text of *Great Learning*] When the [royal] household becomes benevolent, benevolence will prevail [兴] in a country. When the [royal] household becomes courteous, courtesy will prevail in a country. When one person [i.e., the king] becomes greedy and cruel, chaos will prevail in a country. This is the mechanism of [politics]. It is said that one word can ruin the deed and one person can habituate [定] a country.
> [Zhu's commentary] *This passage indicates how established teaching* [in the household] *can affect a country*. (Zhu 2010a, 6:23)

For Zhu, filial piety, fraternal respect, and kindness are universal virtues because they are "the great pillars of the human way [人道] and the same possessions of all human hearts" (Zhu 2010a, 6:539). As such, a virtuous family is both necessary and sufficient for a prosperous country. As Zhu (2010b, 14:549) explicates in his conversation on this passage, "[The passage on filial piety, fraternal respect, and kindness] means that when I have attained these virtues in my household, the people in the world can become virtuous on themselves by watching [my household]. [There is no need] for me to promote these virtues to the country." For Zhu, virtue spreads not through preaching but through exemplary actions. The populace will become virtuous by being drawn to emulate the moral exemplar of the royal family.[16]

Zhu's confidence in the exemplar's ethical influence has an ontological justification. In his *Questions Concerning the Four Books*, Zhu (2010a, 6:540) refers back to the importance of the investigation of things: "It is also said that once all things are investigated, knowledge will be complete. [With such knowledge, one can both understand] the will of all in the world and know

[16] After reading an earlier draft of this paper, Stephen K. White asked whether, by an orderly household, Zhu meant the royal family or all ordinary families. I think that Zhu means both but emphasizes the former. As we have seen, Zhu is a universalist who believes that all humanity can achieve ethical excellence. But Zhu also considers the emperor and his household a special exemplar for the entire empire to follow. See Bol (2010).

that the hearts of tens of millions are in fact the heart of one. With sincere intentions and an upright heart, [one can] defeat selfish desires and rely on one's own heart to know the hearts of tens of millions. This is how things should be done." For Zhu, it is possible for one heart to know all other hearts precisely because there is only one true heavenly pattern, though its manifestation is diverse. A heart that has investigated all things and understood the diverse manifestations of one singular pattern is a heart that comprehends humanity itself. As such, the exemplar can illuminate the heavenly pattern in all his relationships for others to see. Just as diverse materials and worldly affairs actualize different proper patterns, Zhu's exemplar with his various relationships embodies the heavenly pattern.

This common metaphysical basis is also a two-way street. Possessing the same heavenly endowment, the populace can easily understand virtues embodied by the exemplar's actions and be motivated to emulate his examples:

> [The text of *Great Learning*] The key to bringing peace to the world lies in the good governance of the country. If the king treats the elderly properly, filial piety will prevail [兴] among the populace. If the king treats the elder brother properly, fraternal respect will prevail among the populace. If the king cares for the orphans, the populace will not commit betrayal. Therefore, the gentleman has the proper way of measuring the square [絜矩之道].
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> [Zhu's commentary] *Prevailing means that the populace is sentimentally moved* [to follow the king's example] *and then virtues prevail.... In the [aforementioned] three aspects, the populace follows what the king practices and virtuous influence spreads rapidly [*上行下效，捷於影響*], which is the meaning of an orderly household leading to a well-governed country. It is seen that human hearts have the same desires and no one can fail to understand this. As such, the gentleman should use these same desires of all humanity to measure all matters so that different persons' wishes are all fulfilled and the four sides above and below are all made square* [i.e., politics is made right, just as a proper square has been drawn because of the gentleman's proper measurements in his heart]. *Consequently, the world becomes tranquil.* (Zhu 2010a, 6:24)

Here Zhu is clear that the exemplar can resonate with the populace precisely because all human beings share the same form and substance. As such, even though materiality obscures most

people's originally upright hearts, they can sense from their remaining moral embers the same desire for virtue. This natural desire for virtue is a Mencian legacy in Zhu, who thinks that Mencius is only second to Confucius. Following Mencius, Zhu unites desire and ethics in his anthropology. That is, given its heavenly endowment, which is Zhu's metaphysical addition to Mencius' anthropology, humanity is naturally motivated to pursue virtue and the good life. Without this common metaphysical basis, the exemplar's ethical conduct would be unable to sentimentally resonate with the populace. Hence, for Zhu, virtues are not only taught but, more importantly, they are also *aroused*. The exemplar embodies the heavenly pattern by demonstrating to others how to relate oneself to different persons according to proper patterns in practice, e.g., in the household. The populace receives from the exemplar not an ethical theory per se but a concrete way of life with which the populace can experience resonance.

One example Zhu uses to illustrate his exemplary theory is the virtue of kindness. Indeed Zhu singles out kindness, a familial virtue, as a key political virtue:

> [The text of *Great Learning*] The Book of Kang Gao [a chapter on the Zhou dynasty from the Classic of Documents] says: "[Treat the populace] just as caring for the newborn." The heart that sincerely tries would not fall too far away [from the true way], even if it misses the target. No woman [needs to] study how to rear children before getting married [i.e., all women, who in this case stand for all humanity, naturally know how to care for children].
> [Zhu's commentary] *Here [the author] quotes the Classic of Documents to explicate [the teaching], again emphasizing that the root of establishing teaching is not imposing rules by force but knowing the sprout of virtue and promoting it widely.* (Zhu 2010a, 6:23)

Here, we again see Zhu's metaphysical underpinning. For Zhu, caring for the newborn is one of the key moral embers still existing in humanity, despite its material obscurities. As Zhu (2010b, 14:550) states, "Although filial piety and fraternal respect are what humanity originally possesses, there are few who can retain these virtues without ever losing them. However, few have lost their loving sentiment for the newborn. As such, the sage illustrates the teaching [of

humanity's natural sentiments] by using the example of [universal] kindness that can be easily understood by all…." The exemplar should practice kindness in all his engagements with the whole country because it is a virtue common among the populace that enables them to relate themselves to the exemplar and emulate his other virtues.[17] As such, the exemplar needs to be very conscious of his own role and behavior and must know how to present himself publically.

Accordingly, Zhu's politics of ethical exemplar is best summarized in his interpretation of the Confucian motto, "extend oneself to others (推己及人)." This motto, in a less literal translation, means to promote oneself as an exemplar for others.[18] It does not mean that the exemplar should be self-righteous. Rather, it means that he should consciously try to exemplify the heavenly pattern in all his relationships. For Zhu, the sage's political leadership originates in his exemplarity:

> [The text of *Great Learning*] Yao and Shun [i.e., two legendary sages] ruled the world with benevolence and the populace followed their example. Jie and Zhou [i.e., two ancient tyrants long before Confucius' own time] ruled the world with violence and the populace followed their example. When the king's commands contradict his favored practices, the populace will not comply with them. Therefore, the gentleman disciplines [himself] before disciplining others; [he] ensures that [he] is not blameworthy before criticizing others. No one is able to teach others unless he promotes what he practices [恕].
> [Zhu's commentary] *This passage follows the previous passage that one person can habituate* [定] *a country. When there is goodness in oneself, one can then demand goodness in others. When there is no evil in oneself, one can then rectify evil in others. This is what it means to extend oneself to others. If not so, then one's commands contradict one's own favored practices and the populace will not follow the commands.* (Zhu 2010a, 6:23)

> [The text of *Great Learning*] The Classic of Odes says: "If there is no flaw in his [the king's] etiquette, all the country will be in its right balance [其仪不忒，正是四国]." If the king perfectly follows the etiquette of being a father, a son, an elder brother, and a younger brother, then the populace will follow his example. (Zhu 2010a, 6:24)

[17] It also means that Zhu's theory starts not with high ideals but with common sentiments (Zhu 2010b, 14:550).
[18] Many have taken this motto as the Confucian version of the golden rule. I am less sure about that. At least, I do not think that is what Zhu means by it.

For Zhu, to extend oneself to others is a demanding standard of self-cultivation. The failure of self-cultivation harms more than oneself. It sets up a bad model for others to follow and thus spreads vices. Just as all human beings share the same heavenly endowment, they also share the same material obscurities, the sources of moral errors. As such, Zhu is emphatic that the self being promoted must be the self that embodies the heavenly pattern, not the self of human desires:

> The key to the character, promoting [恕], is the meaning of like-heartedness [如心], which indicates that one should govern others with the heart that governs himself and loves others with the heart that loves himself. It does not mean careless acquiescence [in others' moral errors]. After all, one should first cultivate one's heart, i.e., to correct it by exhausting the knowledge of the heavenly pattern, so that governing and loving oneself are done properly. Afterwards, one can extend this [corrected] heart to others and promote what one practices for the sake of the Way…. (Zhu 2010a, 6:537)

For Zhu, what comes first in ethics is not preaching but actions. He considers the Confucian motto, extending oneself to others, not cheap pedantry but a call for leading by example. A person's actions are never only for his own sake. They should always be the examples of the heavenly pattern so that others can be motivated to follow these examples and illuminate their inborn luminous Virtue. An exemplar for Zhu acts according to different proper patterns underlying all his relationships and his proper relationships embody the heavenly pattern innate and common in all humanity. Once the exemplar becomes one with the heavenly pattern, he can activate the populace's desire to pursue a good life according to the same heavenly endowment.

4 Zhu's Exemplary Politics to the Contemporary World

Zhu's exemplary politics assumes that the exemplar and his followers share the same ontological precondition, i.e., all humanity is endowed with the same heavenly pattern and, despite material obscurities, some common moral feelings such as kindness still remain in

humanity. However, I suspect that, aside from some more traditionalist Confucians, our late modern world does not share Zhu's metaphysical and perfectionist presumptions. More importantly, the pluralist world and its history teach us that any insistence upon the same metaphysical and perfectionist foundation often entails political domination and violence. In the rest of the paper, I will explicate the contemporary relevance of Zhu's exemplary politics. To put it in the broader context of political perfectionism, I will advocate Zhu's exemplary politics as a Confucian *method* of attaining virtue in politics. Near the end, by applying Zhu's standard to Clinton's sexual scandal, I will also defend Zhu's exemplary politics against contemporary Confucian scholars' concerns about moral elitism and subjugating politics to ethics.[19]

Opponents of perfectionism worry that if politics, especially the state, starts promoting virtues based on a certain conception of the good life, it will inevitably obstruct individual autonomy by coercive means. Zhu's exemplary politics dissolves this worry about coercion because his method of promoting virtue relies not on the state or its coercive apparatus, but on the actions of the exemplar. For Zhu, the exemplar's task is to embody the inborn luminous vrtue and to arouse in others the ethical desire to discover and follow the same heavenly pattern. This metaphysical common ground allows the exemplar to influence others through moral sentiments, which Zhu considers universal to all humanity. Indeed, Zhu discourages the use of rule imposition for promoting virtues because such imposition would not work unless the statesman himself is already virtuous and capable of motivating the populace to pursue virtues by his own example.

[19] Echoing Xu Fuguan and Mou Zongsan, Angle worries that the Confucian emphasis on the good character of statespersons diverts attention away from more important political issues such as individual rights and distributive justice. Loubna El Amine (forthcoming), for example, holds that Zhu is responsible for moralizing Confucian politics and creating the impression that Confucianism subordinates politics to ethics. El Amine herself argues that the classical Confucians, including Confucius himself, considers politics independent of ethics. For moral elitism, see Kim (2013).

Nevertheless, why should we take Zhu's metaphysics, especially its emphasis on patterned propriety in relationships, seriously? Many of us would probably reject the word propriety outright because it sounds like a euphemism for justifying social hierarchy. However, Zhu's conception of propriety is not external to humanity, but rather stems from human sentiments, which endowed by the heavenly pattern. As such, propriety is not imposed upon us from the outside but, if demonstrated by an exemplar, attracts us towards it. As aforementioned, for Zhu, kindness is the proper pattern that governs the mother-infant relationship, which he believes is natural and attractive to all humanity. Following Mencius, Zhu thinks that a life with various proper relationships should be naturally attractive to all human beings because all humanity by nature desires goodness. As such, propriety by itself originates not in political coercion but in natural sentiments. An exemplar with his proper relationships is what the populace would naturally want to emulate, no coercion necessary.

Hence, Zhu's exemplary politics is a kind of public self-presentation. The method with which the exemplar promotes virtue is not by political decree or abstract reasoning but by a live embodiment of what it means to live a good life. In comparison, we may consider Charles Taylor's conception of articulation in his *Sources of the Self*. Articulation, for Taylor, means "to explicate what makes sense of our moral responses"—that is, "to spell out what it is that we presuppose when we judge that a certain form of life is truly worthwhile, or place our dignity in a certain achievement or status, or define our moral obligations in a certain manner" (Taylor 1989, 26). To be sure, by articulation, Taylor means much more than possessing intellectual knowledge. He expands articulation to include non-intellectual and non-linguistic realms: "A sense of the good finds expression not only in linguistic descriptions but also in other speech acts—as with the example… of prayer. And if we follow this example further, into liturgy, we

see that expression goes beyond the bounds of language as normally and narrowly conceived. The gesture of ritual, its music, its display of visual symbols, all enact in their own fashion our relation to God" or, may I add, the good (Taylor 1989, 91–2). Articulation for Taylor is already connected with our manner of action. To articulate the good is to present oneself in a public manner that embodies the good in both words and actions. An articulate person is indeed an exemplar whose life is an ongoing event of the good or, in Zhu's language, the heavenly pattern.

To be sure, such articulation is not performed in social vacuum. For Taylor (1989, 35), "One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it." The sense of the self comes not from some pure introspection but from its attempts to triangulate itself among interlocutors: "My self-definition is understood as an answer to the question Who I am? And this question finds its original sense in the interchange of speakers. I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my intimate relations to the ones I love, and also crucially in the space of moral and spiritual orientation within which my most important defining relations are lived out" (Taylor 1989, 35). As Taylor (1989, 36) puts it succinctly: "A self exists only within what I call 'webs of interlocution.'" In other words, communal culture or background is necessary for an individual's self-articulation.

Taylor's emphasis on the communal aspect of the self reminds us that Zhu's exemplary politics may not be as universalist as it sounds. As Taylor suggests, "natural" sentiments are not natural at all but shaped by a particular communal liturgy. That is, humanity has no unmediated sentiments. What we find sentimentally moving is always contingent upon the communal culture with which we are imbued. Therefore, one may fear that Zhu's exemplary politics is not sufficiently emancipatory. Rather, it reinforces the existing power hierarchy. As such, even

though exemplary politics does not require state coercion, it is complicit in social sins by relying on sentiments that reflect oppressive social norms. This is a legitimate concern and I do not think that Zhu's exemplary politics as a substantive philosophy can solve this problem. However, I will defend Zhu's exemplary politics by stating that, when formalized, it is not incompatible with any emancipatory project. The strength of exemplary politics lies precisely not *in its content but in its method*. A socialist activist by her own actions and social relationships can become an exemplar of the socialist good life and demonstrate to others that the *proper* relationship between the employer and the employee should not be that of callus cash exchange but fraternal or sisterly cooperation. In her, others can experience socialist propriety as a source of happiness and thus *want* to follow her example. Again, by doing so, this activist implicitly shares with Zhu the same anthropological assumption that a perfectionist project can be grounded in human sentiments, even considering that there is no natural sentiment to start with. In short, exemplary politics in democracy would emphasize less the content of exemplarity but more the possibility that an exemplar can promote virtue by her own good life.[20] *The exemplar reshapes not only sentiments but also subjectivity.*[21]

Still, some contemporary Confucians may object to exemplary politics because it implies moral elitism, i.e., the populace has to have a morally superior exemplar to be virtuous. This objection is less weighty in Zhu's exemplary politics because Zhu allows and even encourages others to evaluate statespersons' moral lives. Recall that Zhu believes not in a relationship but in

[20] When commenting on an earlier draft of this paper, William Sbach pointed out that if we were discussing exemplary politics per se, why would we need Medieval Confucianism at all? After all, there is social psychology literature that already illustrates the social effects of prominent individuals. Due to limited space, I cannot provide a full defense here. However, one crucial difference between Zhu and social psychology is that Zhu's exemplary politics is not a social fact but a normative project. As far as I know, there have been few contemporary thinkers who advocate exemplarity as a political project. I think that Zhu's value lies precisely in his relentless attention to the political effects of exemplars.

[21] Taylor's Catholicism would probably point to the saints as the exemplars.

the propriety of a relationship, which obliges the inferior (e.g., a minister) to criticize the superior (e.g., a king) if the latter commits moral errors. As an illustration, let us apply Zhu's exemplary politics to Clinton's sexual scandal. According to Zhu's exemplary politics, Clinton's sexual misconduct with Lewinsky is problematical because the statesman violates the propriety of the superior-inferior relationship in politics. From Zhu's perspective, the proper relational virtue for Clinton is kindness to Lewinsky and Lewinsky should respect and, when necessary, criticize Clinton's misbehavior. As such, Clinton acted improperly in his relationship with his political subordinate. As the top executive leader of the U.S. government, Clinton thus set up a bad example for other superiors in similar political relationships. From Zhu's perspective, Clinton's misconduct warrants popular criticisms and political reprimand because he spread corrupting influences in the government, if not the society. If we adopted the liberal excuse that what Clinton did was his private business and thus politically irrelevant, we would be condoning improper sexual interaction in political relationships, which indeed corrupts a polity. For Zhu, being a superior entails the duty to exemplify the heavenly pattern in all relationships, which does not at all immunize anyone from legitimate criticisms from others. Clinton, in exemplary politics, would be considered a moral leader who is obliged to exemplify ethics. When the leader fails, it is our duty, that is, the inferior's duty, to correct him so that the corrupting influence can be stemmed and reversed.

To be sure, subjecting Clinton to moral criticism for his sexual misconduct does not mean that we should moralize politics at all cost. That is, it does not mean that we should judge Clinton and his political achievements as a whole simply because of his sexual misconduct. In this case, we are only *pinpointing* Clinton's moral error in a specific relationship. Because different relationships, according to Zhu, require different proper patterns, Clinton's improper relationship

with his political inferior does not imply that, for example, Clinton is an irresponsible father or an incompetent diplomat. Although the sexual scandal may have stained his image as a father or a diplomat, we must evaluate Clinton's actions in other relationships by themselves. As such, between the complete separation of politics and ethics and the total subjugation of politics to ethics, Zhu's exemplary politics can be a model of perfectionist politics that enables us to have a balanced evaluation of a politician based on his or her moral character and political records. In exemplary politics, politics and ethics complements each other. Neither is subjugated.

Conclusion

This paper only glimpses at Zhu's vast system of metaphysics, ethics, and politics. I mainly want to demonstrate Zhu's exemplary politics as a way to integrate metaphysics, ethics, and politics without domination. For Zhu, humanity's original ethical perfection and its material obscurities have determined the political mission as to be one of renewing the populace. This is accomplished through a progression going from self-cultivation to the household, to the country, and finally to bringing peace to the world, a progression whereby the sage seeks proper patterns in his relationships and arouses virtues in others by his ethical excellence. As such, we contemporaries may learn from Zhu that state coercion is not the only way to achieve perfectionism, since virtues are not imposed but aroused. What the exemplar demonstrates to others is more than mere persistence in adherence to rational morality. Rather, the exemplar lives a good life in his proper relationships, which through moral sentiments enable others to experience the beauty of the good life. Based on Zhu's exemplary politics, my evaluation of President Clinton's sexual scandal demonstrates that exemplarity does not entail moral elitism that shields statespersons from legitimate moral criticisms. Nor do such moral criticisms entail any excessive moralization of politics.

Does exemplary politics then mean no more than a moralistic exhortation for politicians to be virtuous? What sort of policy can we expect from these exemplars? To answer these questions will probably take another paper, but I can offer a hint here. If we take for granted that modern culture more or less celebrates individual autonomy, especially negative rights, and remains deeply suspicious of the state's proactive intrusion into personal life, then Zhu's exemplary politics can be on board with these liberal rights. However, Zhu's exemplary politics will be more selective in its promotion of positive rights. As Zhu emphasizes in the preface to his edition of *Great Learning*, one of the most crucial political tasks is education. As such, a statesman who follows Zhu's philosophy would do whatever he can to promote good education, that is, to create schools and curricula suitable for individuals to be close with and reflect upon political exemplars. This statesman would also reject capitalism's tendency to level down all etiquette in favor of economic efficiency and start promoting proper gestures in various relationships, especially that between parents and children. In short, Zhu's exemplary politics does not have to contradict basic negative rights but can favor those positive rights that amplify the effects of the exemplars.

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