

A Study on the Complementary Phenomenon of Confucianism and Daoism in Wang Yangming's Thought

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Abstract: Wang Yangming, as a representative figure of the new Confucianism in the Ming Dynasty, was deeply influenced by the intellectual trend of synthesizing the three teachings since the Tang and Song Dynasties and the complementarity of Confucianism and Daoism. He ingeniously integrated the cultural essences of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, forming the unique philosophy of Yangming's mind. The formation of this ideology not only originated from his distant family cultural tradition but also closely related to his unique life experiences. In Yangming's mind philosophy, the complementary features of Confucianism and Daoism are particularly evident. Based on the ontology of mind philosophy, Wang Yangming actively drew on Daoist speculative philosophy, daringly questioned Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, and developed Confucianism by incorporating Daoism. This had a profound impact on the intellectual and literary artistic creation of ancient Chinese literati. His thoughts reveal the rich results brought about by the exchange and collision of diverse cultures in the development of ancient Chinese philosophy. In the history of Chinese thought, it has unique philosophical connotations and research value. Exploring the complementary phenomenon of Confucianism and Daoism in Wang Yangming's thought contributes to a deeper study and understanding of his philosophy.

Keywords: Wang Yangming, Complementarity of Confucianism and Daoism, Yangming's Mind Philosophy, Ancient Chinese Philosophy

1. Introduction

Wang Yangming (1472-1529) is the epitome of Lu-Wang School of mind learning, and he stands as one of the most significant philosophers in the intellectual history of the Ming Dynasty and Chinese thought as a whole. He claimed to have spent "thirty years in and out of Buddhism and Daoism," indicating his in-depth study and comprehension of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian thoughts. The emergence and development of Yangming's mind philosophy are closely tied to Wang Yangming's integration of Confucianism and Daoism, showcasing the profound impact of his complementary philosophical achievements not only on subsequent Confucian thinking but also on the positive promotion of the development of traditional Chinese culture. This paper will explore the background, manifestations, and significance of the complementary phenomenon of Confucianism and Daoism in light of Wang Yangming's life experiences and key philosophical propositions.

2. Tracing and Researching Wang Yangming's Complementary Philosophy of Confucianism and Daoism

2.1. The Background of Wang Yangming's Complementary Philosophy of Confucianism and Daoism

The formation of the complementary characteristics of Wang Yangming's Confucianism and Daoism is closely linked to his family's cultural background and life experiences. According to historical research, Wang Yangming's affiliation with the "Yaojiang Mitu Mountain School" traces back to the family lineage of the uncle of the prominent calligrapher Wang Xizhi from the Jin Dynasty [1], showcasing a profound cultural heritage. During the Jin Dynasty, the Wang family migrated to the south to escape warfare, leading subsequent generations to a life of daytime farming and poetry composition under the moon. This lifestyle provided conditions for the later acceptance of Daoist thinking. Historical records confirm that several of Wang Yangming's ancestors were indeed influenced to a certain extent by Daoist ideas of tranquility and inaction, establishing myriad connections between the Wang family and Daoism. The family possessed characteristics of both Confucianism and Daoism, creating an indelible influence on Wang Yangming's assimilation of Confucian and Daoist thoughts.

2.1.1. Records on Wang Yangming's Ancestors Embracing Confucianism and Daoism

Wang Yangming's sixth-generation ancestor, Wang Gang, styled Xingchang, was renowned for his literary talent along with his brothers Bingchang and Jingchang. However, he was not fond of officialdom, remaining indifferent to fame and fortune and often "traveled between mountains and rivers." Towards the end of the Yuan Dynasty, Wang Xingchang and his mother encountered Daoist Zhao Yuan Du from Mount Zhongnan while escaping the ravages of war. The two shared a deep connection, and Zhao Yuan Du "taught him divination and personally divined for Xingchang." Later, when Wang Xingchang advised Liu Bowen, he referred to his own nature being in the mountains and hills, expressing his wish not to be burdened by worldly affairs, stating, "Fortunately, not being entangled by worldly ties is already virtuous." [2] This reluctance to be troubled by mundane matters vividly demonstrates his Daoist spirit and indicates that Wang Xingchang had achieved a certain level of proficiency in Daoist and Taoist philosophical cultivation. However, after being recommended by Liu Bowen, Wang Xingchang chose to enter the government, assisting Wang Yanda in suppressing the Chaozhou rebellion. The people of Chaozhou were grateful, acknowledging their offenses, and his influence greatly increased, revealing the dual characteristics of both Confucianism and Daoism in his thinking. Wang Yanda, the eldest son of Wang Xingchang and the fifth-generation ancestor of Wang Yangming, continued his father's legacy after Wang Xingchang was killed by pirates. He "mourned his father's loyal death, personally cultivated the fields to support his mother, wore ragged clothes, and endured meager meals, never seeking an official career [2]." Wang Yangming's great-grandfather, Wang Yu, followed his father's aspirations and focused on scholarly pursuits, showing no interest in officialdom. Like his ancestors, Wang Yangming's grandfather, Wang Lun, was also erudite and talented. He had a deep affection for bamboo, earning him the title Bamboo Pavilion Master. Records in "Biography of Master Bamboo Pavilion" state: "(Wang Lun) loved bamboo and planted it in a ring outside his pavilion, reciting poems among them daily. When he observed the bustling and profit-seeking, he remained aloof." He regarded bamboo as a sincere and trustworthy friend, learning from its qualities of disdaining wealth and fame. Those who knew him considered his demeanor as open-minded and comparable to renowned figures like Tao Jingjie and Lin Hejing [3]. Wei Han believes that Wang Lun, compared to the famous recluses Tao Qian and Lin Bu, was equally remarkable, demonstrating Wang Lun's profound Daoist cultivation and the complementary

characteristics of Confucianism and Daoism. Zhu Xiaopeng points out that traditional Chinese society respects family traditions, and the ancestral concepts, achievements, and character performances will accumulate into a family's cultural tradition, influencing the ideological will of future generations[4]. Daoist cultural thinking shaped the Wang family's "hidden conduct and hidden virtue," while mainstream Confucian thinking incorporated the active involvement of the Wang family in societal affairs. The convergence of these two streams of thought, the complementary nature of Confucianism and Daoism, became more pronounced in Wang Yangming's generation.

2.1.2. Evolution of Wang Yangming's Thought

From a young age, Wang Yangming studied under his grandfather, Wang Lun, gaining not only extensive knowledge of Confucian traditional culture but also imbibing the Daoist philosophy of carefree and unrestrained living. This shaped his daring and intellectually agile character. According to the "Chronicles," Wang Yangming developed an interest in Daoist practices at the age of eight. At seventeen, when he married Zhu, the daughter of Zhu Yanghe in Nanchang, he accidentally entered the Iron Pillar Temple on his wedding day, hearing the Daoist's teachings on nurturing life. He sat in quiet meditation with the Daoist, inadvertently delaying the timing of his wedding. At eighteen, he extensively read the works of Zhu Xi, attempting to practice the doctrine of "investigate things to gain knowledge." Faced with continuous contemplation of bamboo for seven days and nights without attaining the principles of the sage, he turned to question Zhu Xi's propositions. At twenty-five, after repeated failures in the imperial examinations, he exclaimed, "I am not ashamed of failing the exam; I am ashamed that my heart is affected by the failure." Despite aspiring to a career in government, his determination remained unshaken despite setbacks in the officialdom, showcasing the indelible imprint of the complementary Confucian and Daoist thoughts in Wang Yangming's mind.

The question of the way of the sage was a core issue Wang Yangming focused on in his early years. After diligently studying Confucian classics without grasping their essence, he immersed himself in Buddhist and Daoist studies, feeling joyous at the insights gained and believing that the way of the sage lay in these teachings. However, upon practical application, he found shortcomings in Buddhist and Daoist teachings. During this period, Wang Yangming maintained an ambiguous attitude toward Daoism, characterized by "adherence, deviation, back-and-forth, belief, and doubt. [5]" At the age of thirty-one, he built a dwelling in Yangming Cave, leading a secluded life for self-cultivation. He gradually realized the inadequacies of Buddhist and Daoist teachings and "began to think about worldly matters," indicating that while he harbored the desire for seclusion, he never forgot his aspiration for worldly achievements. This laid the ideological foundation for his later establishment of Yangming Neo-Confucianism. In the first year of the Zhengde era, Wang Yangming was demoted to Longchang, where he experienced a profound realization. He regretted indulging in Daoist practices and returned to Confucian culture, stating, "Now I know the way of the sage. My nature is self-sufficient. Previously seeking principles in external things was a mistake." He believed that the principles reside within the mind, establishing the idea that there is no external principle. Wang Yangming also began to form the basis of his thought, rooted in Confucianism and harmonizing the three teachings, during his enlightenment in Longchang. A famous statement, "Five Immersions and Three Transformations," summarizes Wang Yangming's lifelong learning journey: the "Three Transformations" in learning refer to initially immersing himself in the study of poems and articles, then delving into Buddhism and Daoism, and only after his enlightenment at Longchang did he truly understand the aspirations of the sages. The "Five Immersions" indicate the early immersion in chivalrous practices, followed by archery, then immersion in poetry and literature, the fourth immersion in pursuits related to immortality, and the fifth immersion in Buddhist practices. In the year Bingyin of the Zhengde era, he finally returned to the study of the sages. This succinctly outlines Wang Yangming's comprehensive exploration of Chinese culture, indicating that through continuous

absorption and accumulation of cultural ideas, he integrated the strengths of various schools of thought, achieved the elevation of his mindset, and laid the foundation for his later proposition of the complementary nature of Confucianism and Daoism.

2.2. Results of Wang Yangming's Complementary Confucianism and Daoism

Against the backdrop of the integration of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, Wang Yangming established a philosophical system centered on "mind," making significant breakthroughs from Zhu Xi's idealist philosophy based on the principle of Tianli (Heavenly Principle). His main propositions, such as "nothing exists outside the mind; the mind is the principle," "the unity of knowledge and action," and "cultivating the innate knowledge," all more or less exhibit typical characteristics of Confucianism and Daoism complementarity.

2.2.1. Confucianism and Daoism Complementarity in "The Mind is the Principle"

The characteristics of Confucianism and Daoism complementarity in Yangming Neo-Confucianism are mainly manifested in its rebellion against Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism and its borrowing from Daoist thoughts. Zhu Xi believed that li (principle) is the origin of all things, and humans should seek the sacred principles externally through reading. However, his emphasis on pursuing external things overlooked the objective limitations of human beings and the significance of the dimensional value of thought. While affirming the universality and transcendence of li, he absolutized li, proposing "preserve Heavenly Principle, eliminate human desires." This severed the connection between metaphysical principles and empirical things, creating a detachment between objective Heavenly Principle and subjective psychology, thereby contributing to the rise of Yangming Neo-Confucianism. Wang Yangming questioned and refined Zhu Xi's theories. While affirming the importance of subjective psychology, he connected it with real experiences and sensory perceptions, compensating for the deficiencies in Zhu Xi's thinking. He proposed the concept of "xin ji xing, xing ji li," asserting that the heart is the subject of all things, and the understanding of "li" (principle) should be an internal-to-external cognitive process, in stark contrast to Zhu Xi's learning method of "exploring principles through things." As a universal law of the world, "li" requires people to comprehend it through abstract thinking and then understand the myriad things in the world through the externalization of conscious subjectivity. Wang Yangming's statement, "xin wai wu wu, xin ji li," indicates that "li" is not in the external world but exists within the human mind, emphasizing that "the accomplishment of investigating principles is done only in the body and mind," and seeking principles within the heart is the way of the sage. This proposition tightly links the subjective nature of the human mind with external objects, forcefully refuting Zhu Xi's viewpoint that "principle exists outside the mind." Instead, it advocates that the human mind should follow the perspective of obeying heavenly principles, establishing a form of Confucian-based ontology in his philosophy of the mind.

Wang Yangming's concept of "mind" is also deeply influenced by Daoist culture. Laozi's saying, "The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name," emphasizes that the Dao is hidden without a name, and the great image is formless. This indicates that Laozi recognized and emphasized that the Dao, as a metaphysical existence, cannot be limited by objective things. Therefore, people cannot sense it with their bodies or express it in language. In terms of the relationship between knowledge and existence, Wang Yangming inherited Laozi's epistemological viewpoint of "the Dao that cannot be spoken," creating an intriguing parallel between the "mind" and the "Dao." Wang Yangming believed that "what exists but has never existed is true existence; what does not exist but has never not existed is true non-existence; what is seen but has never been seen is true seeing." He then likened the great Dao to the sky, stating that even though people cannot see the changes of the sky with the sun and moon or the four seasons, it does not mean

these changes do not exist. While people can see the sky, the sky is high and beyond reach, as if it does not exist. This contains the Daoist philosophical thinking of distinguishing existence and non-existence. From “good is my nature, without a visible form to point to, without a fixed location, how can it be derived from any particular place? [6]” we can see that he drew inspiration from Daoist thought of “the mind is the Dao, and the Dao is the mind; there is no Dao outside the mind, and no mind outside the Dao.” He believed that the “Dao” or the essence is an unspeakable realm, linking the “mind” with the “Dao” and emphasizing that the mind’s essence is not an object that can be spoken of. He considered the mind as the essence, possessing the characteristics of “infinite variability and inexhaustibility.” Therefore, individuals should focus on inner cultivation and seek truth within themselves.

2.2.2. The Confucianism and Daoism Complementarity Reflected in the Doctrine of “Innate Knowledge”

In the realm of Mind Learning (Xin Xue), Wang Yangming’s most significant conceptual innovation lies in the introduction of his unique “Innate Knowledge” doctrine. This constitutes a central idea that runs through the mature phase of Wang Yangming’s philosophical thought and serves as a typical manifestation of the complementarity between Confucianism and Daoism. The construction of Wang Yangming’s theory on the ontology of Innate Knowledge not only draws from traditional Confucian ideas but also actively incorporates Daoist metaphysical speculations to establish the study of Innate Knowledge. By leveraging the results of the integration of the three teachings (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism), Wang Yangming’s doctrine of Innate Knowledge reached the pinnacle of metaphysics in the context of the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. This marked a shift in the value dimension of ontology, transforming the fundamental essence of metaphysics from “principle” to “mind,” and from “heavenly principles” to “Innate Knowledge.” In other words, the focus transitioned from the external principles of the world to the spiritual realm constructed through internal mental experiences [4]. The mention of “Innate Knowledge” in the text from Mencius Jinxinshang, specifically in the passage “What one does not deliberate about but knows, that is Innate Knowledge,” emphasizes that Innate Knowledge is an inherent human quality. Mencius believed that with proper guidance, the “Innate Knowledge” within one’s heart would naturally transform into a concept of “benevolence and righteousness.” From the statement “The mind governs the body, nature resides in the mind, and goodness originates from nature; this is Mencius’s assertion that nature is inherently good, [6]” we understand that Wang Yangming concurs with Mencius’s viewpoint. According to Wang Yangming, the mind is the ruler of the body, nature exists within the mind, and the root of goodness is inherent in human nature, referred to as “Innate Knowledge.” Remaining steadfast in the foundational position of Confucianism, Wang Yangming assimilates the insights of Daoist philosophy. He rejects the Daoist metaphysical stance and incorporates Daoist ontological ideas, shifting the ideological focus of the doctrine of Innate Knowledge from “feudal moral principles” to the “essence of the mind.” Drawing on the Daoist perspective of “the unity of substance and function,” Wang Yangming puts forth the notion that the study of Innate Knowledge unifies substance and function. Moreover, he uses this point to highlight the Daoist tendency to completely abandon external affairs, leading to an overemphasis on internalization and resulting in the dichotomy of “substance and function.” This underscores Wang Yangming’s speculative attitude towards Daoist culture.

“No good or evil in the essence of the mind, with good and evil arising from the movement of the will; knowing good and evil is Innate Knowledge, practicing goodness and discarding evil is investigating things.” These four sentences succinctly summarize the core ideological achievements of Yangming Neo-Confucianism. Wang Yangming believed that the essence of the human mind is without the distinction of good and evil. Observations of the external objective world and its laws by the inner mind should not be tainted by personal emotions. Only in this way can one perceive the true

nature of things, achieve insight into everything, and maintain a clear and calm mind. He also incorporated Laozi's speculative results regarding non-prescriptiveness, proposing "supreme goodness is the essence of the mind." This forms a contrast with "no good or evil in the essence of the mind," expressing that the essence of Innate Knowledge is formless but truly has a rationale. The strong Daoist influence is evident in these thoughts. While the essence of the human mind is inevitably influenced by postnatal worldly habits, Innate Knowledge may be obscured by irrational desires. Therefore, Wang Yangming drew on one of the three cardinal principles of Confucianism, "明明德" (manifesting and illuminating virtue), to propose "knowing good and evil is Innate Knowledge." He advocated the promotion of the bright and virtuous qualities within a person's inner self, emphasizing the importance of inner cultivation. He further advocated actively eliminating evil and cultivating goodness in consciousness, refining the original heart, letting the mirror of Innate Knowledge regain its clarity. This is regarded as the unity of essence and function. Wang Yangming's assimilation of Confucianism and Daoism reflects his departure from the limitations of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism, the creation of his own Neo-Confucianism, and the continuous transcendence of his powerful intellectual drive. It is also a prominent feature of Yangming Neo-Confucianism.

2.3. Wang Yangming's Confucianism and Daoism Complementarity: Philosophical Significance

The significance of Wang Yangming's integration of Confucianism and Daoism is primarily manifested in several aspects. By absorbing the foundation of Daoist culture, Yangming's Neo-Confucianism combines Confucian ethics with Daoist speculative philosophy, significantly elevating the speculative level of Confucianism. This integration enhances the completeness of Confucianism in the Ming and Qing dynasties compared to the previous Confucian teachings, further consolidating the dominant position of Confucianism. Furthermore, it anticipates a new cultural and ideological transformation, propelling the development of traditional Chinese philosophy. The Ming and Qing philosophical era emerges as a crucial period in the history of ancient Chinese philosophy. Rooted in Confucian thought, Wang Yangming's philosophy exhibits a spirit of freedom and independence akin to Daoism, fostering a diverse perspective that emphasizes individual subjectivity. These qualities not only significantly impact the intellectual and artistic aspects of Chinese literati but also greatly uplift the national spirit of the Chinese people. The profound implications extend from the Ming Dynasty to subsequent eras, leaving a lasting legacy.

2.3.1. Impact on the Intellectual Spirit

Wang Yangming, hailed as the culmination of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, led a distinguished life and earned the title of "truly immortal." While adhering to Confucian principles and aspiring to contribute to governance, in his later years, Wang Yangming's inclination towards reclusion and withdrawal from worldly affairs, previously abandoned in his youth, resurfaced [7]. Despite establishing himself within Confucianism and creating his own doctrines, Wang Yangming, like many literati and aspiring individuals of the time, found it challenging to realize his ideals in the increasingly dark political atmosphere of the Ming Dynasty. Faced with setbacks in the bureaucratic sphere, he deeply felt the frustration of unrecognized talent and, in turn, focused on the Daoist yearning for reclusion from the world. The late-life return to Daoist sentiments is evident in his poems and writings. Modern literary historian Qian Jibo praised Wang Yangming's literary prowess, recognizing the pursuit of a self-sufficient, free, and relaxed approach to life reflected in his poetry. This showcases Wang Yangming's spirit of transcendence and independence, extending beyond the reach of typical Confucianism. Simultaneously, Wang Yangming maintained the virtues pursued by Confucians, combining the realms of Confucian and Daoist ideals. The complementary qualities of

Confucianism and Daoism in his character were undeniable. The spiritual world constructed through Wang Yangming's poetry propelled a prevailing trend of literati reclusion in the later period of the Ming Dynasty, fostering diverse approaches to life. Many literati rejected the utilitarian pursuit of a "discarded woman" mentality, and "market reclusion" and "official reclusion" increasingly became prevalent survival modes in the minds of literati.

2.3.2. Contribution to the Development of Confucianism

By the mid to late Ming Dynasty, Yangming Neo-Confucianism had spread throughout the country, forming a situation where "disciples were everywhere, spreading for over a hundred years." The influence of Yangming Neo-Confucianism extended to countries such as Japan and Korea, even playing a role in Japan's Meiji Restoration. This became known as the Yaojiang School and played a crucial role in the improvement of the Confucian system. Take "unity of knowledge and action" as an example; Wang Yangming lamented that Zhu Xi's idea of "knowledge precedes action" had overshadowed the literary and political scene of that time [8]. As Yangming Neo-Confucianism continued to gain influence, adhering to the principles of Confucian philosophy and the Daoist concept of "knowledge and action as one" became a part of the intellectual thinking of literati. It overcame the drawbacks of the Neo-Confucianism school and restored Confucian thought to reality, solidifying Confucianism's political position. With the gradual perfection and dominant position of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, the offshoots of Buddhism and Daoism had to adjust their own ideological systems to adapt to the development of the times, incorporating Confucian principles to stay relevant.

2.3.3. Inspiration for Artistic and Cultural Creation Post-Ming

Yangming Neo-Confucianism also exerted a certain influence on the development of artistic and cultural creation in the post-Ming era. In the Ming dynasty, the legendary play "The Peony Pavilion" written by the playwright Tang Xianzu contains the lines: "Emotions arise without knowledge of their origin, persisting deeply. The living can die, and the dead can live; the living cannot be with the dead, and the dead cannot be revived. This is the utmost extent of emotions." The female protagonist, Du Liniang, falls deeply in love with the scholar Liu Mengmei in her dreams. Eventually, overwhelmed by her emotions, she dies for love. In the afterlife, as a ghost, she finds true love and experiences a resurrection. The theme of intense longing, death for love, and the resurrection of true love contradicts the Neo-Confucian ethical viewpoint of Cheng-Zhu School, emphasizing "upholding heavenly principles and extinguishing human desires." This reflects the ideological essence of Yangming Neo-Confucianism, breaking free from ethical constraints and pursuing the liberation of body and mind. Another example is the classic novel "Journey to the West," one of the Four Great Classical Novels. This work is influenced by Yangming Neo-Confucianism's emphasis on human subjectivity. The journey of Tang Sanzang and his companions to the west to eliminate demons intentionally advocates the will to overthrow the oppression of feudal rituals, promoting ideological liberation and self-awareness. Particularly, the character of Sun Wukong, with his rebellious acts like causing havoc in heaven and altering the Book of Life and Death, embodies a spirit of rebellion. Sun Wukong's pursuit of freedom, the spirit of rebellion, and the spiritual journey from "resistance" to "personal growth" to "universalization" effectively integrate the conceptual essence of Yangming's Neo-Confucianism. The inclusive nature of Yangming Neo-Confucianism, blending Confucian and Daoist elements, has become a conceptual support for creating meaning and value within traditional classics.

3. Conclusion

In summary, Wang Yangming, influenced by the cultural traditions of his family, embarked on the

exploration of Confucian and Daoist teachings from a young age. His insightful and unique understanding of the integration of Confucian and Daoist thoughts reflects a profound connection to the cultural heritage. Wang Yangming's Mind Learning (Yangming Xin Xue) is rooted in Confucian culture, yet it seamlessly integrates with Daoist philosophy, mutually enriching and utilizing each other. Throughout its developmental process, these two streams converge with a shared origin, presenting a distinctive form of coexistence and mutual complementarity. From its inception, they have demonstrated a form that is both parallel and complementary. In the process of adjustment and transformation, they further refine the theoretical framework of Wang Yangming's Mind Learning, becoming a unique manifestation within Chinese culture. This phenomenon significantly propels the development of the intellectual and political ideologies of Chinese literati, contributing to the advancement of traditional philosophy. It also underscores the overarching trend of diversity and intellectual openness within Chinese culture.

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