Moral Knowledge and Empirical Verification in Late Ming China: Li Zhi and Jiao Hong on Particularity and Otherness

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**EDITORIAL NOTE**

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This essay is drawn from a larger project which explores the philosophical grounds on which Chinese literati thinkers came to legitimate, and in some cases value, alternative ways of life in the early modern era (16th and 17th centuries). As in Europe, China in the early modern era was animated by debates about human nature and human difference, provoked by encounters with foreign people and religions. Chinese literati grappled in particular with the metaphysical challenges raised for Confucian learning by Chan (Zen) Buddhism. For many scholars influenced by Chan, particularly those of the “Taizhou school” of Confucian learning, it was introspective self-cultivation—not the study of canonical texts or ritual—that stood as an irreducible source of moral knowledge. Yet increasingly Taizhou scholars turned their attention to study of the empirical world as a means of learning more about moral truth as well as validating key claims of Confucianism. In this essay I examine arguments from two such scholars, the flamboyant iconoclast Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602) and his lifelong friend, the historian and classicist Jiao Hong 焦竑 (1540-1620), to show how this interest in the empirical world led them away from commitments to moral universalism and toward an appreciation of the diversity and plurality of human existence.

NOTE: This draft includes an introduction to the larger project (Part I) and a section detailing the historiographical debates along with some intellectual background (Part II), which have been cut down from their original size to make this draft more manageable. These sections can be skipped or skimmed depending on the reader’s interest; however, if the reader is not familiar with late imperial Chinese intellectual history, these first two sections will make what is to follow much more comprehensible. The main arguments about Li Zhi and Jiao Hong begin with Part III. Finally, please note that lockdown conditions have severely impeded my

1 I am extremely grateful to Rivi Handler-Spitz for her careful and sympathetic reading of this essay, her many literature suggestions, and her helpful comments—some of which saved me from embarrassing errors; to Signy Gutnick-Allen, who patiently listened to me talk about this project and offered encouragement and insight for the past two years; to Ying Zhang, who encouraged my study of the Ming dynasty; and to the participants at the University of Toronto Political Theory Seminar in September 2020 for their comments and questions.
access to sources. I plan to include more references to Chinese-language secondary literature as these become available.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE LARGER PROJECT

In the first third of the seventeenth century, Jurchen nomads under the command of Hong Taiji consolidated their hold of the Liaodong peninsula, leading to the collapse of the Han Chinese-dominated Ming empire in 1644 and the consolidation of Jurchen (later renamed Manchu) rule throughout north and central Asia. Peter Perdue has shown that the Manchu victory constituted a major world-historical event, which enabled the territorial expansion of their agrarian Qing state across the nomadic Eurasian frontier. Attended by what Lynn Struve has called “adversities in the climatic, microbic, and economic environments, and when peoples of eastern, central and western Eurasia came into epochal compacts and conflicts,” the Manchu victory was part of a global “seventeenth century crisis” that would stabilize only later in the 18th century, when the Qing consolidated its rule across southern and western Asia, and European empires expanded into Africa and the Middle East.

From the perspective of the Han Chinese educated class experiencing these transitions, the fall of the Ming dynasty was by no means perceived as a clearly delineated historical event. It was rather an open-ended interval that took on many different meanings in the historical consciousness of those who experienced it, marked by uncertainty about “what kind or quality of dynasty was perhaps ending, at what speed, in what way.” Yet in the centuries that followed, this transition gradually came to stand in the minds of later scholars as nothing less than an existential crisis for Chinese identity—both driving and driven by a shift in intellectual perspective that emerged in the early years of Qing consolidation. Many educated literati retrospectively blamed the crisis on the abstruse philosophizing that preoccupied followers of Wang Yangming 王陽明 (Wang Shouren, 1472-1529), the Ming statesman, frontier general and philosopher whose rejection of state-sponsored Confucian orthodoxy rode a wave of interest in metaphysical speculation about the sources of moral knowledge. In its place—just as the government policy adapted from an inward-looking, Han-dominated state to a cosmopolitan, expansionist inner Asian empire—seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literati turned their attention to the historical and philological verification of classic texts, inaugurating the “evidential learning” (kaozheng) that twentieth-

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3 Perdue, China Marches West, 10.
century Chinese reformers would see as proof of an indigenous, modern “scientific spirit.”

Yet such divisions obscure from view the extent to which the Manchu victory and the territorial consolidation that followed continued the strong parallels that marked both Chinese and European societies in early modernity. One of the most remarkable, yet understudied, of these parallels is the shared interest in comprehending foreign knowledge and societies. As it happens, some of the scholars most interested in legitimating foreign knowledge and human diversity in the late Ming period also happen to be those who expressed simultaneous commitments to intellectual projects that spanned the philosophy/philology divide. Scholars such as Jiao Hong 焦竑 (1540-1620), Yang Shen 杨慎 (1488–1559), Chen Di 陈第 (1541–1617) and Li Zhi 李贽 (1527-1602)—singled out by later Qing thinkers as early prototypes of what they called “textual criticism”—were also followers of Wang Yangming’s “learning of the mind and heart” (xinxue), which suggest that controversies over moral knowing in the mid- to late-Ming developed alongside, rather than separately from, empirical investigation of social, historical, and natural worlds. Moreover, and what is often overlooked even by historians such as William T. de Bary, who recognize the capacity of neo-Confucian thought to encourage “experimental and observational science,” is that such interest extended to the human and not only natural worlds, including the examination of foreign societies.

These explorations include, most prominently, examinations of non-Han modes of life—which began far earlier than the more well-known ethnographic practices of the mid-Qing, and for different reasons. As scholars such as Leo K. Shin have shown, Wang Yangming’s own pacification campaigns in southern China implicated him in political projects of cultural assimilation and (arguably racialized) identity-formation that are typically associated with later, Qing-era imperial governance. Wang’s followers, particularly those of the more radical Taizhou school of what came to be known as “Yangming learning,” were notably prominent in writing some unusually balanced accounts of foreign thought and peoples: Chen Di wrote the earliest firsthand account in any language of the indigenous people of Taiwan (then called Formosa), offering a valuable source of

6 For discussion of such parallels, see Fletcher, “Integrative History: Parallels and Interconnections in the Early Modern World, 1500-1800”; Brook, Vermeer’s Hat; Handler-Spitz, Symptoms of an Unruly Age.
8 For an examination of Qing ethnographic practice, see Deal and Hostetler, The Art of Ethnography.
9 Shin, “The Last Campaigns of Wang Yangming”; Israel, “To Accommodate or Subjugate.”
insight into their society before Dutch colonization; Yang Shen extensively documented the history and cultural practices of the native peoples of Yunnan; and Jiao Hong was a passionate defender of foreign learning (in the form of Chan Buddhism) on its own terms.¹⁰

There are thus important philosophical consequences for periodizing the Chinese early modern period as an abrupt transition from “Ming to Qing” or “philosophy to philology”. It leaves us unable to assess philosophically the ways in which concepts of human nature and moral knowledge, as they were thematized and debated by scholars of Yangming learning, enabled particular kinds of discourse about human difference to take shape, and in turn how empirical information about human kinds generated by Ming-era territorial expansion, travel and commerce was fed back into philosophical thinking about moral judgment and the kinds of beings—human or not—who might be capable of exercising it.

This has, in turn, important consequences for how we interpret late imperial Chinese approaches to difference, including how they compare to a similar transition in early modern Europe that saw a parallel rise of simultaneous interest in studies of the classical past and in exploration of foreign others. As Justin E. H. Smith has noted of these early modern Europeans, they were “heirs to a scientific and philosophical tradition that made it possible to say some things, and not others, about human nature and human difference.”¹¹ This tradition enabled the conceptualization of “questions of what we would call ‘physical anthropology’ as part and parcel of the project of philosophy,” all of them centered on the problem of human nature.¹² Yang, Jiao, Li and Chen—roughly contemporaries of Michel de Montaigne and Thomas Hobbes—likewise operated within the constraints and possibilities of an intellectual heritage no less fraught with tension when brought to bear on accelerating encounters with foreign others, on both continental and maritime frontiers, under conditions of both peaceful engagement and violent imperial expansion.

What kinds of questions about human difference did these simultaneous commitments to empirical investigation, historical inquiry, and the expansion of moral knowledge make possible? And how did they enable these influential late-Ming writers to articulate more balanced and positive accounts of human diversity than we find in earlier or later writers? Like their European counterparts, Chinese writers too drew on existing tropes of savagery or barbarism, often drawn from the classical past, as a means of articulating both their own claims to civilization as well as the degrees of

¹⁰ Jenco, “Chen Di’s Record of Formosa”; Pidhainy, “A Mid-Ming Account of the Road into Exile”; Ch’ien, Chiao Hung.
¹² Smith, 12–13.
difference that separated them from various foreign others. Sankar Muthu has argued that such tropes—including that of the “noble savage” which celebrated the naturalness of the New World natives even as it subjected them to “dehumanizing exoticism”—were not subverted until Denis Diderot and other eighteenth century thinkers recognized the possibility that non-Europeans could be agents of cultural production. That is, they came to see cultural differences as “produced by interactions of human freedom and reason with diverse environments” rather than “pathological deviations” from a fixed and unchanging European standard. For these European critics of empire, the recognition that non-Europeans could use reason and thereby enjoy freedom to engage in cultural production marked them not only as human, but as deserving of rights and liberties similar to those enjoyed by Europeans.

Significantly, however, nowhere in Chinese discourse does reason or freedom play a role in assessing the moral status of non-Chinese peoples, whether as individuals or as societies. In fact, China was itself the object of such queries, when European thinkers such as Voltaire and Leibniz postulated its capacity for rationality to elevate the status of its civilization in the eyes of contemporary Europeans. Nor does the recognition of foreigners as equals cash out for Chinese thinkers in terms of rights and liberties; such discourse was relatively absent from the Sinophone world until the late nineteenth century. Upon what kinds of conceptual resources, then, did Chinese thinkers such as Yang Shen and Chen Di draw when they recognized non-Chinese peoples as having equal standing to Chinese—or at least, recognized the legitimacy of human diversity? And how do these conceptual resources alter what it means to be seen as “equal” in the early modern period?

My wager is that the recognition by these Chinese thinkers of legitimate human diversity is made possible by, and articulated through, their endorsement of Yangming learning. Wang Yangming explicitly rejected the orthodox view of Zhu Xi that insight into moral knowledge came

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13 Teng, *Taiwan’s Imagined Geography*.
15 Muthu, 9.
17 One of the earliest arguments for introducing such concepts into Chinese political life was put forward by Yan Fu, “Yuan Qiang”; For analysis of this and similar arguments, see Jenco, *Changing Referents*; For an examination of the emergence of rights discourse in China, see Angle, “Should We All Be More English?”
18 I define “legitimate difference” as difference articulated in such a way that avoids the extension of power over it. “Legitimate otherness” includes toleration of offensive things. What I call “valuable otherness” is a stronger formulation that endorses the relative value of difference without necessarily seeking to assimilate it.
from study of classic texts and training with teachers. He rather put forward the view, drawn from Mencius, that human nature was inherently good and required only self-cultivation to reveal its truths—which Wang called “innate knowledge” (lit., “good-knowing,” liangzhi). For those who followed Wang, moral knowledge was thus an unfolding process of realization rather than a set of principles or doctrines that could be memorized and repeated. Rejecting doctrine as unable to guide individuals toward the idiosyncratic insight that alone would enable access to their innate moral knowing, adherents of Yangming learning—particularly those of the Taizhou school—valued engagements with the particular and incidental. For some adherents, these engagements took the form of spontaneous encounters with nature, art, and comradeship with fellow students of the Way, as a means of stripping away the social and ritual conventions that obscured access to true moral knowing. Others focused on gaining personalized experience of the wisdom of the ancient sages which had, in their view, been obscured by subsequent textual commentators.

These interests gave rise to two surprising developments, both of which defy historiographical narratives that divide the moral philosophy of the Ming dynasty from the empiricist philology of Qing dynasty scholars. First, the craving for direct contact with sagely words and teachings encouraged some Yangming adherents to advance classicist practices of philology and historicism, ironically binding them more closely to the textual traditions that Yangming learning ostensibly rejected. Second, and relatedly, although all of these encounters with particularity were meant to facilitate access to a universal, albeit deeply personalized, moral truth, the search for that truth ultimately exposed practitioners to diverse ways of living in both the past and present.

I argue here, then, that Chinese views of difference in the mid- to late-Ming period were posited by means of the very empirical investigations that much historiography confines to a later period. Like their European counterparts—though, significantly, not in dialogue with them—these early modern Chinese thinkers began confronting the limitations of their classic texts with reference to an expanding, empirically-informed knowledge base acquired separately from orthodox classical training.¹⁹ Yet unlike these European scholars, Chinese thinkers did not come to view ancient texts as increasingly obsolete in the face of modern science and the “naked experience” made possible by the age of discovery.²⁰ Rather, their motivations to conduct empirical enquiry both drew from, and were

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¹⁹ For a discussion of the situation in early modern Europe, see Grafton, Shelford, and Siraisi, New Worlds, Ancient Texts, 2–3.

²⁰ The argument about “naked experience” is taken from Grafton, Shelford, and Siraisi, 5.
informed by, a desire to acquire greater insight into moral knowledge. And much of that moral knowledge continued to be found in those very ancient texts—albeit now properly validated using historical and philological methods to reveal the true meanings obfuscated by the commentaries, and even blatant forgeries, of later scholars.

Those interested in text-critical studies (kaoju) of ancient texts began building on their growing realization that the sagely ancients lived differently—namely, that they had different linguistic pronunciation, social practices, forms of literature and even sometimes different moral perspectives to people in the present. This historical relativism, and the empirical investigations that gave rise to it, finds a parallel in their turn to foreign texts and the study of foreign peoples. In the work of Chen Di and Yang Shen, legitimate diversity notably is demonstrated through the participation of non-Chinese peoples in historical production: that is, they are recognized to have not only alternative pasts, but different ways of relating to and recording those pasts. We find foreign peoples who generate history differently by marking time and human relationships in distinctive ways, but are also seen to generate different histories to those articulated in standard Chinese accounts of registering past events.21 For Chen’s friend Jiao Hong, the search encouraged examination of foreign traditions as more authentic and unmediated sources of wisdom.

In similar ways, scholars such as Li Zhi and Wang Gen advocated for spontaneous engagement with the world less mediated by orthodox readings of classic texts, a search which encouraged appreciation of idiosyncrasy and experiments in living. Taizhou scholars, in particular, were interested in reproducing not only the ideas of the ancient past but also its particular textures, feelings, and experiences, in a sensually holistic way that echoed broader late-Ming interests in feeling and sentiment as valued sources of moral guidance. Wang Gen, the unlettered son of a salt merchant, drew attention to the capacity of non-elites to act upon the promise of universal sagehood. He went out in public dressed in a costume that met the ancient ritual prescriptions of the Book of Rites, and travelled about in a carriage similar to one he believed had carried Confucius.22 Sending away his wife and only surviving child, Li entered a Buddhist monastery at the age of 50, in order to pursue a life dedicated to the pursuit of genuineness (zhen), producing at the same time his controversial collection of iconoclastic writings A Book to Burn (Fenshu).23 Both men drew attention to the

21 I begin to explore some of these possibilities in Jenco, “Chen Di’s Record of Formosa”; For an account of Yang Shen’s historiography of non-Chinese societies, see Pidhainy, “A Mid-Ming Account of the Road into Exile.”
22 Huang, The Records of Ming Scholars, 174–75.
23 Lee, Li Zhi, loc. 171.
capacity of groups historically excluded from Confucian moralizing—women and lower class men—to foster moral insight in themselves and others, and potentially even to achieve sagehood.

Although these Taizhou school adherents of Yangming learning disagreed with each other over their approaches to accessing moral knowledge, their willingness to engage in empirical inquiry exposed them, often inadvertently, to how contingency and power made certain ways of life more valued than others. This did not necessarily lead them to reject mainstream Confucian values, but it did lead them to reflect on the dominance of certain forms of social order and moral values in extant textual records, most particularly the standard histories and the Classics. As a consequence, many in this group of scholars began valuing other historical and literary sources, such as “unofficial histories” (yeshi), for enabling alternative narratives of the past; they indulged in sensual and sensory practices that delegitimized texts as exclusive repositories of moral insight; and they began articulating awareness of different moral perspectives and forms of historical agency—including how such awareness might take shape within established genres of Chinese writing. These insights, I argue, were a direct consequence of their engagements with particularity inspired [demanded?] by Yangming learning.

This essay, and the larger project, combine these arguments with a series of broader questions: How and in what way is the globally shared interest in human moral and cultural diversity of the early modern period articulated differently across space, beyond those debates about the rationality and freedom of non-Europeans? How do theorizations of difference in the (largely privately-circulated) ethnographic works of the Ming differ from those more well-studied, official examples produced for administrative use in the expansive Qing empire, as well as in early modern Europe more generally? Most importantly, what do such comparisons reveal about the distinctive features of Chinese theorizations of difference, including their possibilities for critical renewal in the face of Ming, Qing and PRC-led imperialism?

II. THE MING-QING TRANSITION AS PHILOSOPHICAL (AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL) PROBLEM

How could it be that some of the most devoted followers of Wang Yangming and his doctrine of spontaneous moral knowledge—Yang Shen, Jiao Hong, Chen Di—also number among those promoting historicist kaozheng scholarship in the late Ming? These doctrines do not seem to fit together for many reasons. Yangming learning, on one broad understanding of it, entails a rejection of textual truths in favor of personal experience and introspection to generate and verify moral knowledge. In contrast,
kaozheng (lit., “evidential research”) is a form of scholarship committed to contextualizing and verifying the very Classics that Yangming learning denigrated as a factor in the discovery of true moral knowledge.24

The differences between these two forms of scholarship have been periodized by Benjamin Elman, among others, as a transition from “philosophy to philology.” Elman largely follows his Qing subjects in dating the shift away from metaphysical and moral-philosophical concerns in favor of “an exact philological understanding of classical texts in place of earlier philosophic concerns” to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.25 Qing scholars looked back on the Ming as an era obsessed with “learning of the way” (daoxue) or discussions of “meanings and principles” (yilü). These Qing-era terms lump together a wide range of debates and perspectives toward the ancient past and its classic texts, which continued to shape intellectual orthodoxy through the civil examination system. Late Ming scholars themselves tended to see a division between Song learning or Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy, on the one hand, and Yangming learning, on the other.

“Song learning” takes its name from the dynasty in which Zhu Xi and the brothers Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao collated and annotated the ancient Four Books (the Analects of Confucius, the Mencius, as well as two extracts from the larger Book of Rites: the Great Learning and Doctrine of the Mean) in a revival of Confucian learning. This revival remained largely a social movement maintained by interested literati until 1313, when exegesis of the Classics according to Song commentary were established by the state as orthodox readings for the civil service examinations.26

One of the most prominent features of Song learning was its emphasis on “investigation of things” (gewu) as a means of yielding individual insight into the universal “principle” or “coherence” (li) which these scholars posited as existing in all things. This metaphysics, articulated in part as a response to Buddhist ideas, drew from key passages in the ancient canonical text the Book of Rites, extracted by Song Confucians into a separate text called Doctrine of the Mean. Its most well-known passage linked “investigation of things”—which included empirical observation of natural and social phenomena, book learning, as well as study of the classics—to a chain of causation that enabled insight into principles of social action and finally to individual moral self-cultivation. As explained by Zhu Xi,

24 Quirin notes the difficulty in translating the term kaozheng, which is as often seen as a “field of scholarly enquiry” as well as a “method of inquiry and study.” Quirin, “Scholarship, Value, Method, and Hermeneutics in Kaozheng,” 36, fn. 9.
25 Elman, From Philosophy to Philology, 59.
After one has studied extensively, he can have the principles of all things before him. He can therefore examine them and compare them to get the right questions to ask. Then, as he asks accurately, his teachers and friends will wholeheartedly engage in give-and-take with him, thus stimulating him, and he will begin to think. As he thinks carefully, his thoughts will be refined and free from impurities. Thus he achieves something for himself. He can now sift what he has achieved. As he sifts clearly, he can make decisions without making a mistake. He can therefore be free from doubts and can put his thoughts into action. As he practices earnestly, all he has achieved from studying, asking, thinking and sifting will become concrete demonstrations and will no longer remain empty words.27

The processes of thinking and moral action detailed here by Zhu Xi pivot on the belief that a single underlying principle (li) organizes and gives order to all aspects of the universe, from the natural world to the moral mind (xin) that makes individual humans conscious of its work.28 Peter Bol argues that key to this worldview is a particular conception of unity, in which “the true practice of human morality involves understanding that there is a fundamental unity which can be put into practice or expressed variously according to the situation one finds oneself in.”29

The doctrines of Wang Yangming, also called “learning of the heart/mind” (xinxue), deepened these ideas of unity by interpreting the chains of consequence elaborated in the Doctrine of the Mean as an argument for “forming one body” (yiti) with Heaven, Earth, and all things.30 Wang’s arguments turned on the claim that moral knowledge arose from and could be validated by an introspective “inherent knowing” or “innate knowledge” (liangzhi良知). This innate knowledge could not be sought outside one’s self in empirical patterns, texts or things that could be objectively investigated (gewu格物). It could be accessed only through introspection, aided by ongoing participation in discussion with friends and teachers, ethical action in everyday life, and constant self-criticism.31

As Wang himself put it in response to a question from one of his students,

In the matter of serving one’s parents, one cannot seek for the principle (li) of filial piety in the parent. In serving one’s ruler, one cannot seek for the principle of loyalty in the ruler. In the intercourse with friends and governing the people, one cannot seek for the principles of faithfulness and humanity in friends and in the people. These

28 For more discussion of principle, see Ivanhoe, Ethics in the Confucian Tradition, 25.
29 Bol, “LOOKING TO WANG SHIZHEN,” 105.
30 Bol, 109.
31 De Bary, “Individualism and Humanism in Late Ming Thought,” 155.
[principles] are all in the heart-mind, that is all, for the heart-mind and principle are identical. When the heart-mind is free from the obscurations of selfish desires, it is the embodiment of the Principle of Nature, which requires not an iota added from the outside. ... The main thing is for the mind to make an effort to get rid of selfish human desires and preserve the Principle of Nature.\textsuperscript{32}

As De Bary explains it, this kind of truth, for Wang, was “not an object or statement,” so much as an unfolding process of realization that “cannot be summed up in a formula but must be experienced in an intensely personal way.”\textsuperscript{33} Yet Wang did not celebrate these deeply personal, even idiosyncratic, encounters with truth as instances of distinct individual particularity so much as a mark of a common moral insight into the “principle of nature” shared by each person—a quality Wang and his followers associated with sagehood.\textsuperscript{34} He drew on arguments from Mengzi, the canonical 4\textsuperscript{th} century BCE thinker, to claim that the fundamental goodness of human nature (xing) made such sageliness possible for everyone in principle. But like most neo-Confucian thinkers since the Song, Wang had shifted away from what PJ Ivanhoe calls “Mengzi’s psychologically based morality, which was grounded in a particular view of human nature, to a metaphysically based morality, which was grounded in a belief in an underlying physical unity” drawn in part from Buddhist arguments.\textsuperscript{35}

During Wang’s lifetime, his teachings grew more popular throughout the southern provinces of Zhejiang and Jiangxi as his disciples established annual and semi-annual jianghui, large-scale meetings for educated elites to promote the “discussion of learning” (jiangxue) activities associated with Wang’s philosophy.\textsuperscript{36} In the decades after his death, his ideas were mainstreamed through the efforts of influential students such as Wang Ji and Qian Dehong to organize massive series of such activities in the capital Beijing.\textsuperscript{37}

Much of Wang’s appeal lie in presenting an alternative to the Cheng-Zhu state orthodoxy, which had lost its original distinction as a path to sagely learning and instead grew susceptible to “vulgar learning” in

\textsuperscript{32} Wang, \textit{Instructions For Practical Living And Other Neo-Confucian Writing}, 7 Translation altered slightly.
\textsuperscript{33} De Bary, “Individualism and Humanism in Late Ming Thought,” 155.
\textsuperscript{34} De Bary, 150–51.
\textsuperscript{35} Ivanhoe, \textit{Ethics in the Confucian Tradition}, 30.
\textsuperscript{36} According to Lu Miaw-fen, these jianghui meetings lasted from one to ten days, and typically involved such activities as rituals in honor of Wang Yangming; quiet sitting, chanting poetry, and mutual exhortation for moral advancement. Lu, 116.
\textsuperscript{37} Petersen, “Confucian Learning in the Late Ming,” 728.
the service of personal advancement through the exam system. This orthodoxy had long held that moral knowledge originated from one’s own natural inclinations (xing) toward the good, but had to be continually verified by the universal “patterns” (li) of both human and natural worlds through an “investigation of things” (gewu). In contrast, Wang Yangming’s revisionist interpretation of the Great Learning published in 1518, the Gu ben Daxue, interpreted the phrase gewu not as “investigation” of things, but rather the “rectification of affairs”—that is, the realization in daily practice of the moral norms which arose from one’s own innate knowledge (liangzhi).

Despite this, interest in the empirical investigation of historical sources arose not alongside, but in many cases as an outgrowth of, xinxue commitments, to realize more fully the truths believed to lie in the ancient past, particularly its texts and scripts. One mid-sixteenth century advocate of xinxue, for example, argued that ancient writing was the product of “the ancient sages’ grasp of Heaven-ordained commonalities in the mind-and-heart of all people,” and therefore was crucial for the restoration of sagely intent in the present. How, then, could Taizhou scholars reject the orthodox commitment to gewu and the “study of principle” that it supported, while also defending empirical investigation of the natural and human worlds—the latter of which included, most prominently, the textual artifacts of the near and ancient past?

[In the longer version of this paper, I offer an overview of historiographical debates about this transition from Ming to Qing. Contact me if you are interested in reading this.]

III. LI ZHI AND JIAO HONG

One of the most well-known and flamboyant rejections of Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy came from Li Zhi, famous among his contemporaries for his “brazenly provocative” eccentricity and daring iconoclasm. In his essay “On the Childlike Mind” (Tongxin shuo), Li argued that aesthetic and moral direction should be taken spontaneously from “the beginning of the mind,” before conventional ethics or texts deform one’s judgment. He sees Confucian orthodoxy, particularly “study of principle,” as one of the most corrupting such influences, and he singles out slavish devotion to

38 Lu, “Practice as Knowledge,” 30.
39 Lu, “Practice as Knowledge,” 58; De Bary, “Individualism and Humanism in Late Ming Thought,” 162.
40 Rusk, “Old Scripts,” 83.
41 Li, A book to burn and a book to keep (hidden), xv.
canonical classic texts and their commentaries as particularly harmful for one’s moral development.43

Li Zhi’s approach to the Classics was broadly shared by scholars of the Taizhou school, who tended to take a radically subjectivist approach to moral questions raised by Yangming learning.44 Taizhou views were strongly influenced by Chan (i.e., Zen) Buddhist doctrines which upheld the purity of the fundamental nature of all humans, expressed in texts such as the Platform Sutra.45 The task of cultivation for these neo-Confucians was therefore to remove the false notions, borne of convention and desires for conformity, that obstructed access to this pure nature. Introspective self-cultivation—not the study of canonical texts or ritual—formed the exclusive and irreducible source of such knowledge. As Li were to famously put it, so far as the “childlike mind” was concerned, “Why speak of the Six Classics? Why speak of the Analects or Mencius?”46 We find in the Taizhou school the most radical formulations of what the later Qing critic Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610-1695), in his early seventeenth-century survey of Ming scholarship, called “the transformation of consciousness as direct perception of nature”—that is, the belief that self-cultivation and authentic sentiment were sufficient to provide moral guidance without recourse to observation of the material world, engagement with tradition, or participation in conventions of any particular kind.47

Yet not all members of the Taizhou school took this radical subjectivism in the same direction. Li Zhi’s close friend Jiao Hong is among the most prominent Taizhou adherents to defend (certain kinds of) empirical investigation and classicism not as a rejection of, but as both consequence and requirement of, the pursuit of their own self-cultivation. Over their lifelong friendship, Jiao and Li left a record of conversations in which each responds, empathetically and sometimes passionately, to the contrasting perspective of the other. As Li Zhi describes one of his meetings with Jiao, they “sat close to each other, knee to knee from morning until night, each of us delving into the real being of the other...consequently, our minds intimately coincide like the halves of a tally.”48 The work of these two major and intimately connected figures of the Ming dynasty offers a unique opportunity to examine how these two adherents of the Taizhou school debated about the nature of empirical investigation and classicism,

44 De Bary, “Individualism and Humanism in Late Ming Thought.”
45 Ivanhoe offers an accessible overview of the Chan influence on Wang Yangming in Ivanhoe, Readings from the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism, 3–11.
47 Huang, The Records of Ming Scholars, 165.
48 Li Zhi, Xu fenshu, 2:56, cited in Ch’ien, Chiao Hung, 39.
on the one hand, and the proper relationship of these activities to moral insight, on the other.

Against the background of their shared commitment to Yangming learning, the disagreements between Li and Jiao track distinct ways of incorporating what we might call particularity into their philosophizing about morality, and in turn how that particularity transformed dogma rather than entrenched it. By particularity, I mean the divergences from the expected and conventional that were disclosed through exposure to diverse practices, historical records, texts, sensory data, aesthetic objects, or everyday experience. Peter Bol has argued that the study of such practices and texts disrupted the smooth correlation presumed by neo-Confucianism to obtain between, on the one hand, the unitary “coherence” or “principle” (li) presumed to structure the wider universe “out there” of which such texts and experiences were a part; and on the other, the intuitions “in here” that validated moral knowledge.\(^49\) This disruption encouraged new forms of “scholarship” (xuwen) that valued learning for its contribution to disciplinary specialization rather than moral cultivation.\(^50\) Bol characterizes such scholarly pursuits as “alternatives” to neo-Confucianism, particularly to the “inward turn” of Yangming learning and its “tilt toward the spiritual.”\(^51\) Yet for adherents of Yangming learning such as Li Zhi and Jiao Hong, study of the particular was undertaken for the very purpose of providing evidence of, or insight into, the (presumably singular, moral) Way; they were not treated as objects of study in themselves, divorced from the broader moral patterns they were meant to reveal. This is crucial for understanding how they could understand differences of practices, ideas, or language between one society or time period and another as potentially legitimate, rather than necessarily deviant. It was the very correlation presumed by Yangming learning between objects “out there” and moral insight “in here” that provided the template by which Li, Jiao, and others came to see particularities as giving rise to (and possibly justifying) different kinds of moral commitments, whether for themselves or (more usually) for others.

Given Li’s reservations about the use of the Classics, it is not surprising that the main point of contention between Jiao and Li lies in their different appraisals of classicism (jingxue), the branch of study that concerned itself with compiling commentaries and philological information on classic

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49 Bol, “LOOKING TO WANG SHIZHEN,” 111.
50 Bol, 100, 112.
51 Bol, 111. Bol argues that by the time Huang Zongxi compiled his Records of Ming Scholars (Ming ru xue an) in the early seventeenth century, investigation of the “myriad things,” including texts, were no longer interpreted as evidence of a broader cosmological unity or in terms of their contribution to moral insight. Rather, they were simply objects of study within broader communities of specialized learning.
texts, in an effort to refine both literary and moral understanding. Jiao set out his ideas explicitly in a series of prefaces written for compendia of work by the Song-dynasty literatus Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101). Su Shi was of particular interest to Ming thinkers looking for an alternative cultural tradition to the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy they rejected, which had emerged in the decades after Su’s death.\textsuperscript{52} Su promoted the idea that actualizing the Way derived from each individual’s authentic, and possibly idiosyncratic, realization of its truths, rather than from fixed conventions or texts that shaped interpretation.\textsuperscript{53} His emphasis on the importance of direct engagement with the Classics, rather than imitation of a teacher or commentator, resonated with Taizhou commitments to authentic self-discovery. But it was Su’s commentaries on the classics, ironically, which peaked Jiao’s interest. His explanations for their importance are crucial to explaining the seeming contradiction between Taizhou commitments to subjective moral self-cultivation, on the one hand, and the background requirements for evidence-based historical investigation, on the other.

Jiao engages these questions most directly in his “Preface to the Classical Commentary of the Two Sus” (1592), which explains in the greatest detail why classicism specifically is necessary for the moral insight that makes literature both resonant and relevant. The two Sus in question are Su Shi and his brother Su Che 蘇轍 (1039-1112), whose classicism tended to be overlooked in favor of their more well-known contributions to poetry and literary composition. Jiao’s preface explains why he has taken the unconventional step of highlighting Su Shi’s lesser-known text-critical work on the ancient canonical text of the \textit{Changes}, together with Su Che’s commentaries on the \textit{Odes} and the \textit{Spring and Autumn Annals}.\textsuperscript{54} This is precisely because the Classics are, pace Li, necessary for producing moral knowledge of the Way.

The Six Classics were taken by the early Ru [Confucians] to be the literature [\textit{wen}]\textsuperscript{55} that carried the Way. And the ultimate fruition of literature is a Classic. Why? No one on earth who has abandoned the Way can still produce literature. No matter if language is necessary to extol the early kings, or learning is necessary to glimpse the original source; to be dexterous like using a pole to catch a cicada, or quick like rolling a pellet, bitter or sweet, slow or fast, like chopping wood to make a crate to haul a load—[in the case of all of these activities], technique [\textit{ji}] is necessary to approach the Way. But can such

\textsuperscript{52} Petersen, “Confucian Learning in the Late Ming,” 774.
\textsuperscript{53} Bol calls this idea of Su’s “unity with individuality.” \textit{This Culture of Ours}, Ch. 8.
\textsuperscript{54} Ch’ien, \textit{Chiao Hung}, 49.
\textsuperscript{55} This richly multivalent term \textit{wen} originally indicated the pattern on a piece of carved jade; by the late imperial period it meant something like “literature,” (as “patterned writing”) but also more broadly “culture” in general.
technique become a divine thing unto itself? Technique approaches the Way, and the Way is carried by the Classics. To say that you can abandon the arts of classicism and still be able to produce literature, is to abandon the stream and [become able to draw] water, to abandon kindling and be able to make a fire, to abandon the sun and moon and be capable of illumination. There is no such logic.\(^{56}\)

Jiao’s preface boldly states the need for engagement with Classics and with selected commentaries about them in order to arrive at the meaning of the sages—which, for Jiao and his readers, was understood as being the right kind of moral knowledge capable of leading the world back to the Way. This engagement requires the “techniques” and “arts” of classicism, an allusion to detailed philological and text-critical analysis, to glimpse these meanings in the pages of the Classics. They were ineliminable components of the process by which the reader might cultivate such knowledge in himself.

Yet what sets Jiao’s argument apart from the assumptions of earlier classicists, who held that commentaries alone were sufficient to penetrate these mysteries, is his insistence that engagement with the Classics crucially goes beyond mere techniques of reading or philology. Technical knowledge of words and texts were not “divine,” able on their own to deliver the crucial moral knowledge the reader sought. Only the individualized insight of a careful reader, or commentator, was capable of summoning forth the abundance of meanings intended by the early sages. In the hands of skilled and cultivated readers like the Sus, Jiao argues, the text becomes like “the unending lapping of rivers, never ceasing night or day” [allusion to the Analects?], spouting forth new and unanticipated changes and insight.\(^{57}\) This was only possible because the Sus were capable of “apprehending it for themselves” \( (zide \text{ 自得}) \), a quality that enabled their writing to transcend the obscurity to which most literary production of his time would fall, and to reach those most in need of help.\(^{58}\) The Sus’ greatness lies, Jiao argues, in deploying their “self-apprehension” to reveal the “subtle words and abstruse discourses of the ancients,” the “true reality” of the sages, which appear throughout the Classics.\(^{59}\)

Yet by claiming a need for both the subjective interpretation of a suitably cultivated reader, on the one hand, and the empirical reality of the Classics and commentaries meant to encourage such cultivation, on the other, Jiao effectively (if unintentionally) destabilizes the Classics as exclusive sources of meaning. He seems to acknowledge this fact when

\(^{56}\) Jiao, “Ke liang Su jingjie xu,” 3b.
\(^{57}\) Jiao, 4a.
\(^{58}\) Jiao, 4a.
\(^{59}\) Jiao, 4a–4b.
he disputes the very idea of orthodoxy: “the Way is not that which one sage alone can plumb.” Its significance is so multivalent and vast that we are never given full knowledge of it; we know only that in reading the Classics to apprehend this Way, “the ones before [us] open it, the ones after [us] push it further. Where schematic it is expanded, where subtle it is elucidated; and in this way its principle (li理) becomes apparent.”

To Jiao, the Classics offer “imposing words” (zhuang yan庄言) rather than packaged dogma; careful readers, like the Sus, always “progress beyond the text” (you jin yu wen 有進於文). Jiao claims the same hope for himself: in seeking to penetrate the classics and study the ancients, his own critical edition of the Sus’ works is but a “whistling arrow,” announcing what is to come without legislating it.

For Jiao, achieving such insight required trusted guides, such as the Su brothers, whose interpretive understanding meshed with their own self-cultivation to call forth new and unexpected meaning in the classics. Such guides were all the more important in the late Ming, when rampant forgeries and social upheaval made signs of all kinds—literary, sartorial, and numismatic—increasingly difficult to decipher. In his “Preface to the Collected Works of Su Changgong [Su Shi],” Jiao frames Su’s classicism as walking the narrow line between two prevalent modes of engaging the Classics. The first mode simply accumulates knowledge and forces interpretation of the Classics, where “the spirit which lies amid the merely useful”—that is, the techniques of classicism—“does not withstand scrutiny.”

The other form simply uses mystical understandings to call forth meaning. In contrast, Su Shi’s literature draws from both a study of classic texts as well as an active heart-mind “that roams the vast firmament, setting no aim yet nothing is left with lingering arrowtips.”

Jiao analogizes this creative mode of engagement to learning music, in a passage that alludes to the famous story of the zither master Cheng Lian and his technically proficient but spiritless student Bo Ya. Cheng admonished Bo Ya for his inability to play the zither with true feeling, abandoning him on a distant seashore to provoke the emotions required to elevate his music. To Jiao, Su’s mode of engaging texts

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60 Jiao, 4b.
61 Jiao, 4b.
62 Jiao, 4b.
63 Handler-Spitz, Symptoms of an Unruly Age, 6, 129.
64 Jiao, “Ke Su Changgong ji xu,” 33b.
65 Jiao, 44a.
66 Li, A book to burn and a book to keep (hidden), 159.
can be compared to the craving for sound, which must respect believing in antiquity so that one can follow up with the [right] sounds and move the plectrum [across the zither]. [It involves] not only returning to the [demands of the] musical score, but also finding a great master to provide instruction. Just as in the case of Cheng Lian and Bo Ya, the disciple must travel to the remote shore, reaching the gloomy depths of the mountain forests and the deep caves full of seawater. But afterward suddenly the zither can express for the entire world [tianxia 天下] the sublimity of the tune of water and mountains. If an ignorant person were to suddenly take up the zither and make a sound with it, and say to himself “This is music,” such a situation would be akin to asserting that, gazing up, one need not study the ancients; bowing one’s head, one need not draw awareness from one’s heart-mind, and [could just] defiantly have faith in oneself alone [to master the zither]. What logic is this?!  

Here Jiao emphasizes the need for classical scholarship to learn both from the ancients and from one’s own heart-mind. What emerges is spontaneously creative but still resonant with “the whole world,” even as its content—like Bo Ya’s tune—has never been anticipated before. Despite the obvious room it leaves for creativity and the workings of the heart-mind, Jiao’s argument was anathema to his friend Li, who called him out for placing too much emphasis on reading and education in place of the spontaneous arousal of creativity that came from unmediated engagement with the world. The defense of classicism Jiao puts forward in the “Su Changgong” preface apparently convinced an acquaintance of Li’s, the prefect of Ningzhou Fang Ziji, to such a degree that Li felt compelled to pen a rejoinder to Jiao. In an afterword written for the now-lost text Journeying with Companions, Li argues that true companions do not guide one’s reading or interpretation, but encourage each other to attain understanding for themselves. He speaks directly to Jiao Hong’s claim in the “Preface” that it would be illogical to think one could do away with the study of the ancients and instead “defiantly have faith in oneself alone.” Li argues the exact opposite:

It seems Cheng Lian had Cheng Lian’s distinctive sound; not even Cheng Lian could transmit it to a disciple. And Bo Ya had Bo Ya’s distinctive sound; not even Bo Ya could learn it from Cheng Lian. What we call “sound” is the sort of thing that one encounters by chance and instantly grasps; one cannot obtain it through study or imitation. “Blind ignoramuses,” having received no training, resonate immediately upon such a chance encounter.

67 Jiao, “Ke Su Changgong ji xu,” 44a; Parts of this paragraph heavily modify the translation provided in Li, “Afterword to Journeying with Companions,” 159.

68 Li, A book to burn and a book to keep (hidden), 158.
Bo Ya, having been trained, was able to produce marvelous sounds only after he had shed this training.69

The implication here is that Jiao’s classicism—his study both of ancient texts and of the past masters who interpret them, like the Su brothers—is a direct hindrance to realization of the Way. For Li, the true Way can be revealed only through understanding for oneself. This did not necessarily mean abandoning the Classics altogether; Li himself was known for several important commentaries on the Classics which, in typical fashion, he arrogantly claimed to be more insightful than others available.70 Li’s point is more that moral understanding, much like Chan (Zen) enlightenment, comes about spontaneously, through chance encounters that give rise to authentic sentiment.71 It cannot be called forth deliberately by means of study and book learning. Continuing the Bo Ya analogy, Li argues that it was only by going “to a place distant from any human trace, that the ancient scores ceased to exist for him and that there no longer was anything to be passed on nor any teacher to be found,” that Bo Ya could attain understanding.72 In a separate essay written to accompany his notes on the Buddhist text the Heart Sutra, Li is more explicit about the ability of text to convey the Way: “The Way is fundamentally great, but since the Way [is presumed to] rely on scriptures, on cannot clearly make it out... Scriptures are robbers of the Way and explanations are barriers to the scriptures. So what use are they?”73

As “robbers of the Way,” those who write texts—even revered Classics—are guilty of distorting true moral knowledge in favor of their own perspective. As he explains further in his essay “Explanation of the Childlike heart-mind,” when the original foundation of moral knowledge, the “childlike heart-mind,” is “obstructed” by dogma and book learning ensconced in what people of the day call “the Principles of the Way,” this external construction takes the place of one’s heart-mind.74 At that point, one is unable to use one’s own, naturally occurring faculties—i.e. the “childlike heart-mind”—to discern moral truth.

Pauline C. Lee and William T. deBary have both distinguished Li’s position here from that of Wang Yangming. Wang focuses self-cultivation on the removal of the selfish thoughts obscuring the true heart-mind, and tends to ground the nature of that heart-mind in an abstract universal

69 Li, “Afterword to Journeying with Companions,” 160–61.
70 Li once declared, “When it comes to reading Confucian texts...truly no one is more skilled than [I], Master Zhuowu!” Handler-Spitz, Symptoms of an Unruly Age, 134.
71 Handler-Spitz, 28.
72 Li, “Afterword to Journeying with Companions,” 161.
73 Li, “Notes on ‘The Hub,’” 119.
74 Li, “Explanation of the Childlike Heart-Mind,” 108.
philosophical scheme. In contrast, Li’s experience of the heart-mind is rooted in the spontaneous desires that Wang associated with selfishness. The maintenance of this childlike heart-mind, for Li, is shared by all, but remains grounded in everyday practices that may manifest differently across different groups of people, just as health might be conceived of differently over the course of a single person’s lifetime or across different persons. This is an important feature of Li’s perspective, which enables a recognition of human diversity even as he assumes a single universal moral endowment.

In fact, Li here seems to assume the same correlation between external stimulation and investigation, on the one hand, and inner moral knowledge, on the other, even for instances where the objects and experiences “out there” lead to different kinds of values “in here.” As Li notes in a letter to his friend Geng Dingxian, “The variety of people and things in this world are countless. If one wants all these people and things to abide by one’s methods, then heaven and earth would not be able to function.” Only by indulging in this diversity of experience and desire can each thing in the universe find its proper place, where all things move in harmony and “spontaneously come to completion and fulfillment.”

We are now in a better position to understand why Li might object to his friend Jiao’s reliance on classic texts to gain insight into the heart-mind. To Li, overreliance on such texts, like the social conventions they both draw on and support, obstruct rather than nourish the spontaneous use of one’s childlike heart-mind. But they also may also frustrate the expression and examination of humanity in its diversity, resulting in a homogenizing sameness that obscures the true working of each individual’s heart-mind. Li phrases his objection to Jiao in a way that indicates the broader implications of this concern, when he begins his essay “Explanation of the Childlike Heart-mind” with a direct criticism of Jiao’s claim that “those who know may not say that I still possess a childlike heart-mind.” Li argues of the Classics,

if they are not words of overdone reverence for official historians, they are phrases of bloated praise from royal subjects...Who knows whether more than half these writings are not words from the mouths of sages?

75 De Bary, “Individualism and Humanism in Late Ming Thought,” 183.
76 De Bary, 195, 199.
77 Lee, Li Zhi, loc. 1684.
78 As cited and discussed in Lee, loc. 1731.
79 Lee, loc. 2208.
80 Li, “Explanation of the Childlike Heart-Mind,” 106.
Even if these words are those of the sages, still, they were uttered in response to a specific situation. This is much like the case of prescribing a medication for a particular illness, applying a specific remedy depending on the circumstances in order to cure this dim-witted disciple or that misguided follower. The medicine prescribed depends on the illness; surely there is no fixed and unchanging prescription. Given this, how could we hastily accept these writings as the perfected doctrine for endless generations?\(^{81}\)

Given how these reflections are framed as a direct response to a claim of Jiao’s, we might rearticulate them as posing the following kinds of questions for Li’s friend: In so far as the words of the Classics are contingent products of their time and place, does not their careful scrutiny under the auspices of classicism reproduce their biases, obstructing both the emergence of a truly “self-attained” creative understanding of moral value, and of alternative contexts in which that value might take shape? That is, how can consideration of particular empirical details in classicist research not simply entrench the conservative values that elevate the reading of certain texts (such as the Classics) over other modes of experience as sites of moral insight, when we remain unsure even of how well those texts reflect truly universal lessons anyway?

Jiao has provided already one response to these concerns, which Li does not endorse: namely, that the Classics should not be reduced to what Li seems to assume here are mere collections of texts. As a consequence, they are not finite repositories of value or blueprints for action, but—as Jiao pointed out in his two “Prefaces”—fountains of ceaseless and dynamic insight that exceed the bounds of the text when handled by a careful interpreter. But Jiao also offers another, more complex response to Li’s concern in other works, most prominently in his defense of religious syncretism. A close examination of Jiao’s argument there reveals another path by which late Ming thinkers could travel from a commitment to shared, universal value toward a recognition of legitimate difference.

IV. “ON BRANCHES”

We can find an illustration of these stakes in other of Jiao’s works, most prominently in his long three-part essay “On Branches” (\textit{Zhi tan}).\(^{82}\) In this essay, Jiao defends Chan Buddhism from charges of “heterodoxy” (\textit{yiduan}, literally “different strands”) leveled by Confucian detractors, who

\(^{81}\) Li, 109.

\(^{82}\) This essay was originally published as an independent work in the Wanli period [1573-1620] in the famous compendium \textit{Baoyan tang biji}, edited by Chen Jiru. Ch’ien, \textit{Chiao Hung}, 280–81; Chen was a famous teacher and editor in Jiangsu. The biji he edited also included work by the Jesuit Father Matteo Ricci. Hummel, \textit{Eminent Chinese of the Ch‘ing Period}, “Ch’
'en Chi-ju.”
see its foreignness as a key reason to deny its relevance to key concerns of what throughout the essay Jiao calls “Confucian learning” (ruxue). The title of the essay is rich with ironic literary allusion. Typically, “branches” are regarded as a metaphor for the fragmentary, the marginal, and the distracting in comparison to the fundamental and significant “trunk” which is construed as the real heart of a matter. Branches can also be understood as the streams that diverge from a core source, dispersing its energy and power; similarly, they may be understood as distinct sects of a religious order. The association of branches with the trifling and insignificant led Edward Ch’ien to translate the title of Jiao’s essay as “Extraneous talk,” but it seems Jiao is playing on the multivalence of “branches” to draw attention to the importance of what his contemporaries might have seen as fragmentary or incidental.83

The composition and theme of the essay reflects this preoccupation. The essay is comprised of a series of quotations from historical and contemporary sources, alongside Jiao’s introduction and notes. This drawing-together of dispersed elements mirrors Jiao’s arguments in the essay for a synthesis of the fractured “Three Teachings” (sanjiao heyi) of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. Defenses of three-teachings syncretism were widely prevalent in the late Ming, where intellectuals tended to converge on the idea that each teaching had particular strengths that complemented the other two, or could be compartmentalized to satisfy distinct parts of a complete religious life.84 Yet Jiao’s essay goes beyond the typical arguments for syncretism to argue that Buddhist texts and concepts were better suited even than typically “Confucian” ones for explicating the truths of the Confucian way.85 In doing so, he defends “heterodoxy” (yiduan)—literally “different strands”—of religious and social value—as sources of insight necessary for realising the Way.

Jiao begins the essay by arguing that followers of Laozi (i.e., Daoists) who criticize Confucians (ru), and Confucians who criticize Laozi and the Daoists, do not really understand the true nature of their own teachings. He quotes Gao Shuci to argue that “when the sages spoke of the Way, it was like humans trying to name the sky (tian).” That is, the vastness of this Way belied attempts to offer a single name, leading the Chinese to call it one thing and foreigners—such as the so-called “barbarian” Xiongnu peoples—another. These differences do not reflect any differences of underlying reality, Jiao insists, but show merely that humans force various

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83 Ch’ien, Chiao Hung, 280.
84 For surveys of syncretic thought in the Ming, see Berling, The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-En, 46–55; Ch’ien, Chiao Hung, 21–30.
85 Berling notes that others (some of whom Jiao cites) also propagated similar ideas, but distinguishes them from more typical arguments for syncretism. Berling, The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-En, 51.
names on something that “had no knowledge of itself.” What people do not know, Jiao argues, is that

the Way did not [originally] have three [parts], the three [teachings] have never been three. The Way did not originally have a one; the one has never been one. If someone divides a hand up into empty space, and regrets their rashness in dividing it up, and subsequently uses the hand to unify itself, is this possible?

Jiao here argues that the three teachings are not three things to be brought together, but rather an originally undivided entity that at present is unfortunately glimpsed only through three particular manifestations, which are then incorrectly construed as three separate bodies of doctrine and insight.

What Jiao intends by this form of syncretism becomes clear as the essay progresses. The first consequence of his approach is most succinctly stated in a quote he appropriates from Zhang Shangying: “I studied Buddhism (Fo) and [only] after that understood Confucianism (Ru).” Jiao is explicit here in arguing that in “acting as a compass for our [Confucian concepts of] human nature (xing) and fate (ming),” Buddhist texts comment on the “quintessence of Confucius and Mencius,” not the “dregs” that preoccupied Han- and Song-era Confucian commentators. The truths of these core Confucian ideas, in other words, were not to be found directly in Confucian texts, but should be actively sought in other traditions and teachings. As a result, he argues, “those who study the Way ought to thoroughly sweep away the straw dogs of the ancients, and from their own chests pull out a piece of the universe before they can truly be made use of. How can they be happy beneath the feet of dead people?”

Here Jiao seems to be contradicting his defenses of classicism, decrying the texts of the (Chinese) ancients as “straw dogs.” Yet in other places of the essay he clarifies that his concern is mainly with those who follow commentaries at the expense of seeing the real wisdom of the texts they claim to explain. Confucius knew that his words were subtle and difficult to understand fully; this is why he was said to speak only to the right kind of people. It was partly because of the subtlety and profuseness of his meanings that commentaries arose to sort them out. Combined with

87 不知道無三也，三之未嘗三；道無一也，一之未嘗一。
89 Jiao, 227.
90 Jiao, 229.
91 Jiao, 230.
92 Jiao, 227.
Jiao’s claim that there is a universal principle behind the three teachings, he suggests here that the sects and factions of these teachings give rise to desiderata that don’t really have anything to do with the universal principle or knowledge that is driving them. This is not a denigration of book learning or classicism per se: it is rather a motivation to study texts for different reasons, to uncover the truth behind all of them as it is scattered across them. But in admitting that the truth is scattered and fragmented among many different texts and traditions, Jiao effectively denies the possibility of a single source of truth, or of a truth that could possibly be known prior to the investigation of these texts or traditions.

He demonstrates these ideas throughout much of the second and third parts of the essay, in which he offers evidence—through a series of extended quotations from Buddhist texts, Chan masters and Confucian (largely Taizhou) commentators—that putatively Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions share the same “doctrine of ‘constant response, purity and stillness’” found in the Tang-era Buddhist Classic of Stillness and Tranquility (Qingjing jing). When the ancient ninth-century BCE Chinese divination text the Book of Changes (Yijing), for example, urges us to act “without thinking, without acting,” it reflects these Buddhist principles avant le lettre.93 Jiao traces this concept of “tranquility and purity” (Ch. 清淨, Sans. parśuddha) from ancient Chinese texts, to the Dingguan Classic and the Laozi of the Daoist canon, to Buddhist verses. In doing so, he is speaking effectively of an isomorphic concept adumbrated, but not sufficiently realized or recognized, in the Confucian or Daoist tradition. As Jiao puts it, “Without turning to Chan [Buddhism], how could we understand this?”94

It is this insufficiency that drives Jiao to make an even more radical argument, which lays out the stakes of his approach to syncretism. If no one recognizes ideas such as “tranquility” or the real meaning of “human nature” in the Confucian texts, even if such concepts reside there, then it effectively means that these ideas must be garnered from other places. He analogizes this insufficiency to historical cases where Chinese people not only did not recognize the value of foreign goods, but denigrated them as strange (guai) and even mystical. Such “treasures”—including the cinnabar used by diviners that would eventually become a pigment distinctive of Chinese fine arts—were valued by some Chinese yet their “subtle words and mystical theories” were largely ignored.95 This led to the ironic situation where “family treasures” were only valued by other than their keepers:

93 Jiao, 231.
94 Jiao, 231.
95 Jiao, 228.
So once it was spoken about “human nature” and “fate.” They are family treasures. But I have a hidden treasure that has not been fully used, and has been buried for a long time now, and [my family] has become extremely poor [as a result]. But if a foreign merchant comes along, and points to [this treasure] and reveals it, would we then reject his words just because he is not a Chinese person (Zhongguo ren)? That person might be a barbarian trader, but the treasure is originally ours. People have descendants, but treasure does not have descendants. And anyway descendants have no fixed name; in the olden days people just shot arrows at each other. If I point to some other person as a descendant, how do I know he won’t point to me as a descendant?96

Without his even realizing it, Jiao’s explanation here effectively denaturalizes Confucian ideas, and by extension the Chinese identity that some harness to it, by situating those ideas within an alternative historical genealogy: taking on board putatively foreign thought is a requirement, not merely a supplement, to revealing the true meaning of Confucian values. The “treasures” that are distinctively on view in foreign thought are, moreover, not governed by the logic of descent, which Jiao dismisses as arbitrary anyway. Such treasures can be enjoyed by everyone, although they are revealed at first only to some. He thereby neutralizes claims that Buddhism or indeed other “foreign” traditions or ideas could possibly be what Confucius in the Analects denigrated as “heterodoxy”—literally “different strands” (yiduan) that led away from Confucian teachings.

For Jiao this is partly made possible by the belief—similar to that of Li Zhi—that these differences can be made harmonious. “Things become different [only] as a result of our taking them as different,” Jiao argues.97 He dismisses the seeming contradictions of Buddhist practice and Confucian value—most prominently found in the monastic life which rejects the familial relations at the core of neo-Confucian orthodoxy—as compatible iterations of the same teaching.98 Just as those who garden do not require everyone to engage in gardening before the world can be at peace, so too can Buddhists preach abstinence and vow-taking to others who take wives and start families.99

Yet, although motivated by the assumption that a single universal truth (here, an insight about how the stillness of the mind directs one to moral knowledge) underlies all things, investigation of the very external world presumed to reflect that unity does not offer further evidence of it. “On

96 Jiao, 228.
97 Jiao, 231.
98 Jiao, 228.
99 Jiao, 229.
Branches” directly expresses the view that it is only by turning to other traditions/texts that we become capable of certain kinds of understanding, even when that understanding concerns texts or traditions with which we are already putatively familiar. The consequence of this argument is that, when acknowledging a universal principle behind different manifestations of a shared truth, those manifestations themselves become less subject to censure. To the contrary, they serve rather as a source of insight into truth, whose exploration and investigation are actively encouraged. Here, his arguments complement his defense of classicism by showing how empirical investigation leads toward recognition of the plurality of meaning and value, where the underlying assumptions about what is being sought are supplanted by the fruits of the investigation itself. The accusation by the early Qing writer Huang Zongxi, in his survey of Ming scholarship, that Jiao and other members of the Taizhou school went “beyond the boundaries of Confucian moral philosophy” with their adherence to the doctrines of Chan Buddhism, is actually quite apt.  

Jiao himself would likely not see this process as one of “supplanting” so much as “discovering” the truths that were already there in some form or another. But the overall effect of his argument is to recognize that foreign ideas and texts go on to constitute the very basis of thought, without regard to their origin or period of emergence. Jiao seems to endorse this basic view when he discusses the idea that “Humanity is human” (renzhe ren ye). He argues that this shows that humans are humane, “even if they do not believe themselves to be such.”  

V. CONCLUSION

As members of the Taizhou school of Yangming learning, both Li Zhi and Jiao Hong urge attention to particularity, because such divergences from what is expected or conventional ostensibly illuminate a broader universal truth. But the very correlations between the external world and internal moral insight presumed by Yangming learning mean that, for both thinkers, such particularity ramifies as differences in moral knowledge. As a result, the nature of the very truth each is looking for becomes substantively, if inadvertently, transformed.

Their positions here demonstrate two ways in which a key tension of Yangming scholarship, between classicism and moral knowledge, could produce different kinds of morally relativist positions despite

100 Huang, The Records of Ming Scholars, 165.
being motivated by a belief in a universal human nature. Li offers a fairly generic moral and cultural pluralism that is strongly inflected by Daoist skepticism: he rejects the investigation of classic texts, arguing that they constrain the spontaneity required for the heart-mind to find authentic fulfilment. Li argues that such spontaneity can only arise from unmediated encounters with particular experiences and objects, beyond their instantiation in culturally sanctioned texts, traditions or conventions. Jiao, in contrast, finds that historical investigation of such texts imparts not further constraints on thinking, but a liberation of thought enabled by the inexhaustible depth of sagely utterances and Buddhist insight. What is significant here is that both thinkers are looking for something both new and creative: the insights of the heart-mind are irreducible to the particularities of context that encourage their emergence; likewise they do not reflect any kind of unity or even convergence on what is universal. For Li, creativity entails an irreducible aesthetic experience, emerging spontaneously from this interface between universality and particularity. For Jiao, creativity entails novel and deeply personal insight into the moral direction of the heart-mind: namely, the “self-attainment” that informed the classicism of the Su brothers.

Both men’s views can thus be distinguished from the moral philosophy of Wang Yangming. For Wang, the outcome of individual self-expression and self-cultivation in the service of what he called “moral knowing” (liangzhi) was recognition of “a common moral nature in all mankind” that largely supported existing social and political values. As deBary points out, “The value of the individual in his uniqueness is not something Wang dwells on.” Both Jiao Hong and Li Zhi, in contrast, see in human diversity important clues about the nature and sources of knowledge.

Now that we have explored the differences in Li’s and Jiao’s metaphysical foundations, we are in a better position to understand how each supports the most radically destabilizing practice of all: the pursuit of historical relativism and contextualism. Although both Li and Jiao—as products of their own time and place—profess commitments to many standard Confucian values as universal truths, it is Jiao’s embrace of classicism—and the historical contextualism which it entails—which more radically destabilize the universalism of those values. We explore these radical implications of historical relativism in the next chapter. STAY TUNED!

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102 De Bary, “Individualism and Humanism in Late Ming Thought,” 151–52.
103 De Bary, 151.
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