

Enlightenment Under Autocracy: The Origins of Liberalism in China

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Abstract

This paper examines how liberal ideas can emerge and exert political influence within autocratic settings by studying the diffusion of Wang Yangming’s philosophy in late imperial China. Using a dataset of over 24,000 historical texts from 1000 to 1900, we trace the spread of Yangming’s core tenets—innate moral knowledge, personal responsibility, and the unity of thought and action—principles that emphasized individual moral autonomy and challenged hierarchical authority. We construct two main measures of diffusion based on the frequency of key concepts and the number of associated authors, and introduce an alternative semantic similarity measure comparing local texts to Yangming’s writings. A difference-in-differences design shows that his ideas rose sharply after 1500, particularly in regions where public lectures were held. To identify causal effects on political behavior, we instrument for exposure to Yangming’s philosophy using geographic proximity to public lecture sites. We find that greater exposure to his philosophy significantly increased the likelihood that a prefecture produced reformist leaders in the Donglin Movement (1604—1627). These findings suggest that liberal principles can take root through moral philosophy, and that their diffusion can generate measurable political consequences even in autocratic regimes.

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-

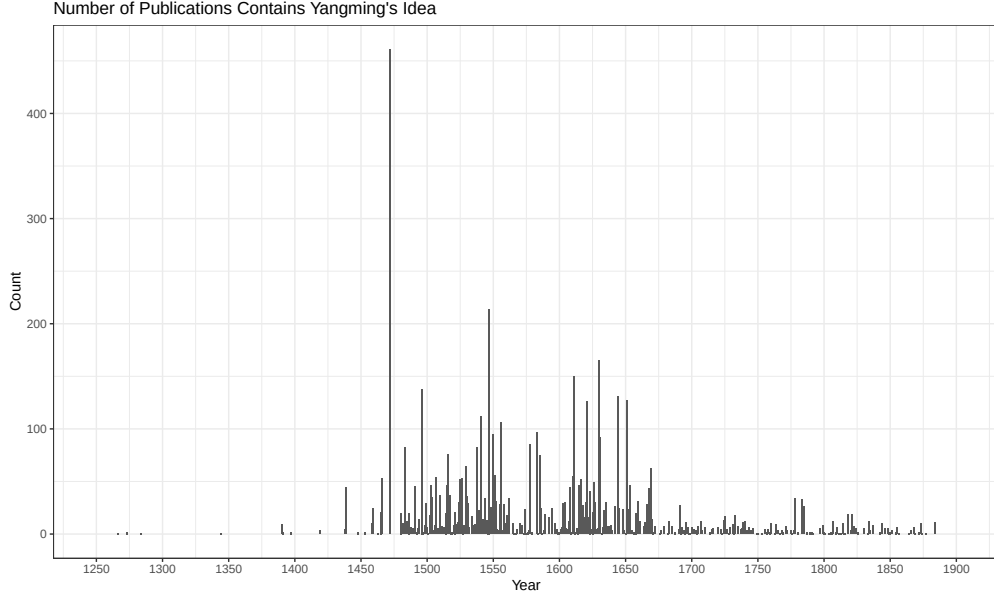


Figure I: Number of Publications Related to Wang Yangming's Ideas

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, Pfaff, and Rubin (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 societies, 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, Pfaff, and Rubin, 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.

A growing body of work conceptualizes this process as a market for ideas, where competing intellectual frameworks vie for influence through elite networks, institutions, and communication channels (Mokyr, 2010; Becker, Pfaff, and Rubin, 2020; Croix, 2021; Ash et al., 2023). Within this framework, ideas diffuse not simply through persuasion but via institutional mechanisms—academies, publishing networks, and official examinations—that shape which philosophies gain legitimacy and endurance. This paper extends this perspective to an autocratic, non-Western setting, showing how Wang Yangming’s philosophy competed for intellectual dominance and political relevance within the hierarchical structures of late imperial China.

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. Wang Yangming’s philosophy of moral autonomy and ethical governance operated within—and subtly contested—an authoritarian framework. His ideas fostered reformist movements, such as the Donglin Movement, by providing a shared moral and intellectual language for scholars who opposed bureaucratic corruption and arbitrary authority. Even under political repression, Wang’s emphasis on personal moral responsibility promoted accountability and moral governance, illustrating how ideas can reshape institutions without direct political confrontation.

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.

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.

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 ?? 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 VI 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 VII 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 ascendancy 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 ascendancy 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.

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.

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

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*** (0.128)		0.745*** (0.128)		0.231*** (0.0673)		0.239*** (0.0556)	
WYM First-Degree Connections		1.182*** (0.202)		1.112*** (0.226)		0.337*** (0.106)		0.276** (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 Ideas¹⁶⁰⁰ refers to the number of mentions of Wang Yangming’s ideas in books written by authors born before 1570, while # Authors¹⁶⁰⁰ with WYM Ideas denotes the number of authors born before 1570 associated with his ideas. # Books¹⁶⁰⁰ and # Gazetteers¹⁶⁰⁰ 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 * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

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)
	Dependent Variable: Donglin Membership				
Connection to WYM (Any Degree)	1.80*** (0.14)				
First-Degree Connection	1.75*** (0.64)	1.50** (0.65)	1.22* (0.74)	0.90 (0.69)	
Second-Degree Connection	2.00*** (0.21)	1.85*** (0.21)	1.65*** (0.24)	1.44*** (0.24)	
Third-Degree Connection	1.66*** (0.18)	1.50*** (0.19)	1.35*** (0.20)	1.22*** (0.21)	
<i>Jinshi</i> Degree			✓	✓	✓
<i>Juren</i> Degree			✓	✓	✓
<i>Shengyuan</i> 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:

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

where $DonglinReformers_p$ 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. $\mathbf{X}'_p \boldsymbol{\Gamma}$ 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 control for number of Wang Yangming’s connectors since personal network is crucial in diffusing his idea. Finally, We 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, coastline, 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.

Baseline 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 Wang Yangming’s personal network, 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.

Table III: Baseline OLS Estimates: Yangming’s Ideas and Donglin Reformers

	(1)	(2)
	Dependent Variable: Donglin Reformers	
# Mentions of WYM ideas ¹⁶⁰⁰	0.138*** (0.043)	
# Authors with WYM ideas ¹⁶⁰⁰		0.365*** (0.106)
# Books ¹⁶⁰⁰	✓	
# Authors ¹⁶⁰⁰		✓
# WYM First-Degree Connections	✓	✓
Pre-Existing Academies	✓	✓
# Jinshi ¹⁶⁰⁰	✓	✓
Population ¹⁶⁰⁰	✓	✓
Geographic Controls	✓	✓
Ming Province FE	✓	✓
Observations	173	211

Note: This table reports OLS estimates of the relationship between the pre-1600 diffusion of Wang Yangming’s ideas and the number of Donglin reformers born in a given prefecture. The dependent variable is log-transformed. Columns use two measures of idea exposure: (1) number of textual mentions of Yangming’s philosophy, and (2) number of authors associated with those ideas. All models include standard geographic and institutional controls and Ming province fixed effects. Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Individual-Level analysis In addition to the prefecture-level analysis, we conduct an individual-level analysis to estimate the likelihood that a person became a Donglin member, conditional on whether their recorded writings reflect the ideas of Wang Yangming. Table IV reports the marginal effects from probit models. Across all model specifications, individuals whose writings reflect Wang Yangming’s philosophy are approximately 37 percentage points more likely to be Donglin reformers. These estimates remain robust after controlling for geographic characteristics, human capital (proxied by book and gazetteer production), and the presence of pre-existing academies.

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 causal-

Table IV: Wang Yangming Ideas and Donglin Membership

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Dependent Variable: Donglin Reformer			
Has WYM Ideas	0.374** (0.179)	0.372** (0.174)	0.364** (0.176)	0.378** (0.170)
Ming Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Book & Gazetteer Counts	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pre-Existing Academies	No	No	Yes	Yes
Geographic Controls	No	No	No	Yes
Pseudo R^2	0.0206	0.0246	0.0321	0.0421
Observations	5,635	5,635	5,635	5,635

Note: This table reports marginal effects from probit models estimating the likelihood that an individual is a Donglin member, conditional on whether their recorded writings reflect Wang Yangming’s ideas. The sample includes all individuals in the China Biographical Database (CBDB) born 1550–1620. Geographic controls (column 4) include log distances to major rivers, the Grand Canal, the coastline, and Beijing. Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

ity 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.

Influence from the Nearest Public Lecture as an Instrument 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.

To quantify the influence of public lectures conducted by Wang Yangming or his followers, we constructed an instrument that captures the spatial decay of influence from the prefectures where lectures were held. The underlying assumption is that the ideological impact of these lectures diminishes with geographic distance. Specifically, we model the influence from the nearest lecture-holding prefectures using an exponential distance decay function. For each prefecture p , the total influence is calculated as the sum of contributions from all lecture sites j , where each contribution is weighted by the number of lectures and discounted by distance:

$$\text{lecture_influence}_p = \sum_j \text{lecture}_j \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{d_{pj}}{\lambda}\right)$$

where d_{ij} denotes the distance from prefecture p to lecture site j , and λ is the decay parameter.

To reflect realistic historical constraints on travel and communication, we use a decay scale of 25 km, corresponding to $\lambda = 25,000$ meters. This value captures the highly localized nature of intellectual influence in Ming China, where lecture activities were unlikely to have significant effects beyond a limited geographic range. Under this specification, the influence of a lecture falls to approximately 37% of its original value at 25 km, and to less than 5% beyond 75–150 km. For prefectures that themselves hosted lectures, the distance to the nearest point is zero, so the full local influence is preserved in the calculation. This method produces a continuous, spatially-weighted measure of lecture activity that accounts for both proximity and intensity.

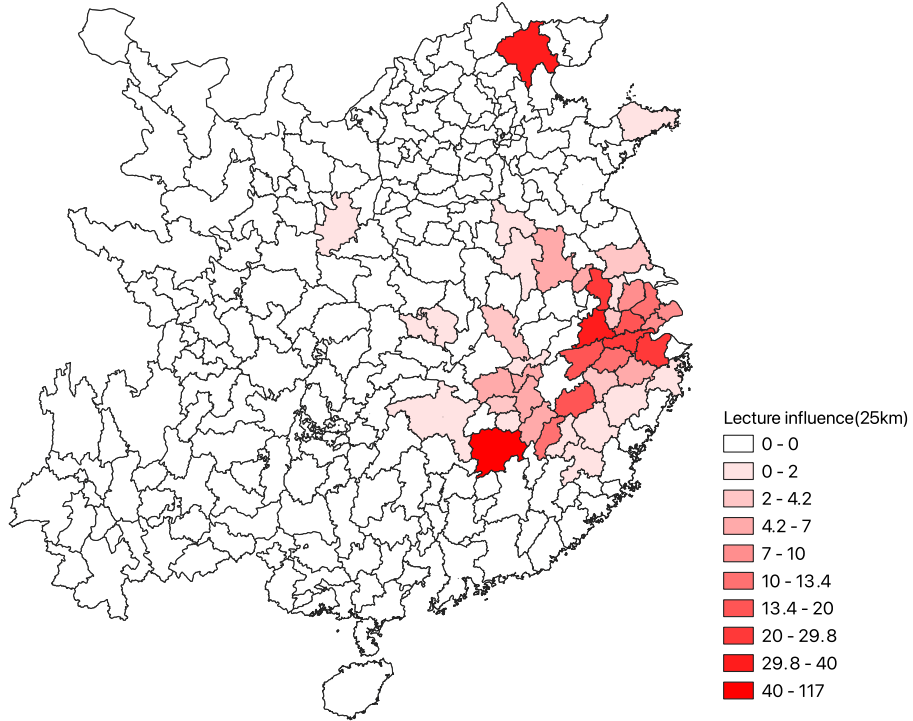


Figure II: Lecture Influence (25km)

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:

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

where $LectureInfluence_p$ denotes the spatially-weighted measure of exposure to public

lectures conducted by Wang Yangming or his followers for prefecture (p), calculated using the exponential distance-decay function with $\lambda = 25,000$ meters. The remaining terms ($\mathbf{X}'_p\mathbf{\Gamma}$, ϵ_p) are defined as in the previous specification.

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

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	OLS	2SLS		OLS	2SLS	
Panel A: Second-Stage Estimates Members of Donglin Faction						
# Mentions of WYM ideas ¹⁶⁰⁰	0.138*** (0.0426)	0.290** (0.144)	0.287** (0.131)			
# Authors with WYM ideas ¹⁶⁰⁰				0.349*** (0.108)	0.777** (0.354)	0.751** (0.351)
Panel B: First-Stage Estimates Wang Yangming's Ideas, Pre-1600						
Influence from Nearest Public Lecture ¹⁶⁰⁰		0.544*** (0.136)	0.573*** 0.134		0.225*** (0.063)	0.226 *** 0.062
# Authors ¹⁶⁰⁰				✓	✓	✓
# Books ¹⁶⁰⁰	✓	✓	✓			
Density of Buddhist temples			✓			✓
Density of Taoism			✓			✓
# WYM First-Degree Connections	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pre-Existing Academies	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jinshi ¹⁶⁰⁰	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Population ¹⁶⁰⁰	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Geographical Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ming Province FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
First-Stage F-Statistic		16.02	18.07		12.72	13.25
Observations	173	167	167	211	205	205

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 the influence of the nearest public lecture conducted by Yangming or his followers (25km). The results generally support the validity of the instrument. 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 * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Instrumented Estimates. Table V presents the results from instrumental variable (IV) regressions. The analysis employs the influence from the nearest public lecture conducted

by Wang Yangming or his followers (within 25 km) as an instrument (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 this instrument. Prefectures with higher influence of public lectures exhibit significantly higher levels of Yangming’s ideas. In columns 3 and 6, we additionally control for the density of Buddhist temples and Taoist institutions. This addresses the concern that Wang Yangming’s philosophy was influenced by Buddhist and Taoist thought, and that prefectures with stronger Buddhist or Taoist traditions might be inherently more receptive to his ideas. Importantly, even after including these controls, the instrument remains highly significant, and the first-stage F-statistics actually increase (to 18.07 and 13.25, respectively), further strengthening confidence in the identification strategy. The first-stage F-statistics range from 12.72 to 18.07 across all specifications, well above the conventional threshold of 10, indicating a strong instrument.

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 0.35–0.78% increase in 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.

Instrument Robustness 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.

We considered Conley (1999) spatial standard errors and alternative functional forms (e.g., above/below median indicators) but found them inappropriate given our data structure. Wang Yangming’s lectures exhibit extreme spatial sparsity: over 75% of prefectures have zero exposure, with non-zero values concentrated in a handful of nearby locations. Under this distribution, Conley standard errors become overly conservative because they treat all nearby non-zero observations as a single spatial cluster, reducing the effective number of independent clusters to only a few units. This mechanically inflates standard errors and eliminates statistical significance despite stable point estimates. Alternative functional forms do not resolve this issue, as the same treated locations remain spatially clustered regardless of measurement.

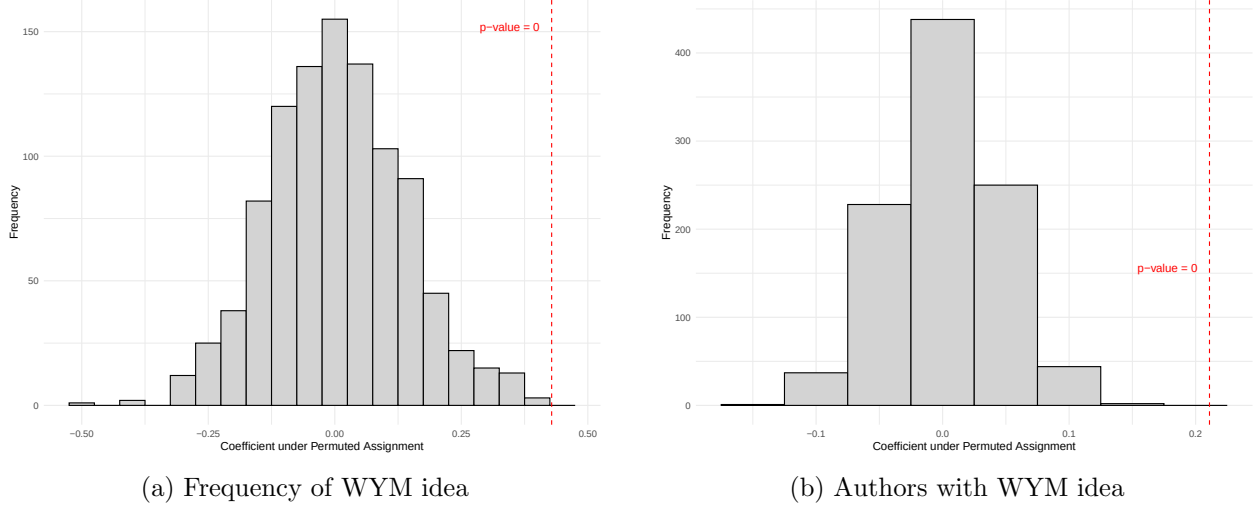


Figure III: Randomization Inference: Effects of lecture on WYM idea

We therefore employ randomization inference, which is well-suited for spatially sparse treatments. Our procedure generates 1,000 spatial placebos that preserve the geographic clustering of actual lectures. Figure III presents the results of the randomization inference that assesses whether the observed effect of the presence of the lecture on the frequency of the Wang Yangming idea / authors with the Wang Yangming idea is likely to arise by chance. The red dashed line represents the actual estimated coefficient from the real data. Under random re-assignments of the lecture variable across prefectures, the distribution of placebo coefficients centers around zero. The actual coefficient lies in the extreme right tail of the distribution, suggesting that the observed effect is statistically unlikely to occur under random assignment. This provides strong evidence that the spatial distribution of lectures was non-random with respect to influence of Wang Yangming’s idea.

In addition, we test the correlation between lectures and key economic or culture variables. Table VI tests whether the distribution of lectures correlates with pre-existing economic or social development indicators in the Ming period. Lecture influence shows no significant relationship with urbanization or population size, suggesting that the spatial pattern of lectures was not driven by economic prosperity. Although lecture influence shows no significant relationship with economic development, the correlation with educational variables raises a potential concern: if academies or jinshi independently facilitate Donglin formation through channels unrelated to Wang’s ideas (e.g., by providing organizational capacity or elite networks), our instrument might violate the exclusion restriction.

To address this concern, we adopt a conservative two-step approach: First, we residualize the instrument by regressing lecture influence on academies, jinshi, and geographic controls, then extracting the residuals. This residualized measure captures the component of lecture

Table VI: Endogeneity test: Lecture Influence and Key Economic Variable

	(1) Ming Urbanization	(2) Population ¹⁶⁰⁰	(3) Charity ¹⁹⁰⁰	(4) Academy ¹⁵⁰⁰	(5) Jinshi ¹⁶⁰⁰
Lecture influence ¹⁶⁰⁰	-0.0133 (0.0265)	-0.0847 (0.0608)	0.170* (0.0934)	0.521*** (0.168)	0.537*** (0.162)
Ming Province FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Geographic features	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Adjusted R^2	0.0872	0.158	0.559	0.274	0.286
Observations	179	206	208	208	208

Notes: This table testifies the relationship between our instrument and other core economic and social variables, including the number of pre-existing academies, the number of *jinshi* before 1600, population size in 1600, the number of charity before 1900, and urbanization rate in Ming. Standard errors are clustered by Ming province. Geographic characteristics such as distances to the Grand Canal, Beijing, and major rivers, as well as proximity to the coastline are controlled. All variables, except for Ming province fixed effects, are log-transformed. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

influence orthogonal to pre-existing educational infrastructure. Second, in our IV regressions (Table VII), we continue to include academies and jinshi as control variables in the second stage, even when using the residualized instrument. This dual strategy ensures that our estimates are identified from variation in ideological exposure that is both (a) orthogonal to observables in the first stage, and (b) conditional on observables in the second stage.

The results in Table VII demonstrate that our findings are robust to this conservative specification. The coefficients on Wang’s ideas remain positive, significant, and of similar magnitude across specifications, supporting the interpretation that ideological transmission—rather than pre-existing social structures—drives Donglin formation.

Similarity as Alternative Measurement To capture the long-term intellectual diffusion of Wang Yangming’s philosophy, we construct a novel prefecture-by-period panel of textual similarity as additional measurement of Yangming idea. Using BERT-based semantic similarity between over 12,000 historical texts and a curated set of Wang Yangming’s core writings, we generate a measure of Yangming similarity across 30-year intervals from 990 to 1920. This allows us to examine both temporal and spatial variation in philosophical alignment with Yangming’s thought. Appendix B shows the technical details of how this method works.

Figure IV presents the nationwide average similarity trend over time. A notable rise begins in the 16th century, coinciding with Wang Yangming’s public lecturing period. Interestingly, we observe two prominent peaks in average similarity prior to the emergence of Yangming’s own school of thought in the 16th century. The first peak (1140–1170) is linked to a cohort of Southern Song thinkers, including Lu Zuqian, Zhu Xi, Cui Dunshi, Lu Ji-

Table VII: Impact of Yangming's Ideas on Donglin Formation: IV Estimates with Residualized Instrument

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A: Second-Stage Estimates Members of Donglin Faction				
# Mentions of WYM ideas ¹⁶⁰⁰	0.290** (0.144)	0.287** (0.131)		
# Authors with WYM ideas ¹⁶⁰⁰			0.751** (0.354)	0.739** (0.353)
Panel B: First-Stage Estimates Wang Yangming's Ideas, Pre-1600				
Residual of Influence from Nearest Public Lecture ¹⁶⁰⁰	0.544*** (0.136)	0.573*** 0.135	0.225*** (0.063)	0.227*** (0.062)
# Authors ¹⁶⁰⁰			✓	✓
# Books ¹⁶⁰⁰	✓	✓		
Density of Buddhist temples		✓		✓
Density of Taoism		✓		✓
# WYM First-Degree Connections	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pre-Existing Academies	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jinshi ¹⁶⁰⁰	✓	✓	✓	✓
Population ¹⁶⁰⁰	✓	✓	✓	✓
Geographical Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ming Province FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
First-Stage F-Statistic	16.02	18.07	12.93	13.31
Observations	167	167	205	205

Notes: This table reports 2SLS estimates using a residualized instrument. Instrument: We regress lecture influence on pre-existing academies *jinshi* before 1600, geographic controls, and province fixed effects, then extract residuals. Columns (1)-(2) use mentions of ideas; columns (3)-(4) use authors with ideas. Controls include geographic features, Wang Yangming's first degree network, socioeconomic characteristics, and Buddhism temples and Taoism places. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

uyuan, and Chen Fuliang. Lu Jiuyuan, in particular, is widely recognized as a key precursor to Yangming's School of Mind (xinxue), promoting the doctrine of "the mind as principle" (xin ji li). These patterns indicate that the foundations of Yangming thought were already embedded in the broader intellectual lineage of Song Neo-Confucianism. The second peak observed around 1380-1410 captures the large-scale homogenization of Confucian discourse during early Ming China. Between the late Hongwu reign and the Yongle era, the imperial state launched unprecedented textual projects, such as the Yongle Encyclopedia, the Exegesis of the Four Books, and the Exegesis of the Five Classics. These compilations involved numerous literati, editors, and local scholars whose writings were standardized around orthodox Neo-Confucian vocabulary derived from Zhu Xi.

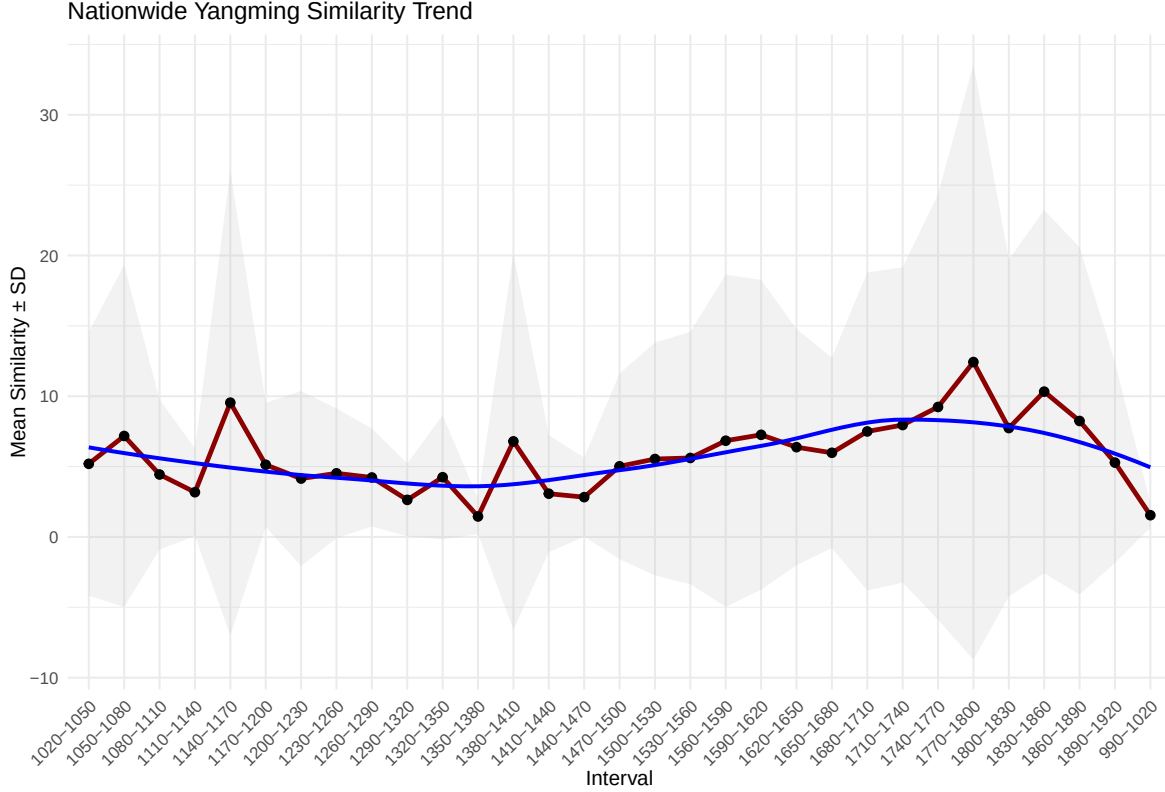


Figure IV: National Trend of Similarity over Time

Before examining the impact of Wang Yangming’s ideas on Donglin formation, we first establish that public lectures effectively transmitted his philosophy to local intellectual communities. VIII shows a substantial and robust effect of lectures on ideological diffusion. Column 1 reports a coefficient of 0.31, indicating that prefectures with lectures experienced a thirty-one log point increase in similarity to Yangming ideas after 1500 relative to non-lecture prefectures. This effect remains highly significant when we include controls for book production and when we restrict the sample to prefectures with positive baseline similarity. Columns 5-6 demonstrate that results hold in the full sample with varying control specifications.

Our main analysis estimates the average effect of Wang Yangming’s philosophy on Donglin formation using instrumental variables. IX presents two-stage least squares estimates of the effect of Yangming ideas on Donglin membership using similarity as measurement. Second-stage results showing that ideological similarity substantially increases the likelihood of Donglin affiliation. First-stage estimates demonstrating that lecture influence strongly predicts ideological similarity, with F-statistics of 10.34-10.48. Together, these results establish a clear causal chain: public lectures transmitted Yangming philosophy to local scholars, and this ideological exposure in turn shaped political behavior by increasing participation in the Donglin reform movement.

Table VIII: Difference-in-Differences Estimation: Effects of Public Lectures on Similarity to WYM Ideas

	Dependent Variable: Similarity to WYM Ideas					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Has Lecture $\times$ After 1500	0.22*** (0.072)	0.60*** (0.17)	0.22*** (0.072)	0.60*** (0.17)	0.22*** (0.072)	0.61*** (0.17)
#Books		Y		Y		Y
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Time Period FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Adjusted R^2	0.81	0.16	0.80	0.16	0.80	0.16
Observations	1557	1557	1574	1574	1614	1614

Note: This table reports difference-in-differences estimates of the long-run diffusion of Wang Yangming’s ideas. The treatment variable is an interaction between regions that hosted public lectures and a post-1500 indicator. Columns 1–2 restrict the sample to prefectures that both had books and non-zero average similarity to Yangming’s ideas. Columns 3–4 include all prefectures with books. Columns 5–6 use the full sample. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

To provide additional evidence on the timing and dynamics of ideological transmission, we implement an event study design that traces how ideological similarity evolved before and after the introduction of Yangming school lectures. This dynamic analysis reveals whether the effects of ideological exposure emerged gradually over time or materialized immediately following treatment, shedding light on the mechanisms through which ideas spread and become embedded in local intellectual culture.

We employ the difference-in-differences estimator developed by Callaway and Sant’Anna (2021), which is specifically designed for settings with staggered treatment adoption and heterogeneous treatment effects. This estimator is particularly well-suited to our context because Wang Yangming and his followers introduced lectures in different prefectures at different times over approximately a century, from 1500 to 1600. Unlike conventional two-way fixed effects estimators, which can produce biased estimates when treatment effects vary across cohorts or time periods, the Callaway-Sant’Anna approach constructs group-time average treatment effects by comparing each treated cohort to clean control groups consisting of never-treated or not-yet-treated units. This ensures that already-treated units never serve as controls for newly-treated units, avoiding the “forbidden comparisons” problem that plagues standard difference-in-differences designs.

Our treatment variable captures exposure to public lectures on Yangming philosophy. For each prefecture, we define the treatment start year as the year of the first recorded lecture on Yangming philosophy. The timing of treatment appears plausibly exogenous to prefecture-specific trends in ideological development, as it was determined primarily by Wang’s official

Table IX: Impact of Yangming’s Ideas on Donglin Formation: IV Estimates with Similarity Measurement

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	OLS	2SLS	OLS	2SLS	OLS	2SLS
Panel A: Second-Stage Estimates Members of Donglin Faction						
Similarity to WYM’s book ¹⁵⁷⁰	0.249*** (0.0584)	0.989*** (0.364)				
Similarity to WYM’s key idea ¹⁵⁷⁰			0.256*** (0.0560)	0.990*** (0.362)		
Similarity to WYM’s key idea ¹⁵⁷⁰					0.249*** (0.0585)	0.983*** (0.361)
Panel B: First-Stage Estimates Pre-1600 Wang Yangming’s Ideas						
Influence from Nearest Public Lecture ¹⁶⁰⁰		0.240*** 0.0745		0.240*** 0.074		0.242*** 0.075
# Books ¹⁵⁷⁰	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
#Academy ¹⁵⁰⁰	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
#Jinshi before 1600	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
First-stage F-statistic		10.40		10.34		10.48
Observations	187	183	187	183	187	183

Note: All regressions have controlled for province fixed effect, geographic features, and population in 1600. Standard errors in parentheses * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

postings, his disciples’ travel patterns, and the geographic diffusion of the broader intellectual movement rather than by local demand for Yangming philosophy.

We set the baseline period to 1470-1500 because individuals born during this time were the first generation to experience direct exposure to these public lectures. Wang began his major teaching tours around 1500, precisely when members of the 1470-1500 cohort were entering their prime intellectual years at approximately age thirty. In our event study framework, event time zero corresponds to this baseline cohort, with negative event times representing earlier periods and positive event times representing subsequent periods following lecture introduction.

Figure V plots the estimated dynamic treatment effects. Each point represents the average treatment effect on the treated at a given event time, with ninety-five percent confidence intervals shown as vertical bars. Pre-treatment coefficients hover around 0.2 to 0.3 and are statistically indistinguishable from zero, consistent with treated and control prefectures following similar trends before lecture introduction. The coefficient turns positive and significant shortly after treatment, rising to approximately 0.9 to 1.0, and remains elevated throughout the post-treatment period at around 1.0 to 1.5. This pattern indicates that ideological similarity increased immediately following lecture exposure and persisted for centuries, sug-

gesting that Yangming ideas became durably embedded in local intellectual culture. The magnitude of these effects is broadly consistent with our instrumental variable estimates and supports our main findings. we estimate an event study model centered on the 1470–1500 pre-treatment period.

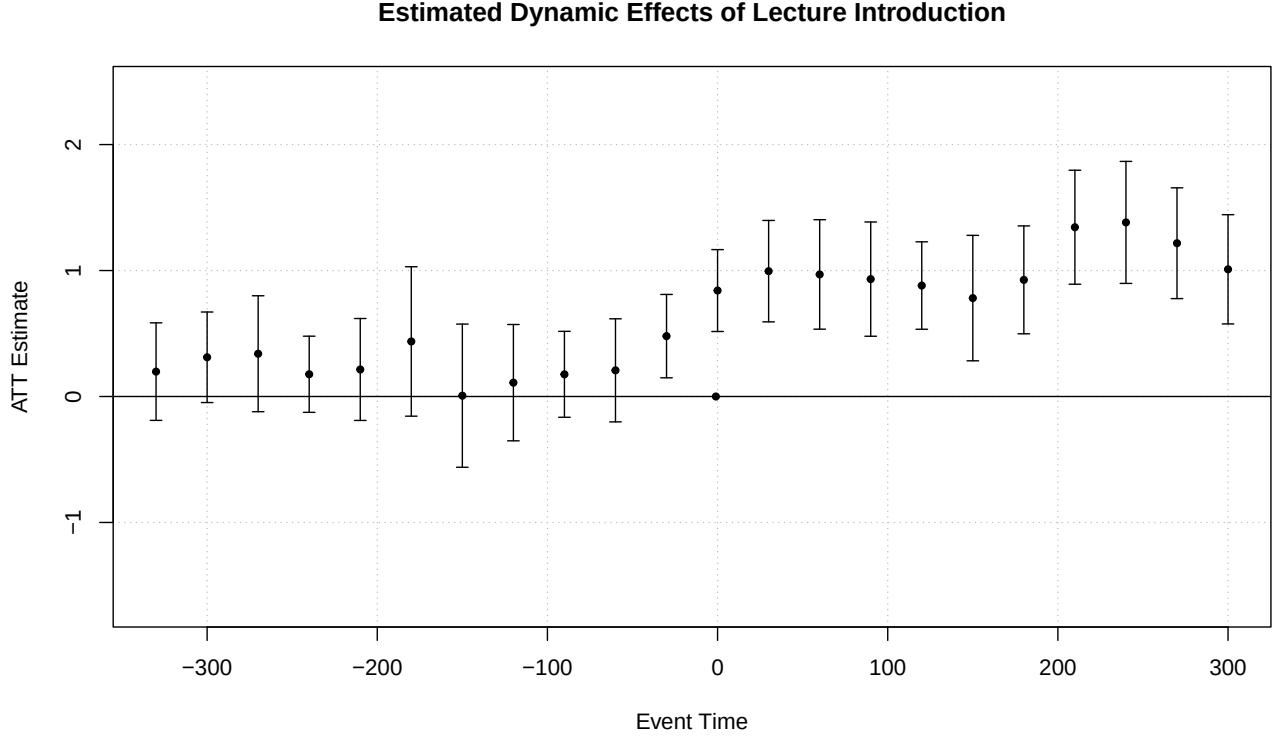


Figure V: Event-Time Effects of Lecture Exposure on Yangming Similarity

VI 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.

VII 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.

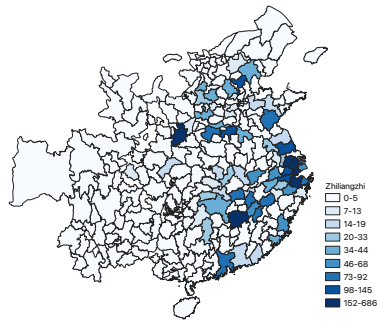
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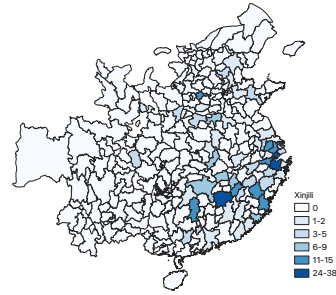
Xue, Melanie Meng. 2021. “Autocratic Rule and Social Capital: Evidence from Imperial China.”

APPENDIX

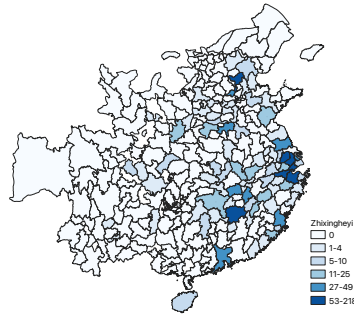
A ADDITIONAL FIGURES AND TABLES



(a) Inner Knowledge

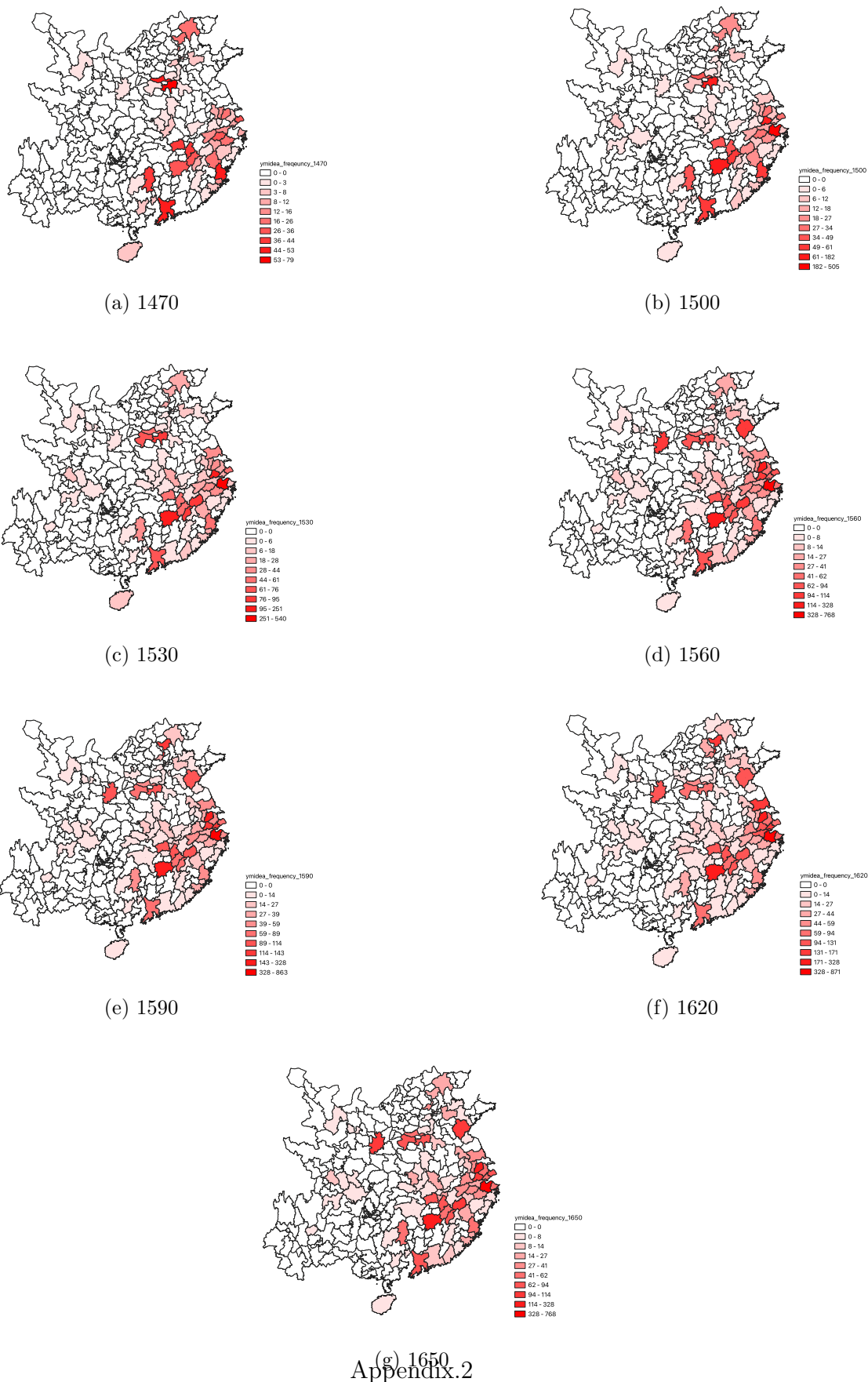


(b) The Mind Itself is Principle



(c) Unity of Knowledge and Action

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



Appendix.2

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

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*** (0.114)		0.501*** (0.142)		0.199*** (0.0610)			
WYM First-Degree Connections		1.182*** (0.202)		1.112*** (0.226)		0.337*** (0.106)		0.276** (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 four key books (Instructions for Practical Living, The Complete Works of Wang Yangming, Principles and Sayings of Master Yangming, and Collected Works of Wang Wencheng) 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 Measuring Book Similarity

1. **Text Preprocessing and Segmentation:** We normalize line breaks, compress excessive whitespace, and filter out documents shorter than 500 characters. To address BERT’s 512-token input constraint while preserving semantic continuity, we implement an intelligent chunking algorithm. The algorithm first detects whether punctuation marks exist in the text. For punctuated texts, we split by sentence boundaries (periods, question marks, exclamation marks) and accumulate sentences until reaching a target chunk size of 1,500 characters for paragraph-level analysis or 200 characters for sentence-level analysis. For unpunctuated texts, we apply fixed-length segmentation. Critically, we employ a sliding window technique with 300-character overlap (paragraph-level) or 50-character overlap (sentence-level) to ensure that semantic information at chunk boundaries is not lost. This approach yields chunks that maintain linguistic coherence while fitting within model constraints.
2. **Topic Modeling via Latent Dirichlet Allocation:** To capture high-level semantic similarity, we extract topic distributions using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). We first determine the optimal number of topics through coherence modeling rather than arbitrary selection. Specifically, we tokenize all texts using Jieba, construct a word dictionary filtering terms that appear in fewer than 2 documents or more than 80% of documents, and train separate LDA models with 5, 10, and 15 topics. For each model, we compute the C_v coherence score using Gensim’s Coherence Model, which measures the semantic interpretability of topics based on word co-occurrence patterns. We select the topic number that maximizes coherence. Once determined, we vectorize all documents using TF-IDF (maximum 5,000 features, minimum document frequency

of 2, maximum document frequency of 0.8) and train the final LDA model with 20 iterations. This produces a topic distribution vector for each document, where each element represents the probability that the document discusses a particular topic.

3. **Sentence Embedding via GuwenBERT:** For fine-grained semantic representation, we employ GuwenBERT (ethanyt/guwenbert-base), a BERT model pre-trained specifically on classical Chinese texts spanning from pre-Qin to Qing dynasty. Since the base BERT architecture outputs token-level representations, we add a mean pooling layer to generate sentence-level embeddings. Specifically, we feed each text chunk through the tokenizer with padding and truncation (maximum 512 tokens), obtain the last hidden states from BERT, apply attention-mask-weighted mean pooling over the token dimension, and L2-normalize the resulting 768-dimensional vectors. We process chunks in batches of 32 to leverage GPU parallelization. This encoding transforms each text chunk into a unit-length vector in a semantic space where cosine similarity reflects semantic relatedness.

B.3 Measuring writing style similarity

We complement semantic similarity with a stylistic distance metric capturing writing form independent of content. We extract eight style features from the first 2,000 characters of each document: (1) modal particle frequency, (2) connective frequency, (3) function word frequency, (4) respectful term ratio, (5) average sentence length, (6) sentence length variance, (7) lexical diversity (unique characters / total characters), and (8) punctuation density. We compute stylistic similarity between documents d and d as:

$$S_{\text{style}} = \sum_k w_k \cdot \frac{\min(f_k(d_1), f_k(d_2))}{\max(f_k(d_1), f_k(d_2))} \quad (2)$$

,where f_k is feature k and w_k are weights summing to unity (modal: 0.20, connective: 0.18, function word: 0.15, sentence length: 0.12, diversity: 0.12, punctuation: 0.10, variance: 0.08, respectful: 0.05). This metric ranges from 0 to 1, with values above 0.8 indicating highly similar writing styles regardless of topic.

B.4 Measuring key idea similarity

For key idea and whether approve WYM’s idea, we use ChatGPT 4o for classification, keep the texts meeting our demands only, and use these texts for measuring text similarity as 1 Measuring book similarity.

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 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.