

The Author



Lianbin Dai

YCAR CCKF Postdoctoral Fellow
York University

Contact

For further information on this research, please contact: [Lianbin Dai](#)

Understanding Knowledge Culture of Late Imperial China

Conventional understandings label Chinese Neo-Confucians as moralists and localists, who advocate moral cultivation to the neglect of statecraft knowledge acquisition, and choose to devote themselves to the autonomy of their local communities over national interests. My research attempts to revise this understanding by reexamining Neo-Confucian activism from 1200 to 1800 CE.

Reacting to sociopolitical issues of the time, leading Neo-Confucian activists redesigned a secular social order according to their understandings of Confucian ideals canonized in the Classics. I argue that Neo-Confucian activism involved both moral self-cultivation and statecraft knowledge acquisition so that its practitioners were able to effectively assume their sociopolitical duties according to their understandings of the Classical texts. Among Neo-Confucian activists, the tension that was maintained between self-cultivation and sociopolitical concerns as well as that between localism and centralized government, brought them mental crises and intellectual controversies. Their intellectualist knowledge horizon, though, remained a combination of moral self-cultivation and Confucian statecraft tradition in their relations to the imperial power. While the imperial power elevated Neo-Confucian morality as imperial ideology to justify its political legitimacy, the Neo-Confucian society tended to claim its authority over morality. Both parties, however, shared the pursuit of statecraft knowledge and skills in order to maintain a sociopolitical order at the local and national levels, which was institutionalized in the knowledge horizon required for the civil service examinations to ensure the state-society collaboration. Self-cultivation in Neo-Confucian political discourses was advocated not for moral advancement per se but instead for statecraft. The tension between moralism and intellectualism came to end in the seventeenth century with the failure of moralism in dealing with sociopolitical crises and the return to intellectualism based on book learning and statecraft tradition. Ultimately, it was not moralism, but intellectualism that became featured in Neo-Confucian knowledge culture.



Portrait of Zhu Xi (1130-1200) | [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Asia Research Briefs

Asia Research Briefs provide short summaries or perspectives based on research by YCAR Associates. Their purpose is to share insights from academic research with journalists, policy analysts, community leaders and interested members of the public. For further information, or to subscribe to the series, contact: ycar@yorku.ca.

About YCAR

The York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR) is one of Canada's largest and most active communities of scholars working on East, South and Southeast Asia as well as Asian migrant communities around the world.

The Centre includes faculty, graduate students and research associates from the social sciences, humanities, fine arts, law and business.

YCAR facilitates and supports research projects, knowledge exchange and graduate student training, as well as engagement with wider communities in the conduct or dissemination of research. YCAR is located on York University's Keele campus.

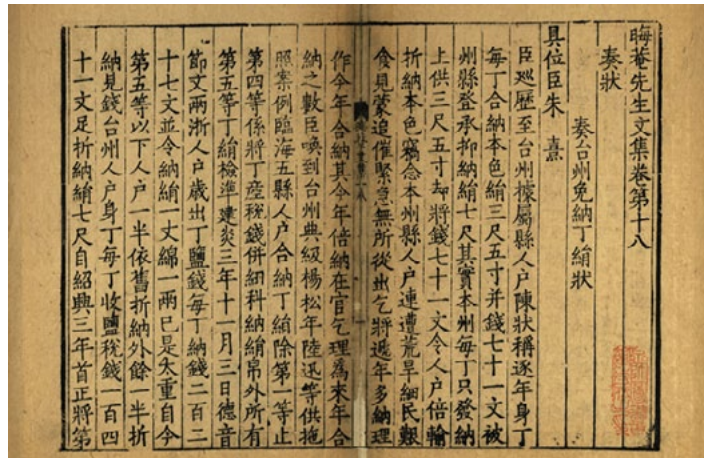
For more information:

www.yorku.ca/ycar

Eighth Floor, Kaneff Tower
4700 Keele St., Toronto
Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3



My research begins with Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi's (1130-1200) program of learning that dominated the Chinese literati's intellectual life from the fourteenth through the early twentieth centuries. Zhu Xi's program provided not only an ideological justification for the imperial states but an intellectual justification of the elite attitude towards learning and their sociocultural vision. In his program, Zhu Xi advocated knowledge acquisition as the prerequisite for moral self-cultivation through the studies of the Confucian Classics and the investigation of things (gewu, meaning understanding what makes a thing what it is). To achieve sagehood meant to put what one had learned from the Classics into intellectual and sociopolitical practice. He developed a comprehensive scope of knowledge and a tradition of intellectualism for Neo-Confucian moral cultivation and knowledge acquisition.



The Literary Collection of Zhu Xi (1130-1200)
[Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Zhu Xi's program of learning was institutionalized with the reinstatement and reinforcement of the civil service examination system in the fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries. His commentaries on the Classics were designated as the subject matter of the examinations, and the early-fifteenth-century imperial patronage (with adaptation) elevated it to imperial ideology. In spite of partly betraying Zhu Xi's original vision, the imperial power deliberately preserved the knowledge horizon that he planned, for the court still expected its employed scholars to be both morally virtuous and practically capable of administering its government units and subjects. The degenerating examination culture did not challenge Zhu Xi's knowledge horizon, and in the fifteenth century his program was still used to deal with the sociopolitical crises the Ming court faced. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the flourishing Yangming school of Neo-Confucianism philosophically challenged Zhu Xi. It initiated a moral cultivation movement in Chinese society by advocating the cultivation of the moral intuition in one's mind and downplaying knowledge acquisition through the studies of the Classics. The Yangming moral movement turned out to be a failure, and its leading practitioners' knowledge practice continued to follow the pattern that Zhu Xi had planned. Zhu Xi's intellectualism based on book learning was finally restored in Confucian intellectual life in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

My research historicizes these changes in knowledge culture in the political, social and intellectual context of late imperial China, focusing on the roles that the imperial state and literati society played in forging the Neo-Confucian knowledge concept and practice.