Introduction

On September 27, 1571, the reigning emperor of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) decreed: “A public consensus about Xue Xuan [薛瑄 (1389–1464)] has been reached. He is to be included among those receiving sacrifices in the Temple to Confucius [Kongmiao 孔廟].”¹ Within the long span of the Ming dynasty, only four Ming-era Neo-Confucians were granted the honor of inclusion in the sacrificial rolls of the Temple to Confucius: Xue Xuan, Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), Hu Juren 胡居仁 (1434–84), and Chen Xianzhang 陳獻章 (1428–1500). Official sacrificial rituals were carried out twice a year in the nationwide system of Kongmiao, and latter-day Confucians such as Xue who were deemed worthy of enshrinement would join Confucius in receiving the veneration of officials and degree holders. These Confucians gained immortality in the memories of generations of scholars, and were elevated as models for others to follow. In a very real sense, the enshrined elite formed a concrete manifestation of state-endorsed orthodoxy.²

Among the four Ming-era Neo-Confucians to receive the honor of enshrinement, not only was Xue Xuan the first, but he was also the only one from north China.³ Xue was the founder of the so-called Hedong School (an intellectual movement retrospectively referred to as a school), which was influential in parts of modern-day Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Henan provinces during the early Ming.⁴ Xue and his Hedong School embraced the philosophy of Cheng Hao 程頤 (1032–85), Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), although not without certain modifications. ChengZhu Neo-Confucianism had been endorsed as orthodox
since the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). Ming and Qing (1644–1911) scholars regarded Xue as the representative of the ChengZhu tradition during the Ming, and paired him with Wang Yangming, an anti-ChengZhu Neo-Confucian, as the two most revered masters of that period.\(^5\) The split between these two traditions intensified in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries when Lü Nan （呂柟）(1479–1542) became the most important intellectual figure from north China. Lü was one of the most respected Neo-Confucian thinkers of his day, and a primary competitor to the emerging Wang Yangming School.\(^6\)

This book on Xue Xuan and the Hedong School of Neo-Confucianism employs an integrated approach that combines philosophy and biographical study, as well as social, intellectual, and institutional histories. It provides new insight into the history of Neo-Confucianism, which until now has had a distinctly southern bias, by focusing on the different modes of development that took place in the north. As such it challenges our conventional knowledge of Neo-Confucian philosophy, as well as established views concerning modes of networking and kinship organizations, by reconstructing how generations of northern Neo-Confucians from the early to the mid-Ming diverged from their southern counterparts. Taking Xue as their main representative, this group of Neo-Confucians and their supporters approached the Neo-Confucian tradition differently. Their unique vision of Neo-Confucianism has yet to be explored in contemporary scholarship.

**Approaches to Neo-Confucianism**

The study of Neo-Confucianism as a philosophy is no doubt one of the most popular angles through which scholars have viewed it. Many scholars have chosen to focus on a single theme and trace its development over time. Take, for example, the works of William T. de Bary, which typically begin by discussing a philosophical theme or position in its beginning stages and continue by tracing its development in latter dynasties.\(^7\) De Bary is the leading thinker of the so-called Columbia School, a network of modern scholars that exerted a great deal of influence within the United States from the 1960s into the last decade of the twentieth century. Focusing on texts by undertaking a close reading of them, and in the process establishing a “dialogue” with the authors, is central to this group’s approach.\(^8\) Critics have accused de Bary’s scholarship of being ahistorical;
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some have labeled the work of another member of his group as a Lovejoyan “history of ideas” or structuralism. De Bary’s exclusive focus on Neo-Confucian philosophical doctrine at the expense of historical background has not resonated well with some historians.

Another way scholars have approached the Neo-Confucians’ philosophy is by concentrating one’s research on the ideas of a particular individual. For instance, Willard Peterson’s important study of intellectual change during the seventeenth century undertook an in-depth investigation into the evolving mind of Fang I-chih 方以智 (1611–71). Although Peterson concedes that perceptions of the social and political environment helped shape the particular characteristics of the “new” mode of scholarly endeavor as it evolved from the 1630s, his work is nevertheless based on a detailed examination of Fang I-chih’s philosophy. A more recent example of a similar approach is On-cho Ng’s study of the early Qing Neo-Confucian philosopher and statesman Li Guangdi 李光地 (1642–1718). Although he does not entirely ignore Li Guangdi’s positions on political and social institutions, Ng emphasizes that his work remains that of a historian of ideas. To Ng, a thinker’s major influences are previous or contemporary works, not one’s own provincial experiences.

Although the studies by Peterson and Ng are based on different assumptions and allot varying weight to the thinkers’ environments, both emphasize the importance of a close analysis of philosophical doctrine. Anne Birdwhistell’s study of Li Yong 李顒 (1627–1705), on the other hand, is premised upon an entirely different set of questions. Her work also focuses on the philosophy of a Neo-Confucian during the Ming-Qing transition, but unlike intellectual historians who pay attention to the historical context and development of a particular thinker’s philosophy, Birdwhistell’s work is a philosophical analysis conceived in strictly epistemological terms. Li Yong is the only northern figure of the Ming-Qing period who has been studied from this angle in such depth. Although Birdwhistell also reconstructs Li Yong’s philosophical system by analyzing his ideas on educational issues, she fails to address key social factors and recognize the significance of northern-style learning.

In polar opposition to the above methodologies, Yu Yingshi’s latest work on Zhu Xi offers what he describes as a new approach to the study of Neo-Confucianism. Yu introduces his own methodology as combining political history with cultural history, and he proposes that cultural
history must engage with the ideas of the era in question; thus he does not treat them in isolation but observes them in integral relation with the thinkers’ actual lived experiences, which are for him inherently political. This, according to Yu, is the fundamental difference between cultural history on the one hand, and intellectual history on the other. Yu accuses scholars with an intellectual history or history of philosophy paradigm bent, particularly those affiliated with the so-called Columbia School and contemporary Neo-Confucians, as working “under the paradigm of ‘grand narrative,’” which “usually also employs a method that transcends time and space in their studies of Neo-Confucianism’s emergence and formation, and they do not relate it to a specific historical context.” To Yu, the “grand narrative” approach is too ahistorical to be meaningful. His own method, on the other hand, reveals the complex historical forces at work in the production of ideas.

Yu also refuses in his work to make room for social historians. He argues that the basic tendency of modern social history is to “observe from a purely pragmatic perspective, thus Song scholar-gentry look as if they only knew how to plan wisely for their own gain, that of their families, and of the scholar-gentry as a whole.” In contrast to this perspective, Yu insists that the idea of “taking the world as one’s responsibility” is the key to entering the inner hearts of Song scholar-gentry. Thus he concludes that “there were slight changes between the political cultures of the scholar-officials from the two Songs, but the spirit of rebuilding the order of Wang Anshi’s 王安石 (1021-86) era was collectively inherited by Southern Song Neo-Confucians.” Although Yu paid close attention to specific political events and issues, his reconstruction of Neo-Confucian political culture was achieved by studying what the Neo-Confucians themselves thought and said about politics.

In my opinion, while each of the above approaches has its own merits, each also has its limitations. The study of Neo-Confucianism ought to be more than an analysis of the development of philosophical themes, more than a revealing of individuals’ ideas or special areas of thought such as political thought. Given Yu’s critique, it is fair to ask: What have social historians told us about Chinese history? And more importantly, how are their findings related to the study of Neo-Confucianism? Social historians researching China in the post-Tang era can hardly ignore the increasingly active roles that Neo-Confucians played in local society. It is now com-
monly accepted that the major voluntary and local institutions that Southern Song Neo-Confucians proposed and built, namely the community compact, the community granary, and private academies, were in fact alternatives to the Northern Song state-sponsored baojia 保甲 system of mutual surveillance and policing, the Green Sprouts (Qingmiao 青苗) farm-loan program, and a more integrated system of county and prefec-
tural government schools. These products of state activism were part of the New Policies initiated by Wang Anshi. In contrast to Wang, Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–93), a Southern Song Neo-Confucian master who came from the same prefecture as Wang, was a very different type of elite. According to Robert Hymes’s groundbreaking case study, Wang, the Northern Song reformist prime minister, was state-oriented, and Lu, the Southern Song Neo-Confucian, was concerned with local affairs and engaged in a localist strategy. The works of social historians were not strictly limited to Neo-Confucianism, but rather were concerned with how social changes after the Southern Song affected the ways in which Neo-Confucians organized themselves and how they perceived their role and that of the state. This focus on the social dimension of Neo-Confucian activism has provided a more complex picture of Neo-Confucianism, but it is still not complete.

Despite the contributions of social historians, the question remains: Did the Neo-Confucians have more than a social program to offer? The “learning of principle” (lixue 理學) also proposed a new way of understanding politics, especially the different roles to be occupied by the emperor and scholarly elites, according to Peter Bol. In order to comprehend this new political theory, it is necessary to study Neo-Confucian doctrine, particularly as it relates to cosmology and moral philosophy. As Bol has recently demonstrated in his work, a comprehensive survey of Neo-Confucianism is possible only when we integrate the analyses of their philosophy and their social activities. In short, only when the links between the Neo-Confucians’ philosophical system, social program, and political vision are established can a more complete picture of Neo-Confucianism be possible.

Institutional history can add another useful dimension to our understanding of Neo-Confucianism. For example, one important development that took place during the Southern Song concerned changes in the civil service examinations. From the perspective of institutional history,
Hilde de Weerdt demonstrates how teachers from both the Yongjia School and the Learning of the Way (that is, Neo-Confucians) shaped the examination by defining its content and standards, and how the institution of the exam served to increase teachers’ intellectual standing. De Weerdt further argues that the development of the examinations as an institution acted as a catalyst in the transformation of elite strategies between the two Songs, from a focus on state activism to a greater sensitivity towards the interests of local elites. Neo-Confucians from different eras and regions would react to the civil service examinations differently. Although her research is limited to the Southern Song, De Weerdt’s work reminds us to pay attention to the negotiations between the two groups.

Bol’s research also demonstrates that the Neo-Confucians’ social program was advocated mainly in the south during the Southern Song, in the period following the loss of the northern territory to the invading Jurchens. Bol suggests that the institutions that developed in the south most suited the economic conditions of the south, which had a higher level of commercial wealth and a greater number of well-to-do families. According to Bol, “Neo-Confucianism in the south spread among literati in local society and came to depend on private patronage from local literati and the occasional support of local officials.” This important characteristic of Neo-Confucian history is a result of the difference in literati orientations, Bol further argues, for in the south, Neo-Confucians had two options: they could either pursue a state-oriented career or rely on local resources; northern literati, however, had only the state to turn to.

Although Neo-Confucianism emerged during the Northern Song in north China, it gained widespread momentum as an innovative form of Confucian thinking as well as an influential social movement under the leadership of Zhu Xi in the Southern Song. For that reason, the focus of the above studies has been on the south. Taken together, these studies have shown that the spread of Neo-Confucianism was closely tied to its proponents’ involvement in the civil service examinations and the fact that the state retreated from actively setting a standard curriculum during that period. The Neo-Confucians’ metaphysical, educational, and political doctrines served as the foundation of this new social vision and method of networking. As southerners were equipped with greater private wealth, their various social programs were built upon a more commercialized and densely populated environment. The unprecedented number of
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candidates participating in the civil examinations in the south, together with a more vibrant commercial printing industry, led to an increased concern with local interests and an emphasis on volunteerism. The later development of Neo-Confucianism was understood to be moving along this track, despite its recurring cycle of low tides and subsequent revivals. However, in contrast to the Neo-Confucianism of the south, Neo-Confucianism in north China developed along a different trajectory. Furthermore, a general surface description of developments in Neo-Confucianism overshadows its internal diversity. More focused research on a particular group of Neo-Confucians, especially the group of northerners, will serve to refine our understanding of the subject.

Likewise, although Chang Woei Ong’s recent work on Guanzhong literati has increased our understanding of the complex nature of local history, his analysis focuses on long-term temporal changes and does not provide an in-depth study of a particular group. Perhaps the most important contribution of Ong’s study is his reminder of the need to define the “local” conceptually. In addition to being construed in spatial terms, the “local” can also be a consciousness that is displayed by historical actors in their construction of the tradition, history, and identity of a place. Using the three sets of relations (national/local, “official”/“unofficial,” central/regional), Ong convincingly demonstrates the changes that occurred in the communal self-consciousness among the Guangzhong literati over a millennium. In contrast to Ong’s work, this book is less concerned with the consciousness of identity towards a specific place. In fact, as we will see, Xue Xuan displayed no trace of localism.

Neo-Confucians of North China

During the Jin dynasty (1115–1234), the literati of north China had a very different intellectual inclination from the Southern Song Neo-Confucians. After the Mongols conquered both Jin and Southern Song to form the Yuan dynasty, the most prominent northern Neo-Confucian master was Xu Heng 許衡 (1209–81), best remembered for securing state sponsorship towards Neo-Confucianism. Peter Ditmanson has pointed out that leading northern Neo-Confucians in the Yuan such as Xu Heng and Hao Jing 郝經 (1223–75) sought to place the court at the center of the Neo-Confucian movement. Such court-oriented Neo-Confucian effort is in stark contrast to the movement in the south.
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gues that during the Yuan, both local tradition and dynastic discourses existed in the south, but the north saw only the dynastic discourse, indicating a court-centered, centripetal cultural order there. Chen understands this as very much a result of a long process of separation between Chinese political and cultural centers since the mid-Tang, and thus “the north in the Yuan was an area where the political and cultural centers were still envisioned as being identical.” Chen further points out that the limited avenues for political advancement of Han literati during the Yuan, especially the ceasing of the examination system as a major route to officialdom, represented an important factor in the emergence of a new cultural order. One result was that literati came to be connected through validation of each other’s reputations by members of the community itself.

I argue that during the first half of the Ming dynasty, northern scholars who also saw themselves as Neo-Confucians had a vision that was different from their southern counterparts—an alternative way of thinking and practicing Neo-Confucianism and a different means of constituting social networks. This alternative model is reflected in the attempt to enshrine Xue Xuan in the Temple to Confucius. The efforts made on behalf of Xue by his supporters shaped a new paradigm for Ming officials and scholars to evaluate a candidate’s worthiness for inclusion, as well as a new way of understanding the position of Ming masters in the history of Neo-Confucianism. Compared with the Yuan, north-south differences may not have been new in Ming China, but the ways in which these differences were conceived and the reasons behind the differences, not to mention their historical significance, were by no means identical. By the time of Xue Xuan, for example, the civil service examination was already fully reinstated as the major, if not only, respectable route to an official position in the civil bureaucracy. In my analysis of this northern alternative, I examine two major types of relations: kinship and intellectual.

It is widely acknowledged that the work of anthropologist Maurice Freedman and his followers on Chinese lineages has greatly impacted the study of Chinese history. At the same time, historians are now more cautious about the conclusions anthropologists reached, because they relied predominantly on interviews with living informants. Furthermore, Chinese anthropologists have focused their work almost exclusively on the southern provinces of Guangdong and Taiwan. Thus in terms of both the time period and geographical space of their work, anthropologists can
provide us with only a limited understanding of Chinese kinship organization. In addition, anthropologists’ emphasis on material property, especially corporate landholding, as the foundation of such organization, their understanding of burial rites and ancestor worship as derivative of political and economic activities, their assumption of a marginalized role for women, and their view that uxorilocai residence was undesirable, have all been challenged to different degrees. Social historians have stressed that a common feature of kinship groups in southern China during the Southern Song and Yuan was their localist and voluntary nature. Like the anthropologists, social historians such as Hymes and Walton have focused primarily on cases from the south.

Why should we study the north? Dominant lineages with considerable corporate holdings were not common in the north, and northern social elites did not view lineages as localist and voluntary organizations through which they could influence society. Without the strong centripetal force of lineages, Neo-Confucians could not rely upon kinship organization to support the proliferation of their teachings, even when their ancestor was a national figure for the dynasty. Xue Xuan and his descendents demonstrated other obvious differences with their southern counterparts. Contrasting sharply with southern Neo-Confucians, Xue Xuan saw the lineage as neither a building block for local society nor a level of organization for the display of local leadership. Kinship inclusivity was a means to social order in the south, but the Xues demonstrated an exclusivity that limits cultural prestige to an illustrious man’s direct line. The Xues, in this sense, acted in a more typically northern fashion, the characteristics of which can be seen in Susan Naquin’s study of the Lang-yeh Wangs, whose conception of kinship stressed the importance of status. And, to Xue Xuan, the statuses meaningful to a kinship organization were those bestowed by the state.

In addition to kinship, this book also discusses the different ways that northerners established and maintained intellectual relationships. In my analysis of this issue, I focus on Xue Xuan’s stance towards government schools and private academies, as well as his views on the nature of intellectual lineages. One major innovation of Zhu Xi and his Neo-Confucian fellows was the proliferation of private academies in the Southern Song. Together with the community compact and the community granary, the private academy was “at bottom a substitute or replacement, of a local and
voluntary kind, for a major state institution promoted from the center under the reforming regimes of the Northern Song. From the Southern Song onwards, the private academies were major platforms in which Neo-Confucian teachers and students congregated, and Zhu Xi’s role in this development was essential. Within the parameters set by Zhu, the Neo-Confucians enjoyed a high level of autonomy in pursuing a curriculum of moral and ethical education; they were not overtly concerned with the civil service examination, although passing it remained an objective for many. They also enjoyed autonomy in their finances since they relied on donations of land and cash instead of regular government funding. In terms of ritual practices, they enshrined past Neo-Confucian masters of their own choosing instead of the figures dictated by the state.

The relation between private academies and the official school system evolved over time. At certain times, the government employed a hostile attitude towards private academies and went to the extreme of implementing bans against them; at others, the government attempted to incorporate the academies into the state apparatus. But despite periodic government interference, Neo-Confucians of late imperial China continued to establish their own private academies. Such academies thus played a crucial role in perpetuating the career and experiences of leading Neo-Confucians in south China from the Southern Song through the Yuan and Ming. But such institutions were not as vibrant in north China, and they were nonexistent within the Hedong School tradition of the early Ming.

Besides the establishment of a scholastic space for intellectual activities, the mode teachers and students employed in their interpersonal relations is an important indicator of intellectual orientation. Was it the case that a direct master-disciple relation had to be formally established? How did members of the school imagine their tradition? Did the members share a common consciousness of lineage? In the early Ming, the Jinhua lineage of eastern Zhejiang utilized a mode of network that emphasized direct and personal transmission between masters and disciples. In other words, the members of the Jinhua intellectual lineage were bound not by kinship, but rather by academic ties. The shared consciousness of the Jinhua lineage as constituting the only authentic transmission from Zhu Xi following the Song is best exemplified by Fang Xiaoru, who promoted his own recognized status as the scion of Song Lian.
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The Jinhua intellectual lineage, however, was destroyed when Fang Xiaoru refused to cooperate with the usurper, Emperor Chengzu 成祖 (r. 1402–25), who seized the throne from his nephew in a civil war. Although the Jinhua lineage perished in the early Ming, the idea of a Jinhua-style lineage that connected Neo-Confucians to Zhu Xi through generations of master-disciple relations continued, and it served as an important indicator of the authentic transmission of Zhu Xi’s learning.

During Chengzu’s reign, a different type of scholar occupied the central positions at court. These men, predominantly of Jiangxi origin, were from families with prevailing traditions of inherited family learning in the Confucian Classics. They were unlike the Jinhua elites on at least two fronts: first, they did not promote Neo-Confucian–style social institutions that were voluntary and locally oriented; and second, they did not stress intellectual lineages or the affiliations established through master-disciple relationships. These Jiangxi men were ready to cooperate with the new emperor, who claimed the authority to define Neo-Confucian orthodoxy and impose its choices on all scholars taking the civil service examination, southern Neo-Confucians continued to build their networks and discuss the nature of true learning. Throughout the Ming, the construction of private academies was an enterprise predominantly carried out by southern Neo-Confucians. It was also common to find master-disciple relationships forming in these academies, and there were even attempts to create new intellectual schools in the south, as evidenced by the case of Wu Yubi 吳與弼 (1391–1469). But this familiar narrative cannot be applied to north China during the Ming.

Xue and his Hedong School were different from their southern counterparts in significant ways. Xue did not believe that a master-disciple relationship was necessary in the quest of “learning for one’s self.” This belief was closely related to his philosophy. In Chapter 2 of this study, I analyze two of the major themes in Xue’s philosophy, the “Transmission of the Way” (Daotong 道統) and “Restoring Nature” (Fuxing 復性).
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This analysis lays the foundation for understanding Xue’s denial of the need for a specific master-disciple relationship in one’s quest for Neo-Confucian truth. As a consequence, he felt no need to construct a network of intellectual schools based on the transmission of a certain body of knowledge from a common master. This denial of the importance of concrete master-disciple relationships was a key feature of the northern alternative offered by Xue, and it no doubt limited the development of the Hedong School. Another major difference between Xue and his southern counterparts, and even the Song predecessors whom he revered, can be found in his indifference towards private academies. Xue did not build an academy, nor did he compose a dedicatory inscription for one, even though this was a common practice among southern Neo-Confucians. Instead, his gaze was on the state. Xue saw government schools not only as training grounds for potential state agents, but also as avenues for teaching the Neo-Confucian Way, and particularly his own theory of “Restoring Nature.” This no doubt represented a clear break with the Neo-Confucian tradition of the Southern Song. It was these two characteristics that marked the Hedong School as an alternative to the southern model.

Xue Xuan and the Hedong School

In scholarship to date, three approaches prevail in the study of Xue and his Hedong tradition. Scholars employing the first approach have uncritically accepted the negative evaluation of Xue made by Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–95) in the late Ming.48 Ironically, Huang’s opinion of Xue is largely the manifestation of his own partisan views. This group includes leading Chinese scholars such as Qian Mu and Rong Zhaozu, and their views have had a great impact on the field. Because of their influence, Xue has conventionally been treated as an unimportant early Ming Neo-Confucian, with nothing genuinely exciting or significant to contribute to the development of Chinese philosophy.49 I discuss Huang’s partisan point of view and influence over modern scholars in Chapter 1. Eager to elevate Xue’s status, scholars adopting the second approach have responded to Huang’s criticism by erroneously claiming that Xue was an “underdeveloped materialist.” The recurrent theme dominating their discussions is that Xue Xuan proposed that “principle” (li 理) and “material-
force” (qi 氣) are one, a view that opposes Zhu Xi’s dualism. They contend that Xue Xuan’s contribution to Ming Neo-Confucianism lies in the unification of li and qi, which opened the way for the “learning of material-force” (qixue 氣學) of Luo Qinshun 羅欽順 (1465–1547) and Wang Tingxiang 王廷相 (1474–1544). Yet, they have also noted Xue’s inconsistency on this issue. Not surprisingly given Xue’s view of “material force,” they labeled him an “underdeveloped materialist,” which is one of the most positive evaluations Chinese researchers can award to pre-Marxist figures.50 The third approach went to the extreme of fabricating a connection, called the “Transmission of the Way in the Yellow and Fen Rivers Region” (Hefen daotong 河汾道統), between Xue Xuan and the Confucians Wang Tong 王通 (584–617) and Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819) of the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties when, in fact, there was no broad intellectual similarity among the ideas of the three thinkers.51 The first approach is influential throughout the field and has almost a “textbook-like” status, and the second approach is pursued mainly by scholars from the Shanxi region. The third approach is the latest and is still minor and isolated.

A common criticism advanced by many of these scholars concerns the inconsistency in Xue’s philosophy, in particular, regarding the relation between principle and material-force. I argue, however, that such a reading misunderstands Xue’s thought and has resulted from the failure of scholars to consider the full development of Xue’s philosophical views. Xue’s major philosophical writing is the Reading Notes (Dushulu 讀書錄), which consists of two different parts written during distinct periods of Xue’s life.52 Scholars indiscriminately cite from the two parts of the Reading Notes when analyzing Xue’s philosophy, and thus mistake the traces of Xue’s intellectual development as philosophical inconsistency. This book pays careful attention to Xue’s different positions on major Neo-Confucian issues over time, thereby providing a more complete picture of Xue’s larger search for unity of principle and material-force. The analysis contained in Chapter 2 is made possible only by carefully treating the two parts of the Reading Notes separately instead of collapsing them into one single work. A more accurate understanding of Xue’s philosophy helps us understand the relation between his theoretical views and his stance on state institutions and community organizations.
The existence of these three prevailing approaches has led many scholars to overlook the great influence of the Hedong School and interpret Xue’s thinking as lacking in innovation, while others focus on what they perceive as inconsistency in his philosophy. In Chapter 1, I describe Huang’s marginalization of Xue and provide a more complete account of Xue’s life. My discussion there serves as a foundation for my analysis of the two parts of the Reading Notes and the history of Xue’s learning.

The close analysis of philosophical doctrine remains important in the study of Neo-Confucianism, and Chapter 2 is devoted to such an analysis. An in-depth study of Xue’s philosophy remedies the common error made by conventional scholarship of interpreting his philosophy as inconsistent. The discussion in that chapter also reveals the philosophical foundation for Xue’s emphasis on state authority and its institutions, which shaped his ideas on kinship organization and intellectual networks—ideas that were significantly different from those of his southern counterparts. Kinship organization and intellectual networks are the two main themes for Chapters 3 and 4 respectively. Together with Chapter 2, these chapters demonstrate that for any study of Neo-Confucianism to be consequential, neither philosophy nor social history can be ignored, and furthermore they ought to be connected in meaningful ways. An isolated survey of Xue’s philosophical discussions on central Neo-Confucian themes would probably reach the conclusion that his ideas closely resemble those of Fang Xiaoru and Wu Yubi (since all three belong to the ChengZhu tradition) and overlook the important differences in how they practiced Neo-Confucianism.

Xue Xuan deserves recognition in the history of Neo-Confucianism, not only because he was the first Ming master to be enshrined in the Kongmiao, a long process that I discuss in Chapter 5, nor because his Hedong School was understood by Ming and Qing scholars to represent the ChengZhu tradition in the Ming, nor even because the Hedong School was most influential in a region that covers core areas of three northern provinces, but most importantly because he and his Hedong School promoted a different way of practicing and thinking about Neo-Confucianism. This alternative model from north China deviates from
the common narrative of Neo-Confucianism that we are familiar with, a narrative that gives unequal attention to the south.

The last point I must make in this Introduction concerns the book’s title. The comparison of the southern model and its northern alternative in this book provides a more complete picture of Chinese social and intellectual history. But I must stress that by calling the northern model an “alternative,” I do not thereby intend to validate the southern model as the norm of the Chinese past. The northern model was an alternative only insofar as modern scholarship has been overly concerned with the study of the south, leading to a scholarly landscape in which the south has come to represent China in its totality.