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WANG YANGMING IN BEIJING, 1510–1512: “IF I DO NOT AWAKEN OTHERS, WHO WILL DO SO?”*

ABSTRACT

After being recalled to Beijing in 1510 for evaluation and reassignment in the wake of his two-year exile to Guizhou and his period of service as a magistrate, Wang Yangming was assigned to a succession of posts at the capital that kept him there through 1512. During that short time, he remained disillusioned with the Ming court and high politics and chose to put his energies into fostering a philosophical movement. He believed that by restoring the “way of master-disciple relations and friendship,” he could help propagate the learning of the sages. To that end, he held *jiangxue* gatherings with colleagues and friends and carried on an active correspondence. In those venues, Wang Yangming engaged others with his ideas about the goal of sagehood, the obstacles to attaining it, and the methods for overcoming those obstacles. The following article reconstructs this critical period in Wang Yangming’s philosophical development and the intellectual movement he sought to foster, as well as the status of his philosophy as of this point in time.

INTRODUCTION

During the last month of the seventh year of the Zhengde emperor’s reign (1512), Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) was appointed to serve as vice minister in the Nanjing Court of the Imperial Stud.¹ Consequently, he had to relocate from Beijing—where he had lived since the fall of 1510—to Chuzhou 滁州, a city located just to the northwest of Nanjing.² He soon departed, but first he took advantage of the promotion to return to Shaoxing 紹興 and visit his family. During his trip down the Grand Canal, Wang Yangming was accompanied by Xu Ai 徐愛 (1487–1517), who had returned to Beijing in 1512 after serving as prefect of Qizhou 祁州 for three years.³ Xu was native to Wang’s hometown of Yuyao 余姚, had married Wang’s younger sister, and, in 1507, formally presented himself as a student. That declaration made him Wang

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*I would like to thank Professor Dong Ping of Zhejiang University for providing me the unfettered free time I needed to complete this article.

¹Where possible, I have changed dates from the Chinese to the western calendar. When sources only indicate months (following the Chinese calendar), I have retained those.

²Wang Yangming 王陽明, *Wang Yangming quan ji* 王陽明全集, vol. 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992), 33.1231. Hereafter, *WYMQJ*.

³Liu Linchang 劉麟長, “Ming Yueren xiansheng Xu Ai 明曰仁先生徐愛,” in *Xu Ai, Qian Dehong, Dong Yun ji* 徐愛, 錢德洪, 董澐集, edited by Qian Ming 錢明 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), 384–85.

Yangming's first follower. So important would he become to his master that when Xu passed away in 1517 at the young age of thirty-one, Wang stated that he was his Yan Yuan 顏淵, putting him on a par with Confucius's most beloved disciple, who likewise died at a young age. Indeed, one day, while pacing around the columns of his house after holding a frustrating session of philosophical discussion and inquiry with students, Wang quipped, "If only I could raise Xu from the dead to hear this!"⁴

Given Xu's important role in developing an organizational foundation for the formation of Wang Yangming's school and promoting his thought, such warm compliments hardly seem surprising. Shortly after Xu made his formal declaration in 1507, his master departed for his assignment at a postal station in distant Guizhou, where he was sent as punishment for speaking up to the emperor and running afoul of the court eunuch Liu Jin 劉瑾. The two would not have occasion to cross paths again until both were in Beijing in 1511. In the meantime, Xu obtained his *jinsi* degree in 1508, and was then appointed prefect in 1509.⁵ That prefecture's location in northern Hubei meant he was charged to govern an area caught in the midst of raging banditry and rebellions. During his period of service, he not only repeatedly put up an admirable defense against roving brigands but also went after the causes of commoner discontent by prosecuting powerful lineages, lowly government functionaries, and agents of Liu, all of whom were preying on the local population. Indeed, upon Xu's departure, locals built a living memorial in honor of his service.⁶

After Xu returned to the capital in mid-1512 for his three-year evaluation and reassignment, he spent the remaining six months with Wang Yangming, "from morning until evening receiving instruction."⁷ Fortunately for him, during the same month that Wang received his assignment to Nanjing, Xu was promoted to deputy bureau director in the Nanjing Ministry of War.⁸ Hence, they were able to travel together to their home province of Zhejiang, and departed late that year.

While they travelled, Xu reviewed Wang's correspondence and realized that he was unfamiliar with many of his master's students and associates. As he described the scene in Beijing after Wang was summoned there in 1510, "[Wang] lived there for over a year, and during that time a substantial crowd kept company with him."⁹ Xu was so moved by this that he composed a volume listing their names. He also recorded their hometowns, ages, and the point at which each studied under his master. "For a long time this Way had not been made known to all under Heaven," Xu wrote, estimating the importance of the phenomenon. "Ever since Master [Wang] again brought [the Way] to

⁴Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, "Langzhong Xu Hengshan xiansheng Ai 郎中徐橫山先生愛," in *Xu Ai, Qian Dehong, Dong Yun ji*, edited by Qian Ming (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), 388–89. For a translation, see Huang Tsung-hsi, *The Records of Ming Scholars*, edited by Julia Ching (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987), 109–11.

⁵Liu, "Ming yueren xiansheng Xu Ai," 384.

⁶Xiao Mingfeng 蕭鳴鳳, "Ming gu feng yi dafu Nanjing gongbu du shui qing li si langzhong Xu jun muzhiming" 明故奉義大夫南京工部都水清吏司郎中徐君墓誌銘, in *Xu Ai, Qian Dehong, Dong Yun ji*, edited by Qian Ming (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), 92.

⁷Liu, "Ming Yueren xiansheng Xu Ai," 385.

⁸Xiao, "Ming gu feng yi dafu," 92.

⁹Xu Ai 徐愛, "Tongzhi kao xu" 同志考序, in *Xu Ai, Qian Dehong, Dong Yun ji*, edited by Qian Ming (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), 56.

light, the world has been very suspicious, viewing it as eccentric. Hence, should there be individuals capable of stepping forward with extraordinary sincerity, having faith in it without being inhibited [by such opinions], shall they not be called heroes?"¹⁰ These heroes, Xu insisted, were the ones whose duty was to share their insights with and spur one another on, so that this Way would once again become manifest to the world.¹¹ And as the first student of Wang's gate (*men ren* 門人: lit. "student of his gate"), it was incumbent upon Xu to document this following.

In addition, Xu assembled a record of important discussions he had held with Wang Yangming while they were together in Beijing. That made him the first student to give substantial written testimony of what his master taught the students whose identities he was documenting. Xu's preface, introduction, and postface to this record explain why he chose to do so. Under ideal circumstances, where students could gather together with their master and have their needs individually addressed, such a volume would be unnecessary. In fact, Xu admitted that choosing to make such a record was antithetical to his master's wishes and incurred some criticism from Wang's followers. Wang had pointed out that sages and worthies teach their students in the manner of a physician prescribing medicine for an ailment: what one patient requires might in fact be dangerous to another, even deadly. In terms of teaching, Wang had told them, "Now, with you gentleman, I do nothing more than diagnose and polish away each of your particular prejudices or obsessions. As soon as you manage to make these changes, my words become nothing but useless tumors." That is, Wang feared that if written down, his teachings would be adhered to dogmatically, doing a disservice to others and even positively wronging them: "Could I ever atone for such an offense?"¹²

Nevertheless, Xu pleaded his case by pointing out that not permitting such a record would be reasonable only should Wang's adherents be able to remain together forever at their master's gate. But the reality was that they would often be apart and therefore unable to give advice to one another. Indeed, Xu noted, "without having these words at all times facing him and warning him, few indeed are those who won't fail."¹³ Hence, his hope was that, "if from this record we can grasp the general idea of his teachings and sincerely realize them in concrete action, then this record is truly the heart-mind of the Master, which can talk [to us] all day."¹⁴

Xu had another important reason for making this first such record: he strongly felt that the treatment Wang was receiving from "the gentlemen of the day" was altogether wrongheaded and uninformed. Consequently, he wished to compile Wang's supposedly controversial ideas and by so doing set the record straight. After wrestling with many doubts about them, Xu had come to the realization that these ideas were indeed the "correct transmission of the gate of Confucius."¹⁵ "Like the coldness of water, like the

¹⁰Xu, "Tongzhi kao xu," 56–57.

¹¹Xu, "Tongzhi kao xu," 57.

¹²Xu Ai 徐愛, "Chuan xi lu xu" 傳習錄序, in Xu Ai, *Qian Dehong, Dong Yun ji*, edited by Qian Ming (Nanjing: Fenghuang Chubanshe, 2007), 90. The translation is adopted from Philip Ivanhoe's work. See his *Readings from the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009), 131.

¹³Xu, "Chuan xi lu xu," 91.

¹⁴Xu, "Chuan xi lu xu," 90. For this translation, see Ivanhoe, *Readings*, 132.

¹⁵Xu Ai 徐愛, "Chuan xi lu ba 傳習錄跋," in Xu Ai, *Qian Dehong, Dong Yun ji*, edited by Qian Ming (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), 90.

heat of a fire—[a person] can absolutely wait one hundred generations for the coming of a sage without becoming confused,” Xu claimed.¹⁶ Yet, in spite of the fact that they had no real knowledge of his teachings, literati were belittling and ridiculing Wang, claiming that he had put forward such startling ideas only to draw attention to himself. What they didn’t know, Xu explained, is “that by living for three years in a barbarous region, overcoming difficulties and cultivating tranquility, our Master became ‘wholly refined and [wholly] focused.’ He surely has passed beyond [ordinary men] and entered the realm of sages, where everything is perfectly in accord with the grand mean and what is absolutely correct.”¹⁷

Xu’s prefaced list and record of discussions outline the state of Wang Yangming’s teaching as of the Beijing years, indicate how and why he was fostering a following during this time, and hint at how national elites residing in the Ming capital were receiving his ideas and conduct. Yet, although it is well known that Wang unveiled his earliest doctrines to a provincial audience while he was in Guizhou, the greater significance of these two years for his growing reputation has not been fully documented. Unfortunately, Xu’s “Verification of Associates” has been lost. But twenty of the individuals he included show up in Wang’s *Chronological Biography*.¹⁸ Moreover, the record of discussions is very brief, containing only fourteen entries. Fortunately, Wang Yangming’s other correspondence and literature pertaining to this time and those with whom he socialized help a great deal. In sum, these materials provide a more complete picture of conditions in the capital and how and why Wang went about fostering an intellectual movement.¹⁹

THE BEIJING YEARS

Wang Yangming lived in Beijing for two years because he was assigned to a series of central government offices located there. He likely arrived in the tenth (lunar) month of 1510, when he was summoned for evaluation and rating. Although sources don’t explain why what should normally have been a three-year stint as a county magistrate was abruptly interrupted after only six months, it seems likely that this summons had something to do with the eunuch Liu Jin’s execution on September 27, 1510. After the eunuch that had dominated the court since 1507 was convicted of treason and dismembered, the court received a flurry of memorials calling for punishment of officials

¹⁶Xu Ai 徐愛, “Chuan xi lu ti ci” 傳習錄題辭, Xu Ai, *Qian Dehong, Dong Yun ji*, edited by Qian Ming (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), 89.

¹⁷Xu, “Chuan xi lu ti ci,” 89. For this translation, see Ivanhoe, *Readings*, 133.

¹⁸Qian Dehong 錢德洪, ed., “Nianpu” 年譜, in *WYMQJ*, vol. 2, 33.1235. Hereafter, *NP*.

¹⁹For an intellectual biography in Japanese that touches upon Wang Yangming’s years in Beijing, see Okada Takehiko 岡田武彦, *Ō Yōmei taiden* 王陽明大伝, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Meitoku, 2003), 233–95. Okada covers the historical background, albeit without more recently published materials, and then explains why Wang Yangming turned to the old edition of the *Great Learning* 大学, as well as his new interpretation of key Neo-Confucian terminology, including the highest good, investigation of things, and making the will sincere. A more recent historical study in Chinese of the development of his philosophy at this time can be found in Yang Zhengxian 楊正顯, *Jue shi zhi dao: Wang Yangming liangzhi shuo de xingcheng* 覺世之道：王陽明良知說的形成 (Beijing: Beijing Shifan Daxue chubanshe, 2015), 56–77. He explains how a dark political environment led Wang Yangming to focus on individual morality, especially the “learning of the noble man,” which primarily entailed illuminating mind.

tainted by association with him and rehabilitating others who had paid a price for their opposition. In brief, as Daniel Bryant has characterized it, a “turning of the political tide” swept members of officialdom in different directions.²⁰

Sometime in the ninth or tenth (lunar) month of 1510, Wang departed Luling 廬陵, Jiangxi, and traveled to the capital for his review and reassignment. He was then appointed secretary in the Sichuan Bureau of the Nanjing Ministry of Justice.²¹ At first, he stayed at the Temple of the Great Flourishing (Da Xing Long Si 大興隆寺).²² Located along West Chang’an Boulevard southwest of the Imperial City, this temple was one of the largest in Beijing, as well as a site for literati gatherings. Soon thereafter, he took up residence next to Zhan Ruoshui 湛若水 (1466–1560) in “Ash Place,” a site where brick-making materials were normally stored, also located to the southwest of the Imperial City. Upon arriving in the capital, so Zhan tells us, Wang immediately sought out his old friend and told him “now we can be neighbors!”²³

Judging from the normally authoritative *Chronological Biography*, upon arriving in Beijing near the end of the year, Wang remained there until he departed at the end of 1512.²⁴ Yet a few pieces of poetry included in the 2011 edition of the *Collected Works of Wang Yangming* reveal that in the first and second months of 1511, he traveled from Nanjing to his home in Shaoxing and then returned to Beijing.²⁵ Hence, he must have gone to Nanjing late in the year to take up his new assignment, but then returned because his friends wanted him to be where they were.

Here is how the story likely unfolded. Upon arriving in Beijing, Wang Yangming began to see a steady stream of visitors, some former friends and acquaintances and some new. Among those visitors was Huang Wan 黃綰 (style name Zongxian 宗賢, 1480–1554), the scholar and at times official who eventually became so important to Wang’s story because of the lifelong friendship they were about to form. Huang hailed from a gentry family located in Taizhou prefecture 台州府, Zhejiang. Both his father and grandfather had obtained their *jinshi* degrees and established a distinguished record of service to the Ming court.²⁶ In 1510, Huang was serving as an office manager handling clerical work in the Rear Chief Military Commission. That position made him a low-ranking central government official.²⁷ In fact, Huang had always been reticent about

²⁰Daniel Bryant, *The Great Recreation: Ho Ching-ming (1483–1521) and His World* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 287. For memorials calling for the impeachment of officials with ties to Liu Jin or recall of others who had been cashiered by him see, for example, Xia Xie 霞變, *Ming tong jian* 明通鑑 (1873; several modern editions), *juan* 43, 8/18/1510; *juan* 44, 1/26/1511.

²¹*NP*, 33.1231. Qian states that Wang entered the capital for evaluation in the eleventh month and received the Nanjing assignment in the twelfth month. But Wang’s 1517 memorial listing his series of appointments states that the assignment was received in the tenth lunar month (*WYMJQ*, vol. 1, 9.299), making that month the more likely time of his arrival in the capital.

²²*NP*, 33.1231.

²³Zhan Ruoshui 湛若水, “Yangming xiansheng muzhiming” 陽明先生墓誌銘, in *WYMJQ*, vol. 2, 38.1403.

²⁴*NP*, 33.1230–31.

²⁵For a discussion of the evidence, see Shu Jingnan 束景南, *Yangming yi wen ji kao biannian* 王陽明佚文稽考編年, vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), 320.

²⁶Zhang Hongmin 張宏敏, *Huang Wan shengping xueshu biannian* 黃綰生平學術編年 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Daxue Chubanshe, 2013), 3–5.

²⁷Zhang, *Huang Wan shengping*, 47.

serving, and also declined to participate in the provincial or metropolitan examinations. But after his three-year period of mourning for his father concluded in 1509, Huang's mother urged him to seek office by taking advantage of the protection privilege granted to his grandfather for his meritorious service.²⁸

In his *Record*, Huang explains in some detail how his relationship with Wang Yangming first developed. He was aware of him because their families, both from Zhejiang, had enjoyed good relations for generations. Yet, in spite of this and his similarly lifelong pursuit of the learning of the sages, he had yet to meet Wang in person and study his thought. At the urging of his close friend Chu Quan 儲燾 (1457–1513, *js.* 1484), he finally paid him a visit. Chu—who in 1510 was serving as vice minister of the Ministry of Revenue—had sent Huang a letter stating that “recently scholars such as Master Wang Bo’an 伯安 are moving in a positive direction. His attainments are deep, and he doesn’t solely focus on literary composition. If you are of a mind to go spend time with him, the benefits you will realize from the friendship won’t necessarily be insignificant.”²⁹

Huang recounted his first visit:

Because [of Chu Quan’s letter] I came to admire Master [Wang] and that evening went to see him. When I arrived, Master Zhan was seated together with him in a room, and Master [Wang] came out to speak with me, stating with joy, “This learning has been extinguished for a long time. What did you hear that led you to rush over here?” I replied, “Although I have some crude aspirations, I have not in fact really applied myself.” Master [Wang] responded, “you should only be concerned that you are lacking in determination, and not that you are without accomplishments.”³⁰

Wang also asked his visitor whether or not he was acquainted with Zhan Ruoshui, proposing that he return to his residence the next day and join them. Upon going home that night, Huang recounted, “I still dreamt that this was happening, with Sir Yangming present. So not daring to sprout a hair of selfishness, like a steady stream, I would visit him, and thereafter I no longer knew of my own one hundred bones and nine orifices.”³¹

Huang did indeed take up the invitation to meet the Hanlin Academician. His first impression was that “[Zhan] was straightforward in appearance, he was focused, and what he had to say to me was subtle and complete.”³² Finding themselves to be like-minded, the three men “really connected,” and hence formed a covenant, vowing to study the Way together to the end of their lives.³³ Subsequently, Huang regularly frequented both of their courtyards: “Whenever we had the slightest break from our official duties, we never failed to meet together to *jiangxue* 講學 [discuss and learn]; whatever we did each day, we would make sure to do it together and encourage one another.”³⁴

²⁸Zhang, *Huang Wan shengping*, 47.

²⁹Huang Wan 黃綰, “Yangming xiansheng xingzhuang” 陽明先生行狀, in *WYMQJ*, vol. 2, 39.1409. Huang’s recollections leave the impression that this advice dates to 1510, yet Chu stated this in a letter sent to Huang Wan in 1507. For this letter, see Zhang, *Huang Wan shengping*, 41.

³⁰Huang, “Yangming xiansheng,” in *WYMQJ*, vol. 2, 39.1409.

³¹Huang Wan 黃綰, *Huang Wan ji* 黃綰集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2014), 11.186–87.

³²Huang, “Yangming xiansheng,” in *WYMQJ*, vol. 2, 39.1409.

³³Huang, “Yangming xiansheng,” in *WYMQJ*, vol. 2, 39.1409.

³⁴Huang, “Yangming xiansheng,” 39.1409–10.

Although Huang Wan doesn't indicate that his new friend in the Way departed for a brief time to take up the assignment in Nanjing, he does explain why Wang would have had to return to the capital after his whirlwind trip. As he recounts it, Zhan brought up Wang's situation with him, and believed that Minister of Personnel Yang Yiqing 楊一清 might intervene. He proposed contacting their mutual acquaintance Qiao Yu 喬宇—a well-connected member of the national elite then serving as vice director of the Ministry of Revenue—and asking him to convey their wishes.³⁵

Yang Yiqing was indeed the right person to ask. For one thing, he had successfully managed the aftermath of the rebellion by the Anhua Prince 安化王 in early 1510, right after local forces had trounced it. That management included instigating the downfall of Liu Jin by having another court eunuch, Zhang Yong 張永, bring a list of charges against him before the emperor. For his service, Yang was first appointed Minister of Revenue and then, in early 1511, Minister of Personnel.³⁶ Holding that office put him in charge of the ministry that managed the career tracks of officialdom. In addition, Yang was an old friend to Wang Yangming's father, Wang Hua 王華.³⁷ Likely, Wang viewed Yang Yiqing not only as a senior colleague but also as a teacher. Hence, as Yang rose through the ranks at the capital, he may have sought to train and promote men close to him, including Wang. For these reasons, it made sense to approach him, and he did in fact help out. In the first month of 1511, due to Yang's influence, Wang was appointed secretary in the Bureau of Honors at the Ministry of Personnel.³⁸

After he returned to the capital sometime during the second month of 1511, Wang was additionally tasked by the Ministry of Rites with serving as an assisting examiner for the triennial metropolitan examination. This role required him to read the examination papers of hundreds of aspiring candidates who had flocked to the capital in the hopes that they would win the highest degree and hence join the national elite. The presiding examiners were two grand secretaries, while the assisting graders included Zhan Ruoshui and other prominent capital officials with some reputation for literary talent. Importantly, in Ming China, successful examinees formed a special bond with their examiners, as a type of student-teacher relationship. That is the likely explanation for why several new metropolitan graduates showed up as students to or correspondents with Wang Yangming during his Beijing years. Their identities will be explored in the next section.

Sometime that spring, after the examinations were graded, some of the new graduates and now students to Wang Yangming, as well as some close friends and colleagues, accompanied him on an excursion to Fragrant Hills. These were mountains located on the northwestern outskirts of Beijing. Wang's company included Xu Ai, who had apparently taken a break from his assignment in Qizhou; his colleagues (and students) Huang Wan, Fang Xianfu 方獻夫, and Gu Yingxiang 顧應祥; and newly minted *jinshi* degree holders Ying Liang 應良, Liang Gu 梁穀, Wang Dao 王道, and Wang Yuanzheng 王元正.³⁹

³⁵Huang, "Yangming xiansheng," 39.1409–10.

³⁶Tse Yun-chip 謝雋擘, *Yang Yiqing de zhengzhi shengya* 楊一清的政治生涯 (Taizhong: Bai Xiang Wenhua, 2011), 45–48.

³⁷Both served in the capital under the Hongzhi emperor, and Yang Yiqing composed an epitaph for Wang Hua. See Yang Yiqing 楊一清, "Haini xiansheng xingzhuang" 海日先生行狀, in *WYMQJ*, vol. 2, 38.1385.

³⁸Huang, "Yangming xiansheng," in *WYMQJ*, vol. 2, 39.1409.

³⁹Zhang, *Huang Wan shengping*, 51.

Much poetry was composed as part of the trip, capturing the emotions of the moment with the scenery through which they strolled. One of Wang Yangming's poems was this seven-character quatrain composed in response to Huang Wan's:

At water's edge poplar and willow canopy a thatched hut.
Horses are watered from the springtime stream and continue their ascent.
We sat so long we lost track of time, returning along the path at dusk.
Stream and clouds pour forth the spring mountain verdure.⁴⁰

Indeed, so late was it that the group didn't make it back to the city. Rather, they lodged overnight at the Temple for Meritorious Good Deeds (Gong De Si 功德寺), which was located on the east end of Fragrant Hills, just to the north of West Lake. Wang wrote,

Exploring the hills we arrived at a mountain temple; thrilled, we forgot the mountain.
We sat beneath the bluff's trees, in silence; in spring, vines on the cliff intermingle.
Stars rise over the hall, drum and chime sit idle in the verdant hills.
Worldly thoughts suddenly cease; a limpid stream, we returned under the moonlight.⁴¹

Outdoor treks had always provided respite for Wang Yangming, and this short pleasure trip with friends was clearly a much-needed break from the discontent he felt over national affairs. A letter Wang sent to his father on May 29, 1511, demonstrates that he was in fact yearning to leave the capital. But he informed Wang Hua that his plans for doing so weren't panning out both because of his physical condition—he was suffering from chronic fatigue and back pain—and matters at the capital. Thus, his principal reason for writing was to give instructions regarding his wife and other family members who were planning to come north to be with him. Wang told his father they should rather comply with his wish that they not come but, should they insist, they should travel lightly and plan only for a short stay.⁴²

No doubt, Wang insisted the journey wasn't worth the trouble because of the rampant violence transpiring across North China. The last entry for 1511 in the "Annals" section of the *Ming History* sums up the dire conditions: "From the capital environs to Jiangsu, Anhui, Hubei, and Sichuan, bandits were killing officials and sub-official functionaries, with Shandong being particularly serious, having reached a point where over ninety towns were occupied and the roads were blocked."⁴³ Or, as David Robinson aptly characterizes it, "Between 1509 and 1513, Ming China experienced some of the most widespread and intense social unrest of the dynasty."⁴⁴ Most notable was the 1510 Rebellion of Liu Liu 劉六 and Liu Qi 劉七, which developed on the North China Plain and spread to several neighboring provinces. From 1510 into the spring and summer of 1511, reports kept pouring into the capital of roving brigands and outlaw armies attacking government

⁴⁰WYMQJ, vol. 1, 20.722.

⁴¹WYMQJ, vol. 1, 20.723.

⁴²Shu, *Yangming yi wen ji kao*, vol. 1, 314.

⁴³Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉, ed., *Ming shi* 明史, vol. 2, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), "Ben ji" 本紀, 16.205.

⁴⁴David Robinson, *Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven: Rebellion and the Economy of Violence in Mid-Ming China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 14.

compounds in county and prefectural seats, including ones located just to the south of the capital.⁴⁵ Hence, traveling through the area would surely have been dangerous.

However, what was really fueling Wang Yangming's discontent was not so much the social disorder as it was the court's handling of it, the emperor's behavior, and his own failure to take action and do something about it while enjoying office and receiving promotions. In the tenth (lunar) month of 1511, Wang was promoted to vice director in the Bureau of Appointments in the Ministry of Personnel, a subsection that managed civil service personnel assignments, including rankings, promotions, demotions, and transfers. Subsequently, in the third month of 1512, he was further promoted to director of the Bureau of Evaluations in the same ministry. Although these two promotions raised his rank—from 6A to 5B and then 5A—they were still mid-level central government posts, neither particularly taxing nor prestigious.⁴⁶ More significant for these two years was the fact that Wang was living at the nerve center of officialdom, rubbing elbows with national elites and young men aspiring to join that class. He was positioning himself to serve as the leader for an intellectual movement that aimed to transform Ming China's political culture. Huang Wan's *Record of Conduct* succinctly captures this: "Shortly thereafter, [Wang] was promoted to vice director of the Bureau of Appointments and then promoted to director of the Bureau of Evaluations, all while his learning progressed unabated. All those scholar-officials with higher aspirations came together and accompanied him. It was like this for two years."⁴⁷

It is fortunate that since the publication of the *Collected Works of Wang Yangming* in 1992, three letters Wang sent to his father in 1512 have surfaced that shed much light on the political scene at the capital and how it was impacting him. Indeed, Wang proved himself to be a keen observer who was concerned to keep his father abreast of the latest news. The first letter was dispatched during the fourth (lunar) month after a county official had arrived at the capital with news from Wang's father. The second one was sent about a month later after the arrival of a messenger.

In the first, Wang informed his father that Minister of Personnel Yang Yiqing had retained him, and then launched into a meditation on his moral predicament. Two issues bothered him: Should he serve or leave office? Was he living up to what might be expected from a loyal servant? Wang wrote:

I have been retained [in the capital] by Sir Yang [Yiqing], so [my plans] to recuperate from illness and quit my office can't be realized. I suppose such is my fate. The servitor promises himself to his country, and should he withdraw when times get tough, that is totally unacceptable. Nevertheless, when measuring the propriety of [choosing to] remain in office or leave according to conditions at that moment and one's particular station, there may yet be a legitimate justification for withdrawing. That is why he can't be indifferent. Otherwise, he can serve with utter loyalty, fully carrying out the Way, doing everything he can through his mental and physical efforts, and merely lose his life while doing so. So why vacillate and bide one's time just because one insists on finding a way to leave? Yesterday, a scholar with whom I am unfamiliar sent a letter to me, and criticized me [stating], "on the one hand, you are unable to speak up and earnestly remonstrate, but on the

⁴⁵Robinson, *Bandits, Eunuchs*, 14–16.

⁴⁶For a discussion of the nine-rank system and these titles, see Charles Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).

⁴⁷Huang, "Yangming xiansheng," in *WYMQJ*, vol. 2, 39.1410.

other you can't leave. Instead, you sit on the sidelines watching the disorder and loss. I am not sure if your service these days is inadequate? Or is it right?"... Upon reading this I genuinely sighed in shame. While together with others, we invariably mock each other about just this [predicament]. It all owes to a failure to dutifully acquire virtue each day; rather, we merely steal vacuous titles and hence have arrived at where we are today.⁴⁸

Wang's ruminations reveal clearly the extent to which he had internalized his sense of responsibilities as a Ming official and battered himself for his failure to deal proactively with the problems he saw about him. It was his duty as an official to serve according to the Way, but he wasn't able to do that. Under certain circumstances, however, an official may withdraw. His circumstances met those criteria, and that is what he was trying to explain to his father. Wang wanted out.

Conditions at the capital were at the heart of the matter. Wang outlined those too, and the picture he painted wasn't pretty, amply illustrating why he was so disgusted with the state of the Ming court. The most pressing problems for it, of course, were the relentless armed disturbances transpiring across the North China plain. True, by the time he sent the second letter, the unpredictable roving banditry in the northern metropolitan region, Henan, and Shandong that so worried him one month before had been somewhat pacified. Yet, shocking as it was, one of the principal leaders—Liu Qi—had yet to be captured. In addition, soldiers weren't being paid, troops relocated from the northern border to the interior for the purpose of suppressing the rebellions were exhausted and undisciplined, and repeated epidemics and an empty treasury were causing widespread hardship and suffering. Hence, there was little will to fight and much grievance.⁴⁹

These conditions, which "words can't describe," made the emperor's conduct appear all the more egregious: "and yet the top of the imperial court is perfectly at ease, sitting around enjoying the happiness of the Great Peace!"⁵⁰ From here on out, Wang sneered, "[he'll] treat disasters and calamities even more indifferently, and all the more brazenly goof around." The consequences were frightening: "demons and ghosts will simultaneously flourish, backbiting slander will worsen each day, and those who see it will lose all hope!"⁵¹ In the prior letter, he had already described in detail how bad things had become:

The court's expenditures grow greater each day and more exuberant each month. Adopted sons, foreign clerics, female entertainers, and actors living in the Forbidden City number over a thousand, and they all wear fine clothing and feast on delicacies. [The Zhengde emperor] builds princely villas for adopted sons, and reverently decorates temples and pagodas for foreign clerics. But lacking sufficient funds for these expenditures, [he] demands money from the families of eminent officials, imperial in-laws, and prominent eunuchs. [He] also leads adopted sons and the like, searching every directorate for what the eunuchs have accumulated in storage. [He] also makes demands upon the empress dowager. [He] had people invite her out for a drink, and then demand gifts for the actors putting on the plays. [He] furthermore had someone trick her into going out on an excursion, and then secretly dispatched someone to enter her palace, search it, and take everything. Guards at the palace gate were ordered to deny her entry when she

⁴⁸Shu, *Yangming yi wen ji kao*, vol. 1, 341.

⁴⁹Shu, *Yangming yi wen ji kao*, vol. 1, 346.

⁵⁰Shu, *Yangming yi wen ji kao*, vol. 1, 346.

⁵¹Shu, *Yangming yi wen ji kao*, vol. 1, 346.

wanted to return, and only after she gave them some money was she free to enter.... Inside and outside the imperial gardens noise from the din of a crowd and cannons goes on day and night without end. Only with high winds or an epidemic does it lessen a tad bit for a day or two. Officials and commoners are altogether used to seeing and hearing it. At present, they are still terribly alarmed. Zhang Yong is controlling the reins of power, and the direction of things is gradually becoming more difficult to predict.... High officials run about doing their bidding. [Things are] gradually returning to the way they were during Liu Jin's time. His [Zhang Yong's] deep treachery and seasoned cunning are even worse than the criminal [Liu] Jin's. He directs his resentment towards his superiors and curries favor from juniors. I still don't know what his intentions are, and how this will turn out.⁵²

Wang's letter provides evidence that the downfall of Liu Jin and seemingly hopeful shuffling within officialdom had not improved conditions at the court. As before, the emperor was forever seeking diversions, often outside the palace.⁵³ That behavior allowed eunuchs to run the show. This time it was Zhang Yong, now the object of Wang's ire. Even such eminent high officials as Li Dongyang 李東陽 and Yang Yiqing weren't behaving much better. In an effort to advance their agendas, they were shamelessly singing the praises of Zhang.⁵⁴ In sum, Wang Yangming was thoroughly disgusted with the emperor's outrageous conduct, eunuch interference, and the ingratiating—if not sycophantic—conduct of high officials. Beijing had become a cesspool of corruption.

Given his disappointment with the capital scene and his health, it is hardly surprising that he repeatedly brought up the issue of leaving office during his Beijing years. In a letter dating to early 1512, he told Zhan that he didn't often go to his office at the Ministry of Personnel; instead, he quipped, “each day I just close my door and sit quietly in meditation (*jing zuo* 靜坐).”⁵⁵ In mid-1512, he also told his friend about how Yang Yiqing had blocked his plans to leave office on account of illness, and also that he was trying to relocate to Nanjing.⁵⁶ This was finally resolved when on December 27, 1512, he was promoted to vice minister of the Nanjing Court of the Imperial Stud, a second-tier agency of the central government responsible under policies determined by the Ministry of War for managing state horse pasturages. Because Nanjing was the first Ming capital, most of the bureaucratic apparatus remained in place even after it was duplicated and headquartered in Beijing. Nanjing then became a kind of training ground for officials at the northern capital. Hence, Wang's elevation to a higher rank and this position—one that, he quipped, was “somewhat respectable”—may have fit that career track. Just how this happened is difficult to say. But he did tell his father that Xu Ai's plans to request that his next appointment be there made sense, adding, “if your son obtains a transfer to Nanjing, I should then travel together with him.”⁵⁷ Late in 1512, Wang did indeed depart with

⁵²Shu, *Yangming yi wen ji kao*, vol. 1, 341–42.

⁵³For a classic study, see James Geiss, “The Cheng-te Reign, 1506–1521,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 7: *The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644*, ed. Frederick Mote and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 403–8.

⁵⁴Geiss, “Cheng-te Reign,” 342.

⁵⁵Shu Jingnan 東景南, *Wang Yangming yi wen ji kao biannian (zeng ding ben)* 王陽明佚文稽考編年(增訂本), vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2015), 361.

⁵⁶Shu, *Wang Yangming yi wen ji kao biannian (zeng ding ben)*, vol. 1, 362.

⁵⁷Shu, *Wang Yangming yi wen ji kao biannian (zeng ding ben)*, vol. 1, 342.

Xu Ai, and they headed down the Grand Canal for a visit home. Wang Yangming's Beijing years had concluded, and he would never see the capital again in his lifetime.

THE WAY OF MASTER-DISCIPLE RELATIONS AND FRIENDSHIP

While the number of scholars staying in Beijing who received instruction from or corresponded with Wang Yangming while he was working there cannot be determined with any certainty, it is useful to compose a list of and explore those who can be identified. The most important clue remains twenty men mentioned in Wang's *Chronological Biography* because they were on Xu Ai's lost list. Ten other scholars who show up in poems and correspondence can be added. Sixteen of these men were colleagues who interacted with Wang Yangming roughly as social equals because, although there were degrees of junior or senior status in their relationship, they all held the highest examination degree and had served or were serving the Ming court. That list includes Zhan Ruoshui, Mu Konghui 穆孔暉 (1479–1539, *js.* 1505), Chen Ding 陳鼎 (*js.* 1505), Tang Peng 唐鵬 (*js.* 1508), Fang Xianfu (1485–1544, *js.* 1505), Xu Ai, Wang Hugu 王虎谷 (1465–1517, *js.* 1484), Qiao Yu (1464–1531, *js.* 1484), Chu Quan, He Mengchun 何孟春 (1474–1536, *js.* 1493), Lu Ying 路英 (1483–1562, *js.* 1508), Wang Jun 汪俊 (*js.* 1493), Zheng Yichu 鄭一初 (1476–1513, *js.* 1505), Zhang Bangqi 張邦奇 (1484–1544, *js.* 1505), and Gu Yingxiang (1483–1565, *js.* 1505). Even though he never attempted a provincial *juren* degree, because he was serving in the central government, Huang Wan can also be included here. Eight other students had come for the 1511 metropolitan examinations and succeeded, making them freshly minted *jinshi*. Those men include Wan Chao 萬潮 (1487–1547), Liang Gu (1483–1533), Ying Liang, Wang Yuan 汪淵, Zheng Jie 鄭傑, Wang Yuanzheng, Wang Dao (1487–1547), and Chen Huang 陳洸 (1478–1534). Two men who frequently accompanied Wang Yangming in the capital — Cai Zongyan 蔡宗兗 and Zhu Jie 朱節 (1475–1523)—were old friends from his hometowns (Yuyao and Shaoxing). Four years before, they had formally pledged themselves as students. No doubt they had come to Beijing for the examinations, but Zhu only obtained his *jinshi* in 1514, and Cai in 1517. Lin Da 林達 (*js.* 1514), Xiao Mingfeng 蕭鳴鳳 (1480–1534, *js.* 1514) and Ma Mingheng 馬明衡 (*js.* 1514), and possibly Wei Tinglin 魏廷霖 and Sun Hu 孫瑚, were likewise in the capital for the exams.⁵⁸

Although the individuals in Wang's Beijing social circles were all literati, they varied a great deal in their status. About half were scholar-officials who both held the highest degree and had established a record of service to the Ming court. The other half were younger gentleman who had just entered or were about to enter the ranks of the national elite by winning the highest examination degree and obtaining their first appointments in the bureaucracy. But just as it is impossible to establish a complete list of those who sought Wang's instruction, so is it difficult to establish the full contours of each

⁵⁸I haven't been able to locate information for Sun Hu. As for Wei Tinglin, Wang Yangming refers to him as a *mensheng* (student of his gate) in a letter he composed in 1514 (Shu, *Wang Yangming yi wen*, vol. 1, 425). Xu lists both of these men as having accepted instruction (*shou xue*) from Wang in 1512. It is likely that they also took the examinations, and Wang Yangming was their grader. Vital and *jinshi* dates largely come from the Zhongyang Yanjiuyuan Renming Quanwei Ziliao Ku. See http://archive.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/tsweb/html_name/build.php.

individual's relation to him—that is, beyond their having received instruction from him. That issue has to be explored on a case-by-case basis. Some were colleagues and friends seeking his advice and to understand his ideas. Some were students who had merely sought instruction from him for a time. Some were students of his gate because he had served as their examiner. Some were or would become self-declared disciples, also making them students of his gate. Here we will highlight exemplary cases of scholars who both remained important throughout Wang Yangming's life and for whom we have enough documentation to establish in a meaningful way the issues they were discussing at the capital.

The general setting is clear enough. Huang Wan's description of his regular gatherings with Wang and Zhan Ruoshui fits what the rest were doing at some level. A letter Wang Yangming sent to Huang Wan and Ying Liang, for instance, references a discussion they had held the evening before he composed it.⁵⁹ In parting words he gave to Ying Liang, Zhan spoke of gatherings where they had discussed matters of truth and justice day and night.⁶⁰ In an epitaph written for Liang Gu, Huang says he spent much time together with Liang, Zhan, Wang Yangming, Gu Yingxiang, and Wang Yuanzheng discussing the learning of the sages. Just prior to departing Beijing, Qiao Yu dropped by Wang's official residence and they conversed about that same topic.⁶¹ In a letter to Wang Dao (style name Chunfu 純甫), Wang states that “recently I've been holding philosophical discussions (*jiangxue*) with several people besides Huang Wan. Whenever we get together, we sigh over just how wise Chunfu is.”⁶² He also told him why these gatherings mattered: “Is there any greater joy in the world than having genuinely good friends with whom to gather and progress together along this Way?” As for what I've been through with those matters of honor and shame and gains and losses, are they even worth mentioning?”⁶³ Clearly, friendship and the Way provided a welcome refuge from and counterweight to the complexities of political life.

This letter, dating to 1512, was written shortly after Wang Dao had departed the capital for Nanjing. He was going there to serve as an instructor in the Nanjing Directorate of Education. The year before, he had come to the capital from his hometown in Shandong to take the examinations. Upon passing them at the young age of twenty-four, he was given a position at the Hanlin Academy. But with rampant outlawry plaguing his province, Dao feared for the safety of his grandmother and stepmother, and hence petitioned to leave.⁶⁴

While on his way out late in 1511, he spoke with Wang Yangming, who provided words of encouragement about his new duties, spurring him on with Mencius's philosophy. Dao demurred that he had never really studied the Way, and told his teacher what a crime it was for someone so lacking as himself to teach. Hence, he needed advice, and Wang obliged. He explained that teaching is about fully conveying what one has

⁵⁹WYMQJ, vol. 1, 4.145.

⁶⁰Zhan Ruoshui 湛若水, *Zhan Ganquan xianseheng wenji* 湛甘泉先生文集, in *Si ku quan shu cun mu congshu, ji bu*, vol. 56 (Tainan: Zhuangyan wenhua, 1997), 17.701.

⁶¹WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7.228.

⁶²WYMQJ, vol. 1, 4.154–55.

⁶³WYMQJ, vol. 1, 4.154–55.

⁶⁴Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, *Ming ru xue an* 明儒學案, vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 42.1035.

learned, and learning is about practicing what one teaches. He quoted the *Great Learning*: “The noble men of ancient times first require it of themselves before they require it of others.”⁶⁵ That is, a person must become virtuous before expecting others to do so. Dao also asked if there is one method for teaching people of differing temperaments. Wang said no. Rather, he explained, it is true that the goal of teaching is to guide the student towards recovering their nature and returning to the good. That’s the same for everyone. But because people vary in character and ability, the only fixed method for teaching is to instruct them according to their specific needs. Each person will require a different approach.⁶⁶

After Dao departed, Wang Yangming sent him a letter. By that point, Dao had returned home and gone on to Nanjing to take up his position in the Directorate. Wang told him that others had brought news of Dao to him. Apparently, his father had been most displeased with his return and he wasn’t getting along well with his senior and junior colleagues. “When I first heard this,” Wang let him know, “I felt sorry [for you]. But then I was very happy!”⁶⁷ He reminded Dao that he should understand his sentiment. After all, they had once discussed this matter and Dao totally agreed. Wang nevertheless explained again how suffering is the path to virtue and psychological autonomy and, hence, to developing the capacity to live well no matter where one may be:

My pity [for you] was only selfish sentiments deriving from conventional ways of thinking. As for saying that I was very happy, Chunfu ought to know what I meant. Why would I begrudge you just a little suffering, when your mind and character will be steeled, making your attainments ever greater? Compare this to smelting gold. From the gold’s perspective, it suffers greatly when subject to a fierce blaze and clamping and hammering. But others watching this will be thrilled that the gold is becoming ever more pure, and only worry that the furnace isn’t hot enough to smelt it completely. And after it exits the smelting, the gold will also be pleased with the results of obstacles and smelting. I also used to have the habit of looking down on others of the same status as myself and with contempt upon the ways of the world... But after I was sent away [by the Ming court] to Guizhou for three years, where I tasted to the full every possible hardship, I gained some insight. For the first time, I understood that what Mencius had said about “being born in a time of sorrows and calamity” was in no way deceiving me. I have often thought that “the gentleman regulates his conduct according to the condition in which he finds himself, desiring nothing beyond. When enjoying wealth and honor, he acts according to what is appropriate to enjoying wealth and honor. When living in poor and humble circumstances, he acts according to what is appropriate to poor and humble circumstances. When living amidst [a time of] calamities and hardship, he acts according to what is appropriate to [a time of] calamities and hardship. Therefore, no matter where he is he finds fulfillment.”⁶⁸

Wang Yangming asserted that gentlemen of later times also ought to know the value of learning endurance through suffering, as described in the *Doctrine of the Mean*. Hence,

⁶⁵WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7.232. For a different translation, see Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 91.

⁶⁶WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7.232.

⁶⁷WYMQJ, vol. 1, 4.154.

⁶⁸WYMQJ, vol. 1, 4.154. Part of this letter is translated in Julia Ching, *The Philosophical Letters of Wang Yang-ming* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1973), 18. Wang is quoting the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhong Yong* 中庸), ch. 14.

he was celebrating the fact that Wang Dao had such excellent opportunities to experience the steeling and tempering necessary to refine this virtue in all its purity.

He explained this further by repeating his parting words to Wang Yuan. Here was another young man who had obtained his *jinshi* that year and sought instruction from Wang Yangming. Yuan had to leave in 1512 because he was given an appointment outside the capital as a prefect. Several associates saw him off. Xu Ai wrote a poem for him, encouraging him to “solely focus his aspirations upon becoming a worthy and a sage.”⁶⁹ In the presence of literati companions who were enjoying sweet wine, Huang Wan asked Yuan what he had learned from Wang Yangming, adding, “When the gentlemen of ancient times studied the Way, there was nothing their minds didn’t penetrate.... Should you fully exert your mind and be staunchly determined, then the master’s Way will be with you.”⁷⁰

So Yuan had spent time studying under Wang Yangming, and when he was heading out of Beijing, he sought his master’s advice. In his letter to Wang Dao, Wang Yangming recounted what he had told Yuan about how temperament is transformed:

When living through peaceful times, one really does not gain much insight, something that only comes when beset by gains and losses, weathering misfortune, and confronting adversity and humiliation. Should one have the ability not to become angered over those things that in normal times would anger one; should one not become distressed to the point of losing one’s footing over something that could cause one to do so—this also is the place to put forth effort. Although under Heaven there might be ten thousand changes, [it is natural that] the way in which I respond does not go beyond happiness, anger, grief, and joy, these four emotions. This is the essence of learning, and governance is also to be found here.⁷¹

Once again, Wang drove home the point that weathering suffering brings a kind of inner freedom to the emotional life. That freedom is one of the principal goals of philosophical inquiry, and it also makes those who serve in an official capacity more effective.

Another recent examination graduate who had studied under Wang Yangming was Liang Gu (style name Zhongyong 鍾用). This Shandong man hailed from a gentry family with a record of service to the Ming court. Both his grandfather and father had won the provincial *juren* degree and served in various offices. Liang was apparently groomed to carry on that tradition. According to Huang Wan, he “was very ambitious in his desire to serve and make a difference; after passing the examination, he attended Wang’s *jiangxue* gatherings, and eventually presented him with a gift to show his esteem while formally declaring himself a student.”⁷² His first appointment as a secretary in the Ministry of Personnel would also have made Liang a close colleague.

They must have spent quite a bit of time together—Liang also went on the excursion to Fragrant Hills. One day that very year, he sought input from Wang about the name Liang had given to his studio: “Maintaining Silence” (*mo* 默). Wang gladly discoursed about it, because it was a serious matter. But he first had a bit to say about Liang and how he had come to this point. He found him to be very knowledgeable and bold. Liang was keen to

⁶⁹Xu Ai, *Qian Dehong, Dong Yun ji*, edited by Qian Ming, 5.

⁷⁰Huang, *Huang Wan ji*, 8.146–47.

⁷¹WYMQJ, vol. 1, 4.154–55.

⁷²Huang, *Huang Wan ji*, 508–9.

serve all under Heaven but critical of his own ambitiousness: “Hmm! I have prematurely [taken office]. Those who can’t control themselves can’t govern others!” So he focused hard on a learning that is learning for oneself, and deeply reflected upon his personal character issues. He also faulted himself for speaking too readily.⁷³

Wang deprecated himself for having that same fault, for being yet another of those men who shoot off at the mouth. That’s the way of superficial characters with frivolous aspirations. So how could he know the Way of Maintaining Silence (*mo*)? Nevertheless, Wang recited what the ancients taught about this matter. He enumerated both insincere and sincere reasons people might choose not to speak. He first listed the wrong reasons for doing that. Sometimes questions must be asked and matters argued; choosing not to do so amounts to a kind of self-deceiving ignorance. Sometimes remaining silent is a cunning way to lure people in. Sometimes people don’t say anything because they don’t want others to see their strengths and weaknesses. Last, sometimes people use silence to do evil to folks they pretend to care for.⁷⁴

Everything that is sincere about remaining quiet had been touched on by Confucius. So Wang quoted the sage for his student: “A gentleman would be ashamed should his deeds not match his words. The ancients were reluctant to speak, fearing disgrace should their deeds not match their words.”⁷⁵ Hence, Wang explained, “if a person truly has a sense of shame, he’ll understand maintaining silence.”⁷⁶ He asserted that when it comes to understanding this, none compared to Confucius’s disciple Yan Yuan. Yan exemplified what Confucius meant about storing up knowledge in silence. As Confucius had observed, although Yan said nothing all day long while receiving instruction and hence appeared stupid, that was precisely because Yan had understood. The proof of the pudding is in the eating: “Observe him when he is on his own: his actions fully reflect what he learned. Oh no, [Yan] Hui is not stupid!”⁷⁷

In light of the example set by Yan, Wang explained the connections between not speaking, the maturation of virtue, and the Way. What is acquired by remaining quiet? The *Doctrine of the Mean* states that it is the way of the noble man to conceal his virtue even as it becomes evident to others that he has it.⁷⁸ Hence, virtue is acquired. How do you know if the path of silence has produced results? The *Book of Changes* “Appended Remarks” explains that owing to their moral integrity, those who remain silent achieve much and earn the trust of others without speaking.⁷⁹ Hence, others will see it—they will sense the charisma and be positively impacted. When has the path of silence reached its destination? After Confucius had stated, “I wish to speak no more,” his disciple Zigong 子貢 questioned how he was to hand down his master’s teachings. But Confucius said, “Does Heaven speak? Yet the four seasons follow their course

⁷³WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7:254.

⁷⁴WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7:254.

⁷⁵*Analects*, 7.27 and 4.22. For the translation, see Simon Leys, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 17 and 70.

⁷⁶WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7:255.

⁷⁷WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7:255. Wang is citing *Analects* 2.9. See Leys, *The Analects*, 7.

⁷⁸WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7:255. The reference is to *Zhong Yong*, ch. 33.

⁷⁹WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7:255. The reference is to the *Book of Changes*, “Appended Remarks,” 1.12.

and the hundred creatures continue to be born.”⁸⁰ At its most profound, silence accords with the natural course of things. The practice reveals nature. Wang concluded by asking Liang if he truly didn’t know why he had chosen this name for his studio.

Another 1511 *jinsi* who frequented Wang Yangming’s gatherings was Ying Liang. He had passed the metropolitan examination in 1507 but skipped the palace examination because he was disillusioned by the eunuch coup at the Zhengde emperor’s court. So on the pretext of health issues, he returned home to Taizhou, Zhejiang. And then in 1511, likely owing to Liu’s downfall, he finished what he had started and was appointed as a Hanlin Academy bachelor. It was about this time that his fellow townsman Huang Wan introduced him to Wang Yangming, who also introduced him to Zhan Ruoshui. As Zou Shouyi 鄒守益 characterized the scene in his epitaph for Ying, “he befriended Wang Shouren and Zhan Ruoshui and, upon learning much from them, humbly declared himself a follower.”⁸¹ Indeed, just one year later, Zhan offered Ying parting words that explain how their relation evolved: “In 1511, through the introduction of Yangming, I got to know Mr. Ying of Xianju 仙居.... We discussed matters day and night in the capital.... Mr. Ying was honest, trustworthy, and serious about learning. At first, he harbored doubts about me and Yangming, but midway through he believed [us]. For that reason, it wasn’t the case that he blindly subscribed [to our ideas].”⁸²

One day in 1511, Huang, Ying, and Wang were bemoaning how the learning of the sages had remained unclear for so long. As Qian Dehong 錢德洪 summarizes it, Wang explained that, “should a student desire to become a sage, he must bring forward the purity of the mind’s essence, not permitting the slightest darkening element to remain; only when true nature is first seen will there then be a place from which to begin cultivating moral personhood.”⁸³ Because Ying Liang suspected this was entirely too difficult, Wang followed up the next day by addressing a letter to both him and Huang. He began by recalling what had transpired in their discussion: “Last night I may have talked too much, but having come across the two of you I could not but help speak at some length. Owing to the fact that my philosophical insights haven’t yet fully matured, some of what was said was indeed not crystal clear. Nevertheless, from it we can see a portion of our genuine efforts.”⁸⁴

Wang then clarified what he had discussed with them regarding sagehood. The ultimate goal of the practice of self-cultivation is to bring forward a mind free of habitual ways and self-centered intentions that bind and conceal it. Once that mind has been witnessed, the body of humanity (*ren ti* 仁體) will also become known. A mirror provides a good analogy. The sage’s mind is like a mirror that is free of all dust and stains, while the minds of the rest of humanity suffer from varying degrees of dirtiness. To see this condition for what it is, a person must overcome the love of ease and apply much effort to rubbing and polishing away the defilements. After the mirroring quality of the mind has been glimpsed, the dirt and dust that might obscure it will be more readily

⁸⁰WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7:255. Wang is citing *Analects* 17.19. See Leys, *The Analects*, 88.

⁸¹Zou Shouyi 鄒守益, “Ying fang bo Liang muzhi” 應方伯良墓誌, in Li Qingyun 李青云, “Zhezong Wang men xue zhe Ying Liang lun kao” 浙中王門應良論考, *Guizhou Shifan Daxue Xuebao*, no. 4 (2015), 39.

⁸²Zhan Zhan *Ganquan xiansheng wenji*, 701.

⁸³NP, 33.1231.

⁸⁴WYMQJ, vol. 1, 4.145–46.

recognized.⁸⁵ Qian Dehong rather more directly described this as obtaining a glimpse of true nature, the critical first step for realizing virtue.

When Zhan Ruoshui left for Vietnam early in 1512 and traveled down the Grand Canal, Ying Liang accompanied him part way. After having served at the Hanlin Academy for just a few months, Ying requested leave to care for his father. He may also have been disillusioned by the political scene at the capital. That would align with how Wang Yangming and several others in their social circles who left about the same time were feeling. Along the way, Ying discussed the Way further with Zhan—his other teacher—and, upon returning home, “spent the next ten years in the mountains lecturing about what he had learned.” This attracted a growing following of students.⁸⁶ According to Li Qingyun, what he taught was likely a synthesis of ideas learned from both of his masters.⁸⁷ In fact, after telling one his students, Zhou Ying, that he must aspire to the learning of the sages and worthies and avoid drowning in conventional ways, Ying urged him to get more advice from Wang Yangming.⁸⁸ So Zhou caught up with him in 1514 when Wang was in Nanjing. As for Ying Liang, he remained in Zhejiang teaching until the onset of the Jiajing emperor’s reign. In 1522, he accepted an assignment as a provincial official in Guangdong.⁸⁹

Gu Yingxiang was another fellow provincial who sought out Wang Yangming, although he was a seasoned scholar-official. This junior colleague had obtained his *jinshi* in 1505 at the astonishingly young age of eighteen. He then served as an Imperial Commissioner in Nanjing, where he was also involved in compiling the *Veritable Records* for the Hongzhi emperor’s reign. After that, he was appointed as a judge in Jiangxi’s Raozhou 饒州 prefecture. As minor as that third-ranking executive position may have been, Gu nevertheless earned something of a reputation for his courage. Accompanied by only one old soldier, he rode directly into a bandit hideout and freed a magistrate he had taken hostage. With such experience, Gu was later sent to Guangdong’s surveillance commission at a time when banditry was rampant in the region.⁹⁰ Indeed, he was leading campaigns there when Wang Yangming arrived in 1517 to serve as Grand Coordinator. That placed Gu under his jurisdiction, and they would coordinate military operations for the ensuing three years.

The reason Gu had the opportunity to study under Wang Yangming in 1511 was that someone in the Censorate had raised the issue of his eligibility to serve in office, given his young age. He was summoned to the capital and appointed instead as a registrar in the Embroidered Uniform Guard.⁹¹ According to Sun Qifeng’s 孫奇逢 *Lines of Transmission of the School of Principle*, that office brought him into contact with Huang Wan, and they conversed about things “day and night.” At some point, Huang introduced

⁸⁵WYMJ, vol. 1, 4.147. For a translation, see Ching, *The Philosophical Letters of Wang Yang-ming*, 9.

⁸⁶“Ying Liang” 應良, in Han ji dianzi wenxian ziliao ku—Ming ren zhuanji ziliao suoyin, 9226. http://archive.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/ttsweb/html_name/search.php.

⁸⁷Li, “Zhezong Wang men xuezhe,” 41.

⁸⁸WYMJ, vol. 1, 7.234.

⁸⁹Li, “Zhezong Wang men xuezhe,” 42.

⁹⁰Pan Mingfu 潘明福 and Cheng Qingqing 陳清清, “Ming Huzhou ci ren Gu Yingxiang kao lue” 明湖州詞人顧應祥考略, *Huzhou Shifan Xueyuan Xuebao*, 31:6 (2009), 29.

⁹¹Pan and Cheng, “Ming Huzhou ren ci ren Gu Yingxiang kao lue,” 29.

Gu to Wang Yangming, and “they first discussed the ‘Yan Yuan Inquires about Humanity’ chapter [in the *Analects*] and the theory of investigating [things] and extending [knowledge] in the *Great Learning*. At times, [Gu] Yingxiang had some insights. Wen-cheng 文成 [i.e. Wang Yangming] affirmed those, so Yingxiang studied under him.”⁹²

Another colleague who studied under Wang Yangming but then withdrew from political life was Fang Xianfu (style name Shuxian 叔賢, nickname Xiqiao 西樵). Fang was born in 1485 in Nanhai 南海, Guangdong, and obtained his *jinshi* in 1505 at the young age of twenty. But after serving as a bachelor in the Hanlin Academy for only a year, he returned home to care for his mother. She soon passed away (Fang’s father had died before he was born). Hence, he remained in retirement to mourn the loss, only returning to office in 1509. By 1511, he had reached the position of vice director in the Ministry of Personnel, where Wang was serving as a secretary. “One day,” Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 states, “[Wang] held a conversation with him, and it really hit home with Xiqiao, so he immediately approached him, bowing and declaring himself a student.”⁹³ Considering the fact that he was of a higher rank, Wang viewed his willingness to take this subordinate role as a mark of his humility and seriousness. When Fang left the capital in 1511 on account of illness, Wang wrote to him on parting:

While living together with Shuxian for two years, I have witnessed his learning change three times. At first, he set great store by literary composition. His interests then changed to lecturing and discoursing (*jiangshuo*). Further change in his studies came when he, with much emotion, set his sights on the Way of the Sages. When he still loved literary composition, our relationship was like ice and coal; when lecturing and discoursing, we were about halfway apart. But once he placed his aspirations upon the Way of the Sages, he was altogether of the same mind as me.⁹⁴

Wang praised Fang’s decision to return to West Firewood Mountain (*Xiqiao shan* 西樵山), which was located in his hometown. There, he could pursue this goal, the very foundation of which was selflessness (*wu wo* 無我) and the courage to achieve it. In fact, the manner in which their relationship had developed was testimony to Fang’s having these virtues: “At first he was a colleague of mine,” Wang noted, “but because he was a director, his rank was higher. Yet, as his knowledge developed, he became increasingly deferential towards me, and in the end proclaimed himself a disciple (*dizi* 弟子), treating me as a prior enlightened one. If he hadn’t freed himself of conventional opinions, and reached a state of transcendent selflessness, how could he have accomplished this?”⁹⁵ Wang concluded by noting—as he often did for those he was bringing into his circle of purpose—that an echo of the Way had not been heard for over three hundred years. That is why “with a person of such high quality as Shuxian, it is with much pleasure that I speak of this.”⁹⁶

After leaving, Fang spent the next eleven years at home studying and teaching. He carried on an active correspondence with Wang Yangming, and some philosophical

⁹²Sun Qifeng 孫奇逢, *Sun Qifeng ji* 孫奇逢集, vol. 3 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 2003), 1091.

⁹³Huang, *Ming ru xue an*, vol. 1, 12.1035.

⁹⁴WYMJ, vol. 1, 7.231–32.

⁹⁵WYMJ, vol. 1, 7.231–32.

⁹⁶WYMJ, vol. 1, 7.231–32.

differences in matters of interpreting classical texts emerged over time. He returned to Beijing in 1522 at the beginning of the Jiajing emperor's reign. Owing to his support for the emperor during the Great Rites Controversy, he rose to higher office.⁹⁷ In spite of their differences, Fang would remain a friend and advocate for his former master. Huang Zongxi's *Records of Ming Scholars* includes him as a student of his gate.⁹⁸

Another important colleague of Wang Yangming was Wang Jun. This 1493 *jinshi* serving as a compiler at the Hanlin Academy had known Yangming for a long time. Their relationship went as far back as 1506, when both men were working in Beijing. Like Wang, Jun had ran afoul of Liu Jin, although the consequences were not as severe, for he was merely sent off to the southern capital. After the 1510 housecleaning, he returned to his former post and would thereafter advance through a series of central government offices well into the early years of the Jiajing emperor's reign.⁹⁹ After Wang Yangming passed away, Jun composed an elegy for him. Speaking of their time together prior to his "close friend's" ill treatment at the hands of the court, Jun stated, "early on [in our lives] we were destined to encounter one another; we would sit down together, often discussing matters through the night and until dawn.... Was there anything that we didn't touch upon?"¹⁰⁰ Jun then spoke of how through the years, in their comings and goings, they had promised to spend time together.

Indeed, they did so in 1511, and corresponded too. Wang's reply to a letter he had received from Jun offers insight into the philosophical issues Jun was pondering. Although Jun's original letter is not extant, Wang cites a few sentences from it and speaks to those. Jun had written that "one very knotty problem" discussed the day before "had serious implications that he didn't dare not to discuss."¹⁰¹ Wang wholeheartedly agreed. As Wang saw it, the fundamental issue at stake was Jun's inability to unify his practice of self-cultivation and, therefore, to come to the correct conclusions regarding the relation between the essence (*ti* 體; sometimes translated as substance) and functioning of mind. Wang stated that what lies prior to the arousal of feelings of happiness, anger, sorrow, and joy is the primordial essence of mind. That essence is also human nature. Contrary to what Jun had claimed, this idea began not with Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) during the Song dynasty, but rather with Zisi's *Doctrine of the Mean*. Wang then launched into a discussion of the difference between the essence and functioning of mind and how that relates to two much discussed phrases, one located in the *Doctrine of the Mean* and one in the *Book of Changes*.¹⁰² The *Doctrine* states, "The state wherein feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy have not yet appeared is referred to as equanimity. [When these feelings] arise and are entirely balanced and measured, this is known as harmony."¹⁰³ The *Book of Changes* states, "still and unmoved, when stimulated it penetrates all things immediately."¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷Zhou Yue 周悅, "Fang Xianfu nianpu jianbian" 方獻夫年譜簡編, *Hunan keji xueyuan xuebao* 34:6 (June 2013), 7–8.

⁹⁸Huang, *Ming ru xue an*, vol. 1, 30.654.

⁹⁹Zhang Tingyu, ed., *Ming shi*, 191.5058–60.

¹⁰⁰WYMQJ, vol. 2, 36.1431.

¹⁰¹WYMQJ, vol. 1, 4.146.

¹⁰²WYMQJ, vol 1, 4.146–47.

¹⁰³*Doctrine of the Mean*, ch. 1. For another translation, see Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 98.

¹⁰⁴*Book of Changes (Yijing, 易經)*, "Appended Remarks" (Xi ci 繫辭), 1.10. For a translation, see Chan, *A Sourcebook of Chinese Philosophy*, 267.

Wang's extensive discussion of this had to do with something Jun stated about himself: "From morning until evening, [I] never enjoy a moment where I am still and unmoved (*jiran bu dong* 寂然不動)." ¹⁰⁵ Apparently, Jun was unable to perceive the still essence of mind while engaged in activity; for that reason, he denied that what is prior to the rise of emotions remains present once they arise. For Wang, that wasn't surprising because, as he explained, whereas "the essence [of mind] is subtle and difficult to witness, [the mind's] functioning is obvious and easy to see." ¹⁰⁶ Hence, what most people experience is what is already manifest—thinking, consciousness of an object, and emotions. But what they don't see is the mind's essence, which is prior to but also present within function. Hence, in his pursuit of learning, the gentleman should seek the mind's essence within functioning. Although students of the Way are often able to access what can be variously described as the mean prior to the rise of emotions and the still and unmoved essence of mind while quiet-sitting or otherwise disengaged from social and political life, they are unable to carry that state into their everyday lives. Ultimately, because essence and function have the same origin and are one, unification of the two is the goal. This unity is what Cheng Yi meant when he stated, "'the mind is one.' Pointing at its essence and describing it, it is 'still and unmoved.' Referring to its functioning and describing it, 'when stimulated it completely penetrates.'" ¹⁰⁷ Thus, those who believe there to be "a special time of quiet and passivity and for nurturing and preserving the mind" are mistaken. Rather, when the equanimity of the mind's still essence is brought into activity, harmony obtains. That is the state to be realized, and it can be maintained by an uninterrupted practice of mindful vigilance, caution, and apprehension. ¹⁰⁸ In the case of Wang Jun, Wang was addressing a critical—albeit technical and abstruse—problem an individual faced at the highest reaches of spiritual development: how is the still presence of mind maintained when one is active?

By far, Wang's two closest companions while he stayed in Beijing were Huang Wan and Zhan Ruoshui, both of whom are mentioned earlier. Prior to his first encounter with Wang Yangming in 1511, Huang had established a long history of pursuing sageliness. Beginning in 1497 as a seventeen-year-old licentiate, he spent three years preparing to move up the examination ladder. But he grew disgusted with it. The whole process seemed crass, and essays by the Song philosophers Zhang Zai 張載 and Wang Anshi 王安石 led him to believe that inheriting the protection privilege was honorable enough. ¹⁰⁹ Huang felt justified in focusing on the eminently noble goal of learning about sagehood. So he spent some time living in Purple Cloud Mountain, read the classics and Song philosophers, practiced quiet-sitting, and sought instruction from famed scholars also living in the area, such as the distinguished Cheng-Zhu scholar Xie Duo 謝鐸 (1435–1510). ¹¹⁰ He developed his own ideas about what it meant to learn for oneself, to seek within one's own nature, and to be genuine. ¹¹¹ He drew strong

¹⁰⁵WYMQJ, vol. 1, 4.147.

¹⁰⁶WYMQJ, vol. 1, 4.147.

¹⁰⁷WYMQJ, vol. 1, 4.147.

¹⁰⁸WYMQJ, vol. 1, 4.147.

¹⁰⁹Zhang, *Huang Wan shengping*, 17.

¹¹⁰Zhang, *Huang Wan shengping*, 30.

¹¹¹Huang, *Huang Wan ji*, 16.302.

distinctions between those who were authentic and knew themselves and those who weren't and didn't. He wrote about how difficult it was to illuminate Heavenly principles and how easy it was to be misled by deep-rooted desires for prestige and recognition.¹¹² Most literati in this time, when the Way had for so long been absent, belonged to the latter categories. They lived to impress others, and although they talked a lot about their high aspirations, they were always just fishing after reputation.¹¹³ Sincere seekers of the sagely Way, however, lived for themselves and were ever watchful and concerned. Determined to remain in that category, Huang affixed a wooden placard to his wall. Important advice was engraved on both sides: "Fully follow in the footsteps of Confucius and Mencius, model oneself after Yi [Yin] 伊尹 and Zhou [Gong; the Duke of Zhou]," and "Be diligent, smart, and strive for self-improvement; study the essence, control your temper."¹¹⁴ He says he gazed upon it day and night as a constant reminder of what he was after. Always showing his deep commitment to this learning and a strong sense of responsibility, Huang held the conviction that he must live up to what Heaven had intended for him in giving him this life.¹¹⁵

Prior to meeting Wang Yangming in 1510 and to beginning his three-year mourning period for his father, Huang had been in and out of the capital. He was usually just going along with his father, who had held various offices there. Ever after the Way, he sought instruction from and corresponded with quite a few luminaries, such as then Grand Secretary Li Dongyang (1447–1516) and Lin Guang 林光, the famed disciple to Chen Xianzhang 陳獻章 (1428–1500).¹¹⁶ Hence, given his family background and social history, when he returned to the capital in 1510 he was quite well connected. Judging from a letter he sent to his longtime teacher Xie Duo, he took office not only because his mother had urged him to do so but also because he had developed an interest in making a difference in the world—he inquired about "the way of serving the emperor and saving the times as well as how to serve as an official and govern."¹¹⁷

In spite of the fact that Huang and Wang Yangming varied greatly in their career status, the two shared much in common. As teens, both had become disillusioned with the conventional way of going about pursuing degrees and an official career. They both traversed a similar intellectual journey. At first they were wildly nonconformist, then they dabbled in literary composition, and ultimately they rejected it all and fully committed themselves to the Way. Song philosophers had inspired them to avidly set their sights on sagehood. They both stressed the importance of learning for oneself—in other words, a learning that is fulfilling, means something personally, and has a higher purpose. They felt they were living in dark times and that those truly committed to this subtle and difficult Way were few and far between. Like-minded friends, they believed, were an incredibly rare find. The literati class was superficial, inauthentic, and obsessed with power and prestige.

¹¹²Huang, *Huang Wan ji*, 16.302.

¹¹³Huang, *Huang Wan ji*, 16.306–7.

¹¹⁴Zhang, *Huang Wan shengping*, 23–24. Yi Yin was a revered—albeit possibly legendary—high minister of the early Shang. Zhou Gong, of course, was the brother to King Wu of Zhou, who played a critical role in the dynasty's founding.

¹¹⁵Huang, *Huang Wan ji*, 16.302.

¹¹⁶Zhang, *Huang Wan shengping*, 27.

¹¹⁷Zhang, *Huang Wan shengping*, 46–47.

Finally, both Huang and Wang ran in similar social circles in Beijing. And not long after arriving in the capital, they both sought a pretext to get out of it and go back home. In fact, Huang had his petition for leaving office on account of illness approved late in 1512. He returned home and remained there for the next ten years.

Huang also had his own following of students, although he often referred them to Wang Yangming, whom he clearly admired as the more accomplished master of the Way. That should be evident from the advice he gave to Wang Yuan. He said similar things to others. When Huang was on his way out of the capital, Wang Yuanzheng, Liang Gu, and Gu Yingxiang saw him off. They took his hand and told him they didn't know what they would do without him. Huang told them not to worry because they could still study with Master Wang. Apparently, he hadn't yet received word that his friend was also about to leave. He also told them that although they wouldn't be together physically, they would be together spiritually. When mind is realized, he believed, so is spirit. At that moment, all movement flows from Heaven. In Heaven all is united in one, including self and other. Mere physical vestiges—being in the presence of one another—does not decide whether people are separate or one. The question rather revolves around whether a person is identified with body and persona or with the transpersonal mind-heart, spirit, and Heaven.¹¹⁸

Huang also had advice for Lin Da when Lin was about to head for his hometown in Fujian to pay respects to his parents. While serving at the Censorate, this son of the well-known scholar-official Lin Jun 林俊 (1452–1527) had spent time seeking instruction about the goal of sagehood from both Huang and Wang Yangming.¹¹⁹ They both also wrote parting words for him. Wang stressed the importance of being resolute and determined about setting one's mind upon this learning. The problem is, he said, everyone today is submerged in conventional thinking. Hence, when they hear about it they'll feel hesitant, uncertain, and even despondent. So determination is critical: it brings the aspirant halfway to the goal and ensures success.¹²⁰ Huang, on the other hand, sent Lin Da off with a piece similar to the letter he had received from Wang Yangming, discussing the mind's mirror-like quality: "Is the mind like a mirror?" he asked. "When dirt covers it clarity is lost. If the clarity isn't present then the reflection will be darkened. The reflection isn't good because the clarity is insufficient. Hence, work to completely remove the dirt."¹²¹ In conclusion, Huang humbly noted that although Lin had come to him because he was determined to seek the learning of the sages, and hence as a student, he instead found a friend. "I started learning late [in life]," Huang noted, "and what I have learned is still shallow, so I can't be of benefit [to you], and have spoken to you of this."¹²² Wang Yangming, on the other hand, was confident: he told Lin to take his advice back to his father and see what he had to say about it.

It is difficult to determine precisely why Huang Wan left Beijing. He may indeed have been sick. In the past, that had often been the case, and he usually attributed his weak

¹¹⁸Huang, *Huang Wan ji*, 8.147.

¹¹⁹Zhang, *Huang Wan shengping*, 53.

¹²⁰WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7.227.

¹²¹Huang, *Huang Wan ji*, 8.146.

¹²²Huang, *Huang Wan ji*, 8.146.

constitution to overexerting himself in spiritual pursuits.¹²³ Probably, he didn't like his job—he told Zhan Ruoshui it was like hauling manure around on his back.¹²⁴ But most important, he thought he needed to return home to the mountains in Zhejiang to continue his journey. As happy as he was spending time with his like-minded friends, matters regularly interrupted them, and he “had no way to apply his efforts to focusing on himself, quiescence, and oneness.”¹²⁵ Huang had always spoken in profound terms about his goals for himself. He once told a friend that although he had glimpsed a tiny bit of the Way, he had not deeply cultivated his mind to the point where it had become lucid, so it was difficult not to be confused over right and wrong, disturbed by emotions, assailed by manipulative thinking, and controlled by temptation.¹²⁶ No doubt, he felt that his spiritual aspirations didn't mesh with the environment in Beijing.

In his parting words of advice, Wang Yangming had much to say to Huang, about both of their journeys and what it all meant:

The noble man inquires to bring lucidity to his mind. In its original condition, his mind is without darkness, but desires have concealed it and habit has harmed it. Therefore, when the concealment and harm are removed, lucidity is restored. It doesn't come from outside. The mind is like water. When pollution enters the flow becomes turbid. It is like a mirror. When dirt accumulates the reflection is obscured. Confucius said to Yan Yuan, “Humanity is overcoming oneself and returning to propriety.” Mencius stated, “the ten thousand things are all complete within me,” “look within and find sincerity.” If you overcome yourself, then sincerity won't be dependent upon anything outside of you. Today's scholars have betrayed the ideas of Confucius and Mencius, and [had their minds] dimmed by teachings about “investigating [things] and extending [knowledge]” in the *Great Learning*. They try to improve what's inside them only by applying themselves to obtaining broad knowledge of external things. But that is all [like] entering polluted [water] to find clear [water], and trying to make the mirror reflect clearly by piling dirt upon it. It won't work. When [I] [Wang] Shouren was young I didn't know what learning was. I indulged in unorthodox things for twenty years. While chronically ill, I sought in the words of Confucius, Zisi, and Mencius, and seemed to have gained some insight. That was not a result of my ability. As for Zongxian and me: When he was a kid, he already knew to discard examination preparation, urging himself to place his aspirations on the learning of the sages. It is not Zongxian's fault that as he ever more diligently followed the ideas of conventional Confucians and fully explored them things became more difficult. There is a reason behind whether learning is easy or difficult and fails or succeeds. I once spoke about this with Zongxian. He received what I had to say like a thirsty person getting a drink. He imbibed it all. Every time I saw his face it was overflowing with expression. Today, among the good men of our coterie, none can match what he has realized. Taking leave on account of illness, he couldn't bear saying goodbye to me so he insisted on having parting words.¹²⁷

While in Beijing, although he had spent much time with Wang Yangming, Huang never did formally declare himself a follower. That happened in 1522, after he had spent a decade in his home province teaching and learning and then returned to office to serve the Jiajing emperor. In the meantime, they continued corresponding.

¹²³Zhang, *Huang Wan shengping*, 23.

¹²⁴Zhang, *Huang Wan shengping*, 58.

¹²⁵Huang, *Huang Wan ji*, 11.191.

¹²⁶Zhang, *Huang Wan shengping*, 45.

¹²⁷WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7.233.

Zhan Ruoshui was Wang's other close friend and colleague. Their relationship is a famous one in Ming history, and it has been well documented, as has the comparative development of their philosophies and their philosophical debates.¹²⁸ Yet, as Liu Yong has pointed out, those intellectual debates really don't emerge in their correspondence until 1515.¹²⁹ Prior to that time, they appear primarily as close friends with shared concerns. If they were genially disagreeing over the proper method for realizing one's moral self, the definition of mind, and the meaning of the investigation of things in the *Great Learning*—as they later would—then the sources don't show it.

When Wang arrived in the capital in late 1510, took up residence next to his old friend, and spent much time with him holding philosophical discussions, Zhan was a compiler at the Hanlin Academy and a classics mat lecturer. He had been serving at the academy ever since he obtained his *jinshi* in 1505. The next year he met Wang Yangming. Already back then, they vowed to advocate for the learning of the sages. They sought to restore the Way of master-disciple relations and friendship. They held gatherings and received students. But they couldn't remain together for long because Wang ran afoul of the emperor and his eunuchs, and was forced to take up a post far from the capital for three years. They must have missed each other. Zhan told Wang he dreamt about him.¹³⁰ Their poems to one another indicate that at times they had longed to see one another so badly that they shed tears.¹³¹

They only spent about a year together as neighbors in Beijing. In the ninth month of 1511, Zhan was given orders to proceed to Vietnam as an ambassador, where he was to confer the title of king on the ruler of this tributary state.¹³² For this occasion, Wang composed parting words that point to the ideas he believed they shared in common. He noted that the learning of the sages was lost after Mencius's time, and then only temporarily recovered by Song philosophers. Hence, learning had lost its foundation and purpose, only emphasizing things external to the self. Scholars had come to believe that learning was about impressing others with florid literary composition, ever more refined analysis of principle, and skilled repartee. In short, *Ru* 儒 learning was in a bad way: "It may seem as if the Way of the sages is manifest throughout the world, but when I go looking for it, I can't locate a sage and see it!"¹³³ Zhan would surely have entirely agreed with all of these propositions. He had also, in communications with others, idealized ancient times, claiming that the Way was lost¹³⁴ and that scholars had substituted verbal and literary sophistication for substance.¹³⁵ In fact, in a preface he had written in 1511 for descendants of Zhu Xi, Zhan quoted the same line from Confucius that Wang had for Liang Gu: "Does Heaven speak? Yet the four seasons follow their course and the hundred creatures

¹²⁸The most complete study is Ichirō Shiga 志賀一朗, *Tan Kansen to Ō Yōmei no kankei* 湛甘泉と王陽明の關係 (Tokyo: Kazama Shobō, 1985). For the years under discussion, see pp. 49–71.

¹²⁹Liu Yong 劉勇, "Wang Yangming 'Daxue guben' de dangdai jingzhengzhe: Zhan Ruoshui yu Fang Xianfu zhi li" 王陽明'大學古本'的當代競爭者: 湛若水與方獻夫為例, in *Journal of Chinese Studies* 60 (January 2015), 161.

¹³⁰Li Yeming 黎業明, *Zhan Ruoshui nianpu* 湛若水年譜 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2009), 39.

¹³¹Li, *Zhan Ruoshui nianpu*, 40.

¹³²Li, *Zhan Ruoshui nianpu*, 44.

¹³³WYMQJ, vol. 1, 4.230.

¹³⁴Cf. Zhan, *Zhan Ganquan xiansheng*, 17.701.

¹³⁵Zhan, *Zhan Ganquan xiansheng*, 17.699.

continue to be born. So what need is there to speak?"¹³⁶ Both had the overwhelming sense that scholars were simply too oriented to "exteriors" and utterly lacked insight into spiritual matters.

Hence, Wang forcefully pointed out to Zhan how ironic it was that these scholars, while claiming the orthodox traditions taught by Confucius and Mencius, self-righteously poured scorn upon Yang Zhu 楊朱 and Master Mo 墨子, and rejected Buddhism and Daoism. "Are they capable of anything like Master Mo's universal love? Are they capable of anything like Master Yang's [ideas about] living for oneself? Are they capable of anything like Daoist tranquility, purity, and preserving nature, or the Buddhist's inquiry into mind, nature, and destiny?"¹³⁷ In fact, because scholars in their day had gotten so far away from the original *Ru* meaning of humaneness and righteousness, and nature and destiny, Wang considered them far worse off than those they disdained. For although Zhu and Mo's ideas differed from the path of the sages, they each directed the individual towards some level of spiritual realization. Ultimately, that defined the Way of the sages.¹³⁸

Zhan would surely have assented to these propositions, except perhaps Wang's liberal reading of the value of Buddhist insight into nature and destiny. On the one hand, Wang's confident claim that "Ganquan's 甘泉 [i.e. Zhan's] ideas regarding acquiring knowledge emphasizes seeking personally meaningful spiritual realization (*zi de* 自得)" is borne out by Zhan's writings.¹³⁹ But Zhan did draw a clear distinction between the *Ru* Way and Buddhism. Something Wang stated may explain why that was the case. Zhan was apparently being accused of embracing Chan Buddhism, because Wang defended him against that accusation in his parting words: "[People] suspect he practices Chan [Buddhism]. But if he really does, I haven't seen it!"¹⁴⁰ In a parting preface written for a colleague about one month earlier, Zhan had asserted that if a person knows what makes a *Ru* (scholar) a *Ru*, he will understand why a Buddhist is different. Practitioners of both traditions experience tranquility and motion. But through tranquility, the scholar apprehends Heaven, and in his actions he accords with Heaven. Consequently, tranquility and action are unified. The cessation of the Buddhist, however, destroys Heaven, and his actions violate it. That is why Buddhists don't possess a unified practice. In sum, "the sage embodies Heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things and is without self; the Buddhist estranges the four limbs and six senses and is self-centered. Thus, what is public and private and great and small are divided."¹⁴¹

The capacity of the individual to realize oneness with all creation had figured large in Zhan and Wang's thinking about the meaning of sagehood ever since they had met in 1506. Back then, they had also committed themselves to the Song philosopher Cheng Hao's 程顥 teaching that the humane person forms one body with Heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things.¹⁴² But that is only one doctrine to which they both subscribed.

¹³⁶Zhan, *Zhan Ganquan xiansheng*, 17.699.

¹³⁷WYMJ, vol. 1, 4.230.

¹³⁸Zhan, *Zhan Ganquan xiansheng*, 17.699.

¹³⁹Cf. You Tengda 游騰達, "Zhan Ganquan zhexue sixiang de fazhan yu wancheng" 湛甘泉哲學思想的發展與完成 (PhD diss., Guoli Taiwan Shifan Daxue, 2013), 15–16.

¹⁴⁰Zhan, *Zhan Ganquan xiansheng*, 17.701.

¹⁴¹Zhan, *Zhan Ganquan xiansheng*, 17.701.

¹⁴²WYMJ, vol. 2, 38.1401.

As of the Beijing years, as a result of their unique awakenings, both had taught that the humanly realm of self-centered desire must be extinguished in order that the transpersonal realm of flowing Heavenly principle would manifest as the causal source of moral knowledge.¹⁴³ Long before, in 1497, Zhan had experienced a kind of sudden enlightenment that led him to understand what the Song philosophers Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi had meant by Heavenly principle (*tian li* 天理) and also the Song philosopher Li Tong 李侗 by “sit in silence and clear the mind, witness the principle of Heaven.”¹⁴⁴ So powerful was his realization that he concluded that everything sages from Yao and Shun to Confucius and Mencius had said about humanity, justice, etiquette, and wisdom could be summed up with these two characters. That is why his principal teaching became “Wherever one may be realize the principle of Heaven” (*sui chu ti ren tianli* 隨處體認天理).¹⁴⁵

In 1508 in Guizhou, after having also “sat in silence and cleared the mind,” Wang likewise experienced his own enlightenment. One conclusion he drew from it was the absolute identity of mind and (Heavenly) principle. To realize this identity, the individual must practice rejecting desire and maintaining the presence of principle. In fact, in a letter he wrote to Zhan in 1512 speaking of his own efforts at self-cultivation, Wang explained why his own efforts at “realizing the principle of Heaven” were insufficiently skillful.¹⁴⁶

Both also stressed that to see the realm of principle, one must become resolute, for habitual ways of experiencing things and the weight of bodily energies obscure it.¹⁴⁷ Second, one must practice humaneness. It is true that ultimately, as Mencius had stated, one who fully realizes mind will know human nature and Heaven. Yet the path to that is simply learning how to be fundamentally human in every conceivable intersubjective exchange.¹⁴⁸ For these last points, I have cited only Zhan’s letters because the next section will bring out broadly similar ideas being taught by Wang Yangming when they were together in Beijing. For all these reasons, it makes sense that Wang would conclude his parting words for Zhan by stating, “My friendship with Ganquan was such that without speaking, our purposes conjoined, [and] without prior consultation, our ideas went in the same direction. His hopes for this Way won’t come to an end until after he is laid to rest!”¹⁴⁹

WANG YANGMING’S PHILOSOPHY DURING THE BEIJING YEARS

Judging from Wang Yangming’s social life at the capital, these were the critical years during which he first began to purposefully and energetically convey his ideas to the elite scholar-official class. It is true that he had also taught in Beijing in 1505, but we know very little about what and whom he was teaching. In any case, his first set of mature philosophical doctrines was articulated only after he had been punished by the Ming court and sent far away to Guizhou. In 1508 and 1509, he did teach in a makeshift

¹⁴³Li, *Zhan Ruoshui nianpu*, 29.

¹⁴⁴Li, *Zhan Ruoshui nianpu*, 15.

¹⁴⁵Li, *Zhan Ruoshui nianpu*, 15.

¹⁴⁶Shu, *Wang Yangming yi wen (zeng ding ben)*, vol. 1, 361.

¹⁴⁷Li, *Zhan Ruoshui nianpu*, 28–30.

¹⁴⁸Li, *Zhan Ruoshui nianpu*, 28.

¹⁴⁹WYMJQJ, vol. 1, 4.230.

academy built for him by locals living near the courier station to which he had been assigned. He also taught at an academy (Wenming Shuyuan 文明書院) in Guiyang. But aside from officials who happened to be serving in the area at the time, the audience was provincial, and from a marginal province at that.¹⁵⁰ Thus, if Wang Yangming had the intention of fostering a philosophical movement, it makes sense that he would put his energy into doing so while at the capital.

And he did. Wang explained what he was up to in a letter he sent to Chu Chaixu, a scholar-official mentioned earlier. He decried how the “Way of master-disciple relations and friendship had long been cast away,” and explained why this was so consequential. “Nothing under Heaven is greater than the Way, and nothing more honored than virtue,” stated Wang. The most essential virtue is humanity, which is what makes a person human as well as what should be taught to others. And the best way to learn humaneness is through contact with friends and teachers. Friends should encourage each other to become humane, and teachers should discuss it with their disciples. Considerations of status (nobility and lowliness), rank, and age (seniority) are of secondary importance. Wang noted that the sage Yi Yin 伊尹 once said, “Heaven, in giving life to the people, causes those who are first enlightened to enlighten those who are later enlightened.... I am [one of] the first enlightened of Heaven’s people. If I do not awaken others, who will do so?” And that, for Wang Yangming, is the same urgent question everyone must continue to ask today:

My idea is that when one already has a little portion of wisdom, one ought to wish at once to share this little portion of wisdom with others, and when one already has a little bit of enlightenment, one ought to wish at once to share this little bit of enlightenment with others. The more people there are who possess a little wisdom and a little enlightenment, the easier it will be to have them share with one another their wisdom and enlightenment. And then, after this, we might look forward to great wisdom and great enlightenment.¹⁵¹

Wang humbly denied that he was one of those with the ability to spread around wisdom, even as he was doing so for his friends and students in Beijing. Apparently, though doubtful of his own credentials, he felt they were sufficient to undertake this task: “If one considers oneself as possessing only a little wisdom, and as being only slightly awakened, and therefore does not dare to awaken others, one will eventually awaken no one. Does a man of humanity act in this way? The man of humanity fosters the virtue of others when he wishes his own to be fostered and enlarges others’ [minds] when he wishes [his own to be enlarged].”¹⁵² Given this program for enlightenment, I shall conclude by summing up the goals he held out for students of the Way, and obstacles to and methods for attaining them, as documented in literature dating to the Beijing years.

The goal Wang Yangming set forth for his students and friends was sagehood. The purpose of philosophical inquiry, he insisted, is to understand and attain what sages

¹⁵⁰See George Lawrence Israel, *Doing Good and Ridding Evil in Ming China* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 26–33; Qian Ming 錢明, *Wang Yangming ji qi xuepai lun kao* 王陽明及其學派論考 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2009), 257–61.

¹⁵¹WYMJQ, vol. 1, 21.812–13. For a discussion, see Israel, *Doing Good and Ridding Evil*, 39–41. For this translation, see Ching, *Philosophical Letters*, 20–21.

¹⁵²WYMJQ, vol. 1, 21.813. For a translation, see Ching, *Philosophical Letters*, 20.

had understood and attained: lucidity of mind and the transcendent (Heavenly) virtues of human nature that will be realized through it, especially humaneness. To become sagely, a person must restore the mind to its primordial condition, where it will be perfected, focused, and pure. Illuminated like the transparency of clear water or a mirror, the mind apprehends moral principles as they naturally arise and manifest in awareness. At this point, Wang explained, “one already knows the humane body,” and is abiding in the highest good: “The highest good is simply this mind [in the state] where the purity of Heavenly principles is fully realized.”¹⁵³ Furthermore, human nature will have been recovered. He told the senior scholar-official Wang Yunfeng 王雲鳳 that Cheng Yi’s claim that “it is a joy to accord with principle” is true. But only those who know human nature are able to accord with the good, and those who know human nature know humaneness as the mind itself.¹⁵⁴ In sum, Wang pointed to a natural moral goodness of which all are capable. Insofar as the mind is pure, this goodness will manifest as a flow of conscious moral states. Mind will apprehend the flow of these states as its own true identity and nature. The manifestation in awareness of the unimpeded flow of transcendent (Heavenly) moral knowing is what happens when mind, principle, and nature are identical.

Reaching sagehood, however, is difficult. There are many obstacles, but the principal obstacle lies within the self. People are normally self-centered and full of desires, and therefore fail to perceive their natural moral goodness and the impetus to action it provides.¹⁵⁵ Their true nature is obscured by the personal. That impacts society too, for the Way can’t prevail when most people are looking out for themselves. Wang repeatedly told colleagues that the Way had been lost for centuries, going back to Song times, when the philosophers Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 and the Cheng brothers had temporarily recovered the message of Mengzi, Yan Yuan, and Confucius.¹⁵⁶ Now he was attempting to do something similar, and seeking the assistance of friends and students. But it wasn’t easy. He told Huang Wan that whereas the ancients eschewed depravity, people today eschew principled conduct. He noted that it is frankly easier to go along with all of the vice because virtuous conduct only incurs jealousy, recrimination, and ridicule.¹⁵⁷

To make matters worse, the all-important examination system diverts scholars’ attention from the important task of becoming moral persons. People today are only interested in prestige and recognition, and exams are the way to that. They have crude minds and shallow attainments; are boastful, opinionated, and argumentative; and concerned only to get ahead of others.¹⁵⁸ Teaching isn’t what it’s supposed to be either. Ultimately, the purpose of education is to make students more humane and help them to recognize their good nature. But teachers today are only concerned with helping students secure

¹⁵³Wang Yangming, *Chuan xi lu zhu shu*, annotated with commentary by Deng Aimin (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), 9. For this translation, see Ivanhoe, *Readings*, 139.

¹⁵⁴WYMQJ, vol. 1, 21.813.

¹⁵⁵I am indebted to David Tien for his useful translation of *si yu* 私欲 as “self-centered desires,” as opposed to “selfish desires.” See David W. Tien, “Oneness and Self-Centeredness in the Moral Psychology of Wang Yangming,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40:1 (2012), 52–56.

¹⁵⁶WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7.230.

¹⁵⁷WYMQJ, vol. 1, 21.724.

¹⁵⁸WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7.233.

reputation and profit. Nor is friendship what it should be. As opposed to being about the mutual pursuit of the Way and virtue, friendship has become about mutual self-interest in the pursuit of fame and recognition.¹⁵⁹ It is not about making your friend a better person. It is about a kind of tacit, mutual agreement to help one another secure advantage.

Finally, none of this is helped by the fact that the sage's wisdom was not being conveyed correctly by standard commentaries. Scholars "are ignorant of the investigation [of things] (*ge wu* 格物) and the extension [of knowledge] (*zhi zhi* 致知) in the *Great Learning*," Wang told Huang Wan.¹⁶⁰ The *Great Learning* (*Da xue* 大學) was one of the Four Books students must master when preparing for the examinations, so its importance would be difficult to overstate. The Song philosophers Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi had said that in terms of entering the gate to virtue, this text comes first, after which came the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Doctrine of the Mean*.¹⁶¹ Ming scholars would have understood that the *Great Learning* was the work of Zengzi 曾子, one of Confucius's most important disciples. They would know that it was originally part of a Western Han Dynasty classical text, the *Record of Ritual* (*Li ji* 禮記), but over time had come to stand independently of it, with multiple commentaries. The most important commentary, and the one that was designated by the state as orthodoxy and the standard for examination, was Zhu Xi's *Great Learning in Chapters and Sentences* (*Daxue zhangju* 大學章句). But Zhu Xi had somewhat rearranged the original Han version and added material to it, producing a new edition that properly fit his thinking about what the text meant. And that is what Wang Yangming objected to. Much to the consternation of his students (Xu Ai said he was at first "alarmed," and he was hardly alone in this sentiment), and in what amounted to a serious attack on orthodoxy regarding what the sages of ancient times had said, Wang insisted that scholars return to the ancient version of the text.¹⁶²

Wang repeatedly pointed to a few essential practices necessary to overcome the obstacles. Being resolute (*li zhi* 立志) is the first critical step. As he had told Lin Da, those with determination have already made it halfway to the goal and shall surely succeed. Second, finding the right environment for learning will foster recovery of the mind's goodness. To that end, Wang repeatedly advocated restoring the Way of master-disciple relations and friendship (*shi you zhi dao* 師友之道). These relationships replace external, artificial hierarchies of status and roles with an inherently egalitarian, internal hierarchy of virtue. That is, I am your master only by virtue of my having become more humane and understood more deeply what virtue is and how it is rooted in human nature. You have chosen me as your master because you have made a decision to learn for yourself by seeking these qualities within yourself.

Third, the individual must apply effort to bring forth the moral mind, a mind identified with Heavenly principle, the causal source and ground of moral consciousness. Under whatever circumstances, the individual is naturally able to know where goodness lies. Wang stated:

¹⁵⁹WYMQJ, vol. 1, 21.812–14.

¹⁶⁰WYMQJ, vol. 1, 7.233.

¹⁶¹Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Si shu zhang ju ji zhu* 四書章句集注 (Shanghai: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2014), 5.

¹⁶²Wang, *Chuan xi lu*, 5.

Knowledge is the original essence of the mind. The mind is naturally able to know. When you see your father you naturally know filial piety. When you see your elder brother you naturally know brotherly reverence. When you see a child fall into a well you naturally know empathy. This is the intrinsic knowledge of the good.¹⁶³

This knowledge manifests (*fa* 發) most purely as compassion and inexhaustible humanness in individuals who have dis-identified with the limiting desires of the merely personal and identified with the transpersonal Way. The knowledge of most, however, is limited by self-centered desires. So that is where the real effort is required. Wang repeatedly makes statements like these: “If you want this mind to be pure in Heavenly principle, then you should apply effort wherever principle manifests”;¹⁶⁴ “Wherever principle manifests that is where you study how to hold forth Heavenly principle”; “The only thing one needs to do is to exert oneself to keep this mind rid of human desires and hold present Heavenly principle.”¹⁶⁵

All this might sound odd enough, but Wang seemed to believe that human beings were capable of a kind of self-transcending ethical practice wherein, by rejecting negative or unethical states of mind, they would be relieved and purified of self-centered desires. At that point, they would perceive the ongoing flow or manifestation or arising of selfless and essentially good, conscious moral states. These states would be recognized as the very nature of mind itself, and also point to a natural course of action. The individual is naturally able to know how to act. That is why, at this point, three of Wang’s fundamental teachings were (1) recognizing mind as (Heavenly) principle (*xin ji li* 心即理);¹⁶⁶ (2) unifying knowledge and action (*zhi xing he yi* 知行合一);¹⁶⁷ and (3) holding present Heavenly principle and rejecting human desire (*cun tianli qu ren yu* 存天理去人欲).¹⁶⁸

Xu’s record of Wang’s conversations reveals that his students were consistently puzzled by his approach to the best method for acquiring moral knowledge. Are there not many principles that must be studied, each specific to a social relationship and circumstance? Don’t we need to inquire as to the principles suited to each matter we encounter, such as how to keep one’s parents warm in the winter and cool in the summer? Is that not what Zhu Xi meant when he stated that “each thing and every affair has its own fixed principle”?¹⁶⁹ Both Xu Ai and Zheng Yichu raised this issue, and it was one that Wang took to heart and addressed most forcefully.

Indeed, Zhu Xi’s commentary on the *Great Learning* would seem to suggest that moral knowledge (and hence virtue) grows through a process of accumulating deepening knowledge of moral rules, dictums, and laws. At least, that is how Wang’s students had understood him. Acquiring moral knowledge was a matter of passing through a conceptually formal and rational process of determining and understanding what principles were involved in each situation. Zhu Xi had written about “what is referred to as

¹⁶³Wang, *Chuan xi lu*, 15.

¹⁶⁴Wang, *Chuan xi lu*, 16.

¹⁶⁵Wang, *Chuan xi lu*, 8. For a translation, see Ivanhoe, *Readings*, 139.

¹⁶⁶Wang, *Chuan xi lu*, 8.

¹⁶⁷Wang, *Chuan xi lu*, 10.

¹⁶⁸Wang, *Chuan xi lu*, 8.

¹⁶⁹Wang, *Chuan xi lu*, 7.

extending knowledge and investigating things: the statement means that if I desired to extend my knowledge, I must exhaust the principles directly where things are.”¹⁷⁰ Hence, Wang was repeatedly queried as to why it wasn’t important to inquire into all the various dictums that pertain to each human relationship.

But Wang rejected this approach as objectifying the good and boiling it down to following rules, something akin to an actor following a script. Goodness is not somewhere out there, he stressed.¹⁷¹ Wang’s students seemed to believe that morality was either conventional—a matter of conforming to principles as established by an authority—or post-conventional—a matter of rationally determining what a universal moral principle (such as humaneness) would require in a particular circumstance. Conventional morality tells me I am good because I did things that ensured my parents would be comfortable. Post-conventional morality tells me I am good because I can apply the universal principle of humaneness to many different circumstances.¹⁷² But neither of these types quite fit what Wang had in mind. Neither counts as the kind of immediate, visionary, and transpersonal moral knowing naturally arising from the root of moral personhood that Wang described. That is a superior form of moral knowledge. If the mind is pure in Heavenly principle, then the script will follow along with little effort. Since the principle obstacle is just such self-centered impulses and desires, Wang insisted that investigating things and extending knowledge is not about conceptual inquiry into what principles fit each relationship and circumstance. Rather, a thing is simply what the mind intends or wills, so the focus of moral practice lies there. If what the mind intends is right, then transpersonal moral knowing will have been brought forth. And if anything is not right, then it must be righted. Investigating things is a matter of righting the mind to the point where moral vision manifests under any particular circumstance. Wang wrote that investigating is

rejecting what is not right in the mind, in order to make whole the rightness of its primordial essence. In order to make whole its rightness, wherever [one’s] intention may lie, reject what is not right in it. That is, there is no time or place that is not the occasion for maintaining the presence of Heavenly principle. That is fully inquiring into principle. The “principle of Heaven” is “illustrious virtue.” “Fully inquiring into virtue” is “illuminating illustrious virtue.”¹⁷³

In terms of the philosophical debates of the moment, this was Wang Yangming’s most poignant and concrete response to what he perceived as the critical issues of his time. To reverse the tide of declining virtue and the darkening of the Way, as manifested in political culture and literati mores, education had to be changed, and that required using the correct text and understanding it in the correct way. Wang asked that his friends and students find the fundamental source of morality by looking deeply within the goodness of which they were already aware and by taking action to maintain its presence while also rejecting any self-centered impulses that might interfere with its manifestation.

¹⁷⁰Zhu Xi, *Si shu zhang ju ji zhu* (Shanghai: Zhejiang gu ji chubanshe, 2013), 7–8.

¹⁷¹Wang, *Chuan xi lu*, 9–10.

¹⁷²I am here simplistically referencing Lawrence Kohlberg’s stage of moral development. Cf. William Crain, *Theories of Development: Concepts and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 157–165.

¹⁷³Wang, *Chuan xi lu*, 15.

CONCLUSION

The years Wang Yangming spent in Beijing—from 1510 to 1512—were critical for the development of his philosophical movement. In 1506, for speaking out about the abuses of the court eunuch Liu Jin, he had suffered a humiliating beating and was “exiled” to a minor post in the distant province of Guizhou. In retrospect, he judged that experience as the perfect opportunity for tempering his character and developing his philosophical insights. After spending six months as a magistrate in Luling, Jiangxi, he returned to the capital with a renewed sense of purpose. But his goal was not to advance to higher offices at the Ming court. Conditions there were dire, and he had nothing but disdain for the emperor. Little had changed, and he wanted to leave and make a difference in another way. He explained his thinking to Chu Chaixu:

The world today has long been morally degenerate. It does not differ from a sick man approaching death. And yet, every man continues to hold stubbornly to his own opinions and refuses to seek humility in guidance and correction. That is why, in today’s world, only the heroic and independent scholars, who really recognize the urgency of the need to seek one’s own nature and endowment, take upon themselves the responsibility of seeking the way of the sages, and are anxious to find a teacher to follow.¹⁷⁴

While in Beijing, Wang Yangming embraced the role of teacher, for both friends and students. He sought to restore the Way of master-disciple relations and friendship and to foster a movement among the “heroic and independent” scholars with philosophical goals similar to his own. He saw that under challenging political conditions, intellectual elites should return to the fundamental purpose of learning—becoming truly human by purifying the mind and recovering human nature. His venue for accomplishing his teaching goals were *jiangxue* gatherings where he and his fellow students could discuss the Way. Wang had established the contours of the educational program he would pursue for the remainder of his life.

¹⁷⁴WYMQJ, vol. 1, 21:811. Ching, *Philosophical Letters*, 23.