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The soldier as a sage: Qi Jiguang (1528-1588) and the neo-confucianization of the military in sixteenth-century China
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Chapter 8 – Cementing the *Xinxue* Network: A New Discourse on Friendship

In this chapter I will delve deeper into the subject of the formation of personal ties, by highlighting the changing discourse about Neo-Confucian notions of friendship generated within Wang Yangming's movement. Wang Yangming unleashed a movement which infused new value in the bond of friendship within the traditional Confucian scheme of social relations which, I argue, in its turn facilitated Qi Jiguang's formation of friendship ties with members of the civil bureaucracy. Moreover, I will argue that this new Neo-Confucianism fused well with-, and in its turn influenced the resurgence of the traditional knight-errant archetype, which would again become an ideal to live up to among different social layers of the empire during the sixteenth century. The role of *xinxue* in propagating an internal subjective approach to morality instead of holding fast to external markers and appearances, opened up the fusion of literati norms of comportment with the knight-errantry ethos, as I will argue below.

The New *Xinxue*-Discourse on Friendship

A probing of Qi Jiguang's thought reveals that he took stock of a changing discourse on the meaning and significance of friendship (*you* 友) during the sixteenth century as well as *xinxue*. The ideas of Wang Yangming and his followers seem to have taken central stage in the discourse surrounding the Neo-Confucian redefinition of the term in this epoch. In the coming paragraphs, I will address the question in what ways these new ideas about friendship facilitated Qi Jiguang's formation of amical relationships with colleagues in both the civil and military hierarchies of the empire's bureaucracy.

Within Confucian thought, the role of friendship in the web of ideal social hierarchical relationships has often been an ambiguous and marginalized one. This ambiguity and marginalization has also carried over to some modern scholarly studies of the phenomenon. Confucian conceptions of the moral social order stress the importance of the five relationships, or bonds, which had to be observed by the individual. These were the relationship between ruler and minister (or the ruled in general), father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brother and friends. These relationships were conceived to be hierarchical, but also reciprocal. For example,

the minister was expected to be loyal to his ruler, but this in turn obliged the ruler to perform his duties towards his subject as a ruler. Similarly, a son was expected to be filial towards his father, but his father was expected to reciprocate this by performing the duties of a good parent.⁵⁵⁰ As Norman Kutcher notes, the relationship between friends stands out, because it was neither a state-based nor a family-based relationship and it moreover included the element of voluntariness. To further demarcate the distinctiveness of friendship as a bond, the ruler's governing of his state was conceived to be as modelled on his patriarchal functioning as head of his family.⁵⁵¹ Kutcher's ultimate position is that the friendship bond was the only one conducive to equality between the two parties, and therefore could contain the seeds of a phenomenon ultimately detrimental to the envisioned socio-moral Confucian order. These views are further echoed by Martin Huang, who directs attention to the ways in which befriending the wrong people could damage the family. In the sphere of the state too, he notes that personal friendships were thought to have been at the root of political factionalism in the imperial bureaucracy.⁵⁵² Not everyone agrees on the potentiality of equality in Confucian friendships, however, as some modern scholars have argued that friendships were closely modelled on hierarchical relationships within the sphere of the family.⁵⁵³

Xiufen Lu, reviewing Kutcher's position and those of other scholars before him, fiercely criticized the notions that friendships in a Confucian context were either of necessity conceived of in familial hierarchical sense, or was one with a necessary potential for equality (and thus was a potential hazard for society and empire).⁵⁵⁴ Lu refutes the former position by arguing for a distinction between "social custom shaped by kinship ties" and the content of Confucian philosophy itself. For example, the argument that in Chinese contexts of amical relationships, kinship terminology was often used to designate friends, does not prove that friendships were experienced as an extension of hierarchical kinship relations. Refuting the latter position, Lu argues that the absence of equality in friendship (a notion he suspects is tied to a specific western frame of thought), and thus the necessary presence of hierarchy, does not preclude the existence of a Confucian kind of friendship which was not detrimental to society. According to Lu, there would often be an implicit hierarchy between friends based on status in society and birth order.

⁵⁵⁰ Lu Xiufen, "Rethinking Confucian Friendship," *Asian Philosophy* 20.3 (2010): 233.

⁵⁵¹ Norman Kutcher, "The Fifth Relationship: Dangerous Friendships in the Confucian Context," *The American Historical Review* 105.5 (2000): 1615-1616.

⁵⁵² Martin W. Huang, "Male Friendship in China: An Introduction," *Nan Nü* 9 (2007): 2.

⁵⁵³ Lu, "Rethinking Confucian Friendship," 226, 229-230.

⁵⁵⁴ Idem, 225.

What promotes Confucian friendship according to him is a mutual appreciation for each other's achieved moral excellence. Applying his reading of Confucius' writings, Lu argues that the fact that all humans are assumed to be endowed with a special fate (*ming* 命) by nature means that Confucian friends would appreciate each other for their moral cultivation efforts, regardless of social station and life experiences. Kutcher is accused of focusing on a small segment of the Confucian literary heritage which merely focuses on the "wrong" kinds of friendship.⁵⁵⁵ Lu then proceeds to reconstruct his perceived essence of Confucian friendship based on his own reading of Confucius' and Mencius' writings.⁵⁵⁶

The problem with Lu's approach lies in the fact that he tries to reconstruct an essentialized un-changing notion of friendship in a Confucian setting, which completely ignores the historical context. Therefore, despite some of his criticisms of other scholars noted above being of substance, he is not able to successfully historicize his subject. Norman Kutcher is more sensitive to the passage of time, and cognizant of the idea that Confucian ideas about friendship probably fluctuated and shifted in meaning across history. In contrast, Xiufen Lu's prescriptive reconstruction would ironically not be out of place amidst other Neo-Confucians' commentaries and treatises on friendship. Instead, following Kutcher and others producing a quite recent body of research on friendship in Chinese history, one comes across an interesting historicized picture. It lays bare a rift between pre-Song times and the period Neo-Confucianism first emerges in force during the southern Song empire. A second period of change seems to have been the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, although this change seems to have not crystallized into a permanent universally recognized reconceptualization of friendship and the earlier Song discourse seems to have reasserted itself again afterwards.⁵⁵⁷

Significant in the shift from pre-Song times to the hegemony of the Neo-Confucian discourse regarding friendship, was a further downplaying – if not outright denial – of the emotional function of friendship in favour of more utilitarian views, a trend evident in the writings of someone as exalted as Zhu Xi. One was to make friends with like-minded or morally superior people, who would then help perfect one's inculcation with (Neo-) Confucian values. According to Kutcher, the emerging Song Neo-Confucian discourse stressed service to the state and service

⁵⁵⁵ Xiufen Lu then claims there are many other writings extolling the virtues of friendship, but does not back this claim up with proof. See Idem, 235.

⁵⁵⁶ Idem, 229, 233-243.

⁵⁵⁷ Kutcher, "The Fifth Relationship," 1620-1621.

to the family, and friendships could distract one from these paramount concerns. What is more, the wrong kind of friendships could also tempt one into engaging in morally odious behaviour, like gambling. One result of this shift during the Song dynasty, was also the disappearance of the notion that one could die for a friend (as one could for one's parents) or share property with them, further proof of friendship's marginalization.⁵⁵⁸ In chapter two we have already seen the criticism of knight-errantry by Neo-Confucians during the Song dynasty, which can perhaps be seen as a result of this chivalrous ideology promoting ties of brotherhood between friends. An institutional reason for this limited conceptionalization of friendship could have to do with the increasing importance of the examination system as an access route to political power from the late Tang dynasty onwards. Within the context of this system of vertical and horizontal amical relationships formed between peer students within the same year cohort and between examiners, teachers and students. This tied the need to form relationships intimately with the pragmatic and utilitarian desire for success in the examinations and its resultant career in state service.⁵⁵⁹ The research tying this reconceptualization of friendship during the Song to the examination system fails to explain, however, why there was a shift in ideas about friendship in the sixteenth century. I would argue that the emergence of *xinxue* as a popular form of Neo-Confucianism next to the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy institutionalized by the examination system would to a great extent explain this shift. We will see below that within the group of Wang Yangming-followers friendship achieved renewed importance vis-à-vis older Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, because many of them can be assumed to have adopted this philosophical re-orientation for reasons other than examination success.

As mentioned above, the sixteenth century has been thought of as the second period in imperial Chinese history in which a shift in the (Neo-) Confucian discourse about friendship occurred. Whereas during the Song the emerging Neo-Confucian movement showed a clear tendency to relegate friendship to a subordinate and inferior position vis-à-vis the other four relationships, the rise of Wang Yangming's influential re-interpretation of *daoxue* thought and practice was accompanied by a rise in the esteem of amical relationships within the intellectual discourse. This shift was first recognized by Joseph McDermott in an article which studies the changes within friendship discourse in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As one of the first

⁵⁵⁸ Kutcher, "The Fifth Relationship," 1616, 1620.

⁵⁵⁹ Huang, "Male Friendship in China," 3.

to fill the gap in scholarly studies on friendship in a Chinese context, he reflects on its sparsely studied nature: “Perhaps the reason for this fate can be traced to its lack of a long - lasting social or political base. It never acquired and bequeathed land, it never had buildings constructed, and it never became the central concern of a Chinese organization. Furthermore, its moral standing has often been open to question.”⁵⁶⁰ He notes a change in the later days of Ming imperial rule, when, according to him, friendship was seen in the eyes of some as a “moral basis for criticizing Chinese imperial rule.”⁵⁶¹ The first Neo-Confucian thinker McDermott analyses in his article is He Xinyin, a follower of the left-wing Taizhou school of Wang Gen and thus a follower of Yangming thought. Hailed by McDermott as “Perhaps the earliest Ming re-evaluation of the political dimension of friendship”, He Xinyin’s vision seems to have exalted the status of the ruler-subject and friend-friend relationships vis-à-vis the other three, which were solely focused on the family.⁵⁶² According to He Xinyin, the very particularity of the three family bonds prevented them from being much use to ordering the world. This had to be done on the level of the ruler who formed relationships with his subjects in official governmental positions on the one hand. On the other hand, complementing this vertical axis was to be the horizontal axis represented by the amical community of evangelical Neo-Confucians like himself, spreading “teachings based on benevolence” consciously modelled on the received life of Confucius himself.⁵⁶³ He Xinyin’s belief in the importance of friendship could have been based on his confidence in the potential of the mind, *xin*, to draw the different human sides in the five relationships closer to one another, ultimately resulting in intimacy and equality within all five, qualities normally only found in friendship.

By singling out He Xinyin as an early example of a Neo-Confucian re-centring friendship amongst the traditional bonds, the question presents itself whether Wang Yangming’s following as a whole contributed to this change in discourse and should be considered a starting point for this phenomenon? Miaw-fen Lu analysed the role of friendship within the Yangming movement and she posited that it formed the glue keeping the members together and that it therefore

⁵⁶⁰ Joseph P. McDermott, “Friendship and Its Friends in the Late Ming,” in *Family Process and Political Process in Modern Chinese History, Part I*, edited by Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1992), 67.

⁵⁶¹ McDermott, “Friendship and Its Friends,” 68.

⁵⁶² Idem, 79.

⁵⁶³ Idem, 80.

constituted the basic social framework facilitating the dissemination of Yangming ideas.⁵⁶⁴ Several of Wang Yangming's most prominent followers' views on friendship are singled out by Miaw-fen Lu, including Wang Ken, Ouyang De, Luo Hongxian, Wang Ji and Luo Rufang. Their rhetoric hardly diverged from the already established orthodoxy that friendships mainly existed to help one perfect one's moral nature, but in praxis friendship became a much more important bond within the emerging Yangming movement of the sixteenth century, and many followers actually elevated it over the other four relationships in theory. This was a stark departure from the position of Song Neo-Confucians, who emphasized the benefits of friends in pursuing moral excellence, but still firmly ranked friendship as the fifth and last of the bonds in the scheme of things. There was even a tendency to abbreviate the system by only referring to the three cardinal guides (*sangang* 三綱) of social order, namely the ones between ruler and subject, father and son and husband and wife. This abbreviation completely omitted brotherly order and friendship. Why did the valuation of friendship rise to such unprecedented levels within the Yangming movement? The answer needs to be sought in both the philosophy the movement expounded, and the socio-political circumstances in which it took place.

As noted before, the emergence of Yangming philosophy marked a decidedly moral subjective turn within the history of Confucianism. To become a sage, one had to activate one's innate knowing of the good (*liangzhi*) and extend it into the world. Furthermore, the *Five Classics* and *Four Books* declined in importance as vehicles for discovering morality. The focus of cultivating good virtue shifted inward and relied less on external written sources of authority. One of the problems that arose as a consequence was that of verification. One's *liangzhi*, when it appeared, was an infallible guide for virtuous decision making, but how could one know if the decision was really based on *liangzhi* instead of a judgement clouded by selfish desires? The answer was that aspiring sages should rely on and actively seek out verification by friends.⁵⁶⁵ Hence, the nature of the philosophy itself increased the necessity and importance of the fifth bond. As regards the correct path to enlightenment, Wang Yangming had declined to write a clear guide for his followers, and the achievement of sagehood came to rely on oral instruction, often within the context of social gatherings.

⁵⁶⁴ Lu Miaw-fen 呂妙芬, *Yangming xueshi shequn – Lishi, sixiang yu shijian* 陽明學士社群 - 歷史, 思想與實踐 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindai lishi yanjiusuo, 2000), 295-298.

⁵⁶⁵ Lu, *Yangming xueshi shequn*, 313-314.

Another element buttressing the bond of friendship originating in Song Neo-Confucian philosophy, but amplified by the Yangming movement, was the notion of the fundamental unity of the universe. One of the characteristics of enlightenment was actually being able to experience the wholeness of the universe and the interconnectedness of all the phenomena within it. Literally the totality of things, including human beings and lifeless objects, were thought to form one unified body (*yiti* 一體). As everything is connected in nature, so is everything in human society. The holistic conceptualization made no fundamental distinction between what a modern human being would call “nature” and “culture”. Humans did not stand apart from other phenomena, but were in constant interaction with everything around them. Translated in social terms this paradigm shifted from *sein* to *sollen* (from is to ought) and exhorted humans to realize their interconnectedness with one another and cultivate the correct human relationships.⁵⁶⁶ Perhaps this sentiment enticed Wang Yangming’s followers to strengthen their social ties through the bond of friendship. I would argue that the reorientation of learning and thought away from a pragmatic and utilitarian focus on the examination system towards a moral brotherhood of all men divorced from the needs of career building and geared more towards the emotional need of peer recognition of moral achievement, explains the rise in importance of friendship in the sixteenth century and impact on Qi Jiguang career, to which I will now turn.

Qi Jiguang’s thinking about friendship can be seen in his own collection of literary writings, the 止止堂集, or the *Collection of the Zhizhi Hall*. In one of his sacrificial prayers compiled in this collection, eulogizing a deceased friend who was a Brigade Commander (*wanhu* 萬戶), Qi Jiguang is seen to hold friendship in high regard:

Alas! The way of friendship has not been manifested on earth for a long time! As for the sincere rectification of the heart-mind, without friends it [the sincere rectification] cannot be clarified; cultivating oneself and managing the family well, without friends they [oneself and the family] cannot be put in order. Governing the country and pacifying all under Heaven, without friends this cannot be achieved. Only friendship will do to illuminate the relation between fathers and sons. Only friendship will do to illuminate the order between older and younger brothers. Only friendship will do to illuminate the differentiation between husbands and wives. Only friendship will do to illuminate the righteousness between ruler and subjects. Admonishing, criticizing, viewing, and emulating virtue cannot be attained without friends. Not forgetting old promises is

⁵⁶⁶ Idem, 314-315.

the guiding principle of the way of friendship. The ones with scant kindness and numerous resentments: the world always has them as well. Alas! The way of friendship has not been illuminated for a long time!

嗚呼！友道之不明於天下也久矣！誠意正心，匪友弗闡；脩身齊家，匪友弗飭；治國平天下，非友弗臻。父子之親也，惟友足以明之，兄弟之序也，惟友足以明之；夫婦之別也，惟友足以明之；君臣之義也，惟友足以明之。箴砭觀摩，德非友弗成，久要不忘，友道之經。寡恩叢怨者，世亦比比。嗚呼！友道之不明於天下也久矣！⁵⁶⁷

This particular military leader, named Wang Chang 王長, participated in the south-eastern maritime frontier defence of the 1550s. This highlights the opportunity of developing and fostering Neo-Confucian friendships among the army leadership during military service. Another interesting phenomenon highlighted by this sacrificial prayer is the existence and articulation of these friendships betwixt hereditary military personnel and aboriginal leadership. These were not exactly two Ming era social strata in which one would expect friendship, conceptualized in a very Neo-Confucian way, to be in evidence. The title of Brigade Commander was exclusively conferred to the hereditary chieftains of the south-, and southwestern aboriginal tribes inhabiting the external and internal frontier zones of the empire, so it would seem Wang Chang had an aboriginal background as well.⁵⁶⁸ Moreover, this prayer highlights the importance of friends in moral cultivation, an importance Qi Jiguang endorses.

The Renaissance of the Knight-Errant and Identity Eclecticism

Yangming ideology offered another path through which Neo-Confucianism and martial lifestyles could find each other. This pathway was opened through a stress on the value of *kuang* 狂, which in the context of *xinxue* came to mean a kind of unconventionality expressed through certain kinds of behaviour, but prompted by sincerity of mind. Following the doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action, any behavioural act would in theory be justified as long as it was the result of a sincere extension of the innate good. In practice, this opened the theoretical floodgates for, now, legitimate unconventional behaviours, justifiable by upright sincerity. This tendency of unconventionality was, I suspect, further strengthened by the performative needs of opposition to the older Cheng-

⁵⁶⁷ Qi Jiguang 戚繼光, *Zhizhitang ji* 止止堂集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 191-192.

⁵⁶⁸ Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China, Volume 1*, 562.

Zhu Neo-Confucianism. According to Miaw-fen Lu, the *kuang* (in Confucian discourse) stood in opposition to the *xiangyuan* 鄉愿, who were the “good careful people from the villages.”⁵⁶⁹ According to both Confucius and Mencius, the *xiangyuan* were unsuitable moral exemplars, because their outward moral excellence was only a show put on for the outside world, and one that was not backed up by a sincerity of will. Translated to the society of sixteenth-century China, this notion of a dichotomy between outside pageantry and inner sincerity made for an excellent performative and rhetorical tool with which to undermine Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy. One of Wang Yangming’s main criticisms of this orthodoxy was its posited existence of principle outside of the mind. This could lead to a confusion between behaviour and intention, which was especially problematic in the moral sphere. For example, an act of filial piety should only be considered legitimate if it was a spontaneous outcome of a sincere intention, an extension of innate goodness. Instead, Wang Yangming contended, Cheng-Zhu’s doctrine lent moral legitimacy to outward moral posturing, which was not backed up by virtuous intent.

I posit that the high esteem accorded to sincere unconventionality by followers and offshoots of the Yangming movement coincided and merged with a positive re-evaluation of martial culture and lifestyles in the late Ming. Chen Baoliang already noted that Wang Yangming’s personal example inspired many to combine knight-errantry with a Neo-Confucian identity, but I argue that his philosophy itself furnished the philosophical tools to legitimate this combination.⁵⁷⁰ As can be seen from the example of Qi Jiguang’s ideas about the *wen wu*-divide, Yangming ideas on sagehood could furnish tools of legitimation and justification for these martial pursuits. The notion of *kuang* provided another, as it significantly enlarged the scope of acceptable behaviours (and thus lifestyles) for a Neo-Confucian. Giovanni Vitiello mentions that traditional Confucianism in the late Ming offered a too narrow-minded morality for the rapidly developing society, and therefore many sought a kind of syncretic identity by combining Confucianism with other sources of systematic ethical thought.⁵⁷¹ One of these sources would be the value system associated with the knight-errant tradition. As we saw in chapter one, these *youxia* seem to have emerged during the tumultuous Warring States Period and were a group of wandering men of

⁵⁶⁹ Lu, “Practice as Knowledge,” 296.

⁵⁷⁰ Chen Baoliang 陈宝良, “Mingdai zhishi ren qunti yu xiadao guanxi kaolun – jian lun ru, xia, dao zhi bian jiqi hudong” 明代知识人群体与侠盗关系考论——兼论儒、侠、盗之辨及其互动, *Xinan daxue xuebao* 西南大学学报 37.2 (2011): 40-43.

⁵⁷¹ Vitiello, “Exemplary Sodomites,” 207-210.

martial ability who used their skills to mete out justice in an atmosphere of growing state power and societal upheavals caused by wars which were increasing in frequency. The social background of these knights-errant varied and was of little relevance to their moral code, which emphasized universalism in the approach to inter-human relationships and egalitarianism in their conceptions of social justice. In the typical real and fictitious *youxia* stories we can often see the knights-errant right the wrongs perpetrated by the rich and powerful and representatives of the state on the weaker members of society. Other important elements of the *youxia* moral code included physical and moral courage, a personal loyalty to friends instead of a customary one towards the ruler, altruism and a contempt of wealth, and last but not least, a quest for fame, honor and freedom of unconventional expression.

There were a number of differences between the *youxia* moral code, and its Neo-Confucian equivalent. Yet, I would argue that the Yangming re-interpretation actually diminished these differences. Invoking the Weberian concept of *Wahlverwandtschaft* or “elective affinities”,⁵⁷² I argue that Confucianism and its more martial knight-errantry counterpart merged into a new (sub-) culture of militarized literati in the course of the sixteenth century. James Liu highlights the traditional differences between the *youxia* and the *ru*. First of all, in Confucian ideology, moral obligations had a distinctly particularistic character. Whereas in the *youxia* tradition universal justice took centre stage, for the *ru* this was hierarchically conceived in the five bonds and the societal division between scholars, peasants, artisans and merchants. However, as we have seen, in the Yangming movement the primary focus on obligation towards ruler and family shifted in favour of friendship based on shared moral aspirations. In addition, with the rise of the rhetoric emphasizing scholars, peasants, artisans and merchants all sharing the same *dao*, the inherent democratizing potential of the school of the heart-mind *ipso facto* undermined the particularistic tendencies of traditional Confucianism. Second, the primacy of moderation and conformism in behaviour was replaced by the esteem accorded to *kuang* unconventional (sometimes translated as “wild”) behaviour. Third, the knight-errant was supposed to be true in word and action, which meshed well with Wang Yangming’s doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action. Sincerity of intent had to be expressed in sincerity of behaviour. Last, but not least, the use of force to obtain justice could be legitimized as a proper moral action for a Neo-Confucian sage, as demonstrated

⁵⁷² On the interpretations of this concept, see Andrew M. McKinnon, “Elective Affinities of the Protestant Ethic: Weber and the Chemistry of Capitalism,” *Sociological Theory* 28.1 (2010): 108-126.

by Qi Jiguang himself. In addition, as James Liu points out, martial pursuits like archery and charioteering (later equestrianism) were part and parcel of the Confucian ideal gentleman. Thus, the differences between both moral codes were marginalized, and in other ways both the knight-errant and the Confucian already shared some similarities, including a disdain for wealth (one may recall here Qi Jiguang's previously quoted literary self-fashioning as a warrior practicing repression of desires), a thirst for fame and a concern with preserving individual honour.⁵⁷³

The context in which this elective affinity was activated facilitated its flowering. Next to the stifling orthodoxy of the state-sanctioned Cheng-Zhu learning, the "ever more depressing, and oppressive, reality of contemporary politics (incompetent emperors and the corrupting influence of eunuchs)"⁵⁷⁴ posited by Martin Huang should be considered as well. In this context Yangming-learning, which inherent moral subjectivity encouraged moral autonomy vis-à-vis ancient teachings and imperial authority, would have found fertile ground. Again, this moral autonomy fit well into the mould of the social activist role of the knight-errant as dispensing justice in the absence of good governance from the centre was a shared aspiration. After all, the Neo-Confucian program of social intervention had already in Song times started where active state intervention stopped and knights-errant's main occupation was righting social wrongs on the local level. Taiwanese historian Wang Hung-tai posits that we should not consider Wang Yangming as a *youxia*, because he did not choose to embrace its way of life,⁵⁷⁵ but there is evidence that his followers compared him favourably to this ideal-type. Wang Ji, while addressing a discussion assembly (*jianghui*), described the man in the following way:

The former master's [Wang Yangming] learning changed altogether three times and then he began to enter into enlightenment. Once more he changed and that which he achieved was the start of transformation and pureness. His few petitions were brave, determined, confrontational, and strident: he exceeded knights-errant in lack of inhibition. With regard to learning, there was nothing he did not study minutely; his taste was overflowing in his poetry and prose. He actively engaged with Sunzi and Wuzi, and although his aspiration lay with statecraft, his talents were also that which he gave free reign to.

先師之學，凡三變而始入於悟，再變而所得始化而純。其少稟英毅凌邁，超俠不羈，於學無所不窺，嘗泛濫於詞章，馳騁於孫吳，雖其志在經世，亦才有所縱也。⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷³ Liu, *The Chinese Knight-Errant*, 7-9.

⁵⁷⁴ Huang, *Negotiating Maculinites*, 43.

⁵⁷⁵ Wang, "Wugong, wuxue, wuyi, wuxia," 213.

⁵⁷⁶ Wang Ji 王畿. *Wang Ji ji* 王畿集 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), 33.

After detailing the many phases Wang Yangming's ideas passed through and enumerating the multi-faceted nature of his talent, the praising of his lack of inhibition should be of note. This lack of restraint should be considered together with the preceding statements about his "brave" and "confrontational" petitions, which all point to his unbridled critical and reform-minded spirit vis-à-vis the empire, its institutions and the ultimate source of its authority, the emperor himself. Note that Wang Yangming's surpassing the knights-errant in this sense is meant as a positive evaluation. Wang actually achieved fame for this exact bearing by refusing to indulge the reigning Zhengde 正德 (r. 1505-1521) emperor, who wanted Wang to set a rebellious member of the imperial family free (who had just been captured by Wang Yangming in a notable military campaign) in order to capture this prince himself in a wasteful exercise of martial posturing. The basis of the comparison with the attitude of the knight-errant is exactly this unbridled opposition to official state authority in the name of a greater good. This no doubt resonated with the activist Neo-Confucians of the later Ming dynasty, who, as guardians of morality, civilization and culture, saw it as an important part of their duty to correct the flaws of their ruler. Such was the consequence of a system in which moral and political authority was divided between different groups.⁵⁷⁷

The resurrection of the knight-errant as a positive role model has been considered by modern scholars as phenomenon of the late Ming.⁵⁷⁸ Harriet Zurndorfer, for example, has noted that it became an important subject in the fictional narratives of writers and that these writers were also connected with the "the highest echelons of the Ming military elite, civil officials, and generals responsible for running the Korea campaign [...]."⁵⁷⁹ I posit, however, that this re-evaluation was already apparent around the middle of the sixteenth century in the writings of the followers and friends of Wang Yangming. Wang Ji used the spirit of knight-errantry to refer to positive character qualities in both Wang Yangming, as shown above, but also when referring to Tang Shunzhi:

I recently heard that you, my brother, engaged in military affairs and your temperament spread wide and manifested. The duty of ruler and minister and friends is to personally and mutually pledge an oath to wish

⁵⁷⁷ Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 98-99.

⁵⁷⁸ Allan H. Barr, "The Wanli Context of the 'Courtesan's Jewel Box' Story," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 57.1 (1997): 110.

⁵⁷⁹ Harriet T. Zurndorfer, "Wanli China versus Hideyoshi's Japan: Rethinking China's Involvement in the Imjin Waeran," in *The East Asian War, 1592-1598: International Relations, Violence, and Memory*, edited by James B. Lewis (London: Routledge, 2015), 205.

to share life and death. I regard this to esteem bringing about the spirit of a knight-errant. The knight-errant attaches importance to promises and thinks lightly of life and death and in the end attains a good reputation - it also truly differs the least bit from the crucial inherent characteristics and motives of the sage, and that's all.

昨聞兄請兵，意氣橫發，君臣朋友之義，以身相許，誓欲與同生死。竊意此尚從俠氣帶來。俠者之重然諾，輕生死，終涉好名，與聖賢本色作用未免毫釐，亦在機上辨之而已。⁵⁸⁰

This description of Tang Shunzhi by Wang Ji is a very clear indication of how close the ideal of the sage and the values associated with knight-errantry had approached each other in the context of military activities. Of these military activities in the context of Tang Shunzhi's life, Wang Ji also writes the following in the same letter: "How could you stop at being a superb military commander: the eternal learning of the sages is also not separate from this! /豈止用兵如神，千古聖學亦不外於此矣!"⁵⁸¹ Here Wang Ji establishes the legitimacy of the military occupation within the sphere of sagely activities.

Perhaps, as Wang Hung-tai argues, Wang Yangming did not actively embrace a *youxia* identity and his interest in military affairs was mainly of a pragmatic nature. Nevertheless, in addition to Wang Ji and Tang Shunzhi, also some members of the more radical Taizhou-branch of his followers embraced a dual identity of Neo-Confucian and knight-errant. This group included the already mentioned He Xinyin, but also the founder Wang Gen and followers Wang Bi 王襞 (1511-1587), Wang Dong 王棟 (1502-1581) and Yan Jun 顏鈞 (1504-1596).⁵⁸² Many prominent thinkers in this group were characterized during the late Ming as "wild Chanists" (*kuang Chan* 狂禪), because of their unconventional blending of Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism. The "Chan" here refers to the Chinese pronunciation of the more famous Japanese "Zen", a form of Buddhism stressing meditation in lieu of scriptural studies.⁵⁸³ According to Vitiello, this syncretism was part of a larger trend during the late Ming to revitalize Confucianism by fusing it with other religions, ideologies, and lifestyles. He also mentions that this fusion was also attempted with knight-errantry,

⁵⁸⁰ Wang Ji 王畿. *Wang Ji ji* 王畿集 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), 267.

⁵⁸¹ Idem, 267.

⁵⁸² Zuo Dongling 左东岭, "Kuangxia jingshen yu Taizhou chuantong" 狂侠精神与泰州传统, *Kongzi yanjiu* 孔子研究 3 (2001): 104-112.

⁵⁸³ For more on these "wild Chanists", see: Mao Wen-fang 毛文芳, "Wan Ming 'kuang Chan' tan lun" 晚明「狂禪」探論, *Hanxue yanjiu* 19.2 (2001): 171-200.

and among prominent members of the Taizhou branch, this seems to have been a widespread phenomenon, as shown by Zuo Dongling.⁵⁸⁴ I argue that the more general trend towards syncretism in Confucianism had a tendency to express itself in a fusion between the latter and knight-errantry in the particular case of Wang Yangming's Neo-Confucian movement. Wang Daokun also fused Neo-Confucian identities and knight-errantry in the figure of the merchant. He would write a number of biographies of merchants which emphasized their possession of the associated moral qualities resulting of this synthesis.⁵⁸⁵ Xu Wei would also write many stories about knights-errant, people he admired.⁵⁸⁶ Nor was this tendency restricted to Wang Yangming's brand of *xinxue*. Liu Tao, a follower of Chen Xianzhang whom we have already met in chapter six, also embraced the ethos of the knight-errant.⁵⁸⁷ This infiltration of a more martial moral code of Neo-Confucianism can be detected as well in the context of Qi Jiguang's career and friendships. Wang Chang, the aboriginal leader on behalf of whom Qi wrote a sacrificial prayer, is described in the following way by his friend:

Thereupon you exclusively kept carrying on your father's trade. You indulged yourself in wild knight-errantry [*kuang xia*] and thereupon became a fellow-official. In 1555 we shook hands at parting and twelve autumns passed. In the past, you were repeatedly called to arms, you threw yourself into public affairs and went to Fujian. Altogether, you were honourable without exception, using the lessons of the past.

迺廬保其箕裘。台恣狂俠，遂成乎宦遊。乙卯握別，越十二秋。台曾屢檄，趣公聞詣，共有均榮，用訓夙昔。⁵⁸⁸

So here we are presented with an aboriginal official who combined two value systems with a very martial lifestyle, cultivating Neo-Confucian friendship with a hereditary Han military officer. Crucially, Qi characterizes Wang Chang's combination of the two value systems as *kuang xia* 狂俠, which I propose to render as "wild knight-errantry", following the translation precedent set by "wild Chanist". I posit that in this instance we can see the potential of the Confucian value of *kuang*, or sincere unconventionality, to encourage a mixing between Neo-Confucianism and

⁵⁸⁴ See note 107 above; Vitiello, "Exemplary Sodomites," 209-210.

⁵⁸⁵ Lien Chi-yuan 連啟元, "Ruxia zhi bian: Wang Daokun dui Huizhou renwu 'ruxia' xingxiang de lunshu yu xing su" 儒俠之辨：汪道昆對徽州人物「儒俠」形象的論述與型塑, *Mingdai yanjiu* 明代研究 19 (2012): 121-140.

⁵⁸⁶ Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities*, 54.

⁵⁸⁷ Chen, "Mingdai zhishi ren qunti yu xiadao guanxi," 42-43.

⁵⁸⁸ Qi Jiguang 戚繼光, *Zhizhitang ji* 止止堂集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 192.

martial identities. This friendship was forged on the frontier amid military action, as the mention of the year 1555 makes it very likely that they were both active in the southeast fighting the Wo pirates. Nor does this seem to have been an isolated occurrence. As we have seen above, Hu Zongxian also cultivated intimate personal relationships with his aboriginal colleagues.⁵⁸⁹ There can hardly be a more striking example of the potential of Yangming ideology to blur social and ethnic boundaries and provide moral sanction for a variety of pursuits and identities.

A further element promoting friendship and the archetype of knight-errantry among the *xinxue* network contributing to the anti-Wokou campaign was the mobility and detachment from family caused by the associated career and lifestyle. Concerning this detachment, many of these men were away from house and hearth for a considerable time and had to rely on each other for their lives and careers' successes. As part of Wang Yangming's movement they were already accustomed to seek verification and validation for their moral fibre within the context of associations and bonds of friendship within the movement itself, which was represented by the network during the campaign. As for mobility, we have seen that many *xinxue* followers joined Hu Zongxian's private staff out of their own volition. As such, they were symptomatic of a late Ming "social and geographic mobility" posited by Anne Gerritsen, when because of socio-economic changes the opportunities for men to travel and interact increased compared to the Yuan and early Ming dynasties.⁵⁹⁰ These conditions would, I argue, create the ideal circumstances for bonds of friendships and the brotherhood of knight-errantry to develop among the participants of the anti-Wokou campaign.

In a poem written by Qi Jiguang when he was serving at the northern frontier he affirms the importance of friendship and its close connection with the chivalric spirit associated with knight-errantry:

A poem composed when gathered above the river Luan

Standing alone I cherish ones who know me, because of the many quandaries I sigh over the feelings of officials.

Who in ancient times and the present day has chivalric spirit? Heaven and Earth are one fortress of sorrows.

Despite the great distance I have yet thrown away my writing brush, for a long time I have admired volunteers for military service.

⁵⁸⁹ Lim, *Lineage Society on the Southeastern Coast of China*, 84-85.

⁵⁹⁰ Anne Gerritsen, "Friendship through Fourteenth-Century Fissures: Dai Liang, Wu Sidao and Ding Henian," *Nan Nü* 9 (2007): 37.

The gentlemen [we] all are learned sword fighters, we dedicate ourselves to service to our own country and have renewed our pact.

集灤上賦詩

獨立懷知己，多岐嘆宦情。
古今誰俠氣，天地一愁城。
萬里猶投筆，千年羨請纓。
君俱學劍者，報國有新盟。⁵⁹¹

He wrote this poem in 1570, when the frontier defences were brought to alert status in response to a feared Mongol attack. The poem commemorates the assembling of the military units and their commanders near the river Luan in Hubei province and it poetically reflects and expresses the importance of friendship to the good functioning of Qi's career. He seemingly accords the "chivalric spirit", *xiaqi* 俠氣, a central place as a force for positive change within the "fortress of sorrow", which was his contemporary social reality. The "fortress of sorrow" should be understood here as human society which continues to concern and cause sorrow for the ones governing it. It would seem the knight-errant could fulfil a useful function next to the Neo-Confucian sage in society. Stressing his choice for a military, martial, career Qi mentions having thrown away his writing brush, which was a literary trope denoting giving up civil one's civil accomplishments and future career for the military profession. The implied rigours of this choice prompted Qi to fashion himself as "standing alone", and therefore he posited ties of friendship as being of crucial importance. Qi needed to rely on "ones who know me" (*zhiji* 知己), intimate soul mates, and in the *youxia* tradition denoting friends or patrons who really appreciated the knight-errant for his moral qualities.⁵⁹² According to Anna Shields, during mid-to-late Tang times the term still carried this meaning of a patron who knew the talent and potential of his client, but in later times it came to denote a close friendship.⁵⁹³ It is possible that Qi Jiguang in his poem referred to the appreciation for a knight-errant's moral integrity, considering his evocation of the spirit of the *youxia* in the second line.

⁵⁹¹ Qi Jiguang 戚繼光, *Zhizhitang ji* 止止堂集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 42.

⁵⁹² Vitiello, "Exemplary Sodomites," 217-218.

⁵⁹³ Anna M. Shields, *One Who Knows Me: Friendship and Literary Culture in Mid-Tang China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015), 98-99.

Friendships and philosophy were two pillars on which Qi Jiguang's career were built. The democratization of the sagehood ideal and the moral subjectivity of Yangming learning went hand in hand with the adoption of martial identities and the cultivation of friendships outside of the narrow focus on empire and family, which had been the hallmark of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. Whereas Qi used *xinxue* to legitimize the role of the military man in the polity, his close friend and colleague Wang Daokun would use the same ideology to serve as "apologist" for the merchant profession. In addition, both Wang and Qi were attracted by the ideals associated with the tradition of knight-errantry. A similar fusion of civil and martial identities can be observed with many of Qi Jiguang's civil bureaucrat friends and superiors as well. Known Yangming followers like Hu Zongxian, Ruan E, Tan Lun, Zhao Dahe, Xu Wei, Tang Shunzhi and Wang Daokun all served during the piracy suppression campaign of the 1550s and 1560s and embraced martial endeavours in addition to their civil functions. In this atmosphere of military activism, Qi made the beginning of a successful career and nurtured friendships which would continue to bloom as his life progressed. In addition, the prominent place the value of *kuang* would assume in more radical branches of Wang Yangming's movement created an additional bridge between *wen* and *wu*, as it provided literati and military men to assume the identities of both the Confucian gentleman and knight-errant. I therefore posit that, next to the devaluation of external investigations and texts as sources of moral principles (thus paradoxically re-legitimizing the Strategists and their texts as proper study materials for the Confucian gentleman), the esteem accorded to *kuang* increased the number of bridges Wang Yangming's *xinxue* allowed to be built between *wen* and *wu* to two. Qi Jiguang and his social surroundings were thus able to legitimize and perform their friendships through the model of social intercourse knight-errantry offered, in which intimate friendship and brotherhood between men were important aspirations. Ultimately, this lead to a syncretism which made the fusion of the identities of Confucian gentleman, Sunzian general, and knight-errant socio-culturally acceptable during the late Ming. This contrasted with the more restrained and narrow identities allowed by Song Neo-Confucianism, which barely provided scope for the *rujiang* Confucian-general ideal, and which downright rejected knight-errantry. Meanwhile, beyond creating and constituting a community of officials and literati cultivating *wen* and *wu* qualities, the *xinxue*-network on the southeastern coast had another important function as well: as a platform for military knowledge circulation. In the next chapter I will turn to exactly this phenomenon and its impact on the Qi Jiguang's systematization of knowledge in his two military manuals.