

On the Theory of Human Nature in the Confucian Tradition: Focusing on Zhang Huang's Theory of Nature and Qi

Xuefei Su 

School of Philosophy, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China
Email: suxuefei1213@163.com

How to cite this paper: Su, X. F. (2026). On the Theory of Human Nature in the Confucian Tradition: Focusing on Zhang Huang's Theory of Nature and Qi. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 16, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2026.161001>

Received: November 15, 2025

Accepted: January 13, 2026

Published: January 16, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Throughout the development of theories of human nature in Chinese philosophy, the debate concerning physical nature (qizhi) and innate moral nature (tianxing) constitutes a significant vein of thought. While early discourses ranged from Mencius's metaphysical goodness to the Song Neo-Confucian dichotomy of nature and physical endowment, this paper focuses on the critical transition in the Ming Dynasty. It examines Zhang Huang, a pivotal figure in the Yangming School of Mind, who proposed that "it is acceptable to say that innate morality exists within the physical body." By defining physical nature as the locus of innate nature, Zhang Huang attempted to unify the two within the realm of practice. The paper argues that although Zhang Huang remained constrained by the paradigm of innate knowing (liangzhi), his theoretical reconstruction bridged the gap between Wang Yangming's subjective ontology and Liu Zongzhou's later synthesis. Ultimately, Zhang's work paved the way for a cultivation theory that fully grounds moral nature within physical practice.

Keywords

Confucian Theory of Human Nature, Physical Nature, Yangming School

1. Introduction

The opening statement of The Doctrine of the Mean ("What Heaven confers is called the nature") illustrates that in Chinese philosophy, human nature has always been connected with the metaphysical Principle of Heaven (tianli). Unlike the Cheng-Zhu School, which viewed the Principle of Heaven as an external, objective law governing the cosmos and human nature, the Yangming School internalized this principle, asserting that the mind itself, in its original substance, is the

principle. Consequently, scholars of the Yangming School, adhering to “the mind is principle” (xinjili), tended to diminish the transcendent quality of nature and instead emphasized its connection with the principle inherent in the mind. Qi represents the physiological and perceptual functions of the body—including the heart-mind (xin), emotions, and desires. When nature and qi are undifferentiated, the inherently good original nature penetrates the perceptual functions, aligning the operations of the physiological mind with rational principles (xingli). As Wang Yangming stated, to clearly perceive the original nature is to see that qi and nature are ultimately identical (Chen, 1983: p. 210) Zhang Huang further argued that humans are the “mind of Heaven and Earth” (tiandizhixin), and that nature should be sought within physical form and appearance, rather than by abandoning physical nature to pursue a metaphysical Nature of Heaven and Earth (tiandizhixing) (Zhang, 1983a: p. 536).

Zhang Huang (1527-1608) was a third-generation disciple of Wang Yangming and a representative figure of the Jiangyou Wang School. Huang noted that Zhang Huang insightfully clarified that while physical nature is not itself moral nature (xing), the latter cannot be sought apart from the former (Huang, 1985a: p. 663) Building on Yangming’s School of Mind, Zhang Huang explored the unity of nature and qi. However, constrained by the limitations of the concept of innate knowing (liangzhi), his thought remained within the traditional framework and did not fully achieve metaphysical integration. Nonetheless, his work inspired later scholars like Wang Shihuai and contributed to Liu Zongzhou’s eventual breakthrough—using the concept of the “unactivated root of the will” (weifazhiyigen) to fully unify physical nature and moral nature at the metaphysical level. Zhang Huang’s theory of nature and qi thus represents a crucial transitional stage in Ming philosophy. This paper focuses on his ideas, examining the relationship between physical nature and innate moral nature within the School of Mind and its implications for moral cultivation (gongfulun).

2. The Duality of Nature (Xing) and Qi: The Dichotomy of Metaphysical and Physical Realms

The innate goodness of human nature is a foundational consensus among most Confucian scholars. Confucius stated, “By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart” (Analects17.2), highlighting the distinction between innate endowment and acquired influence. Mencius further elaborated, “The nature of the gentleman is such that benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are rooted in his heart. Their growth and manifestation are a mild harmony appearing in his countenance, a rich fullness in his back, and the extension of their influence to his four limbs. The four limbs, without words, understand.” (Yang, 1960: p. 309) This clarifies the connotation of humanity’s innate moral nature (benxing) and its process of manifestation. Since Mencius, the concept that innate goodness manifests through the posterior heart-mind became the fundamental structure of the theory of innate goodness. However, just as the the-

ory of evil nature must explain the existence of good in the world and the possibility of moral improvement, scholars emphasizing innate universal goodness must confront the reality of coexisting good and evil in human affairs.

As scholar Chen Lai points out, “Mencius’s theory of human nature possesses a dual perspective: one is ontological, the other is practical. Regarding the former, Mencius considers human nature to be good... Regarding the latter, Mencius discusses human nature in terms of fate.” (Chen, 2017) In the ontological sense, Mencius used the metaphor of “Ox Mountain” to describe evil merely as a loss or obscuration of the original innate nature, without granting evil an ontological status in the posterior realm. Yang Bojun interprets Mencius’s “fulfilling the heart-mind and knowing nature” as “fully expanding the innate good heart-mind is called understanding human nature. Understanding human nature is to understand the Mandate of Heaven (tianming). Preserving the heart-mind and nourishing nature is the way to serve Heaven” (Yang, 1960: p. 301). For Mencius, the metaphysical innate nature manifests through the posterior heart-mind, demonstrating its concrete posterior functioning. Thus, the process of cultivation involves fulfilling the “posterior heart-mind” to know the “innate nature” and ultimately reach the state of “knowing Heaven”. This demonstrates the positive significance of innate nature (tianxing) for humanity. Mencius achieved the unity of Heaven-endowed morality and moral practice through the concept of the correlative relationship between innate nature and cosmic destiny (xingmingxiangdui). Even under the influence of the Mandate of Heaven and innate nature, human agency is still required to actively pursue morality; hence, “Seek and you will get it; let go and you will lose it” and “seek it in the proper way and get it—it is fate that determines it” (Yang, 1960: p. 302).

However, as Chen Lai notes, “Mencius’s emphasis lies on ‘seeking it in the proper way’ and ‘awaiting it with fate’—that the gentleman should entrust the outcome to fate, rather than striving forcefully.” (Chen, 2017) While integrating personal cultivation with the Mandate of Heaven and innate nature encourages the return to goodness, it can also lead to the drawback of splitting nature and fate (xingmingfenlie). Fundamentally, in Mencius’s theory of goodness, nature remains in the metaphysical realm, while evil is purely a product of acquired bad habits. Overemphasizing the innate goodness of nature, even attributing it to the Mandate of Heaven, inevitably leads to a theoretical imbalance between the innate and posterior dimensions, as well as an incomplete commitment to the subjective effort of “fulfilling the heart-mind and knowing nature” in real life.

Unlike Gaozi’s philosophy, which discussed human nature solely in terms of physiological instincts, Confucian scholars ultimately sought support for virtue and education, not merely an abstract theory of nature. Mencius’s theory of innate goodness, with its deterministic tendencies, could potentially induce passivity. As Dong Zhongshu commented on the debate about good and evil in nature: “The sage believed that in an age without enlightened kings and among uneducated people, none could be entirely good. If goodness is so difficult to achieve, how can

we say that the nature of all people is capable of it? This is an error. Mencius based his argument on the behavior of birds and beasts, thus claiming that nature is already good. I base my argument on the actions of sages, therefore I say nature is not yet entirely good.” (Su, 1992: p. 304) The discussion of nature must not only acknowledge the moral significance of Mencian theory but, more importantly, emphasize its significance for education and transformation in real life. This gave rise to theories relatively inclined towards acknowledging evil, such as the theory of evil nature, the theory of three grades of nature, and the theory of the mixture of good and evil in nature. These theories primarily focused on the physiological functions of the physical realm and the emotions and desires arising therefrom, diluting the metaphysical characteristics of nature and turning attention to the function of cultivation in the present world. However, they still maintained the transcendent status of nature as unchangeable and beyond cultivation in specific posterior practice. For instance, Dong Zhongshu said, “Humanity receives the mandate from Heaven, possessing a nature capable of good and evil. It can be nourished but not altered, can be guided but not eliminated.” (Su, 1992: p. 304) Yang Xiong said, “Learning is that by which nature is cultivated. Seeing, hearing, speaking, appearance, and thinking are what nature possesses.” (Yang, 1987: p. 16) Evidently, this approach was merely a modification of the theory of innate goodness for pedagogical purposes, pulling goodness into reality through the metaphor of “the rice sprout growing from the grain”, similar to Dong’s “rice-in-the-grain” analogy. However, it failed to explain the origin and resolution of evil from a physical perspective. Consequently, although they noticed the lack of emphasis on physical cultivation, they still passively placed the hope for overcoming evil and cultivating goodness on the spontaneous emergence of the original nature.

In the context of competing with Buddhism and Daoism, Han Yu inherited Dong Zhongshu’s “three grades of nature” theory while focusing on the influence of emotions on nature. Han Yu believed that “Nature is what one is born with. Emotions are what arise from contact with things.” (Han, 1986: p. 20) Therefore, the focus of cultivation should be on how to make the expression of the seven emotions conform to the Mean (zhongdao), achieving unity of nature and emotions, thus enabling one to be “sufficient in oneself and having no need to depend on external things” (Han, 1986: p. 13). Li Ao further developed this theory, making it more aligned with the Confucian emphasis on worldly engagement and the need to counter Buddhism and Daoism. Li Ao believed that “Emotions can be good or bad, but nature is entirely good.” The relationship between nature and emotions is like water and silt: “The nature of water is clear. What makes it turbid is silt. When it is undisturbed, how can nature be said not to exist? If left still for long, the silt will settle of itself, and the clear and bright nature will be able to reflect Heaven and Earth.” Although nature is originally good, emotions themselves do not equate to evil but rather to “obscurity”. It is only rootless “perverse emotions” that hinder the proper functioning of “good emotions” based on nature. Simultaneously, precisely because “perverse emotions” are rootless, they can

be completely eradicated to restore the original goodness of nature and emotions. It can be seen that by Han Yu's time, although the innateness of nature was still emphasized, the discussion of emotions pointed the way to connecting the physical realm with the metaphysical nature. This latent trend was expanded by Li Ao, who, in a certain sense, realized the manifestation of metaphysical nature in the physical realm through the combination of innate good nature and posterior good emotions. He explained the problem of relative evil through posterior rootless evil emotions and also provided a specific path of cultivation. However, this integration was still confined to the subject's own physiological functions and supremely good nature, without engaging with the external world of life. Therefore, even though Li Ao, under the banner of the "School of Nature", sought to retain good emotions and eliminate evil emotions, seemingly affirming the legitimacy of certain emotions, he essentially demanded emotionlessness, pursuing the emptiness and stillness of the original mind by detaching from the physical world.

The genuine discussion of the metaphysical and physical aspects of human nature within the context of the real world began with Song Dynasty Neo-Confucianism. Zhang Dainian believed that "Since the Warring States period, the contentious and unsettled theories of human nature found a relative unification and a relative conclusion with the emergence of the theory of the duality of nature." (Zhang, 1982: p. 212) For the Song Neo-Confucians, principle not only served as the ontological Heavenly Principle governing the external world but, more frequently, referred to the morally endowed nature-principle. In contrast, qi represented the fundamental element constituting all things, including the human form. Zhang Zai of the Northern Song used qi to explain the generation and development of the entire world, categorizing human nature into the Nature of Heaven and Earth and the physical nature (qizhixing) based on the two states of qi: "After physical form exists, there is the physical nature. If one returns to the original good state, then the Nature of Heaven and Earth is preserved." (Zhang, 1978: p. 23) He proposed the cultivation method of "transforming one's physical nature" (bianhuaqizhi). Humans acquire form through the process of qi-transformation in the world; hence, their nature is naturally the attribute of qi. The Cheng brothers believed that "Qi can be good or bad, but nature is entirely good" (Cheng & Cheng, 1981: p. 274) and "To discuss nature without discussing qi is incomplete; to discuss qi without discussing nature is unclear" (Cheng & Cheng, 1981: p. 81). Extending the discussion of nature to the external world raised a question: compared to other things formed by qi, how do humans uniquely possess moral attributes? The Cheng brothers explained this as "the bias or uprightness of qi", attributing the exclusive moral possession to humans receiving "upright qi", while other things "obtain a biased aspect of Yin and Yang" (Cheng & Cheng, 1981: p. 4). Zhu Xi further elevated the status of Heavenly Principle, considering human goodness as "receiving the principle of Heaven and Earth", and raised the principle within qi to a metaphysical height as the source of moral principles. As he said, "Principle has never been separated from qi. However, principle is metaphysical,

while qi is physical. Speaking in terms of metaphysical and physical, how can there be no sequence? Principle is formless; qi is coarse, having dregs.” (Li, 1986: p. 57) While emphasizing the origin of all things and morality, this theory inevitably led to the dilemma of the bifurcation of principle and qi (liqierfen), particularly evident in human nature. The external principle manifests in concrete human nature as principle descending into qi constitution. “The good nature is like water; the physical nature is like adding some sauce and salt to it, making it a different flavor.” (Li, 1986: p. 3) Therefore, effort must be made on the posterior physical nature, realizing “the essence and detail, the entirety and substance of all things are all penetrated, and the whole substance and great functioning of my mind are all illuminated” (Zhu, 1983: p. 7), through the investigation of things and exhaustion of principle (jiwuqiongli) in the external world.

By the time of these developments, the theory of human nature was primarily characterized by the relationship between principle and qi. Correspondingly, the focus of cultivation shifted from “returning to nature” to “exhausting principle” (qiongli). As Chen Lai states, “...qi-endowment not only affects the completeness of the received principle but also obscures the received principle, hindering its full expression.” (Chen, 2000: p. 136) The introduction of the physical nature meant that Neo-Confucians shifted their focus from seeking the passive arrangement of innate nature to how to pursue transcendence within the physical world. The substance of the good nature transformed from an abstract Mandate of Heaven to the universal law of the cosmos encompassing moral norms in the real world. Metaphysical moral concepts, reified, resided within the physical qi, echoing the objective laws prevailing between Heaven and Earth. Although this integration was not thorough due to the logical gap between principle and qi, it indicated the trend towards the unity of metaphysical and physical. Early Ming Neo-Confucians further developed this; for example, Cao Duan’s “principle and qi are one body without interruption” and Xue Xuan’s “the Way and vessels are inseparable”, “nature and qi are simultaneous”. However, they remained within Zhu Xi’s dualistic framework. The realization of the unity of metaphysical and physical in human nature would be achieved in the School of Qi and the School of Mind through the mutual subsumption of principle and qi.

3. Nature Residing in Qi: The Tendency toward Unification in the Dualistic Theory of Nature

From the perspective of the School of Mind, the world is the world as perceived by the mind’s consciousness; therefore, the ultimate meaning of the world inevitably resides in the perceiving mind. As Wang Yangming stated, “My spiritual consciousness (lingming) is the master of Heaven, Earth, and the spirits. Without my spiritual consciousness, who would perceive the height of Heaven? Without my spiritual consciousness, who would perceive the depth of Earth? ...Heaven, Earth, and the mind flow together as one qi; how can they be separated?” (Chen, 1983: p. 381) Furthermore, “Consider people who have died; their spiritual intel-

ligence has dispersed. Where, then, are their Heaven and Earth and the myriad things?” (Chen, 1983: p. 333) The human mind, through its own “spiritual consciousness”, becomes the “spiritual consciousness” of the entire world. Such a mind, possessing the cognitive function of innate knowing, also takes on an essential significance. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that “The substance of the mind is nature, and nature is principle.” (Chen, 1983: p. 137) Here, nature is reduced to the metaphysical, unactivated, supremely good substance but is manifested through the original mind of innate knowing. The primary path of Yangming Learning thus became the manifestation of the supremely good nature through the original mind of innate knowing, which itself is expressed in the mind of right and wrong that knows good and evil at any moment. The relationship between physical nature and moral nature is thus: “Physical nature is like a vessel, while moral nature is like water. It is the same water, but the vessels differ in clarity, turbidity, thickness, thinness, strength, and weakness. However, its nature as water is one. If one can expand and fill it, the vessel cannot restrict it.” (Chen, 1983: p. 407) Physical nature and moral nature constitute a certain relationship of substance and function. Physical nature also transforms from the meaning it held in Neo-Confucianism—where it obscured the Nature of Heaven and Earth, like a “cage around a lamp” or “water around a pearl”—into a “vessel that holds water”. The focus of cultivation shifts from transforming the physical nature to expanding the mind and nature. Compared to the Neo-Confucian “nature is principle”, the School of Mind believed that nature has no external, substantiated source, and the “substance of the mind” refers to nature being merely the original state of the mind. Through the original mind and innate knowing, which penetrate activity and stillness, being and non-being, the metaphysical nature is connected with the physical qi, and the internal mind is connected with external affairs. This elevates human subjectivity while preserving the ontological basis for choosing good over evil, making the subjectivity of Confucian cultivation more explicit. However, just as the emphasis on external Heavenly Principle in Zhu Xi’s Learning ultimately risked degenerating into the hypocritical practice of “philology”, the School of Mind’s discussion of nature and qi was also confined to the subject’s innate nature and their own physical constitution. Establishing morality based on the internal innate knowing could also deviate from the original purpose of unifying activity and stillness and seeking the mind in affairs, leading to the fragmentation of “mysterious emptiness and dissolution” or “emotional indulgence and recklessness”. Zhang Huang’s theory that “physical nature is innate nature” was born from critiquing the shortcomings of later scholars.

Ding Weixiang once explained the Jiangyou School’s revision of Yangming by period: “The theoretical scale of the first generation was basically based on Yangming’s School of Mind, primarily revolving around the disagreements among the three major branches of the later Wang School; the second generation progressed to the divisions between Zhu Xi and Yangming, including the emerging School of Mind and School of Qi” (Ding, 2022: p. 419). The characteristic of the Jiangyou

Wang School lay in its emphasis on practical cultivation. Zou Shouyi and Ouyang De of Jiangyou devoted themselves to expounding Yangming's principle of the unity of knowledge and action. Nie Bao and Luo Hongxian further proposed a cultivation method of "seeking stillness in movement" and "returning to stillness" (guiji). Under this lineage, Zhang Huang also began criticizing the Zhezhong School's "innate knowing is present" and the Taizhou School's "innate knowing is readily available" for neglecting physical cultivation.

Wang Ji of the Zhezhong School further enhanced the initiative of Yangming's innate knowing. He believed that "Innate knowing is the source of the unity of nature and fate; it is the master, it is the flow; thus, the effort of extending innate knowing has only one place of application." (Huang, 1985a: p. 281) "Innate knowing is the spiritual root of nature, which is called the substance" (Huang, 1985a: p. 281). He thus limited the scope of nature's function to the realm of the subject's internal activities, even negating the externality of the external world: "Things follow the will; if the will is correct, things are correct; if the will is deviant, things are deviant. To recognize things as principle is excessive; to interpret things as desire is deficient (Huang, 1985a: p. 283)." Zhang Huang believed that such talk seemed subtle but was meaningless for the real world: "Even the wise and perceptive know that fate, nature, and principle are one. They say not seeing and not hearing is its substance; non-thinking and non-acting is its function; not forgetting and not helping is its effort; neither yes nor no is its ultimate. Listening to their words, it seems they know nature and know Heaven, but examining their own persons, they have no connection to it at all." (Zhang, 1983b: p. 201) Zhang Huang believed that the effort of the School of Mind's innate knowing must be grounded in reality; the discussion of nature must return to the real world. Over-emphasizing the substantial innate knowing, the unique metaphysical status of nature and the mind's conscious function could reasonably lead to the conclusion that "innate knowing is present," because Yangming's original structure was that the supremely good nature manifests in the mind as the mind of right and wrong that knows good and evil at any time. However, this did not mean that the School of Mind was a sudden enlightenment Chan Buddhism that could work directly on the substance. Therefore, Wang Yangming said during the Tianquan Bridge discussion (tianquanlundao), "The views of you two gentlemen complement each other and should not be held one-sidedly" (Chen, 1983: p. 359), requiring the integration of substance and practical effort. Correspondingly, regarding the relationship between nature and qi, Zhang Huang opposed discussing innate nature apart from physical nature and also opposed the theory that bifurcated the Nature of Heaven and Earth and the physical nature: "It is acceptable to say that physical nature is innate nature; it is incorrect to say that there is a physical nature. It is acceptable to say that one should nourish nature to transform one's physical nature; it is incorrect to say that one should transform the physical nature to preserve the Nature of Heaven and Earth's principle and righteousness" (Zhang, 1983b: p. 201).

At the level of “fulfilling nature” (*jinxing*), Mencius also noted the nature of the physical form: “Physical form and appearance are innate nature” (*xingsetianxing*) (Yang, 1960: p. 319), but “There is fate involved herein, so the gentleman does not call it nature” (Yang, 1960: p. 333). Based on this, Zhang Huang returned nature to the realm of reality and attempted to continue the integration of the duality of nature within the realm of physical nature: “To fulfill nature is to exhaust what one has received without lack or excess, and physical form and appearance are one with innate nature”. This created a dilemma similar to that of the School of Qi: if nature is considered identical to physical nature (or residing within it as one), the moral attributes of nature struggle to find metaphysical support. To provide ontological support for the theory that physical nature is innate nature, Zhang Huang adapted Wang Yangming’s idea that “no affairs exist outside the mind” and drew upon Zhan Ruoshui’s theory of the “mind of Heaven and Earth” to establish a mind-based ontology consistent with his theory.

Zhan Ruoshui, in his Diagram of the Mind and Nature (*xinxingtu*), interconnected the mind and the world, believing that “Heaven and Earth have no inside or outside, the mind also has no inside or outside” (Huang, 1985b: p. 142), thus the mind “encompasses what is outside Heaven and Earth and pervades what is within Heaven and Earth” (Huang, 1985b: p. 142). While Wang Yangming focused on the internal “innate knowing” as the subjective standard of morality, Zhan Ruoshui emphasized the “mind of Heaven and Earth” as an entity that inherently encompasses both the internal mind and the objective external world without separation. He directly integrated the “mind of Heaven and Earth” in the manner of Zhu Xi’s Heavenly Principle, but this introduced problems similar to those in Zhu Xi’s Learning. Zhang Huang highly regarded the Diagram of the Mind and Nature and reproduced the complete Explanation of the Diagram of the Mind and Nature in his own Compilation of Diagrams and Writings (*tushubian*). However, Zhang Huang did not accept that the mind could directly replace Heavenly Principle as the origin of the external world: “Heaven is high, Earth is low, the multitude of things are transformed and born. They gather by kind, separate into groups, beyond counting...Humanity is the most intelligent and refined, but is only one among the multitude of categories” (Zhang, 1983a: p. 536). Yet, humanity can “Assist in the transforming and nourishing processes of Heaven and Earth, but only utmost sincerity can achieve this” (Zhang, 1983a: p. 536). He elevated the status of humans as the “mind of Heaven and Earth”. Inspired by Zhan Ruoshui, he used perception as a medium to indirectly connect with the external world. He said:

Now, the Great Ultimate (*taiji*) and the Two Modes (*liangyi*) differentiate into the Five Agents (*wuxing*); the Five Agents multiply into the five flavors, resonate as the five sounds, form the five colors. And colors, sounds, smells, and tastes further differentiate into ten thousand differences. Humans living between Heaven and Earth are never those who do not eat flavors, distinguish sounds, and are clothed in colors, yet are called human apart from these

(Zhang, 1983a: p. 536).

The spiritual awareness within the square inch [the mind] and the divine intelligence of the universe are merged without distinction. Therefore, human hearing resides in the ears, but that by which one can hear is the acuity of Heaven and Earth; seeing colors resides in the eyes, but that by which one can see is the clarity of Heaven and Earth; eating flavors resides in the mouth, but that by which one can enjoy them and transform them into essence and spirit is the transformation of Heaven and Earth (Zhang, 1983a: p. 537).

Such a person, the vast qi fills Heaven and Earth, the mind of the Way (daoxin) fits with Qian and Kun [Heaven and Earth]. They stand as the third term [with Heaven and Earth], forming the Three Ultimates (sanji). Heaven and Earth rely on them for their positions. How can this not be the mind of Heaven and Earth? It can be seen that the mind does not depart from colors, sounds, smells, and tastes, yet truly transcends them. This is why the mind is the mind. Although humans are produced by Heaven and Earth and are more intelligent than the myriad things, they are truly the master of Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things. This is why humans are human (Zhang, 1983a: p. 538).

From the above, it can be seen that Zhang Huang's worldview starts from the perceptual function of the mind, objectifying the conditions for the occurrence of sensations and the objects of sensation, and uses this as a medium to connect the internal subject and the objective world. Zhang Huang believed that although humans are just one category among the myriad things of Heaven and Earth, they possess a status equal to Heaven and Earth. Perception, as the main function of the human mind, is endowed with a transcendent perceptual capacity. On the one hand, humans are born receiving the Five Agents of Heaven and Earth; on the other hand, it is precisely through the mind's perception and physiological senses that they connect with the "acuity" and "clarity" of Heaven and Earth, embodying their own intelligence by conforming to Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things through feeling. The difference between humans and things lies in humans having a vacuous, intelligent, perceptual mind that connects with Heaven and Earth; other things are such that "when the mind is not present, looking, one does not see; listening, one does not hear; eating, one does not know the flavor." (Zhang, 1983a: p. 537) Thus, although the mind is not as thoroughly replacing Heavenly Principle as in Zhan Ruoshui's theory, it breaks through the limitations of the individual, regarding humans as the mind of Heaven and Earth, an important part of the world standing alongside Heaven and Earth. Moreover, as the key source of "intelligence", the discussion of nature can, as Zhan Ruoshui said, "mind and nature are not two" (Huang, 1985b: p. 141), be completely transferred to the discussion of the mind.

Under this construction of a mind-based ontology, the domain of the mind's mastery shifts from the individual's world to the objective world. The source of nature-principle can be traced not only to the external world but is also not entirely limited by it, because the intelligence of the external world lies precisely in

the human mind of Heaven and Earth. Although Heaven and Earth provide perceptual conditions like “clarity” and “acuity”, cognitive activity is still led by humans: “Sound strikes the ear; the ear is originally without sound. Only by not being led by sound can hearing, though performed by the human mind, truly be the hearing of Heaven” (Zhang, 1983a: p. 537). Ultimately, the mind of Heaven and Earth is the human mind that has reached the endpoint of cultivation; the original state of the human mind is nature. In this way, Zhang Huang constructed a schema of the mind of Heaven and Earth and nature similar to the structure of “nature is principle” in Neo-Confucianism, highlighting the essential meaning of nature that had gradually faded in the development of the School of Mind, and placed nature within the physical constitution for discussion, thereby emphasizing the effort of transforming the physical nature and opposing the malpractices of empty discussion of mind and nature. Hence, “physical nature is not itself the nature, yet one cannot seek the nature apart from physical nature” (Huang, 1985a: p. 663).

Compared to the Neo-Confucian effort to transform the physical nature to preserve the Nature of Heaven and Earth, Zhang Huang, who also emphasized working on the physical nature, reversed the sequence between nourishing nature and transforming the physical nature. He believed the focus of cultivation still lay within the subject; therefore, one should nourish nature to cause changes in the external physical nature. This maintained Yangming’s purpose of interpreting the “investigation of things” (gewu) as “rectifying the mind” (gexin), emphasizing internal effort while insisting that the goal of cultivation is to transform the physical nature, i.e., to implement one’s supremely good nature in human affairs, achieving the unity of internal cultivation and external practice. However, the shortcomings of his theory are also evident. Regarding the origin of nature within physical nature, Zhang Huang drew upon the theory of nature endowed through qi from the School of Qi. Although he replaced the “principle within qi” with the objectified “mind of Heaven and Earth” as the support for nature, the “mind of Heaven and Earth” was still the result of the expansion of the human mind. Despite the subjective individuality potentially being eliminated by the idea of the “mind of the multitude”, it remained confined within Yangming’s framework of the perceiving mind. The so-called innate nature within the physical constitution was still the metaphysical unactivated mean; what was sought was only a morally active subject whose responses, under the arrangement of the original nature, were sensitive and responsive to events and affairs. This was no different from Yangming’s theory of innate knowing. In this sense, Zhang Huang’s theory that physical nature is innate nature was a correction within the Yangming School of Mind aimed at returning to the origin in response to the various malpractices of later scholars; it did not transcend the framework of innate knowing learning, which focuses on cultivating the unactivated substance of the mind and applying effort to the mind. This dependence persisted because Zhang Huang continued to view the “innate nature” as a metaphysical, unactivated substance stored within the physical con-

stitution, rather than recognizing moral quality as an intrinsic property of the physical process itself.

4. Beyond Qi There Is No Nature: The Subjective Destination of the Unity of Nature and Qi

Wang Shihuai, a contemporary of Zhang Huang, once vividly summarized the shortcomings of the then-popular studies of mind and nature (*xinxingzhixue*):

The substance of nature is originally vast, lofty, and bright; its function is inherently refined, subtle, and balanced. If one suspects that focusing solely on penetrating nature (*touxing*) as the core tenet may lead to emptiness and lapse into Buddhism or Daoism, and instead considers pursuing branches and details as practical learning, believing this can distinguish oneself from the two traditions, they do not realize that the differences with the two traditions will naturally become clear after truly penetrating nature. Now, without having penetrated nature, and forcibly establishing theories based on conjecture, is ultimately like scratching an itch through a boot—what relevance does it have? It only prevents one's true nature from becoming manifest, and in the end, one merely spends a life expounding principles. How can this be called understanding the Dao? (Huang, 1985a: p. 553)

This passage points out the fault of scholars at that time blindly pursuing mind and nature, focusing only on seeking nature itself. For the School of Mind, the biggest challenge it faced was the accusation that overemphasizing mind and nature risked lapsing into Buddhism or Daoism. Ultimately, the problem lay in Wang Yangming's theory of innate knowing. In the system of innate knowing, Wang Yangming believed that "the master of the body is the mind; what emanates from the mind is the will (*yi*); the substance of the will is knowing; where the will is directed is the thing" (Chen, 1983: p. 37). The supremely good nature flows within the master of the mind, manifesting as the innate knowing that knows good and evil. The function of knowing lies in the will, which has actual content, and the will lands on things. In terms of specific attributes, "What is without good and evil is the substance of the mind; what contains good and evil is the movement of the will; what knows good and evil is innate knowing; doing good and eliminating evil is the investigation of things (*gewu*)" (Chen, 1983: p. 359). Knowing is the function of the master of the mind, i.e., "knowing good and evil." It is itself only a set of rules for judging good and evil without any content, so its content can only be attributed to the substance of the mind, using the supreme goodness and absence of evil in nature to explain the source of the moral judgment of knowing. Relying on the self-evidence of nature to support the theory of innate knowing leads to a separation between knowing and the will that contains good and evil, thus sowing the seeds for the later theories of "innate knowing is present", where those of "sharp faculties" directly comprehend nature, and "innate knowing is readily available", where "average people" pursue everyday learning. Therefore,

the reason later scholars failed to manifest their “true nature” was because they “have not penetrated nature, yet forcibly establish theories based on conjecture”. And the reason for clinging to “penetrating nature” lay in the pursuit of an innate knowing capable of knowing good and evil. From the perspective of nature itself, Wang Ji’s statement that “the substance of the mind is without good and evil, the will is also without good and evil, knowing is also without good and evil, and things are without good and evil” (Chen, 1983: p. 359) seems not unreasonable: since the substance of nature itself is already supremely good, naturally there is no need to “penetrate” it. As demonstrated above, the need to “penetrate” the metaphysical realm was indeed a force within the theory of innate knowing.

While adhering to Wang Yangming’s theory of innate knowing, Zhang Huang also noticed the awkward position of nature’s metaphysical status and its role in the physical realm. Accordingly, he explored the mechanism of nature’s function in depth. Zhang Huang believed that the unactivated nature (*weifazhixing*) functions through the “incipience” (*ji*) that lies between being and non-being. Since the incipience has not yet involved concrete activation, it can remain consistent with the supreme goodness of nature. This raises a question: since the incipience and nature share the same goodness, why single out the incipience between the unactivated and the activated? It seems superfluous. Zhang Huang explained using Zhou Dunyi’s and Hu Hong’s theories of “incipience contains good and evil”:

I have seen two Diagrams of Principle and Incipience in the study of nature and principle. Zhou Zi said: “Sincerity is non-action, incipience contains good and evil,” which seems similar to Hu Zi’s theory of “same substance, different functions”. Zhou believed that good arises from correctness, and evil arises from deviation, while Hu believed that good and evil emerge together. There is already a settled judgment regarding approving Zhou and disapproving Hu. But are there indeed two “incipience”? “At rest in death, such is the nature of Heaven” (ancient saying). Incipience is its movement in the undifferentiated state between being and non-being. Is nature not the source of incipience? Zhou Zi also said: “The five natures are stirred and good and evil are distinguished, and the myriad affairs are generated.” He also said: “Nature is simply about strength, weakness, good, evil, and the mean.” He spoke of good and evil in relation to nature, and also of good and evil in relation to “incipience”. (Zhang, 1983b: p. 211)

Zhang Huang believed that incipience is “the movement of nature”, so in terms of its good and evil attributes, it naturally belongs to the goodness of nature. Even if Zhou Zi said the attribute of incipience is a mixture of good and evil, it was to tell people that “all people have the incipience of evil, and learning should restrain human desires and preserve Heavenly principle. This is the teaching of clarifying goodness and returning to the origin” (Zhang, 1983b: p. 273), emphasizing that the good incipience is the “first thought” and the “direct descendant of nature”, while the evil incipience is the “turned thought” and the “collateral branch”. Spe-

cifically, Zhang Huang explicitly departed from Zhou Dunyi's formulation, which posited that incipience could contain both good and evil depending on its direction. Instead, Zhang maintained that since incipience is the direct movement of the inherently good nature, it must be purely good; any manifestation of evil arises only from a deviation in the posterior thoughts (*nian*), not from the incipience itself. Therefore, one must "establish the direct descendant as the primary heir" (Zhang, 1983b: p. 211), eliminating evil and preserving good, ensuring from the source that the activation of thoughts all emanates from goodness. "Is it not better to clarify the source so that the flow naturally becomes clear?" This is close to Wang Ji's theory of "innate knowing is present". However, Zhang Huang attempted to shift the dependence on the disactivated nature in the School of Mind towards the discussion of incipience, moving from the comprehension of "nature" to the pursuit of "incipience" as the beginning of activation, further highlighting the innate and unconditional nature of the metaphysical realm. "If following Hu Zi good and evil are like east and west opposing each other, confronting each other, then Heavenly principle and human desires share the same source, and before activation, these two ends are already present. What is called 'what Heaven confers is called nature' would be very polluted and mixed." (Zhang, 1983b: p. 211)

From Zhang Huang's elaboration on incipience, it can be seen that he attempted to shift the focus of the School of Mind from knowing to the more internal incipience, and to a significant extent replaced the function of the original supremely good nature with incipience. However, Zhang Huang did not further analyze how incipience functions or how to cultivate it, failing to form a complete system. Lacking the support of a practical method, Zhang Huang's theory of incipience became another version of "innate knowing is present." The systematic analysis of incipience was truly undertaken by his contemporary, Wang Shihuai.

In defining incipience, Wang Shihuai did not differ from Zhang Huang, also believing that incipience is the state where nature, "at rest in death", is "active but not yet formed" (Huang, 1985a: p. 560). "This incipience is generated without generation, extremely subtle and dense, neither existent nor non-existent" (Huang, 1985a: p. 564). Wang Shihuai's method involved "penetrating nature and studying incipience" (*touxingyanji*). As mentioned earlier, Wang Shihuai believed the fault of the School of Mind lay in blindly pursuing nature without being able to penetrate it thoroughly, fundamentally because nature itself is transcendent and indescribable. Therefore, the discussion of nature had to be replaced by the discussion of incipience. "Basically, the original mind is constantly generating and constantly still; it cannot be discussed in terms of existence or non-existence. Forced to name it, it is called incipience" (Huang, 1985a: p. 560). However, for Wang Shihuai, who consistently advocated "holding the mean" (*chizhong*) and "grasping the mean" (*zhizhong*), incipience was not an empty talk but was discussed between nature and fate. Wang Shihuai believed that fate is manifested in the physical realm as "awareness, thoughts, and ideas". "The word 'nature' fundamentally cannot be discussed; no effort can be applied to it. Awareness, thoughts, and ideas are always

the manifestation of nature; all are fate.” (Huang, 1985a: p. 549) Within this lies a “knowing”. “Knowing belongs to the opening of activation; it is the son of the innate and the mother of the posterior. This knowing lies between substance and function. If one seeks substance before knowing, it leads to emptiness; if one seeks function after knowing, it leads to chasing things.” (Huang, 1985a: p. 549) This “knowing” is an incipience, manifesting as the intermediary between the innate and the posterior. Under this theory of incipience, Wang Shihuai extended Zhang Huang’s theory of physical nature, believing there are not two natures, nor is there a separate nature of moral principle. Nature exists within habitual dispositions (xiqi). “Qi is the function of nature. Nature has no generation or extinction, thus it is constant and one; Qi has contraction and expansion, thus it is constant and two. However, Qi is within nature; although it has contraction and expansion, it cannot be discussed in terms of generation and extinction.” (Huang, 1985a: p. 561). The practical method derived from this was the combination of “comprehending the substance of nature” and “cultivating habitual dispositions”, still not free from dependence on the metaphysical nature.

Building on the development by earlier Confucians, the incipience lying between being and non-being, being “the movement of the still nature,” was thoroughly substantiated by Liu Zongzhou as “intent” (yi), directly regarded as the manifestation of the substance of the mind. “Intent is what is stored in the mind, precisely following the Doctrine of the Mean which takes the unactivated as the great root of the world; it is not heard that the activated is taken as the root.” (Huang, 1985b: p. 934) Liu Zongzhou abolished the core status of innate knowing in the traditional School of Mind, considering “intent” as a more fundamental existence. “The knowing that knows good and evil is precisely the intent that loves good and hates evil.” (Huang, 1985b: p. 947) He believed that the perception of good and evil is only the activation of the mind and cannot represent the nature of the mind. Therefore, Liu Zongzhou defined “what is stored in the mind” as intent, distinguishing it from “thoughts” (nian), which have specific content and are completely activated. In this way, the process of the mind’s activation directly moves from the “intent that loves good and hates evil” to the level of activation. The practical method thus became the “sincerity of intent” (chengyi) and “vigilance in solitude” (shendu) focused directly on intent, achieved liberation from metaphysical substratum. Liu Zongzhou thus completely canceled the speculation in the metaphysical realm and shifted the effort entirely to the practical life in the physical world. Therefore, he clarified the physical nature in the complete sense without relying on the metaphysical: “What is physical is called qi, what is metaphysical is called nature, hence it is said: ‘Nature is qi, qi is nature,’ ‘Nothing can be added to human nature. Scholars should first seek a master in the physical realm, then the metaphysical principle will be present therein.’” (Huang, 1985b: p. 956) Thereby achieving the unity of moral nature and physical nature in the realm of practice.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the developmental trajectory of Confucian theories of human nature,

the debate between “physical nature” (qizhi) and “innate moral nature” (tianxing) essentially reflects the tension between the metaphysical moral ontology and the pursuit of moral cultivation within the physical realm. Since Mencius established innate goodness endowed by Heaven as the source of morality, Gaozi presented the physiological nature of the real world as a counterpoint. Although Mencius acknowledged that “physical form and appearance are innate nature”, he was compelled to debate Gaozi to defend his theory of innate moral goodness. The discourse between Mencius and Gaozi provided inspiration for later theories of human nature. Dong Zhongshu’s metaphor of “the rice sprout growing from the grain” to illustrate the relationship between nature and goodness already indicated a trend of moving moral attributes from the metaphysical to the physical realm. By the Tang and Song dynasties, the rise of Daoism and Buddhism presented significant challenges to Confucianism, while also providing rich intellectual resources. Influenced by Buddhist and Daoist doctrines, Han Yu and Li Ao began discussing human nature through the lens of “manifesting nature through emotions”, initiating the integration of the physical and metaphysical realms. However, they ultimately oriented cultivation towards emptiness and stillness, detaching it from the physical world.

The genuine integration of physical nature and innate nature began in the Song Dynasty. Neo-Confucians, represented by Zhu Xi, while integrating metaphysical innate nature into the realm of physical constitution, maintained the transcendent status of the metaphysical substance. The School of Mind, by contrast, achieved a unity of metaphysical substance and physical function through the natural functioning of innate nature within the mind. However, its overemphasis on the perceptual function of the mind gradually caused the physical elements within this unity to fade, reducing it to empty talk among later scholars. Zhang Huang, from the standpoint of the School of Mind, was the first to explicitly articulate the concept of physical nature, steering the debate back on track. Through the developments by Zhang Huang, Wang Shihuai, and others, the significance of nature in physical practice gradually diminished, yet a residual reliance on “returning to nature” and the metaphysical substance remained. It was not until Liu Zongzhou replaced the function of nature within the mind with the “root of the will” (yigen) that nature completely assumed the role of a self-evident metaphysical substance, forming a “physical nature” with physical constitution that achieved the unity of moral nature and physical nature within the realm of practice.

Zhang Huang’s theory of the relationship between nature and qi, situated within the context of the Yangming School of Mind’s discourse on mind and nature, critically inherited the Yangming theory of innate knowing while attempting to correct the shortcomings of later scholars who neglected practical cultivation. By proposing that “physical nature is innate nature”, he strove to ground the discussion of mind and nature in reality. Although his theory remained constrained by the paradigm of innate knowing and failed to completely transcend the School of Mind’s framework, his emphasis on the origin of nature within physical con-

stitution and his exploration of the mechanism of nature's functioning through the concept of "incipience" (ji) provided important inspiration for subsequent scholars like Wang Shihuai and Liu Zongzhou. In this sense, Zhang Huang's thought played a pivotal role in the Ming Dynasty's intellectual trend towards the unity of nature and qi, serving as a crucial link between the earlier and later phases of this development. Consequently, the focus of Confucian self-cultivation shifted from the abstract search for a metaphysical entity to the concrete practice of "vigilance in solitude" (shendu) over the will. This effectively transformed moral practice from a recovery of a lost abstract nature into a constant, active rectification of one's intentions in daily life.

Acknowledgements

Avoid the stilted expression, "One of us (R. B. G.) thanks..." Instead, try "R. B. G. thanks". Do NOT put sponsor acknowledgements in the unnumbered footnote on the first page, but at here.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Chen, L. (2000). *A Study of Zhu Xi's Philosophy*. East China Normal University Press.
- Chen, L. (2017). Mencius on the Goodness of Nature and Nature-Destiny. *Modern Philosophy, No. 6*, 115-119.
- Chen, R. (1983). *Detailed Annotations and Commentary on Wang Yangming's Instructions for Practical Living*. Student Book Co., Ltd.
- Cheng, H., & Cheng, Y. (1981). *Collected Works of the Two Chengs* (Vol. 1). Zhonghua Book Company.
- Ding, W. (2022). *General History of Chinese Philosophy: The Ming Dynasty Volume*. Jiangsu People's Publishing House.
- Han, Y. (1986). *Annotated Collected Works of Han Changli*. Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House.
- Huang, Z. (1985a). Ming Ru Xue An (Er). In S. Shen (Ed.), *Complete Works of Huang Zongxi* (Vol. 8, pp. 1-888). Zhejiang Ancient Books Publishing House.
- Huang, Z. (1985b). Ming Ru Xue An (Yi). In S. Shen (Ed.), *Complete Works of Huang Zongxi* (Vol. 7, pp. 1-1016). Zhejiang Ancient Books Publishing House.
- Li, J. (1986). *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu* (Vol. 1). Zhonghua Book Company.
- Su, Y. (1992). *Verification of the Meaning of Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals*. Zhonghua Book Company.
- Yang, B. (1960). *Mencius: Translation and Annotation*. Zhonghua Book Company.
- Yang, X. (1987). *Explication of Model Sayings* (Vol. 1). Zhonghua Book Company.
- Zhang, D. (1982). *Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy*. China Social Sciences Press.
- Zhang, H. (1983a). Tu Shu Bian. In Y. Ji (Ed.), *Wenyuange Siku Quanshu* (Vol. 968, pp. 1-

714). The Commercial Press.

Zhang, H. (1983b). Tu Shu Bian. In Y. Ji (Ed.), *Wenyuange Siku Quanshu* (Vol. 971, pp. 1-819). The Commercial Press.

Zhang, Z. (1978). *Collected Works of Zhang Zai*. Zhonghua Book Company.

Zhu, X. (1983). *Collected Commentaries on the Four Books*. Zhonghua Book Company.