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Reasserting the primacy of *xing* (human nature) and self-cultivation (*xiushen*): Li Cai's (1529-1607) defense of Confucianism against the interpenetration of the three teachings

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ABSTRACT

By the late Ming, the concept of 'the mind/heart-cum-principle' 心即理 had generated confusion in the relations between *xing* (human nature) and *xin* (mind/heart). Moreover, with the increasing interpenetration of the three teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, some scholars became gravely concerned that the perversion of traditional Confucian thinking had resulted in the degeneration of the moral and social order. Li Cai (1529–1607) was one of these concerned scholars. Wielding the two concepts of '*zhizhi*' (knowing the ultimate end) and '*xiushen*' (self-cultivation) in the *Great Learning*, Li wrestled with Wang Yangming's teachings by reasserting the primacy of *xing*, insisting that moral reality must involve direct individual action in order to preserve the unity of substance and effort. Li's keen awareness of the inner tension between the mind/heart and *xing* not only prompted his critical reflections on Wang 's thought but also on Zhu Xi's. In so doing, he sought to address the fundamental question of what Confucianism is by clarifying the boundaries between the three teachings, and reshaping the spiritual values of Confucianism.

KEYWORDS

Li Cai 李材; *xing*性; self-cultivation修身; Confucianism; three teachings

1. Introduction

Neo-Confucianism became the state orthodoxy during the Song and Ming Dynasties. Existentially, as a moral philosophy, it espouses the ultimate goal of sagehood, the attainment of which hinges on the realization of *xin* (mind-heart 心) and *xing* (human nature 性). It is within the realm of *xin-xing* that the Cheng-Zhu School of Principles (*lixue* 理学) metaphysically diverges from the Lu-Wang School of Mind/Heart (*xinxue* 心学). The former regards *xing* (human nature), being the same as *li* (principle 理), as the ontological basis of moral practice. Thus, the essence of humanity is defined by the primacy of the heaven-endowed rationality of *li*. The *xin* (mind-heart) embodies the general mental activities and phenomena of both *xing* and *qing* (feelings 情) that pertain to both the perceptual and affective make-up of humanity. Therefore, in Cheng-Zhu learning, the

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relationship between *xing* and *li* (principle) differs from that between *xin* and *li*. *Xing* is the manifestation of *li* in the mind-heart, thus having the same identity as *li*. In other words, principle/nature is the master and content of the mind-heart. Cheng-Zhu learning asserts the mutual ontological identity of *xing* and *li*. But this risks ignoring or at least mitigating the existential dimensions of the human qualities stemming from nature and the mind-heart; the transcendent principle and pattern of *li* obscures the blood, sweat, and tears, as it were, of human living. Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), while acknowledging that the principle of nature (*xingli* 性理) is inherent in the mind-heart, famously declares, 'Even if mountains, rivers and the earth are destroyed, *li* is still there' (Zhu, 2011, p. 4).[1] In short, the transcendence of *li* ultimately trumps the immanence of *xing* and *xin*.

As a response to Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming 王阳明 (1472–1529) focuses on the mind-heart, which has two meanings. First, it is the fundamental substance (*benti* 本体) of morality, embodying heaven's principle (*tianli* 天理): 'The original mind-heart is vacuous (devoid of selfish desires), intelligent, and not beclouded. All principles are contained therein and all events proceed from it. There is no principle outside the mind-heart; there is no event outside the mind-heart' (Wang, 2015, p. 19). Wang's dictum of the 'mind/heart-cum-principle' (*xin ji li* 心即理) sees mutuality between universal moral principle and individual moral consciousness. Second, unlike Cheng-Zhu's call to 'transform the mind-heart into *xing*' (*huaxin weixing* 化心为性), Wang not only identifies the mind-heart with *li*/principle but also connects the mind-heart with the human perceptual and sensory existence. Therefore, the doctrine of 'the mind/heart-cum-principle' presumes the continuity between the universal principle and a person's subjective consciousness, including feelings, will, intuition and other a-rational aspects. Wang's central notion of *'liangzhi'* (innate knowledge of the good 良知) is an expression of 'the mind/heart-cum-principle'. As Yang (2014, p. 62) has commented, 'As a fusion of *li* and the mind-heart, the innate knowledge of the good is obviously different from the pure form of reason. It inherently includes people's pursuit of value and feelings as the motivation for moral behavior, thus providing both universal guidance and the intrinsic motivation for moral behavior'. However, the rational norm has a duality. On the one hand, it only influences the individual's behavior if it is internalized in the subject's consciousness. On the other hand, as a general principle, it has a public quality that transcends the individual; over-emphasizing the immanence of rational norms may weaken their universality. Among the latter-day followers of Wang Yangming, especially the Zhezhong 浙中and Taizhou 泰州 scholars, some of them overemphasized innate knowledge of the good and gave short shrift to earnest effort, arguing that those endowed with intelligence could achieve enlightenment by directly tapping the source of *liangzhi*. The result was that their thinking came to be associated with Buddhism/Daoism. Some even came that because innate knowledge of the good was emotions and desires, they gave free rein to the latter, thereby flouting conventional ethical conduct (Z. Liu, 2012, p. 248).

Indeed, in the late Ming, thoughts had become fungible as many scholars embraced the idea of the compatibility and inter-penetrability of the three teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. Consequently, some Confucian scholars became gravely concerned that true Confucian thinking had been perverted and subverted, leading to the degeneration of the moral and social order.[2] They saw the urgent need to reconceptualize the proper relations between *xing* and *xin*. Li Cai (1529–1607) was one of these concerned scholars. Wielding the two concepts of *'zhizhi'* 知止 (knowing the

ultimate end) and *'xiushen'* 修身 (self-cultivation) in the *Great Learning*, Li did wrestle with Wang Yangming's teachings by reasserting the primacy and ultimate reality of *xing*, insisting that moral reality must involve direct individual action in order to preserve the unity of substance and effort. Li's keen awareness of the inner tension between the mind/heart and *xing* not only prompted his critical reflections on Wang Yangming's thought but also on Zhu Xi's. In so doing, Li sought to address the fundamental question of what Confucianism was by clarifying the boundaries between the three teachings and reshaping Confucianism's spiritual values. It is small wonder that *'Mingzong'* (明宗 clarify the fundamental and central principles of Confucianism) and *'Bianyi'* 辨异 (identify heresies doctrine) emerged as two important notions in Li Cai's thought.

Qian (2011, pp. 6–22) has identified a principal item on the philosophical agenda that arose in the late Ming—the nature of *xing*. On-Cho (2001, pp. 13–50) has also examined the late Ming polemics on the nature of *xing* and defined the philosophical dimension of the Ming-Qing intellectual transition as ascertaining the ontological centrality and primacy of *xing*, thereby establishing the meta-practical fulcrum for practicality and concreteness. Peng Guoxiang has similarly suggested that there was a gradual deviation from the teaching of Wang Yangming in the late Ming. But it was Li Cai who explicitly challenged Wang Yangming's teachings by reasserting the primacy and ultimate reality of *xing* (Peng, 2015b, pp. 319–360). This development was likewise noted by Tang (1990), pointing out that late Ming scholars, ranging from Li Cai and Gao Panlong 高攀龙 (1562–1626) to Liu Zongzhou 刘宗周 (1578–1645), underscored the primacy of *xing* (pp. -415–417).

Does Li Cai's reassertion of the *xing* indicate a return to Zhu Xi's teaching, or is he seeking another way to resolve the problem of *xin-xing* by engaging with both Cheng-Zhu and Lu-Wang thoughts? Huang Zongxi 黄宗羲 (1610–1695) had found it difficult to determine Li Cai's intellectual affiliations, and so he established a 'Zhixiu Xue'an' 止修学案 (Records of Zhixiu [Li Cai]) in his *Mingru Xue'an* 明儒学案 *(Records of the Ming Scholars)*, placed after the six lineages of the Wang Yangming school, and before those of the Taizhou scholars. Only Wang Yangming, Li Cai, and Liu Zongzhou occupy an independent record. His juxtaposition with Wang Yangming and Liu Zongzhou in an important indication of Li's special academic status.[3]

Similarly, present-day researchers have found it difficult to determine whether Li Cai is a member of Wang's school or some other school. For example, Okada (2000, pp. 240–243) includes Li Cai in what he calls the 'school of revisionism' (修正派 *xiuzheng pai*), following his teacher Zou Shouyi 邹守益 (1491–1562). He sees Li Cai's theory of *zhixiu* 止修 (cultivation of ultimate [knowledge]) of as a revision and development of Wang Yangming's learning. Chen Lai holds a view similar (Peng, 2015b, p. 3) while Yu (1993, pp. 64–83) also regards Li Cai as a latter-day follower of Wang Yangming but remarking that Li was the title 'closer to Cheng-Zhu'. Lao Siguang argues that since Li Cai ultimately departed from Wang's theory and proposed *zhixiu* as his fundamental principle (*zongzhi* 宗旨), he should not be considered as a part of Wang's school (Lao, 2007, vol. 3, p. 345). Zhong (2011, pp. 273–321) suggests that Li Cai's thought, to the extent that it was a theoretical exploration of Zhu Xi's thought on the basis of Wang Yangming's, should be connected to the thought of Liu Zongzhou.[4]

In this essay, I focus on the development and contents of the main notions in Li Cai's thought— *'mingzong'* 明宗 (clarify the fundamental and central principles of

Confucianism) and *'bianyi'* 辨异 (identify heresies doctrine)—heretofore neglected or understudied in the existing literature, and show how they represent the core of Li's arguments.

2. The evolution of Li Cai's thought

Li Cai (1529–1607, also known as Mengcheng 孟诚 and Jianluo 见罗) was a native of Fengcheng 丰城 in Jiangxi province. He became a *jinshi* 进士 (metropolitan graduate, lit. presented scholar) in the forty-first year of the Jiajing period (1562), being first appointed as a secretary in the Ministry of Justice, and then promoted to a surveillance commissioner in Yunnan province. Li had a checkered career in government and stayed in office for less than a decade. But he was devoted to the study of governance and military affairs while being committed to Confucian learning. Whether as an official in the civil and military branches of the officialdom, or as a private scholar at home because of illness, arrest or exile, he never stopped lecturing. In his early years, Li appeared to be an active follower of the Wang Yangming school. As a student of Zou Shouyi 邹守益, he visited several followers of the Yangming school, in particular Qian Dehong 钱德洪 (1496–1574) and Wang Ji 王畿 (1498–1583), when he was young (Y. Li, 2003, p. 682). However, Li Cai gradually began to question Wang Yangming learning, especially with regard to the idea of the innate knowledge of the good.

In 1557, he began to question whether the innate knowledge of the good was indeed the fundamental substance (*benti*), or whether it was the awareness and effective functioning of the mind-heart, and therefore must be returned to the original substance of the mind-heart. Therefore, some four years later, Li Cai espoused the theory of *'xingjue'* 性觉 (awareness of *xing*), suggesting that the mind-heart is both inherent human nature and awareness. In the end, he rejected both Wang's view and his earlier arguments. As he revised his view, he told us that *'zhiti'* 知体 (the substance of innate knowledge of the good) and *'xingjue'* were different names for the innate knowledge of the good. Both were determined by experience, not morality. But distinguishing the substance (*ti*) and function (*yong*) of the mind-heart could also not be a way to understand the oneness of fundamental substance. In fact, it would lead to the misleading conception of a dichotomized the mind-heart. Li gradually began to develop the idea that in order to understand fundamental substance, the focus could not be on the innate knowledge of the good, *liangzhi*; instead, it should be on *xing* (Li, 2011, vol. 16, pp. 2–3; vol. 5, pp. 4–5).

His realization of *'zhiben'* 知本 (knowing the root) is an important transition in Li Cai's thought, and is the key to his departure from Wang's learning. By 1563, Li had begun to focus on the relationship between the mind-heart and the body. However, he had yet to clarify the meanings of *'zhizhi'* and *'zhiben'*. He could only use the *Book of Changes* to express his idea. Li Cai gradually realized the meaning and significance of *'zhiben'* after he became a *jinshi* 进士 in 1562 (Li, 2011, vol. 9, p. 14). The following year, he told his father Li Sui 李遂 what he had learned, and consulted Wang Ji and Qian Dehong (Y. Li, 2003, p. 682). An examination of several early letters in the appendix of the *Manuscript of Guanwotang* 观我堂稿 reveals that Li Cai had come to understand *'zhiben'* primarily because of his efforts to revise and reinterpret the *Great Learning* (Li, 2011, vol. 19, pp. 12–18). He declared, 'The clearer the purpose of the *Great Learning*, the clearer my thoughts are' (Li, 2010, vol. 8, p. 86).

Finally, in 1572, Li Cai came to fully embrace the idea of *'zhiben'* and he abandoned the doctrine of the innate knowledge of the good. This happened when he was serving as a military officer in Lingxi 岭西, leading his troops into Leizhou 雷州 in pursuit of pirates. Li recalled his experience: 'When the army was fighting, between success and failure, my thoughts were more concentrated, and suddenly it seemed that I was alone in the mountains and sea. Among the millions of golden leather (weapons), it seemed as if nothing had happened. I inherited and developed the idea of *zhizhi* (knowing the ultimate end) from Confucius and Zengzi 曾子. Therefore, I dare to say that "to dwell in the highest good" (*zhi yu zhishan* 止于至善) is vital to learning, and "self-cultivation" is the key to *zhizhi*'. (Li, 2010, vol. 8, p. 87).

After experiencing the arduous expedition against pirates and unpleasant political encounters in Lingxi, Li Cai realized the inner relationship between moral awareness and political practice, and therefore, he connected the concepts of *'zhizhi'* and 'self-cultivation' in the *Great Learning*. The aim was to restore people's belief in a moral idealism that was realized in moral and social activism. As Li Cai told us, 'It was only during the battle of Linghai that I became more convinced of the meaning of *zhiben*' (Li, 2011, vol. 14, p. 3). The following year (1573), Li Cai gave a lecture on the meaning of *'zhiben'* at the Duanxi Academy 端溪书院in Zhaoqing 肇庆 in Guangdong. He refuted Wang Yangming's learning of the innate knowledge of the good and then publicly announced '*zhixiu*' 止修 as the fundamental principle whose basic premise was the 'self-cultivation as the root' (修身为本 *xiushen wei ben*). Apart from his personal experience, let us examine the intellectual and cultural contexts in which his philosophical shifts occurred.

3. Li Cai's reflections on the intellectual trends of the late Ming

3.1. The four maxims and the followers of Wang Yangming

Wang Yangming attracted a large number of followers, but the complexity of his ideas also divided them. In his later years, Wang Yangming took the 'four maxims' 四句教 as the core of his thought. According to his *Instructions for Practical Living*, the four maxims are: 'In the original substance of the mind-heart there is no distinction between good and bad. When the will becomes active, however, such distinction exists. The faculty of innate knowledge of the good is to know good and bad. The investigation of things is to do good and remove bad' (Wang, 2015, pp. 145–146).[5] In the sixth year of Jiajing (1527), Wang Yangming was appointed to suppress the rebellion in Guangxi province. As he was about to leave, two of his disciples, Wang Ji and Qian Dehong, had different understandings of the four maxims. Wang Ji emphasized the consistency between the substance of the mind-heart and the will. Because the mind-heart extends beyond good and bad, then according to the principle of unity of the substance and function, the will, knowledge and things must transcend good and bad as well. Logically, this leads to the elimination of moral efforts to do good and overcome bad. Qian Dehong, on the other hand, paid attention to the distance between the potential form of fundamental substance and the existing form of reality. As such, he focused on moral endeavor. That evening, Qian and Wang sat down beside Yangming at the Tianquan Bridge and asked to be corrected. Wang Yangming said:

> Wang Ji's view is the one I use in dealing with the man of sharp intelligence. Qian Dehong's view is for the second type. If each of you holds on to one side, right here you will err in handling properly the different types of man and each in his own way will fail to understand fully the substance of the Way. (Ibid., p. 145)

As mentioned above, Wang Yangming's substance of the mind-heart has a dual connotation. In terms of its inherent principles, the mind-heart and *xing* overlap; both are characterized by the highest good, providing an internal basis for realization. At the same time, the mind-heart consists of a-rational factors and elements such as emotion and will, which define human existence, and are therefore dynamic and developmental. Wang had focused on the principle of individuality in his later years, and maintained that self-cultivation varied in accordance with the talents of different people. He said, ' When a sage teaches people, he does not require everyone to be the same. For example, a sage will help another from the place where he is arrogant, and guide him from the place where people are timid. How can people get the same talent?' (Wang, 2015, p. 129). This very idea of Wang's was developed by Taizhou scholars, who accepted people from the lower realms of society insofar as all had the innate ability to attain sagehood.

Wang Gen 王艮 (1483–1541), founder of the Taizhou School, insisted that there were no social distinctions in teaching. Most of his disciples and audience members were from the lower class, such as woodsmen, potters, and farmers. Therefore, the Taizhou School played an important role in introducing Confucianism to society at large. However, because of the overemphasis on the idea that innate knowledge of the good did not depend on knowledge, to the extent that which it was intrinsically possessed by all people, it led the corresponding the deemphasis on moral practice and efforts as the way to curtail the desires and transgressions. Wang Bi 王襞 (1511–1587), son of Wang Gen, once said:

> When people propose the notion of learning, it seems as if they wish to propose several levels of meaning, without knowing that originally there is no thing, it is originally and spontaneously pre-formed and simply follows the natural responses of illuminating awareness. From morning until evening, movements and actions are all nothing but the Dao. (Huang, 2008, p. 721)

After Taizhou, scholars such as Yan Jun 颜钧 (1504–1596) and He Xinyin 何心隐 (1517–1579) made further dents in the Confucian moral norms, espousing ideas that were close to the Chan Buddhist adage that 'function is inherent human nature' (作用是性*zuoyong shi xing*), giving free rein to human action and behavior, construed as the naturalist functioning and expression of one's inner nature. This did further harm to the Confucian conviction in the efficacy and utility of the ritual order *li*, where propriety and decorum served as ethical constraints. Huang Zongxi commented on the Taizhou school:

> After Taizhou, many of its people considered themselves able to tie up dragons and snakes with their bare hands, and by the time it was transmitted to the school of Yan Jun and He Xinyin, the ethical norms of Confucianism (*mingjiao* 名教) was completely unable to restrain or hold them. (Huang, 2008, p. 703)

Without the constraints of reason and ethics, and simply emphasizing personal innate knowledge of the good, blind impulses of the will might run rampant, metaphorically described by Huang as 'tying up dragons and snakes with their bare hands'.

Li Zhi 李贽 (1527–1602) elaborated the Taizhou school's principle of individuality, but he replaced 'innate knowledge of the good' with what he called the *'tongxin'* 童心 (the childlike mind-heart). He said:

> The childlike mind-heart, free from all falsehood and entirely true, it is the original mind-heart at the very beginning of one's first thought. . . . However, why is the childlike mind-heart lost? From the beginning, sounds and sights enter through our eyes and ears, and when one allows these to dominate what is within oneself, then the childlike mind-heart is lost. As one grows older, moral principles also enter by being seen or heard, and when one allows these to dominate what is within oneself, then the childlike mind-heart is lost. (J. Zhang, 2010, p. 276)

In Li Zhi's view, the childlike mind-heart is a pure mind-heart without any falsity or external contamination. Any study or moral cultivation may cover up such a state. Therefore, our own mind-heart should be the standard for judging right and wrong. If we employed only the moral judgments of right and wrong from the Six Classics and Confucius, we would reverse the right and wrong. Therefore, Li Zhi boldly proposed: 'When heaven gives birth to someone, then that person naturally has the functionality of a complete person, and doesn't need to wait to be made complete by Confucius' (J. Zhang, 2010, p. 40). In fact, Wang (2015, pp. 93–94) also said: 'What is valuable in learning is to attain from the mind-heart. If words are examined in the mind-heart and found to be wrong, even when they have come from Confucius, I dare not accept them as correct'. Confucius, as a sage, can be regarded as an incarnation of the universal moral ideal. 'What is valuable in learning is to attain from the mind-heart' and 'a person naturally has the functionality of a complete person'—these statements affirm that each person has one's own intrinsic value. This contrasts with the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy's effort to define and shape the individual through universal categories such as 'heaven's principle'(*tianli*). Thus, Li Zhi's notion of the childlike mind-heart is commensurable with Wang Yangming's espousal. However, Li explicitly uses his arguments as the ground for the rejection of moral principles. As such, it was regarded as heretical. Perhaps, this is why Wang Yangming exhorted Wang Ji not to spread the doctrine of the 'four nonbeings' (四无说 *siwu shuo*), because the line between the substance of the mind-heart that does not set specific norms and the childlike mind-heart that does not include moral principles can be blurred and erased.

3.2. Debates about the heresies

As mentioned above, the retreat of 'heaven's principle' (*tianli*) into the mind-heart could lead to the conception of a private inner world free from ethical disciplines and social bounds. Self-cultivation thus becomes consciousness. To many Confucian scholars, such as Li Cai, such a view came dangerously close to that of Buddhism and Daoism. Li was worried about the increasing interpenetration of the three teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, as many scholars 'introduced Buddhism into Confucianism' (*yuan shi ru ru* 援释入儒) or vice versa. As far as Li was concerned, this caused great ethical and moral chaos among the scholars (Li, n.d., vol. 6, pp. 1–3). He therefore argued that the pressing heresy was not Buddhism or Daoism but the mixture of the three teachings.[6] He said:

> Is Buddhism/Daoism the only heresy? I am particularly disgusted with people who are hypocrites. Mixing different teachings together is like treating cattle and horses as one family; both in Confucian school, while those who do not have the same fundamental purpose will do great harm. (Li, n.d., vol. 1, p. 8)

The 'hypocrites' were those who claimed to be Confucian but did not embrace Confucian values and norms. At the same time, they failed to adhere to the rules and precepts of Buddhism or Daoism. They ended up being rejects of the three teachings. Therefore, Li pointed out:

> If someone can resolutely follow Buddhist-Daoist otherworldliness, I will praise him. Why? Because his behavior is not mixed with Confucianism. That's why I said there is no need to suppress him. Confucians follow the way of Confucianism, Buddhists follow the way of Buddhism, and then they do not hinder each other. Those who talk about Yao 尧 and Shun 舜 in their mouths, but believe in Buddhism and Daoism in their hearts are the real heretics, who really need to be suppressed. (Li, n.d., vol. 2, p. 17)

Li Cai concluded heresy was the eclectic form of Confucianism that was watered down and defiled by the infusion of Buddhism and Daoism.

Li Cai strongly believed that the three teachings were independent and separate traditions on account of their divergent emphases on values and norms, and they should not be mixed (Li, n.d., vol. 6, pp. 1–3). Different value orientations led to different ways of cultivation. Unless one fully upheld and comprehended the Way according to one's own specific teachings, there would not be a stable foundation for self-cultivation. One who sought to embrace a variety of teachings at the same time would achieve nothing:

> Some people believe in Confucian this-worldliness, but they talk about Buddhist-Daoist otherworldliness all day long. Some people want to achieve the state of nirvana but cannot give up the palace and families. Some people want to become immortals but cannot avoid being obsessed with money. I have never seen people who talk about Buddhas who can actually become Buddhas. (Li, n.d., vol. 6, pp. 15-16)

Therefore, according to Li Cai, even though Li Zhi left Confucianism and turned to Buddhism, his sincerity in seeking the Way was still worthy of recognition (Li, n.d., vol. 6, p. 2). By contrast, Li Cai hated the hypocrites, that is, the Confucians in name only, who made it difficult for ordinary people to distinguish the true from the false:

> There are people who appear to be faithful and probity; they behave like sages, though they are actually filthy, unprincipled, and trying to please the majorities. People are bewitched by their words and even praise their virtues as if this is the real sage. These hypocrites do great harm to the Way, that is why Confucius hates *xiangyuan* 乡愿 rather than Laozi. (Li, n.d., vol. 4, pp. 15-17)

Much to the disgruntlement of Li Cai, many of his contemporaries believed that Confucianism was mostly limited to the external matters of ethics and studies, and therefore, when it came to the questions of inner morality, it was inferior to that of Buddhism and Daoism. It was to Confucianism's advantage to incorporate ideas of the other two teachings (Li, n.d., vol. 6, pp. 15–16). Li Cai reminded them that Confucianism was not limited to mundane affairs but that it excelled in the 'unity of moral and practical governance' (Li, n.d., vol. 2, p. 2). The inquiry into human nature means not the building of a private inner world free from disciplines and

social bounds. Rather, it is the active reflection on and realization of the self in relation to the world. No matter how intertwined Confucianism and Buddhism/Daoism are, there are still basic differences between the three teachings. Confucianism holds a positive attitude towards the real existence of the heaven's principle and the world, thereby affirming that the realization of the absolute goodness of human nature, *xing*, is to realize thoroughly the moral and intellectual virtues endowed by heaven. In turn, realizing the good *xing* demands incessant solid effort (*gongfu*) and social activism. Buddhism, on the other hand, claims that 'all dharmas are empty because they have no nature of their own but depend on causes for their production' (*yuanqi xingkong* 缘起性空). Therefore, the myriad phenomena of the cosmos are illusory transformations. The same is true between Confucianism and Daoism, as far as their differences are concerned. As Li Cai states, the Confucian way of understanding goodness, as opposed to the Buddhist one, requires heaven's principle and concrete efforts: 'Returning to *zhi* (the ultimate end) is to dwell in the highest good, not at emptiness nor silence. Confucianism not only emphasizes individuals' moral practices, but also is devoted to constructing an effective social and political order. This reveals the fundamental differences between Confucianism and Buddhism/Daoism'. (Li, n.d., vol. 6, p. 18).

Li Cai argued that it was only because people did not fully understand Confucianism that they came to regard the doctrines of Buddhism and Daoism as brilliant and appealing (Li, n.d., vol. 7, p .15). In order to resolve the problem of the indiscriminate mixing of the three teachings, the fundamental question of 'what is Confucianism?' must be re-clarified, so as to clearly distinguish it from Buddhism/Daoism. By clarifying once and for all Confucianism's superior spiritual and moral value, the tradition could then be safeguarded.

4. Rebuild the spiritual value of Confucianism: The theory of 'Zhixiu'

Li Cai's fundamental principle (*zongzhi* 宗旨) is '*zhixiu*' 止修, which comes from the two concepts of 'to dwell in the highest good' (*zhi yu zhishan* 止于至善) and 'self-cultivation' (*xiushen*) in the *Great Learning*. Li Cai claims that, as the basis of Confucian classics, the *Great Learning* has well preserved the spiritual value of Confucianism, which was embodied in two core concepts— *'zhizhi'* (knowing the ultimate end) and *'xiushen'* (self-cultivation).

> The *Great Learning* clarifies the purpose of Confucianism. The 'three items' 三纲领 are based on *zhizhi* (knowing the ultimate end), and the 'eight steps' 八条目 are rooted in *xiushen*, which points out the direction and path for beginners to learn. The *Great Learning* shows that the fundamental principle of Confucianism is the unity of moral and practical governance, which shows Confucius' ardent teaching for the world. (Li, n.d., vol. 6, pp. 3-5)

Li Cai then defined the meaning of *'zhizhi'*:

> What is *zhi*? *Zhi* means to dwell in the highest good, the highest good is *xing* . . . . Once a person has consciousness, he is easily seduced by external things, then the inherent *xing* is abolished and left behind. Hence, if one's mind-heart approaches one step closer to *xing*, there is nothing but goodness; if one departs one step further away from *xing*, the opposite is

> the case. This is why *zhizhi* is the primary meaning of the *Great Learning*. (Li, 2011, vol. 4, pp. 3-4)

Li Cai's definition of *zhizhi* is based on his analysis of *xin-xing* (heart-mind). For Li Cai, the mind-heart embodies the general mental activities and phenomena of both *xing* and *qing* (feelings) that pertain to both the perceptual and affective make-up of humanity; as such, it can be either good or bad. *Xing*, as the ontological basis of morality, is the manifestation of *li* (principle) in the mind-heart; therefore, it is inherently good. He said:

> The goodness of humanity (*ren*) is within human nature, and the feeling of commiseration (*ceyin*) is revealed to the outside; the goodness of righteousness (*yi*) is within human nature, and the feeling of shame and dislike (*xiuwu*) is revealed to the outside. . . . If people simply regard the good feelings (*qing*) as the original substance of morality, how can they explain the bad feelings they sometimes experience? (Li, 1995, vol. 2, p. 18)

According to Li, the humanity (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), propriety (*li*) and wisdom (*zhi*), as the specific virtues of *xing*, are the masters and contents of the mind-heart. The feelings of commiseration (*ceyin*), shame and dislike (*xiuwu*), respect and reverence (*cirang*) and right and wrong (*shifei*), are the natural expressions of the mind-heart following its inherent principles. Therefore, Li Cai concluded the relationship between the mind-heart and *xing* as follows: 'The mind-heart is the effective functioning of *xing*, and *xing* is the inherent principle of the mind-heart' (心者性之发灵, 性者心之蕴奥). This reveals both the stark contrast and inseverable nexus between the two.

Li argued that the mind-heart is easily affected by various temptations in the world, thereby losing its calm and direction. Only by returning to the guidance of *xing* can the mind-heart perform its proper function and present its intrinsic value. Therefore, *zhizhi* (knowing the ultimate end) is to teach people to understand and realize their own moral nature, and to act according to its requirements. Thus, Li Cai stated that the object of *'zhizhi'* must be the inherently good *xing*, while the mind-heart, will (*yi*) and knowledge (*zhi*), including the mind-heart of the Way (*daoxin* 道心) and the human mind-heart (*renxin* 人心), can only operate on the empirical level, not the fundamental substance of morality (Li, 2011, vol. 12, pp. 1–2). On this point, Li Cai criticized Wang Yangming's equating 'innate knowledge of the good' with 'fundamental substance', which suggests that moral efforts stem from the active will. Wang's view, to Li, does not make clear the real substance (*ti*) of morality: 'Those who take the extension of knowledge (*zhizhi*致知) as their decisive intention are those who simply know the practical function (*yong*), but do not know the essential substance (*ti*)' (Li, 2011, vol. 11, p. 3).

Li Cai's criticism of Wang learning was not always consistent and might sometimes be even unfair.[7] However, there is no denying that many of the latter-day followers of Wang Yangming overemphasized the pure void and luminous side of the innate knowledge of the good and gave short shrift to earnest effort, thereby flouting conventional ethical conduct. Gu Xiancheng 顾宪成 (1550–1612), a Cheng-Zhu follower, for instance, was prompted to criticize them: 'If everyone says that "the mind/heart is principle", then I only need to ask my mind-heart in everything. This is like someone holding a scale without a weight, a ruler without a scale; how can he not make mistakes when measuring the weight and length of things?' (Huang, 2008, p. 1395). Furthermore, the retreat of 'heaven's principle' into the mind-heart could lead to the conception of a private inner world free from ethical disciplines and social bounds. Self-cultivation thus becomes

consciousness. As far as Li Cai was concerned, such a view came dangerously close to that of Buddhism and Daoism. He therefore proposed the idea of 'assimilating knowledge and returning to *zhi* (the ultimate end)' (*shezhi guizhi* 摄知归止), aiming to reshape the substance of morality, so as to rectify the ethico-moral chaos brought on by the latter-day followers of Wang Yangming:

> The mind-heart is often tempted by external things and has nowhere to settle; that is why I propose the idea that 'assimilating knowledge and returning to *zhi*'. The ancients used to cultivate the mind-heart by returning to the guidance of *xing*, so that the foundation of morality could be established. (Li, 2010, vol. 39, p. 493)

Unlike Wang Yangming's call to unify the *xin* (mind-heart) and *li* (principle), and the rational and a-rational aspects of the mind-heart, Li Cai, following Zhu Xi, underscores the priority of *li* and *xing* over the mind-heart, so as to curtail the desires and transgressions. As Okada (2000, p. 245) commented, 'This serious ethical standpoint that maintains the absolute authority, objectivity and purity of *xing*, as well as moral norms, are both in line with the spirit of Zhu Xi's learning, who opposes "the mind/heart-cum-principle" and advocates the doctrine of "*xing*-cum-principle"'.

Furthermore, Li's *zhizhi* (knowing the ultimate end) transcends the subject of the time, and points to the universal and fundamental question of what humanity is. He states that since the mind-heart is easily affected by various temptations in the world, the sage's teaching aims to 'guide people to be good' and 'prevent people from pursuing excessive desires'. In this way, people can finally recognize and realize their own moral nature, and take up the moral responsibilities of human beings:

> Some people are tempted by various desires and don't know what humanity is. The sage was worried about this situation. He patiently persuaded people to be kind, and formulated moral norms to prevent people from chasing excessive desires. The sage wants people to understand that there is no end to the unbridled pursuit of desires, and only humanity receives the full endowment of goodness from heaven; as long as they continue to cultivate themselves, they may become sages; otherwise, they will degenerate into the same kind of plants and animals. (Li, n.d., vol. 8, pp. 18-20)

Li Cai's emphasis on *Zhizhi* draws attention to universal essence of humanity by stressing its morality, rationality, and civility.

Indeed, Li's reassertion of *xing* and his efforts to reshape the principle of rationality were in line with Zhu Xi's ideas. But he put his own spins on Zhu's teaching, as evidenced by his understanding of the concepts of 'the investigation of things' (*gewu*) and 'the extension of knowledge' (*zhizhi*):

> Knowledge (*zhi*) is a differentiative activity of the will (*yi*); things (*wu*) are whatever is known and felt by knowledge (*zhi*). There are no other things than the family, state, world, self, mind-heart, will and knowledge, and there is no other knowledge than the investigation of things, extension of knowledge, sincerity of the will, rectification of the mind-heart, cultivation of the self, regulation of the family, national order and world peace. In short, '*zhi*' 致 means to understand and expand one's innate knowledge of goodness, while '*ge*' 格 means to recognize and correct what is wrong in the mind-heart. Someone took the investigation of things (*gewu*) as exploring the principles of all things, this view actually did not understand that the principles of all things do not exist apart from the activities of human consciousness, thus causing the maladies of fragmentation. (Li, 2011, vol. 1, p. 8)

Li Cai apparently diverged from Zhu's interpretation of '*gewu*' and '*zhizhi*'. First, Li Cai argued that we cannot disentangle things (*wu*) from human conscious activities. In other words, the objects of 'the investigation of things' and 'the extension of knowledge' are primarily people's conscious activities. However, Zhu's investigation of things mainly focused on obtaining a thorough understanding of the truth by exploring the principles of all things we encounter, so as to understand the meaning of morality and recognize our own moral nature from this process. Li argued that if moral principles needed to be found in external things, moral practice would lose its motivating power. He therefore criticized Zhu Xi's approach as fragmentary.

Second, in terms of the relationship between '*zhizhi*' 知止 and '*gewu*' 格物, Zhu Xi regards the efforts of 'investigation [of things] and extension [of knowledge]' (*gezhi* 格致) as prior to *zhizhi* (knowing the ultimate end 知止). The 'highest good' (*zhishan* 至善) thus refers to the ultimate state on two fronts—'illuminating the luminous virtues' (*ming mingde*明明德) and 'renovating the people' (*xinmin* 新民):

> From the extension of knowledge to self-cultivation, these five things can be considered matters of manifesting the clear character; from the regulation of the family to world peace, these three things can be considered matters of renovating the people. The highest good is doing these two fundamental things just right. (Zhu, 2011, p. 308)

However, Li Cai argued that *zhizhi* (knowing the ultimate end) means to apprehend and realize one's own moral nature, *xing*, which is the primary and fundamental effort of the *Great Learning*. Only by starting with *zhizhi* can other cultivation efforts follow (Li, 2010, vol. 13, p. 146). Li Cai, as opposed to Zhu Xi's argument, stated that 'to dwell in the highest good' was not the ultimate principle or state of 'illuminating the clear character' and 'renovating the people', but as the basis of the two. He said: 'The highest good is the foundation of moral practices and social activism. "To dwell in the highest good" is like a tree that must be rooted in the soil, flood control must be dredged from the source. . . . Therefore, *zhizhi* is the primary and fundamental effort of the *Great Learning*' (Huang, 2008, p. 685).

In short, Li Cai's idea of *zhizhi* (knowing the ultimate end) presupposes that there is a direct way to reach original substance (*benti*), or *xing*, whereas Zhu Xi does not make such a claim. Li's approach is in fact closer to the learning of Wang Yangming. As far as Li is concerned, Zhu's idea of 'investigating things and plumbing principles' (*gewu qiongli*格物穷理) likely leads people to simply conform to the external moral norms. This would render them unable to galvanize their inner moral awareness, thus resulting in the separation of knowledge and action. Recognizing the differences and flaws of Zhu and Wang's theories, Li Cai's theory of *zhizhi* calls for the apprehension and realization of one's own moral nature, *xing*, as the foundation of all efforts of cultivation. In other words, the key to the 'investigation [of things] and extension [of knowledge]' lies in recognizing the authentic self as a moral existence, rather than relying on the accumulation and exploration of objective knowledge.

To Li Cai, the inquiry into human nature means not the building of a private inner world free from disciplines and social bounds. Rather, it is the active reflection on and realization of the self in relation to the world. This process unfolds through Li's interpretation of the concept of 'self-cultivation' (*xiushen* 修身) in the *Great Learning*.

Li Cai states that, the 'self' not only means the existence of individuals, but also connects to the family, state, and world. This is because no person exists in isolation, and personal moral practice can only be achieved through its constant expansion into political and social lives:

> If one of the four things, the investigation of things, extension of knowledge, sincerity of the will or rectification of the mind-heart is not completed, self-cultivation cannot be achieved; if one of either regulation of the family, national order or world peace is not completed, it cannot be regarded as achieving self-cultivation. Why? Because no person exists in isolation, they are always in the social relationship of the family, state, and world. Therefore, when we talk about the self, we already entail the family, state, and world in it. (Li, 1995, vol. 1, p. 9)

Li Cai's theorizing on '*xiushen*' (self-cultivation) sought to arrest the tendency toward the recondite brought on by the latter-day followers of Wang Yangming, who embraced the idea of pursuing instantaneous realization of the fundamental substance in the absence of earnest effort. He therefore castigated scholars for 'rashly talking about the fundamental substance with their own thoughts all day long, and disdain paying attention to the specific and real things in their daily life, undermining actual practice and learning, thereby consuming much of time and energy, but getting nothing' (Li, 1995, vol. 1, pp. 9–10). As far as Li was concerned, the notion of '*xiushen*' in the *Great Learning* should remind scholars of the necessity for ceaseless effort in realizing and fulfilling the good nature.

Furthermore, since Zhu Xi's interpretation of Confucianism became orthodoxy and the basis of the civil service examinations, many scholars simply regarded learning as a mean for personal profit and success, ignoring the core goals of Confucian learning. Therefore, Li proposed that 'self-cultivation' should be the basis of the 'eight steps':

> There may be regulation of the family, national order and world peace, but if there is but one affair that is not rooted in the self, this is just the utilitarian learning of the Five Hegemons (*wuba* 五霸); in investigating, extending, making sincere, and rectifying, if there is but one thought that is not rooted in the self, this is just the empty and obscure learning of Buddhism and Daoism. Hence the self is the root, the beginning, and that which should be placed first. To know 'self-cultivation as the root' (*xiushen wei ben* 修身为本) is 'to know the root' (*zhiben* 知本), is to 'know the ultimate end' (*zhizhi* 知止), to know what comes first and what comes later. (Li, 2011, vol. 1, p. 4)

In the continuous process of expanding personal self-cultivation (*xiushen*), *zhizhi* (knowing the ultimate end) plays the guiding role:

> This is like only by holding on to the rudder can we keep balance of the boat in the huge waves; only by tightening the reins can we control the direction of the horse's running. Therefore, *zhizhi* (knowing the ultimate end) is very important; only on this basis can one's body and mind-heart be stable and tranquil, and the spirit will not wander. (Li, 2010, vol. 19, pp. 235-236)

At the same time, human nature, *xing*, also needs to find manifestation in human relationships. Only by apprehending and practicing it in the specific moral life can we arrive at a genuine understanding of *xing*. In other words, cultivating and realizing one's *xing* encompasses the family, state, and world:

> The effort of *zhizhi* should start with the things people come into contact with; humanity (*ren*), reverence (*jing*), filial piety (*xiao*), deep love (*ci*) and faithfulness (*xin*), as the principles of the goodness, embodies in the process of self-cultivation. (Li, 2011, vol. 9, p. 12)

'Self-cultivation' is not to constrain one's lives via external rules, but to extend one's innate goodness from within, such that it reaches people, society, and the myriad things in the cosmos. Li's urgent call for the practical realization of the goodness of *xing* aims to galvanize individual moral responsibility and social activism. Therefore, '*zhizhi*' (knowing the ultimate end) and 'self-cultivation', are two aspects of the same process of moral practice; in their interaction, there is the unity of substance and effort:

> We can't abstractly talk about dwelling in the highest good; only by taking self-cultivation as the root, constantly carrying out moral practices, and knowing the ultimate end through manifesting the clear character and loving the people, can we truly unify both moral and practical governance. (Li, 2011, vol. 5, pp. 15-16)

In short, Li Cai, unlike Buddhism and Daoism, dwells not on intrinsic goodness as a static quality. He sees it as a dynamic process of development that requires constant, purposeful realization in social relationships.

5. Conclusion

A generation of literati in the late Ming saw the urgent need to reconceptualize the proper relations between *xing* and *xin*. Li Cai was one of these concerned scholars. Unlike Wang Yangming's call to unify the mind-heart and *li* (principles), and the rational and a-rational aspects of the mind-heart, Li, following Zhu Xi, underscores the priority of *li* and *xing* over the mind-heart as a way to curtail desires and transgressions. But he does not entirely embrace Zhu's teaching. Li's central idea of *zhizhi* (knowing the ultimate end) argues on behalf of direct access to the original substance (*benti*) of *xing*, running counter to Zhu's approach. Li's position here is in fact closer to that of Wang Yangming.

In sum, as regard the entities of *xin* and *xing*, much of Li Cai's thinking is derivative of that of Zhu Xi and provides no truly new insights. On the other hand, his theory of '*zhixiu*' seek to reconstruct *xing* as rational reality that serves as the ontological basis for individual moral and social activism. His concept of the 'self' relates individual moral practice to the contiguous world of social relationships, ending with the construction and realization of ethical and sociopolitical orders. Li confronted the intellectual and social maladies that he felt were generated by latter-day Wang Yangming learning's overemphasis on the individual dimension of the innate knowledge of the good, which led to the deemphasis on earnest action. He defined humanity in terms of the rationality—and by turns, the morality, civility, and sociality—of *xing*. Ultimately, armed with this conception of *xing* as the basis of Confucian spiritual and moral values, Li wanted to clearly define just what Confucianism really was, and in so doing, he distinguished it from Buddhism and Daoism.

Nevertheless, Li's philosophical theory has its own problems. Although Li underscores the futility of pursuing enlightenment and nature in the absence of earnest effort, he does not resolve the tension between fundamental substance and effort; he simply presumes that *xing* is an a priori moral entity. In the biography of Sun Shenxing 孙慎行 (1565–1636), Huang Zongxi attacks Li Cai's view on the nexus between mind-heart and *xing*, 'Scholars have always regarded humanity (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), propriety (*li*) and wisdom (*zhi*) as

xing, commiseration (*ceyin*), shame and dislike (*xiuwu*), respect and reverence (*cirang*), right and wrong (*shifei*) as feelings (*qing*). Li Cai tried to deduce the original substance from these feelings, and argued that these issued feelings should not be regarded as *xing*. However, he did not see that we have the feeling of commiseration before we name it humanity; we have the feeling of shame and dislike before we name it righteousness .... Once you leave these feelings, where do you look for *xing*? You (Sun Shenxing) said that, Mencius directly regarded the feeling of commiseration as humanity, rather than having a humanity within the mind-heart, and the feeling of commiseration became its sprout. This shows that Li Cai's argument is inappropriate (Huang, 2008, pp. 1449–1450).' Within the domain of the School of Mind/Heart (*xinxue* 心学), the inner tension between the mind-heart and *xing*, or existence and essence, was not quite reconciled. Li's thought only gestured toward its resolution, but it did lay the philosophical groundwork for the later rethinking espoused by Liu Zongzhou and Huang Zongxi in the late Ming and early Qing.[8]

Notes

1. Unless indicated, all translations of citations from Chinese texts in this essay are my own.
2. For detailed discussions on the interpenetration of the three teachings in the late Ming, see Peng (2015b) and Wei (2016).
3. Peng Guoxiang states that Huang Zongxi's original manuscript did not include the preface to the 'Records of Zhixiu [Li Cai]', so it is possible that he had not planned to set up an independent record for Li Cai. The legitimacy of this case rested on maintaining the reputation of the Wang Yangming school, and minimizing criticism over the Wang school's merger with Chan/Zen Buddhism (Peng, 2015a, p. 201).
4. For other philosophical studies on Li Cai, see Yoshida (1975, pp. 143–157), Nabeshima (2003, pp. 122–136), X. Zhang (2012, pp. 223–233), Liu (2015), and Hou (2012, pp. 181–275). For an English biography of Li Cai, see Ching (1976, pp. 874–877).
5. Translations of 'Verifying the Way in Tianquan' 天泉证道 from the *Instructions for Practical Living* are adapted from Chan, Wing-tsit (1973, pp. 686–689).
6. As a result of the growing prominence of Wang Yangming learning, traditional debates over the orthodoxy and heresy have changed focus in the middle and late Ming; they have shifted from between Confucianism and Buddhism/Daoism to within Confucianism. See Peng (2015b, pp. 484–495).
7. Li Cai criticizes Wang Yangming's idea of '*liangzhi*' for two reasons: first, *liangzhi* is the effective functioning of the mind-heart, not the fundamental substance of morality; second, the notion that 'the original substance of the mind-heart is beyond good and bad' stems from Gaozi's flawed understanding, which violates Mencius' clear teaching on the goodness of human nature, thereby breeding contempt for principles and disciplines, as well as solid efforts. Such a view comes dangerously close to that of Buddhism and Daoism (Li, n.d., vol. 3, pp. 11–14). Nevertheless, Wang's central notion of *'liangzhi'* is an expression of 'the mind/heart-cum-principle'. Wang explicitly states that 'the innate knowledge of the good is nothing other than a place where heaven's principle spontaneously reveals itself in clear consciousness' (Wang, 2015, p. 88). His first maxim simply refers to the state of profundity and silence of the mind-heart before its issuance (*weifa*); the other three maxims, are the initiation of cultivational efforts. As such, Li Cai's criticism of Wang Yangming does have its inconsistencies.
8. On the intellectual transition of the 'de-substantialization' (去实体化) of the Ming-Qing School of Principle, see Chen (2010, pp. 479–513).

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