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CHEN DI'S *RECORD OF FORMOSA* (1603) AND AN ALTERNATIVE CHINESE IMAGINARY OF OTHERNESS*

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines Chen Di's 1603 text Record of Formosa (Dongfan ji), the earliest first-hand account in any language of the indigenous people of Formosa (now called Taiwan). Recent commentators have viewed Chen's text as a key elaboration of Chinese imperial discourse and its various tropes of hierarchical difference. In contrast, I argue that Chen reads the perceived cultural differences between his society and Taiwan's indigenous peoples as evidence of the contingency, rather than inevitable superiority, of a historical story that produces the outcome of 'civilization'. Building on a broader understanding of Chen's intellectual biography and his extant works, I show that Chen Di places the indigenes along a different timeline in which they forge their own contingent history parallel to, rather than behind, that of a civilizational centre. By doing so, Chen's historical narrative resists aligning their society with Han Chinese forms of development and offers a glimpse of how late Ming syncretic thought could produce an account of legitimate otherness.*

In 1603, the Chinese general Shen Yourong 沈有容 (1557–1628) launched a punitive expedition from Kinmen Island with the aim of wiping out Japanese

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pirates making repeated raids on the south China coast.¹ He took the unusual step of targeting the pirates' lairs on Formosa, an island outside Ming dynastic territory.² Spectacularly successful on all counts, Shen's expedition managed not only to destroy the pirates' network but also to frighten away a group of 'red-haired barbarians'—Dutch sailors led by Admiral Wybrand van Warwijck—who were lurking on the nearby Pescadores island chain waiting for the Ming court to grant them trading privileges in Macau. But perhaps the most exciting outcome of this expedition was the earliest first-hand written account in any language of the indigenous societies living on Taiwan, the *Record of Formosa* 東番記 (*Dongfan ji*). Written soon after Shen's expedition by Chen Di 陳第 (1541–1617), a military adviser and itinerant literatus in Shen's retinue, the *Record* was occasioned by a meeting with the island's indigenous people, led by a person Chen calls Da-mi-la. These people presented deer meat and wine to Shen and his men, to thank them for eliminating the pirate threat; presumably, they were also the hosts for Chen's twenty-one-day stay on the island.³ Over subsequent centuries, the *Record's* definitive first-hand account would be summarized or closely duplicated in reference materials produced for travellers and colonial administrators on the island, including appendices to the Song-era text *Record of foreign lands* 諸番志 and the 1696 Taiwan provincial gazetteer.⁴

Aside from its obvious ethnographic and historical significance, Chen's account has also been cited as an exemplar of what, in European scholarship, is often called 'imperial ideology'.⁵ Extending this concept to the study of

¹ Laurence G. Thompson, 'The earliest Chinese eyewitness accounts of the Formosan aborigines', *Monumenta Serica*, 23 (1964), pp. 163–204, at p. 171; Chou Wan-yao 周婉窈, 'Chen Di *Dongfan ji*: Shiqi shiji chu Taiwan xinan diqu de shidi diaocha baogao' 陳第東番記: 十七世紀初台灣西南地區的實地調查報告 ('Chen Di's *Record of Formosa*: a factual investigative report of south-western Taiwan in the early seventeenth century'), *Gugong wenwu yuekan*, 21 (2003), pp. 22–45, at p. 27.

² The island was called 'Formosa' by most contemporary European sources, so I use this term to translate all of the Ming-era Chinese names for the island, such as 'Dongfan' and 'Jilong shan'. I also occasionally use the term 'Formosan' to describe the unnamed indigenous people with whom Chen was in contact, because he does not differentiate them into separate groups. The island did not acquire its present name until after the Dutch established Fort Zeelandia in 1624 at Tayouan, an indigenous place name from which the present-day Chinese appellation 'Taiwan' is derived.

³ Chen Xueyi 陳學伊, 'Ti *Dongfan ji* hou' 題東番記後 ('Postscript to the *Record of Formosa*'), in Shen Yourong 沈有容, ed., *Minhai zengyan* 閩海贈言 (*Words of praise from the Fujian Sea*) (Taipei, 1959), pp. 27–8, at p. 28.

⁴ Fang Hao 方豪, 'Bianyan' 弁言 ('Preface'), in Shen Yourong, ed., *Minhai zengyan*, pp. 1–2; Wang Bichang 王必昌, *Congxiu Taiwan xianzhi* (*Gazetteer of Taiwan county, revised*) (Taipei, 1752; orig. edn 1961). The appendices to the *Record of foreign lands* were extracted from Zhang Xie 張燮, *Dong Xi yang kao* 東西洋考 (*Investigations of the eastern and western oceans*), ed. Zhao Rugua 趙汝適 (Taipei, 1961).

⁵ For examples of how this concept has been used in relation to European colonial and imperial enterprises, see Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the world: ideologies of empire in Spain, Britain and France, c. 1500–c. 1800* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1995).

Chinese territorial expansion, Emma Teng and others have viewed Chen as a key elaborator of Chinese colonial discourse and its various tropes of hierarchical difference.⁶ Teng identifies Chen's *Record* as the 'basic model for the rhetoric of primitivism' that both denigrated the backwardness of the indigenes while simultaneously praising their primitive virtue.⁷ This reading of Chen situates him amid other Chinese writers, as well as his European near-contemporaries such as Michel de Montaigne and John Locke, for whom first contact with indigenous inhabitants of 'new' worlds prompted rumination on the very nature of civilization and the kinds of moral, political, and economic commitments which held it in place.⁸ Typically, the existence of such peoples served to highlight the differences between a pre-political, but often uniquely virtuous, 'nature' on the one hand, and a more advanced civil order constituted by appropriate forms of sociality, on the other. In many cases, including the later Qing administration on Taiwan and European settler expansion in the New World, these arguments were marshalled to justify the seizure of territory from indigenous peoples on the basis of the settlers' presumably more advanced capacities.

A broader understanding of Chen's intellectual biography and the scholarly conversations to which he contributed, however, shows that his *Record* does not contribute to this fraught imperial narrative as directly as some have claimed. To the contrary, Chen's account illustrates a rarely glimpsed Chinese imaginary of otherness that interrogates, rather than upholds, the Sinocentric hierarchies that render foreign difference inferior to Chinese ways of life. Using a series of comparisons to other Chinese travel writers, I argue that Chen sees in the indigenous people of Taiwan evidence of the contingency, rather than inevitable superiority, of a historical story that produces the outcome of 'civilization'. As a result, he presents the difference of indigenous peoples as a parallel, rather than less advanced, form of historical experience.

I

Chen visited the island of Taiwan (called 'Dongfan' in most contemporary Chinese sources, and 'Formosa' in European ones) in 1603 during the Ming dynasty, before Dutch colonization of the island began (in 1623) and before the island was incorporated into the subsequent Qing dynasty (in 1683). Chen (courtesy names Jili 季立 and Yizhai 一齋) was a native of Lianjiang in

⁶ Emma Teng, *Taiwan's imagined geography: Chinese colonial travel writing and pictures, 1683–1895* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), pp. 62–3; Jia Ning 贾宁, 'Chen Di yu Dongfan ji' 陈第与《东番记》 ('Chen Di and *The record of Formosa*'), *Zhongyang minzu xueyuan xuebao* (1983), pp. 45–51.

⁷ Teng, *Taiwan's imagined geography*, p. 62.

⁸ For an examination of these debates in European thought, see Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against empire* (Princeton, NJ, 2003).

Fujian province, who had followed his father to achieve the exam rank of *xiucai* at the early age of nineteen.⁹ After fighting Japanese pirates along the south-east coast of China, he was brought into the *mufu* 幕府 (akin to a private secretariat or consultation office) of the regional superintendent Yu Daxian. Following the death of his father, Chen began turning down offers of official positions, and retired from his eventual career as a garrison commander along the Great Wall to travel and write. At the age of sixty-two, he had the opportunity to visit to Taiwan as a military expert attached to Shen Yourong's entourage.¹⁰

The *Record of Formosa* is a short text of fewer than 1,500 characters, attached to a longer compendium of essays and poems dedicated to Shen, *Minhai zengyan* 閩海贈言 (*Words of praise from the Fujian Sea*).¹¹ Until the middle of the last century, Chen's text was believed to be lost, despite reference to it in a series of regional histories throughout the Ming and Qing periods.¹² It was only in 1955 that the scholar Fang Hao located an original copy of Shen's compendium in the holdings of the former Tokyo Imperial University, which included – among other previously unseen texts – Chen's lost *Record*.¹³

The *Record* begins by noting the ancient and unknown origins of the island's inhabitants, whom Chen refers to as 'the barbarians (*yi* 夷) of Dongfan': 'the naked and rope-tying people (*min* 民), who have neither calendars nor officials nor chiefs'.¹⁴ These observations are strikingly similar to those of later Dutch writers such as the missionary George Candidius, who also remarks on the acephalous nature of village life among the Siraya – the

⁹ The biographical information recorded here is taken from Jin Yunming 金雲銘, *Chen Di nianpu* 陳第年譜 (*Chronological biography of Chen Di*) (Taipei, 1972; orig. edn 1946); Mao I-Po 毛一波, 'Chen Di jiqi zhuzuo' 陳第及其著作 ('Chen Di and his works'), *Xiandai xuefan*, 10 (1973), pp. 20–1.

¹⁰ Jin, *Chen Di nianpu*, pp. 87–8.

¹¹ For more information on the compilation and content of this compendium, particularly Chen Di's *Record*, see Fang Hao 方豪, 'Chen Di *Dongfan ji kaozheng*' 陳第東番記考證 ('Text-critical analysis of Chen Di's *Record of Formosa*'), *Wen shi zhe xuebao*, 7 (1965), pp. 41–76, at pp. 52–4.

¹² In fact, Jin Yunming's 1946 biography of Chen notes that the *Record of Formosa* is no longer extant. Jin, *Chen Di nianpu*, p. 88; Zhu Jiuying lists the mentions of Chen's *Record* in Zhu Jiuying 朱玖瑩, 'Zuixian du Tai zhi xuezhe – Chen Di' 最先渡台之學者 – 陳第 ('The earliest scholar to visit Taiwan – Chen Di'), *Wenshi huikan*, 1 (1959), pp. 22–3, at p. 23. Chou Wan-yao notes that Chen's literary corpus was not large, and that his collected works (*Yizhai ji* 一齋集 (*Collected works of Yizhai [Chen Di]*), edited by Jiao Hong 焦竑) – which did not contain the *Record* – were eventually listed on the Qing dynasty's register of banned materials, making any texts by Chen Di difficult to obtain even by the early twentieth century. She therefore argues that such a seeming loss of an essay as important as the *Record* would not have been seen as unusual. Chou, 'Chen Di *Dongfan ji*', p. 27.

¹³ Fang, 'Bianyan', p. 2. Recognizing that the compendium provided important resources for the study of Taiwan and Fujian in the Ming period, Fang reprinted a punctuated, annotated edition of the compendium in 1959 (for the full story of the recovery of this text, see Fang, 'Chen Di *Dongfan ji kaozheng*').

¹⁴ Chen Di, *Dongfan ji (Record of Formosa)*, in Shen Yourong, ed., *Minhai zengyan*, pp. 24–7, at p. 27.

indigenous group with whom Chen was most likely in contact.¹⁵ Chen does not note the name of the people or groups from whom he is gathering information, but he does observe that the people on the island 'are of diverse kinds'. He expresses wonder at their physical fitness and – like Dutch commentators two decades later – also compares their running speeds to that of a horse. He notes that they live in villages of up to a thousand people, broadly distributed along the coast.¹⁶ When villages quarrel with each other, they engage in fervid battle and take heads, but the following day quickly normalize relations. Chen notes that the 'nature' (*xing* 性) of the indigenes 'is to be brave, and enjoy fighting', yet he notably does not use such facts to ascribe an unusual penchant for violence to the islanders.¹⁷ The bulk of his account is rather taken up with the details of indigenous social custom, architecture, agriculture, and cuisine.

Chen is particularly interested in marriage and funeral customs, which would have posed a considerable contrast with those of his own society. It is, for example, the son-in-law who is welcomed into the bride's family, rather than vice versa, and it is the prospective bride who remains in charge of when and for how long to pursue the courtship.¹⁸ 'The women are sturdy and active', he notes, and do most of the agricultural work.¹⁹ He offers extensive details about what food they grow and which domestic animals they raise, and how they do so, as well as how the men conduct collective deer hunts which bring the village meat.²⁰ When someone dies, they expose the corpse to dry in the house; only when their house becomes dilapidated do they 'dig a pit underneath and bury [the corpse] in a standing position but with no mound to cover it, and the house is then again raised above it. If the house is not rebuilt, the corpse is not buried.'²¹ The largest structures maintained by each kinship group (*zu* 祖) are 'public offices' (*gong xie* 公廨), where young men live before marriage. These offices are also the place where 'discussion of matters must be' conducted, to facilitate the investigation and management of problems.²²

¹⁵ George Candidius, 'An account of the inhabitants', in William Campbell, ed., *Formosa under the Dutch: described from contemporary records, with explanatory notes and a geography of the island* (London, 1903), pp. 9–25; Chen, *Dongfan ji*, p. 26. For more information on the indigenous groups occupying the south-west Taiwan plain, see Raleigh Ferrell, 'Aboriginal peoples of the southwestern Taiwan plain', *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica*, 32 (1971), pp. 217–35.

¹⁶ Chen, *Dongfan ji*, p. 24. All translations of Chen Di's essay are my own, but I have consulted the translation found in Thompson, 'Earliest Chinese eyewitness accounts'.

¹⁷ Chen, *Dongfan ji*, p. 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²² *Ibid.* Candidius, 'Account of the inhabitants', p. 15, notes the range of opinions expressed in these public meetings.

Near the end of his account, Chen summarizes his findings and offers his personal reflections on the nature of his encounter, dwelling in particular on what to him are the most notable ‘differences’ (*yi* 異) between his own and Formosan society. Given the significance of this passage for interpreting how and what he hoped to accomplish in the *Record*, it is worth quoting at length:

Mr. Unofficial Historian [i.e. Chen himself] says, ‘How different [or “extraordinary”] is Formosa (*Dongfan*)! From Lieyu and other inlets, on a boat catching the northern wind, it would take a day and night to reach the Pescadores; in one more day and night one would reach Jialaowan. It is close. Yet it [the island] has naked and rope-tying people, who have neither calendars nor officials nor chiefs – are they not also different? Moreover, they live on the sea but do not fish, live mixed up together yet are not licentious, men and women exchange status, live and are buried in the same place; the whole year they hunt deer, yet deer are not depleted. Taking all on the island together, they would amount [in population] to one Chinese county, living with and being cared for by each other; until this day they are totally without calendars or writing – how different this is! The pirates of the south and the Mongols of the north²³ all have writing, like the ancient bird script [of early China]; presumably at the beginning there was a wise man who invented it? But only here is without it. Why? Yet, eating to fullness and roaming freely, contented and harmonious, what need have they for a great man? These are the people of [ancient mythical rulers] Wuhuai and Getian!’²⁴

Most discussions of Chen’s *Record*, in Chinese- and English-language commentaries, as well as in the only existing full-length English translation by Laurence Thompson, construe the *Dongfan* (‘Formosa’) that appears in this passage and in the title of the work as meaning ‘eastern savages’, and *yi* 異 (‘difference’ or ‘extraordinariness’) as meaning ‘strangeness’.²⁵ These translations impart a strong flavour of cultural chauvinism to Chen’s work: they diminish his ambition to be offering a balanced account of his trip to the island, and make it easier to claim, as Teng does, that Chen associates the Taiwan indigenes with the ‘eastern barbarians’ of Japan and Korea.²⁶ Yet in all but one of the cases where it appears in the text, including in the passage above, ‘*Dongfan*’ cannot grammatically function as ‘eastern savages’ – it can only be construed as the name of a place. This tallies with all five references to *Dongfan* in the Ming standard histories, as well as in Chen Di’s other related work, including the *Zhoushi kewen* 舟師客問 (*Guests ask questions of a sailor*) and diary entries of

²³ These terms were conventional ways of referring to the peoples threatening the Ming’s northern and southern frontiers, respectively.

²⁴ Chen, *Dongfan ji*, p. 26; compare Thompson’s heavily interpolated translation in Thompson, ‘Earliest Chinese eyewitness accounts’, p. 177. I am indebted to Ying Zhang for suggesting the translation ‘extraordinary’ for *yi*.

²⁵ Tu Long explicitly identifies ‘*Dongfan*’ as ‘the barbarians who live on an island in the seas off Penghu’. Tu Long 屠隆, ‘Ping *Dongfan ji* 評東番記 (‘Comment on *Record of Formosa*)’, in Shen Yourong, ed., *Minghai zengyan*, pp. 21–3, at p. 22; Thompson, ‘Earliest Chinese eyewitness accounts’; Teng, *Taiwan’s imagined geography*, pp. 60, 63; Jia Ning, ‘Chen Di yu *Dongfan ji*’.

²⁶ Teng, *Taiwan’s imagined geography*, p. 67.

the trip recorded in his biography, which all use Dongfan as the name of the island itself.²⁷

This well-established historical usage of Dongfan as the name of a place implies nothing about its inhabitants or their savagery. Notably, in fact, Chen more frequently uses the term 'people' (*min* 民) to describe the inhabitants than he does the more loaded term 'barbarian' (*yi* 夷), which would have been the conventional usage in such accounts. Yet in expressing wonder at the simplicity of the indigenes, including their lack of writing, he does seem to view them as leading lives of primitive virtue. He worries that the honest life of these 'people of Wuhuai and Getian' will soon end under threat from Chinese traders, who cheat them with shoddy merchandise and, by increasing their 'awareness' (悟 *wu*), threaten their 'simple days' (*pu ri* 朴日).²⁸

Chen's remarks here bear interrogating. In fact, they contradict one of the few other contemporary Chinese accounts of indigenous life on Formosa, found in Zhang Xie's 張燮 (1574–1640) *Investigations of the eastern and western oceans* 東西洋考 (*Dong Xi yang kao*), published in twelve volumes in 1618 and eventually included in the authoritative compendium *Siku quanshu*.²⁹ The two sections of Zhang's work relevant to Taiwan were published alongside Chen's contribution in a later edition of *Words of praise*.³⁰ Zhang's account largely duplicates or summarizes Chen's report, but adds crucial new information about commerce along the northern Taiwan coast. According to Zhang, who gathered much of his intelligence from fishermen and merchants who regularly traded with the indigenes in the northern ports of Danshui and Jilong,

²⁷ The *Account of foreign countries* (*Waiguo liezhuan* 外國列傳) of the *Ming history* (*Mingshi* 明史) reads, 'Jilong mountain lies to the north-east of Penghu. In the past it was called Beigang, and also Dongfan' (雞籠山在澎湖東北, 故名北港, 又名東番). In discussing this passage, Zhu, 'Zuixian du Tai zhi xuezhe', p. 22, notes that 'therefore Dongfan refers to present-day Taiwan'. Of the other four mentions of 'Dongfan' in the *Ming history*, two refer to the occupation of the island by Japanese pirates and the Shen expedition to eradicate them (*Mingshi* 270.6938); one refers to Formosa's exclusion from Zheng He's 鄭和 voyages (*Mingshi* 323.8376); and one refers to the Dutch being forced from Macau by Ming authorities, and their subsequent flight to Penghu and Formosa (*Mingshi* 222.5861). Only twice in the *Record* does Dongfan refer unambiguously to people rather than specifically to a place: once to describe the indigenous response to attempts by Zheng He to enforce a Chinese imperial edict (contradicting, incidentally, the claim of the *Ming history* that Zheng never reached Taiwan) and once to describe their inability to fend off better-armed Japanese pirates using darts.

²⁸ Chen, *Dongfan ji*, p. 27.

²⁹ Xue Chengqing 薛澄清, 'Ming Zhang Xie jiqi zhushu kao' 明張燮及其著述考 ('Investigation of Zhang Xie of the Ming dynasty, and his works'), *Lingnan xuebao*, 4 (1935), pp. 28–40, at pp. 37–8.

³⁰ Mao reports that Zhang's text was first published as a supplement to Chen's text in 1617 and later included in the 1618 edition of the *Minhai zengyan*: Mao, 'Chen Di jiqi zhuzuo', p. 21. Zhang is careful to note how thoroughly he cross-checked both ancient sources and imperial bulletins with contemporary reports from sailors and itinerant merchants, 'not daring to allow subjective views to randomly produce forced associations'. Zhang, *Dong Xi yang kao*, p. 78.

When the ships of foreigners arrive, both young and old demand a small gift. The people of Danshui are poor, but trading is honest and straightforward. Jilong's population is more affluent but miserly. Typically they take merchandise to exchange for things, then the next day always come back saying the price was not fair and seeking goods in compensation, and then on the last day they again return, wanting to exchange them [i.e. what they received in compensation] for the original goods, then saying the goods are already damaged and they are not willing to accept them.³¹

This report indicates that not only were indigenous practices in different parts of the island more diverse than Chen recognizes, but they were also far from unsophisticated. Long experience trading with unofficial merchants and fishermen, who worked the maritime corridor running from the Philippines to South-east Asia and between China and Japan, made these islanders shrewd bargainers.³² Zhang also mentions that those merchants who ventured deeper into the mountains reported a warm welcome in indigenous villages, where they were treated to food and wine.³³ The Formosan indigenes, even before the expansion of Dutch colonial rule in the 1620s, were thus far from the simple people of Chen's description.

These observations strengthen views such as those of Emma Teng, who argues that Chen, in noting their lack of writing, clothing, and ritual etiquette, situates the islanders within a 'discourse of primitiveness' that 'underscore[s] the indigenes' cultural inferiority in relation to the Chinese'.³⁴ According to Teng, Chen's *Record* repeatedly alludes to a passage in the *Laozi* 老子 (a canonical text associated with classical Daoism of the fifth century BCE) that describes a 'golden age' of simplicity:

Let them take death seriously and desist from distant campaigns,
Then even if they have boats and wagons, they will not travel in them,
Even though they have weapons and armor, they will not form ranks
with them.

Let people revert to the practice of rope-tying...³⁵

Teng argues that the above passage from the *Laozi*—along with the Daoist-inspired utopia of Tao Yuanming's 陶淵明 (Tao Qian 陶潛, 365–427) fifth-century fable 'Peach Blossom Spring'—was the source of the primitivist tropes

³¹ Zhang, *Dong Xi yang kao*, p. 85.

³² Archaeological evidence indicates that, from as early as 500 BCE, the Austronesian peoples of Taiwan were involved in maritime trading networks extending south to South-east Asia, though not east to China: Hsiao-chun Hung and Chin-yung Chao, 'Taiwan's early metal age and Southeast Asian trading systems', *Antiquity*, 90 (2016), pp. 1537–51. Trade with China and Japan, using Taiwan as a base, began in the sixteenth century. Bruce Jacobs, 'A history of pre-Invasion Taiwan', *Taiwan shi yanjiu*, 23 (2016), pp. 1–38, at p. 21.

³³ Zhang, *Dong Xi yang kao*, p. 85.

³⁴ Teng, *Taiwan's imagined geography*, p. 63.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65, quoting *Laozi*, ch. 80.

she identifies in Chen's *Record*.³⁶ Given the pervasiveness of such tropes in writing about non-Chinese peoples, she concludes that narratives employing them 'might have more to do with a traveller's dissatisfaction with Chinese society than with his actual perceptions of indigenous society'.³⁷

To a scholar of the late Ming such as Chen Di, facing socio-economic changes in which social mobility, affluence, and the development of printing gave rise to increasing 'uncertainties accessory to life in the early modern world',³⁸ the Formosan people – 'roaming freely, contented, and harmonious' – must surely have appeared extraordinary, and even appealing. In fact, many intellectuals of the period, particularly those of the Taizhou school, saw in the stripping back of convention a more natural and authentic form of virtue – what Chen Di's fellow Fujianese Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1604) would have called a 'childlike mind' (童心 *tongxin*).³⁹ These interests arose in part from the teachings of the famous philosopher and statesman Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), whose *xinxue* 心學 ('learning of the mind/heart') reacted against the orthodox readings of the classics endorsed by Song-dynasty masters such as Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200).

This craving for simplicity arose alongside a deeper appreciation for the contingency and distinctiveness of personal experience. Following Wang's exhortation to discover the truth of the classics and their virtue for oneself, literati increasingly came to prize authenticity and personal discovery over taught doctrine.⁴⁰ This encouraged exploration of a wide range of thought and experience beyond orthodoxy, including the syncretic embrace of diverse religious and philosophical teachings. But it also extended to historicist studies of the production and meaning of canonical texts, to recover their presumed original form before obfuscation by later interpreters. In Chen's case, these trends culminated in a somewhat distinctive intellectual trajectory, built on an exploration of three-teachings syncretism, a lifetime of travel, and pursuit of the empiricist, text-critical research for which he is best known.

In what follows, I situate the *Record* within this complex background to argue that Chen's observations of indigenous practice stem less from a yearning for a simpler society than they do from a critical relativism arising from multiple sources. Comparing the *Record* to other analogous Chinese travel narratives,

³⁶ These Daoist utopias are discussed by Lorenzo Andolfatto in this special issue.

³⁷ Teng, *Taiwan's imagined geography*, p. 67.

³⁸ Rivi Handler-Spitz, *Symptoms of an unruly age: Li Zhi and cultures of early modernity* (Seattle, WA, 2019), p. 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴⁰ Yu Yingshi 余英時, 'Cong Song Ming ruxue de fazhan lun Qing dai sixiang shi' 從宋明儒學的發展論清代思想史 ('Analysing Qing dynasty intellectual history from the perspective of the development of *ruxue* in the Song and Ming'), in Shen Zhijia 沈志佳, ed., *Yu Yingshi wenji di er juan: Zhongguo sixiang chuantong jiqi xiandai bianqian* 余英時文集第二卷: 中國思想傳統及其現代變遷 (*Collected works of Yu Yingshi, volume 2: Chinese thought traditions and their contemporary transformation*) (Guilin, 2004), pp. 157–84, at p. 164.

I offer an alternative reading that interprets the allusion to widely circulating ideals of civilization as a device for examining their contingency. Although Chen's account suffers its own biases, it attempts to account for an alternative mode of human sociality that does not unfold according to the markers of Chinese civilization.

II

As a member of a rising literati family, Chen was lettered in classic texts, but his early education was nevertheless distinctive. He expressed independence at an early age; at eight years old, he told his father he refused to read the commentaries on the *Classic of documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書) so as to avoid developing a prejudice about its content. Evidence suggests that his early learning focused more on histories and poetry than on the metaphysical discourse about human nature and morality that dominated literati discussion at the time.⁴¹ Chen never passed the imperial exams, but his unusual childhood interests in swordplay and martial arts encouraged a career in the military, where he seems to have possessed an unusual knack for practical technology, devising a wheelbarrow-type sledge for use in battle.⁴² His eventual deployment to the Ming frontiers inaugurated a lifetime of travel, in which he enjoyed extensive opportunities to both observe and engage with 'barbarians' and other foreigners.⁴³ After retirement and the death of his wife, his travel was nearly incessant, rivalled only by the legendary Ming travel writers Yang Shen 楊慎 (1488–1559) and Xu Xiake 徐霞客 (1587–1641).⁴⁴ His early travels may have been encouraged by his association with the three-teachings sect founded by Lin Zhao'en (1517–98), during which time Chen was known to dress in Daoist garb.⁴⁵ Even in later years, he was known to 'discuss the Dao' with monks at temples dedicated to Quanzhen Daoism.⁴⁶ Particularly toward the end of his life, he based himself at the Nanjing home of Jiao Hong 焦竑 (1540–1620), the famous historian, Hanlin academician, and member of the Taizhou school with whom Chen frequently collaborated.⁴⁷ From discussions with Jiao, Chen produced some of his best-known work, on the historical context and pronunciation of ancient language.

These influences and experiences, taken into account alongside the careful and specific detail of the *Record*, suggest that more is at stake in Chen's work

⁴¹ Chou, 'Chen Di *Dongfan jī*', p. 23.

⁴² Mao, 'Chen Di *jiqi zhuzuo*', p. 21.

⁴³ Chou, 'Chen Di *Dongfan jī*', pp. 24–5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26; Zhu, 'Zuixian du Tai zhi xuezhe', p. 23.

⁴⁵ Zhaoying Fang, 'Ch'en Ti [Chen Di]', in L. Carrington Goodrich and Zhaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming biography, 1368–1644* (2 vols., New York, 1976), 1, p. 182.

⁴⁶ Jin, *Chen Di nianpu*, p. 118.

⁴⁷ Fang, 'Ch'en Ti', p. 182.

than an anxiety over the moral decline of his society. We might grasp the more complex picture Chen offers by noting that, as the summary above of his *Record* makes clear, it is simply not the case (as Teng claims) that he 'described Taiwan as small and the villages isolated' or that he followed the *Laozi* so closely as to pretend that the indigenes never contacted each other or 'formed ranks' for fighting. In fact, as we have seen, Chen noted frequent inter-village headhunting and observed that the heads of enemies were displayed over doors.⁴⁸ He remarkably refrains from citing such practices as evidence of barbarity, with which headhunting had been associated by Han Chinese elites since ancient times.⁴⁹ When he mentions that the Formosan aborigines have no contact with other barbarians, it is in the context of his observation that the aborigines appear unable to use sea-going vessels and confine their fishing to streams: thus they have no transoceanic contact with so-called barbarians farther afield.⁵⁰ Indeed, when Chen calls the islanders the 'people of Wuhuai and Getian', he does not necessarily point to 'a primordial era of peace and natural simplicity', as Teng assumes.⁵¹ The most well-known use of this phrase was in a playful, autobiographical sketch by Tao Yuanming, who includes an appraisal of himself as 'a person of [the time of] Wuhuai and Getian' for 'delighting himself by drinking wine and writing poetry' despite his impoverished circumstances.⁵² The phrase does not affirm primordial virtue so much as allude to a sense of contentment despite the lack of amenities conventionally seen as necessary.

The details of Chen's account do not, therefore, straightforwardly evoke the primitive society celebrated by the *Laozi*. In fact, many of what Teng identifies as 'primitivist tropes' deriving from the *Laozi*—such as the aborigines' 'full bellies' and body tattoos—tally with factual descriptions of indigenous practice, corroborated by later Dutch accounts and modern anthropological comparisons with other Austronesian societies.⁵³ For example, deer-hunting provided Formosan islanders with a reliable source of high-quality protein, accounting for their robust size and height in comparison to contemporary Dutch and

⁴⁸ Chen, *Dongfan ji*, p. 25.

⁴⁹ Milburn quotes the *Suishu* 隋書 (*Sui history*) in ascribing headhunting practices to the barbarian people of the Ryukyu islands. Olivia Milburn, 'Headhunting in ancient China: the history of violence and denial of knowledge', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 81 (2018), pp. 103–20, at p. 115.

⁵⁰ Chen, *Dongfan ji*, p. 26.

⁵¹ Teng, *Taiwan's imagined geography*, p. 64.

⁵² Tao Qian 陶潛 (Tao Yuanming), 'Wuliu xiansheng zhuan' 五柳先生傳 ('Biography of the master of five willows'), in Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈, ed., *Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu* 陶淵明集箋注 (*Notes and commentary on the collected works of Tao Yuanming*) (Beijing, 2015), p. 502; Wendy Swartz, 'Self-narration: Tao Yuanming's "Biography of the master of five willows"' and Yuan Can's "Biography of the master of wonderful virtue"', in Wendy Swartz, Robert Ford Company, Yang Lu, and Jesse J. C. Choo, eds., *Early medieval China: a sourcebook* (New York, NY, 2014), pp. 382–7, at p. 386.

⁵³ Teng, *Taiwan's imagined geography*, p. 66.

Chinese.⁵⁴ And, like many other Austronesian peoples, the inhabitants of the south-west coast also tattooed their bodies.⁵⁵

Given such divergences from typical ‘primitivist’ accounts, it is perhaps not surprising that Chen’s connections to the *Laozi* text are neither as deep nor as pervasive as Teng makes them out. Chen’s biography, in fact, indicates a much stronger affinity to the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 – another classical Daoist text that records the playful and ironic disputations of settled truths, advanced primarily by the eponymous master Zhuang (late fourth century BCE). These discussions were often focused on questioning the nature of identity, including conventional boundaries between self and other, and the nature of political authority. One passage from the well-known chapter ‘On equalizing things’ (*Qiwu lun* 齊物論) represents this general spirit, when it observes,

Things are so by being called so. Whence thus and so? From thus and so being affirmed of them. Whence not thus and so? From thus and so being negated of them. Each thing necessarily has some place from which it can be affirmed as thus and so, and some place from which it can be affirmed as acceptable.⁵⁶

The *Zhuangzi* and its logistical disputations would have been widely known in the eclectic intellectual environment of the late Ming, as intellectuals openly embraced and sometimes synthesized a range of views from different textual and religious traditions, including Buddhism and Daoism.⁵⁷ But there is evidence that Chen would have been unusually conversant with the *Zhuangzi* text in particular. He often likened himself to Zhuangzi – who, in a famous passage from the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, mourns his wife by beating a drum – in poems written after the untimely death of his son.⁵⁸ Certain passages in the *Record* itself also reflect Chen’s deep conversance with phrasing from this text. In the key passage of the *Record* cited above, when he muses about whether a great man is truly necessary for the indigenes to have a full and happy life, his language mimics that of *Zhuangzi* 2.20: ‘travelling about with full bellies, drifting like an untethered boat’.

This familiarity may have been encouraged and deepened by Chen’s close friend and reading partner Jiao Hong, who edited (among many other texts) the *Zhuangzi yi* 莊子翼 (*Wings of the Zhuangzi*), a commentarial text on the *Zhuangzi* collated in the authoritative *Xu Daozang* 續道藏 (*Supplement to the*

⁵⁴ John Robert Shepherd, *Marriage and mandatory abortion among the 17th-century Siraya* (Arlington, VA, 1995), p. 14. Shepherd quotes a seventeenth-century Dutch source as noting that the Siraya stood a full ‘head and neck’ above the average Dutchman.

⁵⁵ Peter Bellwood, *Prehistory of the Indo-Malaysian archipelago* (Canberra, 2007), p. 151.

⁵⁶ *Zhuangzi*, 2.20, following the translation in *Zhuangzi: the essential writings, with selections from traditional commentaries*, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Cambridge, 2009), p. 13.

⁵⁷ Edward T. Ch’ien, *Chiao Hung and the restructuring of Neo-Confucianism in the late Ming* (New York, NY, 1986), p. 14.

⁵⁸ Jin, *Chen Di nianpu*, pp. 66–7.

Daoist canon).⁵⁹ Although Chen did not always agree with his friend on intellectual matters, the two men shared an interest in eclectic learning and the critical validation of historical texts. Jiao frequently lent Chen rare books and they discussed them together over a period of many years.⁶⁰ Given the intimacy and duration of this intellectual relationship, it is very likely that Chen was deeply acquainted with both the *Zhuangzi* text and his friend's commentarial engagement with it.

Such influences align Chen with a different set of Daoist techniques: those which set forth conventional boundaries between self and other, and by extension tropes of civilization and enlightenment, as a means of exposing their arbitrary value and contingency. A clear statement of Chen's perspective can be found in an overlooked text that he produced alongside the *Record of Formosa*, titled 'Guests ask questions of a sailor', in which he provides answers to questions about Shen Yourong's expedition and his own role within it. Chen begins this text by noting that, upon mooring in Liaoluo (a port on the southern crescent of Kinmen Island, near the southern coast of China, from which Shen's ships originally launched), people there repeatedly queried Shen's preparations, including the decision to pro-actively root out pirates lodging on Formosa, which was technically 'not our [i.e. Ming dynastic] territory'.⁶¹ After Chen has answered each of these questions in turn, which included providing technical and strategic information about how General Shen achieved such a decisive victory, the guests ask Chen if the general would be willing to undertake further military campaigns to help the greater good. Chen's response is as revealing as it is disruptive: 'People do not acquire knowledge easily, nor are other people easy to understand. I have heard and seen so little, how is this enough to know [other people]?'⁶²

When the guests go on to ask Chen who he is, expecting him to offer information about his name and status, he instead elaborates further on why his own knowledge is so circumscribed, saying that the guests

rose again and asked: 'Who are you?' I replied: 'I have long forgotten myself, and I myself do not know who I am. I once hid among the Xuanyuan mountains, so people who saw me called me the 'Sojourning guest (*jike* 寄客, lit. "dependent guest") of Xuanyuan.' And you are a guest (*ke* 客) to me; I am a guest to the Xuanyuan mountain; the Xuanyuan mountain is a guest to heaven and earth; heaven and earth is a guest to the great emptiness. All are dependent (*ji* 寄), all are guests. What use is there to ask who is who?' The guests then drew back and retreated.⁶³

⁵⁹ Pierre-Henry de Bruyn, 'Daoism in the Ming', in Livia Kohn, ed., *Daoism handbook* (Leiden, 2000), pp. 594–622, at pp. 604–5.

⁶⁰ Jin, *Chen Di nianpu*, pp. 147–8.

⁶¹ Chen Di, 'Zhoushi kewen' ('Guests ask questions of a sailor'), in Shen Yourong, ed., *Minhai zengyan*, pp. 28–32, at p. 29.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

In this deeply revealing passage, Chen plays on his own self-identification as a ‘sojourning’ or ‘dependent’ guest of the Xuanyuan mountain – the birthplace of Xuanyuan, another name for the mythical Yellow Emperor – to claim all knowledge of otherness as mutually dependent, or more literally as constantly ‘sojourning’ or in motion. He also plays on the multivalence and grammatical fluidity of the word *ke*, which means ‘guest’ or (in its verbal form) ‘to live/settle in a strange place’. By referring to his interlocutors as *ke*, here an honorific meant to express respect to one’s counterpart, he situates them too amid his rumination about the nature of otherness and how we come to know what is different. Just as these interlocutors are ‘guests’ to him – both ‘strange and estranging’⁶⁴ – so too does such a relationship obtain between the basic components of the universe, each of which is dependent on other components for identity and meaning. This ontology has its roots in the *Zhuangzi*, where ‘attending on’ a guest and ‘depending on’ (*dai* 待) other objects and persons for the existence of a specific identity is explored at length, through reference to images such as shadows and penumbras.⁶⁵ For Chen, as for Zhuangzi, otherness lies at the heart of knowledge.

Rather than offering firm information, then, Chen denies the very possibility of fixed, non-relative knowledge, even about one’s own self – true to his claims elsewhere that travel demands a forsaking of ‘selfhood’ (*wo* 我).⁶⁶ Moreover, his self-appellation as the ‘sojourner’ of the Xuanyuan mountain highlights the process of estrangement and self-reflection provoked by travel through distant territories. Although travel to foreign lands can entrench prejudices as much as unsettle them, in Chen’s case these unusual experiences seemed to have extended his already distinctive scholarly trajectory in new, deeply self-reflective ways.⁶⁷ Indeed, his journeys, both real and figurative, allude to a long-standing Daoist practice of ‘distant travel’ (*yuanyou* 遠遊), which mimics the ‘free and easy wandering’ of Zhuangzi himself.⁶⁸

These Daoist influences on Chen’s thought, then, do not so much provide a narrative of a simpler past as support an alternative metaphysical framework that rejects the prescriptive certainties of social convention in favour of a more fluid account of identity and meaning. Chen’s self-identification with

⁶⁴ Roxanne L. Euben, *Journeys to the other shore: Muslim and Western travelers in search of knowledge* (Princeton, NJ, 2006), p. 18.

⁶⁵ See especially Zhuangzi, ch. 2, paras. 47–8, and Ziporyn’s exegesis of *dai* (‘depend on’), in *Zhuangzi*, pp. 213–14.

⁶⁶ Chen records this advice to ‘not establish the self’ (*bu li wo* 不立我) in his conversation with some local gentry as he passed through Shaanxi in his travel journal *Wuyue youcao* 五嶽遊草 (*Travel notes of the Five Mountains*) (1612), cited in Jin, *Chen Di nianpu*, p. 115.

⁶⁷ As Euben notes, ‘some kinds of mobility cauterize critical reflection ... [and] direct exposure to what is culturally unfamiliar is just as likely to engender alienation or antagonism as openness’. Euben, *Journeys to the other shore*, p. 18.

⁶⁸ Livia Kohn, *Early Chinese mysticism philosophy and soteriology in the Taoist tradition* (Princeton, NJ, 1992), p. 95. Fittingly, Chen spent the years before his death at the age of seventy-seven travelling, alone, to the five Daoist mountains. Chou, ‘Chen Di *Dongfan ji*’, p. 27.

Xuanyuan in the context of the expedition to Formosa does, moreover, suggest an alternative set of tropes about travel and foreignness that destabilize knowledge about otherness, rather than shore it up in the imperial service of a civilizational centre.⁶⁹

In the *Record*, one of the most significant examples of this perspective lies in Chen's vivid description of indigenous cuisine. Significantly, this passage has been left out of the many appropriations of the text by later Chinese authors, and wholly overlooked by modern-day commentators who align Chen with Chinese colonial discourse:

[The inhabitants] are customarily very fond of deer. They lay open the intestines, and the newly swallowed grass – both that which is about to be turned to faeces as well as that which is not yet turned to faeces – they call 'hundred grasses paste', a delicacy they cannot get enough of. When Chinese (*Hua ren* 華人) see it they immediately vomit. [The inhabitants] eat pig but do not eat chicken. They allow their domesticated chickens to grow to maturity, but they just pluck their tail [feathers] to adorn their flags. They shoot pheasants but this is also just to pluck their tail [feathers]. When they see Chinese eating chicken or pheasant, they immediately vomit. So who knows what the correct taste is? And how can there be similarities in what people have a liking for?⁷⁰

This passage is strongly redolent of Zhuangzi's reflection upon the instability of civilizational conventions. It also recalls that of Chen's near-contemporary Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), who used reports about the eating habits of New World peoples as a mirror for criticizing European barbarity.⁷¹ In his famous essay 'Of cannibals', Montaigne argues that his European readers have much to learn from these flesh-eaters, whose simple living and apparent lack of government reveal their proximity to an 'original naturalness' and a 'purity' akin to the Platonic golden age.⁷² Montaigne's text both drew on and perpetuated the myth of the 'noble savage' in sixteenth-century Europe, which used a fanciful representation of Amerindians to demonstrate that human life could be free from the artifice of social practices and institutions that distorted contemporary society, perpetuated inequality, and naturalized political power.⁷³

⁶⁹ 'Xuanyuan' may also be a clever allusion to another aspect of Chen's biography. The name refers to an ancient kind of high-fronted carriage (*xuan*) and the shafts for wheels (*luan*). It alludes to Huang Di's reputation as an inventor of useful objects, including the wood cart and a magnetic compass for mounting on it: see Lihui Yang, Deming An, and Jessica Anderson Turner, *Handbook of Chinese mythology* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 142–3. As noted above, Chen himself is known to have invented a kind of cart or wheelbarrow to furnish supplies in battle: Mao, 'Chen Di jiqi zhuzuo', p. 21.

⁷⁰ Chen, *Dongfan ji*, p. 26.

⁷¹ Michel de Montaigne, 'Of cannibals', in *The complete works of Montaigne: essays, travel journal, letters*, trans. Donald Murdoch Frame (Stanford, CA, 1958), pp. 150–9, at p. 156.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 'Of cannibals', p. 153.

⁷³ Muthu, *Enlightenment against empire*, pp. 14–17. More can be said about how Chen compares to his European contemporaries in their responses to the indigenous peoples of the New World, which I hope to explore further in other work.

Notably, however, the ethnographic detail of Chen's *Record* identifies his indigenous hosts with enough specificity and first-hand observation that they cannot serve – as they do for Montaigne – as second-hand exemplars of untrammelled purity, against which his own society can be compared. Rather more like Zhuangzi, Chen's utter refusal to claim knowledge about other people, his own identity, or even the 'correct taste' instead points to a deeper critique about the stability and necessity of social convention. Taken alongside his proclamation of the sufficiency of indigenous society, despite its lack of a founder to teach them technologies such as writing, his self-reflexive assessment of indigenous cuisine deliberately interrogates well-established Chinese narratives about the founding of civilization.

III

Although food and tastes may not seem politically relevant as markers of difference, orthodox Confucianism did hold that there existed particular flavours that would appeal to suitably cultivated individuals. Indeed, a well-known passage in the ancient *Book of rites* (*Liji* 禮記) – a key reference text for late imperial Chinese representations of otherness – indexes barbarity in large part by culinary preference, specifically with respect to the eating of raw food and refusal of grains.⁷⁴ The idea that people could exhibit objectively correct preferences for such things as tastes infuses later colonial writing on Taiwan, whose authors for the most part assumed that developing a preference for Chinese cuisine and other cultural practices was a necessary rather than contingent feature of the human condition.⁷⁵ But these ideas were widespread, rooted in early classical sources such as the *Analects* of Confucius (c. 551–479 BCE) and the eponymous text by Mencius (fourth century BCE).

Both of these early masters justify this unity of desires and tastes by reference to a story about the founding of civilization: by relishing certain tastes, we demonstrate our virtue by aligning our intentions with those of the sages who endowed us with civilization. In the following passage, for example, Mencius explicitly identifies a divergence of tastes with animals. Only humans, by nature of their common humanity, relish exactly the same things:

If the response of our mouths to flavor differed by nature from those of other people in the way that they do from other kinds, such as dogs and horses, how could it be that everyone in the world follows the recipes of Yi Ya? When it comes to flavor, everyone in the world wishes to cook like Yi Ya because we all have similar tastes. And so it is too with our ears. When it comes to music, everyone in the world wishes to be like Music Master Kuang because we all have similar hearing. And so it is too with our eyes. All the world knows that Zidu is supremely handsome; anyone who doesn't is

⁷⁴ Magnus Fiskesjö, 'On the "raw" and the "cooked" barbarians of imperial China', *Inner Asia*, 1 (1999), pp. 139–68, at p. 141. *Liji*, 'Wang zhi', ch. 36.

⁷⁵ E.g. Lin Qianguang 林謙光, *Taiwan jilüe* 台灣紀略 (*Brief notes on Taiwan*) (Taipei, 1961).

blind.

So I say, our mouths all share similar tastes when it comes to flavor, our ears all share similar pleasures in listening when it comes to sound, our eyes all share similar standards of beauty when it comes to looks. How could it be that our hearts alone are different? What quality do we share in our hearts? It is the sense of what is proper and right. The sage is merely the one who was first to grasp what our hearts all took pleasure in. And in this way, what is proper and right pleases my heart in just the way that meats please my mouth. (Mencius 6A.7)⁷⁶

For Mencius, the savouring of flavours and pleasures that the sage was 'first to grasp' signals how successfully one's desires have been appropriately channelled into the path laid out by the early masters. It is their teaching which amplifies the quality of our hearts – the virtue with which we regulate our behaviour – by telling us what actions, as much as what tastes, are 'proper and right'. Mencius is explicit about the fact that these norms are tied to a story of sagely founding, which functions at the same time as a narrative of the founding of civilization:

It was Hou Ji who taught the people the art of agriculture and how to plant the five types of grain. As the grains ripened, people could nurture their young. There is a Way that common people (*ren* 人) follow: if they have food enough to eat and clothes enough to wear, they sit in idleness and pursue no learning, little different from birds and beasts. [The sage king] Yao brooded over this as well, and he appointed Xie to be Minister of the People and teach them about proper human relationships – about affection between father and son, righteousness between ruler and minister, the proper divisions between husband and wife, the precedence of elder and younger, and the faithfulness of friends. Yao said, 'Comfort their labor, draw them to come, straighten them upright, assist them with aid, make each gain the place proper to him, and then inspire them further through acts of virtue.' (Mencius 3A.4)⁷⁷

This origin story – repeated throughout Chinese history by various schools and thinkers with little substantive variation – portrays humans as helpless, benighted beings little better than animals before sagely intervention. One of the most well-known retellings, by Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), a Tang dynasty progenitor of the Confucian revival, follows Mencius to explicitly link culinary preferences with the 'teaching of the former kings', that is, sages. Sagely teaching, he argued, was constituted not only by the particular kinds of Confucian social relationships that valued patriarchy and deference, but also by what one ate, wore, and inhabited: 'Its dress is hemp and silk; its dwellings are houses; its foods are rice and grains, fruits and vegetables, fish and meat.' Han Yu was explicit that these preferences were in distinct contrast to the divergent lifestyles of non-Chinese peoples.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Translated in *Mencius: a teaching translation*, trans. Robert Eno, 2016, <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/23421>, p. 110.

⁷⁷ Following Eno's translation in *ibid.*, p. 60.

⁷⁸ Han Yu, 'Essentials of the moral way', in William Theodore De Bary and Richard John Lufano, eds., *Sources of Chinese tradition*, vol. 1 (New York, NY, 1999), pp. 569–73, at p. 572.

Even mid- to late Ming radical followers of Yangming learning reiterated this narrative about civilization, despite their resistance to the orthodoxy it often supported. In their case, ancient scripts and palaeography were means by which they believed they could grasp the original, more natural teaching of the early sages.⁷⁹ The preface to one of the most successful palaeographic dictionaries at the time directly explains the connection between sagely founding, writing, and the simplicity of virtue:

When light and dark [Heaven and Earth] were first separated, the people did not have any knowledge of learning. Then notches began to be cut into wood. So Pao Xi [Fu Xi] drew the trigrams and the Imperial Historian [Cang Jie] set up the system of writing. It was entirely through writing that they instructed the people; they were simply the first to do so. Epigraphic remains contain traces of the thoughts of the sages and worthies of the Three Dynasties, and if you take sincere delight in them, in spirit and demeanor, it will be as if you could see them in person. You can come to a nonverbal understanding of the atmosphere of flourishing virtue [of their time].⁸⁰

The author of this preface defends the interest in paleography as a means of getting closer to what sages actually meant in both word and deed. In this account, transcription is important because knowledge began only when the imperial historian set up the system of writing, and familiarizing oneself with these ‘epigraphic remains’ is a direct means of obtaining the sages’ wisdom.

These origin stories, told from different perspectives at different points in time, converge in their emphasis on the importance of sagely intervention in founding civilization, through the endowment to humanity of key technologies such as agriculture and writing. Chen Di, along with Jiao Hong and Yang Shen, numbered among the many literati in the Jiajing and Wanli periods of the late Ming who contributed to scholarship on paleography and early scripts.⁸¹ He was thus no doubt aware of the way in which writing, along with tastes and cuisine, functioned for many Chinese literati as a vital link between persons in the present and the sagely virtues of the past.

Against this background, Chen’s questioning of the need for a ‘great man’ to teach the Formosans writing, as well as his self-reflective rumination on the indigenous taste for deer faeces, appears startling. But a closer look at the premises of Chen’s philological research suggest a strong commitment to the idea that differences across time and space arise from contingency: that is, something that occurs as a happenstance rather than as a result of a universal need or feature of human society. Before the relatively recent scholarly interest in

⁷⁹ Bruce Rusk, ‘Old scripts, new actors: European encounters with Chinese writing, 1500–1700’, *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*, 26 (2007), pp. 68–116, at p. 83; Handler-Spitz, *Symptoms of an unruly age*, ch. 1.

⁸⁰ Preface by Feng Fang 豐坊, to Zhu Yun 朱雲, *Jinshi yunfu* 金石韻府 (*Rhyming epigraphic dictionary*), pp. 3a–4a; cited and translated in Rusk, ‘Old scripts’, p. 93.

⁸¹ Rusk, ‘Old scripts’, p. 92.

Chen as a chronicler of indigenous society on Taiwan, he was mainly studied for his contributions toward an intellectual agenda whose coalescence in the Qing dynasty would come to be known as 'evidential learning' (*kaozheng* 考證). Evidential learning urged strict historical contextualization of classic texts, including factual verification of historical events, philological analyses, and rationalized methodologies for understanding the past.⁸² In 1606, shortly after his return from Taiwan, Chen published *Investigation of the ancient rhymes of the Mao odes* (*Mao shi guyin kao* 毛詩古音考), a rigorous philological analysis of the ancient pronunciation of rhyming words in the *Classic of poetry*.⁸³ This comprehensive and groundbreaking study was foundational for later Qing scholarship undertaken by such major figures as Gu Yanwu and Dai Zhen, who like Chen used rhyming patterns as a way of reconstructing, and thus determining the authenticity of, ancient texts.⁸⁴

Unlike his contemporaries, who believed that the jarring near-rhymes in these ancient texts were ad hoc, Chen's research was built on the pioneering belief—developed in his conversations with Jiao Hong—that the language spoken by the ancients, and used as the basis of the rhymes in the *Odes* and other works, was different from that spoken in the present.⁸⁵ He explicitly ties this commitment to historical difference with a broader sense of contingency in a clear statement from the *Investigation*: 'Time has past and present; earth has north and south; written characters have transformations and reversals; sounds have changes and shifts—this is inevitably how things go.'⁸⁶ To Chen, change was inevitable and produced dynamic transformations across time, which in turn resulted in irreducible difference between past and present.

Chen's delinking of past language from the reality of the present thus skewers the hope, held by many late Ming palaeographers and thinkers, that the chasm between the early sages and intervening disarray could be bridged with the clearer, more directly referential forms of ancient language.⁸⁷ To the contrary, his ideas about the difference of the past introduces into philological scholarship the quite radical view that the past could be properly understood only by situating it within its particular historical and philological context. Chen's approach, as Benjamin Elman has noted, ultimately had the effect of destabilizing the very philosophical doctrines motivating a turn to the past in the first

⁸² For the difficulties involved in defining *kaozheng*, variously seen as both a 'method' and 'field' of scholarly inquiry, see Michael Quirin, 'Scholarship, value, method, and hermeneutics in *kaozheng*: some reflections on Cui Shu (1740–1816) and the Confucian classics', *History and Theory*, 35 (1996), pp. 34–53, at p. 36, n. 9.

⁸³ Arthur Hummel, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing period* (Washington, DC, 1943), p. 423.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 424; Benjamin A. Elman, *From philosophy to philology: intellectual and social aspects of change in late imperial China* (Los Angeles, CA, 2001), pp. 254–5.

⁸⁵ William Baxter, *A handbook of old Chinese phonology* (Berlin, 1992), pp. 154–5; Ch'ien, *Chiao Hung*, p. 60.

⁸⁶ Baxter, *Handbook of old Chinese phonology*, p. 154. The quote is my translation of 蓋時有古今，地有南北；字有更革，音有轉移，亦勢所必至。

⁸⁷ Rusk, 'Old scripts', p. 88; Handler-Spitz, *Symptoms of an unruly age*, pp. 32–3.

place.⁸⁸ The universal values that followers of Wang Yangming believed inhered in these ancient texts were revealed, on the basis of these kinds of historical investigation, to be relative to a specific time and place.⁸⁹ Chen's approach to historical research thus tallies with his seemingly contradictory ambitions in the *Record*: to both carefully record the 'people and matters' that he 'personally witnessed' on the island, and to interrogate (rather than assume) the grounds of social convention and identity.⁹⁰ The very particularity and specificity of his account is part of what brings him to ask broader questions about the needs and requirements of civilization.

Here, his work might be instructively compared to another, slightly later account of the indigenous people of Taiwan, Yu Yonghe's 郁永河 (b. c. 1650) 1698 travel narrative *Small Sea travelogue* (*Pihai jiyou* 裨海紀遊). Whereas Chen uses his island encounter to wonder whether anyone possesses true knowledge of proper social convention, Yu defends the humanity of the Formosan islanders on the basis of their capacity to accept the teaching of China's sages as founders of civilization.

IV

Yu's *Travelogue* was published soon after the Ming dynasty's successor, the Qing, acquired Taiwan as a territory. Yu travelled to Taiwan in 1697 and stayed for ten months, to assist Qing officials in locating and mining new sources of sulphur in the northern part of the island.⁹¹ Whereas Chen Di's observations were confined to the south-west coastal plains between the modern-day cities of Tainan and Kaohsiung, Yu offers one of the earliest first-hand Chinese accounts of the indigenous customs in the mountainous hinterland and northern coast. Like Chen, Yu was both a literatus and a traveller with great sympathies for how the indigenous peoples of the island were treated in their relations with China. His *Travelogue* offers a comparable ethnographic account to Chen's, equally grounded in moral concern yet built on distinct ontological premises that entail very different conclusions about the treatment of native populations. Yet, whereas Chen was one of the first Han Chinese elites to arrive on Taiwan's shores, Yu was writing for a Qing administration anxious about taking on the troublesome and rebellion-ridden island. In this context, Yu argues for a reconsideration of the status of the oppressed local population:

The worst off people in the world are not as bad off as the [Taiwan] savages (*fanren* 番人). Because they are different they are discriminated against. When people see them without clothes, they say, 'They don't get cold.' When they see

⁸⁸ Elman, *From philosophy to philology*, p. 61.

⁸⁹ Yu, 'Cong Song Ming ruxue de fazhan', p. 170.

⁹⁰ Chen, *Dongfan ji*, p. 27.

⁹¹ Teng, *Taiwan's imagined geography*, p. 261; Yonghe Yu, *Small Sea travel diaries: Yu Yonghe's records of Taiwan*, trans. Macabe Kelihier (Taipei, 2004), p. xiii.

them walk in the rain and sleep in the dew, they say, 'They don't get sick.' When they see them carry burdens over great distances, they say, 'They can work without rest.'

Alas! They are also people! They have limbs and bodies and flesh and bone; in what way are they not human? How can one say such things of them?⁹²

Yu makes clear that treatment of the indigenes – and by extension the best course of action for the Qing administration to undertake in controlling them – necessarily turns on how their humanity is perceived. This passionate plea for equal treatment is based on a loaded assumption about their natures (*xing*): 'There are different people, but their nature is all the same. The benevolent know this and do not need to repeat it.'⁹³ For Yu, this shared nature entails the possession even by these 'savages' (*fanren*) of certain shared human capacities. However, insofar as they are unschooled by the Chinese teachings of civilization, their natures are malformed and thus not conducive to human flourishing or true happiness:

If they [the savages] can be transformed (*hua* 化) by culture and rites, be acculturated (*feng* 風) to the *Book of Poetry* and the *Book of Documents*, be taught the truths of planning and preparation, and be governed by the rules of wearing proper clothes, eating, marriage and burial, then perhaps they will know to love their relatives, respect their elders, and honour the sovereigns. Then they will be instilled with the heart that gives rise to happiness in life, and their evil and despicable natures will disappear. At most it will take one hundred years, at the least thirty years to see their customs (*feng su* 風俗) change. By guiding them with the teaching of ritual, how will they be any different from the people of China?⁹⁴

Crucially, Yu's argument is that these people should be helped, *not* because they are fundamentally immoral, but because they have failed to implement social and cultural practices – such as respecting their elders, and observing Chinese burial custom – that ensure the greatest expression of their human natures. (We may recall that Chen, in contrast, notes the burial ritual of the Formosans in some detail but at no time comments upon its strangeness, unsuitability, or normative danger.) Yu insists that, by using the fixtures of Chinese civilization to guide and shape their practices, the inhabitants of this foreign land can within a hundred years turn out to be no different from 'the people of the central states' (that is, the Chinese).

By linking the development of *xing* (nature) to the specific institutions of Chinese civilization, including what to eat and wear, Yu recalls a long line of origins stories which drew guidance from the meaning of civilization in the deeds of the past, specifically the sagely teaching at the root of a singular social order exclusively capable of developing *xing* and thus making people

⁹² Translated in Yu, *Small Sea travel diaries*, p. 119.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Yu Yonghe, *Pihai jiyou* 裨海紀遊 (*Small Sea travelogue*), ed. Taiwan yinhang jingji yanjiu shi (Taipei, 1959), pp. 36–7; my translation here is heavily modified from Keliher's (Yu, *Small Sea travel diaries*, pp. 115–16).

truly human. In her analysis of the *Travelogue*, Emma Teng interprets Yu's comments as urging readers to have sympathy for the aborigines, likening them to the primitive 'ancient peoples' (*taigu min* 太古民), who also lived simply in a past golden age, but who eventually became capable of civilization.⁹⁵ His rhetoric, she argues, associated them with Sinicized southern Chinese frontier tribes, thereby 'naturalizing' their inclusion into the Chinese empire by linking them to China's long history of southward expansion.⁹⁶ Yu therefore normalized the conversion and suppression of native customs, out of a Mencian belief that a shared human nature enabled everyone to become sages by passing through a universal chronology of moral development.

V

For both Yu Yonghe and Chen Di, the Formosan inhabitants are described by way of a temporal as well as spatial difference: the Formosans are different not only because they occupy a different cultural space outside China proper, but also because they appear to occupy a different point in time from that of contemporary Han Chinese civilization. For Yu, the indigenous populations inhabit the same historical space as the Chinese, even if they are definitively *behind* them. They require the expenditure of both effort and time before they can catch up to the seemingly inevitable goal of Chinese-style civilization, and (presumably) become the happy, flourishing people their inborn nature destines them to be.

For Chen, however, the picture is more complicated. He declares himself the 'unofficial historian' of the island and its people, but his presentation of their history is not self-evidently linked to a search for origins; in fact, the first line of the *Record* clearly states that he does not know the origins of the Formosan islanders.⁹⁷ By asking 'what need have they for a great man' to establish civilizational technologies such as writing, he recognizes that 'history' is not necessarily equivalent to a story about sagely founding, nor does it simply track an established path to civilization. Whereas Yu Yonghe expresses frustration at the Formosans' lack of a calendar or even awareness of how old they are, Chen simply reports: 'They have no calendar and no writing. They figure the full moon as one month, and take ten months as one year. After a time they forget, and therefore cannot reckon their ages. Asking young or old, they do not know.'⁹⁸ This does not mean that Chen believes that the inhabitants are totally lacking in any sense of time. He is careful to note their seasonal observances, including their practice of maintaining silence during the tilling season until the crops ripen. During this time, younger members of the

⁹⁵ Teng, *Taiwan's imagined geography*, p. 75.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 75–6, 79.

⁹⁷ Chen, *Dongfan ji*, p. 24.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

village will 'stand with their back turned' when an elder walks by, but in general the Formosans tend not to dwell on the specifics of age.⁹⁹ They will not engage in killing or violence during this season, even if insulted; and when the weather is warm, they go about with no clothes.¹⁰⁰ Chen provides an explanation from the inhabitants themselves for these observances: 'they say that otherwise, the sky will not protect, the divinities will not bless, there will be fierce famine, and no harvest for the year'.¹⁰¹

Despite these regimented seasonal practices, however, the islanders do not exhibit the granular, genealogically defined sense of time that regulated more familiar Chinese social roles and rituals, and gave shape to official dynastic modes of writing history. What might it mean, then, for Chen to identify as an 'unofficial historian' of Formosa? Consider another comparison to an earlier travel narrative, the *Diancheng ji* 滇程記 (*Record of a trip to Yunnan*), written by Yang Shen.¹⁰² Like Chen Di, Yang was a famed traveller and poet of the Ming dynasty, active about a century earlier. He is well known for the essays written while in exile in Yunnan, on the dynasty's far southern borders. The *Record of a trip to Yunnan* is one such work, which offers a geographic account of his rushed journey from the court at Beijing to his place of banishment. Much like the *Record of Formosa*, Yang's work also features relatively nuanced portrayals of non-Han peoples that draw on local reportage and first-hand observation. In fact, the longest description of any figure in the *Record of a trip to Yunnan* is a discussion of the founder of a non-Han kingdom, the Dali, named Duan Siping.¹⁰³ These similarities are perhaps not surprising, as Chen and Yang exhibit a striking convergence of scholarly commitment. Both were exemplars of late Ming scholarship that embraced eclecticism and contributed to historical readings of classic texts grounded in Han dynasty commentaries; both showed an interest in unorthodox religion and myth (Chen in Daoism, Yang in Buddhism).¹⁰⁴ Both entered their domains of reportage as soldiers: Chen in the entourage of General Shen, and Yang – demoted from high-ranking official to 'common soldier' – journeying to Yunnan via routes 'related to military expeditions aimed at pacifying and stabilizing border regions'.¹⁰⁵ Like Chen, Yang ends his *Record of a trip to Yunnan* with a change of voice, moving from a description

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 25–6.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰² Yang Shen, 'Diancheng ji' ('Record of a trip to Yunnan'), in *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu*, 127 (Jinan, 1997), pp. 669–81.

¹⁰³ Ihor Pidhainy, 'A mid-Ming account of the road into exile', *Ming Studies* (2008), pp. 8–42, at pp. 22–3.

¹⁰⁴ Adam Schorr, 'Connoisseurship and the defense against vulgarity: Yang Shen (1488–1559) and his work', *Monumenta Serica*, 41 (1993), pp. 89–128, at p. 89.

¹⁰⁵ Pidhainy, 'Mid-Ming account of the road into exile', p. 14; L. Carrington Goodrich and Zhaoying Fang, 'Yang Shen', in Goodrich and Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming biography*, 1368–1644, II, p. 1531.

of things seen and heard to more personal commentary undertaken in the guise of an unofficial historian.¹⁰⁶

On the basis of the fact that Yang's account of Duan and his kingdom is 'not culled from Chinese sources', and offers 'an alternative history not present in the traditional historiography', Ihor Pidhainy has argued that Yang speaks 'to the notion that more than one tradition of history is both possible and valuable'.¹⁰⁷ We might read this productive suggestion back into Chen's own claims to be writing in this genre. The 'unofficial' (*ye* 野) part of his narrative lies in the fact that he reports on people and experiences that not only do not exist in official registers or histories, but also lack obvious analogues or connections there. Such 'unofficial' or 'private' histories were traditionally dismissed as hearsay, but Chen, along with Yang and Jiao, contributed to a shift in late Ming history-writing that began to recognize the value of unconventional sources—such as court gossip and travellers' accounts—for revealing social norms, verifying established truths, and sometimes contesting official records.¹⁰⁸ Simply by referencing his observations as a form of 'history' (*shi*), however unofficial, Chen is validating the experience of the indigenous islanders as worthy of detailed inclusion in a record whose conventional formats systematically exclude experiences that do not conform to specific expectations about time.

It is important to note that Chen's perspective is, of course, limited by his own cultural context. It is his voice, and not those of his indigenous interlocutors, which structures the ethnographic detail of the *Record*. He therefore does not fully succeed in making the indigenous peoples 'subjects' of his research; they remain its 'objects'.¹⁰⁹ Yet part of his project does include noting how Formosans themselves sense and mark the passing of time, opening a way toward understanding them as subjects of their own history.¹¹⁰

The move toward 'history' also signals Chen's alternative approach to the presentation of otherness and difference. Rather than pose questions like those Yu Yonghe asked, which focus on the natures of the indigenes (are they inherently good? Rational? Human like us?), or how they measure up to particular standards, Chen focuses instead on questions about their past and future. He does not ask or seem interested in questions about when or how the islanders will achieve the tools and status of civilization, but poses more open-ended

¹⁰⁶ Pidhainy, 'Mid-Ming account of the road into exile', p. 31.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁸ Ch'ien, *Chiao Hung*, pp. 56–8.

¹⁰⁹ Scott Simon identifies this shift as an important and necessary evolution toward making Taiwan indigenous studies more than a study of certain peoples; it should also be conducted with certain peoples. Scott Simon, 'Ontologies of Taiwan studies, indigenous studies, and anthropology', *International Journal of Taiwan Studies*, 1 (2018), pp. 11–35, at pp. 14–15.

¹¹⁰ In this way he perhaps anticipates the later aims of historians of subaltern studies; for discussion, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Minority histories, subaltern pasts', in *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), pp. 97–113.

questions that suggest his awareness of contingency and change. As has already been discussed, he wonders, for example, about how they have come to stand in their own present situation, what kinds of relations they have had with other 'barbarians', and how long their practices have endured. He mentions that they refused contact with the fleet of the eunuch Zheng He, hiding away and refusing to submit; later, they moved further inland as a reaction to piratical threats on the coast sometime in the Jiajing period.¹¹¹ He also asks how their society and outlook might change in the future, most prominently wondering if their 'simple days' will be 'disrupted' by trade with dishonest Chinese merchants.¹¹²

The *Record* thus portrays the inhabitants as living in a society that has developed in path-dependent, but nevertheless contingent, ways. Situated within the context of an account that acknowledges the inhabitants' contentedness even when bereft of key civilizational technologies or etiquette, Chen's historical approach effectively place the indigenous inhabitants of the island alongside, rather than behind, civilization as he understood it. His identity as an 'unofficial historian' – like that of the 'sojourning guest of Xuanyuan' – deftly assumes a voice of authority on certain matters, only to destabilize the very conventions that hold such authority in place.

VI

In this article I have attempted a close reading of Chen Di's *Record of Formosa*, informed by the broader intellectual context of Chen's own experiences as well as those of his contemporaries. Against this background, Chen's narrative cannot be reduced to merely an example of late imperial Chinese discourses of primitivism. Rather, it offers an important glimpse into how, at the site of an encounter with radical otherness, civilizational narratives can be upended rather than entrenched. Dismissing the islanders' need for a sagely founding or technologies of writing, and citing their culinary preferences to advance a profoundly self-reflexive critique of Chinese standards about the 'right taste', Chen questions the need for practices that his readers would have seen as essential to flourishing human society. Self-identifying as the sojourning guest of Xuanyuan, he explicitly situates himself within a Daoist philosophy that views differences across time and space as relative and fluid. Finally, embracing a commitment to historical contingency and change, he uses the 'differences' (*yi*) of the indigenous islanders from Chinese forms of life to interrogate expectations about human paths of development and civilization.

In doing so, Chen offers an instructive contrast to the Han-centric hierarchies of Chinese colonial governance prevalent in other territories of the Ming and Qing empires. The distinctiveness of his perspective within broader global

¹¹¹ Chen, *Dongfan ji*, p. 26.

¹¹² Tu Long, 'Ping *Dongfan ji*', p. 27.

discussions at the intersection of difference, foreignness, and domination – only gestured towards here – awaits further research. But insofar as his historical account succeeds in presenting the indigenous islanders as parallel to, rather than ‘behind’, particular standards of civilization, Chen’s narrative effectively pre-empts colonial arguments (like those of Yu Yonghe) for the extension of rule over them. His assertions of the ‘simplicity’ of the indigenous peoples is not a straightforward assertion of their backwardness, but an invitation to consider instead the possibility that societies may not be assessable by way of given civilizational benchmarks.