Introduction

In about 1580, the English courtier, soldier, and poet Sir Philip Sidney (1554–86) wrote *A Defence of Poesie*, advocating the superiority of poetry over philosophy and history:

The philosopher, therefore, and the historian are they which would win the goal, the one by precept, the other by example; but both, not having both, do both halt. For the philosopher, setting down with thorny arguments the bare rule, is so hard of utterance, and so misty to be conceived, that one that hath no other guide but him shall wade in him until he be old, before he shall find sufficient cause to be honest. For his knowledge standeth so upon the abstract and general, that happy is that man who may understand him, and more happy that can apply what he doth understand. On the other side the historian, wanting the precept, is so tied, not to what should be, but to what is; to the particular truth of things, and not to the general reason of things; that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine. Now doth the peerless poet perform both; for whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done, he giveth a perfect picture of it, by some one by whom he pre-supposeth it was done, so as he coupleth the general notion with the particular example.¹

In the pursuit of knowledge, philosophy deals with universal rules, while history is tied to particular examples of what *is* rather than what might be; it is poetry that can transcend the limitations of both and bring obscure ideas to light with its imaginative and illuminating potency. Poets are equipped with the ultimate power, the ability to illustrate the universal precepts expounded by the philosopher with particular historical examples, making them truly relevant for humankind. Thus poets rise above not only philosophers and historians but also astronomers, geometricians, arithmeticians, musicians, lawyers, grammarians, rhetoricians, logicians, physicians, and metaphysicians.² Poetry provides the best instrument for articulating the workings of the universe as they relate to the human world.

Sidney’s *Defence* was written in response to the tract by Stephen Gosson (1554–1624) titled *The Schoole of Abuse: Containing a Pleasant Invective against Poets, Pipers, Players, Jesters and Such Like Caterpillers of the Commonwealth*. The work, which he had dedicated to Sidney without the latter’s permission, accused poets and dramatists of offering only sensory pleasures to their audiences and failing to motivate them toward fulfillment of their moral duties. Gosson’s attack has been interpreted as deriving from a Puritanical disdain for all forms of fictive literature and art.³ However, the separation of fictive literature in general, and poetry in particular, from the pursuit of virtue, and Sidney’s powerful rebuttal arguing for the recognition of poetry’s value in human endeavors, were both products of a new intellectual trend in Renaissance Europe. In an era when challenges to the once all-encompassing theology of state religion were intensifying, Renaissance intellectuals sought inspiration from the study of ancient Greece and Rome. The result was a “rediscovery” of the wisdom of antiquity, on the basis of which Renaissance intellectuals articulated new visions of humanism, enthusiastically and

³. For a study of Gosson’s *The Schoole of Abuse* that reexamines his contributions and aims to clarify certain misconceptions about the man and the work, see Kinney, “Stephen Gosson’s Art of Argument,” pp. 41–54.
critically reconceptualizing and reassessing every branch of human knowledge.

Seen in this context, it is not difficult to appreciate that Sidney’s call for recognizing the power of poetry was in fact a plea to reexamine the entire corpus of human knowledge that mattered most to Renaissance intellectuals. About half a century earlier, in the territories of the Ming dynasty, the scholar-official and man of letters Li Mengyang 李夢陽 (1473–1530) embarked on a similar attempt to defend poetry against its critics, citing the authority of Confucius:

[Confucius said,] “Young man, why don’t you learn poetry?” [This shows that] it is not true to say that Confucius did not value poetry. [Confucius said,] “If one’s word is not well articulated, it will not spread far.” [This shows that] it is not true to say that Confucius did not value prose. But in later ages, it was claimed that prose and poetry are lesser skills. Why? Is it not because [the standard of] today’s prose does not match that of the ancients, and [the standard of] today’s poetry does not match that of the ancients? Senior Grand Secretary Liu, upon learning about people studying these [i.e., poetry and prose], would harshly reprimand them, saying, “Even if one is able to write like Li Bai and Du Fu, he remains a mere inebriate.” Now, were Li Bai and Du Fu mere inebriates? Furthermore, is it true to claim that there was no poet who surpassed Li Bai and Du Fu? There is a proverb about “Not eating for fear of choking.” This is exactly what Liu is doing!

4. For an ambitious attempt to compare and contrast the European and Chinese perceptions of the past and their implications on intellectual life from 1500 to 1800 through an analysis of antiquarianism, seen roughly as equivalent to the “bronze and stone studies” (jinshi xue 金石學) in the Chinese tradition, see the essays in Miller and Louis, *Antiquarianism and Intellectual Life*.

Some in early sixteenth-century China characterized writing poetry as a useless skill, dismissing the greatest poets as drunkards who cared only about appealing to the senses. To fully appreciate Li Mengyang’s defense of the genre, we need to situate it within the context of his career. As evinced by the following statement by Li’s affinal relative Zhu Anxian 朱安澆 (n.d.), Li was himself a victim of the senior grand secretary’s prejudice:

The senior grand secretary in question was the northerner Liu Jian 劉健 (1433–1526), whom Li Mengyang met at the capital in 1498 before his official posting. We will return to this episode later, in chapter 1. Meanwhile, we can identify three major issues in the passages quoted. First, Li’s understanding of the development of poetry invokes a vision that could be termed “archaist,” in the sense that it sees the poetry of the contemporary period as less than ideal and looks to the distant past for models. Since the time of Confucius, however, looking to history for inspiration has been so common that to be analytically meaningful, the use of “archaism” in this book will be more specific. I use it to refer to a formalistic approach to reintroducing the essence of ancient writings in contemporary times, based on the belief that it is within

the form, language, and style of writing, rather than in its content, that we may locate its true value.

Second, Liu Jian’s attack on poetry and Li Mengyang’s defense converge in the view that literati learning could be classified into different categories, each with its own essence and expression. Their differences arose because Liu privileged certain forms of learning over others while Li sought to legitimize the categories under attack. Finally, the passages testify to the existence of a belief in Ming times that differences in learning could be understood as manifestations of regional disparities.

This study of Li Mengyang will consider the central issues that emerge from his defense of poetry, turning from them to address larger questions about Ming intellectual history. The current textbook treatments of Ming poetry—and prose—generally portray a neat development beginning with the early figures Song Lian 宋濂 (1310–81) and Liu Ji 刘基 (1311–75), whose work was succeeded by the so-called Cabinet style of the grand secretariat and Hanlin academicians. The later development of the “Cabinet” phase saw the ascendancy of Li Dongyang 李東陽 (1447–1516). Although a prominent member of the Cabinet-style writers himself, Li embarked on rectifying the court-centered, overly ornate, and excessively flattering tones of Cabinet writing. He gathered a group of younger writers and formed the Chaling 茶陵 school, named after his hometown. Li Mengyang was initially a protégé of Li Dongyang and joined the Chaling group in his early years, but during the first decade of the 1500s Li Mengyang parted ways with his mentor, initiating, with other members of the so-called Former Seven Masters (Qian qizi 前七子), the first wave of the archaist movement (fugu 復古, literally “restoring the ancient way”). They were best known for rejecting the Neo-Confucian Daoxue 道學 (Learning of the Way) approach to wen 文 (literary writing), advocating instead the learning of Qin-Han prose and High Tang poetry. This led to charges that they were encouraging blind imitation of archaic literary forms. In response, a Tang-Song school emerged that advocated learning from the masterpieces of the Tang-Song period, urging aspiring writers to
look beyond forms and pursue the Way. Its heavy Daoxue flavor drew criticism, however, from leaders of a new wave of the archaist movement, the so-called Later Seven Masters (Hou qizi 後七子). With the coming of the late Ming protocapitalist age, a desire for free-spirited self-expression permeated literati circles, giving rise to a “romantic” twist in literature. The literary theories of the Gong’an 公安 and Jingling 竟陵 schools best represent this late Ming pursuit of individual freedom. Toward the end of the dynasty, however, deep political, social, and cultural crises led scholar-officials to reflect on the unrestrained and idiosyncratic approach to literature in the past decades, mediations that paved the way for the third and final wave of the archaist movement to take center stage, only to be cut short by the Manchu conquest in 1644.

This is the standard summary of the period. One of my objectives is to show, however, that such a neat arrangement of schools and trends of literary thought cannot do justice to the complexity of the Ming literary world. To do better, we need to go beyond the Ming period and adopt a long-term perspective, situating Li Mengyang’s quest within the context of intellectual transitions since the Song dynasty (960–1279). While many intellectual and cultural developments in the Ming could certainly be traced to earlier periods of Chinese history, we begin our inquiry with the Song because Li was mainly reacting against Song visions of learning. At the other end, we will conclude our inquiry in the late seventeenth century. As we shall see in the conclusion, that is the period when, on the one hand, leading intellectuals were reassessing the Ming legacy and, on the other hand, the intellectual world was already moving in a new direction that made certain assumptions and concerns shared by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century intellectuals appear marginal and irrelevant.

The late Ming–early Qing period is also important because it was the environment that formed the lens through which May Fourth intellectuals in the early twentieth century would read Li Mengyang, employing his largely negative reputation at that time to construct their own antitraditionalist discourse. Leading May Fourth figures, especially Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885–1967) and
Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895–1976), were unequivocal in championing the new romantic literary trend that they thought had its origin in the late Ming period. Mostly attributed to the Gong’an and Jingling schools, this trend advocated the concept of “innate sensibility” (xingling 性靈) that sought the “liberation of the self” (gexing jiefang 個性解放) from traditional values that hindered the free expression of personal emotions and aspirations. In the process, Zhou and Lin accepted Gong’an and Jingling criticisms of Li Mengyang and the archaist course, charging Li and his admirers with encouraging blind imitation in writing. Although not all during the May Fourth period agreed with Zhou’s and Lin’s affirmative interpretation of a late Ming romantic vision of literature, they nevertheless by and large concurred that the archaist movements were backward-looking and deserved to be condemned. The May Fourth legacy is still alive today, and it has tainted our understanding of Li Mengyang and the archaist vision.

It is not the main objective of this book to “clear the name” of Li Mengyang. Rather, I am more interested in delineating the historical setting within which Li and his peers operated and explaining why certain modes of thought were better received than others. In other words, after comprehensively examining Li’s intellectual scheme, I look into how and why it emerged at a particular historical juncture and how this affected its influence (or lack thereof) afterward, thereby illustrating some of the intellectual transitions that took place from the Song to the Ming.

This approach will require us to recognize that Li Mengyang was more than a literary theorist and writer. Although my work is profoundly inspired by studies of Chinese literature, unlike almost all other scholars writing in any language, I will not treat Li solely as a literary figure. As it will become clear, Li was a multidimensional thinker who made serious claims about cosmology, ethics, politics, ritual studies, and history. The fact that these aspects of Li’s thought were largely ignored even during his lifetime should not deter us from asking what he was trying to achieve.

7. Mao Fuguo, Xiandai wenxue shi shang de wan-Ming wenxue sichao lunzheng.
We need to move beyond the conventional approach of treating Li simply as a writer and a literary critic. In fact, why Li has been perceived only as a literary figure is a question that calls for exploration.

That being said, I am not suggesting that Li Mengyang did not make distinctions among different branches of knowledge. Instead, as I have just argued, Li explicitly insisted that real distinctions existed and that it was necessary to compartmentalize learning into different categories. Just as during the Renaissance, when a renewed interest in certain classical scholarship signaled the rise of a new understanding and reorganization of knowledge, the emergence of Li’s ideas in the early sixteenth century also hints at a cultural shift in how intellectuals viewed true knowledge.

**Unity and Diversity of Learning**

In his study of the late Ming figure Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551–1602), Peter Bol observes that Hu was representative of a late Ming trend that departed from the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian position—named after the Cheng brothers, Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–85) and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), and further developed by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200)—which by Ming times had been enshrined as state orthodoxy. The Daoxue vision was one of unity and coherence. It assumed that there existed in the distant past a golden age when there was one single source of knowledge that

8. The only studies I am aware of that attempt to deal with the different aspects of Li Mengyang’s scholarship are (1) a recent Chinese-language Ph.D. dissertation that unfortunately devotes only one chapter out of eight to the nonliterary aspects of his life; see Guo Ping-an, “Li Mengyang yanjiu” (the dissertation was later published as a book: see also Guo Ping-an, *Li Mengyang wenyi sixiangyanjiu*); (2) Yang Haibo, *Li Mengyang jiqi shige chuangzuo yanjiu*, which deals mainly with Li Mengyang’s poetry but does contain a chapter on Li’s nonliterary thought; and (3) Liu Po, *Li Mengyang yu Mingdai shitan*, which deals primarily with Li’s place in the history of Ming poetry but contains a chapter on Li’s philosophy and political thought.
authority on learning—an authority that could be revived as a way of solving contemporary problems. This golden age was characterized by a harmonious civilization in which every part was interconnected in a coherent manner. The fact that schools of knowledge had long been divided did not go unnoticed, but Daoxue advocates felt that the contemporary situation in which diversity ruled was less than ideal, and could be rectified by introducing a uniform knowledge system derived from the golden age. Bol further argues that the search for unity was common among other leading Song thinkers, even if they disagreed sharply with Daoxue on what was superior about the past.

In contrast, late sixteenth-century intellectuals generally did not begin with the assumption of unity and were not interested in explaining how all things in the world were ontologically connected. They appreciated broadness in learning and believed that dividing literati knowledge into different fields was the necessary first step toward establishing continuity with a multifarious past and creating a new order. In the end, the era witnessed an intellectual shift that favored understanding the natural world and human society as they are, rather than how they should be. To cite an example, a renewed interest in the teachings of the “hundred schools” (zhuzixue 諸子學) during this period illustrates how late Ming intellectuals envisioned and endorsed the existence of multiple authorities in learning.

Bol further points out that Hu Yinglin was inspired by his mentor Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–90), leader of the second wave of the Ming archaist movement. For our purpose, it is important to note that Wang was in turn deeply influenced by Li Mengyang. Thus, since Daoxue was enshrined as state orthodoxy in the early years of the dynasty, it was Li Mengyang’s generation that saw the first major challenge to it and its method of configuring

10. Wei Zongyu, “Ming-Qing shiqi zhuzixue yanjiu jianlun.”
11. For an important study of Wang Shizhen’s literary theory and practice and how he actually went beyond the narrow definition of archaism, see Ham mond, “Beyond Archaism.”
literati learning. In hindsight, challenges to Daoxue in the early sixteenth century by no means brought it to an end. In fact, it was transformed and emerged with a new way of understanding knowledge and its relations with the cosmos and human nature under Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), the great philosopher, statesman, military general, and friend of Li Mengyang. The rise of Wang Yangmingism constitutes the most fascinating story of Ming intellectual history, so much so that an authoritative analyst of Chinese history has claimed that no Ming thinker is worth studying before Wang Yangming.12

Of course, we now know that the early Ming was neither an intellectual vacuum nor a period filled with mindless followers of the orthodox Cheng-Zhu stance.13 Nonetheless, Wang Yangming’s dominance was undeniable. With his new interpretations of central Daoxue concepts, Wang provoked countless intellectuals of later generations, regardless of whether they were in agreement with his ideas or whether they shared his interest in Daoxue philosophy, to rethink the basic assumptions of whatever cultural and intellectual endeavors they were undertaking.

The issues that Wang Yangming raised were many and profound, but the fundamental ethical question underlying his philosophy was this: At a time when Daoxue’s prescription for arriving at an ideal world of unity and coherence was becoming less convincing, how could one grasp universal and eternal moral knowledge as a guide to action? The answer, Wang argued, lay in an innate ability within the moral mind of each and every individual to exercise correct judgment. This sort of assertion greatly empowered the individual in the pursuit of morality. It is significant that, though this was never Wang’s intention, his vision of moral self-cultivation became an important source of inspiration for idiosyncratic thinkers such as Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602), whom William Theodore de Bary labels as an arch individualist.14

12. Qian Mu, Song-Ming lixue gaishu, p. 254. Contrary to his own assertion, Qian does mention several early Ming figures in the book.
13. Wing-tsit Chan, “The Ch’eng-Chu School of Early Ming.”
Whether we should employ the word “individualism,” a term loaded with culture-specific connotations, is of course open to debate, but de Bary is certainly right to argue that late Ming intellectual culture was characterized by a strong commitment to individualistic expressions in all sorts of intellectual and cultural ventures. Jacob Burckhardt, the nineteenth-century historian, described Renaissance intellectuals as individuals who were not afraid of singularity. One did not fear “being and seeming unlike his neighbors.” To a certain degree, late Ming intellectuals exhibited a comparable state of mind. As Pauline Lee has recently argued in the case of Li Zhi, while he was far from celebrating the idea of the atomistic individual severed from others, he nevertheless tremendously valued the diversity of human talent and temperament. Indeed, Li Zhi once said to Guan Zhidao 管志道 (1536–1608),

However, there is something that I would like to tell you. I hope you will not insist that I reply to your questions concerning scholarship, for once we engage in discussing scholarship, it will inevitably bury all kinds of fun. As human beings, we naturally have some skill that allows us to excel in the world, why is there a need to add this [to the existing package]? Just as Master Kongtong [Li Mengyang] and Master Yangming were of the same generation and born in the same year, one excelled in moral learning and the other in literary writing. [The achievements of] both men were equally subtle and bright, why must we consider the ability to also discuss moral learning as essential? In fact, is not the respect that Master Kongtong received no less than that accorded Master Yangming?

第有所欲言者, 幸兄勿談及問學之事。說學問反埋卻種種可喜可樂之趣。人生亦自有雄世之具, 何必添此一種也? 如空同先生與陽明先生同世同生, 一為道德, 一為文章, 千萬世後, 兩先生精光具在, 何必更兼談道德耶? 人之敬服空同先生者豈減於陽明先生哉？

15. Burckhardt, Civilization of the Renaissance, p. 82.
This letter from Li Zhi was an attempt to stop any further discussion that Guan had initiated, for he knew that Guan was trying to challenge him. Note the way Li Zhi makes a clear distinction between moral learning and literary writing, and then follows up with a comparison of Wang Yangming and Li Mengyang. Guan did not take this distinction gracefully, for he believed that Li Zhi saw him primarily as a literary figure like Li Mengyang rather than a moral philosopher like Wang Yangming. In rebuttal, Guan claims that his learning was closer to that of Wang. Regardless of what Li Zhi thought about Guan, in his view Li Mengyang and Wang Yangming were the authoritative figures in their respective fields, and it was unnecessary to demand that a leader in literature, such as Li Mengyang, concurrently be an expert in moral philosophy. Excellence in literature alone was reason for admiration, so Li’s impact on the literati world was no less substantial than that of Wang, who excelled in moral learning. Clearly, this exchange between Li Zhi and Guan Zhidao points to the fact that late Ming literati were accustomed to interpreting the difference between Li Mengyang and Wang Yangming as a manifestation of the division of learning. Classifying people into different categories according to their learning certainly has a long history, but I shall argue that the ways late Ming literati thought about the division of learning were often historically specific and articulated within the intellectual milieu created during the mid-Ming period. That was the time when Cheng-Zhu Daoxue was seen as inadequate in providing a satisfactory explanation for the existence of diversity in human knowledge and experience. Leading intellectuals, including Li Mengyang, Wang Yangming, and many others, then made it a priority in their intellectual pursuits to propose alternative ways of understanding diversity and dealing with it.

Wang Yangming’s philosophy, with its emphasis on moral subjectivity reworked from Daoxue discourse, provided sixteenth- and seventeenth-century intellectuals with a theoretical framework

for embracing diversity while sharing a set of established norms. Yet it is well known that Wang came to this position only around 1508, when he was banished to a remote area in southwestern China. As Wei-ming Tu points out, Wang had been through a stretch of time in his earlier life when he explored widely but was unable to settle on a school of learning that could fulfill his aspirations. Interestingly, “ancient-style writings” (guwenci 古文詞) were among his pursuits. Apparently he was motivated by Li Mengyang when both men met in Beijing in 1502, but he eventually decided that was not what he wanted.19

Thus, even before Wang Yangming’s ascendency, Li Mengyang had managed to convince a group of promising scholars in their thirties and forties to share his vision of literary writing, in particular, and literati culture in general. Though some of them, including Wang Yangming, eventually embarked on different intellectual journeys, Li had articulated persuasive insight in addressing the central concerns of early sixteenth-century intellectuals. However, we now know that, quite contrary to Li Zhi’s assertion, Li Mengyang was much less a source of inspiration for late Ming intellectuals than Wang Yangming. Apart from his views on literature, Li was unable to entice later Ming intellectuals to take him seriously. Why did his influence falter?

North versus South, Li Mengyang versus Wang Yangming

Li Zhi’s juxtaposition of Li Mengyang and Wang Yangming reminds us that to understand why Li faltered, we have to reflect on what led to the success of Wang Yangming. Although no one can claim to fully explain his rise, by looking at the factors that contributed to the eventual marginalization of some of his contemporaries, we may gain a fresh perspective on the enthusiasm that welcomed what Wang had to offer.

To meaningfully explain Wang’s success, we need to take into account regional factors. Consider the following comment by the scholar-artist Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636) in a preface written for the publication of the literary works of Luo Qinshun 羅欽順 (1465–1547):

During the Chenghua and Hongzhi reign [1465–1505], every teacher professed the same Way and every scholar studied the same learning. The books of the Cheng-Zhu school were enshrined in the Office of Institutional History, and that was supposedly a time of great unity. Scholars who engaged in literary writing then held steadfastly to the styles of Ouyang Xiu and Zeng Gong, and their styles were ordinary and constant. It was Beidi [Li Mengyang or, literally, “Northern Land”] who began to change the contemporary writings by advocating learning from the ancient styles. It was Dongyue [Wang Yangming; literally, “Eastern Yue”] who began to change the learning of principles by advocating following the heart. But Beidi has retained few adherents, while Dongyue, relying on his official status and reputation, was able to add weight to his unique theory, so much so that it almost uprooted the learning of Zhou Dunyi, the Cheng brothers, and Zhu Xi.

In this piece Dong Qichang was lamenting that the authority of Cheng-Zhu Daoxue and Song literary masters was being eroded by the rise of Wang Yangming and Li Mengyang, respectively. In particular, he applauded Luo Qinshun for challenging Wang’s learning, which he thought was really Chan Buddhism in disguise. But my main concern is how Dong, like Li Zhi, made a clear distinction between the different fields of learning that

21. It should be noted that Dong was not hostile to Chan Buddhism; he discussed it approvingly throughout his literary collection. What Dong objected
Wang Yangming and Li Mengyang represent. We also find Dong attributing the success of Wang and the failure of Li to two factors: disparities in official accomplishment (xunming 勳名) and reputation (diwang 地望). I am primarily concerned with the second factor that Dong highlights. The term diwang was originally used in medieval times to refer to the reputation of the great clans, which were identified by their place of origin, for instance Zhaojun Li 趙郡李 and Taiyuan Wang 太原王. Hence, Dong seems to be suggesting that Wang owed his success to his glamorous family background. But notice that Dong uses two geographic terms, beidi and dongyue, which were often used by Ming-Qing writers to refer to Li and Wang. Beidi was the old name of Qingyang 慶陽 in present-day Gansu Province, the hometown of Li Mengyang. Dongyue, the old name for eastern Zhejiang, was Wang Yangming’s home region. Coupling this with the notion of diwang, a term that also carries geographic connotation, it seems as if Dong was inviting his readers to consider regional disparity as an explanation for the difference in the reception that the two men received. Regardless of whether this was really what Dong intended to do in this passage, we will see that Li’s learning was often thought to be “northern” in nature and in opposition to the southern writers.

Certainly, the rhetoric of a north-south divide was not a Ming invention. Xiaofei Tian has shown that the discourse on the north-south division that persists into modern times—that the north is tough, harsh, and austere while the south is warm, soft, sensuous—were first formed and crystallized during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period and found their way into the consciousness to was that, at least from his perspective, Wang seemed to confuse Daoxue with Chan.

22. Wang Yangming’s family traced its origin to Wang Dao 王導 (276–339), an important Eastern Jin dynasty statesman. Wang Yangming’s father, Wang Hua 王華 (1446–1522), was the optimus of the 1481 metropolitan examination.

23. It is worth noting that the north-south divide featured prominently in Dong Qichang’s own conception of literati culture, and he is well known for his division of Chinese painting into northern and southern “schools.” See Ho, “Tung Ch’i-chang’s New Orthodoxy.”
of the Sui-Tang political and cultural elites. The binaries of classi-
cal learning and literary achievement, military and civil, and sub-
stance and form were all employed in this period to denote the
essential differences between the cultures of north and south.24

The founding of the Song and the full implementation of the
civil service examination as the most important avenue for select-
ing officials added a new dimension to the rhetoric of the north-
south divide. Now, the focus moved to the following questions:
Who, northerners or southerners, given their distinct character-
istics and education, was better equipped to serve the state, and
was the civil service examination designed to address this issue
adequately? A major debate erupted between Ouyang Xiu (1007–72), a southerner, and Sima Guang (1019–86), a
northerner, over whether regional quotas should be put in place
to ensure a more fair selection process. The debate again high-
lighted the distinction made between northerners and southerners
according to their different characters (form versus substance)
and their preferences for different types of learning (literary ver-
sus classical).25 As we shall see in chapter 1, Ming debates con-
cerning the quota system continued along these lines and formed
the background against which Li Mengyang issued his criticism
of Liu Jian. Because the examination system in the Song marked
the beginning of a new way of tying the literati to the state, thus
changing the way learned men viewed their role in the state sys-
tem, our discussion of the north-south divide will also begin with
the Song, so as to put Ming’s discussions of this topic in a more
historically specific perspective.

It is important to note from the start that throughout the his-
tory of China, the line that divides north from south is constantly
reinterpreted.26 I will adhere largely to the boundary used for

qucai zhong de nanbei diyu zhi zheng.”
26. Tang Changru, for instance, has shown that in third- and fourth-century
discussions about the differences in scholarship, the Yellow River was marked as
the line that divided north and south. See Tang Changru, “Du Baopuzi tuilun
nanbei xuefeng de yitong.”
determining the Ming regional quota system for the civil service examination (see chapter 1), for this was the most common way that Ming elites referred to the north-south divide.

Influenced by the ways in which Ming elites made sweeping generalizations about north-south disparities, some modern scholars have used Li Mengyang’s northern identity to explain his poetic style and orientation. A common view is that Li’s poetry is characterized by its masculine and “thick” attributes, which differ sharply from the refined and delicate style of the southern poets. However, such an essentialist and impressionistic framework cannot do justice to either Li Mengyang or his southern counterparts. In Li’s works we can certainly find poems resembling the so-called southern style, and in the southern poets’ works we find “northern” features.

Nonetheless, regional classification of this sort is important for several reasons. First, it is obvious that the north, and the south, for that matter, can be further divided into many subregions that are vastly different in all sorts of ways. But each of the two regions still displays certain administrative, social, cultural, and economic traits that allow us to consider it as a generally coherent unit in comparison to the other. For example, it is commonly known that environmental conditions in regions north of the Huai River were unfavorable for rice production, but as Timothy Brook recently noted, ecological constraints did not deter some Ming-Qing statecraft activists from trying to introduce rice production in northern China. They called for stronger state intervention in the local society, as sophisticated irrigation systems had to be set up to ensure a good supply of water. This created a set of state-society relations unlike those in the south. There are many other examples. The point is that, collectively, these findings clearly suggest that we can consider north-south contrasts without assuming homogeneity within a region.

27. For an example of the research built on such assumptions, see Bai, “Beifang zhengtong yu Jiangnan bianzi.”
Second, it has been argued by some that northern and southern political, social, and cultural elites in the Song-Ming period differed in certain aspects of their intellectual outlook. It would have been difficult a decade ago to test their findings on a micro level because local social and cultural history had focused mostly on the south and we knew relatively little about northern elite communities. In recent years, a growing body of literature that adopts a comparative perspective has not only advanced our knowledge of the cultural landscape of north China but also made it possible for us to establish a firm foundation for conducting meaningful comparisons. Collectively, these recent works demonstrate some general differences between northern and southern literati culture and vision.

This is not to subscribe to some sort of essentialist depiction of regional culture suggesting that all northerners (or all southerners) would necessarily think, write, and behave in an identical manner. In fact, given how frequently people crossed geographical boundaries, it would be absurd to assume that an individual’s worldview would definitely be bound by his place of origin. The point is that despite vast differences in the intellectual orientations of individuals, most northern literati did share certain concerns and assumptions that could be compared and contrasted with those of southerners. There were of course exceptions, but the general contrasts between northern and southern intellectual inclinations are still discernable. My objective is to examine Li

29. For some prominent examples, see Liu Shipei, “Nanbei xuepai butong lun”; Qian Mu, *Guoshi dagang*, pp. 707–85; Xiao, “Zhongguo jinshi qianqi nanbei fazhande qiyi yu tonghe.”

30. Most earlier works on northern China cover only the Qing (especially the nineteenth century) and Republican periods. For some examples, see Duara, *Culture, Power and the State*; Esherick, *Origins of the Boxer Uprising*, esp. chap. 1; Cohen, “Lineage Organization in North China”; Pomeranz, *Making of a Hinterland*.

Mengyang’s thought and its legacy within the context of such differences. In particular, the subsequent chapters will focus on explicating a major disparity between northern and southern literati in their vision of their relationship to the state. Building on previous scholarship, I shall establish that the state featured more prominently in the social and cultural lives of the northern literati in general, and explain what this implies for our understanding of Li Mengyang and his legacy.

Third, employing the rhetoric of the north-south divide was a common way for Ming intellectuals to make sense of differences in poetic style as well as divisions in literati learning. My goal is to examine the political, social, cultural, and geographical settings that produced such rhetoric. I contend that the general divide between north and south, besides being an actual manifestation of certain social, economic, cultural, and intellectual phenomena, was also a constructed idea that contributed to the shaping of intellectual developments.

Thus, this study deals with three different layers of north-south division. The first concerns the general differences among the ecological, economic, administrative, and social conditions of north and south. This serves as the background for understanding the second layer, the general differences in the intellectual orientations of northern and southern literati communities, especially in their views of the state. The third layer is related to the historical processes by which the idea of a north-south divide was imagined and used to make sense of differences in political, social, cultural, and intellectual associations, which often may not have been triggered by any real distinction between north and south. This will subsequently lead us to examine the real consequences brought about by such an imagined divide. I shall argue that to understand Li Mengyang’s intellectual endeavors and his legacy, we have to frame our inquiry with these three overlapping but distinct layers in the division between north and south.

This volume gives the field its first (long-overdue) book-length study in English of Li Mengyang’s overall vision of learning, devoting special attention to his compartmentalization of the different branches of literati learning. This in turn gives us a fresh
perspective on one of the most exciting stories of late imperial China—the rise of Wang Yangmingism. By asking why the visions of some of his contemporaries, such as Li, attracted little interest in the intellectual world at large, we will be able to gain new insight into the enthusiasm for what Wang had to offer. Finally, by moving beyond essentialist and impressionistic understandings of the cultural disparities between north and south, we may shed light on the actual differences in the priorities and concerns of the northern and southern literati communities. We will also be able to show, systematically, how the rhetoric of a north-south divide was constructed and employed during the Ming period, and the historical implications it bore.

Structure of the Book

The book is divided into four parts, each with two chapters. Part 1 provides the historical and intellectual background for understanding Li Mengyang’s emergence and reception. Chapter 1 situates Li’s life and career within the context of a north-south divide as experienced by the Ming elite class of shi (often translated as “scholar-officials,” “literati,” or “gentry,” depending on the context). Chapter 2 depicts how leading thinkers from the Song to early Ming periods understood the past and applied that knowledge to tackling contemporary problems. Through this broad survey, we may better appreciate the various visions, especially the ways by which they envisioned the unity and division of literati learning, that shaped the intellectual milieu of Li’s generation of thinkers.

Part 2 discusses the foundation of Li’s intellectual vision: his views on cosmology and the place of human society within the cosmos. In chapter 3 we see that, unlike the Daoxue view of Heaven-and-Earth that postulated ontological oneness and coherence in the working of the universe, Li contended that in the natural world, irregularity and unpredictability are the rule. Moreover, the basic process of creation is one of competition and rivalry, not one of harmony and mutual benefit. The same could
be said for the essence of the human world. Li argued that human nature is not, as Daoxue suggested, inherently good; to the contrary, the cruel reality is that good men are constantly outnum-
bered by evil ones. Li insisted that the presence of a strong state is indispensable for keeping the world in order, for society cannot rely on individuals to act morally of their own volition.

It was for this reason that Li Mengyang spent considerable effort in explaining the source and nature of political power and legitimacy, a topic that will be discussed in chapter 4. Building on the assumption that nature operates in an irregular and unpredictable manner, Li argued that the mandate that Heaven bestows on a ruler is mysterious and incomprehensible. In other words, it is impossible to understand, intellectually, the reasons behind Heaven’s choice of a ruler. This line of reasoning underscores the divine qualities of the Chosen One and the divide between the ruler and his subjects, the former being a semispiritual being and the latter, ordinary human beings. This view stands in stark con-
trast to the mainstream Daoxue position that the ruler is an ordinary human being who has to go through the same kind of step-by-step self-cultivation as everybody else in order to act morally and responsibly. In fact, it was Li’s contention that the ruler should not listen to Daoxue advice. While Daoxue generally pos-
ited a separation of moral authority from political legitimacy, Li’s emphasis was squarely on teaching the ruler how to hold onto his power, and not on helping the ruler to cultivate his moral self.

As for the ordinary people, their moral cultivation is also seen as important, but Li’s approach stands in stark contrast to Daoxue’s convictions. It begins with a different understanding of human feelings, sentiments, and emotions, crystallized in the concept ofqing情. Li’s position was that qing, rather than the moral mind or innate human nature, forms the most authentic attribute of the self. By focusing on qing, Li set out to explain how diverse human experiences and conditions should be understood and managed with different programs of learning.

The division between parts 3 and 4, which address Li’s ideas on politics and literature, respectively, is based on the way Li compartmentalized literati learning. Broadly and superficially
speaking, I argue that in Li’s overall intellectual scheme, literati learning could be divided into these two categories. On the one hand, the literati needed the ethical and practical knowledge that would make them good servants of the state. On the other hand, they needed to develop the literary skills to articulate their ideas clearly and aesthetically, expressing their personality and sentiment in such a way as to arouse the feelings of their audience. These two goals were expected concurrently from anyone who wished to pursue any given subject of learning that might correspond to an independent academic discipline in our times.

Take the study of history, for instance. On a utilitarian level, Li insisted that history should be studied so that moral and political lessons could be extracted from the past in order to help the state better govern in the present. On another level, Li wrote at length about the recording of history as a form of literary writing that could articulate the historian’s ideas clearly and in a manner easy for readers to follow. For Li, understanding and applying the ideas and lessons from history and getting the form of history right clearly required two very different sets of knowledge and skills that warranted separate theories and different approaches.

The logic behind this way of categorizing learning may not be immediately apparent to us today but it made sense for Ming readers, who had to deal with the same intellectual issues that Li encountered. Thus, when discussing Li’s ideas about how learning should be compartmentalized, we should be ready to suspend our modern classifications of scholarship.

The two chapters in part 3 discuss the institutions and programs of learning that Li proposed for preparing the literati to become competent servants of the state. Chapter 5 discusses the nature and function of the institutions, most notably the school system and religious spaces, Li envisioned as ideal settings for educating the people to become loyal subjects of the state and the learned to become competent state agents. Chapter 6 focuses on the various branches of knowledge that Li sought to integrate into a program for teaching the literati to serve the state, including ritual, history, techniques for ruling, and literary writing.
Aside from the political concerns in Li’s theories of literary writing (wen), an equally important concern was the expression of selfhood through literature, the subject of part 4. In this respect, Li’s theory was premised on a discourse of qing that celebrates distinctiveness. In some ways Li’s emphasis on qing anticipates the rise of what Martin Huang and others have called “the cult of Qing” in the late Ming, which encouraged the proliferation of literary works that freely expressed the authors’ personal emotions and feelings. Contrary to the conventional perception of Li as a stern advocate of conforming to or even imitating archaic styles in writing, individuality and originality were not only valued but essential.

Yet an appreciation for individuality does not necessarily lead to idiosyncrasy. As I have noted, Wang Yangming’s entire intellectual project was precisely to establish a shared norm for embracing individuality. It presupposed an ontological and ethical understanding of the completeness of a moral mind shared by all men. In contrast, Li Mengyang tried to locate the shared premise in wen. Used in a narrow sense, wen refers to the genre of prose as opposed to poetry. Used in a broader sense, it may mean “literature,” “civility,” “culture,” or a “normative pattern,” sometimes conflating two or more of these concepts. Clearly, for Li the wen in which we could find common ground for expressing individuality refers to a kind of intellectual endeavor that we would call “literature” today. More specifically, it refers to the genres of prose and poetry. Chapters 7 and 8 are devoted, respectively, to Li’s theories and practices of writing prose and poetry.

From as early as the seventeenth century, the slogan “[In] prose one must take [the masterpieces of] Qin and Han [as the model]; [In poetry] one must take the [the masterpieces of] High

32. Huang, Desire and Fictional Narrative.
33. Despite numerous efforts to refute the conventional perception of Li Mengyang and the Former Seven Masters as mindless imitators, it is still very much alive, so much so that the author of a recent important work on He Jing-ming felt compelled to address the issue in great detail. See Bryant, Great Recreation, pp. 415–27.
Tang” (wen bi Qin-Han, shi bi Sheng-Tang 文必秦漢, 詩必盛唐) has often been associated with Li Mengyang. But such a simple slogan does not do justice to the complexity of the theoretical foundations of the literary archaist movement of the early sixteenth century. The literary models that Li chose for both prose and poetry actually go far beyond the masterpieces of the Qin-Han and High Tang and reflect a sophisticated understanding of the multiple legacies on which literary pursuits could be conducted. In this respect, Li’s appeal to ancient styles was actually a theoretical strategy devised for establishing prose and poetry as two independent fields within the broader scope of literati learning.

In retrospect, Li Mengyang’s theories of learning that made service to the state the ultimate objective aroused little or no interest among late Ming intellectuals. In contrast, his vision of literary writing centered on the expressiveness of the self secured him a prominent position in late Ming discourse. The conclusion addresses these issues and examines Li’s legacy within the late Ming context of the north-south divide and the compartmentalization of literati learning.

34. See, for instance, Li Mengyang’s biography in Zhang Tingyu, Ming Shi, 286.7348.