Summary

Ming dynasty (1368-1644) Neo-Confucianism has taken on various facades when interpreted by scholars who approach it differently. For instance, it has been regarded by some as being a lifeless intellectual activity until the emergence of Wang Yangming 王阳明 (1472-1529); a school of thought or sect that preoccupied itself with moral cultivation and metaphysical issues; an attestation of individualism or grassroots dynamism. I find there are some aspects that have been overlooked. Scholars have been using Wang Yangming as a focus to trace the unfolding of intellectual activity in Ming dynasty. What about pre-Wang Yangming period? Were Ming Neo-Confucians only interested in self-cultivation? Apart from moral issues, would not the teachings of these Neo-Confucians tell us other features of Ming dynasty?

Among the Neo-Confucians who appeared before Wang Yangming, Cai Qing 蔡清 (1453-1508), whose commentaries on Confucian classics gained wide acceptance during the sixteenth century, caught my attention. As an historical figure who has been understood differently by Qing scholar Huang Zongxi 黄宗羲 (1610-95) and contemporary historians, I believe he warrants a more detailed study under a framework that does not observe him through a philosophical glass darkly. Studying him under both philosophical and sociopolitical lenses proves to give us more insights into this mid-Ming (1458-1548) Neo-Confucian. Cai Qing (not surprisingly) highlighted the importance of moral cultivation. At the same time, his thoughts showed us his ideas about how the state should be governed. Self-cultivation is by no means an end in itself as its benefits should be extended to beyond oneself. The harmonization of the self with others and even the entire universe was what Cai Qing aimed to achieve as the ultimate goodness. In his elucidation of the process of achieving the ultimate
goodness, we see that he acknowledged the independence of the people. An ideal system of management should therefore begins from the individual and extends to one's kith and kin and finally to the universe. The institutional manner of governing is not unwelcomed but not always indispensible.

My thesis concludes that the intellectual dynamism of Ming dynasty over nearly 300 years will be pretermitted on the predication that Wang Yangming is the icon. This obnubilates our understanding of Ming dynasty. I also prove that grassroots dynamism was encouraged by Cai Qing, who had inherited the vision of Northern and Southern Song predecessors such as Zhang Zai and Zhu Xi. For Cai Qing, a unified empire that acknowledged diversity and hierarchy was the vision.