Moral Knowledge and Empirical Verification in Late Ming China[1]

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ABSTRACT: This essay begins to explore 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). 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 their commitments to moral universalism and toward an appreciation of the diversity and plurality of human existence.

I

Introduction. 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 (soon 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. These events constituted 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.[2]

From the perspective of the Han Chinese educated class experiencing these transitions, the fall of the Ming empire 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

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[2] Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West : The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 10.

kind or quality of dynasty was perhaps ending, at what speed, in what way."[3] 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 scholarship," or *kaozheng*, that twentieth-century Chinese reformers would see as proof of an indigenous, modern "scientific spirit."[4]

Yet such divisions obscure from view an important philosophical connection that—as I argue in this essay—provides the grounds upon which late Ming thinkers could articulate the legitimacy of human difference. 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 divide between Yangming learning and *kaozheng*. Scholars such as Jiao Hong 焦竑 (1540-1620), Yang Shen 楊慎 (1488–1559), Chen Di 陳第(1541–1617) and Li Zhi 李贄 (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*). The existence of such scholars suggests that controversies over moral knowing in the mid- to late-Ming developed alongside, rather than separately from, empirical investigation of social, historical (largely textual), and natural worlds.

In this essay I turn to two of these writers, 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. What kinds of questions about human difference did their simultaneous commitments to empirical investigation, historical inquiry, and the expansion of moral knowledge make possible? And how did such commitments enable these influential late-Ming writers to articulate more balanced and positive accounts of human diversity than we find in earlier or later writers?

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.[5] Wang Yangming explicitly rejected the orthodox view of Zhu Xi that insight into

[3] Struve, "Introduction," 6.

[4] Shih Hu, "The Scientific Spirit and Method in Chinese Philosophy," in *The Chinese Mind: Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Charles Alexander Moore (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1967), 104–31, http://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/handle/10125/23055.

[5] 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

moral knowledge came 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. These interests gave rise to two surprising developments that are particularly on view in the work of Li Zhi and Jiao Hong, which defy historiographical narratives that divide the moral philosophy of the Ming dynasty from the empiricist philology of Qing dynasty scholars.

In the argument that follows, I begin with an overview of the intellectual background and stakes of this position before examining the work of Li Zhi and Jiao Hong in detail. I show that the craving for direct contact with sagely words and teachings encouraged Yangming adherents, such as Jiao, 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.

II

Intellectual background. Benjamin Elman, among others, has parsed the philosophical differences between Yangming learning and *kaozheng* in terms of a historical transition from "philosophy" (in the Ming dynasty) "to philology" (in the Qing). Elman largely follows his Qing subjects in dating the emergence of "an exact philological understanding of classical texts in place of earlier philosophic concerns" to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.[6] Qing scholars looked back scornfully on the Ming, as an era obsessed with the abstract speculations of "learning of the way" (*daoxue*) or discussions of "meanings and principles" (*yili*). Yet Qing-era terms and perspectives tend to lump together a wide range of debates and perspectives toward the ancient past and its classic texts. 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.[7] One of the most prominent features of

formulation that endorses the relative value of difference without necessarily seeking to assimilate it.

[6] Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*, 2nd revised edition (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series, 2001), 59.

[7] Peter Ditmanson, "The Yongle Reign and the Transformation of Daoxue," *Ming Studies* 1998, no. 1 (1998):

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,

> 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.[8]

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.[9]

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.[10] 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.[11] As Wang himself put it in response to a question from one of his students, "In the matter of serving one's parents, one

10, https://doi.org/10.1179/014703798788763499.

[8] Zuqian Lü and Xi Zhu, *Reflections on Things at Hand: The Neo-Confucian Anthology*, trans. Wing-tsit Chan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 67, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.06060; cited and discussed in De Bary, "Neo-Confucian Cultivation," 178.

[9] For more discussion of principle, see P. J. Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mengzi and Wang Yangming* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 25.

[10] Bol, 109.

[11] De Bary, "Individualism and Humanism in Late Ming Thought," 155.

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… These [principles] are all in the heart-mind, that is all, for the heart-mind and principle are identical."[12]

Despite this philosophical basis, as a historical matter interest in the empirical investigation of historical sources arose not alongside, but in many cases as an outgrowth of, xinxue commitments. Often, scholars pursued historical sources as one means to realize more fully the truths believed to lie in the ancient past, particularly its texts and scripts. 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?

Here, Li Zhi and Jiao Hong serve as productive (albeit mutually distinct) examples of how such argumentation might proceed. Both are members of the Taizhou school, which means they are ostensibly committed to the belief that everyone contains within them moral knowledge of the same kind. Yet each offers a distinct way 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 judgments, or everyday experience. Peter Bol has argued that the study of such practices and texts disrupted the smooth correlation presumed by Cheng-Zhu 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.[13] This disruption encouraged new forms of scholarship that valued learning for its contribution to disciplinary specialization rather than moral cultivation.[14] He characterizes such scholarly pursuits as "alternatives" to neo-Confucianism, particularly to the "inward turn" of Yangming learning and its "tilt toward the spiritual."[15]

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; the particular and the extraordinary 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. I argue it was the very correlation presumed by Yangming learning between objects "out there" and moral insight "in here" that provided the template

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[12] Yangming Wang, *Instructions For Practical Living And Other Neo-Confucian Writing*, trans. Wing-tsit Chan, First Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 7 Translation altered slightly.
[13] Bol, "LOOKING TO WANG SHIZHEN," 111.
[14] Bol, 100, 112.
[15] 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.

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.

III

Response to the Classics. Many of the fairly abstract philosophical disagreements of Yangming learning played out in relation to how, or indeed if, one believed the classic texts of neo-Confucian doctrine should be read. One of the most well-known and flamboyant rejections of this orthodoxy came from Li Zhi, famous among his contemporaries for his "brazenly provocative" eccentricity and daring iconoclasm.[16] 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.[17] He sees Confucian orthodoxy, particularly "study of principle," as one of the most corrupting such influences, and he singles out slavish devotion to canonical classic texts and their commentaries as particularly harmful for one's moral development.[18]

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.[19] 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*.[20] 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*?"[21] 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.[22]

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

[16] Li, *A book to burn and a book to keep (hidden)*, xv.
[17] Li, "Explanation of the Childlike Heart-Mind," 107.
[18] Handler-Spitz, *Symptoms of an Unruly Age*, 19–20.
[19] De Bary, "Individualism and Humanism in Late Ming Thought."
[20] 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.
[21] Li, "Explanation of the Childlike Heart-Mind," 109.
[22] Huang, *The Records of Ming Scholars*, 165.

both *consequence* and *requirement* of, the pursuit of their own self-cultivation. 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 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.[23] 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.[24] 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 *Changes*, together with Su Che's commentaries on the *Odes* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.[25] 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 [*wen* 文][26] 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 [*ji* 技] is necessary to approach the Way. But can such technique become a divine thing unto itself? Technique approaches the Way,

23 Petersen, "Confucian Learning in the Late Ming," 774.

24 Bol calls this idea of Su's "unity with individuality." *This Culture of Ours*, Ch. 8.

25 Ch'ien, *Chiao Hung*, 49.

26 This richly multivalent term *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.

> 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.[27]

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," spouting forth new and unanticipated changes and insight.[28] This was only possible because the Sus were capable of "apprehending it for themselves" (*zide* 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.[29] 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.[30]

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 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."[31] 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).[32] Jiao claims the

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[27] Jiao, "Ke liang Su jingjie xu," 3b.
[28] Jiao, 4a.
[29] Jiao, 4a.
[30] Jiao, 4a–4b.
[31] Jiao, 4b.
[32] Jiao, 4b.

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.[33]

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.[34] 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."[35] 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."[36]

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.[37] To Jiao, Su's mode of engaging texts

> 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?!"[38]

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[33] Jiao, 4b.
[34] Handler-Spitz, *Symptoms of an Unruly Age*, 6, 129.
[35] Jiao, "Ke Su Changgong ji xu," 33b.
[36] Jiao, 44a.
[37] Li, *A book to burn and a book to keep (hidden)*, 159.
[38] Jiao, "Ke Su Changgong ji xu," 44a; Parts of this paragraph heavily modify the translation provided in Li, "Afterword to Journeying with Companions," 159.

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.[39] 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. Bo Ya, having been trained, was able to produce marvelous sounds only after he had shed this training.[40]

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.[41] 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.[42] 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.[43] In a separate essay written to accompany his notes on the Buddhist text the *Heart Sutra*, Li is more explicit about the

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[39] Li, *A book to burn and a book to keep (hidden)*, 158.
[40] Li, "Afterword to Journeying with Companions," 160–61.
[41] 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.
[42] Handler-Spitz, 28.
[43] Li, "Afterword to Journeying with Companions," 161.

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?"[44]

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.[45] 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 philosophical scheme.[46] In contrast, Li's experience of the heart-mind is rooted in the spontaneous desires that Wang associated with selfishness.[47] 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.[48] 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 Dingxiang, "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."[49] Only by indulging in this diversity of experience and desire can each thing in the universe can find its proper place, where all things move in harmony and "spontaneously come to completion and fulfillment."[50]

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

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[44] Li, "Notes on 'The Hub,'" 119.
[45] Li, "Explanation of the Childlike Heart-Mind," 108.
[46] De Bary, "Individualism and Humanism in Late Ming Thought," 183.
[47] De Bary, 195, 199.
[48] Lee, *Li Zhi*, loc. 1684.
[49] As cited and discussed in Lee, loc. 1731.
[50] Lee, loc. 2208.

claim that "those who know may not say that I still possess a childlike heart-mind."[51] 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?
>
> 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?[52]

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" (*Zhi tan*).[53] In this essay, Jiao

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[51] Li, "Explanation of the Childlike Heart-Mind," 106.
[52] Li, 109.
[53] This essay was originally published as an independent work in the Wanli period [1573-1620] in the famous compendium Baoyan tang biji, edited by Chen Jiru. Ch'ien, *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, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*, "Ch'en Chi-ju."

defends Chan Buddhism from charges of "heterodoxy" (*yiduan*, literally "different strands") leveled by Confucian detractors, who 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 contrast 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 title of the essay suggests that Jiao is playing on the multivalent metaphor of "branches" to draw attention to the importance of what his contemporaries might have seen as fragmentary or incidental.[54]

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.[55] 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.[56] 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 names on something that "had no knowledge of itself."[57] 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.[58] If someone

[54] The association of branches with the trifling and insignificant led Edward Ch'ien to translate the title of this essay as "Extraneous talk," Ch'ien, *Chiao Hung*, 280.
[55] 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.
[56] 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.
[57] Jiao, "Zhi tan," 227.
[58] 不知道無三也，三之未嘗三；道無一也，一之未嘗一。

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?[59]

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*)."[60] 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.[61] 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?"[62]

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.[63] Combined with 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,

[59] Jiao, "Zhi tan," 230.
[60] Jiao, 227.
[61] Jiao, 229.
[62] Jiao, 230.
[63] Jiao, 227.

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*.[64] 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?"[65]

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.[66] This led to the ironic situation where "family treasures" were only valued by other than their keepers:

> 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?[67]

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.

[64] Jiao, 231.
[65] Jiao, 231.
[66] Jiao, 228.
[67] Jiao, 228.

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.[68] 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.[69] 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.[70]

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 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.[71]

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.”[72] In other words, we are as we are, regardless of our knowledge or willingness to acknowledge it. Moral reality stands outside of us as an independent object of investigation, that can transform our own assumptions about what we know or are.

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[68] Jiao, 231.
[69] Jiao, 228.
[70] Jiao, 229.
[71] Huang, *The Records of Ming Scholars*, 165.
[72] Jiao, “Zhi tan,” 230.

V

Conclusion. As members of the Taizhou school of Yangming learning, both Li Zhi and Jiao Hong urge attention to particularity, because divergence from what is expected or conventional ostensibly illuminates 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 classisicism and moral knowledge, could produce different kinds of morally relativist positions despite 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.[73] As deBary points out, "The value of the individual in his uniqueness is not something Wang dwells on."[74] Both Jiao Hong and Li Zhi, in contrast, see in human diversity important clues about the nature and sources of knowledge.

[73] De Bary, "Individualism and Humanism in Late Ming Thought," 151–52.
[74] De Bary, 151.