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TO ACQUIRE WISDOM :
THE "WAY" OF WANG YANG-MING
(1472 - 1529)

by
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for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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This dissertation is based entirely
upon my own research.

Julia Ching

Abstract

This is a study of Wang Yang-ming's philosophy, considered as a "Way" of acquiring wisdom and sagehood, based on his central insight into the nature of hsin (mind-and-heart), the fundamental principle of all human activity which is capable of determining and of perfecting itself through its intuitive knowledge of the good, at once inborn and acquired. The "Introduction" indicates the broad problem of the quest for wisdom, and of the question of "correctness" of approach and "orthodoxy" of thought which arises, in the context of traditional Chinese philosophy. The first chapter defines the so-called "Confucian Way" as a quest for wisdom, with the latter consisting of the attainment of consciousness of the unity of man with all things, and of the realisation of a high moral character. It speaks of Han Yü's effort to "restore" Confucian learning, and especially of the Neo-Confucian synthesis accomplished by Chu Hsi. A brief description of Wang Yang-ming as man and philosopher follows, with special emphasis on his interior evolution. His philosophy is then presented in its gradual development, through an analysis of his teachings of hsin, leading up, after exchanges with certain of his contemporary thinkers, to the discovery of his method of acquiring wisdom through the "extension of liang-chih (knowledge of the good)". The deeper implications of his thought and method are then discussed, especially his teaching of the "unity of all things". His expressed attitudes concerning Taoism and Buddhism are also studied, revealing his readiness to accept truth and goodness or "orthodoxy". The concluding chapter offers a critique of his philosophy, evaluating his attempt to solve the basic problem of the acquisition of wisdom, and indicating certain unresolved ambiguities which he has left behind.

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The Philosophical Letters of Wang Yang-ming
(galley proofs)

Australian National University Press

PREFACE

There are enough books published on the subject of the life and thought of Wang Shou-jen 王守仁 [Wang Yang-ming 王陽明 1472-1529] to fill a library, but these are written in Japanese or Chinese. The situation is quite different for European languages. There are only three English translations of Yang-ming's selected writings. The first, by Frederick Henke (1916) gives an abridged translation of Ch'uan-hsi lu 傳習錄, thirty-six letters and twelve short essays.¹ However, it contains many mistakes and gives very few references. The second is Wing-tsit Chan's Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings (1963) which includes a complete translation of the Ch'uan-hsi lu together with certain documents on social and political affairs issued by Yang-ming.² The third is my work, The Philosophical Letters of Wang Yang-ming, a translation of all of Yang-ming's letters with sufficient philosophical content to justify the effort, with critical annotations and references. It is now being prepared for publication by the Australian National University Press.

Where personal research on the thought of Wang Yang-ming is concerned, the field has been almost entirely unexploited in English, the only doctoral thesis being Tu Wei-ming's The Quest for Self-realization: A Study of Wang Yang-ming's Formative Years, (1472-1509) (Harvard, 1968). As the title shows, this is a study of the philosopher's early life, with special emphasis on the formative influences which had acted upon him, but without treating his philosophy as a whole. There is another work, published in French, La Philosophie Morale de Wang Yang-ming, by Wang Tchang-tche (1936) also a doctoral

thesis.³ It presents a clear exposition of Yang-ming's practical teachings, without saying much of his doctrine of the "Unity of All Things" (wan-wu yi-t'i 萬物一體), which I consider to be the core of his teaching. Prompted, therefore, by the need of making the philosophy of this thinker better known to the world of English scholarship, I have allowed my reading of Ch'uan-hsi lu, of Yang-ming's letters, essays and poems to lead me to undertake this study, entitled: "To Acquire Wisdom: the 'Way' of Wang Yang-ming". My assumption is that, interest in Chinese philosophy has always been centred, to a greater or lesser extent depending on times and circumstances, on the practical aspect of whether and how wisdom may be acquired, with the goal being understood as the attainment of high moral character and a certain consciousness of man's fundamental unity with all things, which -- in the Confucian school -- overflows into a strong sense of social responsibility.

In order to see Yang-ming's philosophy of life in the context of the development of "Confucian thought" itself, for the purpose of determining the "correctness" or "orthodoxy" of his position, I have written the first chapter on the so-called "Confucian quest for Wisdom", giving special attention to the meanings of such words as Tao (the Way), Tao-hsüeh 道學 (School of the Way), and Tao-t'ung 道統 (Orthodox Transmission of the Way). I shall speak of the central Confucian virtue of jen 仁 (humanity), with its underlying, optimistic estimate of human nature. I shall speak of the notion of T'ien-jen ho-yi 天人合一 (Unity of Heaven and Man), crystallised especially during the Han (202BC-220 AD) dynasty. I shall go on to the heralds of Tao-hsüeh, Han Yu 韓愈 (786-824) and Li Ao 李翱 (fl. 798), and their effort to revive Confucianism after 400 years of Taoist-Buddhist dominance. I shall then discuss Chu Hsi's 朱熹 (1130-1200) synthesis of Sung philosophy through his interpretation of the ideas of his predecessors, Chou Tun-yi 周敦頤 (1017-1073), Ch'eng Hao 程頤 (1032-1085), Ch'eng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107) and Chang Tsai 張載 (1020-1077), as well as through the debates he had with his

contemporaries, in particular Lu Chiu-yüan 陸九淵 (1139-92) and Ch'en Liang 陳亮 (1143-94). A certain legacy of this synthesis was the transformation of the earlier idea of the "Unity of Heaven and Man" into the newer one of "the Unity of Man with All Things".

The subject-matter of this first chapter makes it the most complex. It sets the scene, as it were, for the rest of the study. The second chapter focuses the attention on Wang Yang-ming himself, as man and philosopher, presenting an analysis of his intellectual and spiritual evolution, and introducing the key-words in his philosophical vocabulary and the main lines of his thought.⁴ The three chapters which follow from there give a more detailed examination of his teachings, analysing his words and presenting the gradual evolution of his thought within the framework of his life-history. Extending from his basic insight, hsin (心) (mind-and-heart), which he understood as the source and agent of all virtue and goodness, through the controversies which he had with his contemporaries over the meaning of ko-wu 格物 (investigation of things), involving different ideas regarding the role of intellectual inquiry or personal insight in the quest for wisdom,⁵ to his discovery of a universal "way", chih liang-chih 致良知 (extension of one's knowledge of the good), these chapters seek to explain Yang-ming's interpretation of what was the "sacred legacy" of the sages, transmitted to posterity not through Chu Hsi, but Lu Chiu-yüan. The sixth chapter then discusses the inner meaning of Yang-ming's discovery, with special attention to his own teaching on the "Unity of Man with All Things", while the seventh represents an attempt to review the comprehensive nature of his approach to wisdom, which transcends the conventional divisions of "orthodox" and "heterodox" schools. The final chapter is a critique, based on personal judgement, of Yang-ming's whole philosophy, commenting upon its similarities and dissimilarities with that of Chu Hsi, his manner of dealing with the inherent conflicts and polarities of the "Confucian Way", between the "inner-outer" realms of interest, between

"knowledge" and "action", "enlightenment" and "cultivation", "self" and "authority", the "metaphysical" and the "moral". Certain unresolved difficulties related to his philosophy which entailed serious consequences in the intellectual development of late Ming times, are also discussed.⁶

I have desisted deliberately from giving too much of my own judgement of his ideas until the final, concluding chapter, in order that the critique itself may be based on impartial analysis of Yang-ming's own words, as examined in the light of their historical context.

I have included an Epilogue which gives a brief discussion of the study of Yang-ming's philosophy in Japan, past and present. Given a different situation--arising, among other factors, from deeper "Zen" influences--Japanese writers have not been as much affected by the criteria of doctrinal orthodoxy which have been imposed on the Chinese themselves.

I have also included, for the reader's reference, a short résumé of the thesis and its contents, an outline chronology of Yang-ming's life, a few pages on the interpretation of certain selected terms of his philosophical vocabulary and certain selected translated texts. There is also a selected bibliography.⁷

In writing this thesis, I have incurred a debt of gratitude to many persons and institutions. I wish in particular to thank Prof. Liu Ts'un-yan and Dr. K.H.J. Gardiner for their kind direction, to Prof. A.L. Basham for his constant encouragement, and to Dr. A. Ruhan for giving important suggestions regarding the methods of philosophical analysis and inquiry.

Notes to Preface

- 1 The Philosophy of Wang Yang-ming, New York, Paragon reprint, 1964.
- 2 Published in New York by the Columbia University Press.
- 3 Variétés sinologiques, No. 63; published in Shanghai, 1936.
- 4 This chapter has appeared, in a slightly different form, in Papers on Far Eastern History III (March, 1971), 85-130.
- 5 Since Yang-ming's critics, both the earlier ones and our contemporaries, have usually attacked his doctrine of the "investigation of things" and of the so-called "absence of good and evil" (wu-shan wu-ō 無善無惡) of man's mind-and-heart, to present him as a Ch'an Buddhist or a metaphysical idealist, Chapters IV and VI have a special relevance, and I wish to indicate it here.
- 6 Although I have chosen to make an independent study of Yang-ming's thought, based on analysis of his own words, I have sought to indicate, by footnote references, the many important works that have been written on him.
- 7 The presence of the bibliography makes it unnecessary to give, in every footnote reference, the names of authors and titles in Chinese characters.

Abbreviations

<u>CSPSR</u>	<u>Chinese Social and Political Science Review</u>
<u>CTCS</u>	<u>Chang-tzu ch'üan-shu</u>
<u>CTYL</u>	<u>Chu-tzu yü-lei</u>
<u>CWWC</u>	<u>Chu Wen-kung wen-chi</u>
<u>CYTC</u>	<u>Cheng Yi-t'ang ch'üan-shu</u>
<u>ECCS</u>	<u>Erh-Ch'eng ch'üan-shu</u>
<u>ESWS</u>	<u>Erh-shih-wu shih</u>
<u>HCLC</u>	<u>Han Ch'ang-li ch'üan-chi</u>
<u>HJAS</u>	<u>Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies</u>
<u>HSCC</u>	<u>Hsiang-shan ch'üan-chi</u>
<u>MJHA</u>	<u>Ming-ju hsüeh-an</u>
<u>MS</u>	<u>Ming-shih</u>
<u>PEW</u>	<u>Philosophy East and West</u>
<u>SBE</u>	<u>Sacred Books of the East</u>
<u>SKTY</u>	<u>Ssu-k'ü ch'üan-shu tsung-mu t'i-yao</u>
<u>SJHA</u>	<u>Sung-ju hsüeh-an</u>
<u>SPPY</u>	<u>Ssu-pu pei-yao</u>
<u>SPTK</u>	<u>Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an</u>
<u>SS</u>	<u>Sung-shih</u>
<u>SSCC</u>	<u>Ssu-shu chi-chu</u>
<u>TSCC</u>	<u>Ts'ung-shu chi-ch'eng</u>
<u>TSD</u>	<u>Taishō Shinshu Daizōkyō</u>
<u>TT</u>	<u>Tao-tsang</u>
<u>WLCC</u>	<u>Wang Lung-hsi ch'üan-chi</u>
<u>WWKC</u>	<u>Wang Wen-ch'eng kung ch'üan-shu</u>

Note: Except for the abbreviations of the following editions: CYTC 正誼堂全書 SPPY 四部備要
SPTK 四部叢刊 TSCC 叢書集成
and TSD 大正新修大藏經 and SBE [Sacred Books of the East], all titles of books and periodicals are cited in complete form in the first references made to them.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1472 Birth of Wang Yang-ming, on October 31, at Yü-yao.
- 1482 Family moves to Peking.
- 1484 Death of his mother.
- 1488 Going to Kiangsi to get married.
- 1489 Visit to the philosopher Lou Liang (1422-91).
- 1492 Passing provincial examinations.
- 1499 Wang Yang-ming receives the chin-shih degree and serves in minor official posts.
- 1501 Visits to many Buddhist and Taoist monasteries in Anhwei.
- 1502 Retirement in the "Yang-ming Cave" and practice of Taoist cultivation (several months).
- 1504 Return to official life and Confucian principles.
- 1505 Yang-ming begins to receive disciples as a Confucian teacher.
Meeting with Chan Jo-shui.
- 1506 Flogging and imprisonment as a result of his memorial intervening in favour of some officials imprisoned unjustly by the powerful eunuch Liu Chin.
- 1507 Exile to Kweichow.
- 1508 Enlightenment: Yang-ming realises that li is to be found in hsin the mind-and-heart.
- 1509 He begins to speak of the Unity of Knowledge and Action.
- 1510 Return from exile, to Kiangsi and Peking.
- 1511 Minor official posts and teaching of philosophy in Peking, Nanking and other places.
- 1516 Yang-ming is appointed Censor-in-Chief and Grand Co-ordinator of the border-regions of Kiangsi, Kwangtung and Fukien.
- 1517-8 Pacification of bandits and re-organisation of local government.

- 1518 Publication of two works:
 "The Old Version of the Great Learning"
 "The Definitive Views of Chu Hsi, arrived
 at Late in Life."
 Hsüeh K'an, Wang Yang-ming's disciple, publishes
 the first collection of his recorded conversa-
 tions, the Ch'uan-hsi lu.
- 1519 Suppression of the rebellion of Prince Ch'en-
 hao.
 Southern expedition of Emperor Wu-tsung (r.1506-
 21).
- 1520 Emperor Wu-tsung returns to Peking.
- 1521 Yang-ming begins to speak of the "extension of
 liang-chih."
 Accession of Emperor Shih-tsung (r.1522-66).
 Honours accorded to Yang-ming.
- 1522 Death of Yang-ming's father.
- 1522-27 Six years of teaching in retirement.
- 1527 Recall to active service, to suppress rebellions
 in Kwangsi.
 Teaching of "Four Maxims".
- 1528 Pacification and re-organisation of Kwangsi.
 Yang-ming's health deteriorates steadily.
 Homebound journey.
- 1529 Death of Yang-ming, on his way home, on January
 9 at Nan-an, Kiangsi.