

Aesthetical Meanings of the Central Notion *Ti Ren* in Cultivation Theory of Neo-Confucianism^{*}

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All things are already complete in us. There is no greater delight than to be conscious of sincerity on
self-examination.

—Mencius (Legge, 1966, pp. 935-936)

萬物皆備於我矣，反身而誠，樂莫大焉。

——孟子

Ti Ren 體認 is a commonly used and very important notion in traditional Chinese philosophy and intellectual history, nevertheless with its connotation unclear in the ancients' discourses. This text tries to analyze the method and process of this notion via the perspective of Neo-Confucianism in Song Dynasty. The basic hypothesis of this research is that *Ti Ren* is the basis of the cultivation theory that helps confucians improve their moral integrity. Under such assumption, this text proposes the core connotation of *Ti Ren* in Neo-Confucianism lies in personal grasp of the heavenly principle. Based on this, from Zhou Dunyi to Shao Yong, Zhang Zai and the Cheng brothers, this kind of grasp gradually developed into a clear clue from appreciation of objects to that of inner mind, and then epitomized by Zhu Xi. Zhu Xi's *Ti Ren* consists of two approaches, extroversive and introversive, and built a way of self-cultivating to be the saint from methods like investigation of things and reading books to the realization of grasping saints' minds. The end of the road is the aesthetic world of eagles soaring in the sky and fishes diving in water, the great pleasure, and on passage, it is overflowing with both physical and spiritual feelings, so that we know *Ti Ren* possesses aesthetic meanings. Further, based on the differentiation and analysis of the connotation of this concept, this text preliminarily compares Zhu Xi's *Ti Ren* with Gadamer's "Erlebnis", promoting the possibility of dialogue between east and west philosophy.

Keywords: Neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Ti Ren* 體認

As an independent philosophical system that is different from western philosophies, there is a distinguishing thinking pattern in Chinese philosophy, namely the linking up between the heavenly principle and the earthly world. There is a famous description in Xi Ci of the *Book of Change*, which has been regarded as the beginning of

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Chinese culture in tradition: “In antiquity when Pao-hsi [Fu-hsi] ruled all under heaven, he looked up and observed the images in heaven, he looked down and observed the patterns on earth, and he observed how the markings on birds and beasts were appropriate to their locales. Nearby he took it from his body, at a distance he took it from objects. Thereupon he initially made the eight trigrams, so as to know the virtue of divinities and to draw analogies to principles of all the things in the world” (“Xi Ci” 繫詞, Chen, 2015, pp. 381-382). In other words, ancient Chinese believed that the working principle of human society should be consistent with rules of heaven and earth, namely the nature. This is also what the American sinologist Sarah Allan said that “early ancient philosophers deemed that the natural world and human societies shared common principles” (Ai & Zhang, 2010, p. 4). Allan believes that “in the absence of a transcendental concept [here the author refers to religious canon and sacred narrative], the ancient Chinese turned directly to the natural world”, “their approach was a holistic one: by studying the principles of nature, one could understand the forces that govern human society” (Allan, 1997, pp. xi, preface). Clearly, this argument coincides with Roger Ames’s view of correlative thinking, which he regards as the basic thinking pattern of Chinese people, at least one of its presenting forms (Ames & Wen, 2002, pp. 223-254). However, the question is how did the process that Chinese philosophers transplant or graft the natural rules to human society happen? Scholars like Allan and Ames realized the phenomenon that could be the essential characteristic of Chinese philosophy, but without a fairly appropriate explanation of how does the correlation happen. I think the way that Chinese philosophers linking up heaven and humanity is *Ti Ren*.

In ancient Chinese philosophy, *Ti Ren* 體認 is a commonly used term primarily describing the method that people recognize, understand and experience the metaphysical noumenon—Dao, or the status of appreciating it. It appeared as early as the Western Jin Dynasty in *Zang Shu* 葬書 written by Guo Pu 郭璞, and then in other literary and philosophical books afterwards, either with the exact expression of *Ti Ren* or its similar concepts. Zhu Xi especially valued this notion, which turned up in *Zhuzi Yulei* 朱子語類 for nearly a hundred times.

In *Zang Shu*, *Ti Ren* was used as a synonyms of *Bian Ren* 辨認, being a typical epistemological way of viewing the nature. Entered into the area of philosophy, nevertheless, *Ti Ren* was used more and more on the ontological level, being the realization and grasp of Dao. It was not only a cognition method, but also a pathway via which subjects could cultivate themselves and enhance their moral accomplishments, so as to be the solon wisdom or even the sage. However, as held by Liu Kangde, “Although the method of *Ti Ren* was repeatedly used by ancient philosophers, the internal meaning of it was not clearly defined (Liu, 1990)”. Hence, this article deems that if we need an all-sided understanding of the philosophical *Ti Ren*, especially when we need a complete comprehension of *Ti Ren* or *Ti X* (like *Ti Cha*, *Ti Yan*, *Ti Hui*, *Ti Tie*, etc.) that was used by Neo-Confucians in Song dynasty, we have to start with the combing of the discourse on *Ti Ren* by each important philosopher since Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤, trying to sort out a line of its academic history, it is then in which case the detailed analysis of the implication of these terms can be possible.

From Guan Wu 觀物 to Ti Xin 體心

The object of *Ti Ren* is Dao or *Dao Ti* 道體 (the substance of Dao), which can also be called *Ren Ti* 仁體 (the substance of humanity) in Neo-Confucianism. Confucians always take much account of the recognizing and grasp of this ontological existence. They think that Dao is a macroscopically cosmical spirit, namely *Da Hua* 大

化, which means people should respect and comply with the Dao, so as to be integrated with it on the spiritual level, then realizing entering into “the flux of universal matter.”¹ However, the question that had aroused much debate among Confucians over dynasties was how to realize this ideal, or how to get close to the Dao that normally being outside of people. *Huai Nan Zi* 淮南子 mentions “sages experience by bodies 聖人以身體之”, which clearly and definitely explained that the understanding of Dao first comes from feelings of the body, namely *Ti* 體. Song philosophers like Zhou Dunyi used to give brief descriptions about *Ti* like: “Facing the sage’s Dao, we should have it entered into ears, harbored in mind, brewed as virtue and practiced as career” (Zhou & Xu, 2020, p. 45). However, in Zhou Dunyi, instead of developing the concept *Ti Ren* into a concrete and practical cultivation method, it was more of a description of the process that people naturally accepting and practicing Dao. Soon after that, another philosopher Shao Yong 邵雍 proposed an initial ontologically epistemological approach—“*Guan Wu* 觀物” (observing objects). Shao Yong said:

So called Guanwu does not mean observe just with eyes, but observe with mind; does not mean observe with mind, but observe with Li 理 (heavenly principle).[...]the reason why saints can equalize Qing of everything is attributed to his capability of review (Fanguan 反觀). So called review does not mean observe from my point of view, but observe from the perspective of the object.

Observing with the object is Xing (inherent character of human beings), while observing with the subject is Qing (personal feelings). Xing is objective and bright, whereas Qing is biased and dark. (Shao, Guo, & Yu, 2020, pp. 1175, 1408)

What Shao Yong said obviously brought up the viewpoint of integrating subject with the object which was also commonly accepted by later Neo-confucians, namely, “equalizing Qing of everything”. And “not observe with eyes” as well as “not observe with mind” imply that people should exclude their consciousness of sensory organs and subjective logical inference, so as to realize the status of “objective and bright” via observing from the object. After Shao Yong, Zhai Zai 張載 further proposed “experiencing all things in the world 體天下之物”:

By enlarging one’s mind, one can enter into all things in the world. As long as anything is not yet entered into, there is still something outside the mind. People’s mind is narrow owing to little knowledge, while sages can extend their nature infinitely, without knowledge hinders their minds; For they regard everything in the world is within them.²

Shao Yong and Zhang Zai’s concern about the object provided an external direction for later Neo-confucians when perceiving Dao, which is *Ti Wu* 體物 or it can be called an external approach. From their perspective, *Ti Dao* is first to realize subjects’ integration with the outside world, which, just as Wing-tsit Chan’s

¹ This view originates from the basic understanding of the cosmos’s formation by Chinese people in ancient times. See Tu Wei-ming’s discussions for further reference: “The Continuity of Being: Chinese Vision of Nature”, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, Albany, N.Y.: State University Press of New York, 1985, pp. 35-53. Frederick W. Mote also pointed out that ancient Chinese people believed that individuals should return to “the flux of universal matter”. See Frederick W. Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China*, N.Y.: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1989, p. 17.

² *Ti* 體 can be translated as “experience” literally, while Wing-tsis Chan translates it as “enter into”, which I think is more appropriate as an intellectual interpretation. See Wing-tsis Chan: *Reflections on things as hand*, New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967, 74-75. The text comes from vol.4 (“Da Xin” 大心), in Zhang Zai, Wang Fuzhi (annotate), Tang Qinfu (intro.), *Zhangzi Zhengmeng* 張子正蒙, Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 2020, p. 154.

translation, is entering into things. Here, *Ti* presents a status of “entering”, which is, to realize the “appreciation”³ of objects via entering into them, so as to deeply experience the situation of “all things are already complete in us” by Mencius. Since it is generally accepted that Neo-confucians in Song dynasty thought their “*Dao Tong* 道統” (Confucian orthodoxy) was inherited from Mencius, his discourse cannot receive more agreement by Neo-confucians.

Moreover, different from Shao Yong, Zhang Zai also pointed out the relation between *Ti Ren* and *Xin* 心 (mind). “Enlarging one’s mind” from the above extract means expanding the space of one’s mind, which has direct relation to Mencius’ discourse of “*Jin Xin* 盡心 (fulfill one’s heart-mind)”, “*Qiu Fang Xin* 求放心 (seek for the lost mind)”, etc.⁴ But the relation between *Ti Wu* and *Xin* was not clear and epistemology of the integral process was not formed until Cheng Hao 程顥. Cheng Hao said: “the student should completely preserve his mind. Although his studies may not be complete, as things come to him he should not fail to respond, but should respond according to his capacity. If he does not hit the mark, he will not be far from it” (Cheng, Cheng, & Pan, 2020, p. 63). “Completely preserve his mind” here means “follow what is from his heart (or mind)”. That is to say, once students can enter into the object freely and naturally and have it become an unconscious habit in mind, this “mind” can immerse in the flow of Dao for long time. Even if subjects cannot reach the realm of Dao, as long as they listen attentively to and experience their minds and follow their nature when doing things, they won’t be too far away from it, even though they cannot yet meet the requirements of it. Thus, we can see from the viewpoints of Zhang Zai and Cheng Hao that *Ti Ren* requires returning to the subject after *Ti Wu* (entering into things), which is *Ti Xin* 體心 (preserve one’s mind), which is also what Mencius said from “all things are already complete in us” to “being conscious of sincerity on self-examination”.

From Shao Yong’s “*Guan Wu* 觀物 (observing the objects)” to Cheng Hao’s “*Ti Xin* 體心 (preserve minds)”, there emerged a qualitative change in Neo-Confucianism. The influence of former confucians had been weakened gradually, while the confucian mind-nature theory that stresses on the immediate concern to oneself started to prevail. On basis of the inheritance and synthesis from the former Neo-confucians, Zhu Xi’s epitomizing concept of *Ti Ren* began to emerge. Among all the Neo-confucians, Zhu Xi used the term *Ti Ren* the most, and endowed it with meanings far more complicated than other philosophers. At this time, *Ti Ren* tent to possess more sense of physical experience, which is also why he sometimes used the term *Ti Yan* 體驗 (coming to know by intimate, personal experience) to express similar meanings.

Zhu Xi 朱熹: *Ti Ren* 體認 as Two Different Approaches from the Outward to the Inward

Seen from Zhu Xi’s discourse, there are mainly two forms of *Ti Ren*: Reading books and investigation of things (*Ge Wu* 格物)—Zhu Xi didn’t stress on mediation as much as some Neo-confucians. And either for reading books or for investigation of things, the final object of *Ti Ren* is Dao. This text holds the view that in Zhu

³ In translation of “須是徘徊顧戀，如不欲舍去，方能體認得”，Gardner uses “We must linger over what we read, longing to understanding it. Only if we don’t wish to put it aside will we come to a personal appreciation of it.” See Daniel Gardner, *Learning to Be A Sage*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1990, p. 141.

⁴ Zhang Zai wrote a book called *Mengzi Shuo* 孟子說 in his early years, but it was lost. However, more than 40 articles of this book were compiled into volumes *Shen Hua* 神化, *Cheng Ming* 誠明, and *Da Xin* 大心 in *Zheng Meng* 正蒙 (Rectifying Obscurations). See Lin Lechang, “Zhang Zai ‘Xin Tong Xing Qing’ Shuo de Jiben Yihan He Lishi Dingwei” 張載 “心統性情” 說的基本意涵和歷史定位, *Zhexue Yanjiu*, 2003, Vol. 12.

Xi, Dao is linguistically abstract while concrete and vivid in *Ti Ren*. So owing to this special dual characteristic of Dao, it is required that subjects recognize it with the mind set of both rational and perceptual, and then enter it and integrate with it.

The first meaning of *Ti Ren* is *Ti Wu* (cognition), which consists of two steps: facing the image of objects and entering into things. The first step is nothing more than a visual realization, where most people stop when seeing objects. While what Neo-confucians emphasized was experiencing things or entering into things. Just as Zhu Xi said, “The first step to entering into the Way is to place yourself in the midst of moral principle; gradually you will become intimate with it. After a while you and it will become one. With people today, however, moral principle is here, and they are external to it—moral principle and people have absolutely nothing to do with each other” (Zhu & Li, 2020, p. 172). If illustrate with a metaphor, it is “Reading a text is like looking at this house here. If you view the house from the outside, then they say that you have finished seeing it, there’ll be no way to understand it. You must go inside and look around at each and every thing. What’s the size and layout of the structure? What’s the extent of the latticework? Look through the house once, then again and again. Remember everything, and you’ll have understood it” (Zhu & Li, 2020, p. 212). “Go inside” refers to the movement and change of subjects’ mind set and spirit, whereas “looking around” can be seen as the rational and logical realization, which is essentially the method of *Ge Wu* (investigation of things). Just like another discourse of Zhu Xi in *Zhuzi Yulei*, “what is the meaning of *Ti*? Just put the mind within objects and find out the principle, like the meaning of investigating things and extending the knowledge” (Zhu & Li, 2020, p. 3068). However, the rational and logical way of “putting the mind within objects” or “investigating the things” is not the goal, but being the media leading to “all things are complete in us”. Being the outcome of *Ti Ren* in its first meaning, “all things are complete in us” is a two-tier feeling both of physical and mental. In terms of mental consciousness, the subject is “enlarged in mind” so as to contain everything, and when it comes to physical esthesis, one can have the same feeling as all the things in the world, namely I and the world are integrated. Hence, it can be concluded that the first meaning of *Ti Ren* is via epistemological method, to realize an ontological status, which is “appreciation with body and spirit”. In other words, the means of *Ti Wu* are of rational and logical while the purpose is to reach the physical and spiritual appreciation that is blended with sense and sensibility.

The second (but not the second important) meaning of *Ti Ren* is *Ti Xin* (preserve minds). *Ti Xin* can be possible only when subjects and objects are integrated (all things are complete in us). And then subjects could go from body to mind, which is “being conscious of sincerity on self-examination”. This is an internal reference of *Ti Ren*, or it can be called an internal approach, which can also be translated or more precisely, interpreted as “discover for themselves” in some scholar’s translations (Gardner, 1990, p. 124). Since the mind of the subject has already possessed the feeling and status that are the same as the object, the subject can then get hold of Dao directly from the inner mind 心 (mind here is equivalent to Xing (inherent nature)), so as to finish the whole process of *Ti Ren*. So it is clear that *Ti Xin* is a natural stretching of *Ti Wu*. They constitute the two processes of *Ti Ren* yet cannot be extinguished exactly. From “all things are complete in us” to “being conscious of sincerity on self-examination” is a momentary activity happened in the mental world of subjects, and the experience of “all things are complete in us” is always ready to slide into its second meaning, namely *Ti Xin*.

As a matter of fact, it is only for the convenience of exposition and argumentation that I divide *Ti Ren* into two stages, the stage “from objects to bodies”, with the result of “all things are complete in us”, and the stage

“from bodies to minds”, with the result of “being conscious of sincerity on self-examination”. However, the cultivation method of *Ti Ren* is an integral whole in Neo-confucians, with subjects’ mind nature functioning throughout. This can be seen from the fact that Cheng (sincerity) runs as a constant principle through the whole process of *Ti Ren*. Cheng (sincerity) is a status subjects should have throughout *Ti Ren* and also a realm after it. Zhu Xi said, “Sincerity means true without absurdity, which is the naturalness of heavenly principle” (Zhu & Guo, 2008, p. 45). This is the realm that subjects realized their spiritual transcendence. And in the stage of *Ti Wu*, Cheng is also a necessary mental state for subjects, which acts on the external way of *Ti*. Just as Zhu Xi said, “without sincerity there will be no objects” (Zhu & Guo, 2008, p. 48), and “all things before people’s eyes can be called objects. Yet it can be the true object only with sincerity” (Zhu & Li, 2020, p. 616). Sincerity is a mental guarantee that subjects can enter into objects and get hold of Dao. Moreover, in the process of *Ti Xin* (preserve minds), sincerity is also an idea that subjects should insist when pursuing Dao via the internal approach. Consider Cheng Hao’s expression for example, “If carefully employing his words he is truly making an effort to establish his sincerity, that is personally realizing the fact that ‘seriousness is to straighten the internal life and righteousness is to square the external life’” (Ye, 2017, p. 51). So called “personally realizing the fact that ‘seriousness is to straighten the internal life and righteousness is to square the external life’” is subjects’ understanding and grasp of *Xing* (inherent nature). Since *Xing* is inherent in everyone, *Ti* becomes a spiritual realization that is both self-conducted and inward-directed. It can be seen that Cheng Hao thought subjects’ grasp of their mind should also insist on sincerity, in other words, *Ti Xin* is right the representation of sincerity. Consequently, we deem that with the core of “person”, *Ti Ren* is two approaches of reaching Dao, of extroversion and introversion respectively.

Aesthetical Meanings of *Ti Ren* 體認

The final point of *Ti Ren* is Le 樂 (pleasure), which is also what Mencius called “great delight 樂莫大焉”. This is fully expressed in cases that Neo-confucians pursuing the pleasure of Confucius and Yan Hui 尋孔顏樂處, commenting on Zeng Dian’s special life style 曾點氣象 etc. It is because of this orientation of Le (pleasure) that we can see that *Ti Ren* is obviously not purely about investigation of things in rational and logical meanings. The meaning of investigation of things bears some resemblance to Cheng Hao’s word *Shi* 識 (recognize). Cheng Hao said: “Learners should recognize humanity first. Humanity is completely melted with objects. Both righteousness, propriety, wisdom and honest can be called humanity” (Cheng, Cheng, & Pan, 2020, p. 65). The substance of benevolence equals to that of Dao. That is to say, Cheng Hao believed that in the *Ti Ren* (experiencing) of Dao, there must be a rational process recognizing the substance of Dao, which is clearly opposed by Zhu Xi. It can be best illustrated in one of Zhu Xi’s teachings in *Zhiyan Yiyi* 知言疑義: “That reaching benevolence firstly requires the cognition of its substance is quite questionable. There are many answers from Confucius to questions from his students about benevolence. He just told them the method of pursuing it and had them work on it, so as to reach it from the inside. It is unnecessary to have them recognize it first.” Although it is kind of in a hermeneutic circle, obviously it reminds us to notice that the key point of Zhu Xi’s *Ti Ren* is not about epistemology or the theory of knowledge, but of ontology—“reach it from the inside” and of the theory of practice—“have them work on it”. Nonetheless, just as what discussed above, there are still something rational in Zhu Xi’s *Ti Ren*. In replying to “Is it experiencing without thinking?”, Zhu Xi said “although the four

headstreams(of benevolent, righteousness, wisdom and honest) is inherent, there's also Mencius' saying 'reaching them with thinking and vice versa.'" (Zhu & Li, 2020, p. 686). Here, what Zhu Xi means by "with thinking 用思" has nothing to do with the rational recognition of the substance of Dao from the macroscopical view, but is to fulfill subjects' ability of logical thinking in the stage of *Ti Wu*, and to investigate objects. It can be seen that Zhu Xi is fully conscious about this. It is on this very understanding that *Ti Ren* is primarily a realization involving both body and mind of the subject, a thinking practice based on dual feelings of both physical and spiritual and finally pointing to the transcendental Le (pleasure), Zhu Xi's conversation "the good thing is just being unrestrained instead of *Ti Ren*" (Zhu & Li, 2020, p. 177) can be well comprehended. From the perspective of Neo-Confucians, after *Ti Ren* (All things being already complete in us and we being conscious of sincerity on self-examination), there is great pleasure indeed.

The final point of *Ti Ren*, which is Le, can be compared to the category "*Gan Xing* 感興 (aesthetic invigoration)" in Chinese aesthetics. "*Gan* (sensation)" is a kind of direct emotional movement triggered by appearance, color, sound, temperature and strength, without the media of rational knowledge (understanding), while *Xing* (inspiration) is subjects' self-experience of the emotional movement (Ye, 1988, pp. 169-170). Compared with *Gan Xing*, although *Ti Ren* is also a sort of individual inner mind change aroused by external things, it should be accompanied by subjects' consciously rational thinking, using "thinking" rather than pure intuition. And the purpose of thinking is to enter into objects and realize "all things are complete in us". More importantly, after rational thinking, *Ti Ren* will go back to the perceptual level, which is also back to the subjective selves or being conscious of sincerity on self-examination, and gradually internalizing into subjects' unconsciousness on this level. That is to say, the final result of *Ti Ren* is to internalize the heavenly principle into people's natural awareness or even the unconsciousness. This is what Zhu Xi said "If in their ordinary lives they are always conscientiously examining themselves, preserving and nourishing it [the mind], in time they will naturally become cultivated" (Zhu & Li, 2020, p. 250). As to aesthetic invigoration, in addition to it only resorts to subjectivity and perception, it also tends to be one-off. In other words, the object of aesthetic invigoration is transient and momentary, while that of *Ti Ren* is perpetual.

It should be noted that in old Chinese text, *Ti Ren* is a word with extremely complex and polytropic meanings, while the meaning discussed in this text refers in particular to the grasp of the substance of Dao in the context of Zhu Xi's study. In fact, *Ti Ren* was also often used in domains like poetics and aesthetics. It possesses the so called "fruitful ambiguity" by the American sinologist Benjamin I. Schwartz. As for *Ti* in *Ti Dao*, it can be a method, like appreciation and discovering; it can be a behavior, like grasp and examine; and it can be a status as well, like experiencing, personal realization, and entering into things. It is because that its object is Dao, with its process being intensive and involving aesthetic elements that are perceptual, *Ti Ren* possesses strong similarity with the method like "eidetic reduction" and "Erlebnis" in phenomenology-hermeneutics, which still needs further research.

Conclusion

For Neo-confucians, "Dao means life and growth in nature", which can breed everything; therefore, it can be pursued in everything in the world. That is to say, Dao is everywhere and existing in each object. Consequently, subjects should put the mind within objects, equate subjects and objects, reconcile one's

physical and spiritual feeling with objects and experience Dao from the standpoint that is outside personal feelings. In this sense, the status that “all things are complete in us” can only be felt via bodily experience like what Zhu Xi called “embody it in their persons 體之於身”. And as long as the “body” is felt by consciousness, this bodily experience can be converted into spiritual feeling immediately, like what are expressed in Zhu Xi’s poems: Experiencing the warmth of spring via pursuing blooming flowers in a riot of color and enjoying the smart water wave and flow in the “half-acre pond” when thinking of its “source where comes the fresh water.” (From the poem *Chun Ri* 春日 and *Guanshu Yougan* 觀書有感 respectively.) So, we know that only on the basis of possessing both physical and spiritual feelings can subjects grasp Dao. In this sense, we can explain the famous stories from the perspective of *Ti Ren*, like Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 not weeding out the grass in his courtyard, Zhang Zai enjoying listening to donkey bray, and the Cheng brothers being into observing chickens and fishes: All things on earth, like the courtyard grass, donkey bray and diving fishes, brought Neo-confucians with physical and spiritual feelings of the circle of life, and it is the appreciation of the great vitality of all things in the world that constitute the essence of aesthetical pursuit of Neo-confucians of the time.

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