Neo-Confucianism combined principles from the three major ancient philosophies of China—Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—and the Wang Yangming school was one of its dominant and most influential movements.

The Wang Yangming school was named after the philosopher Wang Yangming (1472–1529), who began to critique the Confucian concept that material things alone are worthy of investigation. Instead, Wang advocated broadening of the definition of the “thing” to include not only materiality, but also moral precepts and ideas or thoughts.

Neo-Confucianism

The need for Confucianism to address ideas that had become established in Chinese society, namely Daoism and Buddhism, led to a synthesis of sorts during the Song Dynasty (960–1279). The pragmatic approach of the Confucians, with its concern for the here-and-now and the betterment of the individual and society, was tempered first by the Daoist view that human beings were essentially good and required institutions and a society that would permit this goodness to exert itself; and second, by the Buddhist notion that the world was both illusory and filled with suffering, and one’s concern should be on being rid of this pain. These three dominant philosophies amalgamated to fashion what is commonly known as neo-Confucianism.

One of the hallmarks of neo-Confucian thought was the explication of unity within duality, that is, a thing possesses two opposing elements, which in their dissimilarity unite as one in order to give the thing its being. Neo-Confucianism also maintained that the self can be morally constructed by way of educating and contemplating human intuition, which was innate to all people.

Neo-Confucianism focused on the investigation of material things by seeking to place the individual within his/her social context. This could only be done by cultivating the mind in order to affect change for the better upon those things that surrounded and influenced the individual, namely, society and government. A fulfilled life was one which sought to perfect the self in order to perfect society and the state.

Wang Yangming

In contrast to the contemporary neo-Confucian thought, Wang Yangming theorized that material things were in truth comprised of three elements: material reality; the idea of that reality, that is, its intellectual expression; and the moral import of the thing. For example, a friend is a person, a word, and a moral relationship (is the friend good or bad?). Wang sought to combine materialism and idealism in order to arrive at a moral understanding of human actions. In this way, he was very much grounded in the Confucian notion that people must continually strive for betterment. But he wanted to know how to achieve
Wang, of course, did not ignore the importance given by Confucians to right actions. But he suggested that such actions must be guided by the mind. He linked action to both knowledge and morality. Indeed, one cannot have action without knowledge, nor can one have knowledge without action; by extension, all knowledge is morality because the chief end of knowledge is to better the self, society and the state. Betterment requires a principle of morality, in that the lesser is raised to a higher level. This is more than mere tautology (needless repetition of an idea), for Wang pointed to a larger precept: the unity of all things. By this principle, humans and their actions are part of materiality, which is both action and idea, and it is through action (or the manifestation of ideas) that humans become part of the world around them and even part of the universe. Thus, that which is good for the individual is also good for society, the world at large, and the cosmos. Each component must work harmoniously within its larger context to bring about an essential unity of all creation, because all things, in fact, are one body. Each thing shares a pattern (the li), or a way of being, with another thing, just as we eat living things in order to live. For example, theoretical physics states that all things in the universe are constructed from an elementary particle, called the Higgs boson, or what Wang would call a pattern.

The concept that all things are united by shared patterns is an important contribution of the Wang Yangming school. With this theory, it broke free from the Confucian valorization of the family: Confucian thinkers such as Mencius (371–289 BCE) said that society and the structures of the world were versions of the family. In the place of such an analogy, Wang suggested that the relationship between things is not a familial one at all; rather, it is a far more intimate harmony of similar patterns. The universe—all of creation and reality itself—is not a family, it is a single body.

In order to know and comprehend this harmony, Wang refined the concept of the mind. First there exists the mind of the Way—which may be defined as a state of calm and lucidity, which permits the mind to apprehend universality (the Principle); that is, universality and the individual become one so that individual begins to carry out the will of heaven (the Principle)—and second there exists the human mind. The former is the mind in its purest primordial state. This is the mind in itself, while the

A portrait of Wang Yangming, the philosopher who expanded the concept of the “thing” beyond materiality to embrace moral precepts and ideas.
human mind is that which has lost its purity by becoming ensnared in selfish desires. The object of education and of contemplation is to once again purify the mind and return it to its original state, free from all selfish entanglements, so that it might realize its essential role in, and its implicit bond with, the moral order of the self and of the universe. For Wang, such a liberated mind alone could successfully guide the individual to the good. As is obvious, Wang’s debt to Buddhism was apparent in this explanation; however, he entirely negated the Buddhist self-centered ideal of purifying the soul in order to gain freedom from pain and suffering by nullifying individuality, leading the soul to escape into nothingness. For Wang, purification of the mind was not an end in itself, nor was it selfish to flee from the world. Instead, Wang described a more inclusive approach because he did not neglect the Confucian demand for a pragmatic view of action. A pure mind is the only possible guarantor of morality, because to see all things as one body is also to care for that body fully and completely. In brief, the school of thought that he established may be summarized thus: Personal morality alone saves the world and the universe. The influence of the Wang Yangming school reached its apex during the late Ming and the Qing periods. In present-day China, the influence of the school has waned, although its stress on education as a way of bettering the self and society remains as a dominant mindset.

Nirmal DASS

Further Reading


The Words of Wang Yangming

There can be little doubt that among the new trends in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) the teachings and personal example of Wang Yangming were to have the most explosive effect.

Whenever I think of people’s degeneration and difficulties I pity them and have a pain in my heart. I overlook my own unworthiness and wish to save them by this teaching. And I do not know the limits of my ability. When people see me trying to do this, they join one another in ridiculing, insulting, and cursing me as insane… Of course, there are cases when people see their fathers, sons, or brothers falling into a deep abyss and getting drowned. They cry, crawl, go naked and barefooted, stumble, and fall. They hang on to dangerous cliffs and go down to save them. Some gentlemen who see them behave like this… consider them insane because they cry, stumble, and fall as they do. Now to stand aside and make no attempt to save the drowning, while mocking those who do, is possible only for strangers who have no natural feelings of kinship, but even then they will be considered to have no sense of pity and to be no longer human beings. In the case of a father, son, or brother, because of love he will surely feel an ache in his head and a pain in his heart, run desperately until he has lost his breath, and crawl to save them. He will even risk drowning himself. How much less will he worry about whether people believe him or not?
