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RETURNING TO THE ROOT: THE FORMATIVE POLITICAL CAREER AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF NIE BAO, 1487–1548

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Nie Bao 聶豹 (1487–1563) was a Neo-Confucian philosopher and scholar-official of sixteenth-century Ming China. In his *Ming ru xue an* 明儒學案 (Case studies of Ming Confucians), Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 placed him in the Jiangxi (Jiangyou 江右) group of Wang Yangming followers. Nie Bao met the influential founder of the Ming School of Mind in 1526 and was inspired by his teaching of the innate knowing (*liangzhi* 良知). However, he differed from other followers in his quietist approach to realizing and extending this knowledge. While developing his ideas over the course of two decades, as a holder of the highest civil service examination degree, Nie Bao also held a series of impactful official positions, and earned a reputation for effectiveness and integrity. However, he was also the unwitting victim of factionalism at the Ming court, which led to his imprisonment in 1548. The goal of this article is to provide a sketch of Nie Bao's political trajectory and intellectual development from his early years until his imprisonment, as well as translation of significant passages pertaining to that trajectory and development. By the time of his imprisonment, Nie Bao had articulated the essential elements of his philosophy of returning to the root (by which he meant silence), and attaining centeredness and, with that, his unique interpretation of his teacher's central tenet.

Keywords: Nie Bao; Nie Shuangjiang; Wang Yangming; *liangzhi*; Neo-Confucianism; Ming Dynasty

Introduction

Nie Bao 聶豹 (*zi* 字 [courtesy name] Shuangjiang 雙江, 1487–1563) was a Confucian philosopher and scholar-official of sixteenth-century Ming China. In his *Ming ru xue an* 明儒學案 (Case studies of Ming scholars), Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 placed him in the Jiangxi (Jiangyou 江右) group of Wang Yangming followers. The goal of this essay is to provide a sketch of Nie Bao's political trajectory and intellectual development from his early years until he was imprisoned in 1548, as well as to show how his philosophy developed over time. Because Nie Bao deeply believed that his conduct as an official, his public morality, should give proper expression to his philosophical life and moral self-cultivation, his actions as an official are explained alongside his evolving philosophical discourse.

While the Confucian scholar-official Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) is quite well known outside East Asia, the movement he inspired (the Ming dynasty School of Mind) and the lives and philosophies of the disciples composing it remain less understood.

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No doubt, it is the Taizhou 泰州 branch of Wang Yangming disciples – Wang Gen 王艮 and his intellectual lineage – that has been the subject of most English-language scholarship on sixteenth-century Yangmingists. As for the Jiangxi branch, Wang Yangming was assigned by the Ming court to quell unrest in southern Jiangxi in 1516. He arrived in the city of Ganzhou in early 1517 and remained in the region until 1521. While carrying out military campaigns, Wang also actively taught his philosophical tenets and interpretations of classical texts, something that led young men from all over the region to travel to visit with and study under him. Many formally declared themselves disciples, establishing a Jiangxi branch within a broader Wang Yangming movement.

Although Nie Bao lived nearby in Yongfeng County, Ji'an Prefecture, he did not meet the Confucian master until 1526, when Nie was serving in Yingtian Prefecture and Wang was residing at his home in Shaoxing in Zhejiang Province. Their encounter was brief, but Nie was inspired by Wang Yangming's ideas, especially his tenet of *liangzhi* 良知 (often translated as “innate knowledge of the good”, “pure knowing”, “good knowing”, or “innate moral knowing”, or simply “conscience”). He eventually declared his discipleship, albeit only after Wang had passed away. While enjoying a successful but quite rocky political career, Nie proceeded to develop Wang Yangming's ideas in a distinctive direction.

Early Life and Intellectual Development, 1487–1531

In 1487, Nie Bao was born in Yongfeng County, one of nine composing Ji'an Prefecture, Jiangxi Province. He hailed from a well-established local lineage whose ancestors had moved to Yongfeng sometime before the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279). The lineage grew and enjoyed a substantial presence in the county [Hauf 1987, 115; Wu 2011, 326]. Nie's father, Nie Feng 聶鳳 (courtesy name Yuzhi 玉治), was compelled to give up his studies on account of his family's economic hardship. He held out hope that one of his six sons might succeed at the examinations, so he supported them by hiring teachers and encouraging them to study. However, four died at a young age and Nie Bao's older brother's blindness prevented him from preparing for the exams. Only Nie Bao was able to do so [Liu and Wang 2017, 7].

Nie Bao's education also benefited from the influence of prominent Yongfeng scholars residing in his county. One was Guo Song, a Yongfeng man who was one generation senior to Nie. Little is known of Guo, but Nie states that he studied under him as a follower at the time of his coming of age (about twenty-one). Guo had a reputation for being learned in the *Classic of Changes*, and that may have spurred Nie's own interest in the classic [He 2020, 240].

Another was Luo Lun 羅倫 (1431–1478). Even though he died about a decade before Nie was born, Luo Lun's success in obtaining the highest examination degree (*jinsshi* 進士) in 1466 and holding offices for a time impacted Yongfeng's cultural environment. Luo was sent home over his criticism and impeachment of Chief Grand Secretary Li Xian. He accused Li of failing to observe mourning requirements properly, and such courage earned him a reputation for staunch integrity and outspokenness. Luo did subsequently hold office for a time, but he eventually retired on the pretext of illness, returning home and devoting time to classical scholarship, promoting education, and other philanthropic activities. Most importantly, he spent time together and corresponded with prominent Jiangxi and Guangdong Confucian luminaries, such as Chen Xianzhang 陳獻章 (1428–1500), Hu Juren 胡居仁 (1434–1484), and Lou Liang 婁諒 (1422–c. 1491). His friendship with Chen was especially close, although Luo adhered to Song learning [Huang 2006, 45.1071; He 2020, 240–265].

In his “Sacrificial Oration for Master Luo Yifeng”, Nie spoke of Luo's influence on him. He regarded Luo as a Boyi 伯夷 (“Uncle Yi”) in his time: “When I am reading the seven chapters of the *Mengzi* and arrive at [Hence] when they hear the themes of Bo Yi's

conduct, the avaricious man becomes incorruptible and the timorous man steadfast', I always close the book and sigh, thinking, 'goodness, has not Yifeng studied [Bo]Yi and [Shu]Qi and learned from them?' " [Nie 2007, 7.225].

In Nie's time, and going back to classical times, Bo Yi was regarded as a sage who had weathered the transition between the venerable Shang and Zhou dynasties. He was considered a model of integrity who adhered uncompromisingly to principle, putting righteous conduct over self-interest, no matter what the personal consequences might be, such as losing one's position serving the sovereign. Nie saw echoes of Bo Yi's life and conduct in Luo Lun and looked up to him for that reason:

From a young age, whenever my late father Master Shuiyun was enjoying leisure time at home, he would encourage me by speaking of Master [Luo's] moral conduct. Although I was ignorant and didn't know anything, I once had the aspiration to arise and hold the whip. After I tied up my hair and went to school, I enjoyed the opportunity to interact with Master Zhongshan Liu Lin. I then heard about Master [Luo's] conduct in even more detail. Master Liu's grandfather was an old friend of Luo's, which is why he could [speak] in depth and prove it. My aspiration to hold the whip was aroused and only further solidified [Nie 2007, 7.225].

Liu Lin 劉霖 (born c. 1467) was clearly the more immediate influence on Nie. He met Lin at the age of his capping ceremony (again, at twenty-one). Lin's father Liu Bin 劉彬 enjoyed the prestige of holding the 1478 *jinshi* degree. He was also a friend to Luo Lun and had lectured together with Chen Xianzhang at a philosophical discussion forum held at Chen's Jasper Building (Bi Yu Lou 碧玉樓). When his father was appointed to serve in Chengxiang County, Lin accompanied him to Chen's home in Jiangmen, Guangdong. That is where he had the opportunity to meet the influential Confucian master. Lin wished to study under him, but his father would not permit it, rather having him study under Yang Fu 楊敷, a Yongfeng follower of Chen and Luo Lun. Lin subsequently remained actively involved in the academic scene in Yongfeng and neighboring counties, forming a society, constructing an academy, and participating in local forums [Wu 2003, 70–71; Liu and Wang 2017, 10–13].

Nie Bao spoke of Liu Lin in his "Sacrificial Oration for Master Liu Zhongshan". He wrote, "Master [Liu] chose his friends from all over the place, and after he turned forty [*sui*] he befriended me. When I selected friends with bound hair, I gained a friendship with him indifferent to age difference" [Nie 2007, 7.227]. According to He Weixuan, Liu Lin was a key channel through which stories of Luo Lun and Chen Xianzhang's conduct and Confucian philosophizing reached Nie Bao [He 2020, 241–242]. Nie subsequently engaged in projects that elevated their profiles and indicated his debt to them, even if the precise nature of their influence on the development of his philosophy and character at this time is difficult to estimate.

In 1516, during the reign of the Zhengde emperor (Zhu Houzao 朱厚照, r. 1506–1521), Nie passed the provincial exam in Jiangxi, with an emphasis on the *Classic of Changes* [Nie 2007, *fulu*.640]. The education intendant was Li Mengyang 李夢陽 (1473–1529), and they became friends. Now eligible to take the metropolitan examination the following year, Li proposed to his friend that he should call on Yan Song 嚴嵩 (1480–1567), who was then serving at the Hanlin Academy. Yan was a famed litterateur appointed to serve as the principal examiner for this 1517 examination. Naturally, Nie did call on him; he also formally declared himself a student [Nie 2007, *fulu*.640]. On several occasions, in later years, Nie and Yan corresponded with each other, and Yan would play a role in facilitating appointments to important government offices. At thirty, Nie successfully passed the highest-level examination, becoming a *jinshi*.

During winter of that same year, Nie returned home to spend time with his mother and father but alone as well. "After returning, he closed the entrance and stopped sweeping

the pathway”, states Song Yiwang’s “Record of conduct”, meaning that he was not going to be receiving guests or that he would at least limit their flow. Song explains that Nie did so because he wished to nurture his aspiration to model himself after the ancients [Nie 2007, *fulu.639*]. However, in the spring of 1520, the Ministry of Personnel appointed the now thirty-three-year-old Nie as magistrate of Huating, a county located in the Southern Metropolitan Area that fell under the jurisdiction of Songjiang Prefecture.

Although this county had a reputation for corrupting officials and staining their reputations, Nie proved himself an effective magistrate. He brought order to the yamen by disciplining sub-official functionaries and reducing their numbers. Huating locals were securing the services of such willing accomplices and corrupting the local government. Nie also opened the yamen one day each month, permitting commoners to bring litigation before him so that he could review it publicly and issue verdicts. This was another way to get around powerful locals and yamen underlings who would undermine law and order to advance their private interests. Nie attempted as well to reorganize the land tax and make its collection aboveboard. Some of this tax revenue was in arrears, some wasn’t being collected because property had been concealed, and some was being embezzled by underlings. Nie conducted reviews and cadastral surveys and punished yamen runners, using previously uncollected or eliminated taxes to put the county on a sound fiscal footing and set up disaster relief. He punished a wealthy commoner for trying to gain his favor with a bribe, sending the message that he was unwilling to tolerate corruption or local tyrants. After a time, Huating’s festering problems were cleaned up [Nie 2007, *fulu.640*]. This earned Nie a good name in the county and among his colleagues.

Nie Bao’s pedagogical activities while serving as magistrate were also significant. In his epitaph for Nie’s memorial tablet, Xu Jie 徐階 (1503–1583) wrote,

[He] built a shrine in honor of virtuous officials and county worthies and opened the archery grounds, bringing to it those students who came to see him each day and holding philosophical discussions. His teaching was grounded in what is referred to in the *Classic of Changes* as silence and stimulation (*ji gan* 寂感), which he verified with centered harmony (*zhong he* 中和) [in the *Zhongyong*], as well as filial piety and fraternal respect. He also verified it with how the sages and worthies of ancient times perfected themselves and perfected things and maintained a discipline that held to the essential but which was comprehensive in use [Nie 2007, *fulu.635*].

Thus, when Nie Bao first began instructing students while serving in an official capacity, he was already citing phrases from the *Classic of Changes*, *Zhongyong* (Centrality and commonality, commonly referred to as the *Doctrine of the Mean*), and the *Analects*, three classics that will remain central to his classical hermeneutics and Confucian philosophical discourse to the end of his life. In sum, in his spare time, Nie devoted his energies to pedagogy, personally instructing young men and encouraging them to model themselves after the ancients (and, hence, to mature in virtue). Several, such as Xu himself and He Liangjun 何良俊 (1506–1573), successfully climbed the examination ladder and obtained important offices in the Ming government. According to Song Yiwang, when Education Intendant Xiao Mingfeng visited the county and examined the students, he most appreciated Nie’s [Nie 2007, *fulu.640–641*].

In the winter of 1523, having completed his three-year assignment, Nie Bao submitted a report on his record of service and returned to Beijing for appointment. Some court officials sought to appoint him to the Ministry of Personnel, asking him to stay, but he adamantly declined, returning to Huating for another term as magistrate. In 1525, however, Nie was ordered to serve as the investigating censor for the Fujian circuit. These censorate officials were “the most concentrated, broad-ranging investigative and impeaching officials”. Thus, Nie was empowered to gather complaints from the people, impeach officials for misconduct, and submit remonstrates or opinions regarding the emperor’s conduct [Hucker 1985, 145–146]. In fact, upon taking office and within the first few

months, he availed himself of these, stunning officialdom by submitting three memorials directly criticizing powerful officials over matters no one had heretofore dared touch. He impeached Grand Eunuch Zhang Zuo for violating orders, Minister of War Jin Xianmin for accepting bribes, and Minister of Rites Xi Shu for nepotism [Nie 2007, *fulu.641*]. This elevated his profile because his courage in taking these people to task for their conduct, as Huang Zongxi characterizes it, earned him a reputation for being someone genuinely capable of remonstrating [Huang 2006, Vol. 1, 17.369].

Toward the end of 1525, Nie Bao was sent to Yingtian Prefecture and neighboring areas to investigate the management of horse pasturages. The following spring, in 1526, as surveillance commissioner in Yingtian, he completed his assignment and submitted a memorial listing all the problems he had discovered with the horse administration and making recommendations. Not long after, in 1527, he was appointed surveillance commissioner of Fujian [Nie 2007, *fulu.641*].

In the meantime, Wang Yangming was living in retirement in Shaoxing, spending his time holding forums for discussing moral philosophy with his large number of followers and enthusiasts. Nie also wished to meet him, so late in the third lunar month of 1526 he departed from Yingtian, crossed over the Qiantang River, and spent about ten days in Shaoxing. “They discussed the learning of innate knowing together”, Song Yiwang explains, “and Master [Nie] keenly sensed that attaining sagehood was entirely feasible” [Nie 2007, *fulu.641*]. Upon returning to his duties, Song also notes, Nie “sent a letter of inquiry about learning to Master Wang, who sighed deeply over the courage with which the Master shouldered responsibility for the Way, and so he sent a letter in reply” [Nie 2007, *fulu.641*].

Wang Yangming’s impressions of Nie Bao are more readily glimpsed from a letter Wang wrote to another Jiangxi disciple, Ouyang De 歐陽德 (1496–1554). He expressed reservations about his abilities and ideas but also his confidence that in the end Nie would finally break through to an understanding of innate knowing:

Wenwei (= Nie Bao) possesses a generous natural endowment. Although I hesitate to go so far as to say that his daily efforts at study and inquiry are entirely correct, nevertheless, he has a sincere and honest head on him, and the aspiration to learn from the ancients. In comparison, this is a far cry from those today who merely esteem empty talk, try to impress, and conduct themselves perversely, thinking it perfectly reasonable and never doubting it. Recently, I had the pleasure of a visit from him, but regrettably, on account of official business, he could not stay for long. We only superficially discussed the meaning of texts. As for what I really wished to convey, I wasn’t the slightest bit able to do so. After he departed, I felt especially dispirited. Lately, concerning the tenet of *liangzhi*, many of those friends who have discussed this together for one or two years are still confused and undecided about it. But just as soon as Wenwei opens his mouth he is able to put his faith in it. This is because his intelligence truly excels. It might only be noted that his insights are yet shallow, so he is unable to grasp things thoroughly, to the point where he fully gets it: “it seems to rise sheer above me and I have no way of going after it!” This cannot but be the obstacle still posed by book learning and old theories. Yet, he has very little sediment obstructing his mind, and he already understands the gist of it. Add to this his sincere belief and love for learning and, accordingly, there is no need to worry that he won’t totally comprehend it [Qian 2002, 319].

Nie Bao’s first letter is no longer available, but Wang Yangming’s lengthy reply now famously sits in the middle volume of the *Chuan xi lu* 傳習錄. The letter is widely regarded as one of his most important philosophical statements late in life, but it also gives some insight into his thoughts about Nie. Likely written in late spring 1526, at the outset of the letter he said,

This spring you took a long and weary journey to come and see me. Your regard and concern were most earnest and kind. How can I deserve such fond feeling? Originally, I

had hoped to get you and several like-minded friends to go to a quiet place and stay for ten days or so so that I might present some of my humble views and reap the benefit of your polishing and refining. Unfortunately, both public and private business were so onerous that it was impossible for me to do so. As we separated, I felt dispirited as though I had suffered a loss. Then suddenly your kind letter arrived with an earnest discussion of over a thousand words. As I read it, I felt my mind cleansed and my heart comforted. In your letter you praise me exceedingly, no doubt with the generous purpose of encouraging me and leading me forward. Sincerely giving me advice and encouragement, you want to take me into the company of sages and worthies. Moreover, you asked [Ouyang] Chongyi to give me your keenest regards. How could you have done so much unless you had a deep friendship and great love for me? I am grateful and yet ashamed, and fear that I do not deserve all this. However, how dare I merely engage in expressions of gratitude and compliance and fail to rouse myself to effort?

You said that in me you unexpectedly found Zisi, Mengzi, Zhou Dunyi, and Cheng Hao in this late generation, that rather than have the doctrine believed by the whole world, it is better to have it believed truly by one single person, that the Way is self-evident and the Confucian learning is also self-evident, and that they are not augmented because the whole world believes in them nor diminished because only one person believes in them. This is indeed the mind of the superior man who can face disapproval without being troubled. Can people of superficial views understand it? And yet in the way I feel there is something that cannot be helped at all, and I do not mind whether people believe me or not [Adapted from Chan 1963, 165–166].

From this, it seems clear that Nie Bao had already shown much deference towards and admiration for Wang Yangming, informing him that he found in him echoes of Confucians whose writings had been and will remain central to Nie's own thinking: Zisi 子思 (c. 481–402 BCE), grandson to Confucius and purported author of the *Doctrine of the Mean*; the Warring States Period philosopher Mengzi 孟子 (c. 372–289 BCE); and Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073 CE) and Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085 CE), two northern Song dynasty School of the Way (*daoxue* 道學) scholars.

Wang's understanding was that Nie believed this intellectual lineage had illuminated a universally true *Dao*. Those who find it will see it as such. They don't need others' confirmation. Even should everyone deem it false, that wouldn't change the fact of its truth. So true is it that those who see and have faith in it will have acquired a certain nobility, permitting them to persevere even as a pariah. Wang Yangming observed that "this is indeed the mind of the superior man who can face disapproval without being troubled". Unsurprisingly, Nie Bao had established a record of standing up for principle as opposed to seeking approval, showing his willingness to confront people if he believed that doing so was necessary for him to remain true to his convictions. Here too, he had elevated himself into a kind of elect, those treading the path to attaining a special understanding of the Way, possession of which confers an inner certainty unshaken by the influence of matters of social acceptance.

On October 16, 1527 (Jiajing 6, 9/22), Nie received orders to proceed to Fujian as regional inspector [Nie 2007, 2.34]. He arrived February 7, 1528 (Jiajing 7, 1/17). This turned out to be a busy year, for his duties required traveling the province, and while doing so he also occupied his spare time with pedagogical activities. Such assignments generally lasted for a year and required touring all localities in the defined jurisdiction, "observing all governmental activities, checking files, auditing accounts, interrogating officials, accepting complaints from the people, especially inspecting all prisons and trial records, regularly participating in policy deliberations of provincial-level officials; submitting memorials directly to the emperor denouncing unfit officials, criticizing inappropriate policies, or proposing new policies" [Hucker 1985, 253]. Indeed, while in Fujian, Nie toured all eight of its prefectures, busily carrying out the duties required by

his assignment including, for example, reviewing the military and visiting shrines erected in honor of the Song dynasty Learning of the Way scholars Yang Shi 楊時 and Zhu Xi (when passing through Yanping Prefecture) [Zhu 2010, 50–59].

Of Nie's period of service in Fujian, Song Yiwang writes,

In the spring of *wuxu* [1528], he entered Min [Fujian], shaking the lines of the net (*zhen ji gang* 振紀綱: restoring law and order), reviewing personnel administration, suppressing the wealthy and powerful clans, and punishing evildoers. After a time, corrupt officials saw where the wind was blowing and accordingly removed the silk belts [holding their seals] and departed. The Eunuch Grand Defender Zhao Cheng was tyrannical and difficult to control. Master [Nie] dispatched a communication to the surveillance commission, requesting an investigation into his illicitly profiting from the postal stations, and Zhao Cheng was scared. Following, he memorialized concerning reforms to the Maritime Trade Supervisorate, and had Vice Eunuch Director Shi Zhang replace [Zhao] as eunuch grand defender. The tyranny quickly ended. Zhangzhou's Prefect Zhan and Longxi's Magistrate Li were long notorious for their corruption. Just as soon as Master Nie stepped down from his carriage, he impeached them. Jianning's Prefect Chen Neng had already left for another appointment. His record of corruption and making a mess were especially horrible. Master Nie pursued him over it. Chen was cunning and adept at bribery and followed with a memorial defending himself. Those in power wanted to retaliate against the Master, so he submitted another memorial criticizing him. Surprisingly, Chen was cashiered. The Min people were gratified by this.

Every time someone was detained, Master Nie investigated their immoral acts, and even though a wife and son would not know about it, he always uncovered it. After a time, the local villains turned themselves in and accepted responsibility for their crimes. Should a prefectural or county official engage in the slightest misconduct, just as soon as Master Nie detected it, the actions he would take were like spirits planning and ghosts executing, so it couldn't bud [into something worse]. The powerful bandit Zheng Xin occupied Zhangquan. Government armies attacked for many years but failed to defeat him. Nie captured him through stratagem, and only then was the place at peace...

When Nie was in Fujian, he strictly adhered to the law, and his uncompromising integrity inspired fear. Consequently, at the time, he won prestige, but also incurred other's jealousy [Nie 2007, *fulu*.641–642].

Also, in addition to consistently demonstrating staunch integrity as an official, true to his deeper calling, Nie Bao also devoted his time to pedagogy. He approved a request for construction of the [Luo] Yifeng Academy (Yifeng Shuyuan 一峰書院) in Quanzhou and while in Fuzhou he commissioned construction of the Cultivating Correctness Academy (Yangzheng Shuyuan 養正書院) so that he could bring together licentiates from the eight counties for instruction. To facilitate this, he printed an edition of the *Chuan xi lu* 傳習錄 (Wang Yangming's sayings as compiled by followers), the *Daxue gu ben* 大學古本 (Ancient edition of the *Great Learning*), Zhan Ruoshui's *Er ye heyi lun* 二業合一論 (Discourse on uniting two courses of study), and Cheng Minzheng's *Dao yi bian* 道一編 (The Way is one compilation) [Nie 2007, *fulu*.642].

Nie Bao was clearly signaling support for elements of Wang Yangming's Confucianism, including Wang's criticism of Zhu Xi's arrangement of and commentary on the *Great Learning*. Since it was Zhu's version that became the prescribed curriculum for the civil-service examinations, Nie was calling into question state-sanctioned orthodox arrangements and interpretations of the classical heritage as well as aligning himself with a controversial Confucian master and movement. Second, he was also showing support for the work of Zhan Ruoshui 湛若水 (1466–1560), and hence confirming an intellectual heritage going back to Chen Xianzhang, for Zhan was Chen's most prominent disciple. One purpose of Zhan's *Discourse* was to demonstrate that the seemingly conflicting goals of climbing the examination ladder and achieving sagehood could be harmonized. Last,

since the purpose of Cheng Minzheng's 程敏政 (1445–1499) compilation was to reconcile Zhu Xi's School of Principle and Lu Xiangshan's School of Mind, Nie was also signaling his interest in harmonizing different interpretive veins in the tradition of Neo-Confucianism that yet remained the subject of heated debate in his time.

Song Yiwang's account provides additional insight into Nie's pedagogy as of 1528. He wrote,

After he heard the teaching of the Honorable Master Wang Yangming, to the end of his life not a single day went by without his discussing learning with others. . . [L.] Yiwang accompanied Master Nie during his travels for nearly thirty years, and hence repeatedly gave an ear to his teaching, catching a glimpse of one or two of his aims. Since *dinghai* [1527], whenever he discussed the disciplined practice of realizing [innate] knowing, he would identify the young child's knowing to love parents and respect elders as the original appearance of innate knowing. If one turns within and seeks it through serving parents and obeying elders, one will feel they have something to abide by. He sent letters to Honorable Masters Yangming and Nanye, speaking of this exhaustively. Thereafter, when he was living at home, whenever he received and provided guidance to like-minded friends, he would unflaggingly teach personally practicing filial piety and fraternal respect as the straightforward and practical starting point for the practice of realizing innate knowing [Nie 2007, *fulu*.648].

According to Song, Nie had incorporated Wang Yangming's doctrine of the extension (or realization) of the innate knowing (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知) into his own philosophy, declaring that a child's sentiments of love for parents and respect for older brothers (and seniors more generally) are the purest, most immediate, and original expression of an in-born conscience, a natural moral knowledge, that manifests in subjectivity as intersubjective occasions unfold. Hence, acting on and nurturing these sentiments is a practice that will lead to a deepening knowledge of one's intrinsically moral nature.

Nie Bao's other letter to Wang Yangming was written in 1528, two years after his visit to Shaoxing. "At no moment and in no thoughts have I not been together with you", wrote Nie. Throughout this year, Wang was detained in Guangxi because he had been sent there by the Ming court to quell unrest among non-Chinese ethnic groups native to the province. Nie spoke of this assignment, as well as of his own duties as an official, and reflected on the relationship between education and serving. He also indicated where he stood personally in his self-development and wrote of his efforts at self-improvement. But most importantly, he explained his tenet of realizing innate knowing by practicing filial piety and fraternal respect, amply citing classical texts in support of his position:

When our learning arrives at seeking humaneness and the heart, if it is easy and simple all the principles in the world will be acquired. Since the Qin and Han [dynasties], aside from Zhou [Dunyi] and Cheng [Hao], few are those who understand the meaning of this. The practices of knowing and acting and activity and tranquility have been separated, and the defects of scattered and endless learning never cease. Seeking broadly or seizing it from without, these defects have reached an extreme where we are now with today's examination preparation. Hence, to aid all those of the world who are mired in it, there was no other choice in the matter but to tie together humaneness and the mind's intellectual clarity and spiritual transformations as the learning of the innate knowing. This is the heart [of a person] bearing hardship alone and words born of pressing circumstances.

When learning is grounded in innate knowing, and innate knowing is learning, our Way is sufficient. The defects of scattered and endless learning shall, without being attacked, die out on their own. How abundant is the virtue of ghosts and spirits!² The revolutions of Heaven above possess neither sound nor smell. That is the ultimate!³ This knowledge – even Heaven does not act contrary to it, let alone human beings, and the ghosts and spirits. If at any time you take hold of a person on the street and ask them, "Do you have knowledge?" [He will] reply with "I have". If at any time you take hold of a child and ask them: "Do you have knowledge?" [He will] surely reply with "I have".

Knowing hunger and knowing to eat, knowing the cold and knowing to dress, it is all knowledge. Extending it and arriving at knowledge of Heaven and [Heaven's] decree, as well as knowledge of the nurturing transformations [of heaven and earth]: in the sense that any husband or wife may partake of knowledge of it, but that there is that which even the sage does not know of it – they are the same⁴. Where they differ lies in whether or not they are realizing and extending it [that is, innate knowing]. However, so far as the kinds of effort required to realize [innate] knowing go, in my opinion, the starting point for trying varies by the person, and should go with what is suited to their aptitudes and exert effort at it. Mengzi says: “No young child does not know to love his parents, and when they grow older, none does not know to respect elders”⁵. As this is rooted in the Heaven-mandated nature, it does not depend on study and practice, and it is genuine knowledge. Thus, for the functioning of innate knowing, nothing is more straightforward than filial piety and fraternal respect. Are not filial piety and fraternal respect the root of humaneness? The path of Yao and Shun is simply filial piety and fraternal respect. Is not extending and developing this knowledge to the full enough to properly serve our parents? The true meaning of humaneness, righteousness, deference, and wisdom is to be sought in serving parents and obeying elders. This reflects Mengzi's deep understanding of innate knowing. I once turned within to find it in myself, and it is true that the functioning of the void intelligence is intrinsically bright. It quickly and unstably comes and is present and goes and is absent, as if there is no place to moor.

Recently, I have been searching for it in serving parents and obeying elders and have come to feel that I have guidelines. Thus, right when some desirous thought begins to sprout, I criticize myself by telling myself “this is not filial piety”. The errant thought will then vanish on its own. If I error in something that I have said or done, then I will criticize myself by telling myself “I have humiliated my mother and father”. Then shame and perspiration will gush out together.

All men possess a sense of right and wrong⁶. If at any time you take hold of a person on the street or a child and castigate them by saying “you are not filial or respectful”, they will all be angry and displeased, as if they have been covered in filth on account of it. I've only now realized that [Zhang Zai's] ‘Western Inscription [西銘]’ contains reasoning identical to the *Doctrine of the Mean*, as well as that Zengzi's [statement] “take a look at my hands, take a look at my feet”⁷ captures the meaning of [the *Classic of Rites* where it states] [“His parents give birth to his person] all complete, and to return it [to them all complete may be called filial duty”]⁸. Mengzi says: “A great man is one who has not lost his infant-like heart”⁹. What kind of heart does an infant have? A heart that loves parents and respects elders. “Under Heaven, what thinking and deliberation is there? All under Heaven returns to the same point, but by various paths; one goal for a hundred plans”¹⁰. I have inscribed your enlightened teaching on my heart. What do you think of my desire to find the so-called learning of innate knowing in serving parents and obeying elders [Nie 2007, 8.234–235]?

Nie Bao's letter to Ouyang De was written as a reply to criticisms of his teaching on the relation between loving parents and respecting elders and *liangzhi* from the then thirty-one-year-old vice director in the Ministry of Personnel. Ouyang's letter is no longer extant, but clearly Nie felt compelled to spell this out again for his fellow follower:

The two words *liang zhi* (“innate knowing”) are something about which our revered master attained special insight and then selectively brought out for instruction. He did so to destroy the harmful error whereby the world [learns] by trying to research broadly and seize it from the outside. It is very helpful for students and should be discussed together with the theory of the nighttime [restorative] *qi*. As for my having gained some modest insight into filial piety and fraternal respect, it is just that I truly desire to grasp the innate knowing, and regard filial piety and fraternal respect as the innate knowing, as opposed to something one depends upon for assisting [in its realization]. Mengzi's [statements regarding] loving parents and respecting elders points to an appearance of innate knowing so people can recognize it. Summing it up definitively, he says “the Way of Yao and Shun is simply filial piety and fraternal respect”¹¹. The substance of humanity, righteousness,

wisdom, ritual etiquette, and joy lies with serving parents and obeying elders. Extending it and reaching others, “Let all people treat their parents as parents and elders as elders and the world will be at peace”¹². Treat the elderly as the elderly should be treated and treat the young as the young should be treated and you will be able to govern the world as though you turned it in your palm¹³.

The meaning of the first section of the *Lu* [version of the] *Analects* is primarily about applying oneself to the root. It begins with the learning whereby the gentleman regularly practices what he has learned and then immediately follows up with behaving well towards one’s parents and elder brothers as the root of humaneness¹⁴. One cannot say that the intentions of the person who recorded it was altogether lacking in a sequence. It is said that the eighteen chapters of the *Classic of Filial Piety* were the subtle words taught by Confucius to Zengzi. Zengzi understood it, and hence spoke of it stating: “If in his home a man is not solemn, if in serving his ruler he is not conscientious, if in discharging the duties of his office he is not reverent, if with friends he is not trustworthy, and if on the front lines he is not courageous, then in each case he is without filial piety”¹⁵. “Apprehensive and cautious, as if approaching [a chasm], as though treading on [thin ice]”¹⁶ is its solid effort. Freeing the feet and hands¹⁷, dying after the mat was changed¹⁸, is returning it complete¹⁹.

Yet, what the conventional world refers to as the five types of unfiliality²⁰ is already of secondary significance. I have also investigated this in the *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, and six classics. It is repeatedly spoken about without fail. The words differ but the aim is the same, making it difficult to quickly explain. The *Classic of Rites* regards cutting down vegetation when it is not the right season as not being filial²¹. How exceedingly great is filial piety! It is the pattern of Heaven, the standard of the earth, the norm of conduct for the people²², and learning is born from it. “Set up filial piety, and it will fill the space from earth to heaven; spread it out, and it will extend over all the ground to the four seas; hand it down to future ages, and from morning to evening it will be observed”²³. I once tried to search for this within myself. All things are complete within me. Inside, I have the heart, belly, kidneys, and intestines, and outside, skin, hair, and nails. All are what my mother and father have granted to me. Therefore, attaining sincerity in oneself is the way to please one’s parents²⁴, and maintaining one’s integrity is the foundation of serving parents.

If you bring shame upon your parents by harming your body, even should you serve them beef, lamb, and pork every day, this would not be enough to count as filial piety. Does harming one’s body necessarily require having body parts severed, limbs broken, or descending from a hall and hurting one’s foot? If one looks at what is contrary to propriety, then the body’s eyes will be harmed. If one listens to what is contrary to propriety, then the body’s ears will be harmed. If one speaks contrary to propriety, then the body’s mouth will be harmed, and if one acts contrary to propriety, then the body’s four limbs will be harmed. If we turn within and find that there is the slightest insincerity, then the original face will not be what it once was. Is this why Shun’s filial piety was magnificent and Shen’s filial piety was pure? Ever since the Qin and Han, this cardinal principle has become ever more twisted. People always consider properly attending to one’s parents or a single event or act expressing the highest sentiment as filial piety. They don’t realize that the meaning of [the line] in the *Classic of Poetry* “Rising up early and going to sleep late, do not disgrace those who gave you birth” is returning it complete...²⁵

As for scholars and officials eroded and confused by their engagement with scattered practice, that certainly is not worth talking about. Those who are outstanding and merit worthy for their attainments always regard filial piety and fraternal respect as ordinary words and commonplace talk. They search elsewhere for a method that will be novel to the eyes and ears. Tired of the chickens at home they hunt for wild pheasants. They place at a distance such common necessities as grain, cloth, and silk, and search for something rare lying beyond ocean coasts and mountain ridge. No wonder calamities follow one after another, and the order of the Three Dynasties is no longer to be seen in this world. This has its cause. The foundation of the world is the country, the foundation of the country is the family, and the foundation of the family is oneself. In thinking about how

to cultivate oneself, one cannot but attend to one's parents. Loving one's parents is humaneness. Humaneness is the human heart. One goal for a hundred plans, by various paths returning to the same point²⁶, no filial piety and fraternal respect lies outside innate knowing, just as outside innate knowing there is no filial piety and fraternal respect [Nie 2007, 8.238–239].

In these two letters, Nie explains that innate knowing is fundamental and universal, but that people realize and extend it to varying degrees based on their aptitudes. He says that filial piety and fraternal respect are the most original expressions of this knowledge, and hence provide the most direct and effective means for realizing it. In sum, he boils the teachings of the most revered of sages – Yao, Shun, Confucius, Mengzi, and Zengzi (Master Zeng) – down to this one practice, for the love for one's parents and respect for elders are the purest expressions of the heart and derive from human nature.

In 1529 (Jiajing 8), at forty-two, Nie Bao completed his assignment in Fujian and submitted a memorial requesting home leave on account of his health. His request was denied, however, and he was appointed Ningbo prefect. He submitted two more memorials declining this office too, but these were also rejected, and he was then appointed prefect of Suzhou.

Nie arrived there in the spring of 1530 and, as was the case with prior assignments, conscientiously applied himself to his duties. Song Yiwang, who called on Nie at this time with the intention of becoming a follower, wrote,

After Master [Nie] arrived he first supported schools, corrected local customs, inquired among the people about their hardships, forbade and rooted out gambling, and suppressed the cunning bullies. The people of Wu had for long taken satisfaction in behaving as they wished, so this was at first inconvenient, but after a time they came to terms with complying with it. Su[zhou] is a major prefecture of the southeast, for long known for being ungovernable, but Nie handled it with ease. Each day he would gather scholars together at the Studying the Way Academy and discuss things together with them...

To instruct the common people, the acts in the *Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety* were painted on a wall. Among the people, there were two brothers engaged in litigation with each other, so Master Nie ordered them to go look at it. After, their dispute continued as before, so Nie stated, “they are contumacious commoners who can't be changed”. He then totally put them to shame, and they were finally moved to tears and regretted their crimes [Nie 2007, *fulu*.642].

While in Suzhou, Nie Bao also deepened his involvement with Wang Yangming's disciples. Four years before, he had spent just a few days with the Confucian master, after which he corresponded with him twice, the last time just before Wang passed away early in 1529. Thus, he never had the chance to visit him again and formally declare his discipleship. While in Suzhou, he got together with Wang Yangming's two most prominent followers – Qian Dehong 錢德洪 and Wang Ji 王畿, asking them to serve as witnesses to his declaration of discipleship. He told them, “What I have learned was truly acquired from Master [Wang]. In the past it was my hope that I would see him again and declare myself a student by presenting a gift, but now it is too late. But with the two of you as my witnesses, I will prepare an incense table and pay my respects to him” [Huang 2008, Vol. 1, 17.370]. According to Huang Zongxi, Nie set up a spirit tablet and, facing north, repeatedly bowed, declaring himself a disciple.

In Mourning and Retirement in Yongfeng, 1532–1540

In the fall of 1531, Nie Bao was preparing to travel to Beijing to appear before the emperor, but news of his father's death on 9/13 (October 22, 1531), which reached him on 10/1 (November 9, 1531), changed his plans. Together with his wife, he headed for Yongfeng, to fulfill his three-year mourning obligation. And then those three were

lengthened by another three because his mother died during the sixth lunar month of 1534. Thereafter, he wasn't recalled until 1541, which meant that Nie remained at home for about a decade. Song Yiwang summed up this decade:

While in mourning, all funeral rituals were arranged in accordance with ancient rites. When he had the slightest bit of free time, he would receive students and engage in discussions of learning. Consequently, the county's scholars all became his followers. Having completed the mourning period, he submitted a memorial requesting permission to retire from office. In the sixth month of *jiawu* 甲午 [1534], the mourning period for his mother, née Zou, followed, and from that time on he shut his gate and did not go out. All told, this lasted for over ten years [Nie 2007, *fulu.643*].

Thus it was that Nie largely restricted his circle of activities to Ji'an prefecture. He remained at home for the most part, although on occasion, especially after 1536, he involved himself in the prefecture's educational activities or convalesced in nearby mountain retreats. He occupied much of his time with friends and students, receiving and corresponding with them as well as joining them for excursions in the area. Most importantly, this was a busy time for the followers of Wang Yangming, who were actively disseminating their teacher's philosophy through academy building and holding regular academic forums, the *jiangxue* ("discussing learning") events or *jiang hui* 講會 ("discussion forums"). Wang's Jiangxi followers were especially active. These men had received instruction from him personally and were determined to carry the torch for the intellectual, social, and political movement he sought to initiate. During the 1530s, Ji'an became one of the most dynamic centers for Yangmingism, and Nie Bao was a critical part of the scene.

Modern scholarship generally points to the four years following his prescribed mourning as the time when Nie's philosophical discourse entered a different phase, one that included many of the principal ideas articulated in his matured philosophy of the 1550s [Wu 2011, 107–110; Li 2017, 288–289; Lin 2005, 184–192]. The basis for this claim is miscellaneous documents written between 1536 and 1539 that demonstrate a manifest turn in the direction of his tenet of "returning to silence (*gui ji* 歸寂)". Song Yiwang claims that "after *wuxu* [1538], Master Nie realized the significance of the void and silent original condition (*benti* 本體虛寂) [of the mind]" [Nie 2007, *fulu.648*]. But what was the basis for his saying so? It is useful to review some of these documents, the context for which was Nie Bao's activities in Ji'an Prefecture and neighboring counties, most notably his interaction with literati who came to see him or whom he encountered at social events. While these do confirm Song's statement, it should also be added that realizing centeredness (centrality) also became one of Nie's central teachings.

In 1537, Nie traveled to Cuiwei Mountain in Ningdu County to convalesce for a few months. Of this time, his "Bound words (Kuo yan 括言)" states,

During the summer of *Jiajing ding you* [1537], owing to illness I relocated to Cuiwei Mountain for a few months. One day, I was sitting on my old friend Liu Zhongshan's bed. The mountain dweller patted me on the back and asked, "How have your studies been going these days?" I replied, "what cannot be seen or heard is the standard; alertness and apprehension is the disciplined practice²⁷. This has nothing to do with reasoning and does not belong to the category of thoughts. It is nonexistent and spiritual, existent and transforming. It is close to the mind of heaven and earth, and [heaven and earth] taking their proper places and [the things of the world] being nurtured follow it in taking their command".

[Liu] asked: "If that is the case, then is it wrong for me to extend and fulfill the four moral senses?" I said, "'stirred it immediately penetrates' is spirit. This perhaps is not understood²⁸. Those who understand this call it assisting in its growth, while those who forget it call it effortless action²⁹. As for extending and fulfilling, this also proceeds from what is prior to arising, fulfilling it to reach its full measure. This is to engage its most refined

meaning so that the functioning is perfect. Fulfilling it after [emotions] arise is far from the Way”. [Liu] asked, “If that is so then those today who regard forgetting and unknowing as the ideal are correct?”

I said, “Is that the vestigial residue of Daoism and Buddhism? They generally possess insight into the unseen and unheard, yet eschew talking about alertness and apprehension, claiming that alertness and apprehension are a hindrance to the unseen and unheard. Hence, they make forgetting and unknowing the ideal. Those who regard alertness and apprehension as a hindrance are alert and apprehensive while experiencing seeing and hearing. This obstacle to the original condition (*benti* 本體) is firm. How could that be sufficient to speak about the alertness and apprehension of what is neither seen nor heard [Nie 2017, 13.534]?”

In this passage, Nie Bao weaves together passages from several classical sources to explain the Way. “What cannot be seen or heard” refers to a statement in the *Doctrine of the Mean*: “Thus the gentleman is alert and cautious about what he does not see, is apprehensive about what he does not hear” [Adapted from Eno 2016b, 37]. Nie asserts that this is the standard for learning, further characterizing what one neither sees nor hears as both existing and not existing, as both spiritual and transforming, but not as reasoning or thinking as his interlocutor might normally understand it, that is, as a form of discursive or conceptual knowledge.

Nie also draws on the rest of the passage: “Before pleasure and anger, and sorrow and joy have arisen, it is called centeredness; when they have arisen and all attain due measure and degree, it is called harmony. Centeredness is the great root of the world. Harmony is the ultimate Dao of the world. Reaching centered harmony, heaven and earth take their proper places and the things of the world are nurtured thereby” [Adapted from Eno 2016b, 37]. Nie further equates the centeredness prior to the arising of emotions with the unseen and unheard. The relevant term is *weifa* 未發 (“not yet manifest”), meaning before or prior to the arising, manifestation, or expression of the feelings or emotions listed in the *Doctrine* (and, more generally, to the phenomena of experience). This is centeredness, the state/condition of being centered or, put another way, just the middle or center. Last, Nie also states that the center is the mind of heaven and earth, and the root of the order of the universe. It contains both a cosmogonic and psychological meaning.

Furthermore, with “stirred it penetrates”, Nie is citing a passage in the *Classic of Changes*, which states, “The *Yi* is without thought and without action; silent and unmoving, when stirred it penetrates all the circumstances under Heaven” [Adapted from Adler 2020, 279]. Here, albeit without stating it in the passage, Nie is identifying both the unseen and unheard and the centrality prior to arising with the “silent and unmoving”. “Stirred it penetrates”, on the other hand, aligns with “when they have arisen and all attain due measure and degree, it is called harmony.” Finally, he also refers to the above as the mind’s original condition (*benti* 本體). Original condition refers to the mind’s root state, that is, mind-in-itself, the mind’s essence or inherent reality, to borrow renderings common in the existing English-language Wang Yangming literature. In sum, Nie says that the standard for learning is what one does not see or hear, prior to the arising of emotions, silent and unmoving, the mind of heaven and earth, and the mind’s root state.

Another matter addressed in the dialogue is disciplined practice (*gongfu* 功夫) – that is, how does one maintain the standard? Likewise referring to the *Doctrine*, Nie states that it is through the practice of alertness and apprehension. He clarifies, however, that these practices are intrinsic to the mind’s root state, prior to emotions and seeing and hearing, and hence in some sense prior to mind arising. Thus, he is advocating a form of contemplative practice, perhaps in the sense that mindful awareness is for Buddhism or watchfulness for the Christian tradition. However, Liu Lin interprets Nie’s statements in light of a passage in the *Mengzi*, which claims that everyone possesses four moral senses, each of which is the seed of a virtue. *Mengzi* 2A.6 states, “The sense of commiseration is

the seed of humanity, the sense of shame is the seed of righteousness, the sense of deference is the seed of ritual, and the sense of right and wrong is the seed of wisdom". The passage goes on to say that these four senses should be developed: "As we possess these four senses within us, if only we realize that we need to extend and fulfill them, then the force of these senses will burst through us like a wildfire first catching or a spring first bursting forth through the ground. If a person can bring these impulses to fulfillment, they will be adequate to bring all the four quarters under his protection. But if a person fails to develop these senses, he will fail even to serve his own parents" [Eno 2016a, 50].

Here, both Liu and Nie are aligning Mengzi's discussion of the four moral senses and the origins of these virtues with the *Doctrine's* statement regarding centeredness/equilibrium before arising and harmony after arising. Nie further aligns the *Classic of Changes'* description of the thoughtless and actionless *Changes* as "silent and unmoving, when stirred it penetrates all the circumstances under Heaven". He clarifies that just as the practice of alertness and apprehension belongs to the unseen and unheard, so do extending and fulfilling apply to what is prior to the expression of emotions.

Documents dating to 1538 and 1539 offer further insight, including the remainder of his "Bound Words" and parting prefaces gifted to friends (*zeng xu* 贈序: words of advice given in parting). In the rest of "Bound Words", Nie writes,

The following year, *wuxu* [1538], Master Ji Pengshan approached the Cherishing Virtue Shrine established by Luling County to make offerings to Master Yangming. The eighteenth of the third month was divined as the day for holding the spring sacrificial rites. Arrangements were made with like-minded friends to meet and do it together. At that time, together with Master Zou Dongkuo (= Zou Shouyi), I along with such gentlemen as Wu Nanxi, Guo Songya, Gan Lianping, Wang Liangya, Zeng Huashan all arrived on time for it. After the sacrificial offerings were concluded, questions were raised for the purpose of seeking clarification.

Master Dongkuo stated, "This is the learning of the *Doctrine of the Mean*. Are there not similarities to or differences from *zhi zhi* 致知 ('realizing knowledge') and *ge wu* 格物 ('rectifying things' or 'reaching things')?" I said, "It's simply the same. Realizing knowledge is completely filling out the full measure of the original condition of my innate knowing, without permitting even the slightest blockage or concealment in it. This is attaining centeredness. Reaching things is treating things according to the nature of the thing (*yi wu fu wu* 因物付物: lit. 'in accordance with things giving to things'), 'stirred it immediately penetrates all the circumstances under Heaven' – it is the truly beneficial. Yet, the effort lies in realizing [innate] knowing, while for reaching things, I solely obey the natural, marvelous functioning of my innate knowing, absent utilizing inventiveness. The Buddhists and Daoists regard forgetting and unknowing as the ideal, and they certainly have insight into this, but they also forget both alertness and apprehension, which is mistaken" . . .

Realizing [innate] knowledge is like making my scale and ruler precise. Reaching things is like holding a carpenter's square in preparation for the world's weights and lengths. Then the world's weights and lengths will all have a standard. In Daoist and Buddhist learning, the scale and ruler are precise, and yet they regard weights and lengths as obstacles, completely doing away with and extinguishing every bit of it. The crux of it is that what they call precise is not yet so. As for the learning of the five hegemony, when it comes to light and heavy and long and short, they think and think about it all day, so that the weighing is very careful. But they don't understand seeking precision through my own scale and ruler. Thus, from ancient times to today, what they call light and heavy and long and short are suited to bringing disorder to the world's fixed standards. Thus, the distinction between the Confucians and Buddhists and the kings and hegemony, as well as the meaning of what has been transmitted beginning with Yao and Shun, is indeed very subtle. Master Dongkuo said: "Although learning really is like this, to call things the functioning of the natural, and not to apply one's efforts, in the final analysis this way of stating things is not so transparent". Thus, for the time being I left and thought it over [Nie 2007, 13:535].

In this passage, Nie Bao synthesizes his prior explanations of passages from the *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Classic of Changes*, and the *Mengzi* with passages in the *Great Learning*. The *Great Learning* states, “In ancient times, those who wished to make bright virtue brilliant in the world first ordered their states; those who wished to order their states first aligned their households; those who wished to align their households first refined their persons; those who wished to refine their persons first balanced their minds; those who wished to balance their minds first perfected the genuineness of their intentions; those who wished to perfect the genuineness of their intentions first extended their understanding [*zhi zhi* 致知]; extending one’s knowledge lies in aligning affairs [*ge wu* 格物]” [Adapted from Eno 2016b, 12].

Nie says that realizing knowledge (“extending understanding”) requires bringing to fulfillment (*Mengzi*) the full measure of the original condition of innate knowing. By the latter, he is referring to Wang Yangming’s concept of *liangzhi bentu* 良知本體, for which there are multiple renderings in English. For *liangzhi*, translations include “pure knowing”, “good knowing”, “innate knowledge of the good”, “innate moral knowing”, “intuitive faculty”, and “conscience”, among others. Renderings of *bentu* include “original substance”, “original state”, “primordial condition”, “inherent reality”, “being-in-itself”, “noumenon”, “root system of vitality”, “substance/essence”, among others. By extending knowledge, of course, Nie is referring to Wang Yangming’s doctrine of *zhi liangzhi* 致良知 (“reaching good knowing”, “extend and [realize] the knowledge of the good”, “extension of the innate knowledge of the good”, “the extension of pure knowing”, “extending one’s good conscience”, or “realizing innate moral knowing”). Hence, in sum, Nie is stating that extending, reaching, or realizing knowledge/knowing requires bringing to fulfillment or fully attaining – without any obstacles or coverings – the original state, root state, inherent reality, or primordial condition of my pure knowing, innate knowledge of the good, or innate moral knowing. Put most simply, *liangzhi bentu* is “innate knowing’s root state”.

Nie further states that such fulfillment is the same as “attaining centeredness (*zhi zhong* 致中)”. As stated above, centeredness is the center or middle, even if, precisely because it is void and silent, this cannot be identified by a term implying an object or even a state or condition. As for *zhi*, this term is probably best interpreted as meaning bringing about, reaching, or realizing (centeredness). Thus, Nie brings the *Great Learning* in line with the *Doctrine of the Mean*.

As for *ge wu* (“aligning affairs”; for Zhu Xi, “investigating things”; for Wang Yangming, “rectifying matters”), Nie brings this step in the *Great Learning* in line with the *Classic of Changes*’ statement regarding the *Changes*: “Stirred it penetrates all circumstances under Heaven”. In “Bound words”, he equated this phrase with the *Doctrine of the Mean*’s “when they have arisen and all attain due measure and degree, it is called harmony”. Nie adds additional description, explaining that *ge wu* (“reaching things”) is also allowing things to be as they are (according to their nature), as well as obeying the natural, marvelous functioning of one’s innate knowing. *Ge wu*, then, aligns matters as they should be aligned, according to the natural operation of innate knowing, which knows things truthfully. Richard John Lynn’s translation of the phrase as “when stimulated it is commensurate with all the causes for everything that happens in the world” more felicitously captures the operations of the metaphysical as Nie conceptualized it. As for “according to things give to things”, Nie is referring to “*wu ge fu wu* 物各付物”, a phrase used by Cheng Yi and cited by Wang Yangming which literally means “each thing gives over to a thing”. In record 201 of the *Chuan xi lu*, Chen Jiuchuan states,

I said, “The *Doctrine of the Mean* states, ‘without genuineness (*cheng* 誠) there would be no things’ ”⁸. Master Cheng said, “harmoniously respond to things as they come”. And then there are the sort of statements like “leaving things as they are”, and “having no

thing in mind (*naozhong wu wu* 腦中無物)". These are all cases indicative of how the word [*wu* 物] was commonly employed by the ancients. On another day, the Master also said that this was true [Israel 2023, 7].

In the last paragraph of "Bound words", Nie provides an analogy to explain what realizing knowledge and *ge wu* ("reaching things") mean. We have within the tools necessary to gauge the dimensions of matters that come before us, but those tools are not necessarily accurate. Nie does not specifically resort to the language of the craftsman to explain why a tool is imprecise or how it is to be improved, but we can assume he is referring to blockages or concealments and their removal, by working on oneself, in order that innate knowing freely functions with accuracy. In this case, realizing knowledge (and hence, attaining centeredness) means making one's measuring device more precise. As for reaching things, Nie says that this is analogous to putting those measuring instruments to use. That is what a Confucian does but also what a Daoist and Buddhist fails to do, since the object itself is extinguished. On the other hand, as for the activist hegemony of ancient times, they busily apply the instruments, but their instruments are not precise. Hence, they cannot bring the world into line with the correct standard.

Nie penned another important philosophical statement when he saw two young men off to a neighboring county and composed parting words of advice for them. Nie wrote,

I once heard that Mister Lai and Mister Li observe the way of the ancients in their friendship. I was curious about them but had not met them in person. However, on account of my aspiration to follow the Way, we once corresponded, discussing learning and a learning rooted in [human] nature. From this I knew that their education had a foundation and was even more curious about them. During the winter of Jiajing *wuxu* 戊戌 (1538), on the fifteenth day of the tenth [lunar] month, the two young men left home, misguidedly bringing gifts to give me in my thatched cottage. They remained for some time, for several months, and I plumbed their spiritual depths, penetrated their thinking, and I was consequently even more curious about them and thus even more earnest. For so long the manner of friendship observed by the ancients – to motivate to do what is good by reproaching³⁰ to support each other in attaining the virtue of humanity³¹, and to correct each other's mistakes and supply each other's material needs – has not been seen under Heaven. . . .

Regarding "at birth a person is still"³², what one does not see or hear, and returning to one's root through being vigilant, cautious, and apprehensive³³ – this is the fundamental meaning of realizing the innate knowledge. As for everyone nowadays being bound by what is seen and heard, and analogously regarding wandering thought as marvelous functioning, their learning of arriving at things leads in the end to seizing it with an incidental act of righteousness³⁴. Yet the opinion of these two gentlemen is in deep agreement with the concerns of I who am untutored. When what we study is exterior to our nature, few are those who don't mistake habitual knowledge for innate knowledge. The nature is stillness. It is the silent and unmoving³⁵. "When stirred, it penetrates"³⁶, the fear and compassion evoked upon suddenly witnessing [a child] falling into a well³⁷, and the love and respect a child knows without reflecting on it³⁸ – when has there ever been the slightest human force amidst this? Consequently, does one seek alarm and compassion in the act of suddenly witnessing the child fall into a well? Or do I do so by restoring the mind that cannot bear to witness others' suffering?³⁹ In striving for love and respect, does one look for it in what a young child knows without reflection, or seek for it in the pure unity of the centeredness that precedes manifestation [of emotions]? Alone contemplating the source of the ten thousand transformations, knowledge comes to rest and one possesses certainty, and all the situations that can happen in the world are covered [Nie 2007, 4.84]⁴⁰.

In this passage, Nie identifies realizing innate knowing with stillness, silence, the center, and what one does not see or hear, distinguishing it from what is seen and heard, wandering thought, and habitual knowledge. He clarifies that when one achieves this objective, contemplating the root and source and coming to rest in it, the moral life will be

reconfigured. If moral knowledge derives from without, and is forced, then moral responses will be in some sense heteronomous, deriving from what is exterior to one's nature, becoming what Nie, drawing from Mengzi, calls seizing righteousness (*xi yi* 襲義). On the other hand, Nie claims that upon returning to the root, moral knowledge will arise naturally. When the stillness, the silence, the center is acted upon (stimulated or roused), it penetrates, and all the situations in the world will be covered. Such, for example, is the fear and compassion one should feel upon witnessing a child's life being endangered, and the love and respect a child knows for parents and elders without having to think about it. Such moral sentiments do not come about through human force but rather naturally, by returning to stillness. Wu Zhen says that although Nie does not yet speak of "returning to silence (*gui ji* 歸寂)" (his central doctrine later in life), "returning to the root (*gui gen* 歸根)" conveys the same meaning, indicating that his Confucian philosophy was beginning to mature [Wu 2011, 107–108].

In 1539, Nie Bao also gifted a preface to a certain Wang Weizhong. The year before, Weizhong's older brother Shenzhong had been appointed Jiangxi assistant administrative commissioner. He brought Weizhong along with him and then selected several outstanding students, providing living expenses and educating them. In 1539, however, when Shenzhong was relocated to Henan's provincial administrative commission, he decided to send Weizhong back home to Quanzhou to visit their parents, and that was the occasion for Nie's parting words of advice. In his "Preface for the Occasion of Sending Wang Weizhong Home to Quanzhou", Nie wrote,

Nowadays all the world's scholars who engage with the study of *liangzhi* (innate knowing) have altogether lost its truth. How so? Innate knowing is the centeredness prior to arising. All things are complete in it⁴¹ and it deeply transforms⁴². It is not a kind of awareness (*zhijue* 知覺), and yet everyone today always searches for it in awareness. They have not learned from [Mengzi's] words about the young child's love for parents and respect for elders and are mistaken about it. Mengzi said that without study or reflection the young child knows to love parents and respect elders. This is to take up what a young child manifests to verify what is possessed within. Thus, he states, "Love of parents is humaneness; respect for elders is righteousness"⁴³. Originally, Mengzi did not identify love and respect as the innate knowing. That would be like saying that empathy, shame, and dislike are the seeds of humanity and righteousness, and then regard empathy, shame, and dislike as humanity and righteousness. Is that possible? Those today who regard love and respect as the innate knowing then identify awareness as the [mind's] original condition (= essence/inherent reality). Those who regard awareness as the mind's original condition take "without study and reflection" as the practice. . . .

Everyone today who discriminates interior and exterior is careless. It is true that [what is so discriminated as] the exterior is indeed exterior, yet the interior is also the exterior, and not what I mean by interior and exterior. What I refer to as the interior is the centeredness prior to arising, while arising is then the exterior. If one knows that arising is exterior, then one knows that those who take awareness as the innate knowing are not interior. For this reason, realizing centeredness is the highest learning, it is what is meant by "When he precedes Heaven, Heaven does not oppose him". The harmony that proceeds from realizing centeredness is what is meant by "when he follows Heaven, he respects Heaven's timing"⁴⁴. Respecting Heaven's timing when acting is "stirred it penetrates all the circumstances under Heaven". This is what is called "without study or reflection", and no one knows of it.

Thus, I say that the learning of the *Doctrine of the Mean* [concerns] what precedes Heaven. Realizing innate knowing only after arriving at things is what follows Heaven. Master Zeng transmitted this to [Master] Zisi. Now, with that being the case, do they differ? I say: They are the same. "Only after knowledge comes to rest does one possess certainty" – [Zengzi] had already understood the meaning of what one does not see and what one does not hear. Master Yangming grasped what Master Zeng and Master Zisi each meant

and synthesized it. He did not say “realize knowledge” but rather “realize innate knowing”. That is because he had already anticipated that later generations would regard awareness as the innate knowing and few will be those who, in their learning of arriving at things, do not error on the side of the exterior [Nie 2016, 4.78–4.79].

In this passage, having identified innate knowing with centeredness, Nie Bao is at pains to apophatically disentangle it from modes of knowing that have been mistaken for it. First, in doing so, he has changed his position on the relationship between innate knowing and filial piety and fraternal respect. Years before, in his letters to Wang Yang-ming and Ouyang De, he had sung the praises of filial piety, giving it an expansive interpretation and identifying it with innate knowing. Here, however, expressions of filial piety are located in the realm of awareness, that is, in the realm of phenomenal states, or the exterior, albeit as authentic expressions of *liangzhi*. Second, Nie claims that those who believe themselves to have correctly identified the interior are in fact still living outside it, located in the exterior. For him, the interior is *liangzhi*, which is the center prior to arising (or manifestation). This is not a phenomenal state, as it doesn't entail finding oneself located in a particular mental condition or mode of experiencing.

It seems clear that Nie has added more description to the passages he frequently cites from the *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Mengzi*, and *Analects*, as explained above. Now, he furthers those distinctions by redefining the boundaries of “interior” and “exterior” and further citing another passage in the *Classic of Changes*:

The great person's virtue matches that of Heaven and Earth; his clarity/brightness [*ming* 明] matches that of the sun and moon; his sense of sequence matches that of the four seasons; his sensitivity to the auspicious and ominous matches that of ghosts and spirits. When he precedes Heaven, Heaven does not oppose him; when he follows Heaven he respects Heaven's timing. As Heaven does not oppose him, how can humans? How can ghosts and spirits? [Adler 2020, 66].

Nie identifies the center prior to arising/manifestation, and hence the interior, with “when he precedes Heaven”, and both the child's knowledge or awareness of love for parents and respect for elders with “when he follows Heaven, he respects Heaven's timing”.

In the “Introduction” to his *The Original Meaning of the Yijing*, Joseph Adler's section on “Key Terms and Concepts” includes the terms *xiantian* 先天 (“before Heaven”) and *houtian* 後天 (“after Heaven”). The *locus classicus* for these two terms is indeed this passage from the *Classic of Changes*. Adler identifies the following existing translations and paired terms used in other scholarship: *a priori* and *a posteriori*, precelestial and postcelestial, theoretical and phenomenal, natural/primordial and human-made/moral, metaphysical and concrete/physical [Adler 2020, 34]. Each of these pairs are helpful for understanding Nie in some way. As we have seen, he does follow the *Doctrine* in his belief that the center is the source of the ten thousand transformations. The center holds this cosmogonic significance insofar as it is prior to the generation of the cosmos, as well as the source of it. The center is also prior to manifestation or arising, as well as void and silent, so it is indeed *a priori*, metaphysical, and primordial. In fact, the entire point of Nie's preface was to secure the primordial from its mistaken identification with the *a posteriori*, postcelestial, phenomenal, and concrete/physical. For Nie, these would fall into the category of awareness or what is seen and heard (*jian wen* 見聞). That is the category of knowledge those he criticizes have mistaken for *liangzhi* because they have failed to realize (attain) centeredness.

Last, in the fall of 1539 Nie Bao composed a piece for his friend Wang Chuyan 王樗掩 upon the occasion of Wang's departure for the capital. Wang obtained his *jinshi* in 1536 and was then assigned to Ji'an as prefect. In 1539, having completed a three-year assignment, he was required to submit a report and return to Beijing. Wang Chuyan was a

student of Lü Nan 呂柟, a scholar in the tradition of the learning of the Hedong school of Xue Xuan 薛瑄. He remained committed to Confucian education, holding lecture-discussions and befriending fellow enthusiasts, including Nie Bao [Nie 2016, 4.85]. Nie wrote,

What is to be valued in learning is having deep understanding. Yet, learning can also fall into error from having a deep understanding. Having a deep understanding and being conceited about it is like an ailment. “The humane person sees it and calls it humanity; the wise person sees it and calls it wisdom”⁴⁵. While it is not the case that humanity and wisdom are not the Way, to say that they are the gentleman’s Way is incorrect. The Way of the gentleman is vacuity within and selflessness, by which the events of heaven and earth are embodied, the virtue of spiritual clarity is spread⁴⁶, and the dispositions of the myriad things are classified⁴⁷. Yet, people today always malign the Buddhists and Daoists for nothingness (*xu wu* 虛無: lit., vacuity and nonexistence) and shun speaking of it, even though nothingness pushes forward life and change and is insufficient to fault them. It is just that they also call what nothingness brings into existence and changes an obstacle and false. Even ethical human relationships and stimulus and response are among what they dismiss and discard. In the end, because they follow their selfish and self-interested views, they offend against the sages, but it is a mistake for people today always to fault them for nothingness. “The gentleman is alert and cautious about what he does not see, is apprehensive about what he does not hear”: Is this not the utmost nothingness? Void but straight [honest], nonexistent but square [righteous], open and agreeably responding, [heaven and earth] being given their proper place, and [the things of the world] being nurtured happen on its basis – this is only a matter an error by a hairbreadth [can lead you a thousand miles astray]. Nowadays, those who slight nothingness and have nothing to do with it – and even children are the same – say only stubbornly pursue what is logical and the proper form. As for where this ultimately leads, first, the pursuit of fame and profit and, secondly, exegesis, so righteousness is seized and mistakes are passed on, and this rather becomes something that the students of Buddhism and Daoism scorn, and suitable as a pretext for them to mock Confucians [Nie 2016, 4.85].

In this preface, Nie Bao affirms for Wang Chuyan that nothingness is central to the Confucian Way. He provides clues as to what nothingness means in a Confucian context, how it is to be distinguished from Buddhist and Daoist nothingness and, most importantly, the implications of this teaching for scholars who have misunderstood their own tradition and are taking it in the wrong direction. His position on the Way is in fact quite straightforward. The Confucian Way must be rooted in nothingness. He equates nothingness with what the *Doctrine of the Mean* refers to as what is not seen or heard and describes it as vacuity within and selflessness. Just as nothingness births and transforms, so the Way of vacuity within and selflessness is the precondition for according or harmonizing with the world and hence enjoying the capacity to give things their proper place and nourish them. This Way should be distinguished from other Confucian Ways, such as those that place too high a premium on being knowledgeable or virtuous in a certain way. Humaneness and wisdom are important features of the Way, but they must be grounded in a certain absence. Worse are those scholars who have turned Confucianism into the self-interested pursuit of fame and profit, or exegetical enterprises, or an ethics defined by fixed rules. It is these Confucians that have given Buddhists and Daoists good cause for mocking their lack of grounding in the ontologically fundamental. Of course, that does not mean that adherents of these traditions are somehow superior, just that this criticism is not undeserved. Buddhists and Daoists, on the other hand, simply disregard the operations of the cosmos and the ethics of intersubjective relationships as barriers to emptying out.

From Pingyang Prefecture to Prison, 1541–1547

On April 22, 1541, officials in the war and personnel ministries submitted a memorial recommending Nie Bao for office, and during the fifth lunar month he was assigned

prefect of Pingyang Prefecture 平陽府, in Shanxi Province⁴⁸. Upon receiving his certifying documents Nie set out, arriving on January 10, 1542 (Jiajing 21, 12/25) [Nie 2007, 2.41]. Nie immediately implemented numerous measures to prepare the prefecture to defend itself against Mongol incursions. He organized, trained, and provisioned a militia, enlisting over five thousand men, equipping them with clothing, armor, and weapons, and supervising their training. He repaired and fortified defensive structures located at critical passes. All these measures required funds and resources. To raise them, he had letters dispatched to the wealthy families of the prefecture, urging them to contribute money and goods for the benefit of the prefecture's security and the welfare of the people. He also offered people accused of crimes the opportunity to atone for them by paying a fine [Liu and Wang 2017, 62–63].

These measures proved effective, preventing the Mongol incursions of 1542 from throwing the prefecture into turmoil, even as neighboring ones were not so fortunate. During the sixth lunar month of 1542, Mongol forces numbering in the tens of thousands invaded Shanxi, marching through Yingmen Pass and pushing south until they arrived at Pingyang's Lengquan (Cold Spring) Pass, one fortified through Nie's measures. Mongol cavalry then moved on to Guojia Ditch, where they were also repulsed. They eventually departed and moved north in the direction of Taiyuan.

Song Yiwang writes,

[Prior to arriving in Pingyang], *lu* intelligence stated that they wanted to raid Pingyang. When Master [Nie] arrived, the prefecture's treasury was empty, and no preparations had been made for enlisting soldiers or fortifying strategic passes. Consequently, he strategized with colleagues and scholar-officials, asking them to provide reassurance by traveling the subprefectures and counties, preparing sheep and wine for wealthy commoners, and asking them to consider relieving the present [fiscal problems] by paying a tax in lieu of corvée. Therefore, the people of Linfen and the other places – [a total of] thirty-seven subprefectures and counties – such as She Shangneng and others, contributed over 22,000 taels. Because the second wife of Puzhou's ceremonial companion Su Ren was ferocious and jealous, she falsely accused Ren of raping his adopted son's wife and spread the rumor that he had as well taken several thousand in cash to bribe officials in the hopes of escaping punishment for his crime. After a time, Ren ended up in prison. Thereafter, he repeatedly announced his wish to atone for his crimes by funding soldier's pay. Master Nie investigated the circumstances and reported the matter to the regional inspector, permitting Ren to pay five thousand taels. He also enlisted Zhang Luan and 5200 other righteous and courageous men as well as eight-hundred Henan mine laborers, generously providing them with supplies, including clothing, armor, and weapons, making them feel pleased that this was theirs for the keeping. As expected, the northern raiders came through Yingmen, driving south directly to Pingyang, and attacking Guojia Ditch. Soldiers at the pass, Li Fang and others, opened the gate and repulsed the enemy's attack. They killed two *lu* prisoners, and the *lu* were at a loss and made missteps. Following, they withdrew from the camp to the border of Jiexiu. Master Nie also composed a letter in the name of the supreme commander of military affairs for the three frontiers of Shanxi, bogusly stating to the regional military commander that “a massive force will soon come to the rescue of Shanxi”. He ordered someone who was skilled at archery to risk going directly into the *lu* camp, and commanded him, upon seeing *lu*, to discard his certifying documents, the letter, and horses, and then pretend to run off. Having reconnoitered Pingyang's preparations and further obtained the letter and documents, the *lu* were seriously alarmed and evacuated their camp and fled. At this time, the prefectural seat reported starvation, so arrangements were made to offer gruel at a temple nearby in the city. Thousands of commoners came to eat each day. The city's moat was also dredged, and a wall was built outside the southern city gate. Those whose lives were saved on account of the construction projects also numbered in the thousands [Nie 2007, *fulu*.643–644].

In the wake of these events, secretaries of scrutiny memorialized calling for punishing a group of Shanxi officials who had failed to defend the territories under their jurisdiction, as well as for rewarding others for their meritorious achievements, including Nie Bao. Secretary of Scrutiny Liu Hui's memorial, submitted during the eighth lunar month of 1542, called for rewarding and promoting Nie because "with his competence and strategic planning [he] was up to the task"⁴⁹.

Shortly thereafter, Minister of Rites Yan Song did the same, explaining the urgency of the threat posed by the northern border and Shanxi's mismanagement of it. Yan called for appointing competent generals, enlisting the strong and courageous, and supplying adequate provisions. The crux of the matter, Yan explained, is to find people suited to the task of rectifying these problems, people who will strictly follow laws and decrees, including appropriately rewarding and punishing both officers and soldiers. Otherwise, those responsible will simply remain on the sidelines and avoid seizing the initiative. Soldiers will likewise fail to observe discipline. Yan pointed to Nie Bao's exemplary conduct as Pingyang prefect. In preparation for the Mongols' drive toward the territory under his jurisdiction, Yan wrote,

[Nie] trained troops and guarded strategic passes. The northern raiders dared not enter his jurisdiction. Had the other prefectures been [governed by] Bao, how could they have managed to drive in so far and move south? Furthermore, did Bao ever request troops or provisions? Anyone can serve as a soldier. The armies can all acquire food. This is simply a matter of skill at management and planning. Consequently, I say that what is of the utmost importance is finding the right man⁵⁰.

Unfortunately, Nie's competence, as evidenced by such petitions, elevated his profile, and this led to an unpleasant entanglement in political factionalism at the Ming court, making him enemies and incurring the wrath and jealousy of men who sought to derail his career. Ill-willed officials submitted memorials claiming that while serving as prefect he personally profited from his efforts to raise funds and accepted bribes. Although Vice Prefect Xu Sui was an old colleague and had once formally declared himself a follower of his teaching, Nie ran afoul of him when reports on the victory directed the credit solely to Nie. Xu accused Nie of graft, and censors followed up by calling for his impeachment. The court then issued an order to the grand coordinator of Shanxi, calling for an investigation. Thus, for the time being, Nie was compelled to return home⁵¹. Of these events, Song Yiwang writes,

Anticipating the report on Pingyang merit, Regional Inspector Tong Hanchen expressly recommended him, and Secretary of Scrutiny Liu Hui further recommended him for the position of censor-in-chief. When the emperor asked about it, Grand Secretary Jiexi, the Honorable Master Yan [Song], also memorialized in support of him, as one fully capable of serving as grand coordinator. For this reason, the emperor further understood that Master Nie was capable of substantive assignments. Even when the *lu* warnings were coming from all directions, and he was personally managing military affairs day after day, together with today's provincial administrative commissioner Kang Siqian, provincial examination graduates Chen Jiayan, Jiao Mo, Ruan Shizhan, Hou Xiaogu, Liu Guangqi, Qin Jian, as well as with students from each subprefecture and county, such as Cui Ruxiao and several dozen others, the Master engaged in philosophical discussions day and night, without end. He compiled a record of the names of all those mentioned in inscriptions in Pingyang dating from ancient times to the present, hoping that it would provide the most encouragement for all the students. That winter [1542], he wrote "Personal Musings on the *Ancient Edition of the Great Learning*". During the follow year of *guiwei* [1543], he was promoted to Shaanxi surveillance vice commissioner, charged with the Tongguan military defense circuit. Following, the Master composed a memorial requesting leave for office, returning south to retire to private life [Nie 2007, *fulu*.644].

Thus, from spring 1543 until his arrest in 1547, Nie Bao remained in Yongfeng. Once again, he devoted his time to philosophical inquiry and furthering his pedagogical activities. He continued to correspond, meet, and go on excursions with his familiar circle of Wang Yangming disciples, including Ouyang De, Zou Shouyi, and Luo Hongxian, as well as to participate in events arranged by them at Qingyuan Mountain and Jiangxi academies. He also worked together with local gentry and officials to renovate a Confucian school in his home county [Zhu 2010, 79–81].

According to Wu Zhen, Nie Bao began conceptualizing his practice of “returning to silence” while he was residing at Cuiwei Mountain [Wu 2011, 110–111]. Of the further maturation of his philosophy during and after his time in Pingyang, Song Yiwang writes,

While serving as prefect of Pingyang, Nie wrote his “Personal Musings on the *Great Learning*”. Interpreting realizing knowledge and arriving at things, he said: “What governs things is knowledge. What is stirred by things are intentions. To situate things is to *ge* 格. The mind is like a mirror, and knowledge is like a mirror’s clarity. Realizing [innate] knowing is like polishing the mirror and reaching [things] is like the mirror’s reflection. Beauty and ugliness lie in the object, [the mirror] follows along with things and responds to them. Therefore, it is called *ge*, as in saying [Shun] ‘went (*ge* 格) [to the temple] of the Accomplished Ancestor’⁵² or ‘reached (*ge* 格) above and below’⁵³”. He also said: “To realize [innate] knowing is to attain centeredness. It is silent and unmoving. It precedes Heaven and Heaven does not oppose it. Reaching things is the act of realizing innate knowing. Stirred it penetrates. Following Heaven, it respects Heaven’s timing”. He further stated: “If you possess the centeredness before [they] arise, then you will possess the harmony of [their] arising in due measure and degree”⁵⁴. When the sages speak of the *xian* [mutually influencing] hexagram, they speak of vacuity and of silence. This is to speak thoroughly of the principle of stimulus and response, destroying the obstacle posed by all that exists. After the Master returned from Pingyang, when he was discussing learning with his like-minded friends, he first taught that returning is cultivating the void and silent original condition [Nie 2007, *fulu*.648].

Returning to documents written between 1537 and 1539, Song Yiwang’s concise description of Nie’s philosophy – including his interpretation of these citations from classical texts – is accurate, and seemingly lacking in anything new. He begins, however, by noting that Nie had written a commentary on the *Great Learning* while in Pingyang, providing a systematic analysis of this one among the Four Books. Unfortunately, it is no longer extant, which means relying on Song’s summary and the preface Nie composed for it.

The preface sets out by explaining that the text was included in Han dynasty commentaries, but because Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi found that it contained errors and omissions, they suitably edited it and produced what became the standard and widely accepted edition. Wang Yangming, however, insisted that the old edition had been torn asunder, and hence that the sagely wisdom contained in it was lost. That is why he sought to restore it and establish its legitimacy by explaining its meaning with annotations and commentary. Nie quotes Wang’s “Preface to the Ancient Edition of the *Great Learning* (*Daxue guben xu* 大學古本序)”:

Realizing [the innate] knowing is the foundation for perfecting the genuineness of one’s intentions. Rectifying things (*ge wu* 格物) is the fruition of realizing knowledge. When things are rectified knowledge is realized and intentions made genuine, and one then has what one needs to restore one’s original condition. This is what is meant by coming to rest in the highest good. Perhaps the mind of the sage shall once again be witnessed, and those who seek it will possess the essentials for doing so [Nie 2007, 3.52].

Nie insists that Wang took no pleasure in attacking Zhu Xi; rather, his purpose in speaking out was to spur inquiry into the basics of the moral life. He merely sought to cooperate with others in clarifying for the world the learned wisdom of the sages. Nie further points out that other accomplished Song dynasty scholars had provided their own exegeses and interpretations, the majority of which were not entirely in agreement with

Zhu Xi. Yet, thereafter, everyone came to regard Zhu Xi's edition and commentary as definitive. The same applies today. Zhan Ruoshui, Lü Nan 呂柟, and Cui Xian 崔銑 are famous scholars all of whom had written commentaries on the *Great Learning*, and yet none are entirely in agreement with Zhu Xi's interpretations. Here too, they had confidence in their ability to think and stated their theories, as part and parcel of what they regarded as a common effort to seek the truth in this Confucian learning and, by doing so, demonstrate a meaningful loyalty to the spirit of Zhu Xi's learned scholarship.

Of his own efforts, Nie wrote,

When I was living up in the mountains crippled by illness, I studied this book in depth. Over the course of a year, I thought over these many scholar's theories in my own mind, and if I failed to understand, [well], even were it something asserted by my father or teacher I would not dare subscribe to it. I humbly believe that the single thread running through the learning of the school of Confucius is the center (*zhong* 中 [=centeredness]) bequeathed by Yao and Shun. Centeredness is the mind's original condition. Is that not the *Great Learning's* highest good? Realizing innate knowing is the consummate practice for coming to rest in the highest good [Nie 2007, 3.53].

In 1542, just before Nie returned to Yongfeng, Ji'an's prefect He Qigao renovated the White Egret Islet Academy. Originally located on an islet in the Gan River (where it passes through the eastern end of the prefecture's city seat), because the islet was flood-prone, Prefect He decided to appropriate a temple located near the southern gate of the city and to relocate the academy there [Nie 2007, 5:121]. It turned out to be one of the more active venues for forums held by Wang Yangming disciples. Several of them composed pieces to commemorate its reconstruction, including Nie Bao. His "Record for the Mind of the Way Hall" states,

The mind of the Way – is it the centeredness before arising?⁵⁵ Because it is prior to manifestation it is subtle, and because it is subtle it is evident. A good man knows that the subtle is evident. Alertness and caution over the unseen and apprehensiveness over the unheard are how the mind of heaven and earth is founded, the destinies of the people mastered, the great peace of ten thousand generations commenced, and sages of later times awaited without confusion. Yao imparted this to Shun, Shun imparted this to Yu, and Yu imparted it to Tang, from whence it was passed on to [King] Wen, [King] Wu, the Duke of Zhou, Confucius, Zisi, and Mengzi. Some know it from seeing it, some know it from hearing it, but insofar as they know it, they are the same. What is the same? It is centeredness. Centeredness is harmony. It is [all arising in] due measure and degree. Later generations did not understand that centeredness is harmony and used it as a pretext for [pursuing] the utility of the five hegemony. As for those who place harmony outside when seeking centeredness, this developed into void silence (*xu ji* 虛寂) (= complete tranquility of mind or quiescence) of the Buddhists and Daoists. The harm of honor and profit is crude and easy to see. The danger of void silence is concealed and difficult to recognize. "The mind of the Way is subtle"⁵⁶ because it is originally void and silent. Void, it receives; silent, it can be aroused, following Heaven, and Heaven is respected⁵⁷, what thinking and deliberation is there?⁵⁸ When was it that void silence was regarded as withered and being acted upon and responding as an obstacle and falsity? From self-centeredness to acting only out of self-interest to leaving and discarding ethical human relations without pause and muddying the eyes and ears and doing harm to one's life – can one still witness the return of the order of Tang and Yu and the Three Dynasties? Hence, should one desire to restore the order of the age of Tang, Yu, and the Three Dynasties, then seek the learning of Tang, Yu, and the Three Dynasties. Learning for the purpose of fostering and sustaining the mind is the highest learning. The mind is one. Speaking in terms of its essence, it is silent and unmoving. Silence is the centeredness preceding arising, and all change and transformation comes from it. Therefore, the person who named the hall 'The Mind of the Way', does he perhaps have insight into this [Nie 2007, 5.120–121]?

For the Academy, Nie penned a record that both defined the mind of the Way through his central tenets and gave his interpretation of its content the imprimatur of a line of sages running Yao to Mengzi. For Nie, the mind must be understood in two inseparable dimensions – as centeredness and harmony. Silence may be most fundamental, but it is not the cessation of the Buddhists. Rather, it is the basis for correctly responding to life's circumstances, as an expression of the mind of the Way. On the other hand, in the absence of centrality, people fall into the trap of the pursuit of external markers of success, of building a world divorced from its ground. This too is an error because as such the innate knowing will fail to be realized properly, especially in its functions as a mirror correctly reflecting the world and as the source of moral knowledge.

On October 5, 1547 (intercalary 9/22), Nie Bao was impeached and orders went out to the Embroidered Uniform Guard for his arrest. The circumstance behind this unfortunate turn of events was political factionalism at the highest level of the Ming court – in particular, the power struggle between the influential high officials Yan Song and Xia Yan and their respective supporters and enemies. An investigation had already been carried out, one that extended over four years. Nie was found not guilty of the accusation of using his office for personal profit.

However, in 1546, Minister of Personnel Yan Song sought to bring Nie out of his quiet retirement. He ordered a regional inspector to memorialize, and the Ministry of Personnel deliberated and chose to recall him. Chief Grand Secretary Xia Yan, though, set in motion another investigation. The November 4, 1547, entry in the *Veritable Records* explains the charges. Four years before, Nie was accused of using raising an army as a pretext for fleecing the people to the tune over 32,600 silver taels. Also, he was accused of accepting money from a prisoner in exchange for releasing him from prison as well as acquitting others of crimes. Thus, speaking officials had impeached him for graft, and the case was handed over to Shanxi's grand coordinator and regional inspector for further investigation. The outcome was a report indicating only that he had exercised too much discretion by failing to observe certain protocols expected of him in his role as prefect. The entry continues,

The ministries and censorate convened and replied stating: Bao's bribes did not go to himself. It is difficult to call for his dismissal from office. Presently he has returned home to recuperate from illness. It is requested that he be allowed to retire from his original office. The emperor stated: Bao used his capacity as a public servant to abuse his power and embezzle the people's wealth in the amount of over twenty thousand taels, as well as changing a conviction of capital punishment to a meager five thousand in silver, very willfully violating the law. It is ordered that the Embroidered Uniform guard arrest him and bring him to the capital for interrogation⁵⁹.

In sum, Nie Bao was arrested in Yongfeng on November 26, 1547 (Jiajing 26, 10/15). According to Huang Zongxi, "at the very moment when the commandant suddenly arrived and shackled him, the Master was discussing the *Doctrine of the Mean*. After he was shackled, he finished what he was saying to the students and then left" [Huang 2008, 17.370]. Nie was transported to Beijing and placed in the Embroidered Uniform Guard prison on January 1, 1548 (Jiajing 6, 11/21). He was stuck there for a year. During the ninth lunar month of 1548, just after Chief Grand Secretary Xia Yan had been imprisoned and then died the following month, with Nie's former student Yan Song now in power as chief grand secretary, orders once again went out to the grand coordinator and regional inspector for another investigation, and with the support of various officials, Nie's name was cleared. He was released on January 23, 1549 (Jiajing 6, 12/25) and returned home to Yongfeng.

About this entire episode, beginning from the point at which Nie returned home to Yongfeng in 1543, Song Yiwang writes,

Beforehand, assistant [surveillance commissioner] Xu Mianren had been promoted from vice prefect. He was a former colleague of the Master who had also studied under him. When he arrived [in Pingyang] he maintained the same etiquette as he had from the beginning. The Master had never forgotten him. After the meritorious achievement at Pingyang, everyone at that time was attributing [the success] to the Master. Xu could not accept this as fair, so when he was at the capital he thoroughly slandered him for pressing for the paying of a tax in lieu of corvée and handling of the Suren affair. Chief Grand Coordinator the Honorable Master Xia [Yan] brought his claims forward, assisting him in achieving his goals. Thus, secretaries of scrutiny and censors submitted memorials filling in details, and an edict was issued having the grand coordinator and regional inspector carry out an official investigation. The Master remained at home and didn't leave, focusing solely on receiving students and discussing learning. Thereafter, the grand coordinator and regional inspector examined the expense register, and there was not the slightest seepage. For three or four years they went back and forth. Coming to the *dingwei* year [1547], Regional Inspector Hou submitted a memorial reporting on this former matter. The ministries deliberated and were preparing to appoint the Master. But when the Honorable Master Xia Yan was at the helm of the state, he brought out the slanderers' statements and drafted an imperial decree with orders for his arrest and imprisonment in the Embroidered Uniform Guard prison. Interrogation yielded no results. During the ninth lunar month of the following year, the emperor once again dispatched a regional inspector to review the evidence. At that time, Minister [of Personnel] Master Zhang Xipan [Run] was staying over at the capital, and spoke forcefully to the mass [of officials] of his willingness to guarantee Nie's innocence with his entire lineage. Not long thereafter, Xia Yan was also accused of crimes and thrown in prison. When they came face to face, he [Xia] was embarrassed, and further came to understand that the calamity was the outcome of baseless blather. The Master was not the slightest bit upset. What he wrote [during this time] includes the "Draft [record] of being apprehended (*Bei dai gao* 被逮稿)", "Record of discriminating while enduring hardship (*Kun bian lu* 困辯錄)", and "Record of replies while living in seclusion (*You ju da shu* 幽居答述)", among other pieces. When the conclusions to Regional Inspector Master Huang Hongkun's investigation arrived, he was totally exonerated of all the charges brought on by defamation. Following, a decree was issued and he was relieved of office and returned south. At that point it was already the first month of the spring of *yiyou* [1549] [Nie 2007, *fulu*.644].

Conclusion

Although Nie Bao's imprisonment was the result of political persecution, the year *wushen* [1548] was philosophically productive, as Song Yiwang's list of works indicates. Nie composed philosophical writings that, in sum, bring to fruition ideas and insights articulated in prior years while also systematizing and elaborating on them to such an extent that nearly everything he had to say in letters and discussions with his like-minded friends later in life can be found in these. His prior philosophical development, up to this point in his life, however, provided the foundation for these mature works, which is why this study has sought to provide the historical and intellectual background for them. By this time, Nie Bao had developed and articulated his ideas regarding attaining centeredness and the importance of returning to the root, the silent and unmoving, as the means for fully realizing – without any obstacles or coverings – the original condition of innate knowing. It is only then that, in the proper order of things, one can respond correctly to things, becoming a measure to them.

¹ Citing *Analects* 9:11. Unless otherwise indicated, *Analects* translation follows D. C. Lau.

² Citing the *Doctrine of the Mean* 16. Unless otherwise indicated, for the *Doctrine*, I have followed Robert Eno's open-access translations.

³ Citing the *Doctrine of the Mean* 33. See also the *Classic of Poetry*, Ode 234.

⁴ Citing the *Doctrine of the Mean* 12.

⁵ *Mengzi* 7A:15. For the *Mengzi*, all translation is adapted from Robert Eno's open access translation.

⁶ Citing *Mengzi* 6A:6.

⁷ Citing *Analects* 8:3.

⁸ Citing the *Da Dai li ji*, "Zengzi da xiao".

⁹ *Mengzi* 4B:12.

¹⁰ Citing the *Classic of Change, Treatise on the Appended Remarks*, part B, section 5:1 [Adler 2020, 290].

¹¹ Citing *Mengzi* 6B:2.

¹² Citing *Mengzi* 4A:11.

¹³ Paraphrasing a line in *Mengzi* 1A:7.

¹⁴ Citing *Analects* 1:1–2.

¹⁵ Citing the *Li ji (Classic of Rites)*, "Ji yi (The Meaning of Sacrifices)". For the *Li ji*, I am following Legge's translation.

¹⁶ Citing *Analects* 8:3.

¹⁷ Citing *Analects* 8:3. Waley explains that when a man was dying, four people were to hold his hands and feet, releasing them after death. At the end of the passage Zengzi states that he has gotten through safely, meaning that his moral course has run and there is no longer a need to hold the hands and feet. To do so symbolizes a case where the dying man, while struggling, enters into a non-ritual attitude [Waley 1989, 133].

¹⁸ Citing the *Classic of Rites*, "Tan gong I".

¹⁹ Citing the *Li ji (Classic of Rites)*, "Ji yi (The Meaning of Sacrifices)".

²⁰ Alluding to *Mengzi* 4B:30.

²¹ Citing the *Li ji (Classic of Rites)*, "Ji yi (The Meaning of Sacrifices)".

²² Referring to the *Classic of Filial Piety*, "The Three Powers": "Zengzi said, 'How exceedingly great is filial piety!' The Master responded, 'Filial piety is the pattern of Heaven, the standard of the earth, the norm of conduct for the people'" [Ebrey 1992, 65].

²³ Citing the *Li ji (Classic of Rites)*.

²⁴ Referring to the *Doctrine of the Mean* 20.

²⁵ Citing the *Classic of Poetry*, Xiao wan 4.

²⁶ Paraphrasing "Treatise on the Appended Remarks," section 5.

²⁷ Citing the *Doctrine of the Mean* 1.

²⁸ Citing the *Classic of Change*, "Treatise on the Appended Remarks," part A, section 10, where it states, "The Yi is without thought and without action; silent and unmoving, when stimulated it penetrates [connects] all circumstances under Heaven" [Adler 2020, 279].

²⁹ Referring to *Mengzi* 2A:2.

³⁰ *ze shan* 責善. Referring to *Mengzi* 4B:30.

³¹ *fu ren* 輔仁. Referring to *Analects* 12:24.

³² *ren sheng er jing* 人生而靜. Citing the *Classic of Rites* "Record of Music".

³³ Referencing the *Doctrine of the Mean* 1.

³⁴ Referencing *Mengzi* 2A:2.

³⁵ Referring to the *Classic of Change*, "Commentary on the Appended Phrases", part 1, section 10.

³⁶ See prior note.

³⁷ Alluding to *Mengzi* 2A:6.

³⁸ Paraphrasing *Mengzi* 7A:15.

³⁹ Referencing *Mengzi* 2A:6.

⁴⁰ Citing the *Classic of Changes*, "Commentary on the Appended Phrases", part 1, section 9. Following Lynn's translation [Lynn 1994, 62].

⁴¹ *bei wu* 備物. Referring to *Mengzi* 7A:4.

⁴² *dun hua* 敦化. Referring to the *Doctrine of the Mean* 30.

⁴³ *Mengzi* 7A:15.

⁴⁴ Citing the *Classic of Changes* [Adler 2020, 66].

⁴⁵ Citing the *Classic of Changes*, "Treatise on the Appended Remarks", part A, section 5 [Adler 2020, 269].

⁴⁶ Citing the *Classic of Changes*, "Treatise on the Appended Remarks", part B, section 6 [Adler 2020, 294].

⁴⁷ Citing the *Classic of Changes*, “Treatise on the Appended Remarks”, part B, section 2 [Adler 2020, 287].

⁴⁸ *Ming Shizong shilu* 明世宗實錄, *Jiajing ershinian sanyue guichou* 嘉靖二十年三月癸丑 (April 22, 1541).

⁴⁹ *Ming Shizong shilu* 明世宗實錄, *Jiajing ershiyinian bayue yimao* 嘉靖二十一年八月辛巳 (September 12, 1542).

⁵⁰ *Ming Shizong shilu* 明世宗實錄, *Jiajing ershiyinian bayue yimao* 嘉靖二十一年九月乙卯 (October 16, 1542).

⁵¹ *Ming Shizong shilu* 明世宗實錄, *Jiajing ershernian liuyue jiaxu* 嘉靖二十二年六月甲戌 (July 2, 1543).

⁵² Citing the *Classic of Documents*, “Canon of Yao”.

⁵³ Citing the *Classic of Documents*, “Canon of Shun”.

⁵⁴ Citing the *Doctrine of the Mean* 1.

⁵⁵ Referring to the *Doctrine of the Mean* 1.

⁵⁶ Referring to the *Shang shu* 尚書 [Classic of documents], “Da yu mo 大禹謨 [Counsels of the Great Yu]”.

⁵⁷ Citing the *Classic of Changes*.

⁵⁸ Citing the *Classic of Changes*, *Treatise on the Appended Remarks*, part B, section 5:1 [Adler 2020, 290].

⁵⁹ *Ming Shizong shilu*, *Jiajing ershernian liuyue jiaxu* 嘉靖二十六年閏九月庚子 (November 4, 1547).

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Дж. Л. Израель

**Повернення до основ: побудова політичної кар'єри
та інтелектуальний розвиток Не Бао (1487–1548)**

Не Бао 聶豹 (1487–1563) – неоконфуціанський філософ і вчений чиновник, що жив у XVI столітті в Китаї за династії Мін. Хуан Цзунсі 黃宗羲 у своїй праці “Мін жу сюе ань” 明儒學案 (“Дослідження конфуціанців династії Мін”) зарахував його до групи Цзянсі 江右 послідовників Вана Янміна. Не Бао 1526 року познайомився із впливовим за династії Мін засновником школи філософської думки й надихнувся його вченням про вроджене знання (лянчжи 良知). Однак від інших послідовників Не Бао відрізнявся своїм квієтистським підходом до усвідомлення та поширення цих знань. Розвиваючи свої ідеї протягом двох десятиліть, Не Бао, маючи на державній службі найвищий іспитовий ступінь, також обіймав низку вагомих офіційних посад і зажив доброї репутації за свою ефективність і прямоту. Однак він мимоволі став жертвою фракційної боротьби при дворі Мін, і 1548 року його ув'язнили.

Мета цієї статті – подати нарис політичної кар'єри та інтелектуального розвитку Не Бао з ранніх років до ув'язнення, а також переклад важливих уривків, що стосуються його кар'єри та розвитку. До моменту ув'язнення Не Бао сформулював основні елементи своєї філософії повернення до основ (під чим він мав на увазі безгоміння) і досягнення зосередженості, а водночас і свою унікальну інтерпретацію центрального принципу свого вчителя.

Ключові слова: Ван Янмін; династія Мін; лянчжи; неоконфуціанство; Не Бао; Не Шуанцзян

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