Enlightenment Under Autocracy: The Origins of Liberalism in China

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Abstract

This paper investigates how ideas influence political institutions over time, focusing on Wang Yangming's philosophy and its impact on Chinese political development. Wang's teachings emphasized individual moral autonomy and the belief that moral authority resides within each person, challenging the hierarchical and authoritarian structures of Confucian orthodoxy. By analyzing historical texts, validated through a semantic similarity measure comparing key concepts to Yangming's writings, and employing an instrumental variable approach, we estimate the causal impact of the diffusion of Yangming's ideas on reformist political activity during the Ming Dynasty. Our findings indicate that regions more exposed to Wang Yangming's ideas were significantly more likely to produce leaders associated with the Donglin Movement (1604–1627), a reformist faction advocating for moral governance and accountability. The IV strategy leverages two exogenous sources of variation—Wang's same-year examination cohort and proximity to public lectures—to address concerns about endogeneity. These results underscore the role of intellectual movements in fostering political reform, even within autocratic contexts, and highlight the enduring influence of ideas on institutional development.

Keywords: Ideology, Institutions, Development, China

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I Introduction

How do ideas influence institutional development? This question lies at the heart of political economy, a field that has traditionally prioritized material factors—economic growth, resource allocation, and elite competition—as key drivers of institutional change. Yet intellectual movements, by advancing principles such as individual agency, accountability, and governance reform, have demonstrated the capacity to catalyze profound institutional transformations. This paper examines this dynamic by focusing on the diffusion and impact of Wang Yangming's philosophy in late imperial China. It argues that his ideas, centered on moral autonomy and the unity of knowledge and action, played a critical role in shaping reformist movements and governance debates, even within the constraints of an autocratic system.

Wang Yangming stands as a striking example of how intellectual movements can influence governance structures within hierarchical and autocratic regimes. His philosophy centered on the concepts of innate moral knowledge (*liangzhi*) and the unity of knowledge and action (*zhi xing he yi*), both of which emphasized personal moral responsibility and the importance of applying moral understanding in everyday life. By challenging the rigid hierarchies of traditional Confucian thought, Wang introduced a framework that prioritized individual moral autonomy over blind obedience to authority. His ideas promoted the notion that every person possesses an inherent capacity for moral judgment, and that this knowledge should guide both personal behavior and public governance. These tenets, while not explicitly political in nature, contained elements that later scholars and reformers would interpret as seeds of nascent democracy and political liberalism.

An important dimension of Wang Yangming's impact is recognizing that his influence extended beyond mainland China, affecting Japan, Korea, and Taiwan (Ivanhoe, 2016). In Japan, Yangming's approach—known as Yōmeigaku—had a significant impact on the samurai class and later shaped political thought during the Meiji Restoration, contributing to the country's modernization efforts. Similarly, in Korea, Wang's principles inspired reformist thinkers navigating political and cultural shifts during the late Joseon period, influencing discussions on governance and ethical leadership. In Taiwan, after World War II, Confucian revivalists integrated elements of his ideas into broader discussions on liberal democracy, highlighting the adaptability and relevance of his concepts. These regional impacts, while not the focus of this paper, demonstrate the broader applicability of Wang Yangming's thought as a potential driver of political change across East Asia.

The political implications of Wang Yangming's thought became particularly evident in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties with the rise of the Donglin Movement. Donglin lead-

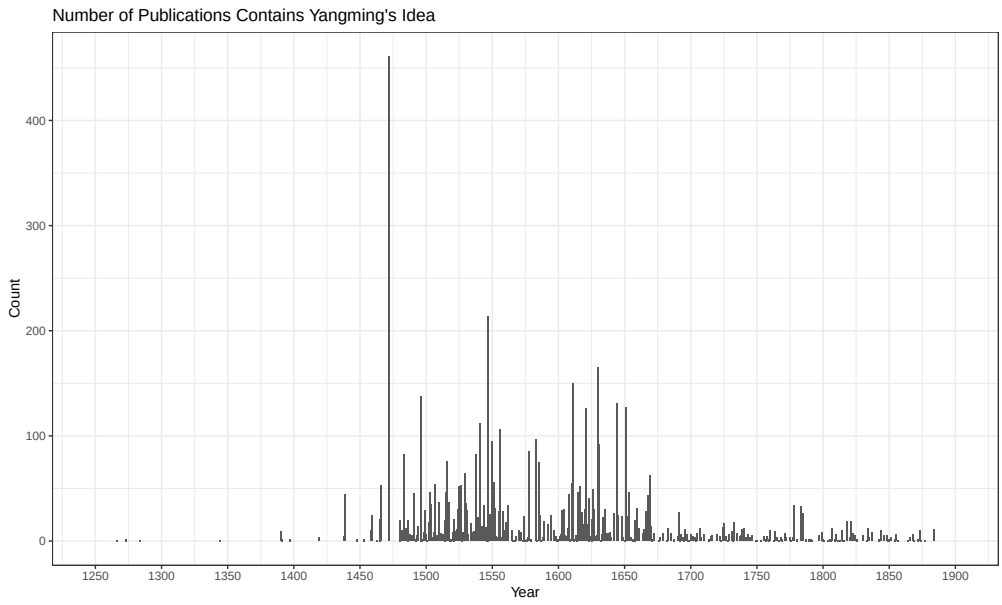


Figure I: Number of Publications Related to Wang Yangming's Ideas

ers and reformers, deeply influenced by Wang's philosophy, sought to reshape governance by emphasizing accountability and moral integrity among officials across the imperial administration. Centered in Jiangnan, the movement was marked by the reopening of the Donglin Academy, which became a focal point for moral and political discourse. These reformers drew on Wang's concepts of moral autonomy and personal responsibility to critique the corruption and unprincipled behavior that plagued the imperial bureaucracy. They championed a system of governance rooted in personal conscience and ethical standards, rejecting blind adherence to imperial decrees.

Evidence from local gazetteers and other publications reveals a direct relationship between the diffusion of Wang Yangming's ideas and the rise of the Donglin faction. Regions where Yangming's teachings were more extensively disseminated—measured both by the frequency of key philosophical terms and the number of authors associated with his ideas—were more likely to produce Donglin leaders and reformers. Many of these individuals held influential positions in government and used their authority to critique the autocratic tendencies of the imperial system. They called for governance reforms, including fiscal responsibility and transparency in taxation, while advocating for holding officials—and even the emperor—accountable to moral standards. By embedding principles of ethical governance within political structures, the Donglin faction subtly challenged the authoritarian nature of the state. This alignment between Wang Yangming's ideas and the Donglin Movement underscores how intellectual frameworks can inspire political activism and institutional reform, even within the confines of an autocratic regime.

The influence of Wang Yangming's ideas extended beyond the Ming dynasty and played a significant role in shaping the intellectual foundations of early republicanism in China. As China transitioned from imperial rule to a republican form of government in the early twentieth century, reformist leaders like Sun Yat-sen drew on elements of Yangming's philosophy, particularly his emphasis on individual moral responsibility and the unity of knowledge and action. These ideas resonated with the political goals of the early republican movement, which sought to challenge authoritarian rule and promote political participation. Sun Yat-sen, for instance, believed that the intellectual traditions of Chinese thought, including those of Wang Yangming, could be integrated with modern political ideals to guide China toward modernization and democratic governance.

China's experience with liberalism—broadly defined as a political doctrine valuing individual autonomy, personal freedom, and limited government—has been deeply influenced by the intellectual currents of figures like Wang Yangming. As Stephen Angle observes, Confucian political philosophy, while traditionally hierarchical, has historically included elements that align with liberal values such as moral autonomy and ethical governance. While liberalism has often remained an intellectual rather than political reality in mainland China, its principles have continued to inform political ideology in Taiwan and Hong Kong, where Wang's emphasis on moral introspection and autonomy finds resonance in democratic movements. These influences underscore how Wang Yangming's intellectual legacy has contributed to shaping China's political development and the broader East Asian intellectual landscape (Angle, 2012).

A historical parallel can be drawn between Wang Yangming's intellectual movement and the Protestant Reformation, which also challenged an entrenched hierarchy and had profound political and institutional consequences. Martin Luther's critique of the Catholic Church, with its emphasis on individual responsibility and direct access to scripture, reshaped European political and religious institutions. Becker et al. (2020) discuss how leadership and reform can trigger far-reaching societal changes, providing insights into how intellectual reform can influence institutional trajectories. Just as Luther's ideas transcended their theological origins to have wide-ranging political and social implications, Wang Yangming's ideas reformed Neo-Confucian orthodoxy and sparked political activism that transcended his initial philosophical concerns, influencing governance and institutional change in China.

This study contributes to several strands of literature in economic history and political economy, particularly on the long-term influence of ideas on political, social, and economic outcomes. Ideas can act as powerful drivers of change, serving as catalysts for institutional reform and the restructuring of governance. Historical examples such as the Enlightenment and the Protestant Reformation demonstrate how intellectual movements have reshaped soci-

eties, with the Enlightenment fostering economic growth and technological progress in Europe (Mokyr, 2010; Squicciarini and Voigtländer, 2015), and the Reformation challenging religious authority while promoting personal responsibility (Becker et al., 2020). Similarly, Cantoni, Chen, Yang, Yuchtman, and Zhang (2017) show how state-driven curricular reforms in China shaped political attitudes by disseminating government ideologies through formal education.

This paper contributes to this literature by exploring how ideas interact with deeply entrenched autocratic systems and shape political institutions over extended periods. While much of the existing research focuses on how ideas influence open or flexible political systems, this study examines Wang Yangming's philosophy of moral autonomy and ethical governance, which operated within—and interacted with—autocratic structures. His ideas fostered reformist movements, such as the Donglin Movement, by acting as a coordination mechanism for scholars who subtly opposed hierarchical governance. Even under authoritarian repression, Wang's emphasis on personal moral responsibility promoted accountability within the existing framework, illustrating the capacity of ideas to challenge and reshape political institutions.

The long-term impact of Wang Yangming's philosophy also highlights the enduring power of intellectual movements. By examining how his ideas influenced reform efforts in both late imperial China and the early republican era, this paper shows that ideas can persist across centuries, continually influencing political institutions despite attempts to suppress them. This long-run perspective enriches the literature by demonstrating that the effects of ideas are not limited to short-term political shifts but unfold gradually, adapting to changing political contexts while opening pathways for reform—even in environments of institutional constraint.

Moreover, this study contributes to the debate on the Great Divergence, exploring the role of ideas and values in shaping China's long-term political and economic trajectory (Mokyr, 2016; Greif, Mokyr, and Tabellini, Forthcoming). Scholars have long questioned why China, despite its early advancements, did not experience an Industrial Revolution or liberal political transformation comparable to Europe. One frequently cited explanation is the rise of individualism in Europe, which played a key role in fostering economic and political development (Macfarlane, 1978). While Wang Yangming's philosophy emphasized individual moral autonomy and responsibility, which could have challenged hierarchical governance and fostered liberal institutions, its diffusion was ultimately constrained by China's deeply embedded autocratic institutions. As a result, China's political trajectory diverged from the individualistic and liberal pathways that emerged in Europe during the Enlightenment.

This paper also contributes to the literature on the interaction between culture and institutions. Acemoglu and Robinson (2024) and Bisin and Verdier (2024) examine how cultural

norms and values co-evolve with political institutions, shaping social and political equilibria. This study provides a historical case study of how Wang Yangming's ideas permeated elite networks and institutions, leading to long-term political shifts. By tracing the diffusion of Wang's ideas through educational institutions, public lectures, and intellectual networks, we show how intellectual movements influence cultural norms and, in turn, drive institutional change.

Finally, this study engages with the literature on democracy and autocracy, particularly the role of ideas in driving political transitions. Scholars such as Berman (2019), Linz and Stepan (1996), and Dunn (2005) have argued that intellectual movements and ideologies play a significant role in challenging authoritarian regimes and promoting democratic consolidation. Chen and Yang (2019) demonstrate how state control over information and propaganda shapes political attitudes and reinforces authoritarian rule. Wang Yangming's philosophy adds to this discourse by illustrating how ideas about moral autonomy and ethical governance can influence long-term political outcomes. While Wang's ideas were not explicitly political, his emphasis on the unity of knowledge and action and the decentralization of moral authority provided a framework for individuals to question the legitimacy of hierarchical, autocratic structures. This study shows how Wang's ideas diffused through intellectual networks, influencing governance structures over time and contributing to the emergence of political liberalism in China.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section II provides the historical background, situating Wang Yangming and the Donglin Movement within the broader context of the Ming dynasty's political and intellectual challenges. Section III examines Wang Yangming's philosophy, detailing the key tenets of his thought and their influence on intellectual and political movements. In Section IV, we analyze the diffusion of Wang Yangming's ideas using historical data, measuring their spread across regions and identifying the channels through which they were disseminated. Section V explores Wang Yangming's impact on the Donglin Movement, focusing on the relationship between his ideas and the rise of reformist scholars. Section VI investigates the influence of Wang Yangming's philosophy on China's early republican period, tracing how his ideas contributed to the intellectual foundations of democratic participation. Finally, Section VII considers the broader implications of Wang Yangming's ideas for political reform, discussing their limitations within the autocratic framework of China and their more successful applications in Japan and Korea, before concluding in Section VIII with a summary of the study's contributions to the literature on political economy and intellectual history.

II Historical Background

To understand the political and intellectual developments discussed in this paper, it is essential to first situate Wang Yangming and the Donglin Movement within the broader context of Ming dynasty China. The Ming dynasty (1368—1644) was a period of significant economic growth, territorial expansion, and centralization of imperial authority, but it was also marked by political instability, corruption, and intellectual upheaval. As with many autocratic regimes, the Ming state was characterized by a complex relationship between the emperor, the bureaucracy, and local elites, with Confucian ideology serving as the foundation for governance and social order.

II.A The Ming Dynasty: Political and Economic Context

The Ming dynasty was founded after the collapse of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), a Mongol-led regime that had ruled China for nearly a century. Zhu Yuanzhang, the founding emperor of the Ming dynasty, sought to re-establish Chinese rule and consolidate power through a highly centralized imperial state. The political structure of the Ming dynasty placed the emperor at the top, with a vast bureaucracy below him, staffed by civil service officials selected through a rigorous examination system based on Confucian classics. This system not only reinforced the Confucian values of hierarchy and loyalty to the emperor but also provided a mechanism for social mobility for the educated elite.

By the late Ming period, the dynasty faced numerous challenges (Brook, 2010). The central government struggled with corruption, particularly among eunuchs, who held significant influence within the imperial court. This concentration of power within the inner circle of the emperor eroded the effectiveness of the bureaucracy and led to widespread dissatisfaction among Confucian officials. Additionally, the empire's economic system, which had experienced a boom due to the expansion of trade and agriculture, began to strain under the pressure of rising costs and fiscal mismanagement. Heavy taxation and the widespread abuse of power by local officials further alienated the peasantry, creating fertile ground for social unrest.

Despite these challenges, the Ming era was also a time of intellectual vibrancy (Brook, 1998). Confucian scholars played a central role in both the governance of the state and the development of Chinese thought. The civil service examination system ensured that Confucian ideals remained dominant in political and intellectual life. However, as the problems of the dynasty deepened, there emerged a growing sense of disillusionment with the rigidity of orthodox Confucianism, which focused on hierarchical relationships and social harmony but offered little in the way of reform or solutions to corruption.

II.B Intellectual Currents in the Ming Dynasty: Neo-Confucianism and Its Challenges

The intellectual environment of the Ming dynasty was dominated by Neo-Confucianism, an interpretation of Confucian thought that had been synthesized during the Song dynasty (960–1279) by scholars such as Zhu Xi (De Bary, 1981). Neo-Confucianism placed a strong emphasis on moral self-cultivation, the investigation of the natural world, and the proper ordering of society based on hierarchical relationships. Zhu Xi's teachings became the basis for the civil service examination system and thus exerted a tremendous influence on the political and intellectual life of the Ming dynasty.

By the late Ming period, however, Neo-Confucian orthodoxy was increasingly challenged by alternative interpretations (Chan, 1963). One of the most important intellectual figures of this time was Wang Yangming, a philosopher, official, and military leader whose ideas would go on to have a profound influence on Chinese intellectual history. Wang Yangming, who rose to prominence in the early 16th century, offered a radical reinterpretation of Neo-Confucianism. He rejected Zhu Xi's emphasis on the external investigation of the natural world as a path to moral knowledge and instead argued that true knowledge comes from within, through moral introspection and the realization of innate knowledge.

III The Ascendancy of Yangming's Philosophy of Mind

The ascendency of Wang Yangming's philosophy was marked by transformative moments in his life and the gradual spread of his ideas, which challenged and redefined Neo-Confucian orthodoxy during the late Ming period. Wang's intellectual journey began within the framework of traditional Confucian teachings, but his unique contributions arose through a profound personal and philosophical evolution, culminating in what is now recognized as his "Philosophy of Mind."

A pivotal turning point occurred in 1506 during his exile to Longchang, known as the "Longchang Enlightenment." Isolated in the remote region of Guizhou, Wang deepened his reflections on Confucian doctrines and arrived at a revolutionary conclusion: true moral knowledge did not stem from external investigation (*li*), as Zhu Xi had proposed, but from within the individual mind. This realization became the cornerstone of his philosophy, emphasizing "innate knowledge" (*liangzhi*)—the inherent moral capacity of all individuals—and the inseparability of knowledge and action (*zhi xing he yi*) as the foundation for ethical behavior.

Upon his return from exile, Wang began actively disseminating his ideas. By the 1510s, his doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action challenged traditional Neo-Confucian approaches that separated moral understanding from practice. Wang argued that true under-

standing must manifest in action, making moral insight accessible to anyone willing to act on their ethical convictions, rather than confining it to the educated elite. This egalitarian principle implicitly questioned the rigid social hierarchies upheld by Zhu Xi's orthodoxy.

During the following decades, Wang's teachings gained prominence through his writings, public lectures, and an expanding network of followers. By the 1520s, his philosophy had become widely influential in intellectual circles, attracting officials, scholars, and local elites. A key innovation during this period was his emphasis on personal responsibility and self-cultivation, which encouraged individuals to rely on their internal moral compass rather than external authorities. Wang's view that moral insight resided within all individuals, irrespective of their social or educational background, democratized moral knowledge and laid the groundwork for a more liberal and action-oriented approach to Confucianism.

As de Bary observes, Wang Yangming's philosophy opened up "almost unlimited possibilities for individual development and self-expression," allowing people to cultivate their moral character without relying on external validation or authority (De Bary, 1970). Wang's belief that "the signs of sagehood do not exist in the sage but in oneself" underscores this emphasis on internal moral cultivation, empowering individuals to achieve ethical clarity through introspection and deliberate action.

Wang's later years were devoted to refining and institutionalizing his philosophy. His public lectures (*jiangxue*) and the personal networks formed by his students played a vital role in spreading his ideas across the empire. These channels facilitated the transmission of his philosophy to diverse audiences, embedding his teachings in local intellectual traditions and contributing to his growing influence.

By the time of Wang's death in 1529, his ideas had gained significant traction, marking a departure from the established Confucian orthodoxy. His focus on personal moral autonomy, the unity of knowledge and action, and the democratization of moral insight provided an intellectual foundation that would later inspire reform movements and challenge hierarchical structures. The ascendency of Wang Yangming's philosophy thus represents not just a personal triumph but a broader intellectual revolution that reshaped the Neo-Confucian tradition.

IV The Spread and Influence of Wang Yangming's Ideas

This section outlines a framework for analyzing the diffusion of Wang Yangming's ideas during the 1500–1600 period and their subsequent impact on China's intellectual and political development. It introduces two key measures to trace the spread of Yangming's philosophy: the frequency of relevant terms in historical texts and the number of authors associated

with his ideas. To explore the mechanisms driving this diffusion, the section focuses on two primary channels: public lectures and personal networks.

IV.A Measuring the Spread of Wang Yangming's Ideas

To assess the diffusion of Wang Yangming's philosophical ideas, we employ two complementary measures that capture distinct aspects of their spread. Both measures rely on key terms central to his teachings, including "innate knowledge," "the unity of knowledge and action," and "the mind itself is principle," as identified by scholars of his philosophy. The first measure tracks the frequency of these terms across historical texts, offering a quantitative view of their prominence in different regions. The second measure focuses on the number of unique authors whose writings incorporate these terms, providing an alternative lens on the intellectual reach of Wang Yangming's ideas.

Our analysis draws on a substantial corpus of historical texts, including approximately 4,000 local gazetteers and more than 20,000 other publications, such as scholarly books and treatises. Local gazetteers are particularly valuable for measuring regional diffusion, as they are directly tied to specific locations. These documents typically include the name of the region they cover and focus on local events, culture, and intellectual life. Their regional specificity makes them a useful resource for tracing the presence and dissemination of Wang Yangming's ideas in particular areas. This geographical focus enables a direct connection between the content of the gazetteers and the intellectual environment of the locations they represent.

In contrast, the broader corpus of over 20,000 publications—including scholarly books and treatises—lacks inherent ties to specific regions in their content or titles. To approximate the geographical origin of these publications, we rely on all documented locations associated with their authors, such as their place of birth, residence, or other known connections. By mapping these locations, we estimate the regional diffusion of Wang Yangming's ideas through these works.

The key terms used in our analysis were selected based on the work of scholars specializing in Wang Yangming's philosophy. These terms—"innate knowledge," "the unity of knowledge and action," and "the mind itself is principle"—capture the foundational principles of his teachings. "Innate knowledge" reflects his belief in the inherent moral capacity of individuals, "the unity of knowledge and action" emphasizes the inseparability of understanding and ethical behavior, and "the mind itself is principle" underscores his conviction that moral principles are internal and self-sufficient. These concepts, identified as central to Wang Yangming's thought, form the basis for both measures in our study.

The key terms used in the first measure were selected by scholars specializing in Wang

Yangming's philosophy. "Innate knowledge" represents his belief in the inherent moral capacity of individuals, "the unity of knowledge and action" emphasizes the inseparability of understanding and ethical behavior, and "the mind itself is principle" highlights his conviction that moral principles are internal and do not require external validation. The second measure complements this by capturing the prevalence of authors who were influenced by or adhered to Wang Yangming's ideas.

The validity of these measures is supported by their strong association with Wang Yangming's philosophical ideas. Using BERT-based semantic similarity analysis, we compare historical texts to the core concepts present in Wang Yangming's 14 authored works. Texts containing the selected key phrases exhibit significantly higher semantic similarity to the core ideas expressed in Yangming's writings compared to texts without these phrases. This statistically significant difference supports the use of these key phrases as effective proxies for capturing the diffusion of his philosophical ideas. See Appendix B for more details.

Figures A.1 and A.2 illustrate the regional variation in the diffusion of Wang Yangming's ideas. Figure A.1 presents maps showing the regional variation of Yangming's three core concepts separately, allowing us to visualize how each of these ideas spread across different regions. Figure A.2, on the other hand, combines these three concepts into a single measure and displays maps for four different time periods, each covering 100 years.

IV.B Channels of Diffusion

Public Lectures One of the key methods for spreading Wang Yangming's ideas was through public lectures, known as *jiangxue*. These gatherings transcended formal educational institutions, often taking place in open spaces and attracting a diverse audience, including scholars, students, and the general public. Wang Yangming himself frequently traveled to deliver lectures, engaging directly with communities across regions. His followers adopted this practice, fostering an oral tradition that played a crucial role in propagating his philosophy. These events not only facilitated the exchange of ideas but also drew influential local figures, amplifying the spread and impact of Wang Yangming's ideas.

To analyze the impact of public lectures on the diffusion of Wang Yangming's ideas, we geocode these events and estimate a regression of the intensity of Yangming's ideas—measured by the frequency of mentions of his key philosophical concepts and the number of authors associated with his ideas—on the number of public lectures.

When using the measure of mentions, we control for the total number of books in each region to ensure that the results are not driven by variations in overall publication activity. Similarly, for the measure based on the number of authors, we control for the total number of authors in each region to account for differences in the scale of intellectual output. To

Table I: Channels Through Which Wang Yangming's Ideas Initially Diffused

	# Mentions of WYM Ideas^{1600}				# Authors^{1600} with WYM Ideas			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Public Lectures^{1600}	0.751***		0.745***		0.231***		0.239***	
	(0.128)		(0.128)		(0.0673)		(0.0556)	
WYM First-Degree Connections		1.182***		1.112***		0.337***		0.276**
		(0.202)		(0.226)		(0.106)		(0.114)
# Books^{1600} and # Gazetteers^{1600}	✓	✓	✓	✓				
# Authors^{1600}					✓	✓	✓	✓
Pre-Existing Academies	✓		✓		✓		✓	
Population^{1600}			✓	✓			✓	✓
Geographical Controls			✓	✓			✓	✓
Ming Province FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Adjusted R^2	0.575	0.584	0.601	0.595	0.637	0.631	0.674	0.657
Observations	273	273	233	233	273	273	233	233

Note: This table examines the channels through which Wang Yangming's ideas were disseminated before 1600. The dependent variables in columns 1 to 4 capture the number of mentions of Wang Yangming's core philosophical concepts, including innate knowledge, the mind is principle, and the unity of action and knowledge. Columns 5 to 8 use the number of authors associated with Wang Yangming's ideas as the dependent variable. Key independent variables include the number of public lectures conducted before 1600 and the number of first-degree connections within Wang Yangming's network. Controls include the number of books and gazetteers published before 1600, population in 1600, pre-existing academies, and geographic characteristics (e.g., distances to major rivers, canals, and the coastline). # Mentions of WYM Ideas^{1600} refers to the number of mentions of Wang Yangming's ideas in books written by authors born before 1570, while # Authors^{1600} with WYM Ideas denotes the number of authors born before 1570 associated with his ideas. # Books^{1600} and # Gazetteers^{1600} similarly refer to works published by individuals from this cohort. All the above variables, including controls, are log-transformed, with the exception of Ming province fixed effects. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

account for educational infrastructure, we include controls for pre-existing academies established before 1500, as lectures were often held in these institutions.

We also control for population size in 1600 and various geographical characteristics, such as proximity to rivers, canals, Beijing, and the coastline, which could influence regional diffusion. Finally, province fixed effects, based on Ming boundaries, are included to account for unobserved, time-invariant regional characteristics that might simultaneously influence the spread of Yangming's ideas and the number of public lectures.

As shown in Table I, columns 1, 3, 5, and 7, public lectures have a statistically significant and positive relationship with both mentions of Wang Yangming's ideas in local texts and the number of authors associated with his ideas. This suggests that public lectures were a vital mechanism for the initial diffusion of Yangming's philosophy. The significance across both measures highlights the enduring influence of these direct interactions in embedding Yangming's ideas in local intellectual traditions.

Personal Networks Wang Yangming's personal network, composed of his friends, students, and their extended social circles, formed a powerful channel for the diffusion of his ideas. The role of these interpersonal connections cannot be understated, as many of Yangming's students went on to hold prominent positions in government and education, further spreading his philosophy. His close followers, who understood his teachings firsthand, became key proponents of his ideas and played an active role in transmitting them across the empire.

To analyze the impact of these personal networks, we assign first-degree connections to all known locations listed for them in the China Biographical Database Project (CBDB). In Table I, columns 2, 4, 6, and 8 demonstrate that first-degree connections within Yangming's network significantly contributed to the dissemination of his ideas. Regions with more first-degree connections exhibit higher mentions of his philosophy and greater numbers of authors associated with his ideas. Similar to the regressions on public lectures, these analyses include controls for population size and geographic characteristics, as well as province fixed effects. The results suggest that these personal relationships were instrumental in embedding Wang Yangming's teachings into local intellectual traditions.

Diffusion in the Long Run Table A.2 extends the analysis of Wang Yangming's ideas to a broader time frame, confirming the sustained diffusion of his philosophy. Variables capturing longer periods show that regions initially exposed to public lectures and first-degree connections in Yangming's network continued to exhibit higher mentions of his key concepts and more authors associated with his ideas. This suggests that early exposure played a crucial role in embedding Yangming's teachings within local intellectual traditions, enabling their persistence across generations.

V Wang Yangming's Impact on the Donglin Movement

V.A The Emergence and Significance of the Donglin Movement

The Donglin Movement, which emerged during the late Ming period (late 16th to early 17th centuries), exemplifies how Wang Yangming's ideas shaped political reform and governance. Led by reform-minded intellectuals and officials, the movement gained traction as a response to widespread corruption and bureaucratic inefficiencies in the Ming administration. A key milestone in its development was the reopening of the Donglin Academy in 1604, which became a hub for philosophical debate and reformist discourse.

The movement's significance lies not only in its immediate critique of imperial governance but also in its long-term influence on statecraft and intellectual traditions in late imperial China (Appendix C). Donglin reformers advanced principles of moral integrity and accountability, opposing unchecked power among court factions, particularly the eunuchs. Their

emphasis on moral responsibility in governance, rooted in Wang Yangming's teachings, highlighted the alignment of personal virtue with public service.

Key figures such as Gu Xiancheng and Gao Panlong embodied the fusion of philosophy and political activism. Their advocacy for fiscal responsibility, reduction of peasant tax burdens, and measures to combat corruption underscored the movement's commitment to ethical governance. Although the Donglin Movement faced suppression in the 1620s, its intellectual and reformist ideals persisted, particularly their critique of autocratic governance structures (Appendix C).

V.B Wang Yangming's Influence on the Donglin Movement

Wang Yangming's ideas—centered on moral autonomy, the unity of knowledge and action (*zhi xing he yi*), and individual responsibility—provided the intellectual foundation for the Donglin scholars. His concept of innate moral knowledge (*liangzhi*), emphasizing every individual's capacity to discern right from wrong, resonated deeply with the movement. This egalitarian perspective challenged rigid hierarchies, promoting governance driven by personal conscience and ethical integrity rather than adherence to tradition or imperial edicts.

The Donglin reformers operationalized Yangming's philosophy to address the political challenges of their time. Their critique of the Ming court's corruption, particularly the dominance of eunuchs and self-serving factions, was informed by Wang's emphasis on aligning moral knowledge with action. By bridging philosophical ideals with political activism, the Donglin scholars sought to reform governance, emphasizing transparency, accountability, and ethical responsibility.

The results in Table II make Wang Yangming's influence on the Donglin Movement evident. Individuals connected to Yangming's network, whether directly or indirectly, were significantly more likely to be members of the Donglin faction. Column 1 shows that individuals with any connection to Yangming had a significantly higher probability of being Donglin members, reflecting the strong influence of Yangming's network. Subsequent columns refine this analysis by distinguishing between first-, second-, and third-degree connections. First-degree connections, such as close associates or students, exhibit a positive association with Donglin membership. Second- and third-degree connections also show significant effects, with second-degree connections often displaying the strongest and most consistent association across specifications.

The inclusion of controls for educational attainment (*jinshi*, *juren*, and *shengyuan*), official positions, and recorded social status in Columns 3 through 5 confirms that the relationship between Yangming's network and Donglin membership is not merely driven by individual characteristics. The robustness of these findings, even after accounting for such

Table II: Wang Yangming's Network and Donglin Membership

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Probability of Donglin Membership				
Connection to WYM (Any Degree)	1.80***				
	(0.14)				
First-Degree Connection		1.75***	1.50**	1.22*	0.90
		(0.64)	(0.65)	(0.74)	(0.69)
Second-Degree Connection		2.00***	1.85***	1.65***	1.44***
		(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.24)	(0.24)
Third-Degree Connection		1.66***	1.50***	1.35***	1.22***
		(0.18)	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.21)
Jinshi Degree			✓	✓	✓
Juren Degree			✓	✓	✓
Shengyuan Degree			✓	✓	✓
Official Position				✓	✓
Social Status					✓
Observations	18,939	18,939	18,939	18,939	18,939

Note: This table examines the probability of being a member of the Donglin faction as a function of an individual's connections to Wang Yangming. The first row considers any connection to Wang Yangming, regardless of degree. Subsequent rows distinguish between direct (*first-degree*) and indirect (*second- and third-degree*) connections, as recorded in the CBDB. Control variables include educational attainment (*jinshi*, *juren*, *shengyuan*), official positions, and social status. The analysis focuses on individuals born between 1550 and 1620. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

factors, highlights the central role of Yangming's ideas and connections in shaping the Donglin Movement's intellectual and political agenda. These results provide compelling evidence that Yangming's philosophy and the networks built around it were instrumental in fostering the Donglin faction's rise.

The sample for this analysis is derived from the China Biographical Database (CBDB) and focuses on individuals born between 1550 and 1620. This timeframe was selected to match the birth years of known Donglin members, ensuring comparability. By including all individuals born in similar years, the sample captures the generation most relevant to the Donglin Movement while allowing for fair comparisons between Donglin members and their contemporaries.

V.C The Causal Impact of Wang Yangming's Ideas on the Donglin Movement

This subsection aims to provide a causal estimate of the relationship between the diffusion of Wang Yangming's ideas and the emergence of the Donglin Movement. We begin with an OLS analysis to assess how regional exposure to Wang Yangming's ideas influenced the number of Donglin reformers in each prefecture. Specifically, we estimate the following

equation:

$$DonglinReformers_p = \beta_0 + \beta_1 WYMIdeas_p + \mathbf{X}_p'\mathbf{\Gamma} + \delta_{\text{prov}} + \epsilon_p \quad (1)$$

where $\ln(D_{\text{p}})$ is the natural logarithm of the number of Donglin scholars in prefecture p, capturing the intensity of the movement in each prefecture. The key explanatory variable, $WYMIdeas_p$, represents the diffusion of Yangming's ideas, measured by either the frequency of mentions of his core concepts or the number of authors associated with his philosophy. $\mathbf{X}_p'\mathbf{\Gamma}$ is a vector of prefecture-level controls, and δ_{prov} are province fixed effects capturing unobserved, time-invariant regional characteristics. The error term, ϵ_{p}, accounts for random variation.

To address potential confounding factors, we include a range of controls in X_{p}. First, we control for the total number of books and the total number of authors in each prefecture, ensuring that the results are not driven by variations in overall intellectual activity. We also include the logged number of pre-existing academies in each prefecture, as these institutions were important venues for intellectual exchange and may have facilitated both the diffusion of Yangming's ideas and the emergence of Donglin reformers.

Geographic characteristics, such as proximity to major rivers, canals, and Beijing, are also included as controls, as these factors could influence both the spread of Wang Yangming's ideas and the development of the Donglin Movement. To account for differences in regional demographics and institutional capacity, we include the logged population size in 1600 and the logged number of successful *jinshi* candidates who passed the imperial examination prior to 1600. Finally, province fixed effects, based on Ming provincial boundaries, capture unobserved, time-invariant institutional, cultural, or geographic differences that might simultaneously affect the diffusion of Yangming's ideas and the Donglin Movement's development.

OLS Estimates. Table III presents the results of the OLS analysis. Columns 1 and 6 show a positive and statistically significant relationship between the diffusion of Wang Yangming's ideas and the logged number of Donglin scholars. Prefectures with more frequent mentions of Yangming's concepts or a greater number of authors associated with his philosophy had higher numbers of Donglin reformers. These associations persist even after controlling for potential confounders, including overall intellectual activity, pre-existing academies, geographic characteristics, and population size. The robustness of these results suggests a strong correlation between the diffusion of Yangming's ideas and the intellectual foundation of the Donglin Movement.

While the OLS analysis includes a wide range of controls to account for potential confounders, concerns about endogeneity remain. The geographical spread of Wang Yangming's

influence was not random, as prefectures closer to major intellectual centers tended to have higher mentions of Wang Yangming's ideas, likely due to better educational infrastructure and greater intellectual exchange. Furthermore, pre-existing political, social, or cultural conditions in certain regions could have simultaneously influenced both the diffusion of Wang Yangming's ideas and the emergence of Donglin reformers, creating potential reverse causality or omitted variable bias. To address these concerns and establish a more robust causal relationship, we employ an instrumental variable strategy using two distinct instruments to generate exogenous variation in the diffusion of Wang Yangming's ideas.

Same-Year Exam Cohort as an Instrument Our first instrument leverages the number of successful candidates who passed the imperial examination in the same year as Wang Yangming (1499). Among the 255 individuals who obtained the *jinshi* degree that year, many entered the same intellectual and bureaucratic networks as Yangming, facilitating exposure to his ideas through shared scholarly debates, official duties, and personal interactions. The regional distribution of these same-year *jinshi* (*tongnian*) provides a source of variation in exposure to Yangming's philosophy that is plausibly exogenous to the subsequent political developments of those regions.

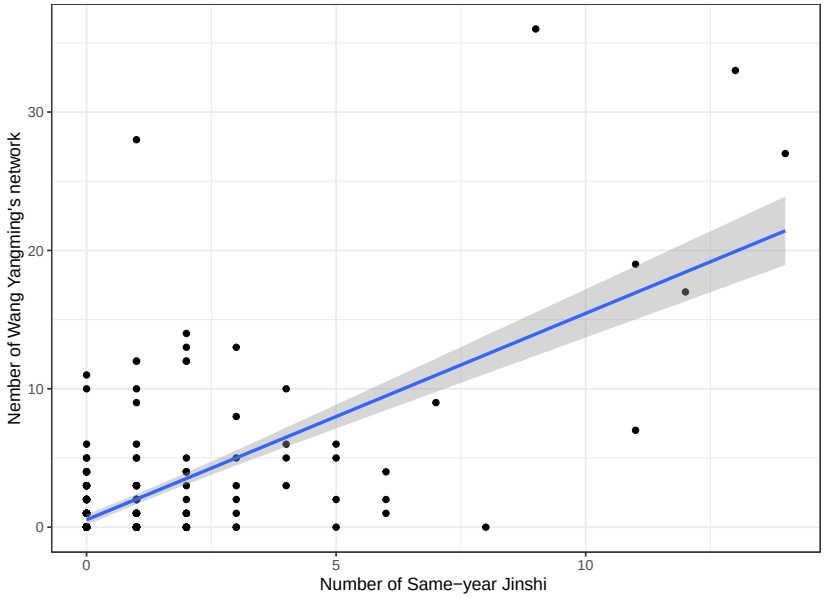


Figure II: Prefecture-Level Size of Wang Yangming's Same-Year Exam Cohort and Its Influence on His Network

The instrument's validity hinges on the assumption that the spatial distribution of same-year *jinshi* is unrelated to regional political developments, conditional on controls. While the number of successful candidates reflects underlying educational infrastructure, the specific distribution of same-year *jinshi* can be treated as random after accounting for the long-

term average number of successful candidates. Unlike self-selected networks, this cohort was determined by the timing of the examination, mitigating concerns about homophily or strategic association.

Regions with larger same-year cohorts naturally had greater opportunities for intellectual exchange with Wang Yangming, contributing to the spread of his ideas. This relationship is reflected in the higher prevalence of Yangming's concepts in regions with more same-year *jinshi*. By exploiting this exogenous variation, we isolate the impact of Wang Yangming's network on the diffusion of his ideas.

The first-stage regression for this instrument is specified as follows:

$$WYMIdeas_p = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 ExamCohort_p + \mathbf{X}_p'\mathbf{\Gamma} + \delta_{\text{prov}} + \epsilon_p \tag{2}$$

where $WYMIdeas_p$ represents the diffusion of Wang Yangming's ideas in prefecture p, measured through indicators such as the frequency of key terms or the number of authors influenced by his philosophy. The key independent variable, $ExamCohort_p$, captures the number of successful *jinshi* from prefecture p who passed the imperial examination in 1499, the same year as Wang Yangming. The control variables, $\mathbf{X}_p$, include pre-existing academies, long-term averages of successful candidates, population size in 1600, and geographic factors such as proximity to rivers, canals, and Beijing. Province fixed effects, δ_{prov}, account for unobserved, time-invariant characteristics at the provincial level, while the error term, ϵ_p, captures unobserved factors influencing the spread of Wang Yangming's ideas.

Distance to Nearest Public Lecture as an Instrument The second instrument utilizes the distance to the nearest public lecture conducted by Wang Yangming or his followers. Public lectures (*jiangxue*) were a critical mechanism for disseminating Wang Yangming's ideas. These events brought his teachings directly to communities, transcending formal educational settings and reaching scholars, students, and local elites. The spatial distribution of these lectures, largely determined by Wang Yangming's travel patterns, provides an additional exogenous source of variation in the diffusion of his ideas.

The validity of this instrument relies on the assumption that proximity to the nearest lecture affects subsequent political development only through its influence on the diffusion of Yangming's ideas. While lecture locations may reflect logistical considerations or Yangming's routes, they were not chosen based on the political characteristics of the regions. Conditional on controls for population size, educational infrastructure, and geographic features, distance to the nearest lecture can be treated as exogenous to later political outcomes.

Regions closer to these lectures were more likely to adopt Yangming's ideas due to direct exposure. This proximity created a gradient of diffusion, with ideas spreading more effectively

in areas nearer to the lectures. The first-stage equation for this instrument is:

$$WYMIdeas_p = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 DistanceLecture_p + \mathbf{X}_p'\mathbf{\Gamma} + \epsilon_p,$$

where $DistanceLecture_p$ denotes the distance from prefecture p to the nearest public lecture conducted by Wang Yangming or his followers. The remaining terms ($\mathbf{X}_p'\mathbf{\Gamma}$, ϵ_p) are defined as in the previous specification.

Instrumented Estimates. Table III presents the results from instrumental variable (IV) regressions. The analysis employs three instruments: the number of same-year *jinshi* candidates, distance to the nearest public lecture, and the number of Wang Yangming's first-degree connections (detailed in Section V.C). These instruments aim to address endogeneity concerns and isolate the causal impact of Yangming's ideas on the Donglin Movement.

The first-stage results confirm the relevance of these instruments. Prefectures with more same-year *jinshi* candidates, a greater number of first-degree connections, or closer proximity to public lectures exhibit significantly higher levels of Yangming's ideas. For the outcome variable measuring mentions of Yangming's ideas (columns 1–5), the first-stage F-statistics generally meet or exceed the conventional threshold of 10, indicating strong instruments. However, for the outcome variable capturing the number of authors associated with Yangming's ideas (columns 8–10), the F-statistics fall below this threshold, suggesting potential weak instrument bias in those specifications.

The second-stage results indicate a robust and positive relationship between the diffusion of Wang Yangming's ideas and the emergence of Donglin reformers. Specifically, a 1% increase in the number of mentions of Yangming's ideas is associated with an approximately 0.4% increase in the number of Donglin reformers. These findings suggest that prefectures with greater exposure to Yangming's philosophy experienced a significant rise in reformist political activity, as reflected in the prominence of the Donglin faction.

Overidentification Tests. The Hansen J statistic, reported in Columns 4 and 8, assesses the validity of the overidentifying restrictions. This test is performed by including all instruments simultaneously in the estimation to examine whether any of them directly affect the dependent variable beyond their role in explaining the endogenous regressor. The null hypothesis of the test is that all instruments are valid, meaning they affect the dependent variable only through their impact on the diffusion of Yangming's ideas. High p-values indicate that we fail to reject this null hypothesis, providing additional confidence in the exclusion restriction assumption and strengthening the robustness of the IV approach.

Table III: The Impact of Wang Yangming's Ideas on the Formation of the Donglin Faction

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	OLS	2SLS				OLS	2SLS			
	Panel A: Second-Stage Estimates Dependent Variable: Members of Donglin Faction									
# Mentions of WYM ideas^{1600}	0.19***	0.33**	0.35***	0.52**	0.36***					
	(0.041)	(0.13)	(0.11)	(0.23)	(0.10)					
# Authors with WYM ideas^{1600}						0.39***	0.89**	0.90*	0.93	0.90***
						(0.11)	(0.40)	(0.48)	(0.59)	(0.34)
	Panel B: First-Stage Estimates Wang Yangming's Ideas, Pre-1600									
Distance to Nearest Public Lecture^{1600}		-0.285***			-0.191***		-0.097***			-0.083***
		(0.0737)			(0.069)		(0.0293)			(0.029)
# WYM First-Degree Connections			1.109***		0.825***			0.283***		0.144
			(0.231)		(0.259)			(0.116)		(0.119)
# WYM Same-Year Exam Cohort				0.449***	0.184				0.165***	0.130*
				(0.174)	(0.178)				(0.068)	(0.069)
# Authors^{1600}						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
# Books^{1600}	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
Pre-Existing Academies	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jinshi^{1600}	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Population^{1600}	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Geographical Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ming Province FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
First-Stage F-Statistic		14.97	23.04	6.64	14.99		11.04	5.98	5.91	7.46
Hansen J Statistic		0	0	0	0.6155		0	0	0	0.9981
Observations	232	232	232	232	232	232	232	232	232	232

Notes This table presents instrumented estimates of the impact of Wang Yangming's ideas, as established before 1600, on the emergence of the Donglin faction in the 1600s. The dependent variable is the natural logarithm of the number of Donglin scholars in each prefecture. The key independent variables measure the diffusion of Yangming's ideas through the number of mentions of his philosophical concepts and the number of authors associated with his ideas. The instrumental variables used include the number of *jinshi* candidates who passed the imperial examination in the same year as Wang Yangming, the distance to the nearest public lecture conducted by Yangming or his followers, and the number of Yangming's first-degree connections. Columns 5 and 10 report the Hansen J Statistics from overidentification tests, which include all instruments to test the validity of the exclusion restriction. The results generally support the validity of the instruments. Control variables include the number of pre-existing academies, the number of *jinshi* before 1600, population size in 1600, and geographic characteristics such as distances to the Grand Canal, Beijing, and major rivers, as well as proximity to the coastline and a river dummy. All variables, except for Ming province fixed effects, are log-transformed. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

VI From Yangming's Thought to Republicanism: The Seeds of Nascent Democracy

VI.A The Survival and Legacy of Yangming's Ideas Beyond the Qing Dynasty

Wang Yangming's ideas, rooted in individual moral autonomy and the unity of knowledge and action, profoundly influenced intellectual and political discourse during the Ming

dynasty. However, with the fall of the Ming and the rise of the Qing dynasty, his philosophy faced significant challenges. The Qing state, intent on consolidating power and enforcing orthodoxy, promoted Zhu Xi's interpretation of Confucianism, which emphasized strict adherence to external moral codes and the investigation of objective principles (*li*). In contrast, Yangming's focus on internal moral reflection and personal responsibility was viewed as subversive, posing a potential threat to the Qing's authoritarian and hierarchical order.

Despite this suppression, Yangming's ideas did not disappear. During the early Qing period, his philosophy survived in pockets of intellectual resistance. Private academies, informal scholarly networks, and a small but dedicated group of followers ensured the continued transmission of his teachings. These spaces allowed Yangming's philosophy to persist, albeit on the margins of official intellectual life. While mainstream Confucianism under the Qing prioritized rigid, formulaic interpretations, Yangming's emphasis on moral introspection and the unity of thought and action appealed to scholars critical of the state's orthodoxy.

As the Qing dynasty weakened under the combined pressures of internal corruption and external threats, Wang Yangming's ideas began to regain prominence. By the late Qing period, reform-minded scholars searching for solutions to China's mounting political and social crises turned to Wang Yangming's ideas for inspiration. His focus on individual moral autonomy and the integration of knowledge and action offered an intellectual framework for addressing the failures of the imperial system and envisioning a path toward renewal. This resurgence of Wang Yangming's ideas laid the groundwork for the reform movements that emerged in the twilight years of the Qing.

The early twentieth century, a period of profound political and intellectual upheaval in China, further amplified the relevance of Wang Yangming's philosophy. With the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the establishment of the Republic of China, political leaders and intellectuals sought to reconcile China's traditional philosophies with the demands of modernization and republicanism. The ideals of moral responsibility and personal action, central to Wang Yangming's ideas, resonated strongly in this context. Reformers such as Sun Yat-sen and other early republican thinkers drew upon Wang Yangming's philosophy as they sought to construct a more accountable and participatory political system (Brière, 1956).

Wang Yangming's emphasis on moral autonomy and self-cultivation was particularly appealing to republican leaders seeking to dismantle the remnants of imperial authority and the entrenched social hierarchies that had long defined Chinese political life. His belief that every individual possesses an innate capacity for moral judgment aligned with the ideals of republicanism and inspired efforts to foster political reform. For example, Sun Yat-sen integrated elements of Yangming's philosophy into his own political vision, emphasizing the importance

of individual moral action as a foundation for building a strong and ethical government. By linking traditional Chinese thought with the emerging ideals of republican governance, Wang Yangming's legacy continued to shape the intellectual and political trajectory of modern China.

VII Discussion

The persistence of autocratic rule in China, even centuries after Wang Yangming's revolutionary ideas on moral autonomy and ethical governance, raises the question: do ideas really matter in shaping political development? Wang's philosophy provided a powerful intellectual framework for critiquing authoritarian governance and advocating for political reform, yet China's political trajectory has remained largely unchanged in its core autocratic structure. The answer lies in understanding how ideas interact with institutions and how certain conditions either foster or limit their transformative potential.

Wang Yangming's ideas can be understood as a potential coordination device, offering reform-minded actors a shared intellectual foundation for challenging the status quo. His emphasis on individual moral responsibility and the unity of knowledge and action provided a compelling vision for governance reform. Movements such as the Donglin faction drew on these principles to advocate for moral accountability in governance. However, the effectiveness of ideas as a coordination tool depends on their ability to spread widely enough to reach a critical mass of supporters. In this regard, the Qing state's suppression of heterodox teachings—through mechanisms such as the Literary Inquisition (Koyama and Xue, 2015; Xue, 2021)—played a pivotal role in limiting the transmission of Yangming's ideas. By curtailing the spread of dissenting ideologies, the imperial system effectively neutralized reformist coordination before it could gain meaningful momentum.

Beyond the suppression of ideas, China's enduring autocratic trajectory is also rooted in the resilience of its institutional framework. The imperial bureaucracy, with its deeply entrenched hierarchical and authoritarian structure, proved adept at absorbing or neutralizing challenges. Despite moments of reformist activity, such as the Donglin Movement, these efforts failed to overcome the centralized governance model. Wang Yangming's ideas, though intellectually potent, were ultimately constrained by these structural barriers, illustrating how deeply rooted institutions can resist even the most compelling ideological challenges.

In contrast, Wang Yangming's philosophy had more enduring success in shaping political and intellectual life in Japan and Korea. In Japan, the Yōmeigaku school, derived from Yangming's teachings, played a significant role during the Tokugawa period and influenced the ethical principles underpinning the Meiji Restoration. This alignment with governance

reform and modernization contributed to Japan's eventual democratic development. Similarly, in Korea, Yangming's ideas inspired reformist scholars who integrated his emphasis on moral autonomy into debates about governance and social transformation, supporting Korea's transition toward democracy in the twentieth century. These comparative cases underscore the importance of context: the relative openness of intellectual and political systems in Japan and Korea allowed Yangming's ideas to shape long-term institutional development in ways that were not possible in Qing or Republican China.

VIII Conclusion

This paper has examined the profound role of Wang Yangming's ideas in shaping the trajectory of political reform and liberal thought within late imperial China. By emphasizing individual moral autonomy, the unity of knowledge and action, and the innate moral capacity of all individuals, his philosophy offered a powerful intellectual critique of autocratic governance and laid the foundation for reformist movements such as the Donglin faction. These movements sought to challenge corruption and advocate for governance grounded in moral integrity and accountability, demonstrating how ideas can inspire political activism even within an authoritarian framework.

Wang Yangming's influence extended beyond the Ming period, leaving an enduring legacy that inspired reform-minded scholars during the Qing dynasty and beyond. His philosophy provided an intellectual framework for critiquing authoritarian rule and envisioning alternative models of governance. This continuity underscores how intellectual movements can adapt to new political contexts, sustaining their relevance across centuries.

However, the transformative potential of Wang Yangming's ideas was constrained by deeply entrenched autocratic institutions. The Donglin scholars, despite their reformist ambitions, faced significant resistance from the imperial system. Similarly, the broader diffusion of Yangming's philosophy was limited by state suppression and the hierarchical nature of Chinese governance. While his ideas laid the groundwork for reform, the persistence of authoritarian structures tempered their ultimate impact.

This study contributes to the broader political economy literature by examining the interplay between ideas, culture, and institutions. Wang Yangming's intellectual legacy offers a valuable case study for understanding how ideologies can both challenge and be constrained by existing institutional frameworks. His philosophy highlights the potential of ideas to inspire reform while revealing the structural barriers that often limit their transformative capacity.

In conclusion, Wang Yangming's ideas illustrate both the power and the limitations of

intellectual movements within an authoritarian framework. His philosophy helped inspire reformist movements and laid the seeds for more liberal governance principles, yet its impact was tempered by the resilience of autocratic structures. This legacy offers critical insights into the historical dynamics of ideology, governance, and institutional change in China's political history.

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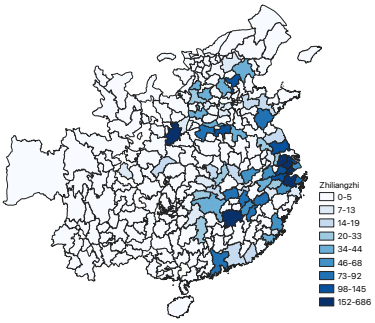
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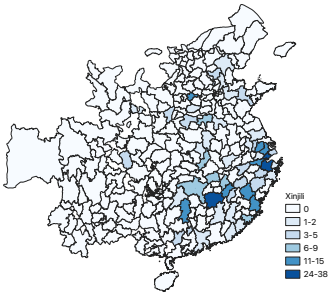
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Appendix

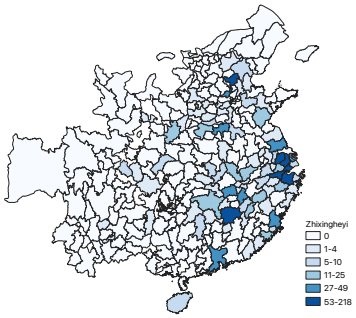
A Additional Figures and Tables



(a) Inner Knowledge

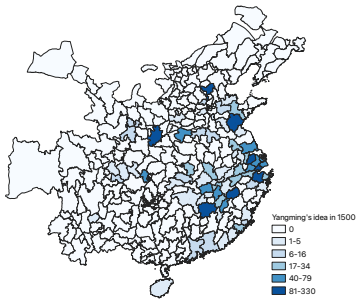


(b) The Mind Itself is Principle

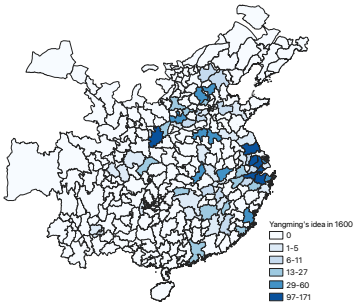


(c) Unity of Knowledge and Action

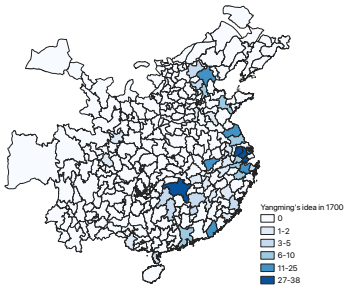
Figure A.1: Regional Variation of Wang Yangming's Three Core Concepts



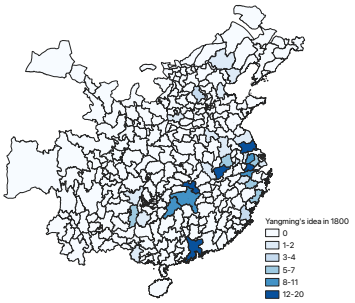
(a) 1500



(b) 1600



(c) 1700



(d) 1800

Figure A.2: Regional Variation of Wang Yangming's Ideas, by Period

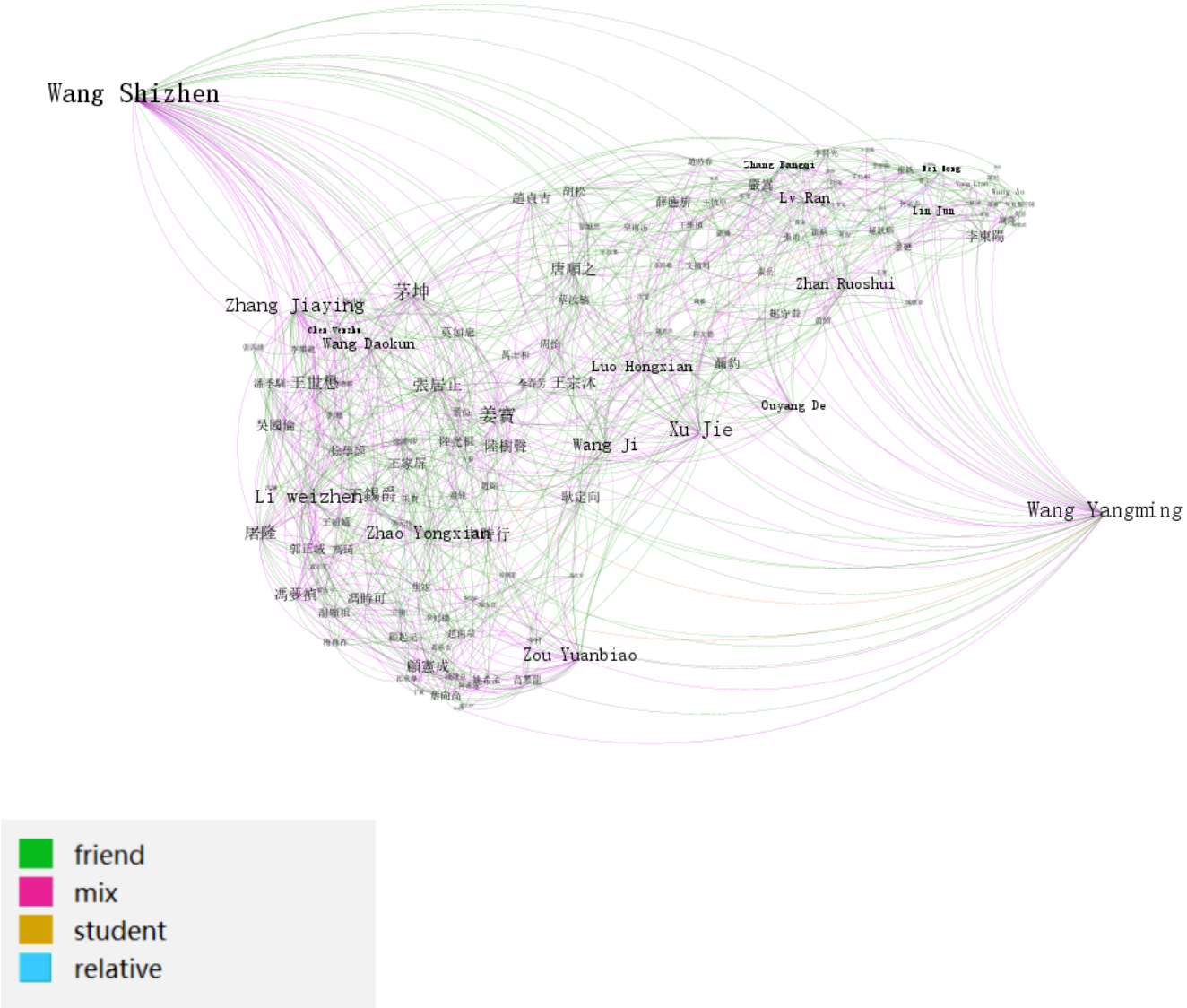


Figure A.3: Wang Yangming's First- and Second-Degree Personal Network

Table A.1: Correlations Between Number of Authors Associated with Yangming's Ideas Across Centuries

Century	**1400**	**1500**	**1600**	**1700**	**1800**
1400	1.0000				
1500	0.6243	1.0000			
1600	0.5074	0.6424	1.0000		
1700	0.4478	0.6423	0.7991	1.0000	
1800	0.2601	0.3595	0.4736	0.5268	1.0000

Note: This table presents correlations between the number of authors associated with Yangming's ideas at the prefecture level across consecutive centuries. All correlations are calculated using prefecture-level data.

Table A.2: Channels Through Which Wang Yangming's Ideas Diffused, 1500 – 1900 AD

	# Mentions of WYM Ideas				# Authors with WYM Ideas			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Public Lectures	0.441***		0.501***		0.199***			
	(0.114)		(0.142)		(0.0610)			
WYM First-Degree Connections		1.182***		1.112***		0.337***		0.276**
		(0.202)		(0.226)		(0.106)		(0.114)
# Books and # Gazetteers	✓	✓	✓	✓				
# Authors					✓	✓	✓	✓
Pre-Existing Academies	✓		✓		✓		✓	
Population^{1910}			✓	✓			✓	✓
Geographical Controls			✓	✓			✓	✓
Ming Province FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mean of Dep. Var.	1.689	1.689	1.728	1.700	0.663	0.663	0.676	0.676
Adjusted R^2	0.583	0.581	0.554	0.614	0.718	0.713	0.701	0.698
Observations	196	196	180	188	229	229	209	209

Note: This table examines the channels through which Wang Yangming's ideas were disseminated between 1500 and 1900. The dependent variables in Columns 1 to 4 measure the number of mentions of Wang Yangming's core philosophical concepts—*innate knowledge*, *the mind is principle*, and *the unity of action and knowledge*—in historical texts. Columns 5 to 8 use the number of authors associated with Wang Yangming's ideas as the dependent variable. Key independent variables include the number of public lectures and the number of first-degree connections in Wang Yangming's network, both of which played critical roles in spreading his philosophy. Controls include the total number of books and gazetteers, population size (measured in 1910), pre-existing academies, and geographic characteristics such as distances to major rivers, canals, and Beijing. Province fixed effects, based on Ming boundaries, are included to account for unobserved regional heterogeneity.# Mentions of WYM Ideas refers to occurrences of Yangming's ideas in texts written between 1500 and 1900. # Authors with WYM Ideas captures the number of authors writing about his ideas during the same period. All variables, including controls, are log-transformed, with the exception of province fixed effects. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

B Validation of the Measure for Wang Yangming's Ideas

This appendix provides details on the methodology used to validate the measure of Wang Yangming's ideas. Specifically, we test the reliability of selected key phrases—such as "innate knowledge" (*liangzhi*), "unity of knowledge and action" (*zhi xing he yi*), and "the mind itself is principle" (*xin ji li*)—in capturing the diffusion of Yangming's philosophical influence. By leveraging BERT-based semantic similarity analysis, we compare texts containing these key phrases against Wang Yangming's own writings to establish whether these phrases reliably reflect his ideas. The results demonstrate that texts with these phrases exhibit significantly higher semantic similarity to Wang Yangming's works, supporting the validity of our measure.

B.1 Corpus of Historical Texts and Wang Yangming's Writings

The historical corpus comprises approximately 4,000 local gazetteers and over 20,000 other publications, such as books and treatises, spanning the late Ming and early Qing periods. Wang Yangming's writings consist of 14 books, which serve as the reference texts for calculating semantic similarity. These writings encapsulate his core philosophical principles, including "innate knowledge" (*liangzhi*), "the unity of knowledge and action" (*zhi xing he yi*), and "the mind itself is principle" (*xin ji li*).

B.2 Embedding Texts with BERT

We use a pre-trained BERT model to generate semantic embeddings for the historical texts and Wang Yangming's writings. BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers) is a state-of-the-art transformer-based language model that produces contextualized embeddings. The process involves the following steps:

1. **Text Preprocessing:** All texts are segmented into sentences. Non-Chinese characters, punctuation, and irrelevant symbols are removed. Simplified Chinese characters are converted into traditional Chinese to align with the classical language of Wang Yangming's writings.

2. **Tokenization:** Sentences are tokenized using a Chinese-specific tokenizer compatible with the BERT model.

3. **Embedding Generation:** Each sentence is processed through the BERT model to generate a 768-dimensional embedding. For each document, the sentence embeddings are averaged to produce a single embedding vector.

4. **Reference Embedding for Wang Yangming's Writings:** Similarly, embeddings are generated for each of Wang Yangming's 14 books. These are averaged to create a single reference embedding vector representing the core semantic content of his writings.

B.3 Computing Semantic Similarity

To validate the key phrases, we compute the cosine similarity between the embedding of each historical text and the reference embedding of Wang Yangming's writings. The cosine similarity is given by:

$$\text{Cosine Similarity} = \frac{\mathbf{A} \cdot \mathbf{B}}{\|\mathbf{A}\|\|\mathbf{B}\|},$$

where $\mathbf{A}$ is the embedding vector of the historical text, and $\mathbf{B}$ is the reference embedding vector of Wang Yangming's writings. Cosine similarity values range from -1 to 1, with higher values indicating greater semantic similarity.

B.4 Validation Results

To assess the validity of the key phrases, we divide the historical texts into two groups: those containing the phrases "innate knowledge," "unity of knowledge and action," and "the mind itself is principle," and those without them. For each group, we calculate the average cosine similarity to Wang Yangming's writings. A two-sample t-test is used to determine whether the difference in mean similarity scores between the two groups is statistically significant (See Table A.3).

The results show that texts containing the key phrases exhibit significantly higher semantic similarity to Yangming's writings ($p < 0.01$). This provides strong empirical support for the use of these phrases as reliable indicators of Wang Yangming's philosophical influence.

Table A.3: Comparison of Semantic Similarity Scores for Texts With and Without Key Phrases

	Without Key Phrases	**With Key Phrases**
Mean Similarity	0.0537	0.0580
Welch t-test		
Test Statistic (t)	-3.163	
Degrees of Freedom	125.24	
p-value	0.00196	
95% Confidence Interval	[-0.0070, -0.0016]	

Note: This table presents results from a Welch Two-Sample t-test comparing the average semantic similarity of texts containing Wang Yangming's key phrases (e.g., "innate knowledge," "unity of knowledge and action," "the mind itself is principle") with texts that do not contain these phrases. Semantic similarity is measured using BERT-based embeddings. A statistically significant difference ($p < 0.01$) suggests that texts with key phrases align more closely with Wang Yangming's writings.

B.5 Main Results using Similarity-Based Measures

C Donglin Reformers' Political Stance and Views on Autocracy

The Donglin reformers were politically active in their critique of corruption and unprincipled governance within the Ming court, particularly focusing on the abuses of power by eunuchs and other court officials. Their vision of governance was rooted in moral accountability, reflecting Wang Yangming's emphasis on moral integrity and personal responsibility in governance. For Donglin reformers, officials should be guided by their conscience rather

Table A.4: Channels Through Which Wang Yangming's Ideas Diffused, Similarity-Based Measure

	Diffusion before 1600				Diffusion between 1500 and 1900			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Public Lectures^{1600}	0.208***		0.178*					
	(0.0733)		(0.0901)					
Public Lectures					0.224***		0.223***	
					(0.0634)		(0.0772)	
WYM First-Degree Connection		0.442***		0.434***		0.447***		0.405***
		(0.114)		(0.115)		(0.118)		(0.120)
# Books^{1600} and # Gazetteers^{1600}	✓	✓	✓	✓				
# Books and # Gazetteers					✓	✓	✓	✓
Pre-Existing Academies	✓		✓		✓		✓	
Population^{1600}			✓	✓			✓	✓
Population^{1910}							✓	✓
Geographical Controls			✓	✓			✓	✓
Ming Province FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mean of Dep. Var.	1.408	1.408	1.416	1.416	1.540	1.540	1.538	1.545
Adjusted R^2	0.230	0.284	0.274	0.347	0.244	0.262	0.263	0.320
Observations	122	122	117	117	136	136	126	131

Note: This table examines the channels through which Wang Yangming's ideas were disseminated, using a similarity-based measure of diffusion. The dependent variable in Columns 1 to 4 captures the diffusion of Yangming's ideas before 1600, while Columns 5 to 8 examine diffusion over the broader period from 1500 to 1900. The similarity-based measure is calculated as the total semantic similarity between texts and Wang Yangming's writings. Key independent variables include the number of public lectures conducted before 1600 (columns 1–2) and the total number of public lectures over the entire period from 1500 to 1900 (columns 5–6), as well as the number of first-degree connections within Wang Yangming's network (columns 3–4 and 7–8). Controls include the number of books and gazetteers before 1600 (columns 1–4), total number of books and gazetteers (columns 5–8), population in 1600 (columns 3–4) and 1910 (columns 7—8), pre-existing academies, and geographic characteristics such as distances to major rivers, canals, and Beijing. Province fixed effects, based on Ming provincial boundaries, are included to account for unobserved regional heterogeneity. All variables, including controls, are log-transformed, with the exception of province fixed effects. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

than adherence to strict hierarchies or blind obedience to imperial authority.

In line with this philosophy, the Donglin reformers advocated for significant reforms in state policy, particularly with regard to taxation and economic management. They were vocal in their criticism of the state's fiscal irresponsibility and the economic burdens placed on peasants and commoners. Donglin reformers called for a more just and transparent taxation system, where the state's resources were used for the public good rather than to enrich corrupt elites. This policy stance reflected an early form of economic liberalism, as they emphasized the need for the state to foster the welfare of the people rather than promote self-serving interests within the court.

Although the Donglin reformers did not directly challenge the emperor's authority, they were critical of the autocratic nature of the imperial court, particularly the unchecked power of eunuchs and court factions. Their views were shaped by Wang Yangming's teachings

on moral integrity, as they believed that the emperor and officials alike should be held accountable to ethical standards. The reformers argued that governance should be based on moral responsibility, and they sought to curb the authoritarian excesses of the imperial bureaucracy by holding officials to higher moral standards.

This implicit critique of imperial autocracy was reflected in the Donglin reformers' calls for political reforms that would enhance transparency, accountability, and moral governance. Their political stance thus represented both a critique of the existing power structures and an attempt to promote a governance system based on moral principles, aligning closely with Wang Yangming's ideas.