Chen Di’s record of Formosa: an alternative Chinese imaginary of otherness

LSE Research Online URL for this paper: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/102388/

Version: Accepted Version

Article:


Reuse

Items deposited in LSE Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the LSE Research Online record for the item.
CHEN DI’S RECORD OF FORMOSA:

AN ALTERNATIVE CHINESE IMAGINARY OF OTHERNESS*

LEIGH K. JENCO

*London School of Economics and Political Science

**Running head:** Chen Di’s Record of Formosa

**Abstract:** This article examines Chen Di’s Record of Formosa (Dongfan jì), the earliest first-hand account in any language of the indigenous people of Formosa (now called Taiwan). Recent commentators have viewed Chen’s text as a key elaborator of Chinese imperial discourse and its various tropes of hierarchical difference. In contrast, I argue that Chen reads the perceived cultural differences between his society and Taiwan’s indigenous peoples as evidence of the contingency, rather than inevitable superiority, of a historical story that produces the outcome of ‘civilization.’ Building on a broader understanding of Chen’s intellectual biography and his extant works, I show that Chen Di places the indigenes along a different timeline in which they forge their own contingent history parallel to, rather than behind, that of a civilizational center. By doing so, Chen’s historical narrative resists aligning their society with Han Chinese forms of development and offers a glimpse of how late Ming syncretic thought could produce an account of legitimate otherness.
In 1603, the Chinese General Shen Yourong (1557-1628) launched a punitive expedition from Kinmen Island with the aim of wiping out Japanese pirates making repeated raids on the south China coast.¹ He took the unusual step of targeting the pirates’ lairs on Formosa, an island outside of Ming dynastic territory.² Spectacularly successful on all counts, Shen’s expedition managed not only to destroy the pirates’ network but also to frighten away a group of ‘red-haired barbarians’—Dutch sailors led by Admiral Wybrand van Warwijck—who were lurking on the nearby Pescadores island chain waiting for the Ming court to grant them trading privileges in Macau. But perhaps the most exciting outcome of this expedition was the earliest firsthand written account in any language of the indigenous societies living on Taiwan, the Record of Formosa (Dongfan ji). Written soon after Shen’s expedition by Chen Di (1541-1617), a military advisor and itinerant literatus in Shen’s retinue, the Record was occasioned by a meeting with the island’s indigenous people, led by a person Chen calls Da-mi-la. These people presented deer meat and wine to Shen and his men, to thank them for eliminating the pirate threat; presumably, these people were also the hosts for Chen’s twenty-one-day stay on the island.³ Over subsequent centuries, the Record’s definitive firsthand account would be summarized or closely duplicated in reference materials produced for travelers and colonial administrators on the island, including appendices to the Song-era text Record of Foreign Lands and the 1696 Taiwan provincial gazetteer.⁴

Aside from its obvious ethnographic and historical significance, Chen’s account has also been cited as an exemplar of what, in European scholarship, is often called ‘imperial ideology.’⁵ Extending this concept to the study of Chinese territorial expansion, Emma Teng
and others have viewed Chen as a key elaborator of Chinese colonial discourse and its various tropes of hierarchical difference. Teng identifies Chen’s *Record* as the ‘basic model for the rhetoric of primitivism’, that both denigrated the backwardness of the indigenes while praising their primitive virtue. This reading of Chen situates him amid other Chinese writers, as well as his European near-contemporaries such as Michel de Montaigne and John Locke, for whom first contact with indigenous inhabitants of ‘new’ worlds prompted rumination on the very nature of civilization and the kinds of moral, political, and economic commitments which held it in place. Typically, the existence of such peoples served to highlight the differences between a pre-political, but often uniquely virtuous, ‘nature’ on the one hand, and a more advanced civil order constituted by appropriate forms of sociality, on the other. In many cases, including that of the later Qing administration on Taiwan and European settler expansion in the New World, these arguments were marshalled to justify the seizure of territory from indigenous peoples on the basis of the settlers’ presumably more advanced capacities.

A broader understanding of Chen’s intellectual biography and the scholarly conversations to which he contributed, however, shows that his *Record* does not contribute to this fraught imperial narrative as directly as some have claimed. To the contrary, Chen’s account illustrates a rarely glimpsed Chinese imaginary of otherness that interrogates, rather than upholds, the Sinocentric hierarchies that render foreign difference inferior to Chinese ways of life. Using a series of comparisons to other Chinese travel writers, I argue that Chen sees in the indigenous people of Taiwan evidence of the contingency, rather than inevitable
superiority, of a historical story that produces the outcome of ‘civilization.’ As a result, he presents the difference of indigenous peoples as a parallel, rather than less advanced, form of historical experience.

I.

Chen visited the island of Taiwan (called ‘Dongfan’ in most contemporary Chinese sources, and ‘Formosa’ in European ones) in 1603 during the Ming dynasty, before Dutch colonization of the island began (in 1623) and before the island was incorporated into the subsequent Qing dynasty (in 1683). Chen, courtesy names Jili and Yizhai, was a native of Lianjiang in Fuzhou province, who had followed his father to achieve the exam rank of xiucai at the early age of nineteen. After fighting Japanese pirates along the southeast coast of China, he was brought into the mufu (akin to a private secretariat or consultation office) of regional superintendent Yu Daxian. After the death of his father, Chen began turning down offers of official positions, and retired from his eventual career as a garrison commander along the Great Wall to travel and write. At the age of sixty-two, he had the opportunity to visit to Taiwan as a military expert attached to Shen Yourong’s entourage.

The Record of Formosa (Dongfan ji) is a short text of less than 1500 characters, attached to a longer compendium of essays and poems dedicated to Shen, Words of Praise from the Taiwan Sea (Minhai zengyan). Until the middle of the last century, Chen’s text was believed to be lost, despite reference to it in a series of regional histories throughout the Ming and Qing periods. It was only in 1955 that the scholar Fang Hao located an original
copy of Shen’s compendium among the holdings of the former Tokyo Imperial University, which included—among other previously unseen texts—Chen’s lost Record.\textsuperscript{13} The Record begins by noting the ancient and unknown origins of the island’s inhabitants, whom he refers to as ‘the barbarians (\textit{yi}) of Dongfan’: ‘the naked and rope-tying people (\textit{min}), who have neither calendars nor officials nor chiefs.’\textsuperscript{14} These observations are strikingly similar to those of later Dutch writers such as the missionary George Candidius, who also remarks on the acephalous nature of village life among the Siraya—the indigenous group with whom Chen was most likely in contact.\textsuperscript{15} Chen does not note the name of the people or groups from whom he is gathering information, but he does observe that the people on the island ‘are of diverse kinds’ (\textit{zhonglei shen fan}). He expresses wonder at their physical fitness and—like Dutch commentators two decades later—also compares their running speeds to that of a horse. He notes that they live in villages of up to a thousand people broadly distributed along the coast.\textsuperscript{16} When villages quarrel with each other, they engage in fervid battle and take heads, but the following day quickly normalize relations. He notes that the ‘nature’ (\textit{xing}) of the indigenes ‘is to be brave, and enjoy fighting,’\textsuperscript{17} yet Chen notably does not use such facts to ascribe an unusual penchant for violence to the islanders. The bulk of his account is rather taken up with the details of indigenous social custom, architecture, agriculture and cuisine.

He is particularly interested in marriage and funeral customs, which would have posed a considerable contrast with those of his own society. It is, for example, the son-in-law who is welcomed into the bride’s family, rather than vice-versa, and it is the prospective bride who
remains in charge of when and for how long to pursue the courtship.\(^18\) ‘The women are sturdy and active,’ he notes, and do most of the agricultural work.\(^19\) He offers extensive details about what and how they grow food and raise domestic animals, as well as how the men conduct collective deer hunts which bring the village meat.\(^20\) When someone dies, they expose the corpse to dry in the house; only when their house becomes dilapidated do they ‘dig a pit underneath and bury [the corpse] in a standing position but with no mound to cover it, and the house is then again raised above it. If the house is not rebuilt, the corpse is not buried.’\(^21\) The largest structures maintained by each kinship group (zu) are ‘public offices’ (gong xie), where young men live before marriage. These offices are also the place where ‘discussion of matters must be’ conducted, to facilitate the investigation and management of problems.\(^22\)

Near the end of his account, Chen summarizes his findings and offers his personal reflections on the nature of his encounter, dwelling in particular on what to him are the most notable ‘differences’ (yì) between his own and Formosan society. Given the significance of this passage for interpreting how and what Chen hopes to accomplish in the Record, it is worth quoting at length:

Mr. Unofficial Historian [i.e., Chen himself] says, ‘How different [or ‘extraordinary’] is Formosa (Dongfan)! From Liyue and other inlets, on a boat catching the northern wind, it would take a day and night to reach the Pescadores; in one more day and night one would reach Jialaowan. It is close. Yet it [the island] has naked and rope-tying
people, who have neither calendars nor officials nor chiefs—are they not also different? Moreover, they live on the sea but do not fish, live mixed up together yet are not licentious, men and women exchange status, live and are buried in the same place; the whole year they hunt deer, yet deer are not depleted. Taking all on the island together, they would amount [in population] to one Chinese county, living with and being cared for by each other; until this day they are totally without calendars or writing (wen zi)—how different this is! The pirates of the South and the Mongols of the North (nanwo beilu) all have writing, like the ancient bird script [of early China]; presumably at the beginning there was a wise man who invented it? But only here is without it. Why? Yet, eating to fullness and roaming freely, contented and harmonious, what need have they for a great man? These are the people of [ancient mythical rulers] Wuhuai and Getian!

Most discussions of Chen’s Record, in Chinese- and English-language commentaries as well as in the only existing full-length English translation by Laurence Thompson, construe the Dongfan (‘Formosa’) that appears in this passage and in the title of the work as meaning ‘Eastern savages,’ and yi (‘difference’ or ‘extraordinariness’) as meaning ‘strangeness.’ These translations impart a strong flavor of cultural chauvinism to Chen’s work: they diminish his ambitions to be offering a balanced account of his trip to the island and make it easier to claim, as Teng does, that Chen associates the Taiwan indigenes with the ‘Eastern barbarians’ of Japan and Korea. Yet in all but one of the cases where it appears in the text,
including in the passage above, ‘Dongfan’ cannot grammatically function as ‘Eastern savages’—it can only be construed as the name of a place. This tallies with all five references to Dongfan in the Ming standard histories, as well as in Chen Di’s other related work including the Zhoushi kewen (‘Guests Ask Questions of a Sailor’) and diary entries of the trip recorded in his biography, which all use Dongfan as the name of the island itself.27

This well-established historical usage of Dongfan as the name of a place implies nothing about its inhabitants or their savagery. Notably, in fact, Chen more frequently uses the term ‘people’ (min) to describe the inhabitants than he does the more loaded term ‘barbarian’ (yì), which would have been the conventional usage in such accounts. Yet in expressing wonder at the simplicity of the indigenes, including their lack of writing, Chen does seem to view them as leading lives of primitive virtue. He worries that the honest life of these ‘people of Wuhuai and Getian’ will soon end under threat from Chinese traders, who cheat them with shoddy merchandise and, by increasing their ‘awareness’ (wù), threaten their ‘simple days’ (pu rì).28

His remarks here do bear interrogating. In fact, they contradict one of the few other contemporary Chinese accounts of indigenous life on Formosa, found in Zhang Xie’s (1574-1640) Investigations of the Eastern and Western Oceans (Dong Xi yang kao), published in 12 volumes in 1618 and eventually included in the Siku quanshu.29 The two sections of Zhang’s work relevant to Taiwan were published alongside Chen’s contribution in a later edition of the Words of Praise compendium.30 Zhang’s account largely duplicates or summarizes Chen’s report, but adds crucial new information about commerce along the northern Taiwan coast. According to Zhang, who gathered much of his intelligence from fishermen and
merchants who regularly traded with the indigenes in the northern ports of Danshui and Jilong,

When the ships of foreigners arrive, both young and old demand a small gift. The people of Danshui are poor, but trading is honest and straightforward. Jilong’s population is more affluent but miserly. Typically they take merchandise to exchange for things, then the next day always come back saying the price was not fair and seeking goods in compensation, and then on the last day they again return, wanting to exchange them [i.e. what they received in compensation] for the original goods, then saying the goods are already damaged and they are not willing to accept them.31

This report indicates that not only were indigenous practices in different parts of the island more diverse than Chen recognizes, they were also far from unsophisticated. Long experience trading with unofficial merchants and fishermen, who worked the maritime corridor running from the Philippines to Southeast Asia and between China and Japan, made these islanders shrewd bargainers.32 Zhang also mentions that those merchants who ventured deeper into the mountains reported a warm welcome in indigenous villages, where they were treated to food and wine.33 The Formosan indigenes, even before the expansion of Dutch colonial rule in the 1620s, were thus far from the simple people of Chen’s description.

These observations strengthen views such as those of Emma Teng, who argues that Chen, in noting their lack of writing, clothing, and ritual etiquette, situates the islanders
within a ‘discourse of primitiveness’ that ‘underscore[s] the indigenes’ cultural inferiority in relation to the Chinese.’ According to Teng, Chen’s Record repeatedly alludes to a passage in the Laozi (a canonical text associated with classical Daoism of the fifth century BCE) that describes a ‘Golden Age’ of simplicity:

Let them take death seriously and desist from distant campaigns,
Then even if they have boats and wagons, they will not travel in them,
Even though they have weapons and armor, they will not form ranks with them.
Let people revert to the practice of rope-tying…

Teng argues that the above passage from the Laozi—along with the Daoist-inspired utopia of Tao Yuanming’s (Tao Qian; 365-427) fifth-century fable ‘Peach Blossom Spring’—was the source of the primitivist tropes she identifies in Chen’s Record. Given the pervasiveness of such tropes in writing about non-Chinese peoples, she concludes that narratives employing them ‘might have more to do with a traveler’s dissatisfaction with Chinese society than with his actual perceptions of indigenous society.’

To a scholar of the late Ming such as Chen Di, facing socio-economic changes in which social mobility, affluence and the rise of printing gave rise to increasing ‘uncertainties accessory to life in the early modern world,’ the Formosan people—‘roaming freely, contented and harmonious’—must surely have appeared extraordinary, and even appealing. In fact, many intellectuals of the period, particularly those of the Taizhou school, saw in the
stripping-back of convention a more natural and authentic form of virtue—what Chen Di’s fellow Fujianese Li Zhi (1527-1604) would have called a “childlike mind” (*tongxin*).39 These interests arose in part from the teachings of the famous philosopher and statesman Wang Yangming (1472-1529), whose *xinxue* (‘learning of the mind/heart’) reacted against the orthodox readings of the classics endorsed by Song-dynasty masters such as Zhu Xi (1130-1200).

This craving for simplicity arose alongside a deeper appreciation for the contingency and distinctiveness of personal experience. Following Wang’s exhortation to discover the truth of the classics and their virtue for oneself, literati increasingly came to prize authenticity and personal discovery over taught doctrine.40 This encouraged exploration of a diverse range of thought and experience beyond orthodoxy, including the syncretic embrace of diverse religious and philosophical teachings. But it also extended to include historicist studies of the production and meaning of canonical texts, to recover their presumably original form before obfuscation by later interpreters. In Chen’s case, these trends culminated in a somewhat distinctive intellectual trajectory, built on an exploration of three-teachings syncretism, a lifetime of travel, and pursuit of the empiricist, text-critical research for which he is best known.

In what follows, I situate the *Record* within this complex background to argue that Chen’s observations of indigenous practice stem less from a yearning for a simpler society, than they do from a critical relativism stemming from multiple sources. Comparing the *Record* to other analogous Chinese travel narratives, I offer an alternative reading that
interprets the allusion to widely circulating ideals of civilization as a device for examining their contingency. Although Chen’s account suffers its own biases, it attempts to account for an alternative mode of human sociality that does not unfold according to the markers of Chinese civilization.

II.

Lettered in classic texts as a member of a rising literati family, Chen’s early education was nevertheless distinctive. He expressed independence at an early age; at the age of eight, he told his father he refused to read the commentaries on the *Classic of Documents* (*Shangshu*) so as to avoid developing a prejudice about its content. Evidence suggests that his early learning focused more on histories and poetry, than on the metaphysical discourse about human nature and morality that dominated literati discussion at the time. Chen never passed the imperial exams, but his unusual childhood interests in swordplay and martial arts encouraged a career in the military where he seems to have possessed an unusual knack for practical technology, devising a wheelbarrow-type sledge for use in battle. His eventual deployment to the Ming frontiers inaugurated a lifetime of travel, in which he enjoyed extensive opportunities to both observe and engage with ‘barbarians’ and other foreigners. After retirement and the death of his wife, his travel was nearly incessant, rivalled only by the legendary Ming travel writers Yang Shen (1488-1559) and Xu Xiake (1587-1641). His early travels may have been encouraged by his association with the three-teachings sect founded by Lin Zhao’en (1517-1598), during which time Chen was known to dress in Daoist
garb.\textsuperscript{45} Even in later years, he was known to ‘discuss the Dao’ with monks at temples dedicated to Quanzhen Daoism.\textsuperscript{46} Particularly toward the end of his life, he based himself at the Nanjing home of Jiao Hong (1540-1620), the famous historian, Hanlin academician, and member of the Taizhou school with whom Chen frequently collaborated.\textsuperscript{47} From discussions with Jiao, Chen produced some of his best-known work on the historical context and pronunciation of ancient language.

These influences and experiences, taken into account alongside the careful and specific detail of the \textit{Record}, suggests more is at stake in Chen’s work than an anxiety over the moral decline of his society. We might grasp the more complex picture Chen offers by noting that, as the summary above of Chen’s \textit{Record} makes clear, it is simply not the case (as Teng claims) that Chen ‘described Taiwan as small and the villages isolated’ or that he followed the \textit{Laozi} so closely so as to pretend the indigenes never contacted each other or ‘formed ranks’ for fighting. In fact, as we have seen, Chen noted frequent inter-village headhunting and observed that the heads of enemies were displayed over doors.\textsuperscript{48} He remarkably refrains from citing such practices as evidence of barbarity, with which head-hunting had been associated by Han Chinese elites since ancient times.\textsuperscript{49} When he mentions that the Formosan aborigines have no contact with other barbarians, it is in the context of his observation that the aborigines appear unable to use sea-going vessels and confine their fishing to streams—thus they have no transoceanic contact with so-called barbarians farther afield.\textsuperscript{50} Indeed, when Chen calls the islanders the ‘people of Wuhuai and Getian,’ he does not necessarily point to ‘a primordial era of peace and natural simplicity,’ as Teng assumes.\textsuperscript{51} The most
well-known use of this phrase was in a playful, autobiographical sketch by Tao Yuanming (365-427), who includes an appraisal of himself as ‘a person of [the time of] Wuhuai and Getian’ for ‘delighting himself by drinking wine and writing poetry’ despite his impoverished circumstances. The phrase does not affirm primordial virtue, so much as allude to a sense of contentment despite the lack of amenities conventionally seen as necessary.

The details of Chen’s account do not, therefore, straightforwardly evoke the primitive society celebrated by the Laozi. In fact, many of what Teng identifies as ‘primitivist tropes’ deriving from the Laozi—such as the aborigines’ ‘full bellies’ and body tattoos—tally with factual descriptions of indigenous practice, corroborated by later Dutch accounts and modern anthropological comparisons with other Austronesian societies. For example, deer-hunting provided Formosan islanders with a reliable source of quality protein, accounting for their robust size and height in comparison to contemporary Dutch and Chinese. And, like many other Austronesian peoples, the inhabitants of the southwest coast also tattooed their hands and faces.

Given such divergences from typical ‘primitivist’ accounts, it is perhaps not surprising that Chen’s connections to the Laozi text are neither as deep nor as pervasive as Teng makes them out. Chen’s biography, in fact, indicates a much stronger affinity to the Zhuangzi—another classical Daoist text that records the playful and ironic disputations of settled truths, advanced primarily by the eponymous master Zhuang (late 4th c BCE). These discussions were often focused on questioning the nature of identity, including conventional boundaries between self and other, and the nature of political authority. One passage from the well-
known chapter ‘On Equalizing Things’ (Qiwu lun), represents this general spirit when it observes,

Things are so by being called so. Whence thus and so? From thus and so being affirmed of them. Whence not thus and so? From thus and so being negated of them. Each thing necessarily has some place from which it can be affirmed as thus and so, and some place from which it can be affirmed as acceptable.\(^{56}\)

The Zhuangzi and its logistical disputations would have been widely known in the eclectic intellectual environment of the late Ming, as intellectuals openly embraced and sometimes synthesized a range of views from different textual and religious traditions, including Buddhism and Daoism.\(^ {57}\) But there is evidence that Chen would have been unusually conversant with the Zhuangzi text in particular. Chen often likened himself to Zhuangzi—who, in a famous passage from the inner chapters of the Zhuangzi, mourns his wife by beating a drum—in poems written after the untimely death of his son.\(^ {58}\) Certain passages in the Record itself also reflect Chen’s deep conversance with phrasing from this text. In the key passage of the Record cited above, when Chen muses about whether a great man is truly necessary for the indigenes to have a full and happy life, his language mimics that of Zhuangzi 2.20: ‘Travelling about with full bellies, drifting like an untethered boat.’

This familiarity may have been encouraged and deepened by Chen’s close friend and reading partner Jiao Hong, who authored (among many other texts) the Zhuangzi yi (Wings of
the Zhuangzi), a commentarial text on the Zhuangzi collated in the authoritative Xu Daozang (Supplement to the Daoist Canon).\textsuperscript{59} Although Chen did not always agree with his friend on intellectual matters, the two men shared an interest in eclectic learning and the critical validation of historical texts. Jiao frequently lent Chen rare books and they discussed them together over a period of many years.\textsuperscript{60} Given the intimacy and duration of this intellectual relationship, it is very likely that Chen was deeply acquainted with both the Zhuangzi text and his friend’s commentarial interpretation of it.

Such influences align Chen with a different set of Daoist techniques: those which set forth conventional boundaries between self and other, and by extension tropes of civilization and enlightenment, as a means of exposing their arbitrary value and contingency. A clear statement of Chen’s perspective can be found in an overlooked text he produced alongside the Record of Formosa, titled ‘Guests Ask Questions of a Sailor,’ (Zhoushi kewen) in which he provides answers to questions about Shen Yourong’s expedition and his own role within it. Chen begins this text by noting that, upon mooring in Liaolu (a port on the southern crescent of Kinmen Island, near the southern coast of China, from which Shen’s ships originally launched), people there repeatedly queried Shen’s preparations, including the decision to pro-actively root out pirates lodging on Formosa which was technically ‘not our [i.e. Ming dynastic] territory.’\textsuperscript{61} After answering each of these questions in turn, which included providing technical and strategic information about how General Shen achieved such a decisive victory, the guests ask Chen if the General would be willing to undertake further military campaigns to help the greater good. Chen’s response is as revealing as it is
disruptive: ‘People do not acquire knowledge easily, nor are other people easy to understand. I have heard and seen so little, how is this enough to know [other people]?’

When the guests go on to ask Chen who he is, expecting him to offer information about his name and status, he instead elaborates further on why his own knowledge is so circumscribed:

…[The guests] rose again and asked: ‘Who are you?’ I replied: ‘I have long forgotten myself, and I myself do not know who I am. I once hid among the Xuanyuan mountains, so people who saw me called me the ‘Sojourning Guest [jìkè 寄客, lit., ‘dependent guest’] of Xuanyuan.’ And you are a guest [kè 客] to me; I am a guest to the Xuanyuan Mountain; the Xuanyuan Mountain is a guest to Heaven and Earth; Heaven and Earth is a guest to the Great Emptiness. All are dependent [jì 寄], all are guests. What use is there to ask who is who?’ The guests then drew back and retreated.

In this deeply revealing passage, Chen plays on his own self-identification as a ‘sojourning’ or ‘dependent’ guest of the Xuanyuan Mountain—the birthplace of Xuanyuan, another name for the mythical Yellow Emperor—to claim all knowledge of otherness as mutually dependent, or more literally as constantly ‘sojourning’ or in motion. Chen here plays on the multivalence and grammatical fluidity of the word kè, which means ‘guest’ or (in its verbal form) ‘to live/settle in a strange place.’ By referring to his interlocutors as kè, here an honorific meant to express respect to one’s counterpart, he situates them also amid his
rumination about the nature of otherness and how we come to know what is different. Just as these interlocutors are ‘guests’ to him—both ‘strange and estranging’—so too does such a relationship obtain between the basic components of the universe, each of which is dependent on other components for identity and meaning. This ontology has its roots in the Zhuangzi, where ‘attending on’ a guest and ‘depending on’ (dai) other objects and persons for the existence of a specific identity is explored at length, through reference to images such as shadows and penumbras. For Chen, as for Zhuangzi, otherness lies at the heart of knowledge.

Rather than offering firm information, then, Chen denies the very possibility of fixed, non-relative knowledge, even about one’s own self—true to his claims elsewhere that travel demands a forsaking of ‘selfhood’ (wo). His self-appellation as the ‘sojourner’ of the Xuanyuan mountain, moreover, highlights the process of estrangement and self-reflection provoked by travel through distant territories. Although travel to foreign lands can entrench prejudices as much as unsettle them, in Chen’s case these unusual experiences seemed to have extended his already distinctive scholarly trajectory in new, deeply self-reflective ways. Indeed, Chen’s journeys, both real and figurative, allude to a longstanding Daoist practice of ‘distant travel’ (yuanyou), which mimics the ‘free and easy wandering’ of Zhuangzi himself.

These Daoist influences on Chen’s thought, then, do not so much provide a narrative of a simpler past. They rather support an alternative metaphysical framework that rejects the prescriptive certainties of social convention in favor of a more fluid account of identity and
meaning. Chen’s self-identification with Xuanyuan in the context of the expedition to Formosa does, moreover, suggest an alternative set of tropes about travel and foreignness that destabilize knowledge about otherness, rather than shore it up in the imperial service of a civilizational center.⁶⁹

In the Record, one of the most significant examples of this perspective lies in Chen’s vivid description of indigenous cuisine. This passage, significantly, has been left out of the many appropriations of the text by later Chinese authors, and wholly overlooked by modern-day commentators who align Chen with Chinese colonial discourse:

[The inhabitants] are customarily very fond of deer. They lay open the intestines, and the newly swallowed grass—both that which is about to be turned to feces as well as that which is not yet turned to feces—they call ‘hundred grasses paste,’ a delicacy they cannot get enough of. When Chinese (Hua ren) see it they immediately vomit. [The inhabitants] eat pig but do not eat chicken. They allow their domesticated chickens to grow to maturity, but they just pluck their tail [feathers] to adorn their flags. They shoot pheasants but this is also just to pluck their tail [feathers.] When they see Chinese eating chicken or pheasant, they immediately vomit. So who knows what the correct taste is? And how can there be similarities in what people have a liking for?⁷⁰

This passage is strongly redolent of Zhuangzi’s reflection upon the instability of civilizational
conventions. It also recalls that of Chen’s near-contemporary Michel de Montaigne (1533-
1592)—who used reports about the eating habits of New World peoples as a mirror for
criticizing European barbarity. In his famous essay ‘Of Cannibals,’ Montaigne argues that
his European readers have much to learn from these flesh-eaters, whose simple living and
apparent lack of government reveal their proximity to an ‘original naturalness’ and a ‘purity’
akin to the Platonic golden age. Montaigne’s text both drew on and perpetuated the myth
of the ‘noble savage’ in sixteenth-century Europe, which used a fanciful representation of
Amerindians to demonstrate that human life could be free from the artifice of social practices
and institutions that distorted contemporary society, perpetuated inequality, and naturalized
political power.

Notably, however, the ethnographic detail of Chen’s Record identifies his indigenous
hosts with enough specificity and firsthand observation that they cannot serve—as they do
for Montaigne—as secondhand exemplars of untrammeled purity, against which his own
society can be compared. Rather more like Zhuangzi, Chen’s utter refusal to claim
knowledge about other people, his own identity, or even the ‘correct taste’ instead points to a
deeper critique about the stability and necessity of social convention. Taken alongside his
proclamation of the sufficiency of indigenous society, despite its lack of a founder to teach
them technologies such as writing, Chen’s self-reflexive assessment of indigenous cuisine
deliberately interrogates well-established Chinese narratives about the founding of
civilization.
III.

Although food and tastes may not seem politically relevant as markers of difference, orthodox Confucianism did hold that there existed particular flavors that would appeal to suitably cultivated individuals. Indeed, a well-known passage in the ancient Book of Rites (Liji)—a key reference text for late imperial Chinese representations of otherness—indexes barbarity in large part by culinary preference, specifically with respect to the eating of raw food and refusal of grains. The idea that people could exhibit objectively correct preferences for such things as tastes infuses later colonial writing on Taiwan, whose authors for the most part assumed that developing a preference for Chinese cuisine and other cultural practices was a necessary rather than contingent feature of the human condition. But these ideas were widespread, rooted in early classical sources such as the Analects of Confucius (c. 551-479 BCE) and the eponymous text by Mencius (4th century BCE).

Both of these early masters justify this unity of desires and tastes by reference to a story about the founding of civilization: by relishing certain tastes, we demonstrate our virtue by aligning our intentions with those of the sages who endowed us with civilization. In the following passage, for example, Mencius explicitly identifies a divergence of tastes with animals. Only humans, by nature of their common humanity, relish exactly the same things:

If the response of our mouths to flavor differed by nature from those of other people in the way that they do from other kinds, such as dogs and horses, how could it be that everyone in the world follows the recipes of Yi Ya? When it comes to flavor,
everyone in the world wishes to cook like Yi Ya because we all have similar tastes. And so it is too with our ears. When it comes to music, everyone in the world wishes to be like Music Master Kuang because we all have similar hearing. And so it is too with our eyes. All the world knows that Zidu is supremely handsome; anyone who doesn’t is blind.

So I say, our mouths all share similar tastes when it comes to flavor, our ears all share similar pleasures in listening when it comes to sound, our eyes all share similar standards of beauty when it comes to looks. How could it be that our hearts alone are different? What quality do we share in our hearts? It is the sense of what is proper and right. The sage is merely the one who was first to grasp what our hearts all took pleasure in. And in this way, what is proper and right pleases my heart in just the way that meats please my mouth (Mencius 6A.7)76

For Mencius, the savoring of flavors and pleasures that the sage was ‘first to grasp’ signals how successfully one’s desires have been appropriately channeled into the path laid out by the early masters. It is their teaching which amplifies the quality of our hearts—the virtue with which we regulate our behavior—by telling us what actions, as much as what tastes, are ‘proper and right.’ Mencius is explicit about the fact that these norms are tied to a story of sagely founding, which functions at the same time as a narrative of the founding of civilization:
It was Hou Ji who taught the people the art of agriculture and how to plant the five types of grain. As the grains ripened, people could nurture their young. There is a Way that common people (ren) follow: if they have food enough to eat and clothes enough to wear, they sit in idleness and pursue no learning, little different from birds and beasts. [The sage king] Yao brooded over this as well, and he appointed Xie to be Minister of the People and teach them about proper human relationships – about affection between father and son, righteousness between ruler and minister, the proper divisions between husband and wife, the precedence of elder and younger, and the faithfulness of friends. Yao said, ‘Comfort their labor, draw them to come, straighten them upright, assist them with aid, make each gain the place proper to him, and then inspire them further through acts of virtue.’ (*Mencius* 3A.4)'

This origin story—repeated throughout Chinese history by various schools and thinkers with little substantive variation—portrays humans as helpless, benighted beings little better than animals before sagely intervention. One of the most well-known retellings by Han Yu (768-824)—a Tang dynasty progenitor of the Confucian revival—follows Mencius to explicitly link culinary preferences with the ‘teaching of the former kings,’ that is, sages. Sagely teaching, he argued, was constituted not only by the particular kinds of Confucian social relationships that valued patriarchy and deference, but also what one ate, wore, and inhabited: ‘Its dress is hemp and silk; its dwellings are houses; its foods are rice and grains, fruits and vegetables, fish and meat.’ Han Yu was explicit that these preferences were in distinct
contrast to the divergent lifestyles of non-Chinese peoples.\textsuperscript{78}

Even mid- to late-Ming radical followers of Yangming learning reiterated this narrative about civilization, despite their resistance to the orthodoxy it often supported. In their case, ancient scripts and paleography were means by which they believed they could grasp the original, more natural teaching of the early sages.\textsuperscript{79} The preface to one of the most successful paleographic dictionaries at the time directly explains the connection between sagely founding, writing, and the simplicity of virtue:

When light and dark [Heaven and Earth] were first separated, the people did not have any knowledge of learning. Then notches began to be cut into wood. So Pao Xi [Fu Xi] drew the trigrams and the Imperial Historian [Cang Jie] set up the system of writing. It was entirely through writing that they instructed the people; they were simply the first to do so. Epigraphic remains contain traces of the thoughts of the sages and worthies of the Three Dynasties, and if you take sincere delight in them, in spirit and demeanor, it will be as if you could see them in person. You can come to a nonverbal understanding of the atmosphere of flourishing virtue [of their time].\textsuperscript{80}

The author of this preface defends the interest in paleography as a means of getting closer to what sages actually meant in both word and deed. In this account, transcription is important because knowledge began only when the Imperial Historian set up the system of writing, and familiarizing oneself with these ‘epigraphic remains’ is a direct means of obtaining the sages’
These origin stories, told from different perspectives at different points in time, converge in their emphasis on the importance of sagely intervention in founding civilization, through the endowment to humanity of key technologies such as agriculture and writing. Chen Di, along with Jiao Hong and Yang Shen, numbered among the many literati in the Jiajing and Wanli periods of the late Ming who contributed to scholarship on paleography and early scripts. He was thus no doubt aware of the way in which writing, along with tastes and cuisine, functioned for many Chinese literati as a vital link between persons in the present and the sagely virtues of the past.

Against this background, Chen’s questioning of the need for a ‘great man’ to teach the Formosans writing, as well as his self-reflective rumination on the indigenous taste for deer feces, appears startling. But a closer look at the premises of Chen’s philological research suggest a strong commitment to the idea that differences across time and space arise from contingency, that is, something that occurs as a happenstance rather than as a result of a universal need or feature of human society. Before the relatively recent scholarly interest in Chen as a chronicler of indigenous society on Taiwan, he was mainly studied for his contributions toward an intellectual agenda whose coalescence in the Qing dynasty would come to be known as ‘evidential learning’ (kaozheng). Evidential learning urged strict historical contextualization of classic texts, including factual verification of historical events, philological analyses, and rationalized methodologies for understanding the past. In 1606, shortly after his return from Taiwan, Chen published Investigation of the Ancient Rhymes of
the Mao Odes (Mao shi guyin kao) a rigorous philological analysis of the ancient pronunciation of rhyming words in the Classic of Poetry. This comprehensive and groundbreaking study was foundational for later Qing scholarship undertaken by such major figures as Gu Yanwu and Dai Zhen, who like Chen used rhyming patterns as a way of reconstructing, and thus determining the authenticity, of ancient texts.

Unlike his contemporaries, who believed that the jarring near-rhymes in these ancient texts were ad hoc, Chen’s research was built on the pioneering belief—developed in his conversations with Jiao Hong—that the language spoken by the ancients, and used as the basis of the rhymes in the Odes and other works, was different from that spoken in the present. He explicitly ties this commitment to historical difference with a broader sense of contingency in a clear statement from the Investigation: ‘Time has past and present; earth has north and south; written characters have transformations and reversals; sounds have changes and shifts—this is inevitably how things go.’ To Chen, change was inevitable and produced dynamic transformations across time, which in turn resulted in irreducible difference between past and present.

His delinking of past language from the reality of the present thus skewers the hope, held by many late Ming paleographers and thinkers, that the chasm between the early sages and intervening disarray could be bridged with the clearer, more directly referential forms of ancient language. To the contrary, his ideas about the difference of the past introduces into philological scholarship the quite radical view that the past could be properly understood only by situating it within its particular historical and philological context. Chen’s approach,
as Benjamin Elman has noted, ultimately had the effect of destabilizing the very philosophical doctrines motivating a turn to the past in the first place. The universal values that followers of Wang Yangming believed to inhere in these ancient texts were revealed, on the basis of these kinds of historical investigation, to be relative to a specific time and place. Chen’s approach to historical research thus tallies with his seemingly contradictory ambitions in the Record: to both carefully record the ‘people and matters’ that he ‘personally witnessed’ on the island, as well as to interrogate (rather than assume) the grounds of social convention and identity. The very particularity and specificity of his account is part of what brings him to ask broader questions about the needs and requirements of civilization.

Here, his work might be instructively compared to another, slightly later account of the indigenous people of Taiwan, Yu Yonghe’s (c. 1650-?) 1698 travel narrative Small Sea Travelogue (Pihai jiyou). Whereas Chen uses his island encounter to wonder whether anyone possesses true knowledge of proper social convention, Yu defends the humanity of the Formosan islanders on the basis of their capacity to accept the teaching of China’s sages as founders of civilization.

IV.

Yu’s Travelogue was published soon after the Ming dynasty’s successor, the Qing, acquired Taiwan as a territory. Yu traveled to Taiwan in 1697 and stayed for ten months, to assist Qing officials in locating and mining new sources of sulfur in the northern part of the island. Whereas Chen Di’s observations were confined to the southwest coastal plains
between the modern-day cities of Tainan and Kaohsiung, Yu offers one of the earliest firsthand Chinese accounts of the indigenous customs in the mountainous hinterland and northern coast. Like Chen, Yu was both a literatus and a traveler with great sympathies for how the indigenous peoples of the island were treated in their relations with China. His *Travelogue* offers a comparable ethnographic account to Chen’s, equally grounded in moral concern yet built on distinct ontological premises that entail very different conclusions about the treatment of native populations. Yet whereas Chen was one of the first Han Chinese elites to arrive on Taiwan’s shores, Yu was writing for a Qing administration anxious about taking on the troublesome and rebellion-ridden island. In this context, Yu argues for a reconsideration of the status of the oppressed local population:

The worst off people in the world are not as bad off as the [Taiwan] savages [*fanren*]. Because they are different they are discriminated against. When people see them without clothes, they say, ‘They don’t get cold.’ When they see them walk in the rain and sleep in the dew, they say, ‘They don’t get sick.’ When they see them carry burdens over great distances, they say, ‘They can work without rest.’

Alas! They are also people! They have limbs and bodies and flesh and bone; in what way are they not human? How can one say such things of them?

Yu makes clear that treatment of the indigenes—and by extension the best course of action for the Qing administration to undertake in controlling them—necessarily turns on how their
humanity is perceived. This passionate plea for equal treatment is based on a loaded assumption about their natures (xing): ‘There are different people, but their nature is all the same. The benevolent know this and do not need to repeat it.’ For Yu, this shared nature entails the possession even by these ‘savages’ (fanren) of certain shared human capacities. However, insofar as they are unschooled by the Chinese teachings of civilization, their natures are malformed and thus not conducive to human flourishing or true happiness:

If they [the savages] can be transformed (hua) by culture and rites, be acculturated (feng) to the Book of Poetry and the Book of Documents, be taught the truths of planning and preparation, and be governed by the rules of wearing proper clothes, eating, marriage and burial, then perhaps they will know to love their relatives, respect their elders, and honor the sovereigns. Then they will be instilled with the heart that gives rise to happiness in life, and their evil and despicable xing will disappear. At most it will take one hundred years, at the least thirty years to see their customs (feng su) change. By guiding them with the teaching of ritual, how will they be any different from the people of China?

Crucially, Yu’s argument is that these people should be helped, not because they are fundamentally immoral, but because they have failed to implement social and cultural practices (feng su, customs)—such as respecting their elders, and observing Chinese burial custom—that ensures the greatest expression of their human natures. (We may recall that
Chen, in contrast, notes the burial ritual of the Formosans in some detail but at no time comments upon its strangeness, unsuitability, or normative danger. Yu insists that by using the fixtures of Chinese civilization to guide and shape their practices, the inhabitants of this foreign land can within 100 years turn out to be no different from ‘the people of the central states’ (i.e., the Chinese).

By linking the development of *xing* (nature) to the specific institutions of Chinese civilization, including what to eat and wear, Yu recalls a long line of origins stories which drew guidance from the meaning of civilization in the deeds of the past, specifically the sagely teaching at the root of a singular social order exclusively capable of developing *xing* and thus making people truly human. In her analysis of the *Travelogue*, Emma Teng interprets Yu’s comments as urging readers to have sympathy for the aborigines, likening them to the primitive ‘ancient peoples’ (*taigu min*) who also lived simply in a past golden age, but who eventually became capable of civilization. His rhetoric, she argues, associated them with sinicized southern Chinese frontier tribes, thereby ‘naturalizing’ their inclusion into the Chinese empire by linking them to China’s long history of southward expansion. Yu therefore normalized the conversion and suppression of native customs, out of a Mencian belief that a shared human nature enabled everyone to become sages by passing through a universal chronology of moral development.

V.

For both Yu Yonghe and Chen Di, the Formosan inhabitants are described by way of a
temporal as well as spatial difference: the Formosans are different not only because they occupy a different cultural space outside of China proper, but also because they appear to occupy a different point in time to that of contemporary Han Chinese civilization. For Yu, the indigenous populations inhabit the same historical space as the Chinese, even if they are definitively behind them. They require the expenditure of both effort and time before they can catch up to the seemingly inevitable goal of Chinese-style civilization, and (presumably) become the happy, flourishing people their inborn nature destines them to be.

For Chen, however, the picture is more complicated. Chen declares himself the ‘unofficial historian’ of the island and its people, but his presentation of their history is not self-evidently linked to a search for origins; in fact, the first line of the Record clearly states that he does not know the origins of the Formosan islanders. By asking ‘what need have they for a great man’ to establish civilizational technologies such as writing, Chen recognizes that ‘history’ is not necessarily equivalent to a story about sagely founding, nor does it simply track an established path to civilization. Whereas Yu Yonghe expresses frustration at their lack of a calendar or even awareness of how old they are, Chen simply reports:

They have no calendar and no writing. They figure the full moon as one month, and take ten months as one year. After a time they forget, and therefore cannot reckon their ages. Asking young or old, they do not know.

This does not mean that Chen Di believes the inhabitants are totally lacking in any sense of
time. He is careful to note their seasonal observances, including their practice of maintaining silence during the tilling season until the crops ripen. During this time, younger members of the village will ‘stand with their back turned’ when an elder walks by, but in general the Formosans tend not to dwell on the specifics of age. They will not engage in killing or violence during this season, even if insulted; and when the weather is warm, they go about with no clothes. Chen provides an explanation from the inhabitants themselves for these observances: ‘they say that otherwise, the sky will not protect, the divinities will not bless, there will be fierce famine, and no harvest for the year.’

Despite these regimented seasonal practices, however, the islanders do not exhibit the granular, genealogically-defined sense of time that regulated more familiar Chinese social roles and rituals, and gave shape to official dynastic modes of writing history. What might it mean, then, for Chen to identify as an ‘unofficial historian’ of Formosa? Consider another comparison to an earlier travel narrative, the *Diancheng ji (Record of a Trip to Yunnan)*, written by Yang Shen (1488-1559). Like Chen Di, Yang was a famed traveler and poet of the Ming dynasty, active about a century earlier. Yang is well known for the essays written while in exile in Yunnan, on the dynasty’s far southern borders. The *Diancheng ji* is one such work, which offers a geographic account of his rushed journey from the court at Beijing to his place of banishment. Much like the *Record of Formosa*, Yang’s work also features relatively nuanced portrayals of non-Han peoples that draw on local reportage and first-hand observation. In fact, the longest description of any figure in the *Record of a Trip to Yunnan* is a discussion of the founder of a non-Han kingdom, the Dali, named Duan Siping. These
similarities are perhaps not surprising, as Chen and Yang exhibit a striking convergence of scholarly commitment. Both were exemplars of late Ming scholarship that embraced eclecticism and contributed to historical readings of classic texts grounded in Han dynasty commentaries; both showed an interest in unorthodox religion and myth (Chen in Daoism, Yang in Buddhism). Both entered their domains of reportage as soldiers: Chen in the entourage of General Shen, and Yang—demoted from high-ranking official to ‘common soldier’—journeying to Yunnan via routes ‘related to military expeditions aimed as pacifying and stabilizing border regions.’ Like Chen, Yang too ends his Record of a Trip To Yunnan with a change of voice, moving from a description of things seen and heard to more personal commentary undertaken in the guise of an unofficial historian.

On the basis of the fact that Yang’s account of Duan and his kingdom is ‘not culled from Chinese sources,’ and offers ‘an alternative history not present in the traditional historiography,’ Ihor Pidhainy has argued that Yang speaks ‘to the notion that more than one tradition of history is both possible and valuable.’ We might read this productive suggestion back into Chen Di’s own claims to be writing in this genre. The ‘unofficial’ (ye) part of his narrative lies in the fact that he reports on people and experiences that not only do not exist in official registers or histories, but that also lack obvious analogues or connections there. Such ‘unofficial’ or ‘private’ histories were traditionally dismissed as hearsay, but Chen, along with Yang and Jiao, contributed to a shift in late Ming history-writing that began to recognize the value of unconventional sources—such as court gossip and travelers’ accounts—for revealing social norms, verifying established truths, and sometimes contesting
official records.\textsuperscript{108} Simply by referencing his observations as a form of ‘history’ (\textit{shi}), however unofficial, Chen is validating the experience of the indigenous islanders as worthy of detailed inclusion in a record whose conventional formats systematically exclude experiences that do not conform to specific expectations about time.

It is important to note that Chen’s perspective is, of course, limited by his own cultural context. It is his voice, and not those of his indigenous interlocutors, which structures the ethnographic detail of the \textit{Record}. He therefore does not fully succeed in making the indigenous peoples ‘subjects’ of his research; they remain its ‘objects.’\textsuperscript{109} Yet part of his project does include noting how Formosans themselves sense and mark the passing of time, opening a way toward understanding them as subjects of their own history.\textsuperscript{110}

The move toward ‘history’ also signals Chen’s alternative approach to the presentation of otherness and difference. Rather than pose questions like those Yu Yonghe asked, which focus on the natures of the indigenes (are they inherently good? Rational? Human like us?), or how they measure up to particular standards, Chen focuses instead on questions about their past and future. He does not ask or seem interested in questions about when or how the islanders will achieve the tools and status of civilization, but rather poses more open-ended questions that suggest his awareness of contingency and change. As has already been discussed, he wonders, for example, about how they have come to stand in their own present situation, what kinds of relations they have had with other ‘barbarians,’ and how long their practices have endured. He mentions they refused contact with the fleet of the eunuch Zheng He, hiding away and refusing to submit; later, they moved further inland as a reaction to
piratical threats on the coast sometime in the Jiajing period. He also asks how their society and outlook might change in the future—most prominently wondering if their ‘simple days’ will be ‘disrupted’ by trade with dishonest Chinese merchants.

The Record thus portrays the inhabitants as living in a society that has developed in path-dependent, but nevertheless contingent, ways. Situated within the context of an account that acknowledges the inhabitants’ contentedness even when bereft of key civilizational technologies or etiquette, Chen’s historical approach effectively place the indigenous inhabitants of the island alongside, rather than behind, civilization as he understood it. His identity as an ‘unofficial historian’—like that of the ‘sojourning guest of Xuanyuan’—deftly assumes a voice of authority on certain matters, only to destabilize the very conventions that hold such authority in place.

VI.

In this essay I have attempted a close reading of Chen Di’s Record of Formosa, informed by the broader intellectual context of Chen’s own experiences as well as those of his contemporaries. Against this background, Chen’s narrative cannot be reduced to merely an example of late imperial Chinese discourses of primitivism. Rather, it offers an important glimpse into how, at the site of an encounter with radical otherness, civilizational narratives can be upended rather than entrenched. Dismissing the islanders’ need for a sagely founding or technologies of writing, and citing their culinary preferences to advance a profoundly self-reflexive critique of Chinese standards about the ‘right taste,’ Chen questions the need for
practices that his readers would have seen as essential to flourishing human society. Self-
identifying as the sojourning guest of Xuanyuan, Chen explicitly situates himself within a
Daoist philosophy that views differences across time and space as relative and fluid. Finally,
embracing a commitment to historical contingency and change, Chen Di uses the
‘differences’ (yi) of the indigenous islanders with Chinese forms of life to interrogate
expectations about human paths of development and civilization.

In doing so, Chen offers an instructive contrast to the Han-centric hierarchies of Chinese
colonial governance prevalent in other territories of the Ming and Qing empires. The
distinctiveness of his perspective within broader global discussions at the intersection of
difference, foreignness, and domination—only gestured toward here—awaits further
research. But insofar as his historical account succeeds in presenting the indigenous islanders
as parallel to, rather than ‘behind,’ particular standards of civilization, Chen’s narrative
effectively pre-empts colonial arguments (like those of Yu Yonghe) for the extension of rule
over them. His assertions of the ‘simplicity’ of the indigenous peoples is not a
straightforward assertion of their backwardness, but an invitation to consider instead the
possibility that societies may not be assessable by way of given civilizational benchmarks.
Contact Details:

Leigh K. Jenco

Professor of Political Theory

London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Government

Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE  United Kingdom

Email: L.K.Jenco@lse.ac.uk

* Research and writing for this paper were supported by the Humanities in the European Research Area Collaborative Research Project ‘East Asian Uses of the European Past: Tracing Braided Chronotypes.’ For their invaluable comments on this manuscript, I would like to thank Timothy Brook, Jon Chappell, Yasmeen Daifallah, Murad Idris, Joan Judge, Joachim Kurtz, Takeharu Okubo, Dominic Steavu, Roel Sterckx, Hans van de Ven, Justin Winslett, and Peng Yu; as well as audiences at the University of Cologne, Cambridge University, and the British Library. Most of all, I extend particular thanks to Julia Schneider and Ying Zhang, whose careful readings of an earlier draft sharpened my arguments and saved me from embarrassing errors. Any errors which remain are, of course, my own.

The island was called ‘Formosa’ by most contemporary European sources, so I use this term to translate all of the Ming-era Chinese names for the island, such as Dongfan and Jilong shan. I also occasionally use the term ‘Formosan’ to describe the unnamed indigenous people with whom Chen was in contact, because he does not differentiate them into separate groups. The island did not acquire its present name until after the Dutch established Fort Zeelandia in 1624 at Tayouan, from which the present-day Chinese appellation ‘Taiwan’ is derived.


Fang Hao, ‘Bianyan (Preface) 弁言’, in Minhai zengyan, pp. 1–2; Wang Bichang 王必昌, Congxiu Taiwan xianzhi (Gazeteer of Taiwan county, revised) (Taipei, 1752 [1961]); the appendices to the Record of Foreign Lands were extracted from Zhang Xie, Dong Xi yang kao 東西洋考, ed. Zhao Rugua 趙汝適 (Taipei, 1961).

For examples of how this concept has been used in relation to European colonial and imperial enterprises, see Anthony Pagden, Lords of all the world: ideologies of empire in Spain, Britain and France : c.1500-c.1800 (New Haven, Conn.; London, 1995).


Teng, Taiwan’s imagined geography, p. 62.

For an examination of these debates in European thought, see Sankar Muthu, Enlightenment against Empire (Princeton, 2003).

The biographical information recorded here is taken from Jin Yunming 金雲銘, Chen Di 陈第.
nianpu 陈第年谱 (Chronological biography of Chen Di), (Taipei, 1946 1972); Mao I-Po 毛一波, ‘Chen Di jiqi zhuzuo’ 陈第及其著作 (Chen Di and his works), Xiandai xuefan, 10 (July 1973), pp. 20–21.

10 Jin, Chen Di nianpu, pp. 87–88.

11 For more information on the compilation and content of this compendium, particularly Chen Di’s Record, see Fang Hao 方豪, ‘Chen Di Dongfan ji kaozheng’ 陈第東番記考證 (Text-critical analysis of Chen Di’s Record of Formosa), Wen shi zhe xuebao, 7 (1965), pp. 52–54.

12 In fact, Jin Yunming’s 1946 biography of Chen notes that the Record of Formosa is no longer extant. Jin, Chen Di nianpu, p. 88; Zhu Jiuying lists the mentions of Chen’s Record in Zhu Jiuying 朱玖瑩, ‘Zuixian du Tai zhi xuezhe -- Chen Di’ 最先渡台之學者——陳第 (The earliest scholar to visit Taiwan—Chen Di), Wenshi huikan, 1 (June 1959), p. 23; Chou Wan-yao notes that Chen’s literary corpus was not large, and his collected works (Yiji ji, edited by Jiao Hong)—which did not contain the Record—were eventually listed on the Qing dynasty’s register of banned materials, making any texts by Chen Di difficult to obtain even by the early twentieth century. She therefore argues that such a seeming loss of an essay as important as the Record would not have been seen as unusual. Chou, ‘Chen Di Dongfan ji’, p. 27.

13 Fang, ‘Bianyan’, p. 2. Recognizing that the compendium provided important resources for the study of Taiwan and Fujian in the Ming period, Fang reprinted a punctuated, annotated edition of the compendium in 1959 (for the full story of the recovery of this text, see Fang, ‘Chen Di Dongfan ji kaozheng’.) .

14 Chen Di 陈第, Dongfan ji 東番記 (Record of Formosa), in Shen Yourong 沈有容, ed., Minhai zengyan 閩海贈言 (Words of praise from the Taiwan Sea) (Taipei, 1959), p. 27.


16 Chen, ‘Dongfan ji’, p. 24. All translations of Chen Di’s essay are my own, but I have consulted the translation found in Thompson, ‘Earliest Chinese Eyewitness Accounts.’


23 These terms were conventional ways of referring to the peoples threatening the Ming’s northern and southern frontiers, respectively.


26 Teng, *Taiwan’s imagined geography*, p. 67.

27 The *Account of Foreign Countries (Waiguo liezhuan)* of the *Ming History (Mingshi)*
standard history reads, ‘Jilong Mountain lies to the northeast of Penghu. In the past it was called Beigang, and also Dongfan’ (雞籠山在澎湖東北, 故名北港, 又名東番). In discussing this passage, Zhu, p. 22, notes that ‘therefore Dongfan refers to present-day Taiwan.’ Of the other four mentions of ‘Dongfan’ in the Ming History, two refer to the occupation of the island by Japanese pirates and the Shen expedition to eradicate them (Mingshi 270.6938); one refers to Formosa’s exclusion from Zheng He’s voyages (Mingshi 323.8376); and one refers to the Dutch being forced from Macau by Ming authorities, and their subsequent flight to Penghu and Formosa (Mingshi 222.5861). Only twice in the Record does Dongfan refer unambiguously to people rather than specifically to a place: once to describe the indigenous response to attempts by Zheng He to enforce a Chinese imperial edict (contradicting, incidentally, the claim of the Ming History that Zheng never reached Taiwan) and once to describe their inability to fend off better-armed Japanese pirates using darts. See also Zhu, ‘Zuixian du Tai zhi xuezhe’, p. 22.

28 Chen, ‘Dongfan ji’, p. 27.

29 Xue Chengqing 閔澄清, ‘Ming Zhang Xie jiqi zhushu kao 明張燮及其著述考’ (Investigation of Zhang Xie of the Ming dynasty, and his works), Lingnan xuebao 嶺南學報, 4 (1935), pp. 37–38.

30 Mao reports that Zhang’s text was first published as a supplement to Chen’s text in 1617 and later included in the 1618 edition of the Minhai zengyan: Mao, ‘Chen Di jiqi zhuzuo’, p. 21. To my knowledge, no one has investigated Zhang’s text or compared it to Chen’s account in Dongfan ji, but Zhang is careful to note how thoroughly he cross-checked both ancient sources and imperial bulletins with contemporary reports from sailors and itinerant merchants, ‘not daring to allow subjective views to randomly produce forced associations.’ Zhang, Dong Xi yang kao, 78.

31 Zhang, Dong Xi yang kao, p. 85.
Archeological evidence indicates that from as early as 500 BCE, the Austronesian peoples of Taiwan were involved in maritime trading networks extending south to Southeast Asia, though not east to China: Hsiao-chun Hung and Chin-yung Chao, ‘Taiwan’s Early Metal Age and Southeast Asian trading systems’, *Antiquity*, 90 (December 2016), pp. 1537–1551. Trade with China and Japan, using Taiwan as a base, began in the sixteenth century. Bruce Jacobs, ‘A History of Pre-Invasion Taiwan’, *Taiwan shi yanjiu*, 23 (December 2016), p. 21.

Zhang, *Dong Xi yang kao*, p. 85.

Teng, *Taiwan’s imagined geography*, p. 63.

Teng, *Taiwan’s imagined geography*, p. 65, quoting Laozi chapter 80.

These Daoist utopias are discussed by Lorenzo Andolfatto, *Historical Journal*, this issue.

Teng, *Taiwan’s imagined geography*, p. 67.


Chou, ‘Chen Di Dongfan ji’, p. 23.


Zhaoying Fang, ‘Ch’en Ti [Chen Di]’, in L. Carrington Goodrich and Zhaoying Fang,

46 Jin, *Chen Di nianpu*, p. 118.

47 Fang, ‘Ch’en Ti’, p. 182.


51 Teng, *Taiwan’s imagined geography*, p. 64.


53 Teng, *Taiwan’s imagined geography*, p. 66.


Chen records this advice to ‘not establish the self’ (*bu li wo*) in his conversation with some local gentry as he passed through Shaanxi in his travel journal *Wuyue youcao* (1612); cited in Jin, *Chen Di nianpu*, p. 115.

As Euben notes, ‘some kinds of mobility cauterize critical reflection...[and] direct exposure to what is culturally unfamiliar is just as likely to engender alienation or antagonism as openness.’ Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore*, p. 18.


“Xuanyuan” may also be a clever allusion to another aspect of Chen’s biography. The name refers to an ancient kind of high-fronted carriage (*xuan*) and the shafts for wheels (*yuan*). It alludes to Huang Di’s reputation as an inventor of useful objects, including the wood cart and a magnetic compass for mounting on it: Lihui Yang, Deming An, and Jessica


Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire*, pp. 14–17. More can be said about how Chen compares to his European contemporaries in their responses to the indigenous peoples of the New World, which I hope to explore further in other work.


E.g., Lin Qianguang 林謙光, *Taiwan jilue 台灣紀略 (Brief Notes on Taiwan)* (Taipei, 1961).


Following Eno’s translation in *Mencius*, p. 60.


Preface by Feng Fang, to Zhu Yun 朱雲, *Jinshi yunfu 金石韻府 (Rhyming epigraphic dictionary)*, pp. 3a-4a; cited and translated in Rusk, ‘Old Scripts’, p. 93.

For the difficulties involved in defining kaozheng, variously seen as both a ‘method’ and ‘field’ of scholarly inquiry, see Michael Quirin, ‘Scholarship, Value, Method, and Hermeneutics in Kaozheng: Some Reflections on Cui Shu (1740-1816) and the Confucian Classics’, *History and Theory*, 35 (1996), p. 36, fn. 9.


Elman, *From philosophy to philology*, p. 61.

Yu, ‘Cong Song Ming ruxue de fazhan’, p. 170.

Chen, ‘Dongfan ji’, p. 27.


Yu, *Small Sea travel diaries*, p. 119.


Teng, *Taiwan’s imagined geography*, p. 75.

Teng, *Taiwan’s imagined geography*, pp. 75–76, 79.

109 Scott Simon identifies this shift as an important and necessary evolution toward making Taiwan indigenous studies more than a study of certain peoples; it should also be conducted with certain peoples. Scott Simon, ‘Ontologies of Taiwan Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Anthropology’, *International Journal of Taiwan Studies*, 1 (February 2018), pp. 14–15.
110 In this way he perhaps anticipates the later aims of historians of subaltern studies; for discussion, see ‘Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts,’ in Dipesh Chakrabarty, * Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000), pp. 97–113.
112 Tu, ‘Ping Dongfan ji’, p. 27.