PART I

Introduction

I. Zhang's Life and Work

Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801) was a native of the Kuaiji district, located in present-day Shaoxing prefecture in Zhejiang province. He spent most of his life under the reign of a single sovereign, the redoubtable Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736–96). This was a period of relative decline and challenge for the Qing dynasty (1644–1905). The combined effects of official corruption, internal rebellion, external military challenges, and a burgeoning population had weakened the dynasty and made life relatively hard for scholars like Zhang. There were precious few official positions to accommodate a vast and growing sea of applicants; competition was intense, and it simply was impossible for a large number of highly qualified candidates to secure decent posts within the Qing bureaucracy. Many were forced to eke out a strained and precarious living by combining the incomes earned through temporary low-level posts,

writing, tutoring, and serving as teachers in the many local academies that had developed partly as a response to the times. While life often was difficult for scholars like Zhang, the Qianlong Period was a time of remarkable cultural creativity and achievement. Literature, theater, calligraphy, ceramics, and painting flourished, advances in printing made books more plentiful, philological studies attained a stunning level of sophistication, and the state supported a number of massive scholarly projects such as the *Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries*, the official aim of which was to produce a comprehensive, organized collection of Chinese written culture.[1]

Zhang was born, matured, and passed away during this unsettled yet fascinating age. He left behind a substantial body of work, which treats a wide range of topics, often with great originality and insight. While he was best known, both during his own age and in contemporary times, for his speculative philosophy of history and his views on historiography, these works are part of a larger concern he had with writing itself.[2] Zhang's attempts to understand the origin, nature, proper form, and significance of writing is the "one thread" running through and unifying his various essays and letters. Historical writing was but one particular example of this larger, general interest. More of his work focused on history simply because this was the type of writing which he believed he was especially suited for by nature, and, as we shall see in our discussion of his views below, Zhang believed that people in his and later ages should follow their natural intellectual proclivities in order to find their way to an understanding of the dao.

Zhang did not enjoy respect, much less fame or fortune, during his lifetime. He and his work largely were ignored while he was alive, and both fell into obscurity—though fortunately not oblivion—soon after he died. One might argue that this, as well as the later accolades he earned from the scholarly community, confirms his views about the difficulty of being understood, especially for those whose ideas cut against the grain of the scholarly fashions of their age. In any event, in the waning years of the Qing dynasty, scholars such as Kang Youwei (1858–1927) revived interest in Zhang's philosophy by criticizing several of his most distinctive views.[3] The Japanese scholar Naitô Torajirô (1866–1934) had a much more positive impression and began to publish on Zhang and his writings.[4] Chinese scholars such as Hu Shi (1891–1962) soon followed suit and later were joined by contemporary scholars such as Yu Yingshi.[5] Western scholarship on Zhang has been limited but in general outstanding in quality. Paul Demiéville wrote a penetrating and elegant essay that remains the best concise introduction to Zhang's histori-

cal views.[6] David S. Nivison's splendid monograph on Zhang is the most comprehensive and insightful study of his life, times, and philosophy.[7] More recently, Susan Mann has done excellent work on Zhang's views on and relationship to women.[8] The present work would never have been started, much less completed, had it not been for the work of such pioneering scholars; those interested in Zhang's life, his theories about history, his thoughts about historiography, or his views on women's virtue and education will best be served by turning to these authors and their works. The aim of the present volume differs from these studies first in seeking to make a broad selection of Zhang's most important works available in English and second by focusing on the ethical features of his writing. The next section of this Introduction offers a sketch of the central features of Zhang's ethical philosophy. It is followed by a brief description of the main philosophical points made in the letters and essays translated in this volume.

II. The Ethical Philosophy of Zhang Xuecheng

Zhang Xuecheng's ethical philosophy is inextricably intertwined with the other strands of his thought and in particular with his speculative theories about the nature and meandering course of history.[9] One of the core ideas animating his ethical philosophy is that a true understanding of the Way—which is the morally correct life for human beings—requires a proper grasp of history. This distinguishes Zhang's thought from a number of traditional and contemporary rivals, whose views were known to him, who served as foils for the development of his own thought, and who in a number of ways influenced the direction and shape of his philosophical speculations.[10] As an introduction to the essays and letters translated in this volume, I shall focus on three related aspects of Zhang's ethical philosophy. First, I will describe what he thought is required in order to make a proper ethical assessment of the actions of those who preceded us in time. Second, I will discuss what he thought each of us must know in order to act properly in our own place and time. Third, I will explore Zhang's views about the process of education and training that one must undergo in order to gain such insights and abilities. As will become clear, these three aspects of Zhang's ethical philosophy are interrelated. The first two mirror features of one another, while the third—the concern with self-cultivation—permeates his discussion of the first two, as it orients, shapes, and colors almost every aspect of his philosophy.

We begin by considering what is required for a proper ethical assessment of the actions of those who preceded us in time; how do we evaluate "someone from the past"?[11] According to Zhang, we must have an accurate understanding of history in order to make such judgments; more specifically, we need to understand the person's place in history. Zhang had a complex conception of what constitutes such knowledge. On his view, we really need three related types of knowledge. First, we must have a clear and detailed view of the person's particular historical context. Second, we have to know the character of the age in which he or she lived in terms of the speculative historical scheme that Zhang used to describe different ages since the breakup of the Zhou dynasty, what we might call the zeitgeist within which the person acted. Third, we must, through a process of sympathetic concern (*shu* 恕),[12] gain a vibrant, imaginative understanding of what the person was aspiring to and aiming at in acting as he or she did; we need to understand a good deal about how the person's heart-mind worked.[13]

Our second concern with Zhang's ethical philosophy can be seen as a first-person correlate of the first. Just as I must understand the historical context and *zeitgeist* of "someone from the past" in order to grasp the ethical value of his or her actions, I must have an appreciation of my own place in history in order to see what ethics requires of me here in my own age. Above and beyond such knowledge, I must have a deep appreciation of the workings of my own heart-mind. I must come to understand my true motivations and aims and guard against being swayed or influenced by unethical concerns or popular fashions. In addition, I must avoid a kind of temporal provincialism. Just as one needs to exercise sympathetic concern retrospectively to understand the heart-minds of others, Zhang insists that one needs to focus the same kind of sympathetic concern prospectively and imagine how one would be viewed by posterity. This reflective exercise is designed to work against the human tendency to indulge in the conceit that one's moral judgment is flawless and timelessly correct.

One can see that both of these first two aspects of Zhang's ethical philosophy require one not only to cultivate an intellectual, theoretically informed understanding of history but also to cultivate oneself to become sensitive to the subtle play of history and the challenges of historical understanding. That is to say, both require distinctive forms of moral self-cultivation. This points to our third concern: the process of education and training that one must undergo in order to gain historical insights and abilities. Ethical understanding, whether of the past or present, oneself or others, requires a grasp

and appreciation of history in two senses: as those things that happened in the past and as a vocation. Zhang insisted that a proper understanding of history—in both senses—requires a proper historian. As he puts it, proper historical understanding requires that an historian develop a special form of Virtue (*de* 德).[14] We shall provide a more detailed discussion of each of these points below, but in order to facilitate this finer analysis, we must first sketch Zhang's speculative theory of the nature of history.

Zhang saw history as divided into three distinct periods. The first phase of history was defined by the evolution of the dao. As Zhang makes clear in the early part of his essay "On the Dao," which is the first selection that appears in this volume, the dao manifested itself in the world in response to a changing series of necessities. As humans became more numerous and needed to live and work together, they had to develop ways to coordinate their activities and organize themselves effectively. This process of development described the evolution of the dao. Zhang does not explicitly discuss the standards for evaluating actions taken during this period, but it seems reasonable to infer that he believed actions that accorded with the smooth development of the dao were right, while any attempt to work against the evolution of the dao was wrong. In this respect, his view is quite close in form to what one finds in Hegel or Marx.

The second phase of history marks the conclusion of the first and the beginning of the Golden Age of the Zhou dynasty. Zhang believed that during this period, society reached a state of completion and perfection. In other words, the dao had evolved and was fully manifested in the world. This age was characterized by a number of distinctive features. For example, because the activities of governing and teaching had not yet grown apart, there were no private schools or teachers. During the Golden Age, government officials simply went about their normal activities, and their work offered people all the lessons they could ever need. The texts that these officials left behind later came to be revered as "classics," but these works are simply records of their daily, official activities. This is why the classics are anonymous, unlike the texts of later ages, and why, Zhang insists, each classic corresponds to and reflects the function of a separate bureau of Zhou bureaucracy. During this period of time, different approaches to understanding the dao all were accorded equal value and practiced as complements to one another, each making a distinctive and critical contribution to Zhou society. This ideal state of affairs, though, was to change forever with the collapse of the Zhou, which precipitated the rise of individual schools, teachers, different versions

of the dao, and competing approaches to understanding the Way. These different approaches or intellectual disciplines for understanding the Way quickly solidified into three different "fashions" of learning, which dominated one another in revolving succession throughout subsequent history.[15]

Zhang's description of the rise and flourishing of the Golden Age enables us to begin to understand his well-known slogan: "The Six Classics are all history" (*liu jing jie shi ye* 六經皆史也).[16] Among other things, it declares that the classics simply are records of different government officials pursuing their jobs during a time when all was as it should be. They most definitely are not what later ages have taken them to be: books about the dao, that is, higher-order analyses or explanations of what the dao itself might be. One can only see and appreciate the significance of the classics—and through them the moral Way—when one reads these works as histories reflecting a particular—very special—time and place.

The third and final phase of history commences with the fall of the Zhou dynasty and the unraveling of its ideal institutions and practices. Zhang never explicitly explains what brought about this catastrophe, and one might well wonder how such an ideal state of affairs could ever go awry.[17] However, in his essay "The Analogy of Heaven," the sixth contribution to this collection, Zhang argues that any systematic attempt to capture the workings of Heaven is bound to go wrong over time. The workings of Heaven are not mechanical in structure or operation and tend to drift over extended periods of time, leading human attempts to institutionalize them to suffer eventual inaccuracy and ever-greater error. Perhaps here we can find the beginnings of an explanation for the eventual collapse of the Zhou. In any event, in order to understand the significance of any action done after the breakup of the Zhou dynasty, we must see it within the scheme of a recurring pattern of historical ages or *zeitgeists*. Each subsequent age has been defined by the ascendance of and overemphasis on one of the three intellectual tendencies or fashions mentioned above. The third phase of history is dominated in succession by ages of *philological research*, *literary art*, and *philosophical speculation*, and this pattern repeats itself again and again. In light of such a state of affairs, the task of a morally committed individual is to discern the nature and tendency of one's age and work to resist the excesses of the dominant fashion, in order to bring the dao back into balance. On a smaller and more particular scale, this means that in order to evaluate any action, we need to grasp how it accords with or subverts this larger effort. On a larger and more general scale, we fully appreciate history as the

master discipline—the only way to understand the dao and work to realize it in one's own age.

Zhang shared the ethical particularism characteristic of Wang Yangming, a thinker who influenced Zhang deeply.[18] Both insisted that correct ethical judgment is irreducibly protean and non-codifiable. However, their respective conceptions of why this is so and how one comes to judge correctly differ in important ways. For Wang, ethical judgment consists in the unimpeded operation of an innate moral faculty, which he called "pure knowing."[19] If one's pure knowing is functioning properly, it will spontaneously lead to the proper judgment, and this will initiate a seamless process of perceiving, judging, intending, willing, and doing. As he put it, there is *a unity of knowing and acting*: "real knowledge" is inextricably linked to action.[20] In order to reach this ideal state of character, Wang advocated a process of self-cultivation that consisted primarily of efforts to remove the impediments that might be interfering with one's pure knowing. He insisted that when carefully examined such obstructions prove to be various expressions of selfish desire and that a full and vivid recognition of the nature of one's selfishness has the power to relieve its grip upon one's heart-mind. All that one has to do is to "have faith" in the power of pure knowing and let it guide one to the Way.

Zhang offered a quite different view. He discussed the non-codifiability of ethical judgment largely in terms of the ever-changing historical context within which human beings must act. Since circumstances constantly are shifting and transforming, one can't apply any set principle or covering law to understand the moral order.[21] Instead, one must take stock of the historical moment, and within this framework, the right kind of historian—one with "Virtue"—will discern what is right and what is wrong. In this respect, Zhang retains elements of Wang's intuitionist theory of moral perception. As noted above, in order to develop this kind of ability one has to have the right stuff. Zhang believed that every person has particular natural talents, and some are fortunate enough to have a special gift for history. However, even those with the greatest natural talent must apply themselves to a rigorous course of study in order to master the skills and knowledge that enable them to refine and apply their enhanced sensibilities to the flow of historical events. In this respect Zhang differs from Wang. Ethical self-cultivation requires a demanding course of sustained intellectual training in the specific field of history. Echoing an idea seen in China's first history, the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記), only such a person can

both "understand the past and command the present."[22] Only one who has cultivated proper historical judgment can possess a complete and reliable ethical sensibility.

III. A Brief Guide to the Essays and Letters[23]

"On the Dao" is Zhang's most comprehensive and important essay.[24] It shares its title with several earlier works by different authors from various periods of Chinese history, but its most immediate inspiration is the justly famous essay by Han Yu with the same title.[25] (A complete English translation of Han Yu's essay can be found in the Appendix to this volume.) Like Han Yu, Zhang understood the title *yuan dao* 原道 to mean both "to trace the dao or Way back to its historical source," and "to provide a complete analysis describing what it essentially is." Of course, for Zhang, these projects were inseparable in principle—a view that Han Yu did not seem to share.

In the course of "On the Dao," Zhang presents many of his most distinctive and significant ideas. He traces the evolution of the dao through the three distinctive historical periods described above and explains why a grasp of this history is critical for understanding how past as well as contemporary thinkers misunderstand the nature of the dao and therefore act in misguided and unproductive ways. This points toward another similarity between these two essays: their polemical stance. Han Yu used his essay to throw down the gauntlet and challenge both Buddhism and Daoism as misguided and pernicious teachings responsible for the decline of Chinese civilization. His work ends with explicit and harsh recommendations for combating their purportedly malignant influences. Many regard Han Yu's essay as a call to battle sounding the opening salvo of the neo-Confucian revival. Zhang's essay is directed not toward threats from without but threats from within. His criticisms are aimed primarily at well-meaning yet misguided Confucians who misunderstood the very nature of the dao and therefore corrupted and misdirected the Confucian tradition. While more accommodating in tone than Han Yu's diatribe, its essential message is no less radical.

"On the Dao" is one of a group of twenty-three essays, eight of which are included in this volume, that Zhang composed in May of 1789, while residing in Taiping.[26] Zhang had struggled to work out the central features of his philosophical system for much of his adult life, and as he reached middle age his various insights seem to have flowed together, reinforced the process of development and expression, and poured forth in a torrent of writing

during this remarkably productive month in Taiping. Zhang himself recognized that the essays from this period marked a special moment in the course of his intellectual life; he is reported to have said that, "In all my life, I have never written anything better than these."[27]

Among the Taiping essays is our second selection, "On Learning," a work in which Zhang continues to explore and expand upon the themes one finds in "On the Dao." Zhang himself describes "On Learning" as a further elaboration of the major issues he discussed in "On the Dao" in his letter, "Reply to Shen Zaiting Discussing Learning" (Letter 1 below).

"A Treatise on Teachers," also written in May of 1789, is an explicit response to Han Yu's well-known essay with the same title. (A complete English translation of Han Yu's essay can be found in the Appendix to this volume.) Against Han Yu, Zhang argues that the highest kinds of knowledge can only be acquired from certain very special kinds of teachers. Zhang develops this idea into an intriguing distinction between *replaceable* and *irreplaceable* teachers. One can learn facts and techniques from the former, but if one is interested in the sense, style, and significance of the dao, one must seek the latter: a teacher who personally embodies this knowledge. Moreover, irreplaceable teachers can communicate this more esoteric type of wisdom only through direct and intimate interactions with their students or disciples. Invoking the style as well as the language of Chan Buddhism, Zhang insists on a "mind-to-mind transmission" of the Confucian dao.

"Conventional Convictions," the fourth Taiping essay included among our selections, explores what it is to arrive at legitimate moral judgments. It starts off by arguing that all convictions begin with doubt, but then takes several interesting and unexpected turns. Zhang argues that most people "know" in a shallow sense the same moral truths that morally wise people know, but that only the latter know the justifying reasons behind such judgments. Nevertheless, those who attain this deeper understanding must be on guard for a peculiar kind of moral failure. They must not succumb to the temptation to take their well-grounded moral knowledge as a private discovery or personal achievement; to do so distorts both the true character of any truth—that it is simply part of the dao and thereby belongs to everyone—and threatens to undermine the value of such truths—when people try to hide away such insights, control their dissemination, or use them to gain personal fame, wealth, or power.[28] In some ways, Zhang can be seen as offering a variation on the well-known neo-Confucian distinction between "ordinary knowledge" and "real knowledge."[29] But while Zhang endorses

the idea that real knowledge requires a well-tuned personal sensibility, his analysis tends to emphasize a greater difference in cognitive content than in affective sense as the feature distinguishing these two types of knowledge. Here we see another example of Zhang's describing an idea that was dear to Wang Yangming—the distinction between ordinary and real knowledge—but offering a more intellectualist account than one finds in Wang. For Zhang, those with real knowledge understand the reasons why ordinary moral convictions are well grounded, but they avoid being affected by this achievement in ways that may shift the focus off the moral issue at hand and onto their personal achievement.

"The Difficulty of Being Understood" also was written during the same productive period. In this essay, Zhang argues that really knowing a person is not a matter of being able to recognize his appearance, manner, or name, but of seeing into and appreciating his heart-mind. As is clear in a number of his other essays, this ability is something that one can exercise not only in regard to one's contemporaries but also toward those in the past. In fact, as noted in the first part of this Introduction, Zhang argues that such sympathetic understanding is essential for proper historical understanding.

However, in "The Difficulty of Being Understood" Zhang's main concern is with being understood oneself and only indirectly with the ability to understand others. He argues that real understanding is very hard to come by and not something that one should expect either from one's contemporaries or from posterity. Zhang illustrates his points with a number of historical examples that show semblances or counterfeits of genuine understanding. Taken as a whole, the essay presents an analytical lament, bordering on an expression of despair, over ever really being understood or appreciated. In this respect, this essay echoes and clearly was inspired by the closing chapter of the *Records of the Grand Historian*, where Sima Qian expresses a similar complaint and vows to hide his work in a "famous mountain" to await a sympathetic future reader.[30]

"The Analogy of Heaven," another of the Taiping essays, offers a remarkable argument for the similarity between examples of what today we would distinguish as ethical and scientific knowledge. Given the fact that traditional Chinese astronomers did not fully understand the structure and movements of the heavens, it was inevitable that their attempts to predict regularly occurring celestial phenomena would, over time, come to grief. For example, without understanding the precession of the planets, their predictions about events like the summer and winter solstices would always

begin to drift and soon become grossly inaccurate. They addressed such failures by adding intercalary months and other patches to bring the system back into alignment. Instead of seeing this predicament as a sign that there was something fundamentally wrong with the theory, Zhang—as well as other prominent Chinese thinkers—took it as a sign that there was something essentially incomprehensible about the operations of Heaven.[31] Working from such a perspective, Zhang argues in "The Analogy of Heaven" that attempts to capture the development and expression of ethical norms with a formal, unvarying theory or system will develop similar problems over time, as Heaven is something beyond the ken of human beings—we only see traces of its workings in the phenomenal world—and its operation and future trajectory are things we can at best only approximate. The most we can do is sketch its basic nature, discern its general direction, cultivate ourselves to be sensitive to the inevitable drift that is bound to come, and be prepared to respond to and accommodate such deviations. While this argument does not present us with a wholly compelling account of the natural sciences, it can be seen as a very sensible stance toward the ongoing process of history.[32]

"Breadth and Economy" was written sometime toward the end of 1789, and, as Nivison notes, it is often thought of and shares many of the same themes as the essays Zhang wrote in May of that year.[33] Zhang sent a copy of this essay, along with a substantial "cover letter," to Shen Zaiting. (A complete English translation of Zhang's letter to Shen appears in the Letters section of this volume.) While similar in content to many of the essays written in May of 1789, "Breadth and Economy" is organized around a distinctive and perennial theme of Confucian scholars: how does one balance breadth of learning with a grasp of what is most essential? Taking its cue from *Analects* 6.27, the essay argues that there is no formulaic answer to this question but that such a concern must be part of how one approaches learning. Zhang's particular account of this problem appeals to and takes shape around the structure of his speculative historical scheme. According to Zhang, it was relatively easy for those who lived during the Golden Age of the Zhou dynasty to master every aspect of the dao, because they learned about the Way in the course of their daily lives. In some sense, everything they did was an expression of the dao. However, such is not the case for those who live in the ages following the breakup of the Golden Age. For people of later times, learning about the dao is much more difficult; they do not spend their lives immersed in the ideal culture of the Zhou. Because of this disadvantage, they

must dedicate concerted effort even to grasp a single, limited aspect of the dao. Given their particular historical location, contemporary scholars must approach the problem of breadth and economy differently; they must focus their attention and energies on some particular intellectual specialization. Once they master their chosen specialization, they then can build upon it, extending and broadening their understanding until they comprehend the entirety of the dao.

Zhang composed "Virtue in an Historian" in 1791, and it offers his clearest attempt to describe a distinctive aspect of his view about the more subjective side of proper historical understanding. Zhang's speculative historical scheme offers a unique account of the objective nature and course of history, but "Virtue in an Historian" seeks to explain a special quality or Virtue (de) needed in the person of a good historian. Nivison has pointed out that, like "Conventional Convictions," "Virtue in an Historian" is concerned with the dangers inherent in understanding in general. As noted in our earlier discussion of the former essay, there is a human tendency to regard one's insights as one's personal property, but to do this is to commit a substantial moral error that can be the source of significant, bad consequences, both for oneself and others. In "Virtue in an Historian" Zhang describes this kind of mistake with language taken from the *Zhuangzi*. He cautions that as one comes to understand the dao, one must be careful not to let the human—i.e., one's efforts to understand the dao—overshadow or interfere with its Heavenly—i.e., natural and spontaneous—character. Even the good intention of trying to assist the operation of Heaven can lead one astray. Any effort to help things along simply adds some unnatural element to the original, pristine state of things: polluting the Heavenly with the all-too-human.[34]

As Zhang makes clear, historians have to be especially careful to attend to the inner workings of their own heart-minds. In addition to the general kinds of errors in understanding that Zhang describes in essays like "Conventional Convictions," the nature of historical work—understanding figures from the past—requires historians to engage their emotions in the exercise of sympathetic concern. This kind of personal engagement also is in play when one evaluates the historical writings of others. When one's emotions are aroused in the course of such imaginative identification with others, it is easy for these feelings to carry away good judgment and replace it with prejudice of one kind or another. Zhang feels that even the best historian cannot fully eliminate such distorting influences—for even the best

are human—but a proper historian is aware of this tendency and on guard against it. Balancing sympathetic concern with a vigilant awareness of our tendency toward prejudice defines the twin imperatives informing Virtue in historians.

"Virtue in a Litterateur" was written in 1796 and offers a complement of sorts to the similarly titled "Virtue in an Historian," produced five years before it. In this work, Zhang is concerned with the more subjective qualities that those who specialize in literature must cultivate in order to be true to their chosen vocation. As in his views on the writing and appreciation of history, in "Virtue in a Litterateur" Zhang offers advice that applies to the litterateur as both critic of other writers and author of his or her own works. In either case, in order to perform well the aspiring litterateur must engage in a form of moral self-cultivation. One must be a certain kind of person in order to produce the ideal kind of writing. While there are significant similarities between the cases of the ideal historian and the ideal litterateur, there are also important differences in the way Zhang describes what is needed.

In general terms, a litterateur needs to work on the same twin imperatives that are needed for Virtue in an historian. Whether as critic or author, the litterateur needs sympathetic concern in order to understand the feelings and intentions of others, whether they are other writers or the subjects of one's own works. As in the earlier case, this emotional engagement conceals a potential hazard, for one can easily be seduced by one's own feelings into producing sappy, maudlin, or overwrought writing or reading these flaws into the work of other authors. In order to counter-balance the need for emotional authenticity, Zhang describes the kind of awareness and self-watchfulness that he recommended in "Virtue in an Historian," but in his later essay he develops this idea further and expresses it more clearly. Zhang counsels the aspiring litterateur to cultivate an attitude of reverential attention (*jing* 敬), a state of mind in which the spirited aspects of one's nature—one's *qi*—are collected and controlled. By combining sympathetic concern and reverential attention, the litterateur can be emotionally engaged but not overwhelmed or disoriented by his feelings. Possessing such Virtue, one can understand and appreciate the work of others and produce authentic and powerful writings of one's own.

"The Principles of Literature" is another Taiping essay. It engages and analyzes a cluster of issues that often occupied neo-Confucian thinkers. As the title suggests, the main theme is the nature of great literature; of equal importance, though, are four related questions: how one can develop an apprecia-

tion for such literature, how one can teach such appreciation to others, how one can become a great writer, and how one can teach the ability to write well to others.[35] Zhang's primary aim is to argue against any formulaic or mechanical method for learning to appreciate or produce great literature or for teaching such appreciation or literary artistry to one's students.

The essay begins with Zhang recounting an occasion when he noticed a copy of a highlighted edition of the *Records of the Grand Historian* in the study of a friend. The purpose of such editions, which often were used to learn and instruct others how to write well, was to guide students through a text and draw their attention to particular points of style, usage, allusion, or structure. The idea was that such pointers could help cultivate an appreciation for great writing and aid in developing the ability to write well. However, Zhang notes that such an approach tends to lead the aspiring student astray, for it offers the impression that great writing is something that can be reduced to a set of principles, techniques, and the like. It inclines one to focus on *imitating* rather than appreciating or creating great literature.

While reading great literature can nourish one's appreciation of literature and one's ability to write well, the focus of one's study must always be to attain a personal understanding of what one is reading. Zhang illustrates this point with the examples of tasting fine food or feeling the warmth and comfort of a well-made coat; one cannot appreciate the value of either without experiencing them for oneself. Creative writing presents the obverse side of this coin. Any attempt to become a great writer or teach others the craft of writing that relies on imitation of the classics or seeks to draw upon a list of techniques or principles is doomed, for all great writing expresses something *unique* about the writer. Great literature manifests the authentic insights and emotions of an author, and in order to join the ranks of such writers, one must find one's own voice and have something of one's own to say.

As we see in other of Zhang's writings, "The Principles of Literature" manifests the deep influence of thinkers like Wang Yangming, the Chan school of Buddhism, and ultimately Zhuangzi. Alluding to the famous character Wheelwright Pian in the *Zhuangzi*, who could not adequately explain his skill at carving wheels or even teach it to his own son, Zhang thinks that writing well involves a kind of knack or know-how that renders it beyond the grasp of more ordinary ways of understanding.[36] As is the case with his ethical particularism, discussed in the first part of this introduction, Zhang does not go quite so far as Zhuangzi, Chan Buddhists, or Wang in advocating the elimination of all writing and study, but he insists that such

efforts are only like fingers pointing to the moon; they can help one see but are not themselves either the ability to see or part of what one eventually comes to see.

In this essay, Zhang also defends literature against the more strident criticisms of certain Song-dynasty Confucians. Here we see him taking part in a long-standing debate about the relative value of literary pursuits. On the more "conservative" side were thinkers like Cheng Yi (1033–1107) who saw literary pursuits as a waste of time and energy and a potential danger to moral self-cultivation. Somewhere in the middle were thinkers like Zhu Xi, who saw a place for literary pursuits but insisted on keeping them in their place relative to the philosophical study of the classics. On the more "radical" side were thinkers like Su Shi (1036–1101), Yuan Mei (1716–98), and Li Zhi (1527–1602) who thought that the appreciation and writing of literature offered the best way to understand the dao.[37] In characteristic fashion, Zhang struck an independent note within this most disharmonious chorus. While vehemently criticizing his contemporary Yuan Mei as a debauched and dangerous threat to the Confucian tradition, he also criticized thinkers like Cheng Yi for failing to see the profound moral potential of literature.[38] Indeed, in this essay Zhang makes clear that he regarded writing well as an ethical imperative for all. There is considerable sense and value in such a view, for if studying and practicing the Confucian Way ultimately is directed at the betterment of society, then moving other people toward the Way must be an ability that every good Confucian should cultivate. Just as teaching in general is central to the Confucian Way, writing well is required to effectively move and inspire others to take up and support the dao. Zhang insisted that the literary path is not just one possible course for pursuing moral self-cultivation; it is part of every true Confucian's calling.[39]

Our last essay, "Distinguishing What Only Seems to Be,"[40] also was written in Taiping during May of 1789, and in it we hear not only a subtle account of a widely condemned human failing but also echoes of Zhang's personal disappointment in the intellectuals of his own age. The central theme of the essay originally was addressed by Kongzi, who lamented that the conduct of one of his disciples made him abandon his original trust that people would reliably do as they say. After several bad episodes involving [his follower] Zai Wo, Kongzi adopted a new attitude and policy toward others: "to listen to their words and then observe their actions."[41] Kongzi also expressed a strong dislike for things that seem to be good but in fact are not;[42] this idea appears in the title of Zhang's essay, and variations of this refrain are

heard throughout its course. Another less evident but clearly present influence on Zhang's thought in this essay is Mengzi's warnings about the effects that subtle but pernicious doctrines can have upon the unsuspecting mind. Zhang clearly thought that, like Mengzi, he was someone who "understood words" and had a mission to awaken a slumbering world to the dangers of false virtue.[43]

One thing that is wrong and even nefarious about things that seem to be good but are not is that they borrow the power and prestige of goodness and employ them toward inappropriate ends. One finds an enduring concern within the Confucian tradition with such semblances and counterfeits of virtue. People who put on the airs of the good in order to achieve some non-moral or immoral end are said to be the "thieves of virtue."[44] But Zhang is equally concerned with another aspect of what seems to be good: the ways in which it can lead astray those starting out on the path of learning.

Zhang begins his analysis of the problem by arguing that it arises, at least in part, from the very nature of language. Since there are only a finite number of ways to talk about things, even people with radically different intentions will inevitably employ similar words. The problem then is to discern the underlying motives and aims beneath what people are saying. This is a problem that everyone faces to some degree. In most cases, it presents no real threat, because bad motives or insincerity often are clumsy and fairly easy to detect. But when the speaker with bad intentions has developed an advanced facility in employing the words and imitating the style of the good, things become more difficult, even dire.

In focusing less upon what bad agents are able to accomplish—though he worries about that, too—and more on the effects that their examples have upon unsuspecting but naïve students, Zhang points the traditional Confucian concern with semblances and counterfeits of virtue in a new and intriguing direction. Those who have set their hearts upon the Way are easily led to mistake things like breadth of learning or excellence in literary style to be the true goals of learning. By focusing on such parts as the whole of learning, they then can come to use these intellectual abilities to vie with each other for fortune, fame, and power and in the process often eclipse and harm sincere students of the Way. Such goals and behavior of course are anathema to the Way, but Zhang insists that the origin of such misbegotten thought and conduct is found in failing to distinguish what only seems to be.

Zhang wrote his "Letter on Learning to Zhu Canmei" sometime around 1783, and in it we find not only descriptions of Zhang's own course of learn-

ing and specific advice to his young protégé but also an analysis of how people in general should pursue an understanding of the dao. Zhang self-consciously modeled his composition on a justly famous letter from Han Yu to his student Li Yi. (A complete English translation of Han Yu's letter can be found in the Appendix to this volume). But Zhang uses the occasion to review and apply some of the central claims of his general philosophical view.

Zhang notes that while many aspiring students are led astray by mundane desires for fame, fortune, or power, others simply are swept up in the particular intellectual fashion of their age. Doing so can be disastrous, because contemporary students must pursue the particular intellectual discipline for which they are best suited by nature, and one's natural inclination may be at odds with the particular intellectual fashion of one's time. Recalling arguments that he presented in "On Breath and Economy," Zhang points out that unlike students in the Golden Age, who could master every intellectual discipline in the course of everyday activities, contemporary students must home in and focus on some particular specialty, knowing that all the various, more local avenues of learning eventually will lead them to the great Way. And so, Zhang advises Zhu to follow his heart's true calling with sincerity and with confidence that his particular vocation will bring him to an understanding of the dao.

Zhang also addresses Zhu's worry that studying for the examinations will prove to be an obstacle to his pursuit of the dao. He reassures his young charge that there is no fundamental incompatibility between studying for or success in the examinations and the attainment of true learning. Drawing upon ideas that are characteristic of the thought of Wang Yangming, Zhang insists that the important thing is one's underlying intention. If one studies simply to realize worldly success and renown, this of course will lead one farther and farther from the Way. But one can use one's preparation for the examinations as a vehicle to cultivate oneself, and one must realize that only such concrete projects offer real opportunities for moral self-cultivation.[45] One cannot cultivate oneself in a vacuum of inactivity; one can only hone and sharpen one's moral edge against the challenges of actual, concrete projects.

Zhang wrote his "Letter on Learning to My Clansman Runan" in 1766, the same year in which he met the brilliant and famous scholar Dai Zhen.[46] Dai obviously made a strong impression on Zhang, and the letter contains a lengthy quote attributed to Dai. The central point of the quote, which Zhang endorsed heartily, is that students need to know a great deal of tech-

nical, background information in order to read the different classics with any degree of comprehension; to study the classics without such knowledge is a waste of time.

Zhang goes into considerable detail recounting and lamenting his own, mostly misguided, early efforts at learning, but then he uses these pieces of autobiography, as well as the quote from Dai Zhen, to emphasize several of his own most cherished and original insights. For example, Zhang uses these resources to provide a sketch of his idea that contemporary students must focus upon and devote themselves to some particular specialization. In this letter, he highlights how such effort requires a kind of heroic independence and fortitude. One must simply bear down and press on, ignoring what the world says, in the confidence that eventually one will begin to master one's vocation and discern the deep truths of the dao. Zhang takes every opportunity to weave this more theoretical account of learning back into his own personal intellectual odyssey, at times in rather obviously self-serving ways. He ends the letter discussing several family genealogies that he had been working on, partly in concert with other family members, and promising to send Runan a copy of a local history that Zhang had helped his own father to compose a number of years earlier and recently had revised.

Zhang's "Reply to Shen Zaiting Discussing Learning" was written sometime toward the end of 1789. One of Zhang's central themes in this essay is that learning must be aimed at personal understanding; its true goal is moral improvement. The aspiring student of the dao must be on guard so as not to be seduced by promises of worldly renown or reward or led astray by the popularity of intellectual fashions. Different intellectual fashions come and go, and every one has its underlying merits, but one must realize that each is but one facet of the dao. Students must keep their eyes on the true prize: a personal understanding of the Way, and the first step in this process is grasping what the dao is and what it is not; this, of course, is the focus of Zhang's "On the Dao."

Zhang then presents a summary of his view of the dao. It is what makes things the way they are. It has no fixed expression, and this has important repercussions for learning. Since there is no single, definitive expression of the Way, there is no exclusive path to it. One is free to follow one's own way. The best course, though, is to follow the particular intellectual specialty in which one shows the greatest natural facility and ease. Here we see another argument—in addition to what we have discussed earlier—for finding and following one's own particular specialty. Zhang bemoaned the fact that

most students of his day simply followed whatever fashion was in vogue and let their spirits rise or fall with the popular praise or criticism they might receive but hardly warranted.

Zhang goes on to argue that each of the three dominant intellectual fashions reflects a nascent intellectual ability or power and a corresponding mature excellence. *Philology* is based upon the fundamental power of memory and when properly developed leads to learning. *Literature* is based upon our innate power of creativity and can lead to skill. *Philosophy* is based upon analytical power and when properly cultivated leads to insight. In the remaining course of the essay, Zhang continues to meditate upon the theme of the three dominant intellectual fashions, at times even suggesting that they can to some degree be reduced to one another. Since Shen has decided to focus on literature, some of Zhang's most interesting and creative ideas concern this particular aspect of the dao. For example, at one point Zhang argues that the different forms of writing associated with the three primary intellectual disciplines offer different avenues to the three forms of this-worldly immortality described in the *Commentary of Zuo*.[47]

Philosophical writing can establish one's immortal fame through the development of Virtue; philological writing can establish one's immortality through the performance of (scholarly) achievements; literary writing can establish one's immortal fame through the production of words. Zhang concludes the essay by encouraging Shen to pursue his own chosen path while warning him not to fall prey to the reigning intellectual fashion or a desire for fame. He repeats his earlier advice about not neglecting the other two primary intellectual disciplines and recommends that Shen study and emulate those—such as Dai Zhen—who manage to combine more than one of them. At the same time, Zhang cautions his young charge to avoid overreaching, for even the greatest of scholars cannot do it all.

Zhang wrote his "Letter on Learning to Chen Jianting" in 1789, and it is of particular value for understanding the motivation and intention behind what is arguably Zhang's most important essay, "On the Dao." The letter begins with Zhang's noting some of the criticisms his essay had received and responding that at least these critics did not really understand the central argument of the essay or the larger project, the *General Principles of Literature and History*, of which it is a part.[48] He suggests that the likely source of their misunderstanding is the fact that his essay shares its title with several famous predecessors—essays by Liu An, Liu Xie, and Han Yu—but notes that the point of his essay is fundamentally different from any of them.[49] Zhang

goes on to explain that "On the Dao" was written to show the historical origins of the dao in a way that would make clear what the dao essentially is. He further points out that "On the Dao" plays a vital role within his larger work, the *General Principles of Literature and History*, which is why it is the lead essay in this collection of writings. The *General Principles of Literature and History* offers an historical review and analysis of the achievements and failings of writing. Zhang argues that writing, in turn, depends upon learning, but contemporary people no longer understand what learning really is. They mistake one of the various intellectual fashions of the day as learning and fail to see that true learning is the search for an understanding of the dao. This argument makes clear that the first step one must take in pursuing one's own learning or correcting the misunderstandings of one's age—these being the primary normative points of the *General Principles of Literature and History*—is to understand the dao.

Zhang goes on to describe different aspects of his essay that strongly support the need for a work like "On the Dao." He reviews, for example, his theory about the three primary intellectual fashions that dominate succeeding ages and shows the connection between this view and his historically context-sensitive account of ethics. On Zhang's model, one ought to work in ways that resist the particular fashion of one's time and help to bring the dao back into a state where all three of the intellectual disciplines that underlie these fashions—philosophy, philology, and literature—are equally valued, advocated, and studied. He goes on to draw out the further implication that modeling oneself on some past age or figure will almost certainly lead one to act poorly; from an ethical perspective, to do what Kongzi did is to fail to act as Kongzi did. That is to say, to perform in one's own age the types of work that were called for in Kongzi's age is to practice a kind of fetish and to forsake one's moral duty to understand and correct the deficiencies of one's own place and time.

Zhang also highlights his account of the relationship and difference between the Duke of Zhou and Kongzi. He notes how on his account the Duke of Zhou and not Kongzi is really the person who "summed up the complete orchestra"—that is, the person who brought together all the pieces of the dao.[50] This is so because the former was the one who happened to appear at that historical moment when the evolution of the dao reached its full and perfect form. The dao comes from Heaven and is manifested in actual things and affairs; on such a view, the Duke of Zhou had the particular task of being the one who fully realized the Way in the world. Kongzi's destiny

and mission were different. He appeared on the historical stage at a moment when the dao had crested and begun to decline. He saw, as any sage in this situation would, that for him the most pressing imperative was to preserve and transmit the essentials of the Way. And so, Kongzi was someone who learned everything he knew by studying the Duke of Zhou.

Zhang goes on to note that "On Learning" is an addendum to "On the Dao." He wrote it to expand upon and make clear issues that he did not treat fully in the earlier essay. He closes his letter with a meditation upon how others respond to one's writing and how one should interpret both criticism and praise. Essentially, he points toward the theme of his essay "The Difficulty of Being Understood" and concludes that truly profound writings often will be misunderstood and as a result will elicit more criticism than praise; quick and ready praise, in fact, usually indicates that people have failed to grasp the true meaning of what one has written.