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This book is the first systematic account of Zhu Xi’s thoughts on natural phenomena. The title is somewhat misleading, since these thoughts themselves were never systematically conceived as a “philosophy”, and it is therefore no wonder that the term “natural philosophy” is rarely taken up again in the body of the text. Instead, the author uses expressions such as “natural knowledge” or “explanation of natural phenomena.” Moreover, it is extremely difficult to assess which kinds of phenomena, in Zhu Xi’s mind, belong to the realm of the “natural.” Is there anything like a “non-natural” sphere in his considerations? Thus, the author has to concede that “my choice of materials uses a criterion that was not Chu Hsi’s own,” and, furthermore, that “my presentation arranges them in a way quite different from the way they [?] appeared in his works” (p. 10). There are two possible methodological consequences of this division of various kinds of knowledge, or “philosophy”: either we use a more or less modern Western taxonomy of natural phenomena and make Zhu Xi answer our questions with regard to them—a procedure which necessarily implies a decontextualization of the original framework of the relevant passages, or we try to do justice to Zhu Xi’s own terminology, concepts and theories by identifying elements that can help us gain a new understanding of his view of Nature. In this case, we have to confront the danger of reductionism, because the extent of the highly polysemic terms and concepts of traditional Chinese intellectual history often shrinks to a pale, one-dimensional meaning.

This age-old dilemma can be traced back to various attempts to prove the “Chinese origin of Western science” in the late nineteenth century. In order to make the Chinese elite more familiar with the “new learning”, and, at the same time, to sustain their cultural pride, several authors used the whole range of the Chinese learned tradition as their authority in the fields of the natural sciences,
technology, and many other new disciplines. Of course, their answer to the question of whether ancient and traditional China had a notion of “natural philosophy” (mostly called gewu 格物), and sometimes even of “science,” was affirmative. More than a hundred years later, Kim—who definitely is not a believer in the “Chinese origin of Western science”—asks a similar question, but his findings lead to a devastatingly negative conclusion: Zhu Xi’s knowledge of the natural world was marked by a “particularistic character” (p. 318), there was a “lack of concern with methodological problems” (p. 322), which went hand in hand with a “lack of abstract, theoretical speculations and debates” (p. 307), and, finally, the commonplace character of his knowledge “hardly … required fresh observations” (p. 322).

It was perhaps in order to overcome the above-mentioned dilemma that the author has chosen both methods: in Part One, he presents us with an analysis of the “basic concepts of Chu Hsi’s Natural Philosophy”, whereas Part Two deals with “Chu Hsi’s actual knowledge about the natural world.” In the part on the basic concepts Kim—for partly valid reasons—does not distinguish between methodological and phenomenological approaches. Thus, we find li 理 (“pattern”) alongside gewu 格物 (with few references to the traditional meanings of this expression and none to its early modern ones), qi 氣, yin-yang and the Five Phases, numbers, images, guishen 鬼神 (demons and gods), Heaven and the Sages, as well as stimulus-response and bianhua 變化 (transformations). A close reading of Part Two, however, shows us that not all of these concepts do indeed serve as heuristic principles guiding Zhu Xi’s actual knowledge about the natural world. This may be due to the fact that the “presence of conceptual schemes did not encumber the particularistic character of Chu Hsi’s knowledge of the natural world” (p. 318). Consequently, Zhu Xi “was not forced to use the idea of yin-yang alternation in every phenomenon” (ibid.). It is also difficult to say whether a more detailed analysis of Zhu Xi’s treatment of “images and numbers,” especially in connection with the Classic of Changes (and, even more particularly, with his commentary on the Zhouyi cantong qi 周易參同契 (The Kinship of the Three According to the Book of Changes), could have helped to elucidate the relationship between basic concepts and actual knowledge, but the author shies away from such an admittedly painstaking effort by restricting his “discussion to the more straightforward points of Chu Hsi’s sayings and writings about numbers and diagrams” (p. 73) and by his decision to omit “the detailed contents of Chu Hsi’s alchemical discussions” in Cantong qi kaoyi 參同契考異 (Investigations of Differences in the Kinship of the Three) (p. 272).

On the other hand, Zhu Xi has to be seen as a twelfth-century Chinese polymath: there is practically no aspect of knowledge on which he did not leave an utterance. If we admit that the natural world—in the author’s understanding—was not the place where Zhu Xi applied his creativity as a thinker most strongly since most of his actual knowledge was commonplace, and if we leave aside the fruitless comparison with Western scientific traditions, then Kim’s book can be
read as a treasure-trove of information about an outstanding person’s encyclopaedic learning that was intended to embrace all branches of life, the world and weltanschaung. With a few slight modifications, Part Two observes, even in its structure, a certain loyalty to the encyclopaedic divisions and subdivisions of traditional China (such as “Heaven, Earth, Man”), and the impact of the model of Zhang Zai’s Zhengmeng is quite obvious. The Zhengmeng has surely also prepared the ground for the all-pervading presence of the qi, whose condensation, dispersion and various other states account even for the strangest phenomena of guishen manifestations (cf. pp. 92-98 for this very interesting generalisation process). Part Two provides rich material on cosmology, meteorology, creatonal processes, plants, animals, the human body, mind and soul(s), as well as therapeutic procedures. Part Three, “Chu Hsi and the ‘Scientific’ Traditions of Specialized Knowledge” shows Zhu Xi’s deep concern for calendrical astronomy, harmonics and music. Moreover, it presents precious insights into his views on geography, divination and alchemy (including “nourishing life” and other techniques), medicine, and some other areas. Although the author does not explicitly make this statement, one sometimes comes to the conclusion that the less important a subject was considered by Zhu Xi the more polemical and less loyal he was to the authority of the Scriptures (and perhaps the more inclined he was to observation). The remarks about Zhu Xi’s geographical knowledge and his rather condescending treatment of both the eleventh century homme de lettres Su Shi 蘇 軾 and the canonical work Yugong 禹 貢 (p. 267) provide good examples for the varying dignity of the subjects treated in Zhu Xi’s works. Furthermore, Part Three makes clear that Zhu Xi’s objections to specialized knowledge are not merely due to a polymath’s arrogance. Rather, it seems that an all-pervading ethical concern is the predominant reason for Zhu Xi’s attitude towards “arts”; every specialization is one-sided, one-dimensional, and thus egoistic. Consequently, the reproach of egoism is not only levelled against the many arts of Taoist provenance, but also against divination and all other skills that are not developed in order to foster the all-embracing endeavour for a moral life.

The author does not intend to give an account of the development of Zhu Xi’s thought (p. 11). Given his focus, he is probably right to do so, and the fact that he makes almost no attempt to situate Zhu Xi in his time and in the framework of the manifold traditions from which Zhu Xi benefited seems also justified by the nature of his topic “nature”—a field of knowledge where the impact of idées reçues was decisive. Thus, Kim’s study is a very instructive book if we leave aside some of the premises under which it was written.