

FORGING CONSCIENCE FOR A POLARIZED AGE: WANG YANGMING'S ENGAGEMENT WITH ZEN BUDDHISM AND HIS ETHICO-POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract: This article explores how, against the ‘polarized’ backdrop of mid-Ming Dynasty political power struggles and intellectual dogmatism, Wang Yangming forged his doctrine of *liangzhi* (innate conscience) into a potent tool of ethico-politics through a critical appropriation and creative transformation of Chan Buddhist theories of mind-nature. The author argues that this ‘forged conscience’ not only provided scholar-officials with the inner authority to engage in political dissent during times of moral ambiguity but also, through the concepts of the ‘unity of knowledge and action’ and the ‘unity of all things,’ proposed an ethico-political imagination aimed at healing social divisions and reshaping public responsibility. This provides a profound historical case study for understanding how the East Asian intellectual tradition has responded to social crises.

Keywords: *Chan Buddhism, Dissent, Ethico-Politics, Liangzhi (Innate Conscience), Polarization, Responsibility, Wang Yangming.*

1. Introduction

We are the silent spectators of an era where ideological opposition is intensifying, waves of populism are surging and widespread political apathy is causing the moral standards of the public sphere to blur or even collapse. In this context, what does it truly mean for an individual to act according to conscience? This is not only a profound anxiety plaguing our contemporary world but also a core issue that has repeatedly confronted humanity during

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various moments of social crisis throughout history. Looking back, we find that the mid-Ming Dynasty in which Wang Yangming (1472-1529) lived strikes a deep historical resonance with the challenges we face today. That, too, was an age moving toward 'polarization': external political struggles were fierce and brutal, while internal intellectual culture grew increasingly rigid and conservative.

As Wu Xin (2021) has pointed out in his research, when Wang Yangming was born, "society was in a state of drastic change, and the traditional feudal order was being severely challenged" (34). On one hand, the incessant struggles among imperial power, the scholar-official bureaucracy, and eunuch factions led to political corruption and the daily decay of governance. This fostered a pervasive sense of crisis about the "nation's decline" and a "melancholy consciousness" among the scholar-official class (Lu, 282). In such a political ecosystem, upholding a moral stance and offering political remonstrance often meant taking enormous risks, posing a severe test to the moral integrity and sense of political responsibility of the literati. On the other hand, the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism, which had long served as the official state ideology, appeared increasingly powerless in responding to the real-world crises despite its grand system. Yang Guorong astutely observed that "the profound social crisis and the inability of the Cheng-Zhu school to prevent or remedy it forced the thinkers of the time to seek another path beyond the external coercion of heavenly principle" (8). Rigid dogma not only failed to guide practice effectively but may have even encouraged hypocrisy and empty talk. The era in which Wang Yangming lived was filled with mediocre sycophants who were concerned only with self-preservation and among whom the lines between right and wrong were blurred. They stood in sharp contrast to the "ardent" spirit that Wang admired—a spirit daring to break through convention and maintain authenticity (Zhang, 2010, 118). Rong Zhaozu also profoundly noted, "The origin of thought arises from encountering difficulties. Social thought often emerges from the difficulties in the social environment, thus becoming a product of its time" (335). Wang Yangming's revolution of the School of

Mind (xinxue) was precisely such a profound intellectual response, born out of this complex and critical historical context. He directly confronted the pathologies of his age, attempting to re-forge a spiritual resource capable of empowering individuals and guiding public action.

As a major turning point in the history of Chinese thought, Wang Yangming and his School of Mind have long been a focal point of academic research. Regarding the historical context, scholars generally agree on the grim reality of political corruption and intellectual stagnation in the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty. Intellectual historians like Yu Yingshi (1995) have analyzed the “shift in the keynote of Ming-Qing thought,” situating Wang’s rise within the broader context of the internal crisis of Neo-Confucianism, and putting forward the famous thesis of a shift from “carrying out the Way through the sovereign” to “carrying out the Way by awakening the people”. However, other scholars hold different views. For instance, Lü Zhenyu (2008), from a historical materialist standpoint, argued that Wang Yangming’s thought was a metaphysical development of the “declining landlord class” (497). Together, these studies reveal the profound connection between Wang Yangming’s thought and the socio-political crises of his time.

The relationship between Wang Yangming’s School of Mind and Chan Buddhism is an even greater focal point and challenge in the field of study. Ever since Wang’s own time, “the Wang school has been accused of being ‘Chanism’ or regarded as ‘Confucian on the outside, Buddhist on the inside’” (Wang Ke and Liu Lifu, 2015, 75). Subsequent scholars have held diverse opinions on this matter. Zhou Lei (2022), based on a stance of “qiology”, argues that the development of the School of Mind was a process “from ‘resembling Chan’ to ‘being Chan’,” even criticizing it for “practicing Chanism under the name of the School of Mind” (95). However, more scholars tend to believe that Wang Yangming’s engagement with Chan was one of critical absorption and transformation. For example, Shang Rong (2018) cites Huang Zongxi’s view that although Wang had “fled to Chan,” he “later realized its errors and abandoned it” (29). Dong Qun (2019) emphasizes that Wang’s School of Mind ultimately “had to be

applied to governing the world"(14). From an ethical perspective, Ding Jianhua (2022) highlights Wang's critique of Chan's "external abandonment of human relations" (9). Deng Shaoqiu (2011) summarizes this relationship as "using Confucianism as the substance and Chan Buddhism as the function" (7). While acknowledging the profound connection between the two, this study will focus on exploring the specific mechanism of Wang's "critical transformation" and its unique purpose of serving his "ethico-political" objectives.

The political dimension of Wang Yangming's thought has also received significant scholarly attention. Zhu Cheng (2006) clearly stated that Wang Yangming "transformed the problem of 'governing the world' into a problem of 'governing the mind'," reflecting the characteristic of "ethico-politics" (12). Scholars such as Wang Zhongyuan (2010) and Zhang Yaqi (2014) have also published articles and monographs exploring his political thought and practice. However, existing research tends to either focus on outlining his specific political proposals or on analyzing the philosophical construction of his theory of mind-nature itself. The innovative contribution this study seeks to make is to treat "liangzhi" (innate conscience) as an "ethico-political" tool consciously "forged" by Wang Yangming in a specific historical context, aimed at responding to political crises and possessing a clear orientation toward public action. It will systematically analyze the process of its "forging" and the unique substance of his "ethico-political imagination." As for core concepts like the "unity of knowledge and action" and the "unity of all things," there is already an extremely rich body of research, mostly focusing on their philosophical meaning, intellectual origins, and significance for self-cultivation.

Building upon the foundations of previous scholarship, this study employs "forging a conscience" as its core verb and "ethico-politics" as its core framework. It will focus on analyzing how Wang Yangming, against the backdrop of a "polarized" age, critically transformed intellectual resources such as Chan Buddhism to construct his School of Mind as a unique solution. This solution could both provide the inner authority for political dissent and propose an inclusive communal imagination to heal

social divisions. The aim is to deepen the understanding of Wang Yangming’s thought and to provide historical insights for reflecting on contemporary social predicaments.

2. Political Polarization and the Crisis of Moral Responsibility

Wang Yangming’s revolution of the School of Mind was not born from pure philosophical speculation or the tranquility of a scholar’s study; rather, it was a direct response to a harsh reality that was becoming increasingly “polarized.” In the mid-Ming Dynasty, the strife of political power and the stagnation of intellectual culture were intertwined, together creating a historical context that left the scholar-official class feeling deeply frustrated and powerless. Understanding these twin crises is key to grasping the profound purpose behind Wang Yangming’s “forging of conscience” as a response to the challenges of his time.

2.1 The Structure of Domination and the Price of Political Dissent

The political ecosystem of the mid-Ming Dynasty was notably characterized by the high concentration of imperial power and the malignant expansion of eunuch influence. Ever since Emperor Taizu, Zhu Yuanzhang, abolished the chancellorship to “gather all the benefits under heaven for himself” (Huang, 1985, 2), monarchical power lost the effective check of traditional prime ministerial authority, and emperors turned to relying heavily on eunuchs, creating a long-term and brutal pattern of struggle between the eunuch and scholar-official factions. When upholding morality meant destruction, while flattery and partisan attacks brought power and position, scholar-officials commonly fell into the dilemma described by Mou Zongsan (2006): under a despotic monarchy, the space for scholar-officials to practice the Way was extremely compressed, and even if they intended to uphold righteousness, they were often powerless to turn the tide (7-9). In his *Notes on the Twenty-Two Dynastic Histories*, Zhao Yi (2011) described the harrowing scene of capital officials who “would bid farewell to their wives and children every morning before going to court, and if they returned safely in the evening, they would congratulate one another on having lived another day” (668). In this high-pressure environment, for a scholar-

official to act on his conscience and speak truth to power required immense moral courage and a spirit of sacrifice.

Wang Yangming's own early experiences were a microcosm of this cruel reality. In the first year of the Zhengde reign of Emperor Wu (1506), the powerful eunuch Liu Jin usurped power and began arresting and persecuting upright officials on a massive scale. Wang Yangming, then a secretary in the Ministry of War, acted out of his Confucian sense of moral duty and attempted to defend his wrongly accused colleagues. This was an action inherent to the duty of a remonstrating official, an attempt to correct the deviation of the "political order" from the "moral-ethical order." However, under Liu Jin's authority, this act of political dissent, based on conscience, was met with the brutal punishment of "forty strokes of flogging at court and banishment to a remote post as an assistant magistrate in Longchang, Guizhou" (Zhang, 1974, 5160). This experience of political oppression profoundly influenced the later direction of Wang Yangming's thought.

2.2 Intellectual Stagnation and Apathy in Public Life

Accompanying the external political pressure was an increasing stagnation of internal intellectual culture. Since the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism was established as the official state ideology in the early Ming, this once vibrant and speculative doctrine gradually degenerated into a stepping stone for the civil service examinations and a rigid dogma for maintaining the ruling order. In her research, Liu Jing (2014) points out that while the Zhu Xi school flourished due to its official status, it also lost its innovative vitality, becoming a "tool for scholars to chase fame and fortune." Compounded by intellectual restrictions, it ultimately "became self-contained and increasingly ossified" (7). This stagnation, which manifested in several aspects, collectively led to the widespread phenomenon of the "disunity of knowledge and action," fostering apathy in public life and constituting a profound crisis of moral responsibility.

The officialized Cheng-Zhu school overemphasized the externality and transcendence of "principle", severing the connection between theory and practice. Although Zhu Xi advocated that "principle" was inherent in "vital force", his

method of “investigation of things to extend knowledge” was often interpreted as outwardly seeking an objective “heavenly principle”. As later scholars criticized, this line of thinking could easily mislead one into believing that “this principle hangs suspended somewhere between heaven, earth and the myriad things, and I must exhaustively pursue it from without,” thereby detaching learning from personal life experience and social practice (Huang, 2008, 7). This tendency to separate “principle” from “mind” and “knowledge” from “action” provided a philosophical justification for their disunity. Scholar-officials could indulge in trivial textual exegesis and philological studies while neglecting their responsibility to apply these theories to the reform of contemporary society.

This intellectual stagnation directly led to apathy in public life. Wang Yangming vehemently condemned the “fragmented learning” of the later followers of the Zhu Xi school, believing that “the great malady of today is surely the habit of memorization and literary composition” (Wang, 2011, 257), because it caused people to lose themselves in trivial details and forget that the fundamental purpose of learning was to become a sage and worthy, and to order the world and aid the people. This style of learning, detached from reality and lacking a drive for action, left the scholar-official class helpless in the face of the increasingly severe social crises of the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty.

3. The Appropriation of Chan Buddhism and the Critical Transformation of Conscience

Facing this dual predicament, Wang Yangming realized that the old framework of the Cheng-Zhu school could no longer provide sufficient strength to respond to the challenges of the age. He therefore turned to Chan (Zen) Buddhism, not to become a Chan monk within the Confucian system, but to inject the traditional concept of “innate conscience” with new power through a critical appropriation and creative transformation of Chan’s theory of mind-nature. This process of “forging” both deeply absorbed the liberating power of Chan’s internalism and steadfastly adhered to the Confucian position of “statecraft for practical application,”

ultimately forging “innate conscience” into a sharp ethico-political weapon.

3.1 *The Foundation of Inner Authority*

The starting point of Wang Yangming’s intellectual revolution was to establish an indestructible inner moral authority for the individual. When the external world, be it arbitrary political power or rigid intellectual dogma, could distort or even subvert the standards of right and wrong, the only reliable anchor was a return to the inner mind. At this core juncture, Wang Yangming drew deeply from the intellectual resources of Chan Buddhism, such as “one’s own mind is Buddha” and “clarifying the mind to see one’s nature”. Huang Zongxi astutely pointed out that Wang Yangming, “inheriting the lost learning after a period of philology and literary composition, turned inward to seek it in his own mind and attained the awareness of his own nature, which he called *liangzhi*.” His intellectual path bore such a clear resemblance to that of Chan that “it was suspected that he might have originated from Chan” (Huang, 2008, 7). This turn to “seeking within the mind” was the crucial step Wang Yangming took to establish the inner authority of *liangzhi*.

Chan Buddhism, particularly the Southern School, emphasizes that Buddha-nature is inherent in the mind of every individual and need not be sought externally; through “sudden enlightenment”, one can “directly point to the human mind and see one’s nature to become a Buddha.” This thought greatly elevated the status of the individual’s mind-nature, viewing it as the sole path to the ultimate reality. Wang Yangming keenly grasped the immense potential of this inward turn for breaking the shackles of external authority. The core realization of his enlightenment at Longchang, “The Way of the sages is self-sufficient in my own nature; it was wrong to have previously sought for principle in things and affairs” (Wang, 2011, 1354), is highly consistent with the spirit of Chan’s internalism. The so-called “self-sufficiency of my own nature” affirms that moral perfection is inherent in the individual’s life itself, without reliance on external things or knowledge. The idea of “not needing to seek externally” directly negated the methodology of

the Cheng-Zhu school’s “investigation of things to extend knowledge” which sought “heavenly principle” externally.

To further solidify the philosophical foundation of this inner authority, Wang Yangming proposed the famous proposition “Mind is principle”: “The mind is principle. Are there any affairs or principles in the world that are external to the mind” (Wang, 2011, 2)? This proposition directly challenged the Cheng-Zhu school’s view of “principle” as an objective existence external to the “mind”. By equating “principle”, the ontological substance of the universe and the basis of moral law, with the active and conscious “mind” of the individual, Wang Yangming completely reclaimed the authority of moral legislation for the subject. As he lucidly elaborated: “*Liangzhi* is simply where heavenly principle naturally and lucidly manifests itself; its substance is simply that of genuine sincerity and compassion” (Wang, 2011, 95). *Liangzhi* was no longer merely a capacity for moral cognition; it was the very manifestation of “heavenly principle,” possessing self-evident authority.

The significance of establishing this inner authority lies not only in philosophical innovation but, more importantly, in providing scholar-officials with the courage and basis for action amidst the “polarized” reality. When external political commands or social opinions conflicted with one’s inner moral intuition, *liangzhi* became the final, unquestionable arbiter. Wang Yangming pushed this principle to its extreme, declaring:

What is valued in learning is to attain it in one's own mind. If, upon seeking it in the mind, it is found to be wrong, then even if the words came from Confucius, I dare not accept them as right... If, upon seeking it in the mind, it is found to be right, then even if the words came from an ordinary person, I dare not consider them wrong (Wang, 2011, 85).

This stance fully embodies the absolute nature of the inner authority of *liangzhi*. Under political pressure, this conviction endowed scholar-officials with the ultimate legitimacy for independent judgment and “political dissent”: as long as an action conformed to one’s inner conscience, it was justified, even if it was not tolerated by those in power.

3.2 The Worldly Turn of an Otherworldly Spirit

However, Wang Yangming's appropriation of Chan Buddhism was by no means a simple copy or imitation. He was acutely aware that Chan's fundamental otherworldly tendency stood in profound tension with the core Confucian spirit of actively engaging with the world. Therefore, he subjected Chan's resources to a fundamental "Confucianizing" transformation, ensuring that this powerful inner force would ultimately serve the Confucian ethico-political ideal rather than leading to nihilism or escapism.

Wang Yangming's critique of Buddhism's tendency to "abandon human relations and neglect worldly affairs" runs through his entire philosophy. He argued: "The Buddhists, fearing the encumbrance of the father-son relationship, flee from it; fearing the encumbrance of the ruler-minister relationship, they flee from it; fearing the encumbrance of the husband-wife relationship, they flee from it... Whereas for us Confucians, when there is a father-son relationship, we respond to it with benevolence; when there is a ruler-minister relationship, we respond to it with righteousness; when there is a husband-wife relationship, we respond to it with distinction. When have we ever been attached to the appearances of these relationships" (Wang, 2011, 112)? This passage points out the fundamental difference between Confucianism and Buddhism in confronting social and ethical relationships: Buddhism takes "escape" as the path to liberation, whereas Confucianism achieves moral perfection by actively fulfilling various social roles and ethical responsibilities.

From the perspective of political philosophy, he further noted: "The followers of Śākyamuni, on the contrary, wish to completely cut off from things and affairs, regarding the mind as an illusion, and gradually enter into emptiness and stillness, as if they had no involvement with the world at all. This is why their teaching cannot be used to govern the world" (Wang, 2011, 121). The ultimate goal of Wang's "forging of conscience" was to apply it to solving real socio-political problems, not merely to attain personal peace of mind.

Based on this critical consciousness, Wang Yangming undertook a profound “Confucianizing” transformation of the Chan concepts and methods he appropriated. First, he firmly anchored the inner authority of Chan’s “clarifying the mind to see one’s nature” in Confucian ethical values. The substance of the “mind” or “Buddha-nature” in Chan can be transcendent of good and evil, and value-neutral, but the substance of Wang Yangming’s “*liangzhi*” is inherently imbued with core Confucian moral content, such as “benevolence”. He emphasized that “*liangzhi*” itself possesses the ability to “know right and know wrong,” and its function is to “do good and remove evil.” Huang Zongxi once criticized certain later followers of Yangming for “drifting into karmic retribution,” believing they had blurred the lines between Confucianism and Buddhism (Huang, 2008, 1514). This very criticism highlights Wang Yangming’s own prudence and self-awareness in handling this issue. He wanted to ensure that the powerful subjective force of *liangzhi* would always be guided by Confucian ethical norms.

Wang Yangming thoroughly “secularized” the Chan methodology of self-cultivation. Although he affirmed the role of quiet-sitting in calming the mind for beginners, he repeatedly emphasized that true Confucian cultivation consists in “polishing and tempering oneself in the midst of affairs” (Wang, 2011, 104), and that “our Confucian nourishing of the mind never departs from things and affairs” (Wang, 2011, 121). This view, which regards concrete socio-political practices as the locus of “real learning,” completely dissolves the barrier between “inner sageliness” and “outer kingliness,” transforming Chan-style inner discipline into a positive force for the reformation of reality.

4. Conclusion

This study has revealed that Wang Yangming’s revolution of the School of Mind was not born from the tranquility of a scholar’s study, but was rather his profound response to the “polarized” predicament of political oppression and intellectual stagnation in the mid-Ming Dynasty. The *liangzhi* (innate conscience) that he forged was, in essence, an ethico-political weapon aimed at transforming the world, its primary cutting edge lying in the

critical transformation and creative application of Chan Buddhist intellectual resources.

Wang Yangming skillfully appropriated the inner transcendence of Chan's theory of mind-nature to establish a solid internal foundation for scholar-officials struggling under external authority, a foundation upon which to resist alienation and maintain dissent. Yet, he did not stop there. With the fundamental Confucian concern for "statecraft and practical application", he thoroughly "secularized" the otherworldly tendencies of Chan, resolutely redirecting this powerful subjective force from a path of seeking personal liberation to one of undertaking public responsibility.

This "forged conscience," impelled by the doctrine of the "unity of knowledge and action," transforms inner moral consciousness into external public commitment, aiming to eradicate the contemporary malady of empty talk that jeopardized the state. Furthermore, through the communal imagination of the "unity of all things," it provides a ultimate direction for action: to heal social divisions and rebuild ethical consensus. The "courage for action" and the "blueprint for reconciliation" thus constitute the two indispensable wings of Wang Yangming's ethico-political program.

Therefore, what Wang Yangming offered was not merely an inward-looking method for personal spiritual settlement but a complete ethico-political program aimed at action and transformation. It emphasizes both the subjectivity and practical courage of the individual in moral decision-making while also caring for the harmony and well-being of the community as a whole. This demonstrates the profound capacity of Confucian thought for self-innovation and theoretical creation in the midst of great crisis. Wang Yangming's intellectual legacy not only provides a profound historical example of how the East Asian tradition has responded to social crises but also offers invaluable insights for us today, living in a world similarly fraught with opposition and division, on how to forge a conscience for our time and seek a path toward reconciliation.

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