

Article

Ontological Actuality and Sacred Actualization: Reconstructing *Cheng* (誠/成) and the Limits of “Religionizing” Confucianism in the Republican-Era *Zhengshi* Corpus

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Abstract

The Republican-era *Zhengshi* 證釋 corpus, comprising the *Yijing*, *Zhongyong*, and *Daxue* *Zhengshi* produced through the spirit-writing of the *Jiushi Xinjiao* 救世新教 community, arose from the institutional, epistemological, and existential collapse of classical Confucian learning under modernity. At its center is a reconstruction of *Cheng* (誠/成 ontological actuality and sacred actualization) as the identity between the primordial generative ground (*Qianyuan* 乾元) and its actualization in the return of all things to their source. What Tu Weiming’s inner transcendence leaves open, and what the dominant Song-Ming trajectories did not supply, is a concrete ontological mechanism by which transcendence is encountered not as a philosophical postulate but as a ground within the practitioner’s own existence. The *Zhengshi* reconstruction supplies it. The *Jiushi Xinjiao* community’s distinction between transformative teaching (*jiao* 教化) and institutional religion constitutes an implicit critique of the “religionizing Confucianism” framework: the sacrality at work here arises from the practitioner’s encounter with the primordial ground rather than from religion, an encounter that belongs to the very constitution of human existence.

Keywords: *Cheng* (誠/成); inner transcendence; *Zhengshi* corpus; *Jiushi Xinjiao*; religionizing Confucianism; sacred self-cultivation

1. Introduction

The question of whether Confucianism constitutes a religion has generated a substantial and unresolved scholarly debate. Historians of Chinese religion have documented how the very category of “religion” (*zongjiao*, 宗教) was imposed upon Chinese traditions through the late Qing (1644–1911) institutional reforms, producing a structural misfit between Western classificatory frameworks and Chinese religious realities (Goossaert 2005; Goossaert and Palmer 2011). Sociologists have traced the contested process by which Confucianism was constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed as a “world religion” across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Sun 2013). Scholars have increasingly recognized that the rigid taxonomic binary between *rujia* 儒家 (philosophical tradition) and *rujiao* 儒教 (religious institution) is structurally inadequate for capturing the tradition’s true character (Tu 1985; Taylor 1990; Billioud 2011). This article engages one framework at work in these debates, the religionizing of Confucianism: the construal of the tradition as a religion (*zongjiao* 宗教) on the model of institutional religion, in which sacrality is approached through ritual mediation, an organized body of practitioners, and an institutional form set between the human and what exceeds it. In its historical form, this is the late-Qing and Republican (1912–1949) project of constituting Confucianism as an organized or state religion,



Academic Editors: Qiyong Guo and Vincent Goossaert

Received: 4 June 2026

Revised: 2 July 2026

Accepted: 10 July 2026

Published: 13 July 2026

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exemplified by the *Kongjiao* 孔教 (Confucian Religion) movement; as an analytic framework, it persists wherever the religious character of Confucian practice is taken to depend on such mediating and institutional forms (Sun 2013; Goossaert and Palmer 2011). Yet beneath these classificatory debates lies a question more fundamental than any of them—one the tradition must answer from within: by what mechanism does a tradition that refuses otherworldly deities, divine commandments, and eschatological reward sustain genuine sacred motivational force in the practitioner’s existence? At stake is the internal logic of Confucian self-cultivation: whether the transcendent operates as a philosophical ideal one acknowledges or as a sacred primordial ground one encounters in one’s own being.

The dominant theoretical reference point for this question in contemporary scholarship is Tu Weiming, a leading figure of the third generation of New Confucianism, and his account of Confucian religiosity as inner transcendence (*neizai chaoyue* 內在超越). Three theses organize that account. First, the continuity of being: the Confucian cosmos is an unbroken continuum in which Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things form a single living whole, with no ontological rupture between a creator and what is created (Tu 1985). Second, an anthropocosmic vision: the human is neither the anthropocentric measure of all things nor the creature of a theocentric order but realizes its humanity by forming “one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things” so that self-cultivation carries cosmological weight. Third, transcendence is immanent and yet genuinely transcendent: *Tian* 天 is at once the ground encountered within the self and that which exceeds it, approached through inward self-realization rather than submission to an external deity (Tu 2002). Religiosity, on this account, consists of ultimate self-transformation undertaken as a communal act and as a response to the transcendent; to become fully human is itself the spiritual act. Confucian religiosity therefore follows a logic fundamentally unlike that of Western theism.

This is precisely what Tu’s framework leaves unresolved: not whether transcendence exists within the Confucian cosmos, but how it becomes operative in the practitioner’s existence—encountered as a sacred primordial ground rather than acknowledged as a philosophical postulate. A transcendence that functions only as an ethical ideal is, in the end, indistinguishable from a sophisticated moral psychology. A transcendence that is structurally built into the practitioner’s own being—as the very source from which existence has been received and to which authentic cultivation returns—operates at an altogether different ontological register. Zhang Wenzhi, in his analysis of the Guan hexagram’s principle of *shendao shejiao* 神道設教 (establishing teaching through the sacred primordial and transcendent agency), shows that Tu’s “inner transcendence” requires supplementation by an equally rigorous account of objective sacred primordial ground if the religious character of Confucian practice is to be fully secured (Zhang 2019, p. 37). The *Zhengshi* texts examined in this article supply such an account at the level of systematic ontological reconstruction rather than hermeneutical observation; that engagement is developed in Section 8 below.

The Republican-era *Zhengshi* 證釋 corpus—comprising the *Yijing Zhengshi* 易經證釋 (*Realization and Exegesis of the Yijing*), the *Zhongyong Zhengshi* 中庸證釋 (*Realization and Exegesis of the Zhongyong*), and the *Daxue Zhengshi* 大學證釋 (*Realization and Exegesis of the Daxue*), a series of revealed texts produced through the spirit-writing (*fujī* 扶乩) practice of the *Jiushi Xinjiao* 救世新教 (The New Teaching of World Salvation) community—offers a sustained and systematic response to precisely this problem. Central to this response is a reconstruction of *Cheng* 誠/成. In classical Chinese, 誠 and 成 are pronounced identically, and on the *Zhengshi* construction, this homophony reflects an ontological identity rather than a coincidence (see Section 5). At the level of the *Daoti* 道體 (the ontological reality of the *Dao*), the primordial generative ground (*Qianyuán* 乾元) in its ontological

actuality (*cheng* 誠) and the sacred actualization (*Cheng* 成) of all things in their return to that source are structurally one. *You cheng er Cheng* 由誠而成 (from ontological actuality to sacred actualization) is therefore not a causal proposition but an ontological tautology: the authentic ground is the actualization, and the actualization is the authentic ground. The practitioner's very being has been drawn from the primordial sacred ground. To cultivate authentically is to return that derivation—deliberately, consciously—to its source. No otherworldly warrant is required. Transcendence is already operative within the very structure from which the practitioner's being proceeds.

The religionizing framework, so understood, rests on two structural premises that the *Zhengshi* texts refuse at the level of ontology. The first premise is that sacrality requiring institutional mediation presupposes a gap between the practitioner and the sacred, a space for ritual, clergy, or communal boundaries to occupy. The second premise is that a social field requiring religious organization must be ontologically neutral, a profane exterior awaiting sanctification from outside. The *Zhengshi* construction of *Cheng* (誠/成) forecloses both. In the cultivational architecture of the *Daxue Zhengshi*, *Shen* 神 is constitutive of the practitioner's own vital-energetic existence: no gap of the required kind opens. In the social ontology of the *Zhongyong Zhengshi*, self and others proceed from the same undivided vital-energetic flux (*yi qi suo tong* 一氣所通): the social field is the *Dao*'s own actualization, not a profane exterior awaiting sanctification. The *Jiushi Xinjiao* insistence on *jiao* 教化 over institutional religion is the ontological architecture's own entailment. Institutional mediation presupposes the separation these texts refuse.

2. Surviving Positivism: *Jiao* 教 and the Structural Crisis of Classical Learning

The *Zhengshi* corpus emerged from a structural crisis—one that made the turn toward esoteric *jiao* effectively unavoidable. For those who refused the epistemological concessions the academic route required, it was not a strategic choice. It was where the pressure of the situation drove them—the one surviving framework within which a cosmos positivism had declared inadmissible could still be inhabited.

For over a millennium, classical learning (*jingxue* 經學) had functioned as the sovereign legislative discourse of Chinese civilization—the framework within which questions of governance, ethics, and cosmological order were settled. Its authority was inseparable from its institutional anchoring in the civil examination system 科舉, which Elman has shown to have been the nexus linking intellectual, political, and economic life in late imperial China (Elman 2013). When the system was abolished in 1905 and classical learning expelled from the national curriculum in 1912, classical learning was stripped, in a single institutional gesture, of the structural authority that had underwritten its claims to truth—demoted almost overnight from sovereign discourse to one academic subject among many.

The *Gushibian* 古史辨 (*Critiques of Ancient History*) movement, launched with Gu Jiegang (1893–1980)'s 1923 proposal of “the layered creation of ancient Chinese history” (層累地造成的中國古史), applied Western philological methods to the classical canon, reclassifying what had been received as repositories of the Heavenly Way 天道 as accumulated historical documents—authoritative sources of cosmological truth reduced to objects of scholarly inquiry (Gu 1982, p. 56; Schneider 1971). This reclassification severed textual authority from ontological reality, stripping the Confucian tradition of its cosmological standing.

The emergence of scientism as the dominant intellectual orthodoxy of the New Culture Movement drove this severance to its furthest consequences. As Goossaert and Palmer have documented, the redefinition of “religion” in Republican China produced its own constitutive outside: “superstition” (*mixin* 迷信). This newly constructed binary delegitimized

any discourse that could not satisfy the criteria of empirical verifiability or institutional legibility (Goossaert and Palmer 2011). Concepts such as *tiandao* (天道, the Way of Heaven), *xingming* (性命, primordial nature and existential finitude), and *guishen* (鬼神, the numinous) were systematically reclassified as pre-scientific superstition.

The positivist dispensation could explain the mechanics of natural phenomena; having already declared *Shen* 神 (the sacred ontological agency) inadmissible as an operative force, it had eliminated the very ground that makes *shendu* 慎獨 (contemplative vigilance in solitude) ontologically binding. The practitioner was left with the injunction to cultivate without the ground that gave cultivation its weight. The resulting vacuum was a crisis of moral motivation.

Faced with this institutional, epistemic, and existential foreclosure, Confucian thinkers divided into two responses. The first was the philosophical accommodation pursued by Xiong Shili (1885–1968) and Feng Youlan (1895–1990), who reformulated Confucian ontology in dialogue with Bergson (1859–1941), Neo-Realism, and Buddhist idealism (Xiong 1985; Feng 2007)—works of real intellectual ambition that nonetheless carried a structural cost. The cosmological and sacred dimensions had to go—the accounts of *qi*-resonance, of *guishen*, of a cosmos actively responsive to moral cultivation. What remained was philosophically rigorous. And existentially hollow. Billioud and Thoraval have traced this pattern across the broader intellectualization of Confucianism: severed from the lived framework that had once given self-cultivation its cosmic weight, the tradition became a system one could defend without inhabiting (Billioud and Thoraval 2015).

Several Republican-era organizations—most notably the *Daoyuan* 道院 (School of the Dao) and the *Jiushi Xinjiao*—took the opposite route. Operating as redemptive societies, they intensified the cosmological and sacred dimensions of the Confucian inheritance through the practice of spirit-writing (*fuji* 扶乩). Marginalized by the mainstream academy as pre-modern survivals, these groups held onto what academic philosophy had abandoned: an account of the practitioner's existence as answerable to a sovereign cosmic order. Turning toward esoteric praxis was, in this context, the only surviving framework capable of sustaining a cosmos that positivism had declared inadmissible.

Unlike most literature produced within redemptive societies, which operated through moral exhortation and ritual prescription, the *Zhengshi* texts undertook a philosophical reconstruction of the classical canon rigorous enough to meet the tradition's highest intellectual standards—without the epistemological concessions the academic route required.

3. Revelation as Restoration: The Philosophical Architecture of the *Zhengshi* Texts

The *Jiushi Xinjiao* was established in 1924, reorganized from an earlier spirit-writing society, the *Wushan She* 悟善社, and kept its principal altar in Tianjin. It belonged to the redemptive societies (救世團體) that proliferated in the early Republic, voluntary associations that combined self-cultivation with charitable and didactic work in response to a widely felt sense of crisis. A 1941 survey sets out two distinct leadership structures (*Huabei zongjiao nianjian* 1941, pp. 485–93): a religious headship (*jiaotong* 教統) under the statesman Duan Qirui 段祺瑞 (1865–1936), and an administrative presidency under Jiang Chaozong 江朝宗 (1861–1943) over the Beijing head association, with Lu Zongyu 陸宗輿 (1876–1941) over the Tianjin branch. Its regulations combined an inner regimen of quiet-sitting and self-cultivation with outward charitable and relief work, including schools, clinics, and famine relief. Doctrinally, it professed the unity of the five teachings (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam) while taking Confucianism as primary. Its three Confucian commentaries appeared over twelve years: the *Daxue Zhengshi* in 1926, the *Zhongyong Zhengshi* in 1929, and, after an interval of nearly a decade, the *Yijing Zhengshi* in 1938, the

last issued in Tianjin in twenty-four volumes. After the society's decline, its texts were preserved within other redemptive movements, notably the World Red Swastika Society associated with the *Daoyuan* (and its philanthropic arm, the World Red Swastika Society) and the *Yiguandao* 一貫道 (Zeng 2016, p. 17); the editions cited in this article are later Taiwan reprints of these mainland originals.

The corpus was produced through spirit-writing, in which a stylus moves across sand or paper under the guidance of spirits, and was attributed to a collective of ancient sages and worthies (*Lie Sheng* 列聖): Confucius (551–479 BCE), Yan Hui (521–481 BCE), Zengzi (505–435 BCE), Zisi (c. 483–402 BCE), and Mencius (372–289 BCE), gathered under the Daoist patriarch Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓 (fl. ninth century), together with the *Yi* commentator Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) (Zeng 2016, pp. 29–30). This attribution expressed the community's central claim: that the *Zhengshi* corpus does not innovate but recovers—restoring what the Qin (221–206 BCE) burning of the books and later commentary, Zhu Xi's (1130–1200) included, were held to have obscured (Zeng 2016, pp. 31–32).

To execute this restorative claim, all three texts deploy the same methodological strategy: each takes a canonical text as its object and proceeds through close exegesis aimed at excavating its primordial cosmological and ontological depth. *Cheng* (誠/成, ontological actuality and its sacred actualization) emerges most explicitly in the *Zhongyong Zhengshi*—the axis connecting Heaven, the sage, and the practitioner's cultivation—though corresponding structures run through the other two works as well. The result is a philosophical architecture rarely encountered in spirit-writing literature of the period.

A brief word on method is needed before the reconstruction begins. The three *Zhengshi* texts are attributed to a collective of ancient sages and were produced through spirit-writing. This article takes no position on their revelatory status, nor does its reading depend on accepting it. The texts are read philosophically: the article draws out the argument they build around *Cheng* (誠/成) and sets that argument out in explicit form. What decides whether the reconstruction holds is the textual evidence itself, not the corpus's provenance or its attributed authorship. The concern here, then, is with the ontological argument these texts make about *Cheng*, not with how they came to be written. Marginalized by mainstream scholarship as a pre-modern survival, these very texts kept alive the cosmological and sacred dimensions the academic route gave up.

Existing scholarship on the *Zhengshi* corpus is limited. Zeng Naifang's study established the philological and historical framework for the *Yijing Zhengshi*, tracing its Confucian inheritance and internal development (Zeng 2016). Zhang Wenzhi has examined the *Zhengshi* reconstruction of the ontological status of *ren* (仁) and its actualization within the text's generative ontology (Zhang 2020). Li Huangying has explored cosmological order and transformative teaching through the Qian hexagram commentary, situating the texts within the *Yi-Dao* and *Yi-jiao* problematic (Li 2015). Lin Yen-Ting's study of the *Hetu-Luoshu* cosmology, while approaching the text critically, maps its numerical architecture and confirms the systematic character of its cosmological claims (Lin 2016).

Prior studies have read the *Zhengshi* texts within Chinese intellectual history and *Yijing* exegesis. This article reads them through the comparative philosophy of religion—specifically, how the *Zhengshi* reconstruction of *Cheng* (誠/成) addresses what Tu Weiming's framework of inner transcendence leaves structurally open.

4. Beyond Moral Virtue: The Song-Ming “Sincerity” and the Absent Sacred Ground

A note on terminology. When discussing the Neo-Confucian (*lixue* 理學) and *qi*-school (*qixue* 氣學) traditions, this section retains conventional Western sinological translations: *cheng* 誠 as “sincerity,” *taiji* 太極 as “Supreme Ultimate,” *li* 理 as “principle,” and *qi* 氣

as “vital force.” The choice is diagnostic rather than neutral. These conventional renderings reflect how *cheng*, *taiji*, *li*, and *qi* function within the Song-Ming systems (i.e., those of the Song, 960–1279, and Ming, 1368–1644, dynasties), where *cheng* is treated as a moral or cosmological category. They are retained to mark the position from which the *Zhengshi* reconstruction departs: as the introduction has set out, that reconstruction takes *cheng* as a sacred ontological ground rather than a moral attribute. When the same terms appear within the *Zhengshi* framework, the translations from this article’s introduction are restored: *cheng* 誠 and *cheng* 成 as “ontological actuality and sacred actualization,” *taiji* 太極 as “the supreme primordial ground”, and so forth. The translational shift tracks the theoretical one.

The *Zhengshi* reconstruction responds to a theoretical problem running through the major Song-Ming interpretations of *cheng* as sincerity from Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073) to Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692): not a deficit of philosophical sophistication, but the failure of *cheng* to function as a ground the practitioner genuinely encounters as the source of their existence and the telos of their return.

In the *Tongshu* 通書, Zhou Dunyi declares: “Sincerity (“誠”) is the foundation of the sage. Great indeed is the *Qianyuan*—the origin from which all things receive their beginning: it is the source of sincerity” (誠者，聖人之本。大哉乾元，萬物資始，誠之源也) (Zhou 1993, p. 13). By anchoring *sincerity* in the *Qianyuan*, Zhou explicitly elevated it from a merely moral virtue to a foundational ontological category. His further declaration that “sincerity is the basis of the Five Constants and the source of the hundred acts of conduct” (誠，五常之本，百行之源也) (Zhou 1993, p. 15) established sincerity as the absolute ground of the entire ethical order. The *Taiji tushuo* 太極圖說 reinforces this cosmological scope, detailing its dynamic unfolding: “The Supreme Ultimate moves and generates *yang* 陽; when movement reaches its limit, it becomes still; stillness generates *yin*. When stillness reaches its limit, it moves again. Movement and stillness alternate, each serving as the root of the other. *Yin* 陰 and *yang* are divided, and the Two Modes are thereby established” (太極動而生陽……兩儀立焉) (Zhou 1993, p. 4). Zhou further specifies this operative structure in the *Tongshu* by fusing it with the hexagram attributes: “*Yuanheng*—the pervasion of sincerity; *Lizhen*—the return of sincerity” (元亨，誠之通；利貞，誠之復) (Zhou 1993, p. 4). Ultimately, this cosmological mechanism culminates in the existential reality of things: “as the Way of Heaven transforms and changes, each thing correctly receives its nature and destiny; sincerity is thereby established—pure and supremely good” (乾道變化，各正性命，誠斯立焉，純粹至善者也) (Zhou 1993, p. 13).

How the *Taiji*/*Qianyuan* and sincerity are ontologically related is precisely what Zhou’s account leaves open. Scholarship has been divided on this point—whether sincerity and *Taiji* are identical in substance, derivatively related, or operating at distinct cosmological and moral registers (Liang 1994, p. 203; Zheng 2012, p. 57; Yang 2004, p. 245). The disagreement persists. Without this architecture clarified, sincerity cannot fully function as the ground that commands genuine awe.

The Cheng-Zhu 程朱 tradition (named after the Cheng brothers, Cheng Hao 程顥, 1032–1085, and Cheng Yi 程頤, 1033–1107, and Zhu Xi) inherits Zhou’s elevation of sincerity but dissolves his ambiguities by severing the ontological ground from the motivational force of cultivation. Zhu Xi resolves Zhou’s ambiguity by subordinating sincerity to *li* (principle)—reducing it from a generative ground to an attribute of principle: “the true reality and non-deception of the Heavenly principle—the natural state of the Heavenly principle as it is” (誠者，真實無妄之謂，天理之本然也) (Zhu 2011, p. 32). The Supreme Ultimate (*taiji*) suffers a similar epistemic flattening. On his account, it is no longer a generative primordial ground, but rather “the supremely good and perfect principle” (太極只是個極好至善底道理) (Zhu 1986, p. 2371)—an abstract totality that “encompasses

the principles of all things under Heaven; its name is merely expressive of its excellence” (總天地萬物之理，便是太極；太極本無此名，只是箇表德) (Zhu 1986, p. 2375). Within the Cheng-Zhu lineage, sincerity is reduced to the mere absence of falsehood: “what is without falsehood is called sincerity; non-deception is secondary to it” (無妄之謂誠，不欺其次矣) (Er Cheng yishu 1999, p. 38). Because sincerity functions here as an attribute of *li* rather than as a generative ground, it can be intellectually apprehended, but its purchase on the practitioner’s existence is, by the criterion set out at the start of this section, correspondingly limited.

This raises a tension within Zhu Xi’s framework. He affirms that *Taiji* is the ultimate generative source of all *qi*-transformations and is purely good, yet he locates the origin of moral imperfection in the turbidity of *qi* 氣之濁. If the source is purely good, the turbidity of its emanations is difficult to account for on the same terms. Confronted with this difficulty, Zhu Xi tends to treat *Taiji* less as a substantial generative source than as a nominal designation for the supremely good principle. Supreme goodness (*zhishan* 至善) thereby carries little independent ontological content, and the normative work falls to the Three Bonds and Five Constants 三綱五常. The *Zhengshi* reconstruction of *cheng* 誠 and *Cheng* 成 sets out to reverse this narrowing of ontological content.

Wang Fuzhi turns to *qi*-cosmology to restore the vitality that the Cheng-Zhu framework lacks. He declares: “sincerity unites inner and outer, encompasses the Five Virtues, and is the undivided substantial reality of *yin* and *yang*—it certainly cannot be reduced to the sequential transformations of alternating *yin* and *yang*” (誠者合內外，包五德，渾然陰陽之實撰，固不自其一陰一陽、一之之化言矣) (Wang 1988, p. 1113). He pushes this dissolution of structure further: “sincerity may be called oneness... with no fixed principle to follow” (誠也曰一……無條理之可循矣) (Wang 1988, p. 1113). Thereby he achieves what the Cheng-Zhu tradition could not: a dynamic sincerity, one embedded in the flow of things. His concept of “daily renewal and daily completion” (*ri sheng ri cheng* 日生日成) places the practitioner within this natural flow.

Wang tends to treat sincerity, human nature, *qi* 氣, and goodness as different idioms within a single monist framework. Within this framework—where principle is already contained in desire (理蘊含於欲) and all things count as expressions of ceaseless generativity (*shengsheng zhi shan* 生生之善)—locating evil becomes structurally difficult. Acquired habits (*xiran* 習染) are themselves products of *qi*-transformation, part of the same generative process. On what grounds, then, are they singled out as evil? If the answer lies in the practitioner’s subjective choices, where does such deviation find its footing when human nature has already been defined as good? And if the satisfaction of desire already accords with Heaven’s generativity and so counts as good, why should the practitioner pursue any good beyond desire? On this account, goodness comes close to being identified with the generative process itself: what accords with ceaseless generation is what is called good. So construed, goodness risks becoming a designation with little independent moral measure, and the injunction to “do good and eliminate evil” 為善去惡 is left without a secure anchor.

In aligning the cosmic generativity of *shengsheng* 生生 with moral goodness, Wang grounds value in a natural process that offers no independent moral measure of its own. If the Heavenly Way is understood as the *yin-yang* interaction of concrete things, the Human Way built upon it has no separately sacred or transcendent basis: a Heavenly Way taken as *qi*-transformation comes to set the terms for the human, and the account gains realism at the cost of sacrality. Without a transcendent ground that carries determinate content, such as the primordial *cheng* 誠, cultivation (*cheng zhi* 誠之) and the resolve to “choose the good and hold fast to it” 擇善固執之 are left without a firm anchor, and the practitioner’s “participation in the transformative work of Heaven and Earth” 參贊化育 tends to become

an extension of natural process, with the sacred dimension of “standing as a third alongside Heaven and Earth” 與天地參 receding.

How to recover a motivating ground that Zhu Xi’s principle does not readily supply and a transcendent terminus that Wang Fuzhi’s naturalized *qi* does not secure is the problem the *Zhengshi* texts take up.

Zhou Dunyi’s account of sincerity is foundational but architecturally incomplete; the Cheng-Zhu tradition develops it rigorously but at some cost to its existential purchase; Wang Fuzhi restores its vitality but at some cost to its transcendent ground. Stepping entirely outside the conceptual vocabulary of the Song-Ming tradition—which lacked any independent category for *Cheng* 成 (actualization)—the *Zhengshi* texts introduce a radical innovation: fusing *cheng* 誠 (ontological ground and its practice) and *Cheng* into a single, indivisible sacred reality. From this point forward, the capitalized *Cheng* designates precisely this identity.

5. From *cheng* 誠 to *Cheng* 成: The *Zhengshi* Reconstruction of Ontological Actuality as Sacred Actualization

The *Zhengshi* reconstruction of *Cheng* begins by clarifying its fundamental cosmic order: the precise relationship between *taiji* (太極 the supreme primordial ground), *Dao* 道, and *Cheng*: “Heaven’s beginning is actualized through the *Dao*—it is the one supreme primordial ground. The supreme primordial ground moves from non-being into being; its being is the *qi* of *yin* and *yang*, which constitutes the beginning of all things... Therefore Heaven emerges from the *Dao*, and its substance is *qi*, its form is the absolute apex (*ji* 極), its number is one, its name is Heaven, its nature is the undivided (*zhong* 中), and its manifestation remains the supreme primordial ground” (天之始也，以道而成，一太極也。太極自無入有，其有也，陰陽之氣，以構萬物之始.....故天出於道，而體為氣，形為極，數為一，名為天，性為中，其狀亦太極也) (Lie Sheng 2004, p. 68).

Taiji is the ontological beginning—the point at which the formless enters form and the source from which all things receive their *qi*-constitution. The *Dao* is how *Taiji* unfolds itself. It is a ceaseless generative movement: the supreme primordial ground expresses itself in the myriad things through this unfolding. Within the *Daoti* 道體 (ontological reality of the *Dao*), no gap exists. The term *cheng* 誠 names the primordial ground as it is in itself—its ontological actuality. The *Zhengshi* texts do not treat actualization *cheng* 成 as an independent concept: it is purely the sacred actualization of this same ground. Viewed from the source, it is the ground acting as absolute reality; viewed from the practitioner, it is the ultimate fulfillment of cultivation. Yet, this completion is strictly conditional: it requires the practitioner to have fulfilled the actualization of self *chengji* 成己, the actualization of others *chengren* 成人, and the actualization of all things *chengwu* 成物—only then does praxis become continuous with the source rather than directed toward it. Within the *Daoti*, the beginning and the end are not opposed realities but two aspects of the undivided *Cheng*.

The *Zhongyong* *Zhengshi* states directly that the *Dao*’s self-unfolding and *cheng* 誠’s self-completing are one and the same—“道之自道，誠之自成，一也” (Lie Sheng 2004, p. 127). The primordial ground is not a remote cause standing behind the process; it is the process’s animating actuality.

Two features of the texts’ own usage warrant rendering *cheng* 誠 as ontological actuality rather than the conventional “sincerity.” First, the *Zhengshi* authors apply *cheng* 誠 to the primordial ground itself: *cheng* 誠 names the *Daoti* 道體 as it is in itself, a feature of the ground and not a quality of the cultivating subject. Second, they define *cheng* 誠 as comprising both ground and manifestation: “中者體也，誠兼體用者也” (*zhong* 中 is the ontological ground; *cheng* 誠 encompasses both ground and manifestation) (Lie Sheng 2004, p. 122). A term applied to the ground and said to comprise *ti* 體 and *yong* 用 carries on-

tological weight that the moral-psychological “sincerity” of the Song-Ming reading does not, and the rendering “ontological actuality” marks it. The same textual basis governs *Cheng* 成. The texts attach it to the ground’s coming into actuality rather than to the success of an undertaking: the fulfillment of primordial nature (*chengxing* 成性), the actualization of self, others, and the myriad things (*chengji* 成己, *chengren* 成人, *chengwu* 成物), and participation in the transforming and nourishing work of Heaven and Earth (*canzan huayu* 參贊化育). *Cheng* 成 is the ground actualized, sacred because what it actualizes is the primordial source from which all things proceed.

That *cheng* 誠 and *Cheng* 成 are phonetically identical is, on this reading, a feature the texts themselves draw on rather than a coincidence the interpreter has imposed. The *Zhongyong Zhengshi* defines each term through the other, treating them as one reality under two aspects: “*cheng* 誠 as sacred actualization speaks of the end; *cheng* 誠 as absolute reality speaks of the beginning” (誠之為成也，言其終也。誠之為實也，言其始也) (Lie Sheng 2004, p. 122). Read together with the identity asserted at the level of the *Daoti* (道之自道，誠之自成，一也), the homophony answers to an ontological identity that the texts establish on independent semantic and doctrinal grounds. To call it an ontological index is to claim only that the identity of sound registers this prior ontological identity, not that a doctrine has been read off a coincidence of sound.

This is why “from ontological actuality to sacred actualization” 由誠而成 is read as an ontological identity rather than a process or a causal sequence. A causal reading would treat *cheng* 誠 as a moral-psychological state that produces completion as a cause produces its effect, which is the reading invited by reducing *cheng* 誠 to “sincerity”. A processual reading would treat *cheng* 誠 as an earlier stage that a later one succeeds. Neither fits a relation the texts locate within the *Daoti*, where ground and actualization are one and no interval separates them. The “from... to” does not pass between two things or two moments; it relates two aspects of one reality: ontological actuality, named from its source, and sacred actualization, named from its completion. The proposition is tautological in this sense: at the level of *ti* 體, the ground is its own actualization. At the level of *yong* 用, it remains a genuine movement, since the practitioner’s cultivation proceeds from an initial condition toward completion; but that movement, taken at its ground, is the self-identity of the reality from which the practitioner has issued.

The architecture of this identity is bidirectional. From the primordial ground (*Qianyuan*) downward, the operative principle is *ji* 繼 (generative succession)¹: “moving from the *Dao* 道 downward is *ji* 繼; returning from conduct back to the source is sacred actualization (*Cheng* 成)” (由道以下則為繼，由行以返則為成) (Lie Sheng 2005, vol. 23, p. 224). *Qianyuan* unfolds downward through *ji* 繼, endowing all things with their primordial nature (*xing* 性) and constituting their existence as a particularized manifestation of the primordial ground.

From the myriad things upward, the operative principle is ontological return through retroactive awakening (*nijue fanben* 逆覺返本): things return to their origin through the fulfillment of their immanent primordial nature—through what the *Zhengshi* texts term “completing the *dao* through fulfilling one’s primordial nature” (*chengxing* 成性): “By conforming to the Good (*shan* 善) and according with its ontological ground (*ti* 體), [all things] return to the origin, the primordial *qi* (元氣) reconstitutes, and the *Dao* is thereby completed. ‘Completing it’ means completing the *Dao*. The *Dao* in itself has nothing to complete; only through the fulfillment of primordial nature is this accomplished. Therefore, it is said: ‘that which completes it is *xing*.’ The actualization (*Cheng* 成) of *xing* is by virtue of its Goodness. Rooted in the Good, proceeding from the Good, resting in the Good. Beginning in the Good and ending in the Good—thus *xing* is fulfilled and the *Dao* is completed.” (善而順其體，返其始，元氣復凝，其道乃成。“成之”者，言成道也。道無可成，惟全其性，

故曰“成之者性”也。性之成也，以其善也。本於善，由於善，止於善。始善終善，而性全而道成。) (Lie Sheng 2004, p. 107). In synthesis: “*cheng* 誠 begins in absolute reality and ends in sacred actualization, possessing both ground and operation, pervading root and branch as one continuous reality” (誠者，始於實，終於成，體用皆具，本末一貫者也) (Lie Sheng 2004, p. 122).

The *Zhengshi* bidirectional structure shares the ontological architecture of the Daoist tradition of *neidan* 內丹 (Inner Alchemy) and its practice of reverse cultivation (*nixiu* 逆修)—both enact a “returning to the root and reverting to the primordial *ming* 天命” (*guigen fuming* 歸根復命). *ming* constitutes the ultimate trajectory of all things returning to the origin; it is both an ontological inevitability and the absolute conformity to this inevitability. Whereas *neidan* cultivation aims at the individual practitioner’s union with the primordial *qi* and transcendence of death, the *Zhengshi* upward movement of *Cheng* 成 culminates in an ontological participation with Heaven and Earth in their transforming and nourishing processes (*canzan huayu* 參贊化育)—“assisting in the transforming and nourishing [processes] of Heaven and Earth, one can thus participate with Heaven and Earth” (贊天地之化育，則可以與天地參矣。) (Lie Sheng 2004, p. 56). Returning to the primordial sacred ground is intrinsically the ontological completion of the myriad things: the sacred actualization of the self (*Chengji* 成己) and the sacred actualization of myriad things (*Chengwu* 成物) constitute a singular dynamic operation of the *Dao*-ground (*Daoti*).

6. Sacred Self-Cultivation: *Chengyi*, the Body, and the Practice of Return

The ontological architecture of *Cheng* (誠/成) established in the preceding section requires instantiation in concrete cultivational practice. The *Daxue Zhengshi* provides this instantiation by reconstituting the classical Great Learning sequence—the ontological rectification of phenomenal reality (*gewu* 格物), the extension of knowing (*zhizhi* 致知), the sacred actualization of intention (*chengyi* 誠意), the rectification of the heart-mind (*zhengxin* 正心), and the ontological cultivation of the existential locus (*xiushen* 修身)—within the ontological framework established by the *Zhongyong Zhengshi*. These stages are not moral milestones to be achieved and left behind, but continuous ontological moments in the practitioner’s return to the primordial sacred ground.

In its analysis of the *Xici Zhuan*, the *Yijing Zhengshi* grounds the ontological rectification of phenomenal reality in a fundamental ontological division: the Way of *Yi* divides all phenomena into *Shen* 神 (the sacred ontological agency) and *xing* 形 (the formal)—the *xingshen* 性神 (primordial nature and sacred ontological agency) against the *xingqi* 形器 (form and concrete phenomena).² *Gewu* is the ontological rectification of the entire phenomenal domain. Its scope extends beyond form, body, and the external world of things to encompass the affective domain—emotions, desires, and the fluctuations belonging to the *xing er xia* 形而下 (below-form) register—realigning each with the sacred ontological ground from which its primordial nature was received. The *Yijing Zhengshi* states the criterion directly: “without first penetrating the originary principle of affairs and things, one cannot, within the domain of human affect and the worldly nexus, exhaustively enact their dynamic transformations to perfectly align with the absolute necessity of Heavenly principle, nor discern the precise ontological demarcation of good and evil” (非先達乎事物之原理，則於人情世故，不能曲盡其變通，而恰得乎天理之當然，識善惡之正的) (Lie Sheng 2005, vol. 24, p. 134). *Zhizhi* 致知 is not the extension of propositional knowledge but the unmediated apprehension that arises from *gewu* itself—the sacred ontological ground pressing through a rectified phenomenal domain. When *gewu* and *zhizhi* are fulfilled, the *tianxing* 天性 (Heavenly primordial nature) flows unhindered, and the *zhenqi* 真氣 (primordial vital-energetic flux) pervades Heaven and Earth. Upon this rectified ontological locus, *chengyi* 誠意 begins.

The *Daxue Zhengshi* declares directly: when *gewu* (the ontological rectification of phenomenal reality) reaches its utmost limit, luminous wisdom is spontaneously replete, the *tianxing* 天性 (Heavenly primordial nature) flows ceaselessly, and the *rende* 仁德 (generative ontological potency) becomes boundless—this constitutes *mingde* 明德 (luminous potency). When it reaches absolute culmination, the affective desires undergo spontaneous regulation, and the *zhenqi* 真氣 (primordial vital-energetic flux) becomes profoundly pellucid and pervades Heaven and Earth—this constitutes *mingdao* 明道 (the illumination of the *Dao*) (格物之極，明慧自充，天性常流，仁德無垠，此明德也。格物之至，情欲自節，真氣湛然，塞乎天地，此明道也。) (Lie Sheng 1993, p. 49). *Mingde* denotes the spontaneous outpouring of primordial nature and generative potency once the phenomenal domain is ontologically rectified. *Mingdao* 明道 designates the ontological regulation of the affective domain and the restoration of *zhenqi* to its pervasive natural state—a condition whose disruption by material desires constitutes the fundamental collapse of praxis.

The *Daxue Zhengshi* conceptualizes the failure of *chengyi* 誠意 entirely outside moral psychology: *ziqu* 自欺 (self-deception) transcends ethical fraud, constituting the coercive imposition of material desires to oppress *zhengqi* 正氣 (the rectified vital-energetic flux sustaining the practitioner's alignment with the sacred ontological ground); it is the state wherein affective fullness constricts the primordial nature, and the growth of delusion dissolves *zhen* 真 (the primordial real). Deception is inherently ontological delusion; when the primordial real is preserved, *zhengqi* is never lost, and intention achieves sacred actualization (自欺，非徒謂欺詐也。謂挾物欲以欺侮正氣，情充而性約，妄長而真漓。欺，即妄也。真存，則正氣弗失，而意無不誠矣。) (Lie Sheng 1993, p. 41). Material desire displaces *zhengqi* 正氣, severing the practitioner's alignment with the *Dao*-ground. The dictum *zhen cun, ze zhengqi fu shi* 真存，則正氣弗失 positions the primordial real as the absolute ontological guarantee of *zhengqi* 正氣. This failure directly inverts *mingdao* 明道 (the illumination of the *Dao*): while the culmination of *gewu* 格物 expands *zhenqi* 真氣 (the primordial vital-energetic flux) into cosmic pervasion, the collapse of *chengyi* 誠意 severs this pervasive flow.

The *Daxue Zhengshi* positions *zhengqi* 正氣 as the absolute foundation of human existence between Heaven and Earth: “*Zhengqi* 正氣 is the foundation upon which humans rely to exist between Heaven and Earth; it is what is termed the supreme and unyielding magnitude. Without enduring praxis and immaculate preservation, it depletes alongside the somatic form and cannot be recovered” (人之正氣賴以存于天地，所謂至大至剛者也。非養之有素，葆之無虧，則與形俱損，不可復矣。) (Lie Sheng 1993, p. 45). This ontological rupture registers directly in the body: “*Ziqie* 自慊 (internal deficit) indicates a flaw in one's inner conduct and an insufficiency of *zhengqi* 正氣; when there is deficiency within, it manifests outwardly as existential abashedness, hence it is as if one's liver and lungs were exposed” (自慊，言其內行有虧，而正氣不足也。內不足則外亦自慊，故如見其肺肝也。) (Lie Sheng 1993, p. 46). What the practitioner is answerable to is not a social code, but a sacred ontological ground whose presence is irreversibly inscribed in the constitution of the body.

Here, *shendu* 慎獨 (contemplative vigilance in solitude) takes on its religious character. The *Daxue Zhengshi* defines it as ontologically inseparable from *chengyi* 誠意: “contemplative vigilance in solitude is nothing other than the elimination of desire and the prohibition of self-deception; because it concerns oneself alone, it is called *du* 獨 (solitude); it is for oneself as a single person, unseen by others—this is precisely the moment when the primordial real is most vulnerable to injury” (慎獨無非去欲，無非戒自欺也。以其自也，故曰獨。為自己一人，人不得而見焉。此最傷其真之時。) (Lie Sheng 1993, p. 50). Solitude constitutes an ontological threshold: the practitioner stands before the sacred ontological ground stripped of social roles and external accountability, rendering *nijue fanben* most directly

available. *Shendu* is a praxis of absolute presence rather than ethical restraint: “if one can maintain cautious and reverential awe, as if *Shen* 神 were pressing down from above and scrutinizing from the side, then no malign impulse can arise in the intention, and only then is the intention actualized as *cheng* 誠” (若能戒慎恐懼，如神臨質其上，鑒察其旁，則惡不生於意，而意始能誠。) (Lie Sheng 1993, p. 51). *Shen* here is not a supervising deity stationed outside the practitioner—it is the sacred ontological agency constitutive of the practitioner’s own existence, the very ground to which *nijue fanben* returns. It is *cheng* 誠 that commands the genuine awe *Cheng-Zhu li* cannot: *li* is available to intellectual apprehension, whereas *Shen* is an operative agency to which the practitioner is answerable simply by existing. Nor is *Shen* Wang Yangming’s (1472–1529) *liangzhi* 良知: *liangzhi* names the heart-mind’s innate knowing of good and evil, whereas *Shen* is the vital-energetic agency that constitutes the practitioner’s somatic existence prior to any moral cognition.

The *Daxue Zhengshi* distills this into its axial formula: “*mingde* 明德 (luminous potency) and the ultimate good originate in the *xin* 心 (the intentional center), continue through the somatic form (身), and culminate in *shi* 事 (phenomenal affairs); whether in movement or stillness, labor or rest, public action or private concealment, active engagement or reclusion, nothing escapes encompassment by this *Dao* (the ultimate cosmic principle and concrete praxis), and all is regulated by this classic” (明德至善，首於其心，繼於其身，終於其事。動靜作息，行藏出入，莫不該於此道，而範於此經。³) (Lie Sheng 1993, p. 46). At its most compressed, this operates as the absolute law: *cheng yu zhong, xing yu wai* 誠於中，形於外 (actualized within, manifested without). The unmediated presence of the sacred ontological ground within the practitioner’s being is never an ethical precept applied to external conduct; rather, it irrupts outwardly as the *Dao*-ground’s own sacred actualization through the practitioner’s somatic totality.

The religionizing framework’s first premise requires a structural condition: a distance between practitioner and sacred, wide enough for ritual, clergy, or communal boundary to occupy. *Shen* is the sacred ontological agency constitutive of the practitioner’s vital-energetic existence—operative through *zhengqi* in the body’s own constitution, the very ground encountered in *shendu*. The practitioner has never been separated from it. Institutional mediation presupposes a distance the *Daxue Zhengshi*’s ontology refuses to admit.

7. Sacred Wholeness: *Chengji* and *Chengwu* Beyond Inner Sage and Outer King

The cultivation sequence traced in the preceding section culminates not in individual perfection but in the sacred actualization of the myriad things (*chengwu* 成物)—a dimension of the practitioner’s return to the primordial sacred ground that extends into the social and cosmic order.

The *neisheng waiwang* 內聖外王 (inner sagehood and outer kingship) paradigm is reconstituted in the *Zhengshi* framework not as a moral-political binary but as an ontological one: *neisheng* 內聖 corresponds to ontological self-actualization (*chengji* 成己)—the practitioner’s return to the sacred ontological ground—while *waiwang* 外王 corresponds to the actualization of others and the myriad things (*chengren chengwu* 成人成物). At the level of practical cultivation, the *Zhongyong Zhengshi* is direct: *chengji* precedes *chengwu*—“If the somatic form is uncultivated, there is nothing to manifest to others; if the somatic form lacks *Cheng*, there is no capacity to compel others” (身有未修，則無以示人；身有不誠，則無以服人) (Lie Sheng 2004, p. 75). What the *Zhengshi* texts refuse is a different claim: that this sequence constitutes a causal relation between two ontologically separate domains, inner completion mechanically driving outer engagement. The contest is not about sequence but about whether the self and things were ever divided to begin with.

The *Daxue Zhengshi* preserves the eight steps in their order, and their practical priority holds. The *Zhengshi* texts, however, operate at the level of *ti* 體 (ontological ground) rather than *yong* 用 (manifestation): that self and things were ever ontologically separate domains is the presupposition they refuse.

The *Zhongyong Zhengshi* states: “Self and things alike are born of the *Dao*. To fulfill the self, to actualize the myriad things, to complete the *Dao*—these are one and the same” (己物皆生於道，成己也，成物也，成道而已。) (Lie Sheng 2004, p. 128). *Chengdao eryi* 成道而已 (completing the *Dao* and nothing more): *chengji* and *chengwu* are not two acts in sequence but two descriptions of one movement—the *Dao*’s own self-actualization. The practical priority of *chengji* over *chengwu* belongs to the order of manifestation; at the level of ontological ground, there is only one movement, and they were never divided.

Grounding this is the doctrine of thoroughgoing continuity through the undivided vital-energetic flux: “Born of a single root, running through all things by the undivided vital-energetic flux” (一本所生，一氣所通。) (Lie Sheng 2004, p. 128). Because self and things share the same vital-energetic flux from the same sacred ontological ground, the boundary between them is a relative differentiation within a single ontological continuum. The sacred ground’s *ji* 繼 flows through the practitioner into the myriad things—not as an ethical extension but as the same movement that constitutes them. Hence: “Heaven, Earth, humanity, and the myriad things are all actualized through the *cheng* 誠 of the practitioner” (天地人物，因吾之誠，而皆成也。) (Lie Sheng 2004, p. 126)—a claim that follows directly from *yi qi suo tong* 一氣所通.

The standard Neo-Confucian reading treats *can zan hua yu* 參贊化育 as a moral destination—participation in Heaven and Earth’s transformative work through the achievement of virtue. The *Zhongyong Zhengshi* articulates this sequence directly: “Cultivate the self to actualize *Cheng*, and persons and things are actualized; rectify the self, and others and the state are rectified; preserve the wholeness of life (*quansheng* 全生), and all under Heaven is at peace” (修己以成誠，然後成人成物；修己以正心，然後正人正國；修己以全生，然後安天下。) (Lie Sheng 2004, p. 127). The *ranhou* 然後 (and thereby/afterwards) in each clause marks practical sequence in the order of *yong* 用, not ontological causation. At the level of *ti* 體, the sequence is one movement—and *can zan hua yu* 參贊化育 is not where that movement arrives but its cosmological name.

On the *Zhengshi* reading, the proposition “rectify the self, and others and the state are rectified” describes something other than a moral reformer applying acquired virtue to political life. *Zhengxin* is understood here as the sacred ontological ground’s own rectifying movement, operative through the practitioner’s somatic and relational existence rather than exported from an inner achievement onto an outer field. Two claims should be kept apart. The first, which the texts establish, is that self and others are ontologically continuous, joined at the level of *ti* 體 by the undivided vital-energetic flux; this is what allows the rectification to be described as immanent to the relational network and not as something imposed upon it from without. The second, which the texts do not assert, is that such rectification would follow from cosmological continuity alone, apart from the practitioner’s cultivation. The continuity grounds the rectification; it does not replace it. At the level of *yong* 用, cultivation remains the means by which a continuity given at the level of *ti* is carried into actuality across the relational order. What the *Zhengshi* texts call *quansheng* names this result: the preservation of the primordial vital-energetic constitution across the whole relational network, from the self outward through family, state, and all under Heaven.

On this construction, the wholeness in question is, at the level of *ti* 體, an ontological structure the practitioner already inhabits, not a condition that moral effort first brings about. The *Zhengshi* reconstruction of *neisheng waiwang* does not append a social dimension

to self-cultivation; it holds that the social order was never external to the sacred ontological ground from which the practitioner's existence proceeds. A relational encounter, accordingly, falls, on this account, within the single continuum of the *Dao*'s self-actualization because the vital-energetic flux that constitutes self and others is undivided and not because virtue is taken to extend outward from a cultivated center. This is a claim about ontological structure, not about moral automatism: that the social field is continuous with the sacred ground at the level of *ti* does not entail that it is actualized apart from cultivation, which remains, at the level of *yong* 用, the means of that actualization. What the rationalist Neo-Confucian tradition supplied in ethics for social engagement, it did not supply in ontology, namely, an account of why the social field is, in its ground, continuous with the sacred and not a profane exterior awaiting sanctification.

The vital-energetic flux of *yi qi suo tong* 一氣所通 runs without ontological interruption through family, state, and the social nexus. On the *Zhengshi* construction, the social field is the *Dao*'s actualization at the collective scale, and as such, it requires no external or institutional mediation to render it sacred: its sacrality is given with its ontological constitution rather than conferred from outside. This bears on the religionizing framework's second premise, which presupposes an ontologically inert social exterior awaiting sanctification. The *Zhongyong Zhengshi* describes no such exterior. The *Jiushi Xinjiao* emphasis on *jiao* 教化 over institutional religion (*zongjiao* 宗教) follows accordingly: where the social nexus the practitioner inhabits is not, in its ground, a profane exterior, institutional boundaries are not needed to mark off a sacred interior within it.

8. From Inner Transcendence to Operative Sacred Ground: The *Zhengshi* Reconstruction in Dialogue with Tu Weiming

The reconstruction set out above stands in a definite relation to Tu Weiming's account of inner transcendence: it does not replace that account but works at a level his comparative project did not set out to occupy. Tu establishes the general shape of Confucian religiosity: a cosmos of unbroken continuity, an anthropocosmic outlook in which self-cultivation bears cosmological weight, and a transcendence that is immanent and yet exceeds the self (Tu 1985, 2002). What this characterization does not provide is the generative ontology it presupposes—an account of how the transcendent comes to be operative within the practitioner's own existence rather than affirmed in the cosmos in general. The difference is one of register, not a defect in Tu's work; to describe the distinctive form of Confucian religiosity is not yet to give an ontology of it. This is the supplementation Zhang Wenzhi calls for in arguing that inner transcendence requires an account of objective sacred ground (Zhang 2019). The *Zhengshi* reconstruction of *Cheng* 誠/成 offers that account and gives three of Tu's central claims an ontological content they otherwise lack.

The first is the continuity of being. For Tu, this is a claim about the cosmos: being is unbroken, and the human stands within it rather than over against a creator. The *Zhengshi* texts specify how the individual practitioner stands within that continuum. The practitioner's existence proceeds from the primordial ground (*Qianyuan* 乾元) by generative succession (*ji* 繼): "moving from the *Dao* downward is *ji*." The practitioner is therefore one particularized actualization of the single ground from which all things receive their nature. Continuity, on this reading, is a line of derivation rather than an undifferentiated whole in which the human happens to be placed: the human is continuous with Heaven because the human's being is the ground's own succession made concrete.

The second is self-transformation. For Tu, religiosity is ultimate self-transformation, an open-ended deepening of the self. On the *Zhengshi* reconstruction, this movement acquires a determinate form and direction. Self-transformation is the conscious return of one's derived being to its source, the retroactive awakening (*nijue fanben* 逆覺返本) through

which the practitioner fulfills the primordial nature received in that descent and so completes the *Dao* by fulfilling that nature (*chengxing* 成性). Cultivation is thus a directed return rather than indefinite self-improvement: a being that has issued from the ground turning back toward it. Where Tu leaves the trajectory open, the *Zhengshi* texts state its terms: from the ground by way of *ji*, back to the ground by way of return.

Third, the identity of *cheng* 誠 and *Cheng* 成 grounds what Tu's "immanent yet transcendent" asserts without explaining. An immanent transcendence left unspecified is open to a worry raised in the introduction: that a transcendence operating only as an ethical ideal becomes indistinguishable from a sophisticated moral psychology, with its cosmological vocabulary doing no independent work. The *Zhengshi* reconstruction blocks this outcome. Because ontological actuality (*cheng* 誠) is the sacred actualization (*Cheng* 成) of one and the same ground, the transcendent is the animating actuality of the very process the practitioner undergoes, not a postulate affirmed alongside it. The cultivational analysis of the *Daxue Zhengshi* shows what this means in practice: *Shen* 神 is the sacred ontological agency constitutive of the practitioner's own vital-energetic existence, encountered in *shendu* 慎獨 as the ground of one's own being, and not a deity that supervises from without. Transcendence is here operative rather than merely acknowledged: it is encountered, within the practitioner's own constitution, as the source from which existence has issued and to which cultivation returns.

The anthropocosmic claim receives the same treatment. That the realized person forms "one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things" is, for Tu, the horizon of cultivation. The *Zhengshi* texts locate the claim in the doctrine of the undivided vital-energetic flux (*yi qi suo tong* 一氣所通): self and others proceed undivided from the same ground so that the wider social and cosmic order is that ground's actualization on a larger scale. The "one body" is then the situation the practitioner already inhabits and that cultivation makes actual, not a state the cultivated self approaches from the outside.

The *Zhengshi* reconstruction occupies a level his comparative project did not undertake, and the two are best read as complementary: Tu characterizes the distinctive shape of Confucian religiosity across the tradition, while the *Zhengshi* corpus supplies, for one Republican-era reconstruction, the generative ontology such a characterization presupposes but need not itself provide. What these texts contribute is therefore not a correction of inner transcendence but a specification of it: an account of how the transcendence Tu locates in the Confucian cosmos becomes operative within the practitioner who cultivates.

9. Conclusions

Where New Confucianism preserved philosophical rigor at the cost of the ontological mechanism that had historically given self-cultivation its existential weight—leaving a tradition one could argue for without inhabiting—the *Zhengshi* corpus held onto that mechanism. The reconstruction of *Cheng* (誠/成) as the ontological identity between the primordial generative ground's (*Qianyuan* 乾元) ontological actuality (*cheng* 誠) and its sacred actualization (*Cheng* 成) in the return of all things to their source supplies the ontological register that Tu Weiming's framework of inner transcendence presupposes but does not itself articulate. Here, transcendence is encountered not as a philosophical postulate but as a sacred primordial ground already operative within the practitioner's own existence. The practitioner's being proceeds from the ground's generative succession 繼; cultivation is the conscious return of that derivation to its source. Awe arises from being answerable to a ground already at work within one's existence, prior to any recognition of it.

Because the self and others are constituted by the same undivided vital-energetic flux (*zhenqi* 真氣) proceeding from the same ontological ground (*yi qi suo tong* 一氣所通), human

relationships already instantiate, at the level of *ti*, the structure the practitioner encounters in returning to that ground. The social field is the same ontological reality at the collective scale, a domain continuous with the sacred ground rather than a profane exterior on which sacrality must be conferred from without. *Zhengxin* 正心 is the primordial ground's own rectifying movement, operative through the practitioner's somatic and relational existence rather than an inner achievement exported into political life. The sacrality of the social order is in this sense given with human relationships themselves; its actualization, however, remains the work of cultivation, the *yong* through which a continuity present at the level of *ti* is brought into effect.

The sacred ontological ground is operative within the practitioner's vital-energetic constitution; the social field is the *Dao*'s actualization, prior to any religious demarcation. The religionizing framework's categories—institutional mediation, sacred interior against profane exterior—presuppose separations the *Zhengshi* texts never admit. A framework built on those separations cannot register what generates the sacrality here.

Esoteric and popular religious forms dismissed as philosophically marginal by mainstream scholarship can reach a depth of ontological reflection that academically accommodated traditions cannot. The reason is their esoteric character itself, which is not a liability to be overcome: they were never compelled to abandon the cosmological and sacred dimensions that academic positivism demanded as a sacrifice. Sacrality within the Confucian tradition is not a religious category. It names the direct ontological encounter between the practitioner and the sovereign primordial ground—an encounter ritual cannot produce, doctrine cannot derive, and institution cannot generate. Analytical frameworks operating only at the level of institutional mediation will find something, but never what actually generates the sacrality. The distortion is structural, not incidental.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Throughout this article, the romanization *ji* used in isolation designates 繼 (*jì*, fourth tone, generative succession) exclusively, and should not be confused with 己 (*jǐ*, third tone, the self), which appears only in compound terms such as *chengji* (成己) and *wei ren you ji* (為仁由己).
- ² The *yin-yang* 陰陽 correspondence—*Yin* constitutes the spectral and *Yang* the sacred agency; they diverge in their ontological loci in accordance with their respective vital-energetic flux (陰鬼陽神，因其氣而異其居)—is concretely mapped onto the body correspondences of the eight trigrams: *Qian* 乾 as the head, *Kun* 坤 as the belly, and so forth, inscribing the *xingshen* 形神 and *xingqi* 形器 division into the finite entity's own somatic constitution (Lie Sheng 2005, vol. 23, p. 67). On the distinction between *qi* 器 (concrete phenomena) and *qi* 氣 (vital-energetic flux): the former denotes everything belonging to the *xing er xia* register; the latter is rendered throughout as vital-energetic flux.
- ³ The character 繼 in 繼於其身 is the cosmological *ji* 繼 of Section 5 instantiated at the somatic level: the body is where the primordial ground's downward endowment becomes concrete.

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