

# The border is occupied and the people are comforted, and the army and the state borrow from the classics—— Zhang Chong's research on "Shangda" educational thought

Xiong Yao

Department of Basic Education, Qiannan Preschool Education College, Qiannan Guizhou, 551300;

**Abstract:** During the Ming Dynasty, Zhang Chong, one of the "Eight Sages of Liuzhou," was exiled to Duyun, Guizhou Province. Through serendipitous circumstances, he organized local lectures that enriched the cultural heritage of Duyun and Guizhou as a whole. Under the influence of Confucian ideals of "vast righteousness," his writings achieved remarkable harmony between literary elegance and practical substance. His educational philosophy thus embodied a transcendent and open-minded approach. Grounded in the principle of applying knowledge to governance, he integrated scholarly pursuits with pedagogical practice, demonstrating his aesthetic vision and life aspirations through this fusion of scholarship and education.

**Key words:** Shangdatongtuo; healing the people; seeking truth from facts

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The political climate of the Ming Dynasty was fundamentally hostile to traditional scholars and upright individuals. Zhang Chong, who served during this era, faced severe repercussions when he publicly impeached Yan Song through a memorial. His actions infuriated the emperor, resulting in both corporal punishment and exile to Duyun. This position, neither within the imperial court nor the frontier regions, profoundly shaped his ideological evolution and worldview, leaving indelible imprints of both historical circumstances and personal experiences. Our current comprehensive study of his educational philosophy aims to systematically trace its origins, clarify its developmental trajectory, and conduct scholarly analysis of its practical significance<sup>[1]</sup>.

## 1 Zhang Chong's main educational ideas

After Zhang Chong was exiled to Duyun, he "roamed freely through historical texts and poetry, composing verses for self-entertainment. Scholars from Duyun flocked to his door, holding classics seeking discipleship. They engaged in discussions about ancient and modern stories of loyalty and filial piety, as well as Confucian theories of human nature and destiny. The educational ethos of Duyun flourished remarkably, standing out from neighboring regions." <sup>[2]</sup> From this statement in Wu Weiyue's preface to Zhang Chong's \*He Lou Ji\* (Crane Tower Collection), we can glean at least five key insights: First, Zhang Chong devoted himself to scholarly pursuits with unwavering diligence after arriving in Duyun. Second, he immersed himself in natural landscapes and expressed emotions through poetic composition. Third, students from Duyun flocked to his teachings, carrying their books with them. Fourth, his educational content primarily focused on "loyalty and filial piety" along with Confucian theories of human nature and destiny. Fifth, the academic atmosphere in Duyun subsequently thrived, surpassing or rivaling that of neighboring regions.

While Zhang Chong's life was marked by profound misfortune, he became a beacon of hope for students in Duyun. As one of the key contributors to the flourishing academic culture in this region, his life's work ultimately achieved its zenith in Duyun. Though not a grand educational reform that gathered talents from across the nation, his pedagogical legacy profoundly shaped intellectual awakening and cultural inheritance, leaving an enduring impact on generations to come.

### 1.1 Thinking of the country: The king thought of his horse, and his achievements were recorded in

## Lingyan

The Confucian ideal of "love for the heart" has been deeply rooted in Chinese thought. From Confucius and Mencius to the political purges of the Party Prohibitions era, Li Bai and Du Fu, and later Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, all adhered to this tradition. Even Tao Qian, who resigned from office to indulge in nature after retiring from official duties, did so out of necessity. Zhang Chong's poem "To Wang Canrong of Gui Peak," written when he returned to court by imperial decree, vividly captures this sentiment: "The emperor yearns for heroic steeds, his achievements inscribed on Lingyan (the Han dynasty's imperial wall)." Beyond praising Wang Canrong, the poem subtly expresses the author's aspiration to achieve military glory like the twenty-four meritorious officials of the Tang Dynasty, whose portraits were hung in the Lingyan Pavilion. Though brief, these lines serve as the poem's crowning touch and a reflection of the author's inner voice. This sentiment resonates with Qu Yuan's concern for the nation and people, as well as Lu You's resolve to defend his homeland from isolation in a lonely village. While social realities varied across eras, the fundamental aspiration of safeguarding the country and pursuing national prosperity remained constant.

### 1.2 Loyalty and filial piety: I have been longing for three thousand miles of Wei Que, and I have been celebrating the hall for eighty years

In the essay "Loyalty and Filial Piety", Zhang Chong explores the concept through a dialogue between Mr. Chuqiu and Guiyangsheng, using two controversial figures—Shen Ming and Bian Zhuangzi—to discuss loyalty and filial piety. He first outlines common perceptions of these virtues, then compares them with those of the author (Hunranzi) to establish the principle: "It's all about weighing the importance of each." Much like Mencius' debate over whether to rescue a drowning sister-in-law, both thinkers face dilemmas rooted in feudal etiquette. Their answers align: adapting to circumstances rather than rigidly adhering to rituals. This reveals Confucianism's approach to ritual observance—transcending rigid conventions while making reasonable adjustments when necessary. From our modern perspective, this flexibility in emergency situations exemplifies intellectual liberation.

### 1.3 Enlighten the mind and exhaust the reason: The universe is everywhere, and the ancient and modern seats are collected

In the traditional Chinese literati's cognition, the universe is constantly explored and developed. The main reason for the continuous development lies in the tireless exploration of generations of people.

Understanding one's specific intellectual objectives enables the pursuit of truth through targeted exploration. This scholarly philosophy aligns with Confucius' teaching of "investigating profound mysteries and exploring hidden depths" [3], as well as the concept of "investigating things to attain knowledge" from The Great Learning. Merely having a direction and attitude is insufficient for scholarly endeavor; proper planning and methodological correctness are equally crucial. In his essay "Exploring Truth," Zhang Chong uses the allegory of seven Chinese travelers who crossed the Southern Barbarians without recognizing the poison's lethal nature, dying suddenly after consuming it, to illustrate that worldly poisons include academia, military strategy, political tactics, and legal doctrines. He then emphasizes: "The path of sages is like beans—tasteless yet harmless; heretical paths are like wild birds (symbolizing poisonous influences)—tasty yet harmful." This analogy demonstrates the duality of principles: While we may not rigidly adhere to conventions, acting in accordance with natural laws remains our true nature.

## 2 The practical significance of Zhang Chong's educational thought

Zhang Chong, a cultural inheritor of China's outstanding heritage, distilled the nation's wisdom and philosophy into his works. Though exiled to the remote Qianzhong region where he could not gather scholars from across the land, his profound immersion in Confucian thought shaped his conduct—acting with integrity that found no shame in heaven or earth. He embodied both the social responsibility to "benefit society" and the natural acceptance of "following the Dao's way." Our interpretation of his educational philosophy aims to reveal its enduring relevance for modern times.

First, the educational history of Guizhou could be reconstructed to enhance its historical depth. When discussing

Guizhou's education, particularly its ancient history, there is an undeniable fact: it started extremely late with a very weak foundation. According to the "Guizhou Provincial Annals • Education Chapter": Schools first appeared in Guizhou during the Eastern Han Dynasty, and continued through the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties, though historical records remain scarce. Moreover, no literary talents emerged to make their mark, so many claims require more substantial evidence. Regarding the Ming Dynasty, the most widely known event is Wang Shouren's exile to Longchang in 1508 during the Zhengde era, which later sparked educational revival in central Guizhou, though limited in scope. Zhang Chong was exiled in 1558 during the Jiajing era, and his educational impact in Duyun has been discussed earlier. Other notable figures like Zou Yuanbiao, a Donglin School leader and disciple of Wang Yangming, contributed significantly to central Guizhou's education but arrived over a decade later than Zhang Chong (Zou was exiled in 1577). Notably, neither the "Guizhou Provincial Annals • Education Chapter" nor "Literary Figures and Guizhou Culture" cites Zhang Chong in their authoritative contemporary works—a regrettable omission indeed.

Secondly, it can enrich the educational essence of Guizhou and promote high-quality development in its education sector. The growth of a school or region requires sustained support from long-term practices, cultural accumulation, and other aspects to facilitate connotative development within the area. "Chinese scholarship not only pursues a realm of harmony between heaven and humanity and the integration of time and space, but also embodies a strong spirit of practical rationality that emphasizes applying knowledge to governance." [4] The highest pursuit in academic endeavors is practical and rational application of knowledge to real-world governance, distinct from the abstract theories and emotional musings often intertwined with theoretical frameworks. This approach, refined through practice, plays a positive guiding role in our educational activities.

As a group unjustly demoted, "many of these officials were upright gentlemen with both moral integrity and competence. They possessed excellent political literacy and governance capabilities, bringing the orthodox ideology and culture of the central dynasty to remote regions. Their efforts significantly strengthened local ties with the imperial court, accelerated regional political-economic development, repelled foreign invaders, and prevented internal centrifugal tendencies." [5] This interpretation accurately evaluates exemplary demoted officials like Zhang Chong: Qu Yuan's exile facilitated cultural integration between Xiangchu and Central Plains; Liu Zongyuan's banishment expanded public understanding of alternative labor systems——; Su Shi's demotion popularized Huizhou lychee cultivation; Zhang Chong's relocation transformed Guizhou from a malarial region into an idyllic paradise described in "Who says the miasma is thick? The mountains and waters are even more enchanting" (West Peak). Compared to Zhang Chong's previous experiences, Duyun's landscapes proved more picturesque—a correction of historical misconceptions about Guizhou.

### 3 Third, the origin of Zhang Chong's educational thought

Zhang Chong's educational philosophy synthesizes the achievements of predecessors with his own insights. His specialized discussions on enlightenment, substance and function, prosperity and decline, fortune and misfortune, loyalty and filial piety, exploration of principles, talent utilization, ministerial ethics, and moral integrity all trace their origins in Chinese civilization. Through careful interpretation, we systematically clarify the ideological roots of these concepts as outlined in the preceding text.

#### 3.1 Family and national commitment

In ancient China, the concept of family and state sentiment was prominently featured in Confucian literature. "Ancient China was a cultural community centered on ritual and benevolence. This can be evidenced by scholars' interpretations of terms like 'China' and 'Zhonghua' across dynasties," [6] as noted. From Sima Qian's *Zhu Zi Lue* (A Brief History of the Masters), which traces the origins of pre-Qin schools, we conclude that other philosophical traditions were merely offshoots of Confucianism. Therefore, it is reasonable to attribute Chinese familial and national sentiment to Confucianism. Rather than viewing China as a cultural entity, it would be more accurate to describe it as an integrated ethnic consciousness deeply rooted in Confucian culture, with its core manifested in shared recognition of family and state ideologies. When discussing why China stands out among the four ancient civilizations, most scholars prioritize cultural identity. From this perspective, our nation's cohesion born from cultural identity is unparalleled. The social significance of culture far surpasses regional or

customary values. The enduring advocacy of the phrase "sacrificing kinship for righteousness" exemplifies how "righteousness" transcends familial bonds: all personal interests pale in comparison when national interests prevail. This identification with righteousness extends beyond intellectuals and officials — it permeates every conscientious Chinese citizen. This recognition of "ritual and benevolence" — the cultural ethos embraced by the Chinese — essentially embodies familial and national sentiment: "The foundation of the world lies in the state; the foundation of the state lies in the family; the foundation of the family lies in the individual." The hierarchical progression from nation → family → individual reflects the crystallization of our ancestors' wisdom.

[7]The Chinese people's identification with the Confucian-defined concept of family and state culture is deeply rooted. Therefore, we believe that Zhang Chong's family and state ideology essentially belongs to this category, originating from the pre-Qin period's established notions of family and state. In modern terms, this represents cultural recognition — acknowledging the excellent elements within Confucian thought. Consequently, the educational philosophy of family and state sentiment becomes self-evident in its ideological origins.

### 3.2 Loyalty and filial piety

In the traditional Chinese people's cognition, loyalty to the country is the first priority. When loyalty and filial piety cannot be achieved at the same time, they often choose to be loyal to the country, so there are all kinds of heroes who abandon their families and leave their homes to go to war in the wars to defend the country.

"Virtue constitutes good governance, and governance lies in nurturing the people" [8]. As an official, this is the primary duty of public service. "To follow the Dao rather than the ruler, to uphold righteousness over paternal authority — this represents humanity's highest conduct" (Xunzi: Zi Dao). When witnessing Yan Song's atrocities, Zhang Chong chose not to preserve his own life but instead resolutely advised Yan to take responsibility. This demonstrates his loyalty to the "Dao" — serving the nation and its people. From the Spring and Autumn period when the Taishi family truthfully recorded Cui Zhu's regicide, Mencius' feigned illness during his standoff with the King of Qi, to Fang Xuanling and Chu Suiliang's verbatim documentation of the Xuanwu Gate coup, and even the causes of Ming-Qing literary inquisitions — all these exemplify loyalty to the "Dao" rather than to rulers. Therefore, we should seriously reconsider the interpretation of "the ruler as the framework for ministers" from this perspective. Deeply nourished by China's excellent culture, Zhang Chong's righteous principles had long been internalized as a mighty moral force. "The Guizhou people are stubborn like rocks in the mountains — honest, straightforward, rugged, bold, and unadorned" [9]. When this character of Guizhou people merged with Zhang Chong's noble integrity, the spark of human beauty naturally ignited.

### 3.3 Understanding the mind and exploring the truth

The "clarifying the mind" we discuss here refers to purifying one's thoughts and aligning them with truth, while "investigating principles" means thoroughly exploring the laws governing the development of things. When both are pursued to perfection, the study of innate knowledge is achieved — this represents the ultimate goal pursued by traditional Chinese literati. "Chinese traditional culture never examines fundamental cosmic and human issues in isolation, but instead connects the universe and humanity through various dimensions, grasping them holistically. The prevailing mode of thinking isn't singular but dual-faceted... We must not overlook these commonplace terms, for within their familiarity lies profound truths, embodying collective consciousness and cognitive patterns of the people." [10] While interpretations of "clarifying the mind" and "investigating principles" have varied across different eras and thinkers, their ultimate purpose can be distilled into guiding principles for understanding and transforming the world.

When examining Zhang Chong's writings, we find many thought-provoking insights in this regard. In "On Material Selection," he demonstrates how different applications of wood determine its usage through contrasting examples of building carts and ships. The treatise "On Substance and Function" employs the interplay between "convergence" and "divergence," using circular reasoning to extend the concept: "True stillness is not the static state of motion or stillness, but the state where neither movement nor stillness exists."

Tracing the origins of Zhang Chong's educational philosophy, we can briefly outline his contributions to Duyun's education. Materially, beyond his hand-carved stone inscriptions and "Xiehe Pavilion," there remains the legacy of his

Reading Hall: "Zhang Chong's Reading Hall, also known as He Tower Academy, was restored by Prefect Duan Mengwang in 1577 (Wanli 5th year) but later abandoned. In the early Daoguang period of Qing Dynasty, Magistrate Gao Qiyong rebuilt it west of the original site as a Young Scholars' Hall. It was destroyed during the 1858 Xianfeng War. In 1872 (Tongzhi 11th year), Prefect Luo Yingliu renovated it into an examination hall and later converted it into the Temple of Loyalty. In 1896 (Guangxu 22nd year), Prefect Qu Weiham of Duyun built the academy on the Ming-era Guanyin Temple ruins to commemorate Zhang Chong, naming it 'He Tower Academy' – the predecessor of today's Duyun No.1 High School." [11] On the spiritual level, beyond his educational philosophy, his descriptions of Duyun's landscapes and inner reflections hold immeasurable value.

## 4 Conclusion

Like his predecessors, Zhang Chong's exile to Duyun was an extremely unfortunate event in his life. However, his understanding of life reached a new height: "When one harmonizes with nature, the mind becomes suddenly enlightened, allowing one to view everything calmly and composedly, no longer burdened by petty pursuits." [12]

Understanding the world requires a pivotal catalyst. "This embodies an indomitable spirit that defies adversity, a transformative force that eradicates decay and overcomes obstacles. Its ultimate origin lies in how suffering suppresses exiled poets, yet their lives resist submission through relentless struggle. It is precisely this clash of suppression and resistance—through countless trials of desperate exile—that strengthens vitality, fortifies resolve, elevates sensibilities, and matures exiled poets. Consequently, the inner essence of exile literature becomes profoundly enriched." In Zhang Chong's essay, his insights into life and education emerge from the nourishment of China's excellent traditional cultural heritage.

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### Author Biography:

Xiong Yao (b. 1986), male, of the Bai ethnic group, holds a Master's degree in Ancient Chinese Literature. He is currently a faculty member at the Department of Basic Education, Qiannan Preschool Education College. His main research area is Ancient Chinese Literature.