

Harmony Of Heart and Mind: The Issue of Morality and Knowledge In The Philosophy Of Wang Yangming

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Received: 14 April 2025; **Accepted:** 10 May 2025; **Published:** 17 June 2025

Abstract: This article explores the spiritual-ethical and epistemological views of the philosopher Wang Yangming, who lived and worked in China during the 15th–16th centuries. It discusses his idea that in order to achieve perfection, a person must cultivate their desires and recognize the nature of things in the world to attain self-awareness.

Keywords: Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, desire, knowledge, person, consciousness.

Introduction: Ancient China, one of the cradles of human civilization, is among the earliest lands where philosophical thought emerged. Its philosophical tradition is rich with diverse schools and streams. Among these traditions, prominent thinkers and philosophers of their time explored fundamental problems related to nature, society, and human life, offering various doctrines shaped by the historical context of their era. One such thinker was Wang Yangming, a representative of the Neo-Confucian school. Following Confucius, he became one of the most influential philosophers in feudal China. Throughout his life, he sought to revitalize the fundamental principles and ideas of Neo-Confucianism in the context of Chinese culture and politics dominated by Confucian teachings. His views on patriotism, loyalty to national traditions and values, remain relevant not only in China but across East Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The ideas of Neo-Confucianism have been thoroughly described by T. Metzger. Western researchers have traditionally approached Neo-Confucianism primarily as a spiritual doctrine. The founder of Russian Sinology, N.Ya. Bichurin (1777–1853), emphasized, “During the Ming Dynasty (14th–15th centuries), moral doctrines in China were revived in their original form, and have remained unchanged since then” [1]. Wang Yangming, who lived and worked during the Ming era, has drawn significant interest from scholars around the world.

Interest in his philosophy in the West began in the first half of the 20th century. The earliest mention of Yangmingism in the West appeared in T. Hagen’s 1893 article dedicated to Japanese philosophical schools. Thus, European academic circles were introduced to this philosophical current through Japanese, rather than Chinese sources – a natural occurrence, given that the doctrine held greater ideological significance in Japan. R. Armstrong further examined Japanese Yangmingism in his book “Light from the East” (1914).

Three major works on Yangmingist ideas appeared in the first quarter of the 20th century. These include the 1936 French-language work “The Moral Philosophy of Wang Yangming” by Wang Changzhi, L. Kedi’s “The Theory of Emotional Cognition of Wang Yangming” (1936) and Zhang Yusuan’s English-language work “Wang Shouren as a Statesman” (1939–1940). Sinologists such as L. Wieger, A. Forke, G. Hackmann, and E. Senker attempted to present Wang Yangming’s philosophy in an accessible way. The most active period of Yangmingism studies in the West occurred in the 1950s, partly due to the growing popularity of Zen Buddhism, ideologically aligned with Yangming’s views. In spring 1966, Columbia University held a seminar on the Ming dynasty’s ideology. This was followed by a scholarly conference in June, under the leadership of American scholars, which marked a new stage in the study of Wang Yangming’s teachings. The conference proceedings were published in two issues of the journal “Philosophy East and West” in early 1973.

Soviet scholars also produced special works on Wang Yangming's doctrine. Notable among these are A.A. Petrov's "Description of Chinese Philosophy" "History of Philosophy" and the "Philosophical Encyclopedia". In Y.B. Radul-Zatulovsky's book "Neo-Confucianism and Its Spread in Japan" one can find more extensive coverage of Yangmingist ideas. A.I. Kobzev's scholarly research is of significant importance in the academic exploration of Wang Yangming's teachings.

DISCUSSION

In the Middle Ages, the synthesis of the three teachings – Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism – formed an essential component of Chinese ideology. Philosophers of this era, as well as those from later periods, continued to serve as moral and social educators, creators of legal norms, and architects of educational systems. In medieval China, Confucian teachings formed the foundation of ethical and legal views. During the 15th - 16th centuries, Wang Yangming, a philosopher and statesman, developed moral and legal ideas grounded in Confucianism. His thoughts played an essential role in state governance and in the evolution of ethical principles of the time.

Simultaneously, Buddhism and Daoism also significantly influenced the development of Wang Yangming's philosophical ideas. His focus on human nature and the inner world of the individual led to the wide dissemination of Yangmingist principles. Unlike earlier philosophers who emphasized society, Wang Yangming, influenced by Neo-Confucian thought, turned his attention primarily to the individual. Thus, Yangmingism emphasizes the concrete person rather than abstract humanity. This subject-centered approach distinguishes Wang Yangming from many other thinkers.

Wang Yangming argued that one must preserve the Supreme Principle of Heaven (in Chinese thought, "Heaven" is interpreted as the great creator) within oneself, and guide selfish desires toward noble goals. He wrote, "When desire is restrained, the Supreme Principle of Heaven remains pure, and selfish impulses are suppressed and eliminated". In other words, by not becoming a slave to one's desires, one strengthens their pursuit of noble aims and frees themselves from thoughts leading to evil and sin.

According to Wang Yangming, the cultivation of desire implies "eliminating baseless thoughts in the mind and preventing senseless actions in the outer world". He states, "When the heart no longer contains the desire that calls forth ignorance, this is a cultivated mind" [2]. He opposed religious views that denied moral norms. His idea of cultivating desire aligns closely with Sufi teachings that emerged in Eastern culture.

Wang Yangming emphasized that everything possesses a positive essence called "li" (in Chinese philosophy, a spiritual principle or substance) [3]. He argued that governance also requires a governing "li". If a state is organized and governed according to this principle, it will remain stable and prosperous; otherwise, it will fall into chaos. He believed this "li" was the governance principle followed and taught by ancient wise rulers. "Li" is eternal, regardless of whether it is practiced or taught. In his debates with fellow philosopher Chen Liang, the concept of "Dao" – a governance principle – was said to exist beyond human comprehension. Chen Liang argued, "Dao remains even if people fail to follow it. That which ceases to exist is of human origin"[4].

Wang Yangming maintained that "li" remains consistent across time. Those who follow it succeed; those who do not, fail. He stated that even the so-called great individuals of his time often acted only according to their desires rather than the eternal principle of "li". As a result, their achievements lacked true excellence, and they failed to maintain the "golden mean". Their actions, though outwardly similar, were not aligned with "li" hence lacked true perfection.

Many Chinese thinkers supported Plato's view: "There will be no perfect state until philosophers become rulers or rulers become philosophers". Wang Yangming also commented on the aspiration of ancient Chinese rulers to be philosopher-kings.

He believed that the "Great Ultimate" exists fully within every individual and everything. Since it encompasses all "li" it is present within us too, although our physical nature may obscure it. He likened this inner "Great Ultimate" to a pearl submerged in murky water – we must cleanse it so that it may shine clearly.

RESULTS

In his teachings, the philosopher argued that achieving the level of a perfect person requires more than just moral effort. If a person lacks awareness, the process of understanding the essence of things becomes a mere spiritual exercise and does not lead to enlightenment. Through understanding things, one fulfills their duty of revealing their true nature and must strive to polish the inner pearl until it shines. To illuminate one's thoughts, one must constantly contemplate clarity – this, according to Wang Yangming, is the mission of consciousness.

His method of spiritual self-perfection resembles that of Plato. His theory that every "li" exists inherently in our nature is reminiscent of Plato's concept of knowledge as recollection. Plato claimed that "we acquire knowledge before the birth of all essences" [5].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the central focus of Wang Yangming's teachings is the human being. However, his goal is not merely an objective study of human existence, but to illuminate the path toward becoming a truly perfect individual.

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