CHAPTER 2

Displaying Sincerity

The Fushe

From the Tianqi reign (1621–27) to the Chongzhen reign (1628–44), the Fushe, an empirewide literary and social network, constituted a significant political force and played a crucial role in turning the political battlefield into an arena of moral contests. Because of their close connections with the Donglin, members of the Fushe have been seen as a “Little Donglin,” one whose organization was motivated by moral considerations. Scholars who argue that the Fushe represented a departure from conventional moral conservatism have offered different understandings of the Fushe’s moral performance. Some argue that, unlike the Donglin, which had formed the core of the late-Ming “moral crusade,” the main concerns of the Fushe lay in social and political practices. Others focus on Fushe scholars’ enthusiasm for entertainment and sexual pleasures, suggesting that they justified their departure from the conventional ideal of self-discipline by redefining loyalty as a value that was compatible with and inspired by romantic love. In fact, such scholarly disagreements reflect the lasting repercussions of the multiple images of the Fushe that were produced and circulated in the seventeenth century.

The Fushe was both an agent and a product of image politics. In contrast to the ambiguity of the Donglin membership, the Fushe compiled its own member rosters for communication and publicity purposes. Identifying itself chiefly as a literary organization, its image-making efforts were more self-consciously coordinated. Adept at using print and social spectacles to widen their influence and strengthen mutual support among themselves, Fushe scholars groomed their images as
filial sons, true friends, and self-disciplined men in order to express their feelings, articulate their families’ demands, pursue career success, and coordinate political actions.

However, as in the case of the Donglin, the Fushe’s claims to be a group of moral exemplars were seriously questioned by their political rivals. Therefore, the following questions are worth pursuing: What kinds of moral images did the Fushe have? Who produced them, and why? What can we discern about the ways in which Confucian moralism shaped their struggles?

At the heart of Fushe scholars’ claim to moral superiority and the challenges posed by their rivals lay the problem of sincerely pursuing Confucian ethical ideals and displaying them properly. This was a critical issue in the intellectual explorations, religious practices, and cultural production of late-Ming literati. The enhanced availability of print and the literati’s diversified approaches to moral cultivation determined that the meaning of sincerity could not be separated from the actions that displayed the authenticity of their moral pursuits when officials engaged Confucian ethics in political communication. Examining the notion and trope of sincerity as an integral part of political negotiations deepens our understanding of the competing moral images of Fushe figures, who not only passionately pursued Confucian ideals but also abused them in their political maneuvers.

The stories of the so-called Sons of the Donglin (Donglin Zidi) and Fushe Four Gentlemen (Fushe Si Gongzi) illustrate how Confucian ethics served as a valuable means of emotive expression. The thought Fushe scholars gave to the importance of moral performance—as sons, friends, and husbands—to their personal career advancement is also a significant aspect of this politico-ethical scenario. The moral attacks and counterattacks between the Fushe and its enemies demonstrate how the Fushe employed Confucian ethics to promote its organizational agenda as well as the intertwining personal, intellectual, and political reasons behind its political enemies’ claims. On each of these levels, Fushe scholars negotiated with the emperor and their rivals through the issue of sincerity in moral performance. Such endeavors were interconnected religious, social, political, and intellectual activities that enriched Confucian moralism and also enhanced the political importance of moral image.
Images and Emotions

Fushe scholars socialized extensively and published copiously. Poetry, letters, theater, drinking parties, and rituals were all ways for them to express the emotions that boiled in an exciting but crisis-ridden time. In particular, expressions of filiality created a structure for their emotive lives because many of them had fathers serving in the government and struggling to survive the political turbulence. Their filial piety was heartfelt. Still, the volatile political conditions demanded that these young men prove the sincerity of such feelings. Publicizing their moral endeavors and negotiating the reception of their moral performance occupied a special place in the political spaces they inhabited.

Sons of the Donglin

The Sons of the Donglin were the younger generation of literati whose fathers had been persecuted by the eunuch faction during the Tianqi reign. The emotive dimension in their pursuit of filial piety and friendship played a significant role in perpetuating factionalism across generations and in making the Fushe a crucial link in the transformation of political culture from the Tianqi reign to the Chongzhen reign. Their fathers’ suffering and the devastation inflicted on their families by the eunuch faction motivated the Sons of the Donglin to explore in depth how to pursue filial duties sincerely and properly. Being filial meant much more than announcing one’s feelings and freely acting on them. Doing so was not an easy matter, as we have already seen in Zheng Man’s decision not to expose his parents’ domestic issues. The richness of the discourse on filial piety and the literati’s diverse approaches to it demanded that a son devise the most appropriate filial expression and action in extraordinary circumstances.

Wei Dazhong (1575–1625), a native of Jiashan (in Zhejiang), was one of the Donglin martyrs murdered by the eunuch faction. Between his arrest and his death, his eldest son, Wei Xueyi (1596–1625), explored all possible avenues for securing his father’s release. After arresting and throwing the senior Wei in prison, where he was tortured, Wei Zhongxian’s men also maneuvered to block Xueyi’s access to powerful officials and threatened to arrest him. Xueyi had to conceal his identity as he followed his father’s prison wagon and sneaked into the capital. Instead of resorting to dramatic measures to rescue
his father, Xueyi sought help from officials covertly, because any impulsive move would jeopardize his father’s life.

The filial son faced a difficult situation, as he revealed in a letter to an old friend. Anticipating doubts about his sincerity, Xueyi explained that he thought through all the legends of filial children in history but realized that, given the dangerous political condition of the time, he would endanger his father’s life if he tried to emulate the legendary Tiying of the Han dynasty, a young girl who had heroically rescued her father.⁴ “When I hear the stories of those loyal, filial, chaste, and heroic historical figures (zhongxiao jie lie), I am always inspired and moved to tears, motivated to accomplish the same. Now I have to hide myself. I cannot act fearlessly like the girl Tiying, because my pointless death would not help. I keep my life intact only to pay the debt of gratitude [to my father]!”⁵

Xueyi’s filial duties also included attesting to his father’s loyalty to the dynasty and safeguarding the Wei family’s reputation. On the trip back from the capital, the presence of his father’s coffin wagon saddened everyone along the way. Due to fatigue, stress, sorrow, and anxiety at the prospect that he still might be arrested by the eunuchs, Xueyi’s health deteriorated precipitously.⁶ In his last letter to the people of their hometown, he cemented his family’s zhongxiao image and authenticated his own deep filial devotion. He thanked them for sending money to help repay what Wei Zhongxian had asserted was a bribe his father has taken, although he refused the money on the grounds that he could not violate his vow to his martyred father: “My father had someone deliver a short note from prison. . . . The note said: ‘When I was taken from our hometown, people proposed to use the county fund to pay the sum imposed on me. This is unacceptable. I have been poor throughout my life and have given so little to my neighbors and countrymen. This incident had nothing to do with the public interest of our county. How could we burden them?’ Alas! I have this handwritten note with me and can show it to you. How could I ignore my father’s will and accept your money?’⁷ Instead of accepting their money, Xueyi asked his townsmen to help sell Wei family property and attend to the needs of his mother and two younger brothers after he “went to the underworld to meet [his] deceased father.”⁸

Now assured that he had preserved evidence that discredited the negative image of his father and that a sympathetic community would take care of his mother and brothers, Xueyi began a slow suicide. He
stayed away from his wife and children, confining himself to deep mourning. He refused to drink water or take medicine, telling others that the sight of water and medicine only brought back the memory of his father who, when imprisoned and tortured, was deprived of these things and suffered tremendously. Soon Xueyi died. Although he had not succeeded in saving his father’s life, he completed a compelling filial performance with his self-inflicted psychological and bodily sufferings. His death was the most effective response to any doubts about the sincerity and impeccability of his filial devotion.

Friends swiftly resorted to print and played a crucial role in authenticating Xueyi’s filiality. Immediately after the newly enthroned Chongzhen emperor crushed the eunuch faction, Qian Fen (juren 1642), the late Wei Dazhong’s disciple and nephew of the Donglin-identified official Qian Shisheng (1575–1652), published Xueyi’s writings (in Chongzhen 1/7 [1628]). Xueyi’s words provided the public with detailed information about the hardships the Wei father and son had suffered and their extraordinary performance of zhongxiao. One of the main purposes of publication was to eliminate doubts about Xueyi’s sincerity. Qian Fen shared his deceased friend’s concern that some might question whether Xueyi could have done more to save his father’s life. In a preface to this publication, Qian drew on some of the most moving details from Xueyi’s writings and asserted that Xueyi, a truly filial son, had exhausted all possible means in his attempt to rescue his father.10

Wei Xuelian (1608–1644), Wei Dazhong’s second son, carried on his brother’s endeavors. When the Chongzhen emperor came to power, Dazhong was given a posthumous honorary title and an imperial burial ceremony. Xuelian had gone to the capital and presented a memorial written in his own blood, detailing the horrendous crimes committed against his family by the eunuch faction and requesting the highest honors for his father and brother. Thanks to this appeal, the elder brother received imperial recognition as a Filial Son, and his tablet was placed in the shrine built in honor of his father’s loyalty.11 In Chongzhen 7 (1634), Xuelian hosted his father’s official burial ceremony, which attracted thousands of attendees.12 At his request, the Donglin heavyweight Liu Zongzhou inscribed Dazhong’s name on the ancestral tablet and delivered a lecture at the place where his body had rested.

In the same year, in memory of his older brother, Xuelian republished Xueyi’s writings. Because brotherly love was defined as a filial
duty, Xuelian’s efforts to publicize Xueyi’s virtues allowed him to fulfill his own filial duties as well. Furthermore, by reprinting Xueyi’s work, the Wei family reclaimed “ownership” of his virtues.

Xuelian’s Fushe friends also participated in authenticating his filial exemplariness. Around the time of the highly publicized burial ceremony for Dazhong and Xueyi, the Fushe had just begun to publicly take on Grand Secretary Wen Tiren. In Chongzhen 9/8 (1636), the “Donglin orphans” gathered at the Mansion of Peach Leaves (Taoyeguan) in Nanjing during the season of the civil service examinations. Almost all the Donglin martyrs’ sons attended this gathering. It was Xuelian who most powerfully embodied zhongxiao and used it to call for the public condemnation of the former eunuch associate Ruan Dacheng (1587–1646) who was in Nanjing—and indirectly his ally, Grand Secretary Wen Tiren, then in Beijing. Xuelian himself had been actively involved in Fushe activities. At this gathering, Xuelian presented to his friends a copy of the Classic of Filial Piety, which he had hand copied in his own blood. It reiterated the strong filial emotions expressed in the “blood memorial” (xieshu) he had submitted to the Chongzhen emperor years before, in which he named Ruan Dacheng in particular as the primary culprit in his father’s murder.

The Fushe activist Fang Yizhi (1611–1671), who was present at the gathering, pointed out that the blood used to replace ink in this copy of the Classic of Filial Piety symbolized Xuelian’s sincerity and elevated him above those who superficially performed filial deeds merely to gain fame. Xuelian’s prolonged mourning in solitude as well as his assiduous study in an effort to better serve the country—acts of both loyalty and filial piety—proved his sincerity and true understanding of this Confucian classic. Chen Liang, a longtime friend of the Wei brothers and a Fushe activist, summarized the Fushe friends’ admiration in a poem composed on the occasion:

The blood-writing reached the court and shook the world;  
[Xuelian’s] fame soared, higher than the mountains.

The Wei brothers’ emotional expressions in a time of crisis were structured by some prominent intellectual and political concerns of their time. Intellectually, contemporary literati were engaged in heated debates about sincerity and self-cultivation. In the political sphere, the negative images of the Donglin conjured by anti-Donglin narratives continued to linger and influence the reading public. Moreover, remnants of the eunuch faction never completely dispersed. Thus, these
young men resorted to publication, rituals, and spectacles as means of authenticating, documenting, and explaining their moral performance.

All these measures ensured that the Wei family would recover from the devastation brought upon them and survive. After Xueyi died, tremendous sympathy was showered on Xuelian. Many extended their hands. Crucial for the Wei family was the first-rate tutorship offered to Xuelian. A number of prominent scholars carefully nurtured him, including Liu Zongzhou, his mentor in the Confucian classics.\textsuperscript{18} With such invaluable public support, Xuelian eventually passed the examinations and obtained his \textit{jinshi} title.\textsuperscript{19}

The Wei brothers’ expression of filiality not only depended much on their friends’ support in print and in public spectacles but also offered Fushe scholars occasions for articulating and demonstrating the meaning of true friendship. Before his death, Wei Xueyi had compiled a collection of his own work. To consolidate Xueyi’s image as a filial exemplar, Qian Fen, who took on the task of editing the collection for publication after Xueyi’s death, decided to remove poems that Xueyi had composed for leisurely occasions and added material from the period of Wei Dazhong’s arrest and imprisonment.\textsuperscript{20} In this way, a shining example of filial piety would become the overarching theme of the book. Qian argued that his editorial choices were “faithful to [Xueyi’s understanding] of the Way and therefore proper.” What was Xueyi’s understanding of the Way? Qian asserted it was the ethics of \textit{zhongxiao}.\textsuperscript{21} Interestingly then, this true friend had to recalibrate the authenticity of the poetry collection in order to prove the sincerity of its late author’s moral endeavors.

\textit{The Fushe Gentleman Fang Yizhi}

Dynastic crises became the backdrop against which Fushe scholars displayed their various masculine virtues. In turn, their political experience in these crises informed their deepening exploration of the notion of sincerity in filial devotion. The image transformation of Fang Yizhi, a Fushe celebrity figure, sheds light on not only the emotional necessity for officials to authenticate their filial exemplariness through literary publicity and ritual performance but also the importance of integrating political experience into intellectual theorizing.

By the mid-Chongzhen reign, Fang Yizhi had become one of the famous Fushe Four Gentlemen.\textsuperscript{22} This group occupied a special place in the Fushe. Their fathers had all been identified as victims of the
eunuch faction. But these young men’s appeal lay more with their Fushe personality than in their connection to the Donglin legacy. Their fame relied heavily on celebrity culture and the public’s fascination with entertainment and liaisons with elite courtesans. Among the Fushe Four Gentlemen, only Fang Yizhi passed the jinshi examinations and became an official before 1644.

A decade after his friend Wei Xuelian presented a blood memorial at court, Fang Yizhi did so, too, petitioning for the release of his father, the official Fang Kongzhao (1590–1655). Kongzhao excelled not only in scholarship and statecraft but also in military strategy. Since his appointment as governor of Huguang (modern-day Hubei and Hunan) in Chongzhen 11 (1638), at a moment when the state struggled to suppress various rebels in multiple locations across the central and southwestern Ming territories, Kongzhao had led eight major victories of the Ming forces and proved himself an extremely capable official-general. But he disagreed with his superior, Xiong Wencan (d. 1640), a Yang Sichang protégé, over general strategies and voiced his opposition to Xiong in a memorial to the emperor. Frustrated by Xiong’s repeated strategic miscalculations and astonished at the devastating consequences of Xiong’s ill-conceived zhaofu policy (allowing the rebels to surrender peacefully), the Chongzhen emperor had Xiong arrested. According to the official history, Yang, probably in hopes of rescuing Xiong, urged the emperor to punish Kongzhao, whose subordinates suffered an embarrassing and demoralizing defeat in late Chongzhen 12 (1639). At this point, the emperor was staking all his hopes on Yang’s leadership in the military efforts against the rebels and the Manchus. Kongzhao was thrown into prison in Chongzhen 13/1 (1640), just before his son Yizhi scored his jinshi success in the metropolitan examination.

Yizhi was devastated by his father’s arrest. Several days before the metropolitan exam, he submitted a memorial to the emperor in which he defended his father but also expressed his willingness to receive punishment in his father’s place. The emperor replied that he should concentrate on the upcoming examination and stop petitioning. Later, instead of celebrating the coveted success of earning a jinshi degree, Yizhi devoted himself to seeking ways of securing his father’s release. Over the next two years, he was a model filial son: he frequented the imperial prison, knocked on powerful people’s doors, and petitioned repeatedly on his father’s behalf.

In fact, the filial devotion that Yizhi displayed was at once a personal commitment, a means of self-expression and self-identity, a
family tradition, and a spectacle that would generate strong emotions and positive support from his contemporaries. Yizhi came from a family that had enjoyed an empirewide reputation for filial exemplariness. As studies of the seventeenth-century fad of lumu (lit., “residing next to a parent’s tomb”) demonstrate, the ascendance of the Fangs’ status in their hometown Tongcheng (in modern-day Anhui) from the late sixteenth century onward was closely related to their image as pious adherents of Confucian ethical values. Starting with Fang Xuejian (1540–1615), Yizhi’s great-grandfather, generations of Fang men had performed lumu. By the time Kongzhao carried out lumu himself (1631–33), this ritual had become an integral part of the Fang family tradition. No less would be expected from his son Yizhi who years later indeed performed it for his deceased mother.

Yizhi’s emotional expression of filial piety was authenticated by his friends’ efforts to publicize it. His sincere filiality crystallized in literary exchanges with friends and colleagues that were included in Works from Manyu (Manyu cao), a collection of works named after his Beijing residence, Manyu. During and after his father’s imprisonment, a long poem, “Jichu,” in which Yizhi passionately articulated filial feelings, was widely circulated and appreciated. Many officials in the capital wrote prefaces for and commented on it.

“When the father suffers so much from injustice, how can the son live!” This line by the official Wei Zaode (1605–1644) communicates the image of a devoted son. In his preface to “Jichu,” Wei, who had topped that year’s jinshi cohort, emphasizes Yizhi’s filial virtue by vividly describing how he withdrew from all social activities even though obtaining the jinshi title would normally entail innumerable celebratory gatherings and visits; instead, he stayed away from fancy food, clothes, and entertainment, splitting his time between visiting his father in prison and confining himself in the quiet residence.

Another friend from the same jinshi cohort, Tian Younian, also contributed a preface. Tian echoes Wei and recalls that when Yizhi was taking the exams in Beijing, many literati were attracted by his reputation and hoped to visit him. But he did little socializing and instead kept to his residence, aggrieved by his father’s suffering.

As shown in the preface composed by the official Huang Jingfang (1596–1662), Yizhi reminded people of other famous filial sons such as Feng Xingke and Qu Jia (both from the Ming Jiajing reign [1521–67]), whose acts had helped save their fathers from political disaster. The success of these exemplars’ actions supposedly showed
Heaven’s reward for sincere filiality. However, the question of sincerity inspired these officials’ more thorough reflections on the proper ways of expressing and pursuing filiality.

Their most interesting and informative discussion on this topic referenced the official Wang Shizhen (1526–1590) in contrast to Fang Yizhi. It was well known that Wang’s father fell victim to factionalism during the Ming Jiajing reign, when the powerful grand secretary Yan Song (1480–1567) dominated the court. Wang tried to rescue his father and was devastated when the mission failed. But the official Yan Hun, in his preface to “Jichu,” suggests that Wang was not really loyal and filial, which explains the tragedy that befell his father and the family. Yan Hun argues that the eventual execution of the elder Wang resulted largely from his son’s shallow understanding of filial piety. Yan Song had hoped to recruit the junior Wang into his faction to burnish his own reputation with the latter’s literary fame and popularity. Wang Shizhen not only rejected Yan’s proposal but also made public his support for Yan’s various political rivals. Eventually, when the elder Wang led his troops into a defeat, Yan found an opportunity to get retribution for the insult and made sure the elder Wang was severely punished. Thus, Wang Shizhen’s overconfidence in his own popularity led to reckless political behavior that contributed to his father’s death.

Although Wang was a literary giant praised by many for his uncompromising attitude toward powerful grand secretaries such as Yan Song and Zhang Juzheng, these officials considered him an unfilial son. In doing so, they articulated some important insights, that taking pride in one’s own celebrity appeal undermined filial piety and that constant self-cultivation and self-rectification at the intersection of everyday life and politics—rather than some superficial factional grudge—was the key to fulfilling true zhongxiao commitment.

This view was further emphasized when Yan Hun drew a stark contrast between the two men’s understanding of the relationship between public service and personal moral cultivation. Yan contended that, whereas Fang Yizhi persisted in pursuing the jingshi (statecraft) ideal amid the family crisis, Wang Shizhen indulged in leisurely enjoyment and completely abandoned public responsibilities in his later life. To Fang’s friends, his actions manifested the true meaning of zhongxiao, whereas Wang’s filiality was lost as a result of his indulgence in fame and sensual pleasures. The friends ranked Fang’s filial performance higher than Wang’s in order to stress that
only a deep understanding of \textit{zhongxiao} ethics, followed by its proper display, could be sincere and authentic.

These interesting discussions engaged officials’ emotions, familial roles, and political experience simultaneously. Compared to others, Fushe celebrity figures such as Fang Yizhi had more opportunities to make filial performance central to their expression and identity because the deepening dynastic crisis directly affected the senior members of their families. These young men did not necessarily surpass their peers as better sons and friends. However, they had access to human and financial resources that could help publicize their moral performance. They were put in the position of not only integrating their understanding of recent political history into theorizing sincerity but also publicly negotiating the meaning of sincere filial expression.

\textbf{Negotiating Sincerity and Propriety}

The Fushe scholars’ filial expressions and political actions, in a circular fashion, continuously informed and reinforced each other. The political stakes of displaying sincere moral pursuits became clearly established in the process. However, it must be noted that even in a time of extreme circumstances, one’s reputation as a true moral paragon alone could not guarantee a free pass. It is more accurate to argue that such a reputation could help initiate negotiations with the emperor over the value of sincere filial expression for political communication in a specific context.

Take, for instance, the Sons of the Donglin. The Chongzhen emperor, as sympathetic as he was toward their families, voiced concerns about the “blood memorials” they had submitted. Since the beginning of his reign, these young men had presented their emotions and demands in such a powerful and unrelenting manner that they began to appear excessive and aggressive. The emperor satisfied their desire to restore the status and reputations of their fathers, but he also declared the medium of “blood memorials” to be “improper” at court. In this way, the emperor not only affirmed his commitment to “governing with filial piety,” but, by asserting his authority in the interpretation of the meaning of \textit{zhongxiao} and the proper use of this language, he also implied that he would not let the Donglin community decide how to punish the eunuch faction.

Such negotiations not only delineated the discursive contours of \textit{zhongxiao} ethics but also publicly acknowledged the legitimacy and
necessity of displaying sincere filial emotions as a means of political communication in complicated situations. Officials were aware of the complexity of these negotiations, even though they—and the reading public—regularly reduced them to familiar stories about the triumph of sincerity. For instance, after almost one and a half years in prison, in Chongzhen 14/5 (1641), Fang Yizhi’s father, Kongzhao, was exempted from the death penalty and sentenced to exile. It was said at the time that, because Yizhi had presented a memorial written in blood and wept outside the palace, the emperor decided it was time to acknowledge the young man’s filial devotion, and with the release of Kongzhao, he recognized Yizhi as a filial paragon by following the principle of “seeking loyal officials in filial sons.” Sympathizers asserted that the emperor released the senior Fang mainly because he was touched by Yizhi’s sincere filiality; by contrast, the emperor scolded the official Chen Biqian’s son for not showing enough sorrow at court when his father suffered a military defeat and subsequent imprisonment. Although this story about the Chens seems to be false, the contrast between the Fangs and the Chens drawn by sympathizers nonetheless represents the prevalent belief that proper display of sincere filiality was important for officials’ political survival. This incident shows again that the Chongzhen emperor tended to negotiate with his officials in the language of zhongxiao rather than passively accepting their claims to moral rectitude. Such negotiations had to be conducted in nuanced ways.

**Image and Career Advancement**

The family crises of these Fushe scholars were enmeshed in the deepening dynastic crisis of the 1630s–40s and affected their emotive lives, identities, and public images. The particularly tumultuous conditions during this time generated more opportunities than usual for them to explore, demonstrate, and negotiate with the emperor and other officials through the performance of Confucian virtues. Their focus on the question of sincerity sharpened in this time of political volatility but was also as a result of contemporary literati religious, intellectual, and social trends. Precisely because of the importance of sincerity at the intersection of everyday life and politics, Fushe scholars’ paid much attention among themselves to displays of moral exemplariness in the interest of career advancement, as did some of their rivals.
It has been argued that Fushe scholars were split over their proper goal: Should they pursue moral integrity or seek political patronage? But this question obscures how these two aspects were seen as intimately connected. An individual literatus’s image as a moral paragon might well facilitate senior officials’ patronage. Fushe scholars understood the importance of moral image for career success. At the same time, the concern with sincerity loomed large, and it demanded constant proofs of authenticity.

Fang Yizhi’s image transformation into a man of zhongxiao resulted from the shift in his personal and career priorities, something his friend-colleagues recognized and encouraged. During Chongzhen 7–12 (1634–39), he lived mainly in Nanjing but shuttled between Nanjing and his hometown Tongcheng, a region rocked by rebellions. He enjoyed Nanjing’s urban culture, literary networking, and courtesans, especially when many friends from near and far gathered there for the civil service examinations. Sensual pleasures he indulged in at such times have been politely interpreted as a sanctioned “respite from daily cares and frustrations,” but at the time, he embraced them not only as part of the Fushe camaraderie but also as a lifestyle. Like many of his friends, he had a mixed public image before he passed the exams and took on his family’s crisis.

The gatherings of Fushe young scholars in Nanjing increasingly drew public attention to their political and personal lives. In the years Chongzhen 11–12 (1638–39), with the widely publicized campaign against Ruan Dacheng under way via the distribution of the sensational “Proclamation against Seditious Elements in Nanjing” (Liudu fangluan gongjie) and a massive Fushe gathering planned for the time of the exams, these young men’s fame reached new heights. Fang was a fixture at Fushe banquets and social events featuring elite courtesans. Enthusiasm for Fang’s political prospects soared when his father led successful military campaigns against the rebels, and Fang himself participated as his father’s assistant, first in Wuchang (Chongzhen 11) and then in Tongcheng (Chongzhen 12). Friends gathered to show their admiration and support at his departure for Wuchang, calling his participation an act of zhongxiao. It is not clear how much Fang actually contributed to these military victories (he was sick for some time during the first venture). Nonetheless, at a time when so many literati fantasized about martial arts and military strategizing, participation in these campaigns lent Fang the aura of genuine experience. He became the Fushe’s brightest star. Then, as we saw earlier,
the developments in factional politics, the Fang family situation in the aftermath of his father’s arrest, and his own entry into government service ushered in a dramatic change in Fang’s self-understanding and identity. His social life looked different after he became an official and secured his father’s release. The new focus on cultivating the public image of being a filial son and good husband corresponded neatly to his life trajectory.

The self-image of Gong Dingzi (1615–1673), a Fushe associate (rather than a formal member), further sheds light on Fushe scholars’ views on the relationship between the appearance of self-discipline and career concerns. Gong was not on any Fushe lists but maintained strong friendships with many Fushe members. In the spring of Chongzhen 15 (1642), the Fushe held its last large-scale gathering in Hangzhou. It was exciting for many Fushe scholars at the gathering that junior officials, such as Fang Yizhi and Gong Dingzi, took part in order to “pass on the wisdom.” Clearly, officials like Gong helped enhance the Fushe’s popular appeal and were included in the Fushe circle for this reason.45

Since conventional history has not thoroughly treated Gong’s life and career, it is necessary to introduce his pre-1644 experiences carefully. Four years younger than Fang Yizhi, Gong was something of a prodigy. He passed the highest level of the civil service examinations at the age of twenty in Chongzhen 7 (1634). After receiving the jinshi title, unlike most promising officials at the beginning of their political careers, Gong did not elect to wait for an opportunity to become a Hanlin Academician. Instead, he chose to serve as the magistrate of Qishui (in modern-day Hubei).46 Gong served two successful terms as a dedicated magistrate in one of the most strategically crucial regions terribly torn by rebellions and natural disasters during the Chongzhen reign. During those years, Gong accumulated rich experience in military strategy, local administration, and law.47 In Chongzhen 14 (1641), he received a rating of Exceptional at the triennial evaluations and was promoted to serve as a censor on the Board of War. In Chongzhen 15 (1642), freshly arrived in the capital as a new member of the metropolitan bureaucracy, Gong received special recognition from the emperor; he was given important assignments and invited to accompany his majesty on New Year’s Eve. He was apparently quite motivated to fulfill his duties as a censor,48 but with his rich military and administrative experience as well as memories of ordinary people’s suffering caused by war and natural disasters, he found himself idling in the belly of the bureaucracy.
Still highly motivated and idealistic, Gong began to cultivate the reputation of a loyal official.\(^4^9\) In the winter of Chongzhen 16 (1643), he submitted a memorial suggesting that the emperor summon back some of the highly competent and upright officials who had been stripped of positions and remained at home in temporary retirement.\(^5^0\) This was a risky move since, in the last years of the Chongzhen reign, one could be seriously punished simply for recommending an official previously dismissed by the emperor. Furthermore, Gong memorialized against the emperor’s use of imprisonment and flogging to discipline his defiant subjects.\(^5^1\) An additional series of memorials from Gong against current grand secretaries had irritated the emperor so much that he had Gong and a few others thrown into prison.\(^5^2\)

Just two months before Gong’s arrest, in the autumn of Chongzhen 16 (1643), his beloved concubine, Gu Mei (1619–1664), arrived in Beijing, leaving behind her fame as one of the most celebrated courtesans in Nanjing. From the moment she arrived in Beijing, she became Gong’s true companion. The couple underwent an image transformation together. Historians have argued that courtesans who married into literati households were expected to conform to Confucian feminine virtues.\(^5^3\) The Gong-Gu image transformation reveals something deeper than mere compliance with domestic norms. A courtesan-turned-concubine could do more than demarcate “a space of *qing*” with her husband and defer to his official wife. A virtuous concubine could also help improve an official’s public image and career opportunities.

Gong-Gu’s correspondence with an iconic Donglin figure, Fang Zhenru (1585–1645), Fang Yizhi’s uncle, is particularly revealing. Upon his release from prison in Chongzhen 17/1 (1644), still deprived of official status, Gong Dingzi inscribed and sent a painting by Gu Mei to Fang Zhenru, who was governing Guangxi, on the southwestern frontier. In the inscription, he recalled that when Gu joined his household, Fang wrote to warn him not to circulate her paintings outside their home or show off her talents.\(^5^4\) Gong told the senior Fang that since Gu had joined him in the capital, they had followed Fang’s advice and kept a low profile, enjoying her art and poetry only in private.\(^5^5\)

Gong Dingzi had developed and cherished his strong ties with several other prominent members of the Fang family as well, including Kongzhao and Yizhi.\(^5^6\) For him, Fang Zhenru was at once a Donglin senior and a kind of mentor. Earlier, in Chongzhen 11 (1638), when
Fan Jingwen (1587–1644), a popular Donglin-identified official and president of the Board of War in Nanjing, was stripped of official status and lost his job for having memorialized against the promotion of Yang Sichang, Gong composed a poem offering Fan moral support. Fang Zhenru thought so highly of this poem that he publicized it among colleagues by having it printed, which undoubtedly elevated the profile of his protégé. Receiving continuous recognition and endorsement from Fang would help advance Gong’s reputation and career in meaningful ways.

In his inscription on Gu Mei’s painting for Fang, Gong recalls that merely fifty days after Gu’s arrival in Beijing, he was arrested and imprisoned. He describes Gu’s womanly virtues—her modesty, dedication, and stamina, as well as the noble spirit of her art and poetry. She stopped eating delicate foods and never complained about their financial distress. She confined herself to vegetarianism and Buddhist prayers. She displayed a strong sense of devotion and filial piety. Because she had such a noble character, Gong asked her to paint for Fang and then had the painting delivered to Guangxi. Concluding the inscription, Gong promises that after this painting, he and Gu would put away their brushes and silk so that they “would not provoke their mentor’s harsh scolding.”

The act of sending a painting bearing such an inscription to a mentor, an inscription that invokes Fang’s disapproval of circulating Gu’s art but also justifies the act of sending this one painting by highlighting her conventional feminine virtues, helps authenticate Gong’s commitment to Confucian masculine ideals. It brings to light the careful balance this aspiring official strove to maintain in a display of both self-discipline and passion. This image-making would not have been complete without imbuing Gu, the former elite courtesan, with Confucian womanly virtues. As Gu is transformed into a companion suitable for an official, Gong also fashions himself as a model Confucian man who displays the virtues of loyalty and self-discipline.

In fact, Gu Mei’s image transformation reflected Gong’s changing political standing as much as her new social identity. Months before Gong sent the painting and inscription to Fang Zhenru, ten poems he composed in prison for Gu Mei’s birthday had already described her in a markedly similar way. The inscription on the painting for Fang drew on those birthday poems in several places. In essence, the poems depict her as a virtuous woman. In one, he expresses gratitude toward her because, out of concern for him in the cold weather, she
made a quilt and had it delivered to the prison. Gong praises her courage, care, and noble mind, so extraordinary in a woman whose husband had been thrown into prison for trying to fulfill his political duties.

Gong’s writings served to present him as a self-disciplined man, which could help earn senior officials’ patronage. The importance of this image was affirmed a few years later, in the unusually complex political environment after the fall of the Ming. Gong, now serving in the Qing government, would repeatedly return to his exchanges with Fang Zhenru regarding his concubine to make claims about his own moral standing.

Many Fushe friends shared Gong Dingzi’s interest in moral image as a means of career advancement. They believed that, in addition to filial piety, self-discipline remained an ideal quality for officials and that displaying masculine virtues was important for achieving a successful political career. This issue bore a sense of urgency when Fushe involvement in factionalism invited constant attacks at court and when a few Fushe stars gained notoriety due to their reputations as pleasure seekers.

Tellingly, the Fushe activist Zhang Zilie once wrote a letter, titled “To a Friend, on Staying away from Sensual Pleasures,” to Sun Lin (1611–1646), Fang Yizhi’s friend and brother-in-law, whose fame rose when he joined the Fang father’s and son’s military operations in central China. The letter was a powerful treatise urging Fushe friends to stop wasting energy on sensual pleasures. In his letter, Zhang mentioned several popular Fushe figures, all close friends of Sun and Fang, who had not demonstrated adequate self-discipline. He called upon all his friends to pay close attention to this issue.

First, Zhang refutes the view that such activities did not compromise one’s commitment to public service:

I believe you possess such extraordinary talents that indulgence in sensual pleasures might not erode them at all. But I also think that because we are facing so many crises, no talent should be wasted on useless matters. . . . In addition, a gentleman’s good judgment and resolve, if spent on unwise indulgence, will not be employed for honorable causes; if spent on entertainment, it will not be employed for difficult tasks.

He further explains the political risks of lacking self-discipline:

If you continue indulging in entertainment, the most sagacious men of our time will think that the talented men among us are self-indulgent and therefore unsuitable [for important missions], and will not nurture these talented men and help them accomplish important things. Meanwhile, the talented men sink deeper and
deeper into such indulgence, and will lose energy and eventually fail to stand out.  

Zhang Zilie’s argument builds on two premises: First, indulgence in sensual pleasures undermines literati commitment to and fulfillment of the Confucian jingshi ideal. Second, senior officials only nurture and mentor men they take seriously, and who demonstrate real political potential, one condition of which is self-discipline.

In particular, Zhang highlights a contemporary political factor, factionalism, to reinforce his cautionary message.

When senior scholars hear about this, they see us as thinking too highly of our talents and having little real knowledge and little prudence. They think that we do not work hard to cultivate morality and improve our scholarship, and therefore we won’t be able to fulfill our responsibilities for the country. . . . Our political enemies will secretly celebrate and take advantage of this opportunity to accuse us of factionalism and chasing undeserved fame. This will defeat us and make us bring shame to the Confucian tradition.

Zhang’s understanding of the relationship between career success and moral image was shared by others, as demonstrated by the three commentators included in the printed version of this letter. These three men were Zhang’s brother, the famous Fushe activist Shen Shoumin (1607–1675), and the official Xia Yunyi. Xia, who would later become a loyalist martyr, was known among the Fushe for his strong career achievements. He was considered one of the most promising officials by the Board of Personnel. In his comments on Zhang’s criticism of indulgence in sensual pleasures, Xia invokes the historical example of Zhuge Liang (181–234), who married an unusually ugly but virtuous wife and became one of the most accomplished ministers in Chinese history. In contrast, Xia suggests that the last emperor of the Chen dynasty, who notoriously indulged in poetry, wine, music, and women, deserved no better than to lose his country.

Similarly, Shen Shoumin makes self-discipline a key issue for officials. He cites examples of model Confucian officials of the Song dynasty:

Staying away from sensual pleasures alone is not enough. Sima [Guang] at the age of forty had not been able to have a son. His wife took a concubine for him, but he never approached her. Cheng [Yi] was physically fragile from childhood. But because he insisted on controlling his desires, he remained strong after seventy. Liu [Anshi] stopped sexual activities when he was forty, and his self-control never...
wavered. These role models not only never took a second woman [as concubine into their households] but also strove to refrain from pleasure seeking [outside]. How can one justify giving in to sensual pleasures and not regret lacking control?71

Their comments demonstrate that these Fushe scholars not only believed in the importance of sexual morality and self-restraint for officials as an essential Confucian teaching but also stressed that there could be serious political consequences for failing to uphold the image of moral exemplariness. Precisely because Zhang Zilie understood the significance of such consequences, he offered criticism but attempted to do so in a way that would not jeopardize his friends’ career future, which is why he refrained from naming names.72

Zhang’s letter testifies to the reality that perception carried tremendous weight in late-Ming politics. Although Zhang urges his friends to sincerely pursue moral cultivation, his emphasis on projecting the image of self-discipline in order to gain the patronage of senior officials almost signals surrender to the reality and endorsement of scholars’ performance of Confucian masculine virtues for essentially pragmatic reasons. In other words, in real-world politics, drawing a clear moral distinction between the sincere and the pragmatic might work against his friends’ careers. Zhang realized that Fushe scholars were not morally superior to their rivals. He also recognized the fluidity of the boundaries between sincerity and hypocrisy and that all parties could appropriate them.

Zhang was correct. The issue of sincerity and authenticity was not merely a personal matter; it had already become a subject of factional debate at court in the struggles surrounding the idealized image of the Donglin man. Attacks on Fushe scholars claimed that they feigned moral exemplariness as individuals and as a collective were repeatedly leveled by their rivals. To understand why the Fushe’s popular image as an organization of moral paragons was vulnerable to such challenges, we should first consider how the moral performance of individual Fushe scholars was used to enhance this group’s organizing power and increase its appeal.

**Image and Organizational Development**

The Fushe’s political appeal relied heavily on its ability to use print and public spectacle to paint itself as an organization of moral exemplars. This reputation had really taken hold with the fall of the eunuch
faction in the beginning of the Chongzhen reign. When Qian Fen published the filial paragon Wei Xueyi’s posthumous collected works, it was the very first publication by any of the martyred Donglin officials or their families after the demise of Wei Zhongxian. Zhang Pu (1602–1641), founder of the Fushe, argued that the posthumous publication of Wei Xueyi’s writings and their wide distribution preserved evidence of the loyalty of his father. Wei Xueyi’s filial piety and Qian Fen’s friendship perfected the senior Wei’s loyalty. Later, in a commemorative essay for the highly publicized burial ceremony for the senior Wei, Zhang further highlighted the significance of *zhongxiao* to the Sons of the Donglin and to Fushe organizing.

Most revealing is the preface Zhang Pu composed for Qian Fen’s poetry collection, in which Zhang spent much ink describing the Qian brothers’ friendship with Wei Xueyi. Friendship derived from, and further manifested, the true understanding of filial piety; friends illuminated one another’s virtues. Images of filial sons and devoted friends went hand in hand, helping create the impression in the early years of the Fushe that it was a collective of devoted practitioners of *zhongxiao* ethics.

Indeed, the founders and early leaders of the Fushe, Zhang Pu and Zhang Cai (1596–1648), promoted this public image of the organization. The story of Zhang Pu, the son of a weak father and a maid-turned-concubine, was frequently mentioned by Zhang himself and by Fushe members. Zhang’s uncle, who had become president of the Board of Punishments, tolerated his servants’ abusive treatment of Zhang Pu’s father, who subsequently died of depression. It became widely known that Zhang Pu wrote in his own blood on the wall: “I do not deserve to be called a son if I don’t seek revenge against the evil servants!” Similarly, Zhang Cai’s father had died from longtime psychological abuse inflicted by a brother born of Zhang Cai’s grandfather and a favorite concubine. The two Zhangs’ shared experience of losing their fathers in unfortunate domestic circumstances and their filial devotion toward their widowed mothers were emphasized by Zhang Pu to show the depth of their friendship. They became devoted sons not only to their own mothers but to the other’s mother as well. Their images as filial sons and true friends were thus mutually defined and mutually strengthened. Their highly publicized stories stressed that friendship did not pose a threat to *zhongxiao* ethics and that Fushe members were committed to the Confucian Five Cardinal Relations.
Instances of this kind abounded in Fushe activities and writings. Members organized gatherings around their parents’ birthdays and funerals, thereby not only reinforcing their intertwined familial and social ties but also legitimizing these opportunities to assemble. Zhang Pu’s biological mother, Madam Jin, received many visits and celebratory essays from Fushe members on her sixtieth birthday, including one from the Donglin celebrity Qian Qianyi, composed at the request of Zhang Pu himself. When Zhang’s official mother, Madam Pan, was to be buried, her funeral also attracted a large number of visitors, followed by the Fushe’s most extravagant gathering.

Zhang Pu had this to say at the celebration of the birthday of the Fushe friend Wu Zeng’s (d. 1655) father: “Friendship does not simply concern one person. It begins with the seniors in the family. The senior chooses friends for the son. . . . The son does not befriend someone without seeking his parents’ approval; without parental approval one does not easily form a friendship. This is because one wants to befriend a worthy man to bring honor to his parents; befriendning an unworthy person would bring dishonor to the parents. Many in our Fushe follow this principle when choosing friends.” On another occasion, celebrating the birthday of the mother of Shen Shizhu and Shen Shoumin, two brothers both active in the Fushe, Zhang wrote: “My friendship with [Shen Shizhu] is built on the Five Cardinal Relations (yi Wulun xiang zhu). . . . There is an old saying: ‘Your mother is my mother’ (ruo mu wu mu). We now know this is not an empty idea.”

Such testimonials put forth powerful images for Fushe activists as filial sons and true friends. For them, the emotive content of friendship had not been drained by Neo-Confucian doctrines. Friendship and filial piety could strengthen each other on emotive, social, and political levels. Fushe individuals’ embodiment and promotion of friendship and filial piety in such a manner not only highlighted the importance of Confucian ethics in their everyday lives and politics but also enriched that system in new historical circumstances.

Thus, instead of seeing these prominent themes in Fushe history as a sign of its failure to go beyond tradition, it is more accurate to argue that their efforts to claim Confucian moral exemplariness were a way for them to adapt to the new sociocultural and political conditions in which they lived. This same understanding can be applied to the Fushe’s deployment of the language of filial piety in factional attacks.
The Fushe organized and coordinated protests in response to the Chongzhen emperor’s promotion of Yang Sichang with a *duoqing* order in Chongzhen 11 (1638). Unlike the opposition to Zhang Juzheng’s *duoqing* case in the 1570s, this campaign took shape outside the court and, to a great extent, evolved among the Donglin and Fushe networks between Beijing and Nanjing. Although the Donglin-identified official Huang Daozhou played the most prominent role in the anti-Yang campaign at court (see chap. 3), it actually started with memorials submitted by the Fushe scholar Shen Shoumin in which he harshly condemned Yang’s betrayal of the *zhongxiao* ideal.

Shen had arrived in Beijing as a highly recommended imperial student and was the first person in the country to memorialize against Yang Sichang’s promotion. His three memorials set the tone for the most consequential political debate of the late Chongzhen reign. These three memorials portrayed Yang as failing in both loyalty and filial piety: he had abandoned his filial duty to mourn his parents for three years when he answered the emperor’s call to lead the Board of War and work on military campaigns against the rebels and Manchus. He had not succeeded in these missions and therefore should be punished for failing to fulfill the requirements of both loyalty and filial piety (*zhongxiao liang kui*). More alarming was the pathetic fact, Shen argued, that few officials had taken Yang to task for his moral-political failures. When certain officials formerly associated with the eunuch faction conspired to make a political comeback, Yang made it seem as if the dynasty had to rely on those morally corrupt men for military victories.

Pressure built when the emperor did not respond to Shen’s criticisms. Attempting to create momentum for the campaign, in Chongzhen 11/8 (1638), Fushe scholars publicized the famous “Proclamation against Seditious Elements in Nanjing,” echoing Shen’s memorials and specifically targeting Ruan Dacheng. This was the Fushe’s most sensational political action. Shen’s memorials had attracted so much public attention that by Chongzhen 11/9 (1639), Huang Daozhou in Beijing felt that he had to memorialize to condemn Yang’s moral defects as well. This momentum propelled Cheng Yong (*jinshi* 1625), an official in Nanjing and a Fushe supporter, to follow Shen Shoumin and Huang Daozhou in criticizing Yang’s violation of filial piety, an action that quickly led to Cheng’s arrest.

The upshot of the Fushe’s “leadership” in this campaign against unfilial sons was complex. The series of political spectacles eroded
the boundaries between the political spaces of Beijing and Nanjing. The Fushe scholars’ roles within and between the two capitals successfully molded the Donglin-Fushe collective images into one community of moral paragons. In a sense, it was the popular appeal of the Little Donglin that pressured Donglin-identified officials such as Huang Daozhou to clarify the moral-political mission for the Donglin faction.

In the meantime, at court, these same dynamics had made the moral standing of Zheng Man a more contentious issue and in effect had diminished his chance of release. The Fushe helped create and perpetuate a distinction between Zheng Man and the “true” moral exemplars of the Donglin-Fushe community, as evinced by Chen Zilong’s public denouncement of Zheng (see chap. 1 in this book). Soon after Zheng’s “death by a thousand cuts” put a sensational end to that tortured case, Zhang Zilie cautioned his Fushe friends against appearing sympathetic to that disgraced man. When some Fushe members were preparing to publish the manuscript of Collected Works of Gaiyuan (Gaiyuan ji), the posthumous collection by the late Fushe member Wan Shihua (1590–1639), Zhang suggested to Shen Shoumin that they leave out Wan’s letter to Zheng Man because the letter contained praises for Zheng that “did not conform to the ‘pure elements’ judgment” (bu he qingyi) of Zheng’s moral defects. Fushe friends were heavily invested in Wan’s image as a moral exemplar, as shown in their concerted efforts to secure biographies of Wan from prominent figures associated with the Donglin-Fushe camp. To these friends, Wan had been the emblem of loyalty, filial piety, and friendship. In print, therefore, a clear contrast of the moral images of the Fushe and Zheng Man had to be preserved by erasing the record of Wan’s praise for Zheng. This, again, was a true friend’s responsibility.

Zheng’s personal crisis had been concurrent with and intimately connected to the moral attacks aimed at the Fushe. As shown earlier, the literati who contributed to presenting sensational charges against Zheng were especially antagonistic toward their rival, the Fushe. Chen Zilong’s panic and Zhang Zilie’s caution reflect the Fushe community’s vigilance and determination to maintain its image of moral superiority so that the organization would survive and thrive. The sincerity and authenticity of the concerned officials’ moral performance was predicated largely on political needs.
REAL AND FEIGNED MORAL PARAGONS

Whereas Fushe scholars were able to mitigate internal differences to some extent as they publicized a self-image of exemplariness for the purpose of promoting their organization, once they launched moral attacks on political enemies, their claim to moral superiority faced serious challenges. These were not necessarily battles between the gentlemen and small men. In fact, it is problematic to see the rivalry through that lens. First, the boundaries between “real” and “feigned” exemplars had already been significantly confused by “public opinion” as presented in the media and further complicated by the literati’s competing views on what constituted sincere and proper expression of Confucian virtues. Second, the Fushe and its challengers employed similar techniques and acted on similar rationales. In particular, sincerity was a key shared political trope.

Blaming the Publisher, Burning the Woodblock

The Fushe’s image troubles began as the organization was gaining empirewide fame. In Chongzhen 4 (1631), the Fushe sustained a blow to its reputation following the brilliant success some of its members achieved in the examinations that year. It was particularly exciting that their star, Wu Weiye (1609–1671), passed the exam as the Secondus (Second Place). His essays were immediately published. However, instead of conforming to the tradition of honoring Wu’s official mentor, the chief examiner Li Mingrui (1585–1671), the publication was dedicated to the Fushe leader, Zhang Pu. On discovering this serious breach of decorum and the mentor-disciple tradition, Li vowed to denounce Wu and threw public doubt on Fushe values. This instantly became a major scandal. Eventually, another Fushe member brought Wu to personally apologize to Li. They blamed everything on the printing house and had the local authorities punish the publisher for the “mistake.” Although this move helped reduce the damage to the Fushe’s public image, it left Zhang Pu feeling dismayed and bitter. The unpleasant fallout from this event went beyond disagreement over whether violating the mentor-disciple ritual called for such strong reactions from either side; it left the impression that the Fushe did not respect Confucian ethical ideals.

The vulnerability of the Fushe’s collective image invited external attacks. In the high-profile literary scuffle over the play The Green
Peony (Lü mudan) in Chongzhen 6 (1633), Fushe members argued that because they had rejected the request of Wen Tiren’s brother to join their organization, the latter had written the play to ridicule Fushe scholars. Portraying themselves as victims of vicious literary attacks, the young men asked the two Zhangs to intervene. The Zhangs subsequently made a special trip and garnered substantial support from a friend and sympathetic official, Li Yuankuan (jinshi 1628). Li “banned bookshops from selling the play, had the wood-blocks destroyed, charged the author, and imprisoned someone from the Wen family,” thereby completely quashing the Fushe’s enemies.  

Often considered a triumph of the Fushe over their enemies’ attempt to defame them, this event merits critical reconsideration. The Green Peony is a romantic comedy. It dramatizes how two pairs of beautiful ladies and talented scholars overcome obstacles to their love. In particular, it mocks appeals to feigned literary celebrity. Revisionist scholarship has tried to explain the inexplicable fact that the script does not read as the slanderous material Fushe had claimed it to be, certainly not slanderous enough to provoke such extreme reactions and measures. More recently, it has been suggested that the script we have today may not be the original; it is believed to have been rewritten, after having been banned, by the pro-Fushe official Wu Bing (jinshi 1619). This rereading of the incident warrants further investigation, but even its possibility reminds us of the danger of presuming the Fushe’s righteousness and victimization. “At the time, people all wanted to put on [the play],” one Fushe insider documented. Regardless of the extant version’s authenticity or the reasons behind the play’s appeal, the instant popularity of the play in its day suggests that the Fushe, far from being universally respected for moral exemplariness, might have been considered an entertaining spectacle in some corners of society.

The Enemy Within

The scandals surrounding Wu Weiye’s exam essays and the play The Green Peony involved print and theater, two political techniques that Fushe scholars mastered and used to publicize their own moral performance. But they could not monopolize these media. Nor could they determine just how the increasing emphasis on moral performance in politics would affect them and their claims to sincerity and authenticity. The long battle between the Fushe and a defector from
the group, the official Zhou Zhikui (jinshi 1631), helps shed light on the environment in which they had to maneuver.

A former Fushe member from Fujian, Zhou enjoyed great success at the beginning of his official career after he passed the examinations in Chongzhen 4 (1631), the same year as did Zhang Pu and Wu Weiye. Zhou’s first job took him to the important position of assistant administrator (tuiguan) in the Suzhou prefectural government. Given the rise of the Fushe and the strategic importance of Suzhou in late-Ming economic, social, cultural, and political spheres, many Donglin heavyweights such as Wen Zhenmeng (a Suzhou native himself) expressed high expectations for Zhou. However, an explosive confrontation between Zhou and the Fushe leadership in Chongzhen 5–6 (1632–33) resulted in a deep antagonism that haunted the Donglin-Fushe community for many years.

According to the established narrative, based largely on Fushe-friendly sources, this was a messy fight in which a selfish individual, Zhou Zhikui, betrayed the two Zhangs and lent himself to the evil grand secretary Wen Tiren as a weapon against the righteous Donglin-Fushe collective. It was said that Zhou competed with Liu Shidou, a Fushe friend who had passed the exams in the same year as Zhou and was appointed magistrate of Taicang (in modern-day Jiangsu), Zhang Pu’s hometown. It was believed that because Liu was much closer to the two Zhangs, Zhou vied with him for control of local examinations as well as the transportation and management of tax and military grain. In the end, in late Chongzhen 6 (1633), Liu and another local official lost their jobs. The Fushe argued that these two officials had been wildly popular and their departure triggered widespread local protest against Zhou. In Chongzhen 8 (1635), Zhou took a sick leave and left in disgrace for his hometown in Fujian. When Wen Tiren and his clique launched attacks on the Fushe and the two Zhangs in Chongzhen 9–10 (1636–37), he enlisted various “witnesses,” including Zhou, who, though in the midst of mourning the death of his official mother (his biological mother was a concubine), traveled northward to testify. These events created a string of serious problems for the Fushe and the two Zhangs.

Zhou’s moral charges against the Fushe have been dismissed by both the Fushe itself and modern historians on the grounds that Wen Tiren used this opportunist Zhou—and the charges he fabricated—as a factional tool against the righteous Donglin-Fushe officials. This standard account—and its clichéd moral-political contrast—overlooks
how Confucian ethics was specifically employed by both sides in print and public spectacles as a language of political communication and therefore obscures how the particular cultural and intellectual conditions of the late Ming shaped factionalism.

For instance, the two Zhangs and their supporters mobilized a massive campaign against Zhou Zhikui in Jiangnan, including physical harassment. Under pressure, Zhou requested a sick leave. But his superiors told him to change it to a request for zhongyang leave (retiring to take care of one’s parent). However, when the request reached the capital, some officials on the Board of Personnel decided that, since Zhou had an elder brother, it would be against the personnel code to let him take such a leave. Eventually, Zhou had to change the petition back to retirement due to illness. Zhou’s official mother passed away just one day after he finally arrived home. Zhou departed in such disgrace and embarrassment that he forever lost the opportunity to bring imperial honors to his deceased parents, a disappointment he deeply regretted.

Zhou felt especially bitter toward the two Zhangs because, according to his recollection of his supervisors’ words, they had pressed colleagues on the Board of Personnel to consider not granting him a zhongyang leave. A later official report done by pro-Fushe officials dismissed Zhou’s claim as “speculative.” Limited sources do not allow us to be certain whether the Zhangs had indeed influenced the Board of Personnel. It is true that the board’s treatment of Zhou was justified by the code. Still, since Zhou’s mother was already in her nineties and dying, the board could have followed other precedents and generously granted him a short leave so that he could claim he had left office to fulfill his filial duties. Further, even if pro-Fushe officials were correct in saying that Zhou was obsessed and paranoid about Fushe animosity and character assassination, they also admitted that Zhou’s superiors had indeed voluntarily requested a zhongyang leave for him so as to avoid greater damage to his reputation or career prospects. This was apparently a common practice. However, once the request was turned down and Zhou was made a public laughingstock, he alone bore the humiliation and devastating consequences. He had become an unfilial hypocrite with little political credibility.

When Zhou later left his home during the mourning period to testify against the two Zhangs, Fushe members spread the word that because their factional enemies had promised Zhou a promotion, he
had suspended mourning and agreed to testify as a witness to expose alleged Fushe corruption. This inspired widespread condemnation and eventually left him disgraced. During Zhou’s brief visit to the capital, some Donglin-Fushe officials, including Huang Daozhou, chastised him and tried to kick him out of Beijing. Even after Zhou returned to Fujian, Huang continued to memorialize at court against him as a co-conspirator of the evil grand secretary. This must have made Zhou’s situation even trickier and scarier, because he and Huang both came from Zhangzhou, Fujian. Huang’s hostility might well jeopardize Zhou’s local reputation.

Not every senior Donglin-identified official endorsed the moral attacks on Zhou, however. Some prominent figures, including Qian Qianyi, Qu Shisi (1590–1650), and Xu Shirou (1587–1642), expressed sympathy for him. However, while these officials enjoyed high reputations and had much influence in local and court politics, they happened to be in deep trouble themselves during those years of 1636 and 1637. To make things worse, once Wen Tiren and his followers had enlisted Zhou’s testimony against the Donglin-Fushe collective, Fushe partisans accused Zhou of conspiring with “vile partisans” in their anti-Donglin, anti-Fushe slander. Zhou was horrified and vehemently denied that he had conspired with those men. He stumbled around in this political minefield alone. In the midst of intense factionalism at court, the above-mentioned three officials told Zhou that openly denouncing the two Zhangs would cause grave damage to the Donglin-Fushe collective. Therefore they really could not do more for him other than express sympathy. All they could do was to privately convey condolences and endorse the publication of his collected writings. Their shared friend, the literatus Mao Jin (1599–1659), a famous book collector and owner of one of the best printing houses in the country, joined in contributing prefaces to Zhou’s publication.

Zhou Zhikui’s published anthology paints a disheartening picture of the Donglin-Fushe collective by showing that, as the Fushe was becoming a powerful ally, many Donglin officials believed that sustaining the two Zhangs’ moral image, though not fair to individuals like Zhou, was the only way to avoid collateral damage to their own numbers. For instance, some of the letters to former colleagues included in Zhou’s collection mention that Qian Qianyi had told him that his superiors in the Suzhou area could not risk displeasing the Zhangs on Zhou’s account, although Qian lamented that Zhou had been “so terribly abused” at their hands (cuican zhici). Zhou
quotes words of sympathy from other officials as well. For example, in response to Huang Daozhou’s angry message to Zhou, Zheng San-jun (jinshi 1598), a close ally of Huang’s and a Donglin-identified figure himself, is said to have told Zhou that although the wrongs were done by the two Zhangs, “there is simply no way to give [him] a voice” (zhi wu wu zi kaikou chu).\textsuperscript{116} To some senior officials, Zhou expressed deep frustration with Huang Daozhou, whose memorials failed to provide any facts to substantiate the moral attacks on Zhou. He argued that Huang did not discuss facts because he simply wanted to stop Zhou from criticizing the Fushe and the Zhangs.\textsuperscript{117}

While the Fushe mobilized human and material resources to condemn and ostracize Zhou Zhikui by painting him as an unfilial opportunist, Zhou conducted his own campaign to expose the moral defects of Fushe celebrity figures such as the two Zhangs and the Four Gentlemen. By circulating and publishing these letters, Zhou attempted to authenticate his own filiality and political integrity by distinguishing himself from the Zhangs’ fake moral images and was able to argue that his trips to testify against the Fushe were a selfless, courageous endeavor motivated by his strong zhongxiao commitment. He took these opinions all the way to the court just as the Chongzhen emperor was evaluating other officials’ warnings against the Fushe.

Questions around the sincerity of filial expression were again at the center of this struggle. Whereas the Fushe ridiculed Zhou’s fumbled filiality, Zhou fought back by exposing the insincere and inappropriate moral manipulations of such prominent Fushe scholars as the two Zhangs and the Four Gentlemen. When the Fushe was formally established in the mid-1620s, its members held a grand gathering at Yinshan near the city of Suzhou to publicize its debut.\textsuperscript{118} Zhou noted that on that occasion thousands of boats carried the young men to waters near the Tombs of the Five Martyrs (Wuren Mu), where five local anti-eunuch martyrs had been buried. There, the young men started a drinking party.\textsuperscript{119} The symbolism of paying homage at this tomb site was potent, not only because it showed Fushe commitment to promoting good government, but also because a commemorative essay authored by the Fushe leader Zhang Pu, “On the Stele at the Tombs of the Five Martyrs” (Wuren mubei ji), in which he spoke on behalf of the people and Donglin survivors, had launched him into official politics.\textsuperscript{120} Zhang and the Fushe thus became linked to the Donglin of the Tianqi reign and the Chongzhen eras. However, Zhou’s description of
this Fushe gathering as a drinking party and self-aggrandizing spectacle throws this image into serious doubt. The impressive gathering was not a proper display of virtues but instead revealed the Fushe as a group of hypocritical fame chasers. Furthermore, on another occasion, Zhou singled out the famous Fushe Four Gentlemen, calling them “bullies and wicked men.” “Self-indulgent and undisciplined,” they only dressed themselves up as “pure elements.” This portrayal of Fushe celebrities was drastically different from their self-image of moral righteousness.

From Zhou’s perspective, the reputation of the two Zhangs and the Fushe Four Gentlemen was deceptive; letting these men define the Donglin’s image could upend the Donglin tradition. Just months before Fushe-Donglin figures attacked Yang Sichang’s violation of filial piety, Zhou went to see a senior official and presented him with a letter in which he called the two Zhangs “disloyal and unfilial” (bu zhong bu xiao). He also accused the Donglin icon Huang Daozhou of associating himself with these two immoral men and thereby “corrupting the Donglin tradition” (baihuai Donglin jiafeng). Earlier, Zhou had expressed similar views to a number of high-ranking officials. He argued that the Donglin had its own tradition, and even though the Donglin lacked manpower at court at the moment, it should resist the temptation to join forces with the Fushe. Otherwise, the public would question the moral character of the new generation of the Donglin.

In particular, Zhou warned his colleagues that Huang Daozhou might ruin the Donglin tradition if he relied on the Fushe’s fake exemplariness to revive and strengthen it. He challenged Huang to tell the public exactly which Fushe members were qualified to pass on the traditions established by generations of Donglin men. Zhou argued that he himself, though ostracized by the Fushe, truly understood the meaning of filial piety and practiced it sincerely and properly. He had inherited the Donglin spirit.

In a letter to Fan Jingwen, president of the Board of War in Nanjing, Zhou recalled that when he was newly appointed to Suzhou, he looked after the sons of the Donglin martyr Zhou Shunchang, at Fan’s request. Zhou Zhikui had never met Zhou Shunchang in person even though the latter once served as an official in Fujian, Zhou Zhikui’s home province. Emphasizing his sincere practice of filial piety and correct understanding of its meaning, Zhou Zhikui explained that he did not visit and introduce himself to Zhou Shunchang because,
during Zhou Shunchang’s term in Fujian, he had just lost a parent and was refraining from socializing. But, later, during an exam trip to Jiangnan in Tianqi 5 (1625), at the height of eunuch persecution of the Donglin, Zhou Zhikui wept at Zhou Shunchang’s tomb in defiance of the eunuch faction’s terror, a heroic move that had deeply touched the martyr’s son. Thus, in Zhou Zhikui’s account, not only did he follow the true Donglin tradition; he properly and sincerely practiced filial piety.

In his campaign to defend his own moral standing, Zhou stood firmly behind his criticism of the moral corruption of the two Zhangs and the Fushe. He argued that the two Zhangs’ very act of proving their filiality by exposing problems within their families was unfilial. As seen in Zheng Man’s case, the proper display of filial piety was not simple. Zheng’s refusal to disclose his father’s domestic troubles put his own life at risk. Just how one should correctly present himself as a moral exemplar posed an especially delicate question for officials. Fushe scholars themselves had been keen to differentiate the true moral paragons from the fake ones. Zhang Pu, expressing his concerns about the procedures of recruiting and promoting officials, had once quoted the Song official Su Shi’s comment that when the state attempted to recruit talent by calling upon filial paragons, everyone started to perform extreme filial acts like *gegu* (slicing a piece of flesh from one’s thigh to make healing medicine) and *lumu* (residing next to the deceased parents’ tombs). Still, Zhang himself was criticized by Zhou Zhikui as a moral hypocrite.

Zhou’s criticisms might well not have been his alone or purely politically motivated. When Zhang Pu publicly exposed the details of his father’s suffering at the hands of his uncle, it probably raised some eyebrows. For example, in the epitaph for Zhang’s father composed by Ma Shiqi (*jinshi* 1631), a prominent Donglin-Fushe figure, Ma seemed to feel that he needed to justify Zhang’s action: “He revealed [those domestic stories,] details that had tormented his father but that his father himself could not reveal. A brother and a son have different ethical responsibilities.” Zhou’s many letters to Donglin-identified officials defy the conventional narrative that reduces him to a shameless clown willing to be used by Wen Tiren in factional attacks. They suggest that his rationale was much more complicated and that he was partly motivated by his conventional understanding of *zhongxiao* ethics and a desire to fulfill his familial duties. His discussion of the feigned moral
exemplariness of the Fushe and the question of who was morally qualified to be included in the Donglin was legitimate—and actually quite common—at the time.

Here, it is helpful to recall the Fushe intellectual leader Zhang Zilie’s cautionary letters on the question of self-discipline, which confirm that Zhou’s accusations were not mere fabrications. Zhang himself warned his friends that Fushe popularity, built on networking, empty debates about literary style, superficial talk about military strategies, and self-indulgence, was meaningless and even harmful. Accordingly, he admonished Fushe scholars to take care to properly display their pursuit of Confucian ethical ideals. The Fushe and its rivals, in their efforts to place personal moral performance at the center of politics, to which the debate about sincerity and proper pursuit of Confucian ethics was central, were motivated by similar concerns and resorted to very similar image-making techniques.

The political attacks at court concluded with the emperor’s decision in 1639 to be lenient with the Fushe. When the emperor closed the investigation of their alleged moral corruption, he did not take a side but instead told the Fushe that they should “pursue zhongxiao and do not chase fame” (jiangtu zhongxiao wu shi biaobang). Shen Shoumin, the leader in the Fushe’s ill-fated anti-Yang Sichang campaign, while still complaining that the young scholars had fallen victim to false accusations, agreed with the emperor that Fushe scholars must choose to focus on self-cultivation rather than criticizing others in order to achieve quick popularity. This might have been the ultimate lesson he summarized for his Fushe friends. After all, no matter how well connected and coordinated they became, they could not control where they would end up on the spectrum between “real” and “feigned” moral exemplars.

Employment of the language of Confucian ethics in Fushe scholars’ emotive expression, career advancement, organizational development, and factional strife demonstrates that, with the intensification of images politics, power relations between the emperor and officials became more complicated. Their political negotiations often took place in discussions about how to conceptualize and practice Confucian ethical ideals such as zhongxiao and self-discipline. This situation helped reinscribe these ideals and mark the boundaries and value of moral performance in the changing environment.
The Fushe’s moral struggles examined here complicate the two leading perspectives in Fushe historiography. One tries to understand the “progressiveness” of politically minded Fushe figures and what this meant for China’s (failed) advance to modernity and enlightenment. The second, more in line with traditional Confucian historiography, approaches Fushe members as tragic heroes frustrated by vicious “small men” in the Ming government and then slain by the Manchu invaders. Both frameworks oversimplify the experiences of Fushe individuals and the positions of their rivals. In fact, within the Donglin-Fushe community, there existed not only “competing loyalties” but also efforts to promote the image of moral integrity for purposes of political networking. Asking why and how certain types of moral images of the Fushe emerged and operated can deepen our understanding of the connection and tension between their moral pursuits and political activities. When we evaluate the Fushe’s gains and losses in its members’ attempts to translate its advantages in publishing, networking, and organizing into political clout, it is especially important to set those activities in the dynamic interactions among contemporary intellectual, social, cultural and political trends. The moral attacks and counterattacks surrounding the Fushe, in particular the issue of sincerity and authenticity of moral performance, reveal the complex reasons behind, and consequences of, individuals’ intensive engagement with Confucian ethics as a language in political communication.

Hence, Fushe scholars’ individual and collective efforts at image-making cannot be reduced to a binary of moral fundamentalism versus hypocrisy. These generalizations more fairly reflect the effects of late-Ming image politics. Confucian ethical ideals motivated and structured these officials’ efforts to adapt to historic changes and simultaneously fulfill competing political, social, and familial responsibilities. Their contributions to making officials’ moral performance central to late-Ming political processes not only demonstrated the complexity of the system of Confucian moralism but also enriched it on both theoretical and practical levels.