


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Which Sage Should I Follow (去宗哪個聖人)? Neo-Confucian Problems with Tradition in Sixteenth-Century Ming China

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(Received 1 August 2023; revised 3 December 2023; accepted 16 December 2023)

Abstract

This article begins with biographical sketches of the Ming thinker Luo Rufang 羅汝芳 (*js.* 1553, 1515–1588), which take place in the Jiajing reign (1522–1566). This time period marks the first high tide of Wang Yangming's philosophy. As a lecturer, Luo Rufang headed discussion gatherings (*jiangxue* 講學) and implemented community compacts (*xiangyue* 鄉約), all of which derived inspiration from Wang Yangming. Although Luo could confidently instill Confucian values in his audience, behind his endorsement of moral learning lay a personal history of doubt, struggle, and search for authority. To uncover the personal search for meaning and moral authority, Luo is an excellent example. A selection of conversations Luo had with his students and followers reveal his personal struggles, which can be aligned with his biography. Luo's quest for sagehood is less abstract; it is a personal reflection on which sage ought to be followed.

Keywords: Ming Neo-Confucianism; Wang Yangming; Luo Rufang; biography; discourse records (*yulu*); moral learning

Introduction

A commonly acknowledged philosophical watershed in the Ming (1368–1644) was the doctrine of Wang Shouren 王守仁 (*js.* 1499, 1472–1529). Wang was invariably addressed as Teacher Yangming 陽明先生 and hailed as the founder of the Yangming school. What in hindsight was denoted as Yangming school (*Yangming xue* 陽明學) has broader connotations. It meant, for example, that people who adhered to Wang's thought would organize themselves according to a time regimen for the practice of moral learning (*jianghui* 講會), and that Wang's doctrines derived their power from how neatly they referenced lines from the Chinese classics. However, Wang Yangming also circumvented some exegetical implications that the orthodox

I would like to thank Li Mengyuan, Aaron Throness, and an anonymous reviewer for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

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Confucianism of the Ming inherited from the preceding Song (960–1276) and Yuan dynasties (1271–1368). Wang took the canonized Confucian classics as his final authority, which naturally can be considered a very common form of legitimization in this tradition. Already before Wang, however, Ming Neo-Confucians sought out personal encounters with their greater tradition, which augmented the authority of the personal teacher who took in disciples under their roof. The innovator of this trend was none other than Wu Yubi 吳與弼 (1391–1469), a thinker who advocated that toiling away at agricultural pursuits was just as conducive to moral learning as reading the classics. Wu was a teacher to some well-known early Ming Neo-Confucians like Chen Xianzhang 陳獻章 (1428–1500), Hu Juren 胡居仁 (1434–1484), and Lou Liang 婁諒 (1422–1491).

Wang Yangming attracted no small number of disciples with his teachings. Even Wang's untimely death in 1529 did not diminish the persistent interest in him and his philosophical doctrines. Yangming's thought remained very much in vogue, even against political odds, and his school received tremendous attention in the decades following his demise. One earnest follower during the early Yangming tide was Luo Rufang 羅汝芳 (*js.* 1553, 1515–1588). It is through the lens of his persona that this paper explores problems of situating oneself in the greater Confucian tradition. It is perhaps due to unorthodox philosophers like Wu Yubi, who took his disciples to agricultural work in the fields, or Chen Xianzhang, who contemplated the nature of the mind, that the philosophical deliberations of Ming Neo-Confucians embraced such an intimate, self-revealing, even doubtful register when finding a place in their Confucian world. While Luo had the reputation of a stirring public speaker, who could convert anyone he encountered to the Confucian conviction, many passages in his discourse records (*yulu* 語錄) reveal a prolonged struggle with Confucian doctrine. Passages of Luo's discourse records can be used to probe the universal quest of making sense of an intellectual tradition like that of the Confucian school. If these passages can be aligned with Luo's biography, then a better understanding of the genre of discourse records of the Ming can be reached.

The Philosophical Background of Wang Yangming's Doctrine

Neo-Confucian *yulu* explored matters of moral learning, social ethics, and the ordering of the state. These classic preoccupations of Confucian discourse were well-established in the Ming. Wang's *Instructions for Practical Living* (*Chuanxi lu* 傳習錄) was a famous contemporary discourse record that was compiled by Wang's disciples. Reading this work had a tremendous impact on the young Luo Rufang. Wang and his disciples discussed matters of their interest, which they then committed to a printed text first published in 1517. *Instructions for Practical Living* begins with a philological question on the exegesis of the Confucian classic *The Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學). The *Great Learning* was a short work dating from early Chinese dynastic history. By the time of the Ming, the *Great Learning* was an ancient text, but Neo-Confucians like Wang and later Luo used the programmatic tone of the *Great Learning*, which they furnished with their own interpretations.

What made an ancient text so interesting for Wang and his disciples? The *Great Learning* concerns the cultivation of individuals and the perfect ordering of the world. At the risk of simplifying rich interpretations of the *Great Learning*, the main purpose of the text can be defined as "social flourishing." A human life is fulfilled if the individual makes constant efforts in self-cultivation. The ideal outcome of

self-cultivation was that the learner's influence radiated out beyond themselves, bringing order to family, state, and all under heaven.

In the Yangming school, the existential problem of social flourishing had a doctrinal edge. Already during the Ming, doctrinal discourse surrounding Wang was convoluted, and modern discussions of his philosophical precepts are also intricate. To simplify this account, a possible intellectual bridge that leads from Wang to Luo Rufang can be put forward. In contrast to the many transmission lines that Ming thinkers devised and which connected a variety of thinkers through time and space, it can be postulated from the outset that the link between Wang and Luo is completely artificial and depends only on the interpretation of their texts. This intellectual bridge forms in this study the basic background for the further reading of passages from Luo's biography and discourses.

Wang saw his own endeavors as a corrective to orthodox Confucianism. Confucianism in history was of course not a static entity and transformed significantly over time, but overall, during the Ming, the official, orthodox version of Confucianism championed by the central court remained unchanged. The metaphysical edge of this tradition, often labelled Neo-Confucianism, was inherited by the Ming from the Song and Yuan dynasties. This was sanctioned by the Ming court early on and thus Neo-Confucianism became state orthodoxy.¹ This meant that the systematic architect of Neo-Confucian thought, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), gained tremendous exegetical prevalence. In the Ming, the official commentary on contentious lines in the Confucian classics was Zhu Xi's, whose exegesis was authoritative for the remainder of the Ming period, and in fact up to 1905. By the time of Wang Yangming, the orthodoxy of Ming Confucianism had attained a lower reputation, despite the fact that Zhu's Neo-Confucianism was intellectually thorough and systematic. Against the tendency of Ming China's intellectuals to only learn Zhu Xi's exegesis in order to pass the civil service exams, Wang tried to re-address the core of Confucian teachings, including caring for people related to oneself, helping others in establishing themselves in life, and the ordering of the world. This list of Confucian concerns is by no means exhaustive but echoes the textual message one can extract from the *Great Learning*.

Wang did not discard Zhu's exegesis outright. Wang's concern was that the commentarial shell that enveloped the revered Confucian classics did not produce positive effects. In Wang's view, the Confucian classics ought to instill moral learning, but the learning of these classics through Zhu Xi, and only for the examinations, loses sight of the moral growth a learner should aim for. Ideal learners should peruse the classics in search of moral principles and paragons. Their minds should remain unattached to worldly demands. Due to Wang's dissatisfaction with the current state of education, he needed to develop a political stance. Wang blended his own educational concerns, which focused on mentoring people about the more immediate moral messages of the classics, with local politics. He did so because the court failed in doing so. He started to attract followers to his cause, and his school extensively reflected upon better ways to tap into and put into practice the wisdom of the classics, including a strong and intimate teacher-disciple relationship and repeated assemblies at designated places (*jianghui* 講會), a phenomenon that spread in the southern provinces. During discussions between Wang and his disciples, Wang gradually set out his new doctrines.²

¹For the historical process of how the early Ming embraced Neo-Confucianism, see Peter Ditmanson, "The Yongle Reign and the Transformation of *Daoxue*," *Ming Studies*, no. 39 (1998), 7–31.

²For a historical outline of how Wang Yangming attracted the followers that later would be conducive to the emergence of a Yangming school, see George L. Israel, "Wang Yangming in Beijing, 1510–1512: 'If I Do

The breadth of all the discussions can be boiled down to one primary doctrine of the late Wang, the “achieving” or “realization” (*zhi* 致) of “innate knowing” (*liangzhi* 良知). Wang believed in the ethical potential of the human mind. He also asserted that knowledge and action were closely related, perhaps even identical. Therefore, if one’s mind realized the good conceptually, it would follow that one’s actions would be good. Of course, Wang knew that humans were prone to fail with regard to this daunting proposition. Everyday experience tells us that humans might know the good, but may still not realize it in their actions. Wang commented on this by saying that people had not yet acquired real or genuine knowledge. Wang established a wealth of ideas, schemes, and ultimately discourses, some surprisingly simple, some more profound, with the goal of allowing human beings to tap into their real knowledge. Once in the right mindset, ethical actions were no longer cumbersome and tedious, but would be undertaken easily and automatically. The idea of innate knowing is one of many doctrines devised by Wang. The idea and its catchy phrase “to achieve innate knowing” (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知) is easy to commit to memory, and even the content has a relatively simple feel. However, despite its simplicity, innate knowing was the only true knowledge for Wang, because only this would motivate humans to do good. True knowledge was conceptualized only in moral terms.³

True knowledge was innate because it sprung from one’s own mind. Wang contended that within the human mind, the interface between the good, innate knowing, and one’s everyday knowing was seamless. One could very much succeed in acting like a sage.⁴ If one really succeeded in realizing how the ethical mind dictated one’s actions, one would have attained knowledge that was already there from the beginning.

This is a very simplified account of one of Wang’s doctrines. Wang himself at times seemed to speak of innate knowledge simply to remind his audience that the moral mind was always at hand, a fact that could easily be forgotten. Followers of Wang’s school made numerous attempts to prove innate knowing. They tried to figure out how the philosophy of their teacher Wang could be stated to the point, making it like an imperative, “realize [your] innate knowing!” This was done in order to increase the reach of his doctrines. Wang’s followers came up with many approaches to substantiate a doctrine for which Wang only used three characters. Luo Rufang would take part of this larger doctrinal discourse, utilizing at times simple answers.

Not Awaken Others, Who Will Do So?,” *Journal of Chinese History* 1.1 (2017), 59–91, and George L. Israel, “Wang Yangming in Chuzhou and Nanjing, 1513–1516: ‘I have only two words to say: ‘Be truthful!’,” in *The Ming World*, edited by Kenneth M. Swope (London: Routledge, 2019), 322–42.

³For one representative line from Wang’s *Instructions for Practical Living*, which catches the gist of innate knowing and is rather short, see passage #8 in the enumeration by Chan Wing-tsit, comp., *Wang Yangming Chuanxi lu xiang zhu ji ping* 王陽明傳習錄詳註集評 (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Shuju, 1992), 40. For renderings into English, see Wing-tsit Chan, tr., *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 15, and Philip J. Ivanhoe, tr., *Readings from the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009), 147.

⁴Wang was aware of subtle linguistic differences between ordinary language and the language of moral instruction. A problem for understanding the philosophical underpinnings of his thought lies in the translation of his doctrines. I have followed some earlier translators, but for a fruitful challenge to some earlier translations, see Harvey Lederman, “The Introspective Model of Genuine Knowledge in Wang Yangming,” *Philosophical Review* 131.2 (2022), 169–213.

Part I: Authority Found in Teachers and Texts

Luo was first educated at home, where his father personally sought out a teacher for his son who was knowledgeable about the new doctrines of Wang Yangming. The Luo clan hailed from Nancheng 南城, situated in the east of Jiangxi Province, close to the border with Fujian. Thus, Luo's residence was reasonably close to major centers of learning and so he learned early on of Yangming's doctrine. Still, the young Luo struggled in coming to terms with Confucian doctrine. A biographical account handled by one of Luo's later disciples records:

In 1540, [Luo] took part in the examinations. In the provincial capital (Nanchang, Jiangxi Province) the scholars and local gentry convened a large learning assembly. During the assembly, [Luo] met with Yan Jun from Jizhong. Yan came from the school of the Taizhou [patriarch] Wang Gen. Yan expounded the doctrinal meanings of achieving innate knowing. Luo reported to Yan that he contracted a grave illness the day before, but that his mind remained unmoved regarding his living or dying. Further, [Luo said] that even though he failed in the present examination, he was entirely unaffected by either success or failure.⁵

庚子，會考，省中縉紳士友大舉學會。見吉中山農顏公鈞。山農出泰州心齋王先生之門，而解演說致良知義旨。師因述已昨觀危疾而生死毫不動心，今失科舉而得失絕弗撓念。

The young Luo believed that maintaining a state of equilibrium came close to achieving innate knowing. Luo tried to convince himself that matters of life and death, or success and failure in the exams, were but minor issues in the grand scheme of moral knowing. But the still malleable Luo encountered Yan Jun 顏鈞 (1504–1596), whom he identified as his definitive teacher. Yan proposed to Luo a different interpretation of moral learning.

[Upon hearing from Luo], Yan Jun did not approve of anything. Yan said: “What you have described is to control one's desires. But it is not embodying benevolence. When we⁶ discuss learning, we need to take Confucius and Mencius as our standard. For one to set their will upon benevolence, they become free of evil,⁷ is this not the instruction of Confucius? Knowing how to expand the four sprouts, like when a fire is ignited or when a spring comes through,⁸ is this not the instruction of Mencius? If one has embodied benevolence, benevolence will never be exhausted. [Then], for what purpose would your actions [be directed at] the control of desires?”⁹

⁵Luo Rufang, “Xutan zhiquan” 盱壇直詮, in *Ruzang* 儒藏, edited by Beijing Daxue Ruzang bianzuan yu yanjiu zhongxin, vol. 195, collation and punctuation by Chen Chang 陳暢 (Beijing: Beijing Daxue chubanshe, 2013), 2.432. In the widespread modern reprint of the original facsimiles of *Xutan zhiquan*, the passage can be found under Luo Jinxi 羅近溪 (i.e., Luo Rufang), *Xutan zhiquan* 盱壇直詮 (New Taipei City: Guangwen Shuju, 1967), 2.220.

⁶The reference *wu chai* often appears in the philosophical discourse of Yangming followers to refer to themselves as a group of likeminded people who aim for the edification of themselves and other members of society.

⁷Luo paraphrases *The Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) “Li ren” 4.4.

⁸Paraphrase of *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子) “Gongsun Chou” 2A.6.

⁹Luo Rufang, “Xutan zhiquan,” 2.432.

山農俱不見取，曰：是制欲，非體仁也。吾儕談學，當以孔孟為準。志仁無惡，非孔氏之訓乎？知擴四端，若火燃泉達，非孟氏之訓乎？如是體仁，仁將不可勝用，何以制欲為？

Luo supposedly tried to achieve innate knowing by controlling his mind, insofar that it would not be affected by any danger or pleasures he encountered. However, Yan Jun corrected Luo, pointing out to him that such a mindset is not informed by the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius. Rather than control one's desires, one had to embody benevolence.

"Embodying benevolence" (*ti ren* 體仁) is a memorable phrase devised by the Neo-Confucians. The content of this axiom is broad, but the main thrust of this short passage is the mechanism of submission to authority. The young Luo thought that he had attained it by himself, claiming that his ultimate authority was his own mind which he controlled perfectly. But the encounter with Yan Jun brought Luo on a new path. The biographical account records that Luo had an episode of enlightenment and from then on regarded Yan Jun as a teacher.¹⁰

Yan Jun was peculiar. Some of the doctrinal underpinnings that had developed ever since Wang started discoursing on innate knowing were amplified by the so-called Taizhou school, a sub-branch of the Yangming school. Yan was a famous and notoriously unrestrained lecturer who serves as an example of many of the distinguishing features of the Taizhou school. If knowing is an ethical possibility in the mind of every human being, it would thus follow that it is not necessarily through an elitist reading of the classics with Zhu's commentaries that this mind arises. The ethical mind of knowing could be achieved with the instruction of a teacher, who may or may not want to combine their lessons with the readings of Zhu Xi. Second, if innate knowing is an end to human actions, and every human being shares the necessary fabric to awaken their ethical mind, then this puts a strong soteriological bent on Neo-Confucianism. The Taizhou school's members were thus known for lecturing to a non-elite audience.¹¹ One specific detail that makes the case of Yan Jun especially anti-ethical to the Neo-Confucian establishment was Yan's supposed difficulties with literacy.

Luo encountered and subsequently revered the iconoclastic Yan Jun. Only a direct encounter with Yan opened Luo's eyes to the true meaning of the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) and the *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子), both canonical and sacred works for all Neo-Confucians. The authority and power of Yan's teaching originated from

¹⁰How much credibility can we give the biographical account? The episode between Luo Rufang and Yan Jun is corroborated by other sources. The Ming-Qing historian Fu Weilin 傅維麟 (1608–1667) drew up a biographical account of Luo in which he sticks to the story presented above. See "Luo Rufang zhuan 羅汝芳傳," in Fu Weilin 傅維麟, *Mingshu* 明書, 171 juan, in *Mingdai zhuanji congkan* 明代傳記叢刊, comp. by Chow Tsin-fu 周駿富 (Taipei: Mingwen Shuju, 1991), vol. 87, 114.645–647.

¹¹Taizhou is a place name in Jiangsu Province, but also stands for the name Wang Gen 王艮 (1483–1541), the Taizhou patriarch who was a salt merchant. It was presumably Wang Gen who increased the scope of edifying lecture activities to unschooled people. For a seminal study, see Monika Übelhör, *Wang Gen (1483–1541) und seine Lehre: Eine kritische Position im späten Konfuzianismus* (Berlin: Reimer, 1986). For a recent study of the Taizhou school that approaches Taizhou as a larger social movement, see Johanna Lidén, "The Taizhou Movement: Being Mindful in Sixteenth Century China" (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2018). For a philosophical-pedagogical reading of the Taizhou school, see Zhang Xing 張星, "Taizhou xuepai de jieyin chuantong" 泰州學派的接引傳統 (PhD diss., The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2018).

instructions that were tailored for Luo and transmitted orally. This had an immediate effect and was thus more efficacious than a one-sided, passive reading of classical texts.

Approaching his thirties, Luo attained the *juren* degree in his next try at the provincial exams in 1543. He and a company of young scholars gathered at the Pavilion of Prince Teng (Teng Wang ge 滕王閣), a local ancient landmark in Nanchang. After the provincial exam, scholars proceed to sit two exams in the spring of the following year, taken at the Ming capital of Beijing. So, one year later, in 1544, Luo stayed at the capital and participated in the metropolitan examination (*huishi* 會試), which he passed. After the exam, he participated in gatherings at the Daoist Temple of Numinous Salvation (Lingji gong 靈濟宮), an important Beijing landmark used by scholar-officials in the capital for lecturing and making important acquaintances. This particular temple was one of many places that gained fame as a venue due to regular gatherings of scholars of the Yangming school. Temples had multiple functions, not only as sites of reverence and faith, but also as spaces for more secular activities, such as public gatherings, studying, and even money-lending. To give high-level state servants of Beijing an opportunity to speak to their peers was certainly within the purview of temple spaces.

It is unclear why Luo skipped the very last exam, the palace examination (*dianshi* 殿試). This more ritualized exam round was overseen by the emperor himself and determined the final ranking of all successful examinees of the preceding metropolitan examination. A more official biographical note drafted by clerks in Jianchang Prefecture for the Ministry of Personnel (*libu* 吏部) explains that, because of his father's illness, Luo departed Beijing and returned to his native place.¹² Other biographers whitewash the turn of events with an equally Confucian trope. They record Luo saying that he was still unprepared for official posting.¹³ Another contentious claim is contained in the biography of Luo in the *Records of Ming Scholars* (*Mingru xuean* 明儒學案). The text in effect claims that Luo, upon hearing that his teacher Yan Jun was put in prison in Beijing, sold off all his land and stayed with Yan in prison to take care of him for a period of six years. Taking care of Yan effectively became the reason for forsaking the last exam.¹⁴ This claim is shaky, because other official biographers and close students of Luo's depict Luo returning home to take care of his father. Both Cao Yinru 曹胤儒 (active between 1580–1610), one of Luo's loyal disciples, and the Ming-Qing historian Fu Weilin 傅維麟 (1608–1667) adhere to the story that Luo returned home to take care of his father.¹⁵

However mysterious, the reason for Luo's departure from Beijing without attaining the final degree is not as important as what he did instead. Almost ten years would pass before Luo's return to Beijing. During this transformative decade, he "sought for teachers and inquired with friends, wandering in the four directions for ten years" (尋師問友, 周流四方者十年).¹⁶ The next section will provide answers for why there was a

¹²According to *Resumée of Luo Rufang* (*Luo Rufang lüli* 羅汝芳履歷), in Luo Rufang 羅汝芳, *Luo Rufang ji* 羅汝芳集, Yangming houxue wenxian congshu 陽明後學文獻叢書, 2 vols., edited and collated by Fang Zuyou 方祖猷, Liang Yiqun 梁一群, Lee Kyeng Lyong 李慶龍, Pan Qizao 潘起造, and Luo Jialu 羅伽祿. (Nanjing: Fenghuang Chubanshe, 2007), vol. 2, 828.

¹³Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 2, 829, 860 and 869.

¹⁴Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, *Huang Zongxi quanji* 黃宗羲全集, 8 vols., edited by Shen Shanrong 沈善洪 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Daxue chubanshe, 1992), vol. 8, 2.

¹⁵Luo Rufang, "Xutan zhiquan," 2.433. "Luo Rufang zhuan," in *Mingdai zhuanji congkan*, vol. 87, 114.645–647.

¹⁶Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 2, 829. Two references to the value of friendship for Ming scholars are Martin W. Huang, "Male Friendship in Ming China: An Introduction," *Nan Nü* 9 (2007), 2–33, and Ying

craze for lecturing, learning, and traveling in Ming China after Wang Yangming. What was the institutional framework for Yangming school members to spend most of their time out of office in different localities to lecture?

The Life of an Itinerant Lecturer

Yan Jun was Luo's teacher, and it was with him that Luo discovered the pleasures of learning whilst travelling through different places in 1544. In 1545, the lecturing itinerary was put on hold when Luo settled down and built the Conggu Mountain Retreat (從姑山房) in his native place. At this life-long study, Luo welcomed scholars and discussed the teachings of Cheng Hao 程灝 (1032–1085), Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–1192), Wang Yangming, and Wang Gen. Only two years later, however, Luo set out for an important trip to Ji'an Prefecture 吉安府 in Jiangxi Province.

Ji'an was home to a number of Wang Yangming's most loyal and intimate disciples, so it is no exaggeration to say that the Yangming school was perpetuated by the efforts of Ji'an scholars.¹⁷ In 1547 Luo would enter this eminent circle of scholars. He became acquainted with Nie Bao 聶豹 (*js.* 1517, 1487–1563) who hailed from Yongfeng 永豐. Nie Bao was a protégé of Xu Jie 徐階 (*js.* 1523, 1503–1583), the soon-to-be grand secretary in Beijing. Luo also met with Luo Hongxian 羅洪先 (*js.* 1529, 1504–1564), a Yangming follower from Jishui 吉水 and later an acclaimed cartographer.¹⁸

Apart from Nie Bao and Luo Hongxian, it should be noted that Luo also came to know Zou Shouyi 鄒守益 (*js.* 1511, 1491–1562), who hailed from Anfu 安福, another famous place in Ji'an. Zou was one of the most active organizers of assemblies, whose blueprint for implementation he derived from Wang Yangming. These assemblies gave the Yangming school a form of solid organization. While Luo was definitely already exposed to the teachings of Wang before 1547, from that year on he befriended three of the most prominent Wang disciples of the time. Nie Bao, Luo Hongxian, and Zou Shouyi were renowned intellectuals in their own right, and were also responsible for much of the organization of the Yangming school as it presented itself in society through assemblies.

To render Luo's personality during for this formative period more vividly, a short reading of two biographic notes is helpful. Cao Yinru was a major disciple of Luo.¹⁹ He compiled the authoritative discourse record *Direct Explanations from the Xu Estrade* (*Xutan zhiquan* 盱壇直詮). The work is considered credible, as Cao, despite being a Buddhist, was a major member of Luo's circle of friends. Toward the end of this record of discourse, the text becomes a biographical account of Luo's life.

In the Wanli period, the cousin Ruzhen of our late teacher [Luo Rufang] shared teachings with [followers in] Wujiang (i.e., Suzhou), and he frequently told me about episodes in our teacher's life. I collated these with my own observations and checked all the facts for a biographical account of our teacher. I ordered them into a summary of his life which is appended.²⁰

Zhang, "The Confucian Ideal Friend," in *The Ming World*, edited by Kenneth M. Swope (London: Routledge, 2019), 241–57.

¹⁷Lu Miaw-fen 呂妙芬, *Yangmingxue shiren shequn: lishi sixiang yu shijian* 陽明學士人社群：歷史、思想與實踐 (Taipei: Zhongyang Yanjiuyuan Jindaishi Yanjiusuo, 2003), 111.

¹⁸Lu Miaw-fen, *Yangmingxue shiren shequn*, 142–63.

¹⁹Cao Yinru himself determines 1565 as the formally first year of his association with Luo Rufang. Luo Rufang, "Xutan zhiquan," 2.417.

²⁰Luo Rufang, "Xutan zhiquan," 2.431.

萬曆中，師從弟汝貞分訓吳江，數為儒言師生平行實。參以儒所見聞，覈以師之狀誌，次第其略附記之。

Within this biographical account, two entries that Cao Yinru penned for Luo's construction of his retreat in 1545 and his trip to Ji'an in 1547 convey the spirit of the young Luo:

In 1545, the teacher built the Conggu Mountain Retreat for hosting itinerant scholars from all over the realm. He was determined and swore to guide incoming learners. With numerous friends, daily he would discuss and argue about Cheng Hao, Lu Jiuyuan, Wang Yangming, and Wang Gen's doctrines and their meanings, such that he did not venture into the city.²¹

乙巳，師建從姑山房以待四方游學之士，矢心天日，接引來學。日與諸友論駁明道、象山、陽明、心齋義旨，足不入城市。

In 1547, the teacher set off for Ji'an. He bid thanks to Yan Jun. [On the trip to Ji'an], he would call upon Nie Bao, Luo Hongxian, Zou Shouyi, and Liu Bangcai, with whom he discussed learning. Previously the teacher told me [i.e., Cao Yinru]: "I requested leave after the metropolitan exam, [because] my actual determination was [roaming] throughout the realm. In the earliest years during my travels [starting from 1544], I took three to four servants with me, but after a while the number decreased to one or two, and in the end I alone carried all my luggage on my journeys, and no assistant followed me. Within our realm, I visited every producer of cloth and accoutrements, every master residing in deep forests, and all people who embraced [the philosophy of] Daoists and Buddhists. Approaching their gate, I only used a short note to present my family name and surname, whereupon some would take me as scholar of stars and images, and some others would see me as master of forms. Some would let me in while some would reject me, but I did not care about either outcome. With those whom I met, I would in any case talk exhaustively with them."²²

丁未，師往吉安，謝山農顏公。因徧訪雙江聶公、念庵羅公、東廓鄒公、師泉劉公輩，商榷學問。師嘗語儒曰：予會試告歸，寔志四方。初年游行，攜僕三四人，徐而一二人，久之自負笈行，不隨一价。凡海內衿簪之產、山藪之碩、玄釋之有望者，無弗訪之。及門惟以折簡通姓名，或以為星相士，或以為形家，或通或拒，咸不為意。其相晤者，必與之盡譚乃已。

The passage gives an impression of the social circles within which Luo intermingled and the circumstances of his travels. Beyond the circle of scholars and local gentlemen, people without a direct scholarly background were also accessible to a traveler like Luo. He deliberately went out of his way to speak to these people. Based on appellations like "scholar of stars and images" or "master of forms," it is remarkable that Luo did not insist on his identity as a Confucian and a corresponding appellation like "Ruist" (*rujia* 儒家). There is reason to contend that there were multiple factors contributing

²¹Luo Rufang, "Xutan zhiqian," 2.433.

²²Luo Rufang, "Xutan zhiqian," 2.433.

to Luo's self-identity, and that not necessarily everything could be subsumed under the rubric of Confucianism.²³

Part II: Enlightenment and Administrative Style

In this stage of Luo's life, which spans the years 1553 to 1562, Luo attained the *jinshi* degree he could have obtained years before but did not due to skipping the last palace examination. However, the year 1552 deserves special attention, because Luo's biographers narrate an episode of enlightenment that Luo had during a crucial transition in his biography. It needs to be said that the quality of Luo's enlightenment remains ineffable as to its spiritual content. That said, I still argue that there is sufficient information to understand the general idea of this enlightenment episode, which instilled in Luo an even more ironclad belief in Neo-Confucian philosophy. That Luo needed an episode of enlightenment to approve tradition is to some extent a Chan-Buddhist trope. Indeed, Luo's terminology in describing his enlightenment includes phrasings like "fortunately due to whatever causations of previous lives, I managed to attain liberation from such hardships and vexations" (自幸宿世何緣，得脫此等苦趣).²⁴ In the Ming context, to situate oneself in the tradition of Neo-Confucianism would be to see through all doctrinal positions and attain a comprehensive understanding akin to an enlightenment. Neo-Confucian understanding conceptualized like this could henceforth adopt Chan-Buddhist terminology, only that instead of liberation from suffering, the Neo-Confucian practitioner was liberated from ignorance.

It is recorded that in 1552, Luo had a moment of enlightenment with regard to the meaning of the "investigation of things" (*gewu* 格物), an important line in the *Great Learning*.²⁵ The substance of this enlightenment is related by Luo himself in his recorded discourse. He shared the prior transformative episode he had when he met Yan Jun; however, he was by his own account still unsure about the "investigation of things." Luo wrote as follows:

Up until the names of examinees were published²⁶ I already returned home, and I struggled much over the fact that I hadn't understood the investigation of things. So, I synthesized previous views, comparing and considering them. Their theories virtually amounted to thousands of different ones. Every time I had some insights, I asked my father to approve, and indeed he often nodded in approval. But still, in the final account my anxieties were not dispelled.²⁷

比聯第歸家，苦格物莫曉，乃錯綜前聞，互相參訂，說殆千百不同，每有所見，則以請正先君，先君亦多首肯，然終是不為釋然。

²³More on lecturing and traveling can be found in Cai Shumin 蔡淑閔, "Yangming xuepai youxue huodong yanjiu" 陽明學派游學活動研究 (PhD diss., National Chengchi University, 2005).

²⁴Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 1, 232.

²⁵Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 1, 232. The dating of this passage to 1552 is provided by Cheng Yu-Yin 程玉瑛, *Wan Ming bei yiwang de sixiangjia: Luo Rufang (Jinxi) shiwen shiji biannian* 晚明被遺忘的思想家：羅汝芳(近溪)詩文事蹟編年 (New Taipei City: Guangwen Shuju, 1995), 20.

²⁶This probably relates the events of 1544, when Luo partook the metropolitan exam, but did not proceed to the obligatory palace examination.

²⁷Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 1, 232.

Zhu Xi's orthodox exegesis of the "investigation of things" was that principles (*li* 理) lay in things, which can be discovered by the learner.²⁸ Steady training in the discovery of principles then leads to a more all-embracing view of human nature and the cosmos, which would in turn result in the moral behavior that every Neo-Confucian aimed for. In the orthodox reading, one discovers principles in the matters and affairs of the external world. It is an outward movement of mind to principle, which in turn feeds back to the mind, actualizing the "original brightness of innate virtue" (*mingde* 明德). Wang Yangming inverted Zhu Xi's process. For Zhu, people learned by becoming familiar with principles they find externally, whereas Wang's interpretation gave precedence to the mind itself. For Wang the "investigation of things" referred to introspection of the internal self, as the learner ultimately remained confined only to their own mind, even if they contemplated principles outside their mind. Wang would disagree, for instance, that the principle of filial piety could be obtained by observing how a son dealt with his father. For Wang the learner would need to come to an understanding of filial piety in the mind.

To give an adequate, short outline of Luo's new understanding, a brief summation of the *Great Learning* is necessary. The text communicates a vision of an ordered society, the result of a given learner having exhausted themselves in the understanding of the highest good. This would then produce a chain of intended side-effects, starting with the learner himself becoming "cultivated," then extending to their family, which would be in harmony, and ending in the ordering of society at large. What Luo seemingly came to realize in 1552 was that his upbringing, while neither particularly positive nor negative, had given him everything he needed for his later life. So, just as Zhu proposed, Luo discovered the principles of "filial piety, brotherly respect, and parental love" (*xiao* 孝, *ti* 弟, *ci* 慈) when he observed his own family life. But also, just as Wang proposed, Luo came to an understanding of these three virtues through introspection. Luo writes as follows:

[After my enlightenment], I henceforth deduced the highest good of the *Great Learning* to [the individual virtues of] filial piety, brotherly respect, and parental love, which were the bright innate virtues that are naturally endowed. The root began in the self of one person, while the branches reached the realm, the family, and all throughout the realm. And so, I focused my own spirit and contemplated for a few months, thinking back to the last fifteen years, during which I encountered the Learning of the Way via my teachers. During this time I saw various Confucians, all defiled and vulgar. And I saw ordinary people, all lacking intelligence. But for scholars with aspiration among us, it is necessary to open up another path, so as to get rid of quelling thoughts and preserving the heart-mind. Thus, another window will be opened, so as to get rid of exhausting the canon and erecting principles.²⁹

²⁸The problem of principles is of course highly debated, both in the historical reception of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism in China, but also in our current academic discussion. What is the correct understanding of principles and what is a cogent English translation? These are subjects of a wealth of studies. However, it seems appropriate in this case to refer the reader to the commentary Zhu crafted for the *Great Learning*. The commentary is both philological and interpretative. Original text and a translation are offered in Ian Johnston, Ping Wang, tr., *Daxue and Zhongyong: Bilingual Edition* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2012), 138–39.

²⁹Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 1, 232.

後遂從大學至善，推演到孝弟慈，為天生明德，本自一人之身而末及國家天下。乃凝頓自己精神，沈思數月，遐想十五之年，從師與聞道學，其時目諸章縫，俱是汙俗。目諸黎庶，俱是冥頑，而吾儕有志之士，必須另開一個蹊徑，以去息念存心，別啓一個戶牖，以去窮經造理。

Luo's description of further insights gained from his enlightenment gives reasons to contend that he indeed saw himself as opening up a new path to Confucian tradition. He was opposed to the unfruitful exploration of canonical passages and sought to establish a new way of doing things. Even the acclaimed practice of "preserving the heart-mind" (*cun xin* 存心) was to Luo's understanding something superficial. While some of his rhetoric demonstrates the idea of Chan Buddhism that one needed to bypass authoritative practice (in the Neo-Confucian case, that of exhausting the canon, of preserving the heart-mind) to gain access to greater truth, on the other hand Luo underscored that his enlightenment only improved his understanding of the *Great Learning*. Luo discovered the three virtues of filial piety, brotherly respect, and parental love, which were the building blocks of the vision of the *Great Learning*, because the work assumed a chain that proceeds from the learner through to his family and to an ordered world. An ordered family, which was conceived as the prerequisite for an ordered world, encompasses the normative values that are prescribed by the three virtues.

Luo's episode of enlightenment only strengthened his admiration for the *Great Learning*. This reportedly took place in 1552, because once Luo had come to realize the message of the *Great Learning*, this would arguably enable him to move on and become a scholar-official. The insight of this biographical episode underscores that Luo had his own approach to the Neo-Confucian tradition. While he was educated as a scholar-official and so surely knew how to read and study the classics, he assumed that one had to practice another path of learning and reflection. Luo did try to sort out the many interpretations for the investigation of things, but at last only an intuitive and more immediate realization could lead to the successful internalization of the virtues communicated by the *Great Learning*. Then, at least according to Luo, a solely intellectualistic approach to learning was no proper conduit. One had to awaken to the message of the classics and carefully realize them in the trajectory of one's own life. This had important ramifications for Luo's didactics, which would be established on engaging his audience in discursive lectures on the validity of core virtues.

Administrative Policies

The obtainment of the highest degree at the age of thirty-nine inaugurated Luo's career as an official. In the summer of 1553, Luo left for his first official posting as county magistrate in Taihu County (Taihu xian 太湖縣) in the Southern Metropolitan Region (Nanzhili 南直隸).

From his first posting in Taihu onwards, Luo "expounded on the *Six Admonitions from the Sagely Edict*" (*fuyan Shengyu liutiao* 敷演聖諭六條) of Ming Taizu 明太祖 (r. 1368–1398).³⁰ This is a notable kind of educational policy that merits a closer look, for it nicely combines the concern of the Yangming school with the moral disposition of the people. It also harkens back to Luo's moment of enlightenment one year earlier.

³⁰Mentioned in the *Epitaph of Our Teacher Mingde, My Teacher Luo Jinxi, Surveillance Commissioner of Ming China's Yunnan Province* (*Ming Yunnan buzheng shishi zuocanzheng Mingde fuzi Luo Jinxi xiansheng muzhiming* 明雲南布政使司左參政明德夫子羅近溪先生墓誌銘), Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 2, 921. This epitaph was written by Yang Qiyuan 楊起元 (1547–1599), a primary student of Luo's.

The Six Admonitions refers to a small portion of a lengthier text, the so-called *Placard of Instructions for the People* (*Jiaomin bangwen* 教民榜文). The text itself has its own history, especially as it was authored by the founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328–1398). Luo glosses over most of the legal enactments that Zhu devised in the text, but refers to six snippets with a confident, direct moral message.³¹ The text of the Six Admonitions states:

Be filial to your parents, respect superiors, maintain harmony with neighbors, instruct and discipline sons and grandsons, live and work in peace and contentment, do no wrongful acts.³²

孝順父母，恭敬長上，和睦鄉里，教訓子孫，各安生理，無作非為。

These moral maxims could indeed be interlinked with the *Great Learning*, and so Luo could elaborate on his approach to the *Great Learning* with reference to the Six Admonitions. According to Zhu Yuanzhang's vision of educational politics in local society, the old, disabled, or blind should be guided by children and walk through every village of the Ming empire, spreading word of this important document. Now as a county magistrate, Luo could easily weave his own educational convictions into the greater moral outlook of the Six Admonitions.

Luo "expounded" (*fuyan* 敷演) on this text during his first official posting in Taihu. With such a general and all-embracing stock text, it can easily be imagined how a new magistrate like Luo might have engaged his audience by fleshing out a less detailed text. But the motivation of Luo's engagement with such a text can also be approached from the underpinnings of the Yangming school. If a person's innate knowing needed to be activated, oral discourse on the principal rules of society in a straightforward medial setting can be capitalized on by the magistrate. For any magistrate, education and politics were conflated, so a lecture on the Six Admonitions could surely be used by Luo to talk about the kind of moral learning that he endorsed. Luo's adaptation suggests how a new magistrate took the matter of proselytizing very seriously. Luo's use of an archaic document from almost two hundred years earlier, with its "forced arcadia,"³³ was not necessarily the expression of reverence for an emperor, but a suitable connection between Luo's own lectures on moral learning and the greater values that had currency in society. There is a related passage of Luo's recorded discourse that goes as follows:

I led my audience to hold up their hands and put them onto their foreheads, saying: "With regard to the words of our great ancestor and emperor, "Be filial to your parents, be respectful to your elders," taken from his Six Maxims, this completely encapsulates the mind of the [sage-kings] Yao and Shun. But today we take this

³¹Zhu Yuanzhang's actions in the arena of education were sometimes erratic but had a long-term effect on the dynasty, as Luo's emulation of the text demonstrates. Luo was not the last to do so, see Jaret Weisvogel, "Invoking Zhu Yuanzhang: Guan Zhidao's Adaptations of the Ming Founder's Ritual Statutes to Late-Ming Jiangnan Society," in *Long Live the Emperor!: Uses of the Ming Founder Across Six Centuries of East Asian History*, edited by Sarah Schneewind (Minneapolis: Society for Ming Studies, 2008), 115–35.

³²Translation from Edward L. Farmer, *Zhu Yuanzhang and Early Ming Legislation: The Reordering of Chinese Society Following the Era of Mongol Rule* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 202.

³³From Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 89.

doctrine and combine it with the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, for propagating and extending [the sagely teachings] to every time and every place. Again, this is akin to walking together in the prosperous age of Yao and Shun. We, the multitude, should not only together hold dear this time. We should especially love this human self together.”³⁴

余復率眾舉手加額曰：我太祖皇帝孝順父母、尊敬長上六言，真渾然堯舜之心，而今日把來合之論語、孟子，以昌大於時時處處，又真是熙然同遊乎堯舜之世矣。大眾可不共惜此時光，而尤共愛此人身也哉！

While we lack sufficient information to align this passage with a particular point in Luo's biography, it illustrates how Luo referred to the Six Maxims. For Luo, the Six Maxims were points of reference that buttressed his lectures on moral learning, interwoven as these maxims were in his efforts to administer and edify the populace under his administration. In this particular passage, the reference to the Six Maxims is at the end of Luo's entire lecture. It served as a proper closing for a longer lecture on moral learning that engaged the Confucian classics and called for self-cultivation.

Part III: Becoming a Seasoned Administrator

The final part of Luo's life covers the years 1562 to 1565, and neatly corresponds with the major position that Luo had during this time. After a few minor postings, Luo was promoted to magistrate of Ningguo Prefecture (Ningguo fu 寧國府), which, like his first posting in Taihu, lay in the wealthy Southern Metropolitan Region. In this official capacity, Luo served from 1562 to 1565.

The Community Compact in Ningguo

Places like Ningguo in Southern China were profoundly influenced by Wang Yangming's thought. The so-called Shuixi Assemblies (Shuixi hui 水西會) were established by a disciple of Wang's in 1548. While the phenomenon of assembling is mentioned throughout Ming sources, it is not always the case that there are comprehensive descriptions of such lectures. The sources provide innumerable names of assemblies, which make the activity interesting for a social study of the Yangming school, but less fruitful for an analysis of ideas.

Better recorded in the historical sources is Luo's use of the “community compact” (*xiangyue* 鄉約) in Ningguo. The community compact “was a concept of subcounty organization, stressing the harmonizing of social relations, resolution of disputes, moral education, and mutual aid.”³⁵ The idea of the community compact came from the Neo-Confucians of the Song dynasty, who in turn took precedents from early Chinese history. Relevant to Luo, Wang Yangming implemented the community compact during his tenure in Jiangxi. During Luo's posting in Ningguo, Luo issued the *Explanatory Remarks on the Community Compact of Ningguo Prefecture* (*Ningguo fu xiangyue xunyu* 寧國府鄉約訓語) in 1563. Luo clearly followed or even emulated Wang. Luo's text, which fortunately has been preserved, provides a window into

³⁴Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 1, 66.

³⁵Kandice Hauf, “The Community Covenant in Sixteenth Century Ji'an Prefecture, Jiangxi,” *Late Imperial China* 17.2 (1996), 1.

political administration down to the level of the magistrate. The community compact encompassed an exhaustive registry of people and their vocation, and the employment of “wooden bell elders” (*muduo laoren* 木鐸老人) who read out the “Sagely Edict” (*Shengyu* 聖諭), Zhu Yuanzhang’s textual legacy to Ming politics, on a regular basis. From the perspective of Luo’s career, one can see how his expounding of the Six Admonitions from the *Sagely Edict* in Taihu laid the groundwork for the full-fledged implementation of the community compact in Ningguo.

Based on the literary record of Luo’s community compact, one cannot know how exactly the political-educational measures worked out in reality. How they were imposed and whether they had lasting effect is unclear, but normative writing about how the process was supposed to transpire remains. In Luo’s compact, the wooden bell elders were supposed to proclaim the rules and norms in publicly accessible places like pavilions six times a month. Luo’s texts explicitly speak of the “Pavilion for Extending Clarity” (*Shenming deng ting* 申明等亭), where the wooden bell elders “proclaim and read the Sacred Edict” (*xuandu shengyu* 宣讀聖諭). Timothy Brook comments that it was up to the local magistrate to carry out administrative affairs at the Pavilion for Extending Clarity, such as announcing criminals in public or settling disputes of the locality.³⁶ Luo attempted to revive an early Ming praxis that he saw fit for the execution of political affairs in Ningguo.³⁷ The text of Luo’s community compact is comprehensive. It offers a complete script of how such a ritualized gathering should take place.³⁸ One of Luo’s speeches, which again makes a case for his episode of enlightenment in 1552, provides an example of Luo’s lecturing in such ritualized contexts:

The official Luo Rufang expounds: “When humans are born into this world, who is not born from their parents? And who does not know to be obedient to one’s parents? Mencius’s phrase³⁹ that “There are no young children who do not naturally love their parents” is to say that early in the life of a human being, one knows nothing. But still, each and every child will vie for their parents’ embrace and nurturing. The child cannot part from their parents for even a few moments. The reason for this is that this corporeal self originally is something derived from the parents’ bodies. Although in form they are now two, the *qi* and blood [of parents and their children] remain one. [Even] in terms of breath, exhalation and inhalation, they remain interconnected. Further, before the parents had their child, they prayed to Heaven and Earth, worrying day and night. Once the child is conceived, the father will use all sorts of methods to protect and sustain [his family]. The mother will suffer infinite hardships up to the birth ten months later. Her body will be heavy like a mountain, and in the moment when the child departs the womb, she is only a fraction separated from death. To have a child in one’s bosom is to acquire something of utmost preciousness. Even a minor illness suffered by the child will tear the parents’ mind apart. Once the parents see how the child can walk and talk, they will be overcome with joy. The love that a human child receives from their parents is truly boundless, and so the saying goes “One’s father is akin to Heaven, one’s mother is akin to Earth.” If human beings

³⁶Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, 66.

³⁷Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 2, 750–51.

³⁸Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 2, 752.

³⁹Verbatim from *Mengzi* “Jin xin” 7A.15. The translation is from D. C. Lau, tr., *Mencius* (London: Penguin Books, 2003, revised edition [1970]), 148.

do not know to be filial, they consequently violate Heaven and Earth. They sever their very foundation. Are there really any people who, upon violating Heaven and Earth, like trees that destroyed their foundation, are able to rise up again?⁴⁰

臣羅汝芳演曰：人生世間，誰不由於父母，亦誰不曉得孝順父母。孟子曰孩提之童，無不知愛其親者，是說人初生之時，百事不知，而個個會爭着父母抱養，頃刻也離不得，蓋由此身原係父母一體分下，形雖有二，氣血只是一個，喘息呼吸，無不相通。況父母未曾有子，求天告地，日夜惶惶。一遇有孕，父親百般護持，母受萬般辛苦，十月將臨，身如山重，分胎之際，死隔一塵。得一子在懷，便如獲個至寶，稍有疾病，心腸如割，見兒能言能走，便喜歡不勝。人子受親之恩，真是罔極無比，故曰父即是天，母即是地。人若不知孝順，即是逆了天地，絕了根本，豈有人逆了天地，樹絕了根本而能復生者哉？

The diction of the text betrays that the target audience consisted of both the elite and commoners. In a pious style, Luo once again elaborates from his enlightenment episode, emphasizing the bond between parents and children.

A reading during a community compact was planned like a scripted performance. Aside from the key lecturer expounding the ritual rules of societal life, children were obliged to read poetry. It was laid out in Luo's compact that scholars and commoners (*shi min* 士民) participated in the regular assembly of a compact. Even scholars on their way to their official duties and those taking care of elders at home should "go to the session in order to rectify the rites of the compact" (*linhui yi zheng yueli* 臨會以正約禮).⁴¹ Presumably, Luo's aim in the community compact was to manage Ningguo in the way how Wang Yangming managed southern Jiangxi Province previously.

Part IV: Luo Rufang's Thought

Selecting sketches of Luo's life necessarily shortens what could be continued with more biographical material.⁴² Luo's highest position was in the provincial administration commission (*Zuo can zheng* 左參政) of Yunnan, a position he was promoted to in 1577 after successfully managing Yunnan since the winter of 1574 as a vice commissioner of state farms (*Tuntian fu shi* 屯田副使).⁴³ But Luo was impeached during his stay in Beijing in 1577, which marked the end of his career as an official.⁴⁴ In retirement, Luo constantly set out on lecturing tours in southern China.⁴⁵ He must have been especially active in Nanjing, where his disciples erected a shrine for him posthumously.

⁴⁰Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 2, 752–53.

⁴¹Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 2, 751.

⁴²The most comprehensive of the modern biographical accounts is Cheng Yu-Yin, *Wan Ming bei yiwang de sixiangjia*.

⁴³Cheng Yu-Yin, *Wan Ming bei yiwang de sixiangjia*, 84 and 116.

⁴⁴Both Huang Zongxi's *Records of Ming Scholars* and Fu Weilin's biography of Luo comment upon the impeachment, which apparently was schemed by Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525–1582). Luo gave lectures in a temple near Beijing, which continued the successful study gatherings popular among the followers of Wang Yangming. But Zhang wished to put an end to the assemblies of Yangming followers and thus asked a censor to impeach Luo, apparently for "not leaving [Beijing] after completing his duties and lingering on at the capital." Huang Tsung-hsi (i.e., Huang Zongxi) and Julia Ching, eds., *The Records of Ming Scholars* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987), 185.

⁴⁵Detailed maps of these tours are given in Cheng Yu-Yin, *Wan Ming bei yiwang de sixiangjia*, 8–12.

The *Records of Ming Scholars* is still the first source in which modern readers interested in Ming philosophy will encounter Luo and his thinking. Below is an account of Huang Zongxi's on Luo's philosophy,

Commentators say that Wang Ji's writings were superior to his verbal skills, while Luo Rufang's verbal skills were superior to his writings.⁴⁶ If one looked around and expected dull talk, [in contrast to that one would be involved in] erudite exchanges and enticing lectures. Wherever Luo was involved, it was much like the movement of spring and the triggering of thunder. Even if there were persons who never knew of [Neo-Confucian] learning, in a short time, Luo could enlighten their minds, [bringing forward] the Way right before their view. He swept away the superficial and formulaic styles of Neo-Confucianism. [He made sure that] he made an immediate impact [on his audience]. Indeed, there was nobody like him.⁴⁷

論者謂龍溪筆勝舌，近溪舌勝筆。顧盼吐欠，微談劇論，所觸若春行雷動，雖素不識學之人，俄頃之間，能令其心地開明，道在眼前。一洗理學膚淺套括之氣，當下便有受用，顧未有如先生者也。

Up to this line, Huang's characterization of Luo is remarkable. It reiterates the point that Taizhou thinkers could supposedly make a lasting impact on their audience. But this is of course colored historical writing. There are few direct accounts about the actual effect of Luo's lectures. Huang proceeds to make more substantial descriptions of Luo's philosophy:

But [Luo's] so-called [doctrine] of submitting easily to the primordial energy in every moment is but the [Chan Buddhist doctrine of] 'everything is at hand.' And the so-called [warning] to give one's living for a wrong cause is also the urge put forward [in the Chan Buddhist *koan*, in which it is said,] you⁴⁸ are quick-witted in awakening to the teachings, do not succumb to the world of [five] accretions.⁴⁹ Luo did not fall into [dry] principles and the [conventional Neo-Confucian] imagination. Luo truly understood the refined [teachings] of Chan patriarchs.⁵⁰

然所謂渾淪順適者，正是佛法一切現成。所謂鬼窟活計者，亦是寂子速道莫入陰界之呵。不落義理，不落想像，先生真得祖師禪之精者。

⁴⁶In actual translation and feel, my translation differs from the extant translation in Huang Tsung-hsi and Ching, eds., *The Records of Ming Scholars*, 188.

⁴⁷Huang Zongxi, *Huang Zongxi quanji*, vol. 8, 3.

⁴⁸Appealed to is Huiji 慧寂 (807–883), a Tang dynasty monk originally surnamed Ye 葉 who hailed from Zhaozhou 詔州, Guangdong. His teacher was Guishan Lingyou 滄山靈祐. He settled down in Yuanzhou 袁州, Jiangxi Province, and is counted to the Guiyang line 滄仰派, an early Chan school, but which already ceased by the time of the Song dynasty.

⁴⁹The five accretions 五陰 consist of one sensual and four mental components. The character *yin* is used in its sense as sediment or accretion. The sensual accretion (色陰) concerns all physical-material aspects of the body. The affective accretion (受陰) concerns all emotional aspects of the self. The imaginary accretion (想陰) concerns all imaginary and conceptual aspects. The action accretion (行陰) concerns the aspirations. The epistemological accretion (識陰) concerns perception and the distinguishing of things. The components are not essentialist, but it is assumed that every component in turn consists of many things.

⁵⁰Huang Zongxi, *Huang Zongxi quanji*, vol. 8, 3–4.

Accusing Ming Neo-Confucians of defiling their doctrines with Chan teachings was a common trope. Whether or not Ming Neo-Confucians like Luo or Wang Yangming were “outward Confucians and inward Buddhists” (*yangru yinshi* 陽儒陰釋) cannot be adequately discussed in the scope of this article. But what can be done, and what can help to better understand Luo’s philosophy, is to counter balance this Chan Buddhist reading of Luo with a passage from Luo’s works that develops a different picture. The passage comes from the *Collected Discourses of Master Jinxi* (*Jinxizi ji* 近溪子集), the first definitive discourse record attributed to Luo that is extant to this day.

One passage from the “Collected Discourses of Master Jinxi”

The content of the *Collected Discourses* is recorded discourse, mostly questions addressed to Luo and his subsequent answers. With rare exceptions, the interlocutors are anonymous. The received text comprises six *juan* and was compiled in the 1580s. Prefaces and evidence from the text itself suggest that the compilation of the text was arranged by an editorial team comprised of Luo and his disciples. What is translated in the following section is derived from the second *juan* of the record. It is not easy to discern a deliberate editorial sequence for the entries in the received text. Moreover, alternate editions of Luo’s discourses remove material from the *Collected Discourses* and arrange them anew. This may suggest that the editorial sequence is random, but, from reading the *Collected Discourses* as a whole, such assumptions would not make complete sense. The entire work does show signs of intentional arrangement. The scope of this article does not allow a long argument for this case, and only two short comments are offered here. First, *juan* one of the *Collected Discourses* starts out with questions on the *Great Learning*. This makes sense from the perspective of Luo’s biographical sketch. Luo needed an episode of enlightenment concerning this classic before he took the last examination in 1553. It was also commonly known that Wang Yangming explicitly used a reading of the *Great Learning* for new incoming students. So, that questions on the *Great Learning*, and also on its sister work *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) appear in the first fifteen entries of *juan* one of the *Collected Discourses* is likely not a coincidence. This suggests editorial arrangement. Second, if *juan* one started out to encompass the basic points that Luo wanted to deliver before going any further, the first question of *juan* two also sets the tone for the subsequent discourse. It is precisely in the first entry of *juan* two that Luo is asked about the “primary doctrine” (*zongzhi* 宗旨), which suggests that the wealth of entries of *juan* two do respond to this subject.

The original print of the *Collected Discourses* does not enumerate its entries. In entry seventeen of *juan* two, counted manually, a questioner involves Luo in the following discussion,

Many times I attended your [lectures], Teacher, listening to your instruction day and night. My sense is that when it comes to learning, one must exclusively follow Confucius’s [teachings]. What is more, I feel that Confucius’s learning predominantly concerns seeking benevolence, “without flagging and without growing weary.”⁵¹ Through this [mindset] one seeks benevolence, and one becomes

⁵¹Almost verbatim from *Mengzi* 2A.2, or alternatively with slightly different wording from *Analects* “Shu er” 7.2. Translation adapted from D. C. Lau, tr., *Confucius: The Analects (Lun yü)* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 86.

“fond of antiquity, quick to seek it.”⁵² And again, by such a [mindset] one is “without flagging and without growing weary.” I don’t know if you, Teacher, would approve of such thinking?⁵³

數時日夕侍先生聽教，覺得學要專宗孔子，又覺得孔子之學以求仁為主，不厭不倦，則所以求仁，而好古敏求，又所以不厭不倦也。不知是否？

The wording of the question comes close to how we might imagine the philosophical debates that swept across Ming China, everywhere where Wang Yangming’s students gathered to deliberate learning. In his reply Luo gives ample cross-references to his own upbringing. While it is ultimately unclear who the real author of a discourse record was, it may be considered to be the genuine Luo, who is recorded to have said:

With regard to your asking about approving, I do indeed approve. But back in my earlier days, I myself was unable to determine which sage I should follow. Nor did it occur to me that I should comprehend the primary doctrines and the practical tasks of moral learning embodied by the sages.⁵⁴

所問是則是矣。但某原日亦未便曉得去宗哪個聖人，亦未便曉得去理會聖人身上宗旨工夫。

Luo’s reply reveals one persistent subject for the Ming Neo-Confucians: the marriage of knowledge and practice. Luo concedes that he previously did not know from whom to learn, and that he was not aware that there were “primary doctrines” (*zongzhi* 宗旨) and “practical tasks for moral learning” (*gongfu* 工夫) tied to the sages. The original Chinese text is clearer in establishing that the two compound words “primary doctrines” and “practical tasks” are something that the personas of the sages emanate. One ought to “follow” (*zong* 宗) the sages, because they embody a perfect state in which no gap exists between knowing and doing.

The original Chinese language also has richer connotations. *Zong*, here translated as a verb “to follow,” contains a sense of ancestry and of veneration. It also includes the sense of “inheritance.” To follow the sages implied reading and becoming acquainted with the canonical works of Confucianism, in which one encountered multiple sages. One inherited the learning of the sages, and so “following” was not only passive, because it also implied that one came up with practical knowledge of the right action as represented by sages. Luo develops this line of argument most interestingly by providing an account of his youthful mindset and reading list:

In the beginning, day and night I only thought of becoming a good person. Ranking in the examination and a career in the bureaucracy were not enough to satisfy me in life. I was helpless and turned to the tasks [for moral learning] as told in *Reflections on Things at Hand and Great Compendium of Nature and Principle*. I trusted and accepted them and put into practice [whatever doctrine] I received from them, even to the extent of forgetting food and sleep, life, and death. And then I became helplessly sick. But I read how in the *Instructions for*

⁵²Almost verbatim from *Analects* “Shu er” 7.20. Translation adapted from Lau, tr., *The Analects*, 88.

⁵³Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 1, 52.

⁵⁴Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 1, 52.

Practical Living it was written: The way how the various Confucians set out the tasks for moral learning is not right.⁵⁵ From that moment on, I started to seek out books by Lu Jiuyuan, Yang Jian, and others. But even regarding the tasks for moral learning as laid out by the three teachers (i.e., Wang Yangming, Lu Jiuyuan, and Yang Jian), every time I ran up against an obstruction [when applying myself to them], and even though my sickness had slightly abated, I ultimately remained stuck and unsettled. At this time I was already twenty and my father was much concerned.⁵⁶

其初只是日夜想做個好人，而科名宦業，皆不足了生。想得無奈，卻把近思錄、性理大全所說工夫，信受奉行，也到忘食寢、忘死生地位。又病得無奈，卻看見傳習錄說：諸儒工夫未是。始去尋求象山、慈湖等書，然於三先生所為工夫，每有窒礙，病雖小愈，終沈滯不安。時年已弱冠，先君極為憂苦。

The young Luo, as recounted in the preceding biographical section, spent almost ten years roaming the country. His incessant reading did not bring about long-lasting understanding. It is at such junctions where the recorded discourse becomes playful and vivid. Subsequently there are several lines in which Luo recalls his ideal upbringing surrounded by a loving family. Then, Luo most likely writes about what happened in 1540, when he went to Nanchang for the provincial examination,

Fortunately, ever since my childhood I received excessive love from my parents, and my heart-mind thus reached out to my parents, my brothers, and sisters. We would also take care of each other. This was truly more sincere than seen among other people of the world. Therefore, every time I read passages in the *Analects* or in the *Mengzi* on filial piety and brotherly love, I would invariably be stirred emotionally, even moved to tears. In the beginning, I took this to be the normal course of human emotions, nothing especially important. But I did not imagine that later, in the text of the many masters, [the workings of filial piety and brotherly love] were turned into something tedious and painful. In the provincial capital [of Nanchang] I also attended a large assembly and heard of the elaborations of likeminded people and mentors. And so it struck me that only *this* was the route for becoming a good person. Alas, before I did not value this [normal experience of living within a family]. Instead, I strayed and drifted every which way, and did I not almost come close to death? From then I looked back and I read the *Analects* with greater care. I really felt that every word and every sentence were supremely precious. And then I read *Mencius*, and then the *Great Learning*, and then the *Doctrine of the Mean*. I found that every single word and every single sentence reflected another.⁵⁷

幸自幼蒙父母憐愛過甚，而自心於父母及弟妹，亦互相憐愛，真比世人十分切至。因此每讀論孟孝弟之言，則必感動，或長要涕淚。以先只把當做尋常人情，不為緊要，不想後來諸家之書，做得着累喫苦。又在省中逢著大會，與聞同志師友發揮，卻翻然悟得只此就是做好人的路徑，奈何不把

⁵⁵This might be no verbatim quote of Wang Yangming's *Instructions for Practical Living*, for I was not able to locate this phrase. Luo seems to paraphrase on Wang.

⁵⁶Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 1, 52.

⁵⁷Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 1, 52–53.

當數，卻去東奔西走，而幾至亡身也哉？從此回頭，將論語再來細讀，真覺字字句句重於至寶，又看孟子，又看大學，又看中庸，更無一字一句不相照映。

While Huang Zongxi painted Luo as on the brink of turning into a Chan Buddhist, what Luo probably intended the reader to believe is the very Confucian nature of his epiphany after a long bout of uncertain wandering—both physical and intellectual.

By appreciating the message of the Four Books, a thoroughly orthodox approach to Confucian learning, Luo ended his long period of doubt and suffering. He was now able to make more sense of the Confucian tradition. Because the Four Books became personal reading for Luo, he projects his own psychological state into that of Confucius and Mencius:

Henceforth (once every sentence in the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Great Learning*, and the *Doctrine of the Mean* made sense to Luo) I thought, Confucius and Mencius praised Yao and Shun to the utmost and said that their Way was just that of filial piety and brotherly love. Didn't Confucius and Mencius also learn until they were helpless, but then encountered this transforming key [to see things differently], and so Confucius said: "I was not born with knowledge but, being fond of Antiquity, I am quick to seek it."⁵⁸ And Mencius also said⁵⁹: "The compass and the carpenter's square are the culmination of squares and circles. The sage is the culmination of humanity."⁶⁰

由是卻想，孔孟極口稱頌堯舜，而說其道孝弟而已矣。豈非也是學得沒奈何，然後遇此機竅，故曰，我非生而知之者，好古敏以求之者也。又曰，規矩，方圓之至也。聖人，人倫之至也。

Luo believed that he came to realize the mindset of Confucius and Mencius, and so he felt even more resonance toward certain sayings of the two sages. Luo proceeds:

At that time, I felt that the spirits of Confucius and Mencius were blended together within me. All primary doctrines, all tasks of moral learning, I covered them all and linked them together, so that for each and every instance they were tallied with each other. However, there was the *Book of Changes*, whose doctrines I could not link together. But at that time I again happened upon some good fortune, because a friend from Chu (i.e., Hu Zongzheng 胡宗正) came to me to prepare for the civil service examinations. The way he lectured on the *Changes* was different from all the other interpreters. Later, because of the examinations approaching, we parted. When I achieved the *jinshi* in the capital, I regretted that I missed out on opportunities [to learn] face-to-face [from my friend]. I was overcome with agitation and knew no way out. Thus, I purported to be ill and returned home, taking care of my parents. Also, I sent someone [over to Hu Zongxian] and invited him to the mountains [where I lived].⁶¹ I asked him

⁵⁸Verbatim from *Analects* "Shu er" 7.20. Lau, tr., *The Analects*, 88.

⁵⁹What follows is from *Mengzi* "Li lou" 4A.2. Lau, tr., *Mencius*, 78.

⁶⁰Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 1, 53,

⁶¹Yu-Yin Cheng supposes that Luo learnt from Hu Zongxian in 1548. Luo Rufang took and passed his *jinshi* exam in 1544, though he did not partake in the palace exam that would actually make him a *jinshi*. Cheng Yu-Yin, *Wan Ming bei yiwang de sixiangjia*, 14.

at great length about details [of doctrine] and made humble requests. At first he said that he possessed an alternative transmission that he would not venture to pass on lightly. But I repeatedly treated him as my teacher and closed up my home for three months. I came to the very brink of death in doing so, but I at last received his assent.⁶²

其時孔孟一段精神，似覺渾融在中，一切宗旨、一切工夫，橫穿直貫，處處自相湊合。但有易經一書，卻貫串不來，時又天幸，楚中一友來從某改舉業，他談易經，與諸家甚是不同，後因科舉辭別。及在京及第，殊悔當面錯過，皇皇無策，乃告病歸，侍老親。因遣人請至山中，細細叩問，始言渠得異傳，不敢輕授。某復以師事之，閉戶三月，亦幾亡生，方蒙見許。

Luo's account is revealing of his psychological state. He might have understood the message of the Four Books, but he was less informed about the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經). In the exchange between Luo and Hu Zongxian, there is a factor of secret and coveted teachings, not elaborated on in the quote, that can only be transmitted in a relationship of trust between a teacher and his disciple. Luo needed more insight in the canonical *Changes* to gain back his confidence that he blended into the spirit of Confucius and Mencius.

Luo's reply to his interlocutor, which already developed into a full-fledged lecture and biography, then comes to an end:

As I see it, likeminded people in the present-day are great in number, but every time they discuss the matters of heart-mind and nature, they are not willing to read about such things carefully. Among them, there might be one or two who are really willing to read, but they read incredibly widely, and they spend their energies on the philosophers, histories, and other masters, but in terms of the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, they treat them insincerely and with coldness. Upon inquiring they say: "I've long understood this section and sentence. What need is there to go over the texts again and again?" Alas! The taste of the five grains indeed cannot compare to the delicacies of the sea and other exotic dishes. However, for preserving the life of one's body, they are indispensable. I casually reacted to the questions you raised and so respectfully described all this. And in considering that extending one's life is something that all people care about alike, then this diet consisting of essential grains is what everyone eats. As for whether [my lecture] can be put to use as a primary doctrine or not, this is not what I venture to know.⁶³

竊觀今時同志極是眾多，但每談心性者，便不肯小心看書，問一二肯讀者，又泛觀博覽，於子史諸家，便著精神，於論語、孟子，反枯淡冷落，叩之則曰：此個章句，我幾久曉了，何待今日贅贅耶？噫！五穀之味，固難比海錯珍羞，而要延軀命，則捨此不能。偶因吾子之問，而敬陳之。亦思軀命是人之所同愛，則此味穀食，亦未必不是人之所共餐也。至若可作宗旨與否，則非某之所敢知也已。

⁶²Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 1, 53.

⁶³Luo Rufang, *Luo Rufang ji*, vol. 1, 53.

Luo ends on a point of doubt. Can any lecture, any recorded talk, be easily transferred into a primary doctrine? The gist of this last utterance seems to support that he asked his disciples to engage in a more careful, personal, and intimate reading of the Confucian classics. Luo's corrective had the same point of departure as that of Wang Yangming. Because under the current educational regimen, people would not benefit from their reading of the classics, teachers like Luo or Wang needed to re-confirm that the classics were indeed good reading for actual moral learning.

Luo's philosophy, as it comes to the fore in this last section, is ultimately based on close readings of the Confucian classics. Luo does not aim for an all-in-one category that could be superimposed on the contents of the classics. There might be primary doctrines out there, but they are not to be understood as universal categories. They simply derive from the act of following a sage and trying to understand his teachings. Luo tries to follow the spirit of Confucius and Mencius and thus situates himself in a greater tradition of learning. Is Huang Zongxi's description of Luo as someone who obtained something from Chan Buddhist patriarchs warranted? Luo surely believed in the kind of instantaneous awakening that the Chan genre of encounter dialogues impresses on its readers. But just as Chan Buddhist iconoclasm did not do away with the day-to-day Buddhist practice of the monastic code, Luo's search for the spirit of Confucius and Mencius ultimately reinforces their authority. Luo's educational program was a process of going back to the basics. It consisted of close, intimate readings of the classics, furthered by recurrent discussions between teachers and disciples. Luo was convinced that with such a *modus operandi*, the moral messages of the Confucian classics would slowly be imprinted on the followers of the Confucian tradition. A teacher like Luo, who could bring their disciples back in moments of doubt, saw himself as a sincere follower of Confucius and Mencius.

Conclusion

There surely is a large difference between the pictures that historical sources paint of the Taizhou school and the writings of its proponents. It was in vogue to blame Neo-Confucians like Luo Rufang for incorporating too much Chan-sounding rhetoric. But by introducing biographical sketches, and further tracing them in the discourses that Luo had with his students, a more nuanced picture of the infamous "left-wing" Taizhou men emerges.

Luo Rufang, for his part, was following the Confucian tradition. He was convinced that the Confucian curriculum of canonical texts was still the best material for promising students. In the *Collected Discourse*, Luo is an advocate of a kind of learning that basically starts from following in the steps of Confucius and Mencius. In numerous dialogues with his interlocutors, Luo proves his versatility and confidence in intuiting the correct moral message from canonical readings. Reminiscent of Wang Yangming's idea of "innate knowing," Luo was convinced that true knowledge would eventually emerge if learners read and pondered the sayings of Confucius and Mencius. A prolonged commitment to the Confucian canon is prominent in Luo's own intellectual trajectory, some phases of which were committed to print in his discourses.

Were discourse records like the *Collected Discourses* a manual for Confucian practice? The passages under close reading do not confirm this assumption. Luo would not want his interlocutor to bring his instructions into a coherent, universal doctrine. More than in philosophical categories, Luo was interested in the encounter at hand. He surely saw that ancient Confucian sages embodied a set of doctrines and tasks for moral learning that could be reflected on by a follower. But instead of abstract

discourse presenting the reader with readymade principles they could follow like a manual for moral learning, Luo was willing to share a good deal of his own doubts and failures to convey the long quest of making sense of Confucian doctrine. The quest boiled down to a sincere reading of the classics.

But how much trust can be put into the kind of recorded discourse that Luo bequeathed to posterity? There is not a definitive answer to this. Chan-like encounter dialogues were certainly a literary genre, whose ingenuity grew more pronounced over time.⁶⁴ Neo-Confucian discourse records owe a great deal of their playfulness and ingenuity to the authoritative position, such as that of a Chan master or Neo-Confucian teacher, in asserting one as having seen “the truth.” The evidence gathered for this paper suggests that Luo’s biography and thinking go together. In his recorded discourse, Luo shares the troubles he had with discovering the most basic Confucian virtues of filial piety and brotherly love, which should be seen as an important trait of his individual discourse record: it presents coming to terms with Neo-Confucian doctrine in a realistic manner. If Luo’s biography and the sayings in his discourse record really do go together, then Neo-Confucian teachers emerged after a prolonged personal quest of making sense of their own tradition.

In a more critical source reading, literary methods that render Luo’s lecturing more convincing can be observed, and in turn his discourse might include fictional elements. But the analysis of the passages supports information from Luo’s biography; this also confirms that Luo’s dialogues and lectures were no utter fabrications. Luo’s discourse record seven more convincing as it really presented Luo as someone who struggled in his search for authority, expressed cogently as “which sage should I follow?” There was a sincere philosophical quest behind Luo’s story: once he followed and personally situated himself in the tradition of Confucius and Mencius, he gained a view of things so thorough and comprehensive that it fueled the remainder of his lecturing life. No matter how we validate the means through which Ming Neo-Confucians arrived at their conclusions about the classics, their more personal appreciation of the tradition was fresh and innovative. This perhaps exclusively Ming approach started with the likes of Wu Yubi, found a temporary climax in Wang Yangming, but continued to reverberate in the lives of Yangming school followers like Luo Rufang. Accordingly, Luo Rufang’s discourse records surprisingly reveal the number of problems and struggles that Luo went through for his exploration of the Neo-Confucian tradition. Luo’s biography makes the message of his lectures more authentic.

⁶⁴This is one of the main arguments in Alan Cole, *Patriarchs on Paper: A Critical History of Medieval Chan Literature* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).