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A School of Mind Philosopher in Ming China: Nie Bao's Formative Political Career and Intellectual Trajectory, 1487-1548

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Abstract: 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. The goal of this article is to provide a sketch of Nie Bao's political trajectory and intellectual development from his early years until he was imprisoned in 1547, as well as translation of important documents pertaining to that trajectory and development. By the time of his imprisonment, Nie Bao had articulated the essential elements of his philosophy of realizing centeredness and returning to silence, and with that, his own unique interpretation of the meaning of the extension of the innate knowledge of the good.

Introduction

Nie Bao 聶豹 (字 [style name] Shuangjiang 雙江, 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. The goal of this article is to provide a sketch of Nie Bao's political trajectory and intellectual development from his early years until he was imprisoned in 1547, as well as translation of important documents pertaining to that trajectory and development. In fact, it was during and in the wake of this imprisonment that Nie Bao composed what are regarded as mature philosophical works. However, the ideas elaborated upon in them were all developed to some degree in his earlier writings.

While the Confucian scholar-official Wang Yangming (1472-1529) is quite well known outside East Asia, the movement he inspired and the lives and philosophies of the disciples composing it remain less understood. 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 the sixteenth-century Wang Yangmingists. As for the Jiangxi branch, Wang Yangming was assigned by the Ming court to quell unrest in southern Jiangxi (and neighboring provinces) in 1517. He arrived in Ganzhou early that year and, for the most part, remained in the region until 1521. While carrying out military campaigns, Wang was also actively teaching his latest Confucian philosophical tenets and interpretations of classical texts, something that attracted young men from all over the region to come study under him. Many formally declared themselves disciples, establishing a Jiangxi branch, although this branch should be understood in geographical terms and not as a sub-school or sect within a broader Wang Yangming movement. That is because the men composing it held diverse interpretations of their master's philosophy.

Although Nie Bao lived nearby in Yongfeng County, Ji'an Prefecture, he did not meet Wang

Yangming until 1526, when Nie was serving in Yingtian Prefecture and Wang was staying at home in Shaoxing, Zhejiang. 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,” or “good knowing”) and he eventually declared his discipleship, although 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 very distinctive direction. No doubt, by 1547, the basic outlines of his philosophy had already come together, and that is what this paper seeks to bring out by narrating in brief the first sixty years of his political and philosophical life.

Early Life and Intellectual Development, 1487-1531

In 1487, Nie Bao was born in in Yongfeng County, one of nine composing Ji'an Prefecture, Jiangxi. He hailed from a well-established local lineage whose ancestors had moved to Yongfeng's Leiyuan village sometime before the Song dynasty, and then from Leiyuan to Yishi during the Song, and then from Yishi to Shuangxi village at the end of the Yuan dynasty. Having relocated three times, the lineage grew and enjoyed a substantial presence in the county.^① Thus, as the Ming commenced, Nie's great-great-grandfather was living in Shuangxi. Nie's father, Nie Feng 聶鳳 (*zhi* Yuzhi 玉治), was compelled to give up his studies on account of his family's economic hardship and older brother's blindness. He held out hope that one of his sons (all told, he had six) might succeed at the examinations, so he supported them by hiring teachers and encouraging them to study. Four, however, died at a young age, and, like his father, Nie Bao's older brother Nie Hong's circumstances prevented him from preparing for exams. Only Nie Bao was able to do so.^②

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 student of his gate at the time of his coming of age (about 21). Guo had a reputation for being learned in the *Classic of Change*, and that may have spurred Nie's own interest in the classic, as He Weixuan has proposed.^③

Another was Luo Lun 羅倫 (*zhi* Yingkui 應魁, 1431–1478). Even though he died about a decade before Nie was born, Luo Lun's success in obtaining the highest examination degree (*jinshi* 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 for his failure to properly observe mourning requirements, and his courage earned him a reputation for staunch integrity and outspokenness. He 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 Ruist (practitioner of a tradition with Confucius as its most important representative) luminaries, such as Chen Xianzhang 陳獻章 (1428–1500), Hu Juren 胡居仁 (1434–1484), and Lou Liang 婁諒 (1422–1491). His friendship with Chen was especially close,

^① Song Yiwang, “Xing zhuang,” *fulu*:639. Song Yiwang's record is contained in the *Nie Bao ji* (Collected Works of Nie Bao), *fulu*:639-650. According to Liu Cong and Wang Lifang, Nie's genealogy was recorded in the Jiajing period *Genealogy of the Yongfeng Nie Lineage* (Yongfeng Nie shi zupu 永豐聶氏族譜). The genealogy shows that Nie Bao's Xiashi ancestors extended back ten generations. Prior, two Nie men had relocated to Xiashi from Yongfeng's Leiyuan village (Liu Cong and Wang Lifang, *Nie Bao ji*, 5–6). However, I haven't been able to locate this genealogy. Nie Bao's family tree is reconstructed from several sources in Wu Zhen, *Nie Bao*, 326.

^② Liu Cong and Wang Lifang, *Nie Bao*, 7.

^③ He Weixuan, “‘Gui ji’” 240.

although Luo adhered to Song learning.^①

In his “Sacrificial oration for Master Luo Yifeng (Ji Yifeng Luo xiansheng wen 祭一峰羅先生文),” 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 sections 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?’”^②

In Nie’s time, 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:

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 his [i.e., Luo], which is why he could [speak] in depth and verify it. My aspiration to hold the whip was aroused and only further solidified.^③

Liu Lin 劉霖 (字 Jizhi 濟之, born c. 1467) was clearly the more immediate influence on Nie. He met Lin at the age of his capping ceremony (again, at 21). Lin’s father Liu Bin 劉彬 enjoyed the prestige of holding the 1478 *jinsbi* 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 Ruist 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.^④

Nie Bao spoke of Liu Lin in his “Sacrificial oration for Master Liu Zhongshan (Ji Zhongshan Liu xiansheng wen 祭中山劉先生文).” He wrote, “Master [Liu] chose his friends from all over the place, and after he turned forty [*shu*] he chose me. When I found friends after tying up my hair [i.e., at twenty *shu*], I enjoyed a friendship that was such that we forgot about our age difference.”^⑤ According to He Weixuan, Liu Lin was a key channel through which stories of Luo Lun and Chen Xianzhang’s conduct and Ruist philosophizing reached Nie Bao.^⑥ Nie would subsequently engage in projects that elevated their profiles and indicated his debt to them, even if the precise nature of their influence

^① Huang Zongxi, *Ming ru xue an*, 45:1071. For a thorough study of Nie’s early intellectual development, see He Weixuan, “Gui ji,” 240–265.

^② Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 7:225. Citing *Mengzi* 5B:1. All *Mengzi* translations are by Eno.

^③ Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 7:225.

^④ Wu Zhen, *Mingdai zhibishijie*, 70–71; Liu Cong and Wang Lifang, *Nie Bao*, 10–13.

^⑤ Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 7:227.

^⑥ He Weixuan, “Gui ji,” 241–242.

over time on the development of his philosophy is a topic for further research.^①

In 1516, during the reign of the Zhengde emperor (Zhu Houzhao 朱厚照, r. 1506–1521), Nie passed the provincial exam in Jiangxi, with an emphasis on the *Classic of Change*.^② The education intendant was Li Mengyang 李夢陽 (1473–1530), and they became friends. Now eligible to take the metropolitan examination the following year, Li proposed that his friend 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.^③ 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 *jinsbi*.

During winter of that same year, Nie returned home to spend time with his mother and father and also to spend some time alone. “After returning, he shut his door 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.^④ However, in the spring of 1520, the Ministry of Personnel appointed the now thirty-three-year-old Nie as magistrate of Huating County, which was located in the Southern Metropolitan Area and under the jurisdiction Songjiang Prefecture.

Although this county had a reputation for corrupting officials and staining their reputations, Nie appears to have 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 a 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 achieve their own ends. 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.^⑤ 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 him each day and holding philosophical discussions (*jiangxue* 講學: lit. discussing learning). His teaching was grounded in what is referred to in the *Classic of Change* as silence and stimulation (*ji gan* 寂感), which he verified with

^① For more discussion, see He Weixuan, “‘Gui ji,’” 241–242. In 1529, when Nie Bao was serving as surveillance commissioner in Fujian, he approved the request for construction of the Yifeng Shuyuan 一峰書院 ([Luo] Yifeng Academy). Later, when Yongfeng’s magistrate Zhang Yan reprinted Luo Lun’s collected works, Nie wrote a preface for it.

^② Song Yiwang, “Xing zhuang,” *fulu*:640.

^③ Song Yiwang, “Xing zhuang,” *fulu*:640.

^④ Song Yiwang, “Xing zhuang,” *fulu*:639.

^⑤ Song Yiwang, “Xing zhuang,” *fulu*:640.

centered harmony (*zhong he* 中和) 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.^①

Thus, when Nie Bao first began instructing students while serving in an official capacity, he was already citing phrases from the *Classic of Change*, *Zhongyong* (Centrality and commonality, commonly referred to as the *Doctrine of the Mean*), and *Mengzi*, three classics that will remain central to his classical hermeneutics and Ruist philosophical discourse to the end of his life. Indeed, together with the *Analects*, these were the classical texts most frequently cited by him.

Since Xu Jie was present at the time, his recollections upon recording this during the second year (1568) of the Longqing 隆慶 emperor's reign (Zhu Zaiji 朱載堉, r. 1567–1572) holds weight. In his spare time, Nie devoted his energies to promoting education and fostering young men, personally instructing them, 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 reviewed the students, he most appreciated the achievements of Nie's students.^②

In the winter of 1523, with his three-year assignment as magistrate complete, 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, empowering him to gather complaints from the people, impeach officials for misconduct, and submit remonstrates or opinions regarding the emperor's conduct.^③ 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 dare 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.^④ 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.^⑤

Towards 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 assigned as surveillance commissioner of Fujian, requiring him to depart for the province.^⑥

In the meantime, the Ming scholar-official and renowned Ruist master Wang Yangming

^① Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, *fulu*:635. With “silence and arousal,” Xu Jie is referring to the *Classic of Change*, “Treatise on the Appended Remarks,” part A, section 10 (unless otherwise indicated, all *Classic of Change* translation are by Adler) “Centered harmony” refers to the *Doctrine of the Mean* 1, and “Perfected themselves and perfected things” refers to the *Doctrine of the Mean* 25. Hereafter, unless otherwise indicated, all translation of the *Doctrine* and *Great Learning* are by Eno.

^② Song Yiwang, “Xing zhuang,” *fulu*:640–641.

^③ Hucker, *Dictionary of Official Titles*, 145–146.

^④ Song Yiwang, “Xing zhuang,” *fulu*:641.

^⑤ Huang Zongxi, *Ming ru xue an*, vol. 1, 17:369.

^⑥ Song Yiwang, “Xing zhuang,” *fulu*:641.

(1472–1529) was living in retirement in Shaoxing, spending his time holding forums for discussing moral philosophy with his large number of students—those who had come from all over to hear him speak. Nie also wished to meet him, so sometime 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 doctrine (*xue* 學: learning) of the innate knowledge of the good (*liangzhi* 良知) together,” Song Yiwang explains, “and Master [Nie] keenly sensed that attaining sagehood was totally feasible.”^① Upon returning to his duties, Song further notes, Nie “sent a letter of inquiry about learning to Master Wang, who sighed deeply over the courage with which Master shouldered responsibility for the Way, and so he sent a letter in reply.”^②

Wang Yangming’s impressions of Nie Bao are perhaps better understood from a letter Wang wrote to another Jiangxi disciple, Ouyang De 歐陽德 (*xi* Chongyi 崇一, 1496–1554). He expressed some reservations about his abilities and some of his thinking but also his confidence that in the end Nie would finally break through to an understanding of the 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 doctrine 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 thoroughly grasp things to the point of fully getting it: “it seems to rise sheer above me and I have no way of going after it.”^③ 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 guiding threads. 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.^④

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, which has been translated by Wing-tsit Chan under the title *Instructions for Practical Living*. 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. In the fifth lunar month of 1526, at the outset of the letter Wang Yangming wrote:

Last 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

^① Song Yiwang, “Xing zhuang,” *fulu*:641.

^② Song Yiwang, “Xing zhuang,” *fulu*:641.

^③ Citing *Analects* 9:11. Unless otherwise indicated, all *Analects* translation are by Lau.

^④ The letter is included in Qian Ming, *Yangming xue*, 319. Qian dates this letter to 1526. According to He Weixuan, the letter to Ouyang De may have been written after Wang Yangming’s first round of correspondence with Nie Bao, and Wang’s opinion thus also includes his impression of Nie’s first letter (which is no longer extant) (He Weixuan, “‘Gui ji,’” 248).

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 feel 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.^①

From the first part of the letter, it becomes clear that Nie Bao had already shown much deference towards Wang Yangming, lavishing praise on him, and telling him that he found in his teaching echoes if not the embodiment of Ruists whose writings had been and will remain central to Nie's own thinking: Zisi 子思 (c. 483–402 BCE), grandson to Confucius and purported author of the *Doctrine of the Mean*; the Warring States Period philosopher Mengzi (c. 372–289 BCE); and the two northern Song dynasty Learning of the Way (*daoxue* 道學) scholars Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073 CE) and Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085 CE).

According to Wang's reading of Nie's lengthy letter, Nie regarded this intellectual lineage as having illuminated a universally and independently true *Dao*. Those who find it will see it as such. They don't need others' confirmation. Even should everyone on earth deem it false, that wouldn't change the reality of its truth. So true is it that those who see and have faith in it will have acquired a certain nobility within, permitting them to persevere even as a social outcast or pariah. Wang Yangming stated, "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?" Unsurprisingly, Nie Bao was indeed an independent character, more than willing to stand up to people if he believed that doing so was necessary for him to remain true to his own principles. Here too, he had elevated himself into a kind of elect, those going down the path to attaining a special understanding of the Way, possession of which confers an inner certainty unshaken by the influence

^① Chan, *Instructions*, 165–166. I have not included Chan's footnotes, and names were changed to *pinyin*.

of social approval or disapproval.

On 9/22 of the sixth year of the Jiajing emperor's reign (October 16, 1527), Nie received orders to proceed to Fujian as regional inspector.^① He arrived on 1/17 of the seventh year (February 17, 1528). This was indeed a busy year for him, for his duties required him to travel 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.”^② Indeed, while in Fujian this year, Nie toured all eight of its prefectures, busily carrying out the duties required by his assignment, including such activities as 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 朱熹.^③

Song Yiwang writes of Nie's period of service in Fujian, highlighting his high ethical standards,

In the spring of *wuxu* [1528], he entered Min [Fujian], shaking the lines of the net (*zhen ji gang* 振紀綱; i.e., restoring law and order), reviewing personnel administration, suppressing the wealthy and powerful clans, and punishing the 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 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 about 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 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 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 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 investigated their bad 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 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

^① Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 2:34.

^② Hucker, *Dictionary of Official Titles*, 253.

^③ Zhu Shenzhi, *Nie Bao*, 50–59.

inspired fear. Consequently, he won a good reputation, but also made others jealous of him.^①

Also, true to his vocation, Nie Bao continued to devote time to pedagogy. He approved the request for construction of the [Luo] Yifeng Academy (*Yifeng shuyuan* 一峰書院) in Quanzhou. While in Fuzhou (during the tenth lunar month of 1528), Nie commissioned the construction of the Cultivating Correctness Academy (*Yangzheng Shuyuan* 養正書院) so that he could bring together licentiates from the eight counties and teach them. To instruct them, he printed an edition of Wang Yangming's *Chuan xi lu* 傳習錄 and the *Daxue gu ben* 大學古本 (Ancient edition of the *Great Learning*), as well as 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).^②

By printing an edition of the *Chuan xi lu* and an ancient edition of the *Great Learning*, Nie was clearly signaling his support for elements of Wang Yangming's Ruism, including Wang's criticism of Zhu Xi's arrangement of and commentary on *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 interpretations of the classical heritage as well as aligning himself with a controversial 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 the compilation of Cheng Minzheng 程敏政 (1445-1499) 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 Song-Ming Learning of Principle that yet remained the subject of heated debate in his time.

Song Yiwang's account provides insight into the social world of Nie's philosophical journey as well as what he was teaching as of 1528:

[I] Yiwang accompanied Master in his travels for nearly thirty years, and hence repeatedly heard his teachings, catching a glimpse of one or two of his aims. Since *dingbai* [1527], whenever Master discussed the practice of realizing knowing, he would identify the child's knowing love for parents and respect for elders as the original appearance of the innate knowing. If you self-consciously search for it through serving parents and obeying elders, you shall feel that you have a program to follow. 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 the innate knowledge of the good.^③

^① Song Yiwang, "Xing zhuang," *fulu*:641–642.

^② Song Yiwang, "Xing zhuang," *fulu*:642.

^③ Song Yiwang, "Xing zhuang," *fulu*:648.

Song quite nicely and accurately captures the status of Nie's Ruist philosophy as of this point in time, highlighting that he tirelessly taught this as time permitted. In sum, he had incorporated Wang Yangming's doctrine of the extension (or realization) of the innate knowledge of the good (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知) into his own philosophy, declaring that a child's sentiments of love for parents and respect (or reverence) for older brothers (and seniors more generally) are the purest expression of the moral knowing that emerges within. Hence, acting on and nurturing these sentiments is a practice that will lead to a deepening knowledge of our intrinsically moral nature.

Nie Bao's 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:

When word first arrived of the turmoil in western Yue [Guangxi], there was no one who was not alarmed, but a victorious return should be upon us any day now. On his throne, the emperor anxiously waits, and the world has been standing on tiptoes in anticipation of great peace.

In the absence of a better qualified candidate, I was assigned to a region, but unable to handle any of its numerous matters. During the first spring lunar month, I arrived in Min [Fujian]. So many tasks had piled up. I was bewildered and did not know where to begin. For the first time I recognized that all that I had learned in life could not be trusted. The words of the sage to the effect that one should worry over one's qualifications [as opposed to whether one enjoys official position] is as near as the earth and as distant as the skies.^① Substance is function, and never has there been functioning that is not its substance. As for [Confucius's] statement that, "When a man in office finds that he can more than cope with his duties, then he studies; when a student finds that he can more than cope with his studies, then he takes office,"^② I suspect this separates the two excessively. In this world, could anything studied not apply to holding office? Holding office is learning and learning is holding office. From setting one's heart on learning at fifteen to following one's heart at seventy, from minor official to minister of war, all of it touches upon matters of governing and holding office. You have governing the people included therein, and the country therein, and all of this requires learning. For this reason, from the arising of happiness, anger, grief, and joy, to the perceptions of seeing, hearing, speaking, and moving—when acted upon by these they become the sentiments of compassion, shame, yielding, and right and wrong. When responding to them, they become the path of the ruler and official, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger, and friends. Change them and they become [the position of] wealth and high status, [the position of] poverty and low status, [being placed among] nomad tribes, and the arrival of birth and death. Is there a single time or a single place where I should not be realizing my innate knowing?

I am forty and have not made a name for myself. I've stumbled along and let others down. The instruction I have received reverberates in my ears, and whether waking or sleeping I will

^① Citing *Analects*, 4:14.

^② *Analects* 19:13.

suddenly feel ashamed. I have not gotten to the point of being absurd, senseless, and violating the Way—fortunately, my sense of suffering [of pain and itching] has not died out entirely. Recently, my many bad thoughts have been ever so slightly contained. It is just that sometimes an explosive angry temperament will flare up again. When I am angry, I find myself to be righteous, having already failed to realize that I have been overtaken by anger. And if one possesses anger, how is that not one thousand *li* away? For the first time I've come to realize that in the effort to accumulate righteousness, if one has not forgotten it then one is helping it. It is very difficult to apply oneself to this.^① What do you think?^②

Nie then veered into his recent theoretical reflections, asking Wang what he thought of four philosophical issues that had engaged him. The first item most clearly explains Nie's position on the practice of realizing the innate moral knowledge as of this point in time, spelling out at length what Song Yiwang had summarized regarding it. Nie wrote,

When our education arrives at seeking humaneness and the heart, it is easy and simple and all the principles under heaven will be acquired. Since the Qin and Han [dynasties], besides Zhou [Dunyi] and Cheng [Hao], few are those who understand what this means. The practices of knowing and acting and motion and stillness have been separated, and the maladies of disorganized and endless learning never cease. Researching in every direction and trying to seize it from the outside, these maladies have brought us to where we are now with today's examination preparation. This is serious. Hence, to aid all those under Heaven who are drowning, there was no other choice in the matter but to designate humaneness and mind's enlightened clarity and wondrous 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 the innate knowledge of the good, and the innate knowledge is learning, our Way is sufficient. The maladies of disorganized and endless learning shall, without being attacked, die out on their own. How abundant is the virtue of ghosts and spirits!^③ The revolutions of heaven above possess neither sound nor smell. That is the ultimate!^④ 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. Inferring from it and reaching to knowing Heaven and knowing [Heaven's] decree, and knowing the nurturing transformations [of heaven and earth]: any husband or wife may partake of knowledge of it, and there is that which even the sage does not know of it—but they are the same in this regard.^⑤ Where they differ lies in whether or not they are realizing it [that is, the innate knowledge of the good]. However, so far as the kinds of effort required to realize [the innate] knowing go, in my opinion, the starting point for giving it a try varies by the person. You should go with what is suited to your aptitudes and exert effort at it. Mengzi says: “No child does not know to love his parents,

^① Citing Mengzi 2A:2:

^② Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 8:233–234.

^③ Citing the *Doctrine of the Mean* 16:

^④ Citing the *Doctrine of the Mean* 33. See also the *Classic of Poetry*, ode 234.

^⑤ Citing the *Doctrine of the Mean* 12:

and when they grow older, none does not know to respect elders.”^① As it is rooted in the Heaven nature, this does not depend on study and practice. It is genuine knowledge and therefore the expression of the innate knowing. Nothing is more straightforward than this filial piety and fraternal respect for realizing it. 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 the innate knowledge of the good. I turned within to find it in myself, and it is true that the expression of the void, spiritual 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 a program to follow. 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 wrong.^② 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 the “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”^③ 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”].^④ Mengzi says: “A great man is one who has not lost his infant-like heart.”^⑤ 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.”^⑥ I have inscribed your enlightened teaching on my heart. What do you think of my wishing to find the so-called learning of the innate knowing in serving parents and obeying elders?^⑦

^① *Mengzi* 7A:15. Adapted from Eno’s translation.

^② Citing *Mengzi* 6A:6.

^③ Citing *Analects* 8:3.

^④ Citing the *Da Dai li ji*, “Zengzi da xiao.”

^⑤ *Mengzi* 4B:12.

^⑥ Citing the *Classic of Change, Treatise on the Appended Remarks* part B, section 5:1.

^⑦ Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 8:134–135.

Regarding his letter to Ouyang De, who was then thirty-one and employed as vice director in the Ministry of Punishments, Nie Bao was writing in reply to correspondence that is no longer available but that was clearly somewhat critical of Nie's position on the relationship between loving parents and respecting elders and Wang Yangming's doctrine of *zhi liangzhi*. He praised Ouyang for his attainments, as reflected in his explanation of the primordial condition (*benti* 本體: fundamental essence or ultimate reality) of the innate knowledge of the good, of its practice and effect, and told him that his thinking was mostly in agreement with the overall objectives of Wang Yangming's instruction. However, Nie also indicated that much of what Ouyang said was somewhat off the mark in terms of understanding where Nie stood. For this reason, Nie once again spelled out his thinking about the importance of filial piety:

The two characters "*liang zhi*", 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 in every direction and seize it from the outside. It is very helpful for students and should be discussed together with the theory of the "the nighttime [restorative] *qi*."^① As for my attaining some modest insight into filial piety and fraternal respect, it is just that I truly desire to grasp the innate knowledge of goodness, and see filial piety and fraternal respect serving 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 a feature of the innate knowing so people recognize it. Summing it up definitively, he says "the Way of Yao and Shun is simply filial piety and fraternal respect."^② The authentic realization of humanity, righteousness, wisdom, ritual etiquette, and joy lies with serving parents and obeying elders. Inferring from this and applying it to others, "Let all people treat their parents as parents and elders as elders and the world will be at peace."^③ 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 palm.^④

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 humaneness.^⑤ One cannot say that the intention 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 profound teachings given by Confucius to Master Zeng. Master Zeng 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."^⑥ "Apprehensive and cautious, as if approaching [a chasm], as though treading on [thin ice]"^⑦ is its true effort. Freeing the feet and

^① Nie is referring to Mengzi and Wang Yangming's discussion of the nighttime *qi*. See Chan, *Instructions*, 219 and *Mengzi* 6A:8.

^② Citing *Mengzi* 6B:2.

^③ Citing *Mengzi* 4A:11.

^④ Paraphrasing a line in *Mengzi* 1A:7.

^⑤ Citing *Analects* 1:1–2.

^⑥ Citing the *Li ji* (*Classic of Rites*), "*Ji yi* (The Meaning of Sacrifices)," 26. Adapted from Legge's translation. All *Classic of Rites* translation are from Legge.

^⑦ Citing *Analects* 8:3.

hands,^① dying after the mat was changed,^② is returning it complete.^③

Yet, what the conventional world refers to as the five types of unfiliality^④ is already of secondary significance. I have also investigated this in the *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, and the six classics. It is repeatedly spoken about, with no end. The expression of it varies but the meaning 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 filial.^⑤ How exceedingly great is filial piety! It is the pattern of heaven, the standard of the earth, the norm of conduct for the people,^⑥ 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.”^⑦ 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 given to me. Therefore, attaining sincerity in oneself is the way to please one’s parents,^⑧ 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 mean 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 eye 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, if one acts contrary to propriety, then the body’s four limbs will be harmed. If we look within and find that there is the slightest insincerity, then the true appearance [of filial piety] will not be as it was originally. 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 most genuine sentiments 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.^⑨

[Cheng] Mingdao and [Cheng] Yi urgently identified the “Western Inscription (*Xi ming* 西銘)” as something that students had never attained since the Qin and Han dynasties. Could that be merely on account of its literary composition? It is truly achieved through loving one’s parent and respecting elders. Take, for example, mundane household affairs such as food and drink. If you talk about it with a young woodsman or shepherd, they will be able to take charge of and act on it. Should a prince, duke, or one of high status wish to change the world for the better, without this they will not succeed. What any husband or wife has the ability to understand and

^① 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, *Analects of Confucius*, 133.

^② Citing the *Classic of Rites*, “Tan gong I,” 18. This allusion also refers to ritual correctness at death.

^③ Citing the *Li ji* (*Classic of Rites*), “Ji yi (The Meaning of Sacrifices),” 29: “His parents give birth to his person all complete, and to return it, to them all complete may be called filial duty.”

^④ Alluding to *Mengzi* 4B:30.

^⑤ Citing the *Li ji* (*Classic of Rites*), “Ji yi (The Meaning of Sacrifices),” 28.

^⑥ Referring to the *Classic of Filial Piety*, “The Three Powers”: For translation, see Ebrey, ed., *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, 65.

^⑦ Citing the *Li ji* (*Classic of Rites*), “Ji yi (The Meaning of Sacrifices),” 27.

^⑧ Referring to the *Doctrine of the Mean* 20:

^⑨ Citing the *Classic of Poetry*, Xiao wan 4. Translation by Legge.

carry out, but about which there is something even the sage cannot know and be capable of—does it lie here? Does it lie here?

As for scholars and officials wasting away and confused by their engagement with disorganized and incoherent learning, that of course 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. Aside from commonly used grain, cloth, and silk they search for something rare lying beyond the mountains and coasts. No wonder calamities follow one after another, and the order of the three kingdoms 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 point,^① no filial piety and fraternal respect lies outside innate knowing, just as outside innate knowing there is no filial piety and fraternal respect.^②

During the eighth year of the Jiajing emperor's reign (1529), 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 in Suzhou during the fourth lunar month of 1530 and, as was the case with prior assignments, conscientiously applied himself to his duties. Of his record, Song Yiwang wrote of this time, presumably quite reliably, given that it was during this year that he and his older brother brought gifts to Nie, expressing their intent to become followers. Song states,

After Master arrived he first set up 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 Master handled it with ease. Each day he would gather scholars together at the Studying the Way Academy and discuss things together with them, including today's Chief Grand Secretary, the Honorable Master Yan Na; Chancellor, the Honorable Master Qu Jingchun; Censor-in-Chief, the Honorable Master Wang Shu; the Honorable Master Zhang Huan; Secretary of Scrutiny, the Honorable Master Gu Cunren; Minister Lu Shidao. These were all renowned scholars selected by Master [Nie].

To instruct the common people, the acts of the *Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety* were painted on the wall. Among the people there were two brothers engaged in litigation with each other, so Master ordered them to go view it. After, their dispute continued as before, so Master stated, "they are contumacious commoners who can't be changed." He then totally put them to

^① Paraphrasing "Treatise on the Appended Remarks," section 5. Adapted from Adler, *Original Meaning*, 290.

^② Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 8:238–239.

shame, and in the end they were moved to tears and regretted their crimes.^①

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 Ruist master, after which he corresponded with him a couple of times, the last just before Wang passed away early in 1529 while returning home from his Guangxi assignment. That meant that Nie never had the opportunity to do what he had intended to do, which was to visit Wang again and formally declare himself a disciple. Yet he still had a solution in mind for carrying out his wish. In Suzhou, he got together with Wang Yangming's two most prominent disciples—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 you two as my witnesses, I will prepare an incense table and pay my respects to him."^② According to Huang Zongxi, Nie set up a spirit tablet and, facing north, repeatedly bowed, declaring himself a disciple of Wang Yangming's gate.

In Mourning 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 out for Yongfeng the next day for the purpose of fulfilling his three-year mourning obligation. Unfortunately, those three were lengthened by another three because his mother died during the sixth lunar month of 1534. Thereafter, he wasn't recalled to office 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 free time, he would receive students and engage in scholastic discussions. 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 *jiawan* 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.^③

What Song Yiwang means is that Nie largely restricted his circle of activities to Ji'an prefecture. He did remain at home for the most part, although on occasion, especially after 1536, he was involved in the prefecture's educational activities and 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 disciples of Wang Yangming, who were actively disseminating their master's philosophy through academy building and holding regular academic forums, the *jiangxue* events or *jiang hui* 講會 (lecture forums). Wang's Jiangxi disciples 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

^① Song Yiwang, "Xing zhuang," *fulu*:642.

^② Huang Zongxi, *Ming ru xue an*, vol. 1, 17:370.

^③ Song Yiwang, "Xing zhuang," *fulu*:643.

initiate. During the 1530s, Ji'an became the most dynamic center for Wang Yangmingism, and Nie Bao was a part of the scene.

In mid-spring 1534, for instance, Nie attended a study forum held at Qingyuan Mountain, about 15 *li* to the south of the county seat of Luling, just east of the Gan River. Many of the movement's luminaries attended, including its principal organizer Zou Shouyi 鄒守益 (1491–1562), as well as Wang Ji, Ouyang De, and Luo Hongxian 羅洪先 (1504–1564). In 1520, when Wang Yangming was yet serving as grand coordinator in the region and residing primarily in southern Jiangxi, he toured Qingyuan with Zou and other students and proposed that scholars might gather here for academic forums. Yet his vision was only realized during the seventh lunar month of 1533, when Zou held the first one of this nature. Although largely a Luling County event, ensuing ones saw participation from all of Ji'an's nine counties, as well as from outside the prefecture. These were also convened on a regular basis, ideally once during the spring and fall, and lasted into the Wanli emperor's reign.^① Although Nie missed the opening meeting, this time he went there together with Liu Lin.

Modern scholarship generally points to the four years beginning from the end of his period of mourning for his mother as the ones during which Nie's philosophical discourse entered a different phase that included many of the principal ideas articulated in the mature philosophy of the 1550s.^② The reason for this is that miscellaneous documents written between 1536 and 1539 bring out ideas not previously emphasized, demonstrating a manifest turn in the direction of his doctrine of “returning to silence (*gui ji* 歸寂).” Song Yiwang claimed that, “after *wuxu* [1538], Master acquired insight into the meaning of the void and silent primordial essence (*benti* 本體) [of mind];”^③ but what was the basis for his saying so, and just how did Nie express his developing insights during these years? It is useful to follow the Chinese scholarship and review a few documents, the context for which are once again Nie Bao's activities in Ji'an Prefecture or 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 the center (centeredness) also became one of Nie's central teachings during this time.

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], on account of 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 criterion; vigilance and apprehension is the practice.”^④ This has nothing to do with principles (*daoli* 道理: reasons) and does not belong to the category of ideas. It is nonexistent yet spiritual, existent yet transforming. It is simply the mind of heaven and earth, and [heaven and earth] taking their proper places and [the things of the world] being nurtured derive their destinies from it.”

[Liu] asked: “If that is the case, then is it wrong for me to extend and fulfill the four moral senses?” I said, “‘acted on it immediately penetrates’ is spirit. This perhaps is not understood.”^⑤

^① See Wu Zhen, *Mingdai zhisibijie*, 57–59; He Weixuan, “‘Gui ji,’” 237.

^② See, for example, Wu Zhen, *Nie Bao*, 107–110; and Li Fuming, *Jiangyuan Wang men*, 288–289; Lin Yuehui, *Liangzhi xue de zhuanzhe*, 184–192.

^③ Song Yiwang, “Xing Zhuang,” *fulu*:648.

^④ Citing the *Doctrine of the Mean* 1. Adapted from Eno's translation.

^⑤ Citing the *Classic of Change*, “Treatise on the Appended Remarks,” part A, section 10, where it states, “The *Yi* is

Those who know this call it assisting its growth, while those who forget it call it inaction.^① As for extending and fulfilling, these are also referring to its unarisen state, fulfilling it in order to reach its full measure. This is to engage its most refined meaning so that the application is completely practical. 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 guiding objective are correct?” I said, “Is that the vestigial residue of Daoism and Buddhism? They possess insight into the unseen and unheard, yet dismiss talking about vigilance and apprehension, claiming that vigilance and apprehension are an obstacle to the unseen and unheard. Hence, they make forgetting and unknowing the guiding objectives. Those who regard vigilance and apprehension as an obstacle are vigilant and apprehensive while experiencing seeing and hearing. This obstacle to the primordial essence (*benti* 本體) is firm. How could that be sufficient to speak about the vigilance and apprehension of what is neither seen nor heard?”^②

In this passage, Nie Bao weaves together phrases 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 vigilant and cautious about what he does not see, is apprehensive about what he does not hear.”^③ Nie asserts that this is the criterion for learning, further characterizing what one neither sees nor hears as both existing and not existing, as both spiritual and transforming, but not as reason or thinking as his interlocutor might normally understand it.

Nie also draws language from the rest of this passage in the *Doctrine*: “Before pleasure and anger, sorrow and joy arise is called centeredness; arising and all are in proper measure 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.”^④ Nie further equates the centeredness prior to emotions arising with the unseen and unheard. The relevant term is *weifa* 未發, meaning before or prior to the arising, emergence, manifestation, or expression of the feelings or emotions listed in the *Doctrine* (referring more generally to experience or phenomenal experience). This is centeredness, the state or condition of being centered (*zhong* 中) 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 fundamental cause behind the order of the universe. It contains both a cosmogonic and psychological meaning.

Furthermore, with “acted on it immediately penetrates,” Nie is citing a passage in the *Classic of Change*, which states, “The *Yi* is without thought and without action; silent and motionless, when acted on it immediately penetrates all the circumstances under Heaven.” Here, albeit without stating it in the passage, Nie is identifying both the unseen and unheard and the centeredness prior to manifestation with “silent and motionless.” “Acted on it immediately penetrates,” on the other hand, aligns with “arising and all are in proper measure is called harmony.” Finally, he also refers to the above as the mind’s primordial essence (*benti* 本體). Primordial essence refers to the mind’s original state or

without thought and without action; silent and unmoving, when stimulated it penetrates [connects] all circumstances under Heaven.” See Adler, *Original Meaning*, 279. In his *The Classic of Changes*, “Commentary on the Appended Phrases,” part one, section 10, Richard John Lynn translates this as “The *Changes* is without consciousness and is without deliberate action. Being utterly still it does not initiate movement, but when stimulated it is commensurate with all the causes for everything that happens in the world” (63). “Acted on” has been translated as “stimulated” and “aroused.”

^① Referring to Mengzi 2A:2.

^② Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 13:534.

^③ *Doctrine of the Mean* 1.

^④ *Doctrine of the Mean* 1.

condition as the ultimate reality, as pure being. 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 motionless, the mind of heaven and earth, and the primordial essence.

Another matter addressed in the conversation is practice—that is, how does one maintain the criterion? Likewise referring to the *Doctrine*, Nie states that it is through the practice of vigilance and apprehension. He clarifies, however, that vigilance and apprehension are inherent or intrinsic to the primordial condition and centeredness, prior to emotion and seeing and hearing, and hence prior to experience. Hence, he is advocating a form of contemplative practice. However, Liu Lin interprets Nie's statements in light of a passage in the *Mengzi*, which states that everyone possesses four moral senses, each of which is the genesis or 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.”^① 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 before and after arising and the center and harmony. Nie further aligns the *Classic of Change*'s description of the thoughtless and actionless *Changes* as “silent and motionless, when acted on it forthwith penetrates all the circumstances under Heaven.” He clarifies that just as the practice of vigilance 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 permit further insight into Nie's philosophical thinking towards the end of his home leave, 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 ascended 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 over, questions were raised for the purpose of seeking clarification. Master Dongkuo stated, “This is the learning of the *Doctrine of the Mean*. Does it have any similarities to or differences from extending knowledge and investigating things?” I said, “It's simply the same. Extending knowledge is completely realizing the full measure of the primordial essence of my innate knowing, without permitting even the slightest blockage or concealment amidst it. This is realizing centeredness. Investigating things is allowing things to be as they are (*yi wu fu wu* 以物付物), ‘acted on it immediately penetrates all the circumstances under Heaven’—it is the truly beneficial. Yet, the effort lies in realizing [the innate] knowing, while for investigating things, I solely obey my innate knowledge of the good's natural wondrous functioning, but without

^① *Mengzi* 2A:6. Translation by Eno.

resorting to rationalizing it. The Buddhists and Daoists regard forgetting and unknowing as the guiding objective, and they certainly have insight into this, but they also put vigilance and apprehension together with it and forget it, which is mistaken.”

Master Dongkuo said, “About the theory of the investigation of things, have you also heard differently?” I replied, “I still hear the words, how could I forget them? I once discussed investigating things in order to realize my [innate] knowing. However, reasons and ideas subconsciously rely on one another, flowing beneath the surface, [and I] tacitly fall into the trap of the maladies of seizing righteousness and assisting growth. Yet, I still regarded this as the true practice of investigating [things] and realizing [knowing]. Consequently, when I sought within and failed to acquire it, I tried to encounter it with my mind. I have some insight into [the propositions] that knowledge is the substance of intention, and things are the functioning of intention. Thus, things are investigated by realizing [the innate] knowing, and it is not the case that investigating things is insufficient to speak of the realization of knowing.

Realizing [the innate] knowing is like making my scale and ruler precise. Investigating 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 all of it and extinguishing it. The crux of it is that what they call precise really isn’t. As for the learning of the five hegemonies, 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 get 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 Ru and Buddhists and the kings and hegemonies, 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.^①

In this passage, Nie Bao synthesizes his prior explanation of phrases from the *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Classic of Change*, and the *Mengzi* with language in the *Great Learning*. These are:

Great Learning: 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].^②

Doctrine of the Mean 1: One may not deviate from the Dao for so much as an instant; that from which one may deviate is not the Dao. Thus the *junzi* is alert and cautious about what he does not see, is fearful about what he does not hear. Nothing is more visible than the obscure,

^① Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 13:535.

^② Adapted from Eno, *Great Learning*, 12.

nothing is plainer than the subtle. Hence, the *junzi* is cautious of his solitude. Pleasure and anger, sorrow and joy: before they emerge they are called centered; emerging by the proper rhythms they are called harmonious. *Centered*: this is the great root of the world. *Harmonious*: this 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.

Classic of Change, “Treatise on the Appended Remarks,” part A, section 10: The *Yi* is without thought and without action; silent and unmoving, when stimulated it penetrates [connects] all circumstances under Heaven.^①

Mengzi 2A:6: Mencius said: “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. Everyone possesses these four moral senses just as they possess their four limbs. To possess such seeds and yet claim to be unable to call them forth is to rob oneself; and for a person to claim that his ruler is incapable of such moral feelings is to rob his ruler. 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.”^②

Nie says that extending knowledge (*Great Learning*) requires bringing to fulfillment (*Mengzi*) the full measure of the primordial essence of the innate knowledge of the good. By the latter, he is referring to Wang Yangming’s concept of *liangzhi benti* 良知本體. Many different translations have been offered for both terms. For *liangzhi*, translations include “pure knowing,” “good knowing,” “innate knowledge of the good,” and “conscientious consciousness,” among others. Translations of *benti* include “original substance,” “original state,” “primordial condition,” “fundamental essence,” “ultimate reality,” “inherent reality,” “being-in-itself,” “noumenon,” “(self)-organizing whole,” among others. By extending knowledge, of course, Nie is referring to Wang Yangming’s doctrine of *zhi liangzhi* 致良知. This phrase has also been translated in many different ways, including “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,” and “realizing good knowing,” among others.^③ Hence, in thinking about possible translations, were these to be gathered together, Nie would be stating that extending, reaching, or realizing knowledge requires bringing to fulfillment or fully attaining—without any obstacles or coverings—the original state, inherent reality, fundamental essence, ultimate reality, or primordial condition of my pure knowing, innate knowledge of the good, or good knowing.

Nie further states that so fulfilling is the same as “realizing 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 a state or condition. As for *zhi*, this term is probably best interpreted as meaning bringing about, attaining, or realizing the center, which is the

^① Adler, *Original Meaning*, 279.

^② Eno, *Mencius*, 43–44.

^③ For the sources of these translations, see Dong Ping, “Eight Virtues,” 92, note 1.

original state or inherent reality of the innate knowing. 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 affairs”), Nie brings this step in the *Great Learning* in line with the *Classic of Changes*’ statement regarding the *Changes*: “Acted on it immediately penetrates all circumstances under Heaven (*gan er sui tong tianxia zhi gu* 感而遂通天下之故).” We can recall here that in the prior section of “Bound words,” he had already equated this phrase with the *Doctrine of the Mean*’s “arising and all are in proper measure is called harmony.” He here adds additional description, explaining that *ge wu* is also letting things be as they shall be, as well as obeying the natural, wondrous functioning of one’s innate knowledge of the good. *Ge wu*, then, aligns affairs as they should be aligned, according to the natural operation of the innate knowing, which knows things truthfully. 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 “allowing things to be as they are,” Nie is referring to “*yi wu ge fu wu* 以物各付物,” a phrase used by Cheng Yi and cited by Wang Yangming. In the *Chuan xi lu* 201, Chen Jiuchuan states,

I said, “In the *Doctrine of the Mean* it is said, ‘Without sincerity there will be nothing.’ Master Cheng Hao said, ‘Respond spontaneously to all things as they come.’ Also, ‘Leave things as they are (*wu ge fu wu* 物各付物),’ ‘harbor nothing in the mind,’ and so forth. The word ‘thing’ has often been used by scholars of the past.” On another day, the Teacher [i.e., Wang] also agreed.^①

In the last paragraph (my punctuation) of “Bound words,” Nie provides an analogy to explain what realizing knowing and investigating things mean. We have within the tools necessary to gauge the dimensions of matters that come before us, but those tools are not necessarily entirely accurate. Nie does not specifically resort to the language of a 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 the innate knowledge freely functions with accuracy. In this case, realizing knowing (and hence, attaining centeredness) means making one’s measuring devices more precise. As for investigating things, Nie says that it is analogous to putting those measuring instruments to use. That is what a Ruist does but also what a Daoist and Buddhist fails to do, so even though they have these tools they can’t be said to be entirely precise. On the other hand, as for the activist hegemony, they busily apply the instruments, but their instruments are not precise. Hence, they cannot bring the world into line with the correct criterion.

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 relationships. I was surprised by them but had not met them in person. However, on account of my aspiration to follow the Way, we once exchanged letters, discussing learning and a learning rooted in [human] nature. From this I knew that their education had a foundation and was even more surprised by 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

^① Chan, *Instructions*, 190.

spiritual depths, penetrated their thinking, and I was consequently even more surprised by them and thus even more serious. For so long the manner of relationships observed by the ancients—to motivate to do what is good by reproaching to support each other in attaining the virtue of humanity, and to correct each other’s mistakes and supply each other’s material needs—has not been seen under Heaven. Mister Li is bold and uninhibited, multiplying his errors early on, so he closed his door and cut off contacts, acquiring insight then restoring his friendship, shaping the gold into a mold. The credit for this all goes to Mister Lai. Mister Lai is pure and prudent, extending and developing it to the full to make up for what he lacks in terms of Li’s effort. What is there to criticize? From that time on, whether at home or travelling they were together, sharing the same likes and dislikes, providing material support for each other, benefiting each other like the hide rope and bowstring. Thereafter, they heard my former master’s doctrine of the innate knowing, rising up arm in arm, and then advocated for it among the scholars of their county.

As for “at birth a person is still,”^① what one does not see or hear, and returning to one’s root through being vigilant, cautious, and apprehensive^②—this is the purpose of realizing [innate] knowing. As for everyone nowadays being bound by what is seen and heard, and analogously regarding wandering thought as wondrous functioning, their learning of investigating things leads in the end to seizing it with an incidental act of righteousness.^③ Yet the opinion of these two gentlemen is in deep agreement with this dummy’s one good idea. When what we study is exterior to our nature, few are those who don’t mistake habitual knowledge for the innate knowledge. Nature is stillness. It is the silent and motionless.^④ “When acted upon, it immediately penetrates,”^⑤ the fear and compassion evoked upon suddenly witnessing [a child] falling into a well,^⑥ and the love and respect a child knows without reflecting on it^⑦—when have these ever been a matter of applying artificial human effort? 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 heart that cannot bear to witness others’ suffering?^⑧ In striving for love and respect, does one look for it in what a child knows without reflection, or seek for it in the pure and one centeredness that is prior to the 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.^⑨

In this passage, Nie identifies realizing the innate knowledge of the good 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 the latter, then it is artificial, and moral responses will be in some sense heteronomous,

^① *ren sheng er jing* 人生而靜. Citing the *Classic of Rites* “Record of Music.”

^② Referring to the *Doctrine of the Mean* 1.

^③ Referring to *Mengzi* 2A:2.

^④ Referring to the *Classic of Change*, “Commentary on the Appended Phrases,” part 1, section 10.

^⑤ See prior note.

^⑥ Alluding to *Mengzi* 2A:6.

^⑦ Paraphrasing *Mengzi* 7A:15.

^⑧ Referencing *Mengzi* 2A:6.

^⑨ Citing the *Classic of Change*, “Commentary on the Appended Phrases,” part 1, section 9. Following Lynn’s translation (Lynn, *Classic of Changes*, 62).

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 aroused), it immediately 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 artificial human effort but rather naturally, by returning to stillness. As Wu Zhen has pointed out, 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 Ruist philosophy was beginning to mature.^①

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. The other students came to Nie for these because Nie had befriended both of them while holding office in Fujian.

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* (the innate knowledge of the good) have altogether distorted its original truth. How so? *Liangzhi* is the centeredness [=the middle] before manifestation. All things are complete in it^② and it deeply transforms.^③ It is not a type 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 child's love for parents and respect for elders and distorted it. Mengzi said that without study or reflection the young child knows to love their parents and respect their elders. This is to approach what arises [from the young child] in order to verify what they possess within. Thus, he states, "Love of parents is humaneness; respect for elders is righteousness."^④ Originally, Mengzi did not identify love and respect as the innate knowledge of the good. That would be like saying that empathy, shame, and dislike are the seeds of humanity and righteousness, and then to regard empathy, shame, and dislike as humanity and righteousness. Is that possible? Those today who regard love and respect as *liangzhi* then identify awareness as the [mind's] primordial condition [=the mind's primordial essence] (*yi zhijue wei benti* 以知覺為本體). Those who regard awareness as the mind's primordial condition then further regard "without study or reflection" as the effort....

Everyone today who discriminates interior and exterior is careless. It is true that [what is so discriminated as] the exterior is indeed exterior, but the interior is also the exterior, and not what I define as the interior and exterior. What I refer to as the interior is the centeredness prior to manifestation, while manifestation is then the exterior. If the manifestation of knowing is regarded as exterior, then one knows that the innate knowledge is regarded as awareness, and it is not interior. For this reason, realizing the middle is the highest learning, it is "When he precedes Heaven, Heaven does not oppose him." The harmony that proceeds from realizing

^① Wu Zhen, *Nie Bao*, 107–108.

^② *bei wu* 備物. Referring to *Mengzi* 7A:4.

^③ *dun hua* 敦化. Referring to a phrase in the *Doctrine of the Mean* 30.

^④ *Mengzi* 7A:15.

centeredness is “when he follows Heaven he respects Heaven’s timing.”^① Respecting Heaven’s timing when acting is “acted on it forthwith penetrates all the circumstances under Heaven.” This is what is referred to as “without study or reflection,” and no one knows of it. Therefore, I say that the learning of the *Doctrine of the Mean* [concerns] what precedes Heaven. Realizing the innate knowing only after investigating things is what follows Heaven. Master Zeng transmitted this to [Master] Zisi. Now that being the case, do they differ? I say: They are the same. “Only after knowledge comes to rest does one possess certainty”—[Zengzi] has 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 integrated it. He did not say “realizing knowing” but rather “realizing the innate knowledge of the good.” That is because he had already anticipated that later generations would regard awareness as the innate knowing. Then, few will be those who in their learning of investigating things do not error on the side of the exterior.^②

In this passage, having identified the innate knowing with the center/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 the innate knowing and filial piety and fraternal respect. Years before, in his letters to Wang Yangming and Ouyang De, he had sung the praises of filial piety, giving it an expansive interpretation and identifying it with the 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 manifestation. This is not a phenomenal state, as it doesn’t entail finding oneself located in a particular mental state or experiencing awareness.

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 Change*:

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?^③

Nie identifies the center prior to 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 *Original Meaning of the Yijing*, Adler’s section on “Key Terms and Concepts” includes the terms *xiantian* 先天 (“before Heaven”) and *houtian* 後天 (“after Heaven”).

^① Citing the *Classic of Change*. For translation, see Adler, *Original Meaning*, 66.

^② Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 4:78–79.

^③ The passage is from “Commentary on the Words of the Text (*Wenyan zhuan* 文言傳)” for the *qian* hexagram. See Adler, *Original Meaning*, 66. Lynn translates the relevant sentence as “When he precedes Heaven, Heaven is not contrary to him, and when he follows Heaven, he obeys the timing of its moments” (Lynn, *Classic of Changes*, 138).

The *locus classicus* for these two terms is indeed this passage from the *Classic of Change*. Adler identifies the following existing translations or broader paired categories that have been considered in prior scholarship: a priori and a posteriori, precelestial and postcelestial, theoretical and phenomenal, natural/primordial and human-made/moral, metaphysical and concrete/physical.^① Each of these are helpful for understanding Nie in some way. As we have seen, Nie does follow the *Doctrine* in his belief that the middle is the source of the ten thousand transformations. The middle holds this cosmogonic significance insofar as it is prior to the generation of the cosmos, as well as the source of it. The middle 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 "knowing-awareness" or what is seen and heard (*jian wen* 見聞). That is the category of knowledge that those he criticizes have mistaken for the innate knowing because they have failed to realize/attain centeredness.

Last, in the fall of 1539 Nie Bao composed a piece for his friend Wang Hou upon the occasion of his departure for the capital. Wang had obtained his *jinsbi* in 1536, as had Nie's nephew Nie Jing, and was then assigned to Ji'an in some capacity. Now in 1539, his three-year assignment was up, and he was to submit a report on his accomplishments and return to Beijing. Wang Hou had himself once studied under the famed Hedong scholar Xue Xuan, and since remained committed to Ruist education, holding lecture-discussions wherever he went and befriending fellow enthusiasts for the Ru way, like Nie Bao.^② For him, Nie wrote,

What is to be treasured in learning is having an informed opinion. Yet, learning can also fall into error from having an informed opinion. Having an informed opinion and being opinionated about it is like an ailment. "The humane person sees it and calls it humanity; the wise person sees it and calls it wisdom."^③ 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 selflessness amidst absence (*xu zhong wu wo* 虛中無我), such that the events of heaven and earth are embodied, the virtue of spiritual clarity is spread,^④ and the dispositions of the myriad things are classified.^⑤ Yet, people today always malign the Buddhists and Daoists for nothingness (*xu wu* 虛無: lit., void nonbeing) and shun speaking of it, even though nothingness spurs creation and the transformation of it and is not enough to fault Buddhism and Daoism. It is just that they also call what nothingness creates and transforms an obstacle and false. No matter whether it is ethical human relationships or being affected and responding [aroused/stimulated and reacting=experiencing] they also dismiss and discard it. In the end, because they follow their self-centered and self-interested opinions, they wrong the sages. Hence, it is a mistake for people today always to fault them for nothingness. "The gentleman is vigilant and cautious about what he does not see, is apprehensive about what he does not hear": Is this not the ultimate nothingness? Void but straight [honest], nonexistent but square [righteous], impartially harmonizing, [heaven and earth] being given their proper place, and [the things of the world] being nurtured happen on account of it—this in particular is only a matter of the slightest error

^① For the relevant literature, see Adler, *Original Meaning*, 34.

^② Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 4:85.

^③ Citing the *Classic of Change*, "Treatise on the Appended Remarks," part A, section 5.

^④ Citing the *Classic of Change*, "Treatise on the Appended Remarks," part B, section 6.

^⑤ Citing the *Classic of Change*, "Treatise on the Appended Remarks," part B, section 2.

[at the outset that leads to a massive one in the end]. Nowadays, those who disregard nothingness and have nothing to do with it—everyone is doing this, saying that only principles and form are to be stubbornly pursued. As for where this ultimately goes, first, the error of the pursuit of recognition and profit and, secondly, of exegesis and seizing righteousness, are spread, becoming something that the students of Buddhism and Daoism scorn, and truly a pretext for them to mock Ru.^①

In this preface, Nie Bao affirms for Wang Hou that nothingness is central to the Ru Way. He provides clues as to what nothingness means in a Ruist context, how it is to be distinguished from Buddhist and Daoist nothingness, and, most importantly, the implications of this teaching for Ru 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 Ru 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 the absence of self, in the sense of the self-centered self, but also in the sense of self identified with exteriors, with arising/manifestation. Just as nothingness is the source of creation and transformation, so the Way of selflessness amid absence (or vacuity) 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 is to be distinguished from other Ru 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 the absence of self-centeredness. Worse are those scholars who have turned Ruism into the self-interested pursuit of recognition and gain, or the purely scholarly enterprise of defining terms and textual commentary, or an ethics dependent on fixed rules external to the self. It is these Ru 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 particular critique is not undeserved. Buddhist and Daoists, on the other hand, simply disregard the operations of the cosmos and the ethics of human intersubjectivity as barriers to the truth.

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, which is located in Shanxi Province.^② Upon receiving his certifying documents Nie set out, arriving on 12/25 (January 10, 1542).^③ Song Yiwang writes,

During *gengzi* [1539] and *xinchou* [1540], northern and southern supervising secretaries and investigating censors such as You Zhende, Xing Rumo and others recommended Master Nie. By this time, the *dalu* 韃虜 [northern raiders; here, Mongols] had been invading Shanxi every year. While living at home, he was appointed prefect of Pingyang. Because his older brother the Honorable Master Dantu had died, Nie did not wish to go. At the time, his nephew [Nie Jing] was a secretary of scrutiny. For speaking out over something, he was removed from office.

^① Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 4:85.

^② *Ming Shizong shilu* 明世宗實錄, *Jiajing ershinian sanyue guichou* 嘉靖二十年三月癸丑 (April 22, 1541).

^③ He states this in a memorial to the court written during the third month of 1542 requesting leave from office on account of illness. Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 2:41.

Hearing news of his father's death, he hurried home. After he arrived, he urged Nie to depart.^①

Upon arriving in Pingyang, Nie immediately implemented numerous measures to prepare the prefecture to defend itself against Mongol incursions.^② Song Yiwang writes,

[Prior to arriving in Pingyang], *lu* intelligence stated that they wanted to raid Pingyang. When Master 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 investigated his situation 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 took missteps. Following, they withdrew from the camp to the border of Jiexiu. Master 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.^③

These measures proved effective, preventing the Mongol incursions of 1542 from throwing the prefecture into turmoil, even as others in the province were not as 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)

^① Song Yiwang, "Xing zhuang," *fulu*:643.

^② Liu Cong, *Nie Bao ji*, 62–63; D.W. Y Kwok, "Nie Bao," in *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, vol. II, 1097.

^③ Song Yiwang, "Xing zhuang," *fulu*:644.

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. 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 month of 1542, called for rewarding and promoting Nie because "with his competence and strategic planning [he] was up to the task."^①

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 finding people suited to the task of rectifying these problems, people who will strictly follow and apply 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 would they have managed to drive so far in 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 man.^②

Unfortunately, Nie's competence, as evidenced by such petitions for rewards and advancement, elevated his profile, and this led to his entanglement in political factionalism at the Ming court, making him enemies and incurring the wrath and jealousy of those who would seek to bring him down. Officials with ill intentions 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 of 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 home.^③ 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 what was up, Grand Secretary Jiexi, the Honorable Master Yan [Song], also memorialized in support of him as fully capable of serving as grand coordinator. For this reason, the emperor further understood that Master was capable

^① *Ming Shizong shilu* 明世宗實錄, *Jiajing ershiyinian bayue yimao* 嘉靖二十一年八月乙卯 (October 16, 1542).

^② *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).

^③ *Ming Shizong shilu* 明世宗實錄, *Jiajing ershiernian linyue jiaxu* 嘉靖二十二年六月甲戌 (July 2, 1543).

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, Master engaged in discussing learning day and night, without end. He compiled a record of the names of all the individuals mentioned on inscriptions in Pingyang 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 *guinei* [1543], he was promoted to Shaanxi surveillance vice commissioner, in charge of the Tongguan military defense circuit. Following, Master composed a memorial requesting leave for office, returning south to retire to private life.^①

Thus, from spring 1543 until he was arrested in 1547, Nie Bao remained at home 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.^②

According to Wu Zhen, Nie Bao's philosophy of "returning to silence" began to form while he was residing at Cuiwei Mountain and then matured during this time.^③ Of the further maturation of his philosophy from the period of his service in Pingyang through these years at home, Song Yiwang writes,

While serving as prefect of Pingyang, Nie wrote his "Personal Musings on the *Great Learning*." Interpreting realizing [the innate] knowledge [of the good] and investigating things (*ge wu* 格物: aligning affairs), he said: What governs things is knowledge. What is aroused by things is intentional awareness. To manage things [affairs] is to align them. The mind is like a mirror, and knowledge is like a mirror's clarity. Realizing knowledge is analogous to polishing the mirror, and aligning is analogous to the mirror's reflecting. Beauty and ugliness lie in the object, [the mirror] follows things and responds to them. Therefore, it is called *ge*, as in saying [Shun] "went (*ge* 格) [to the temple] of the Accomplished Ancestor"^④ or "reached (*ge* 格) above and below."^⑤ He also said: To realize knowledge is to attain centeredness. It is the silent and motionless. It precedes Heaven and Heaven does not oppose it. Aligning affairs is the application of realizing knowing. Acted upon it forthwith 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.^⑥ When the sages speak of the *xian* [mutually influencing] hexagram, they speak of vacuity and of silence. This is to speak exhaustively of the pattern of influence and response, destroying the obstacle posed by all things. After Master

^① Song Yiwang, "Xing zhuang," *filu*:644.

^② For a chronological list, see Zhu Kunzhi, "Nie Bao yanjiu," 79–81.

^③ Wu Zhen, *Nie Bao*, 110–111.

^④ Citing the *Classic of Documents*, "Canon of Yao."

^⑤ Citing the *Classic of Documents*, "Canon of Shun."

^⑥ Citing the *Doctrine of the Mean* 1.

returned from Pingyang, when he was discussing philosophy with his like-minded friends, he always taught that returning is cultivating the void and silent primordial condition.^①

As we have seen where parsing out the content of documents penned between 1537 and 1539, Song Yiwang's description of Nie's philosophy, including his interpretation of these citations from classical texts, is accurate. 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 reliance on Song's brief 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 the sagely wisdom contained in it lost. That is why he sought to restore it and establish its legitimacy by explaining its meaning with annotations and commentary. Nie quotes from Wang's "Preface to the Ancient Edition of the *Great Learning* (*Daxue guben xu* 大學古本序):

Realizing [the innate] knowledge [of the good] is the foundation for making our intentions wholehearted. Investigating things [=rectifying matters] is really and truly realizing knowledge. When matters are rectified knowledge is realized and our intentions become wholehearted. One then possesses what is requisite to restoring one's primordial essence/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.^②

Nie insists that Wang took no pleasure in attacking Zhu Xi; rather, his purpose in speaking out was to spur inquiry into what is basic to mind. 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 Ru had provided their own exegesis 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 Ru 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 Ru learning and, by so doing, demonstrate a meaningful loyalty to the spirit of Zhu Xi's learned scholarship.

Of his own effort, Nie wrote,

When I was living up in the mountains crippled with illness, I studied this book in depth. Over the course of a year, I thought over for myself these many scholars' theories. If I failed to get something out of them, [well], even were it something asserted by my father or teacher I would not dare subscribe to it. There is a single thread running through the learning of the school of Confucius. I regard Confucius's single thread as the center (*zhong* 中 [=centeredness/mean])

^① Song Yiwang, "Xing zhuang," *fulu*:648.

^② Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 3:52.

bequeathed by Yao and Shun. The center is the primordial essence [condition] of mind. Is that not the *Great Learning's* highest good? Realizing knowledge (*zhi zhi* 致知) is the consummate practice for coming to rest in the highest good. Investigating things (*ge wu* 格物 [=aligning affairs]) is the wondrous functioning of abiding in the highest good. Intention is born of knowledge when we are bestirred by things. Wholeheartedness speaks to intention conforming, aligning to its transformation, and realizing to its silence. Silence is for wondrous arousal [bestirring or stimulation], wondrous stimulation is for rapid transformation. It is the myriad that is but one. Now, if one must insist on saying that *ge zhi* 格致 [investigation and extending] are about seeking it in affairs and things, then was it not superfluous for Confucius to call out and speak to Zengzi regarding his carefully examining matters as they come before him and Zigong regarding his widely learning and retaining what he has learned? Thus, for the purpose of seeking clarification from gentlemen everywhere with it, I wrote this as “Personal Musings.”^①

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.^② 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 Way Mind Hall” states,

The Way mind—is it the centeredness before arising?^③ 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. Vigilance and caution over what is not seen and apprehensiveness over what is not heard 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. Later generations did not understand that centeredness is harmony and used it as a pretext for [pursuing] the honor and profit of the five hegemonies. As for those who place harmony without when seeking centeredness, this developed into the 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 Way mind is subtle”^④ because it is originally void and silent. Void, it receives; silent, it can be aroused, following Heaven, and Heaven is respected,^⑤ what thinking and deliberation is there?^⑥ When was it that the void and silent was regarded as withered and being acted upon and responding as an obstacle and falsity? From self-centeredness to acting

^① Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 3:53.

^② Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 5:121.

^③ Referring to the *Doctrine of the Mean* 1.

^④ Referring to the *Shang shu* 尚書 [Classic of documents], “Da yu mo 大禹謨 [Counsels of the Great Yu].”

^⑤ Citing the *Classic of Change*.

^⑥ Citing the *Classic of Change, Treatise on the Appended Remarks* part B, section 5:1.

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 kingdoms, then seek for the learning of Tang, Yu, and the three kingdoms. 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 the silent and motionless. The silence is the centeredness before arising, and all change and transformation come from it. Therefore, the person who gave “Way mind” as the name for the hall, does he perhaps have insight into this?^①

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.

On October 5, 1947 (intercalary 9/22), Nie Bao was impeached and orders went out to the Embroidered Uniform Guard for his arrest.^② 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 benefit, in particular, by taking the Mongol incursions as a pretext for extorting the wealthy and Suren.

However, in 1546, Minister of Personnel Yan Song sought to bring Nie out of his quiet retirement. He ordered a regional inspector to memorialize about this matter, and the Ministry of Personnel deliberated on it 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* states,

Nie Bao, former prefect of Pingyang, Shanxi who was promoted to Shanxi surveillance vice commissioner, on account of the *lu* raids on Taiyuan, first, with raising armies as the pretext, totally fleeced the people for a portion of their wealth, at the higher end a thousand *jin* and at the lower end one hundred and several tens. It is estimated that over 32,600 taels were collected. Also, for a fine of five thousand taels, he freed Ceremonial Companion Su Ren from capital punishment as well as others of crimes which were acquitted through paying money. All these [funds] were designated for the expenses of repairing and dredging the city moat and enlisting soldiers. He further ordered the Buddhist and Taoist temples to cook rice porridge for hunger relief, borrowing salaries used for those managing the rites of the ancestral institutions to fund it. He also disbursed over a thousand in cash to fix the channel to the east of the Confucian temple-school. Speaking officials Lu Xun and Chen Chuxiu impeached him for graft. It was passed down to Shanxi's grand coordinator and regional inspector for further investigation and reporting. This has now been four years ago. The grand coordinator and regional inspector changed several times, and only then was this investigation reported on. It stated: Bao did not have other intentions. It is just that he first urged paying a tax in lieu of corvée and fines [for crimes] and only reported to his superiors after the fact. Having spent the funds, upon receiving the request for investigation, he exercised too much discretion. Furthermore, on account of the

^① Nie Bao, *Nie Bao ji*, 5:120–121.

^② Zhu Kunzhi, “Nie Bao yanjiu,” 81.

lu threat, he broke with protocols and urged paying a tax in lieu of corvée, and his expenditures did not necessarily all go to provisioning soldiers. Thus, it cannot be said that he is without crimes. 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 interrogation.^①

In sum, Nie Bao was arrested in Yongfeng on 10/15 (November 26, 1547). According to Huang Zongxi, "at that moment when the commandant suddenly arrived and shackled him, Master was discussing the *Doctrine of the Mean*. After he was shackled, he finished what he was saying to the students and then left."^② He was then transported to Beijing and placed in the Embroidered Uniform Guard prison on 11/21 (January 1, 1548). That's where he remained for about 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 onetime student Yan Song back 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 12/25 (January 23, 1549) 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 Master who had also studied under him. When he arrived [in Pingyang] he maintained the same etiquette as he had from the beginning. Master had never forgotten him. After the meritorious achievement at Pingyang, everyone at that time was attributing [the success] to 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.^③ 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. 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 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.

^① *Ming Shizong shilu, Jiajing ershernian liuyue jiaxu* 嘉靖二十六年闰九月庚子 (November 4, 1547).

^② Huang Zongxi, *Ming ru xue an*, 17:370.

^③ Song Yiwang, "Xing zhuang," *julu*:644.

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. 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].^①

Conclusion

Although Nie Bao's imprisonment was the outcome of political persecution, the year *wushen* [1549] 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. Nie had by this time developed and articulated his ideas regarding realizing centeredness and the importance of returning to silence, as the means for fully attaining—without any obstacles or coverings—the primordial condition of my innate knowledge of the good. It is only then that, in the proper order of things, one can respond correctly to things, becoming a measure to them.

^① Song Yiwang, "Xing zhuang," *julu*:644.

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