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# Friendship and filial piety in Ming Neo-Confucianism

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## Abstract

This article discusses friendship and filial piety in Ming Neo-Confucianism, particularly the *Yangming* learning. I argue that the Yangming *jianghui* provided important social settings for elevating the value of friendship. True friendship was considered as a means for moral improvement, and to prevent the risk of moral subjectivism in the *Yangming* philosophy.

I also revisit the question of whether Ming Neo-Confucians did challenge the order of the five cardinal relationships by elevating friendship as the most important one. Through the investigation of filial piety in imperial culture and the *Yangming* learning, I emphasize that filial piety was not only the basis of socio-political order, but also the essence of the true self. The importance of friendship lies in its capacity to aid moral cultivation and to become a better self. It could never surpass that of filial piety. It remained a supplement to familial ethics.

**Keywords:** Friendship; Filial piety; Ming Neo-confucianism; Yangming philosophy

When Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865–1898) called for people to “break through all trapping nets” (*congjué wangluo* 衝決網羅) in the world, he imagined an ideal of cosmopolitan equality far beyond the reality of Chinese and western civilization. To obtain this equality, all hieratical social relationships had to be abolished and only friendship preserved.<sup>1</sup> Tan’s elevation of friendship was based on a harsh criticism of traditional Chinese culture and pointed to the reform of China. For Tan, friendship represented the spirit of equality, freedom, and voluntariness, which constitutes the principles of Chinese new politics and civilization (Tan Sitong 1958: 58–61). From Tan Sitong to the May Fourth period, elevating friendship over other social relationships and harshly criticizing traditional Chinese family organization and filial piety became mainstream in the discourse of reform (see Wu Yu 1985: 61–70, 172–177; Wang Fansen 2003: 241–274).

<sup>1</sup>See Tan Sitong (1958: 3), Chang Hao (1987: 66–103), Wang Yue (1990: 52–65, 93–98).

By contrast, when late Ming Confucians elevated the importance of friendship, they never doubted the orthodoxy of Confucian familial ethics or the legitimacy of imperial political regimes. In their views, equality was the ideology of Buddhism, not the teachings of Confucian sages; the hierarchical human relationship centering on filial piety was Heaven's mandate. They believed that the emperor should 'rule all under the heaven by filial piety' (*xiaozhi tianxia* 孝治天下), a phrase from the *Xiaojing* (*The Classic of Filial Piety*, Ruan Yuan 1982: 33-34). Filial piety was not only the affections and ethical obligations between father and son, but also the core of Chinese socio-political order and the foundation of the state (Lu, Miawfen 2011: 1-51, 99-131; Kutcher 2000: 1615-1629). Considering the social and political contexts, when we read late Ming Neo-Confucians' elevation of the value of friendship as a "challenge" to the order of traditional five cardinal relationships (*wulun* 五倫), we need a nuanced interpretation.<sup>2</sup> In my previous study, I also mentioned that late Ming Neo-Confucians challenged the order of the five cardinal relationships (Lu, Miawfen 2003a: 295-325). I will try to revise my previous argument or at least to give a more balanced one in this paper.

This paper aims to investigate the discourse and practice of friendship by Ming Neo-Confucians, especially those who belonged to the Wang Yangming School. I will discuss the social contexts of their elevation of the importance of friendship. The overwhelming importance of filial piety in both socio-political and philosophical conditions of the time will be taken into account. I will also try to expound how the new message about friendship within family members advocated by late Ming Neo-Confucians was in accord with their support of imperial political ideology and Confucian family values.

### Neo-Confucians' *jianghui* activities and their elevation of friendship

Voluntary associations of literati dominated late Ming society, including Yangming Neo-Confucians' *jianghui* 講會 (associations for discussion and learning), literary societies (*wenshe* 文社), benevolent societies (*tongshan hui* 同善會), and the Buddhist associations for releasing animals (*fangsheng hui* 放生會) and Amitabha recitation (*nianfo hui* 念佛會).<sup>3</sup> Although the purposes of these associations were different, they all flourished in common social conditions: economic growth and urbanization, increasing educational opportunities, and growing numbers of students preparing for the civil service examinations in local society.<sup>4</sup> These associations were usually formed by like-minded friends and became an important social arena in which the participants would exchange ideas, identify common interests, and facilitate social actions.

In the history of the Ming Neo-Confucianism, Wang Yangming's 王陽明 (1472-1529) philosophy was one of the most significant shaping forces. The impact of Wang Yangming's philosophy went far beyond Confucian discourse and practice; it influenced a wide range of cultural activities, including literary writing and religious practice, and even crossed boundaries between social classes. While Wang Yangming was alive, his thought was widely studied and successfully constructed into an intellectual school. After Wang died in 1529, the scattering of his disciples sped up the spread of his teachings, and the most important conduits for transmission of Yangming

<sup>2</sup>See McDermott 1992, Chen Baoliang 2000, Huang 2007.

<sup>3</sup>See He Zongmei 2003; Fuma 1997; Wu Zhen 2003; Yü Chün-fang 1981: 76-87.

<sup>4</sup>See Ho Ping-ti 1962: 173-179; Chen Baoliang 2005: 196-216; Rawski 1985.

learning were *jianghui* (Lu, Miawfen 2003a: 21-71). Yangming *jianghui* were usually led by Yangming scholars and gentry, and attracted local government students (*shengyuan* 生員) to participate in philosophical discussion and moral cultivation. In many localities, the *jianghui* developed into well-organized associations that met regularly. They united the locally dominant class to elevate and propagate Yangming learning, and therefore crucial to the spread of Yangming learning in local society (ibid.: 73-110).

Many Yangming Neo-Confucians enthusiastically participated in *jianghui* activities. They called each other *tongzhi* 同志 (like-minded friends), implying that their relationship was bounded by the same resolve to engage in sagely learning. They also emphasized the necessity of friendship in moral cultivation. In fact, Yangming Neo-Confucians often mentioned the importance of friendship in the context of calling for participation in *jianghui*. For example, Wang Yangming said: 'There is no advantage of learning greater than that derived from mutual learning with friends and from never being satisfied with frequently attending *jianghui*' (Wang Yangming 2006: 180). Wang Gen 王艮 (1483-1541) said:

Only with the advice of wise teachers and good friends, can one's moral practice (*gongfu* 工夫) be free from mistakes. Therefore, it was said: "Due to teachers and friends, morality and righteousness are established". Otherwise, I am afraid that, although one commits oneself to good deeds, one will neither manifest [the truth] in his behavior, nor notice [mistakes] in his practice. As for those who like to sit quietly in remote mountains, aren't they indulging in their eccentric fondness for quietness and aversion to movement? I hope that you will come to participate in our meeting (*hui* 會) and discussion. This is a great opportunity occurring only once in a thousand years. (Wang Gen 1631: 5.3a)

Both Wang Yangming and Wang Gen encouraged people to participate in *jianghui*, because they believed only through the mutual help among friends can one's moral practice be free from mistakes. Wang Ji 王畿 (1498-1583), one of the most enthusiastic *jianghui* leaders in his time, encouraged people to attend *jianghui* regularly. He said: 'The relationship between learning and friends is like that between fish and water. A separation of even one day will lead to dehydration (Wang Ji: 53). Luo Rufang 羅汝芳 (1515-1588) also said: 'The only important thing is to participate in *jianghui*, and to associate with friends'. He encouraged his disciples to always learn among friends, saying: 'If I do not see twenty or thirty guests gathering around your place, I will consider you have not improved much' (Luo Rufang 2007: 2.18a-b).

From the above quotations we see that when Neo-Confucians emphasized the importance of friendship, they also encouraged friends to participate in *jianghui* activities. They not only valued friendship conceptually, but often referred to a certain concrete circle of friends and regular meetings. This phenomenon indicates that *jianghui* occupied a crucial role in their moral cultivation and in their social life.

Some Yangming Neo-Confucians saw the *jianghui* as sanctuaries for moral pursuits, the locus for the realization of their ideals and life aspirations. They tended to share their deepest motivations and loftiest aspirations with like-minded friends in *jianghui*. Zhou Chong 周衝 (1485-1532) described how he relied on mutual discussion and exhortation with like-minded friends, saying: 'If I cannot discuss with friends for three or five days, I feel feeble. I am easily puzzled and confused while dealing with affairs, and

often stray from [the correct path of mind]' (Wang Yangming 2006: 57). Lou Hongxian 羅洪先 (1504-1564) said: 'I have relied on friends to gain some knowledge. I understand that we should not live in solitude. If I cannot see friends for ten days, I am in a state of anxiety. If there is a letter from a friend of mine, I hurry to receive it even without putting on my shoes carefully' (Lou Hongxian 2007: 211). These descriptions show a strong psychological reliance on friends. To part with friendship associations would cause anxiety.

The *jianghui* provided not only an arena for friendship associations and spiritual pursuits, but also very concrete material help. They also functioned as charities in local society. Both the Penglai Association (蓬萊會) and the Chishan Association (赤山會) asked members to participate in local charity by helping the poor and the needy (Xiao Yong 1967: 16b-17a; Wang Ji 2007: 103-109). Besides receiving help from local organizations, it was common to receive help from individual friends in private. Famous cases included the efforts of Cheng Xueyan 程學顏 to rescue He Xinyin 何心隱 (1517-1579) and Lou Rufang's aid to Yan Jun 顏鈞 (1504-1596).<sup>5</sup> Geng Dingli 耿定理 (b. 1541) and Zhou Sijiu 周思久 provided room and board for Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602) (Zhang Jianye 1981: 66-67, 80). When Wang Yangming died, his disciples and friends dealt with the family crisis and took care of the education and marriage of his son (Wang Yangming 2006: 1488-1489). Moreover, friends helped to construct academies. The construction of the Tongdao Study (東淘精舍), where Wang Gen taught, relied on donations from Wang Gen's disciples and official support from Hong Yuan 洪垣 (1532 *jinshi*), a salt-control censor (Wang Tong in Wang Gen 1631: 1.25b). When Lou Hongxian constructed the Stone-lotus Cave (*shilien dong* 石蓮洞), a place Lou used for intensive moral practice and for receiving disciples and friends, he received help from Wang Zongmu 王宗沐 (1523-1592) and Yin Tai 尹臺 (1506-1579) (Lou Hongxian 2007: 245).

Of course, mutual material help between friends was not peculiar to the Yangming Neo-Confucian circles; this practice has a long history. By highlighting it here, I would like to emphasize that the functions of *jianghui* were more than moral pursuits and spiritual support. Their function as channels for material help and for social and political networking was equally important. During the late Ming, scholars, gentry, and officials formed a perfect team to promote the Yangming philosophy and construct academies. The Yangming *jianghui* and the networks surrounding them provided for its affiliates not only the opportunity to commit themselves to moral cultivation, but also the chance to manipulate power. The intellectual networks were, therefore, inevitably involved in politics, at least in the cultural domain of social domination. Private intellectual gatherings and discussions and the construction of private academies sometimes led to serious political criticism and factional struggles. One serious case is seen in the order of Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525-1582) to abolish academies in 1579 (He Weixuan 2009: 137-168, Meskill 1982: 137-138). Occasionally, academies and literary societies incurred severe persecution, as was the case with the Dongling group.<sup>6</sup>

To sum up, the Yangming Neo-Confucians' strong psychological reliance on friends resonated with their lifestyle of enthusiastically associating with friends. This lifestyle was formulated on the basis of their moral ideals and expressed in their *jianghui*

<sup>5</sup>See He Xinyin (1960: 2, 120-121), Zhang Tingyu et al. (1974: 286.7276).

<sup>6</sup>See Xie Guozhen (1935: 31-47), Ono (1996).

activities. Within *jianghui*, the bonds of friendship inspired assistance in moral practice, spiritual and material support, and even social and political alliances.

At the philosophical level, there was important meaning for Yangming Neo-Confucians' elevation of friendship. Wang Yangming's philosophy advocates developing humanity by oneself, rather than relying on others; personal volition is central to moral cultivation, and *liangzhi* 良知 (innate moral knowledge) the foundation of morality. Therefore, the most important prerequisite for moral cultivation is the resolve to engage in learning and the belief in one's own moral capacity. The Yangming Neo-Confucians often highlighted this point and called on scholars to set their minds on the pursuit of morality.<sup>7</sup> However, they did not think that one could accomplish morality just by oneself. They also emphasized friendship as a prerequisite for moral cultivation. The following quotation from Wang Yangming (2006: 158-159) demonstrates this well:

If one has not set one's mind on sagely learning, nothing can be done. Today, there are some resolute scholars. But if they cannot have teachers and friends to illuminate the truth, they will take *qi* for *li*, and mistakenly have strong self-confidence. Under such circumstances, even if they diligently make efforts all their life, it will in the end be fruitless. What a pity.

In other words, although personal volition was the core of moral action, teachers and friends formed a necessary condition. One should fully trust one's own *liangzhi*, but at the same time to carefully avoid misunderstandings of the *liangzhi*, which could lead, in Wang Yangming's words, to 'taking *qi* for *li* and mistakenly have strong self-confidence'. Wang Yangming thought that teachers and friends could guard against those misunderstandings.

Similar messages were also expressed by other Yangming Neo-Confucians. For example, Wang Ji, the famous advocate of the theory of "actualized *liangzhi*" (*xiancheng liangzhi* 現成良知), said: 'Without the moral exhortation and inspiration of teachers and friends, one cannot avoid falling into instability and remaining content with one's own ignorance' (Wang Ji 2007: 45).<sup>8</sup> Wang Gen: '(One's own *liangzhi*) is the simplest and easiest way of learning. However, the instruction of wise teachers and good friends are necessary to prevent one from slipping into wrong practice' (1987: 5.3a). Ouyang De 歐陽德 (1496-1554) also said:

Today, the biggest trouble is that scholars lack the resolve to learn. When one has resolve, the next trouble is lack of teachers and friends to illuminate the truth. Without one's friends' help, one will be satisfied with one's own way and think that one has captured the once-lost learning from the Classics. One will never notice that one has deviated from the correct path of learning. (Ouyang De 2007: 99)

Wang Yangming's philosophy marked a peak in the emphasis on moral subjectivity in Chinese Confucian tradition. To be a sage was merely to extend one's own *liangzhi*

<sup>7</sup>For one should trust one's own *liangzhi*. See Wang Ji 2007: 42, 96; Peng Guoxiang 2019: 106-122.

<sup>8</sup>See also Peng Guoxiang (2003).

to the myriad things and affairs. This moral subjectivity, however, was inevitably accompanied by the risk of a lack of objective judgment and of falling back into self-righteousness. Although, in theory, it was said that one's *liangzhi* could judge perfectly all the time, in actual practice, how could one make sure that one's knowledge and judgment were truly stemming from one's *liangzhi*? From the above quotations we see that the Yangming Neo-Confucians emphasized looking for verification among friends. They warned that without friends' verification, the insight gained by oneself could easily fall into blind confidence.

When like-minded friends gathered to have a *jianghui*, they set up certain objective criteria to verify the sagely learning in their dialogues and discussions. Although these objective criteria could not replace the crucial role of personal resolve, they could function as a guide and verification of one's self-realization. They could also prevent scholars from slipping into moral subjectivism. Therefore, we can say that the Yangming Neo-Confucians' emphasis on the prerequisite of friendship for moral cultivation functioned as a counterforce reducing the risk of subjectivism in their philosophy. To study Wang Yangming's philosophy without giving due weight to his argument on friendship presents an incomplete picture of his view of self-cultivation.

Furthermore, some scholars elevated the importance of friendship by referring to it as the ultimate ideal of humanity, a view of humanity in the unity of myriad beings (*wanwu yiti zhi ren* 萬物一體之仁). The Confucian concept of humanity defined the correct relationships between the myriad beings in the universe and prescribed both the ideal behavior of human beings and the content of learning. Nothing in this world is static or can really be isolated. Instead, the universe is ever generating (*shengsheng* 生生) and every being is continuously in transformation and interacting with other beings. Therefore, in striving to accomplish the ultimate goal of being a human being, one should always keep in mind the human relationships and fulfill one's social responsibilities. Even during the heyday of syncretic approaches to the Three Teachings, the Yangming Neo-Confucians distinguished their ideas from Buddhism and Taoism based on this Confucian ideal.<sup>9</sup> Yangming Neo-Confucians often quoted Confucius' saying – 'If I am not the companion of these people, who else should I keep company with?' – to highlight the importance of friendship and their *jianghui*.<sup>10</sup> They also encouraged friends to participate in *jianghui* for social and cultural improvements. Wang Ji (2007: 224, 237) disapproved of the attitude of pursuing enlightenment by and for oneself (*zeliào hān* 自了漢). He claimed that learning is about sociopolitical engagement (*jingshi* 經世), which extends from the mind imbued with the capacity for unceasing practice and the unification of all things (Wang Ji 2007: 274).

In sum, Yangming Neo-Confucians saw association among people within social communities as the only correct form of human life, and claimed their friendship association in *jianghui* as the ideal way to realize their moral pursuit. They did not confine the ideal friendship to the realization of personal morality, but viewed it as a means of social participation, linking sociopolitical engagement to the Confucian ideal of humanity. In their presentations, friendship was a prerequisite for moral cultivation, and *jianghui* an ideal community of friendship and a means to improve social customs and realize political ideals.

<sup>9</sup>For example, see Wang Gen (1987: 3.11a-b), Wang Ji (2007: 82-83, 224).

<sup>10</sup>For example, see Wang Ji (2007: 9).

### Male friendship and personal moral pursuit outside the home

Many Yangming *jianghui* periodically held meetings for intellectual discussions and moral practice. The membership of *jianghui* was mainly composed of eminent Yangming scholars, local officials, and local government students. Only in few local *jianghui* or special meetings were common people allowed to participate.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, in general, Yangming *jianghui* belonged to the associations of elites; their members were all male and had the intellectual capacity to explore abstruse philosophical questions.

*Jianghui* provided their members opportunities to escape from social interference and familial affairs with a very noble reason. By claiming to be in pursuit of the sagely learning, the Yangming Neo-Confucians also intended to distinguish themselves from the members of other literary societies. Associating with friends who possessed the same enthusiasm for and belief in sagely learning, scholars enjoyed the spiritual exchange and self-realization provided by friendship association in the *jianghui*.

We have mentioned Yangming Neo-Confucians' strong psychological reliance on friends. Some of them also vividly described the delightful experience of a circle of friends learning from each other. For example, Zhou Chong said that friendship filled one's spirit with life and vitality, which could not be matched by solitary quiet-sitting or reading (Wang Yangming 2006: 57). Luo Rufang compared the joy and release brought on by mutual discussion with friends to ice melting into water in a gentle breeze (1977: 1.64). Zhou Rudeng 周汝登 (1547-1629) described how he benefited from friends throughout different stages of his life. When he was young and dedicated to study for the civil service examinations, he studied with a group of friends. He said that he could go without seeing his wife for six months, but could not be without association with friends for one day. When Zhou reached middle age, he engaged in pursuing the Dao. He not only discussed with Confucians, but also with Buddhists, and enjoyed the ways they pushed him to investigate the Dao.<sup>12</sup> The intellectual and religious interactions with friends were the deepest joy for Zhou. The following description of Luo Rufang and his friends demonstrates the culture of friendship associations in late Ming:

When our master Luo planned to go somewhere, all the members of our groups would prepare themselves to receive him. When the day came and the master arrived, there were often several tens of friends gathering to live as a community. The next day, the number of participants usually increased to one hundred, no less than fifty or sixty at least. For another one or two days, the number of friends participating often increased to two or three hundred. When the meeting was over and the master left, friends were reluctant to part and often saw the master off by accompanying him for two or three hundred miles (li) before returning. (Luo Rufang 1977: 2.73b)

This description shows scholars' fondness for association with like-minded friends. This life-style also stimulated many to undertake long journeys in search for friends.

<sup>11</sup>See Lu, Miaowfen (2003a: 73-110), Luo Rufang (2007: 420).

<sup>12</sup>See Zhou Rudeng (1997: 4.10b-12b); also see Eichman 2016: 23-25.



The ideal of making friends with all virtuous scholars under the heaven (*you tianxia zhi shi* 友天下之士), stated by Mencius, was embraced by many Ming Neo-Confucians.<sup>13</sup> Luo Rufang (1977: 2.38) once talked about how he endeavored to pursue friendship in his youth:

I finished the metropolitan examination and went back home. I aspired to travel in the four directions. In the beginning, I took three or four servants with me. Later, I had one or two to accompany me. Finally, I traveled alone, taking no servant with me. The people I planned to visit included the famous scholars of the empire, the old gentlemen living as recluses in the mountains, and renowned Buddhists and Taoists. When I arrived at these people's places, I sent them a short note, simply writing my name. Sometimes, they treated me as a physiognomist or a geomancer. My plea for a visit was sometimes received, sometimes turned down, but I never felt disturbed. When I met with them, we usually had a long talk before I left.

This passage records Luo's journey of 1547. At that time, Luo Rufang went to Jian Prefecture in Jiangxi Province to visit Yan Jun, Nieh Bao 聶豹 (1547-1563), Lou Hongxian, and Zou Shouyi 鄒守益 (1491-1562). In addition to discussions with these famous Neo-Confucians, Luo Rufang with his strong desire for pursuing friendship, travelled in solitude to visit various types of scholars, including Buddhists and Daoists. In order to find true friendship, Luo chose to reduce the influence of social status and opted for a more natural way to contact people.

For many scholars, engaging in long journeys in the pursuit of friendship occupied an important role in their intellectual life. From Lou Hongxian's 'A record of a winter journey' (*Dongyou ji* 冬遊記), we can see how Ming scholars interwove travel, sight-seeing, friendship associations, intellectual discussions, and moral practice in their long journeys (Lou Hongxian 2007: 53-64). Many scholars, such as Zuo Shouyi, Wang Ji, and Luo Rufang, loved to travel around to different *jianghui*. Zou Shouyi attended about seventy *jinaghui*, each one with hundreds of participants (Gen Dingxiang 1997: 14.27). Both Qian Dehong 錢德洪 (1496-1574) and Wang Ji traveled to *jianghui* in their sixties and eighties, an example of the Yangming Neo-Confucians' enthusiasm for searching for friends (Huang Zongxi 1987: 225, 238).

Wang Tuo 王訖, a disciple of Lou Hongxian, traveled in the 'four directions' to pursue friendship. He traveled so often that his wife had to sell jewelry to help him out. He also relied on his wife to take care of the family. Hu Zhi 胡直 (1517-1585) in his epitaph for Wang Tuo wrote: 'Thanks to his wife, Wang Tuo could practice filial piety and brotherly respect at home, and make friends with scholars throughout the whole empire' (Hu Zhi 1983: 12.14b-15a). Women were not allowed to participate in *jianghui* activities, but in many cases, those Neo-Confucians were able to full-heartedly participate

<sup>13</sup>For example, see Luo Hongxian (2007: 236). As for the social conditions that enabled practices, the development of transportation and customs for increasing spatial mobility, the civil service examination system that gathered the most talented scholars throughout the state in capital every three years, and the trans-local *jianghui* organizations were all important factors. See Ren Huanlin 2013 Wu Renshu & Di Biase 2010. For Yangming Neo-Confucians's traveling to make friends and participate in intellectual activities, see Tsai Shumin 2010.



in *jianghui* only because their wives took familial responsibilities for them (Lu, Miawfen 2003b). Accordingly, we can imagine the tension between friendship associations and family life emerging in daily life.

In some writings, scholars did compare family life with friendship associations and elevated the latter as ideal arena for learning. For example, Wan Ji (2007: 120) said:

Once I left home for a journey, I had different vision and spirit. When I made friends with other literati, we only engaged in discussing this (sagely) learning. All day, we gathered to concentrate in pursuit of this (sagely) learning. Therefore, not only did wandering thoughts and wild fancy not emerge, but also, vulgar customs could not take root in our minds. Thus, our spirits were concentrated and our ideas in harmony. If one would like to understand one's own nature (*xingming* 性命), one needs to mutually learn with and mutually exhort like-minded friends.

According to Wang Ji's own account, his character was not good at managing family affairs. He relied on his wife to take care of the whole family (Wang Ji 2007: 647-648). In some writings, he regarded family life as an obstacle to learning, because it caused people to indulge in vulgar pleasures (Wang Ji 2007: 120). On the contrary, association with like-minded friends he linked to the ideal arena of sagely learning. He argued that *jianghui* enable men to concentrate and learn from each other, and were therefore the ideal loci for engaging in the sagely learning. Wang Ji said: 'No matter whether we are in or out of office, known or unknown in the world, we should always be in pursuit of friendship to improve ourselves.' For him, instead of holing up at home, men should walk out to associate with friends and embrace the whole world (*ibid.*).

When friendship association was contrasted with family life and the importance of the former was elevated, it sounded peculiar in Confucian tradition, since friendship was the last of the five cardinal relationships and sometimes considered dangerous (Kutcher 2000). How, then, should we understand the discourse of friendship in Ming Neo-Confucianism? In what ways were these scholars unprecedented and creative? Before we return to this issue, we should look at the ideas and culture of filial piety in late imperial China in order to provide a balanced judgment.

### Filial piety in imperial culture and Yangming philosophy

In imperial China, the state was modeled on the principles of family organization. Filial piety was much more than taking good care of one's parents or a personal virtue. It was considered the root of all virtues and the basis of the socio-political order. The hierarchical relationship and the natural affections between parents and children, as well as the unconditional obligation on children toward their parents, all constituted the meaning of filial piety. The virtue of filial piety was also extended to political field. Emperor and officials were treated as great father figures, and filial piety could be transformed into loyalty (*yixiao zuozhong* 移孝作忠). To rule all under heaven by filial piety was the ideology of Chinese imperial governmentality (Lu, Miawfen 2011: 99-131). Even the relationship between heaven and human beings was described as the father-son relationship. Therefore, filial piety also constituted the right attitude of human beings toward the heaven, as well as the key to knowing and serving heaven

(*zhitian shitian* 知天事天), a concept from the *Mencius*.<sup>14</sup> In short, filial piety was the ideological basis for traditional Chinese society; it was both the foundation of the natural order and a moral prescription for human society.

During the late imperial period, the culture and ideology related to filial piety was a mega system consolidated by various institutions and forces. For example, the rapid development of lineage organizations in southern China from the late fifteenth century onward promoted filial education and culture, such as family rituals and lineage regulations.<sup>15</sup> Filial commendations and the teachings of the Sacred Edict were implemented by the state and penetrated to local societies.<sup>16</sup> The publication and performing of filial stories, the moral lessons taught in morality books, and religious exhortations all helped the culture of filial piety to prevail (Lu, Miawfen 2011: 42-46). Moreover, a wave of studying, publishing, and promoting the *Xiaoqing* took place during the late Ming (Lu, Miawfen 2006, 2011: 99-131). Therefore, the teaching of filial piety in imperial China was supported by the state, lineages, the legal system, and religious groups, as well as intellectual trends. It was not only law, but also social norms that shaped people's behaviors and values. When Catholics encountered Chinese culture in the late Ming, filial piety was also a crucial issue. Jesuits who came to China faced the criticism of being unfilial because their vocation required celibacy and abandoning familial obligations. They had to argue that no contradiction existed between their religion and Chinese filial culture, explaining how they valued filial piety and performed filial piety toward the greatest father in Heaven (God).<sup>17</sup>

In addition, filial piety occupied an important position in Yangming philosophy as well. In his youth, Wang Yangming engaged in different religious practices to pursue the Dao. Wang finally confirmed his position in the Confucian Way due to his personal experience of being unable to give up the idea of loving his grandmother and father. He then realized that filial love was innate within human nature; filial piety was the essence of *liangzhi*, and therefore the core of Yangming philosophy (Wang Yangming 2006: 1226).

Filial piety was equally important in Luo Rufang's philosophy. Luo's thought was grounded in filial piety with fraternal and parental love (*xiao ti ci* 孝弟慈) as the manifestation of one's human nature endowed by heaven (Wu Zhen 2005: 211-223). He said that parents, brothers, and all descendents embody the ever-lasting heavenly mandate, and this mandate is demonstrated in filial piety with fraternal and parental love. From a diachronic perspective, the relationship based on filial piety with fraternal and parental love links the ancient past to the present; from a synchronic perspective, it constitutes families, the state, and all institutions under heaven (Luo Rufang 2007: 233). In short, for Luo Rufang, filial piety was the foundation of sagely learning and the key to moral practice and cultural transformation.

Luo Rufang (in Yang Qiyuan 1922: 29b-30a) also equated filial piety with the humanity of human nature (*ren* 仁). He claimed that filial piety and humanity were the same, a view that differed from those of Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi 朱熹

<sup>14</sup>According to the *Mencius*, if a person can fully understand his own nature and fully cultivate it, the person would be able to know and serve heaven. *Mencius* 7A:1, *Mengzi zhushu* 13, in Ruan Yuan (1982: 228).

<sup>15</sup>See Zheng Zhenman 2001, Faure 2007, Chang Jianhua 2005, Ho Shuyi 2009.

<sup>16</sup>See Chang Jianhua (2006: 70-81), Zhou Zhenhe 2006.

<sup>17</sup>See Huang Yinong (2005: 131-174, 482), Ricci (2005: 2.65a-b), Lü Miaofen 2018.

(1130-1200). Cheng-Zhu distinguished humanity from filial piety, and thought the former was the substance of human beings while the latter was the function of that substance.<sup>18</sup> In other words, filial piety belongs to the category of *qing* (情), while humanity to that of *xing* (性). By contrast, Luo Rufang elevated filial piety to the metaphysical level of human nature, equating it with *liangzhi*. Luo Rufang's view was adopted by many contemporary Neo-Confucians, including Jiao Hong 焦竑 (1540-1620), Pan Pingge 潘平格 (1610-1677), and Yang Qiyuan 楊起元 (1547-1599).<sup>19</sup> This view of filial piety also influenced the interpretations of Confucian classics, such as those of the *Analects*, the *Xiaojing*, and the *Ximing* 西銘 (Western inscription, see Lu, Miaowfen 2008).

Since filial piety was believed to be heavenly-endowed humanity within one's nature, the practice of filial piety could also be the practice of the mind-heart. Many Neo-Confucians thought filial piety the most important moral practice and the first step to realize perfect humanity. Some even called filial piety the unified practice (*yiguan gongfu* 一貫工夫) or the thoroughly cutting-through practice (*cheshang chexia gongfu* 徹上徹下工夫). For example, An Shifeng 安世鳳 (1557/8-?) said that human beings could encounter heaven through filial piety, and through the practice of filial piety, all moral practices were linked together (1621: 8.9b-10a, 14.19a-b).<sup>20</sup> Yu Chunxi 虞淳熙 (1553-1621), a scholar inclined to synthesize the Three Teachings, believed that a person who fully extended *liangzhi* would behave with perfect filial piety and fraternal love, and attain the state of transcendental substance of the Dao. Yu also called for a mental practice of fulfilling filial piety (*quanxiao xinfa* 全孝心法), which was involved in controlling *qi*, absorbing spirit, and practicing purification (Yu Chunxi 1995: 182). Wang Qiyuan 王啓元 (1622 *jinshi*) had similar ideas and called filial piety the unity of learning (*yiguan zhixue* 一貫之學).<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, Ming Neo-Confucians such as He Xinyin 何心隱 (1517-1579), Zhou Rudeng, and Li Zhi all emphasized familial obligations despite their simultaneous elevation of friendship. He Xinyin (1960: 68-73) was acknowledged for his unprecedented elevation of friendship, but he also had an ideal vision of lineage community. Zhou Rudeng, whose thought was close to that of Wang Ji, enjoyed studying with friends and said that he could not part with friends for one day. But Zhou also emphasized the importance of engagement in sagely learning in family life. He said, 'It is important to carry out Wang Yangming's teachings by bodily practice, which should be realized in the domestic field, and based on filial piety, fraternal love, loyalty, and faithfulness to pursue moral refinement in all circumstances' (Zhou Rudeng 1970: 2.5a). Zhou also acknowledged that no learning existed without family (*ibid.*: 2.13b-14a). Li Zhi was considered an iconoclast, eccentric, and individualist in the late Ming. He nevertheless never rejected filial piety (Epstein 2020). Li Zhi depicted himself as an exemplary filial son who made sacrifices to fulfill his filial obligations (2000: 78-81). Although Li Zhi took Buddhist tonsure in 1588, he said: 'Those who pursue Buddhism must follow Buddhist practices, and filial piety is the first of the hundred practices' (*ibid.*: 131).

<sup>18</sup>See Li Jingde (1987: 20.471-479, 119.2870), Zheng Hao and Zheng Yi (1983: 18.182).

<sup>19</sup>See Jiao Hong (1999: 12.87-88), Pan Pingge (2009: 133-159), Yang Qiyuan (1995: 2.12b).

<sup>20</sup>For the thought of An Shifeng, see Lü Miaofen 2019.

<sup>21</sup>See Wang Qiyuan, 清署經談 (Discussions of Confucian Classics from a government office), 4.24a-b. It is a late-Ming version, stored at the Fu Sinan Library, Academia Sinica.

To sum up, during late imperial China, not only did social and political forces support the teachings of filial piety, Yangming Neo-Confucians also embraced filial piety as the core concept of their moral philosophy. They promoted filial piety to a metaphysical level, being equal to *liangzhi*. Furthermore, there was no Confucian who bluntly rejected filial piety, although they might reinterpret its meaning. Considering all these factors, it was almost impossible to challenge filial piety in the Ming Dynasty, since to challenge it would consequently shake the entire socio-political order and the Chinese value system, which simply did not happen in that period.

### New messages in Ming Neo-Confucians' discourse on friendship

If there was no challenge to the five cardinal relationships and traditional ethical order, how should we understand Ming scholars' contrasting family life with friendship associations and deliberately elevating the importance of friendship? Was any new message raised in Ming Neo-Confucians' discourse of friendship?

Let us return to the importance of friendship in terms of moral practice. The process of moral influence laid out in the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學) moves from the cultivation of the self, the regulation of the family, and the governing of the state, to the pacification of the world: self-cultivation remains the crucial starting point. Since friendship was considered the prerequisite of self-cultivation, friendship could be elevated as the foundation of all other human relationships. This was what late-Ming scholars often argued.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the stress on friendship helping to fulfill other social relationships was not a new idea. For example, Zhu Xi said:

To unfailingly fulfill the Dao of the interactions between ruler and minister, father and son, elder brother and younger brother, and husband and wife, friends are needed to give moral exhortation and assist the practice of humanity. Except for friends, who else can assist in this? Therefore, although the power of friendship seems light, it concerns affairs of the utmost importance. Although the relation of friendship seems distant, it is concerned with affairs close at heart. The status of friendship seems unimportant; its function is extremely important. This is why the ancient sages were never negligent in friendship when they cultivated the Dao and established the way of teaching. (1972: 81.15a-16b)

Zhu Xi argued that friendship was ordained by the heaven to assist people in moral practice and searching for the Dao. It was what the natural relationships rely on to be rectified (*ibid.*). Huang Gan 黃幹, Zhu Xi's disciple and son-in-law, also said: 'If the way of friendship is lost, the other four human relationships cannot function. ... Therefore, friendship is key to the other human relationships' (1988: 19.501-502).

Although Song Neo-Confucians emphasized the necessity of friendship for moral cultivation, they did not highlight the tension between friendship association and family life. The tension did appear more often in late-Ming writings. I think it represented the tension between family responsibility and personal spiritual pursuit. It also reflected several features of contemporary intellectual culture, including the situations scholars faced when they engaged in friendship associations, and scholars'

<sup>22</sup>This was what late-Ming scholars often argued. See, among others, Lu Kun (1981: 1.4b).

enthusiasm in pursuing personal enlightenment and pondering the meaning of life and death.<sup>23</sup> Scholars such as He Xinyin, Deng Huoqu 鄧豁渠 and Li Zhi were considered eccentrics mainly because they tended to value personal pursuit of Dao over conventional social order and rituals (*mingjiao* 名教).<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Gu Dashao 顧大韶 (b. 1576) described friendship as the linkage belonging to hearts while the father-son relationship linked bodies; hearts never die while bodies would perish after death. Friendship was, therefore, the most essential among the five cardinal relationships (Gu Dashao 1977: 99.2b-4b). Gu seemed to invert the hierarchical order of the five cardinal relationship (Huang 2007), but he was not challenging them. He emphasized that friendship was a force to help fulfill the other social relationships (*cheng wulun* 成五倫), rather than disrupting these relationships (*jian wulun* 間五倫).

Similar tensions between family obligations and individual pursuit existed in other religious practices, and most religions endorsed the priority of their own teachings. Adherents claimed that if one fully submitted to the religious dogma, then the blessing of parents and family will ensue, which was the “true filial deed”.<sup>25</sup> In the case of Confucianism, family remained the core value throughout the imperial period. The tension between personal pursuit and family obligations, therefore, could only be reconciled by a theory combining them both harmiously. This was the goal that many Confucians were trying to work out and became an obvious issue during the Ming-Qing transition. Most early Qing Confucians criticized the late-Ming intellectual culture of syncretizing the Three Teachings. They also rejected the practice of mind-heart in the Yangming learning, and emphasized fulfilling familial obligations as the prerequisite of sagely learning. Confucian sages must be filial sons, they said, and the most proper place to engage in sagely learning was within family (Lu, Miawfen 2017: 71-104). In short, in the wave of reinterpretation of Confucianism during the Ming-Qing transition, to reconsolidate the importance of rites and norms, the five cardinal relationships and familial ethics were the dominant demands. This was also an effort to settle the tension between familial responsibility and individual spiritual pursuit.

During the late Ming, in the heyday of the Yangming *jianghui*, Yangming Neo-Confucians also tried to solve the tension. They sought to perfect the relationships among family members by the spirit of friendship. According to the *Mencius*, the responsibility of moral exhortation (*zeshan* 責善) did not lie within family members, but with friends. However, Wang Ji found this inadequate:

Ancient people said that between father and son, and between brothers, there was no moral exhortation. The responsibility of moral exhortation belongs to friends. This saying refers to those who lack the resolve to engage [in the sagely learning]. In the cases of King Wen and Duke Zhou, Mingdao and Yichuan (the Zheng brothers), they were related as father and son, and as older brother and younger brother, but they were also teachers and friends for each other. In the ordinary life within a family, it is especially impossible to pretend or hide. If the resolve is the same, even over a span of a thousand years, the mind can still respond. If the resolve is different, the father-son relationship, even if it is like

<sup>23</sup>See Lu, Miawfen 1999, 2020.

<sup>24</sup>See Gen Dingxiang (1997: 16.24a-37b).

<sup>25</sup>For example, see Idema (2008: 1-43), Zhang Xingyao (2009: 441); Wang Daiyu (1999: 91-93).

that between Yao and Zhu, or Shun and Jun, will be fruitless. (Wang Ji 2007: 434-435)

Wang Ji reinterpreted the statement of the *Mencius*, which he thought referred to an imperfect situation when family members were unable to engage in moral pursuit together. The ideal situation should be moral exhortations exchanged among family members. The exemplars King Wen and the Duke of Zhou and the Zheng brothers demonstrate how blood relationships could be ameliorated through the spirit of true friendship. On the contrary, the sons of the sage kings Yao and Shun failed to inherit their fathers' moral resolve. Compared to King Wen and the Duke of Zhou, the father-son relationships of Yao and Shun were morally imperfect.

Wang Ji, therefore, demanded his descendants take sagely learning as their highest goal and to mutually engage in moral exhortations, just like true friends should do. Addressing his sons, Wang Ji said that the meaning of filial piety lies in being able to engage in sagely learning. He and his son Wang Yingji 王應吉 took an oath to be the "tongzhi relationship" in the Tianxin Study. They participated in *jianghui* activities and pursued sagely learning together. For pursuing morality and fulfilling the meaning of life, Wang Ji proposed that the bonds of friendship be added to the blood relationships. He did not challenge the primacy of filial piety or the necessity of familial obligations, but redefined the content of familial obligations. As opposed to the *Mencius*, he tried to bring the spirit of friendship into the family. Without the spirit of true friendship among family members, even sage-kings could not have perfect father-son relationships.

### Concluding remarks

This article discusses friendship and filial piety in Ming Neo-Confucianism. I first argue that Ming Neo-Confucians' friendship associations, *jianghui*, provided important social settings for elevating the value of friendship. Yangming *jianghui* were considered ideal communities of friendship and a means to foster social participation and to improve social customs. Through *jianghui* activities, the bonds of friendship not only assisted scholars' moral improvement, but also created social and political alliances. The like-minded friends in *jianghui* were also believed to function as the guide and verification of scholars' moral cultivation, and thereby prevent the risk of moral subjectivism in the Yangming philosophy.

Second, I revisit the question of whether Ming Neo-Confucians did actually challenge the order of the five cardinal relationships by elevating friendship as the most important one. Many Ming Neo-Confucians did engage in long journeys to pursue true friendships and enjoy intellectual and spiritual exchanges in the *jianghui*. They valued the friendship associations as ideal arena for learning and sometimes had to rely on other family members to take care family affairs. In their writings, family life was sometimes regarded as the hindrance to learning. They also argued that friendship was the prerequisite of self-cultivation and foundation of all other human relationships. Nevertheless, I do not think these arguments about friendship did challenge the traditional Confucian family ethics, precisely because friendship was never divorced from them.

Through the investigation of filial piety in imperial culture and the Yangming learning, I emphasize that filial piety was the basis of socio-political order. The dominant



systems of Chinese filial culture were supported by various social and political forces and hard to challenge. At the philosophical level, filial piety was considered the heavenly-mandated human nature (*liangzhi*), and therefore occupied a crucial position in the Yangming learning. In other words, filial piety was the essence of the true self.

The importance of friendship lies in its capacity to aid moral cultivation and to become a better self. Filial piety was, by contrast, the core of the self. In the Yangming Neo-Confucianism, therefore, the importance of friendship could never surpass that of filial piety. It should remain as a supplement to familial ethics. This was what Wang Ji argued. Wang Ji did not challenge the primacy of filial piety, but redefined the ideal of familial relationships, as well as the meaning of familial obligations. He advocated that all family members should take moral cultivation as the first priority of familial obligation. For this goal, family members should also become like-minded friends engaging in sagely learning. Friendship and filial piety, in Wang Ji's proposal, could be perfectly combined, and the historical exemplars of this ideal were sage King Wen and Duke of Zhou, as well as Zheng brothers.

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