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# THE FUSION OF CONFUCIANISM AND CHAN – BUDDHISM IN NEO-CONFUCIAN EPISTEMOLOGY: THE ENLIGHTENMENT AT THE SPRING OF HEAVEN

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## 1. Developments of the Theory of Knowledge in the School of Mind (Xin xue 心學): Gradualist (Xiu shen 修身) Epistemology and Epistemology of Instant Enlightenment (Li gen 利根)

The presumption about the non-existence of absolute validity of good and evil doubtless belongs to the most innovative, and at the same time, to the riskiest results of Wang Yangming's philosophy. On the one hand, his deviation into the ideal space beyond good and evil meant a negation of Confucian determinism of concrete ethical principles, and, on the other, it is this very aspect, that shows us in a most clear way the impact of Buddhist and Daoist elements, that found – although only indirectly and implicitly – their way into the framework of idealistic streams of Neo-Confucianism precisely through Wang's philosophy. Therefore, it is not surprising, that this very presumption became the stumbling block, which later on broke up the spirits of his followers. This development was indicated already before his death. Its beginning is to be found in the famous dialogue between two of his disciples, Qian Dehong 錢德洪 and Wang Ji 王畿. In the histories of Chinese thought it has commonly been recorded under the title "*The Enlightenment at the Spring of Heaven* 天泉證悟". (The respective dialogue took place, of course, on the bridge above the Spring of Heaven, which is allegedly situated in the present Guangxi province) [Bauer 2000, 284]. The contestable point of this debate was just the above mentioned aspect of Wang's teachings. First of all, the two disciples resumed it in the following saying:

*(The substance of mind is neither good nor evil. Good and evil are directed by intentions. Innate knowledge provides us with understanding of good and evil. Exploring things means to act good and to abolish evil.)*

德洪曰：— ‘此意如何？’ (*Dehong asked: - 'What does that mean?'*)

汝中曰：— ‘此恐未是究竟話頭。若曰心體是無善無惡，意亦是無善無惡的意，知意是無善無惡的知，物亦是無善無惡的物。若說意有善惡，畢竟心體還有善惡在’。 (*Wang Ji<sup>1</sup> replied: - 'I think that this is not the end of his proverb. But, if the substance of mind is neither good nor evil, then the intentions can not be good or evil either. In this case, there can be no good or evil in knowledge, nor in the things / beings/. But if we presuppose, that there was good and evil in intentions, then the same should hold true for the substance of mind.'*)

德洪曰：— ‘心體是天命之性，原是無善無惡的，但人有習心，意念上見有善惡在，格，致，誠正，修此正是復那性體功夫若原無善無惡，功夫亦不消說矣’。 (*Dehong said: - 'The substance of mind is the nature of the cosmos, in which originally there was no good, nor evil. But people also possess the habituated mind, and therefore their intentions are good or evil. Only through complete exploration of things and through sincere cultivation of proper actions one can gradually return to this original stage, in which there is no good or evil. Needless to say, that it is a question of exercise'.)*

是夕侍坐天泉橋，各舉請正。 (*The very same evening, both disciples on the bridge over the Spring of Heaven asked their master<sup>2</sup> to teach them about the proper understanding.*)

<sup>1</sup> Here, Wang Ji is being named Ru Zhong 汝中, which was his nickname [see Forke 1934, 414].

<sup>2</sup> Of course, this master was Wang Yangming 王陽明..

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先生曰：— ‘我今將行，正要你們講破此意。二君之見，正好相資為用，不可各執一遍我這裡接人原有此二種利根之人直從本原上悟入人心本體原是瑩澄無滯的，原是個未發之中利根之人一悟本體即是功夫，人即內外一齊俱透了。其次不免有習心在，本體受蔽，故且教在意念上實落為善去惡，功夫熟后，渣滓去去得盡時，本體亦明淨了。汝中之見，是我這裡接利根人的，德洪之見，是我這裡為其次立法的。二君相取為用，則中人上下皆可引入於道；若各執一邊，眼前便有失人，便於道體各有未盡。’ (*The master said: – ‘Today I am leaving and I just wanted to explain to you the meaning of this saying. Both interpretations are correct and complete each other, but none of them is generally valid. Each of them namely corresponds to a certain type of men. On the one side, there are people, who possess the quality of favourable roots<sup>3</sup>. This kind of people can directly and spontaneously experience the most elementary recognition of the substance of mind; they can immediately comprehend it in its totality, up to the last details. On the other side, many people do not possess such a quality yet. They need a lot of exercise and practise to obtain comprehension. Only with practise and exercise they can experience the unity of inner and outer world. The substance of their mind is covered by stacks of common habits, and therefore they need to be taught how to perform good and to avoid evil in their actions. In this way, namely by constant practise, this kind of people will mature in their actions and thus become able to gain the integer recognition of the basic substance of being. Wang Ji’s interpretation corresponds to the first, and Dehong’s to the latter kind of people. Both are mutually complementary, and therefore both kinds of learning have to be taught. If you will persist in only one of both methods, then one part of the people will loose the possibility to gain recognition, since no one of both interpretations represents the one and only truth, valid for everybody’*)

即而曰：— ‘以后為朋友講學，切不可失了我的宗旨’。” (*Then he added: – ‘Later, when you are going to spread out my teachings to your friends, you should by no means forget that!’*) [Wang Shouren 1933, 26-27].

This farewell conversation of both disciples with their master was also their last one, because Wang Ji 王畿 in Qian Dehong 錢德洪 never met their teacher again, since he died soon after that. This record may be a metaphorical one only, because it already implies in a subtle way the boundary between instant and gradual recognition [Mall 1996, 27], which later on deeply marked both main currents of further development of Neo-Confucian epistemology. In the debate about the nature or method of enlightenment (or salvation) this boundary is of immense importance also for Buddhist, especially *chan* – Buddhist disputes, in which it became more and more relevant for the increasing signification of original Buddhist thought [Bauer 2000, 286].

“*In China, the controversies between gradualism and instant enlightenment or salvation was formed in Buddhism; as it occurred anew in the context of Wang Shouren’s school, it still bore characteristic Buddhist features. On the other hand, here, again, we are dealing here with a characteristic Chinese phenomena. It is therefore reasonable not to think about it in a sense of something directly foreign, but rather in a sense of a specific Chinese response to something foreign. This presumption has been confirmed already by the fact, that similar responses could also be observed later in Chinese history, namely during China’s confrontation with Western systems of thought*” [Bauer 2000, 286].

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<sup>3</sup> This expression (*li gen* 利根 = “favourable/roots”) is originally a Buddhist term; the word ‘roots’ namely originally referred to connections with knowledge and recognitions, which were collected during the previous life.

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## 2. Two new Streams in the Theory of Knowledge: Qian Dehong 錢德洪 (1496 – 1574) and Wang Ji 王畿 (1498 – 1583)

As we have seen in the previous chapter, these two best known disciples of Wang Yangming's school simultaneously also represent two basic currents in Neo-Confucian epistemology. Similar currents could also be observed in the parallel development of *chan* – Buddhist theories of knowledge and, speaking in terms of theosophy, in their teachings of salvation respectively [Rošker 2008, 245].

During the Ming 明 dynasty Buddhism, especially sinificated forms of this religion, didn't represent a rigid opponent to Confucian doctrines anymore. The Neo-Confucian teachings were already well established and therefore (even the official) philosophers of this period could allow themselves a bit more openness of mind as well as a bit less dogmatism and formal theoretical xenophobia. So the representative of the subitistic theory, Wang Ji 王畿, openly advocated the opinion, that all three main schools of prevailing thought in China, namely Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, were the same in essence [Bauer 2000, 287].

Therefore, it is not surprising, that the history of Chinese philosophy usually places him among the leading theoreticians of the then *chan* – Buddhism, although he was one of the most important disciples of Wang Yangming 王陽明.

Qian Dehong 錢德洪 and Wang Ji 王畿 were close friends in spite of the rather significant difference between their individual understanding of methods of comprehension, which has been described above. Beside studying together at Wang's school, they were also teaching the freshmen, which were entrusted to both of them together by their master. Before the novices were allowed to attend the lessons of master Wang, they had first to pass the beginning course of his most famous disciples. In the process of this course, they were taught to understand the basic approaches of Neo-Confucian idealism, and, at the same time, free themselves of “prejudices”, to which these heterodox teachings were still exposed. In 1532, i.e. only three years after their master's death, Qian Dehong and Wang Ji also passed the highest official exam together. Qian's most important work embraces 25 volumes under the title “*Debates from the Mountain of Thought (Xu shan hui yu 緒山會語)*”. Among other, Wang Ji is also famous as the establisher of the strongly *chan* – Buddhist determined academic group Dragon stream (Long xi 龍溪). In fact, the title “Dragon stream” was Wang Ji's nickname, and his complete opus in 22 volumes also has a similar title, namely “*The Collected Works of Wang's Dragon stream (Wang Long xi quan shu 王龍溪全書)*”.

If we compare their writings, Qian shows himself to be a more orthodox and “obedient” Confucian, who showed much more respect to his teacher, Wang Yangming, than his doubtless more daring, but also more creative friend Wang Ji. Although Qian thus by no means appreciated any risks, and decided therefore after the death of his master to attend a number of solid official positions, it was precisely this decision that brought bad luck to him. In one of this functions he incurred the displeasure of one of the emperor's protégés, who arrested him instantly after. So Qian remained imprisoned till the death of that huffish imperial official. In the custody, he had plenty of time for profound philosophic reasoning. The sojourn in detention provided him with opportunities for more detailed rethinking of the gradualist epistemology, to which he was, as we have seen in the previous chapter, declined already at the time of his conversation at the bridge of Heavenly Spring. In his letter to his friend Wang Ji he entrusted to him, that this very experience of suppressed freedom, expropriation and isolation consolidated his recognition of the nullity of any attachment and provided him with the insight into the importance of long enduring practice of asceticism for the purpose of genuine comprehension:

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“親蹈生死真境，身世盡空，獨留一念，癡魂耿耿，中夜豁然若省，乃知上天為我設此法象，示我以本來真性不容絲髮掛帶。” (*I am wandering in the depths of the real space of life and death. My body, the whole world around me – all these vanished in emptiness. Only one single thought remained. My spirit was restless wandering around, till the deep night was instantly turned into brilliant light. By that time, I knew, that this was the image of the method, exhibited to me by nature. It showed to me that I should use my own nature and liberate myself of all attachments* [Ming ru xue'an 1987, 234].

Despite of such and similar lyrical passages, which doubtless bear witness of his vein of literature as well as of his profound sensibility for linking elements of style and of content, Qian mostly proved himself to be rather a reproductive, than a particularly creative scholar. His essays were mostly collections of quotations and more detailed explanations of various representatives of the School of Mind, especially, of course, of Wang Yangming's work. So even the central scope of his treatises is predominated by the repeatedly over-chewed concepts of Neo-Confucian idealism; thus, Qian was usually dealing with the not very critical, but most detailed and consequent explanations of the development, elaboration and reflection of well-known notions of mind (*xin* 心), innate knowledge (*liang zhi* 良知), as well as with their connection to the central Neo-Confucian notion of principle (*li* 理).

“良知天理原非二意，以心之靈虛昭察而言，謂之知，以心之文理條析而言，謂之理”。 (*The meaning of innate knowledge is actually not different from the meaning of natural laws. From the viewpoint of spiritual emptiness it can be named knowledge, and from the viewpoint of refined structural order of mind, it can be named principle*) [Ming ru xue'an 1987, 233].

In epistemological sense Qian (similar, but more evident than Wang Yangming) places emphasis upon the function of innate knowledge as the highest criteria for distinguishing true and false or (rational and ethical) proper and wrong.

“知則主宰乎事物，是非之則也”。 (*Knowledge is the ruler of all things and a norm of true and false*) [Ming ru xue'an 1987, 233].

A little special and a bit more complex is at the utmost his emphasising of the gradualist method of comprehension. In addition to continual asceticism and other practices in the cultivation of personality Qian principally stressed the importance of consequent sincerity in conduct and thought. Only a complete acquisition of this quality could enable us to gain genuine recognition, since knowledge as such was a-priori moral goodness in essence<sup>4</sup>.

While Qian was marching upon (apparently) secure, almost a bit hackneyed paths of Neo-Confucian comprehension, Wang Ji's 王畿 thought often leaked out to the forbidden fruits of Buddhist and Daoist disputes. This theoretical infidelity fertilised his philosophy by flashes of new syntheses: hence, Wang Ji indeed succeeded in many respects to unite certain, originally unconnected concepts of all three respective discourses into an integral, consistent and solidly elaborated theoretical system. In spite of these – often brilliant – contributions to Chinese philosophy, he was mostly represented as a negative figure of a Buddhist heretic by Confucian historiography. If we try to familiarise ourselves with traditional Chinese metaphors and symbolic meanings, we can not be astonished by the fact, that even centuries after his death, most various “restless spirits” were still persistently designated as adherents of Wang Ji's Dragon Stream school (Long xi 龍溪) [Forke 1934, 414], even in cases, in which these creative critics of the ruling system of thought didn't have anything in common with his philosophy.

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<sup>4</sup> This opinion is in complete accordance with Qian Dehong's interpretation of Wang Yangming's saying about the relativity of good and evil, quoted in the previous chapter.

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Of utmost importance, however, is the fact, that Wang Ji was a representative of a very rare kind of traditional Confucian scholars, who brought into their systems also archaic elements of the logic of double negation, that were created in the scope of original Indian Buddhism. Wang Ji connected them to Hui Shi's 惠施 Zenonic concepts of relativity of time and space: “心非有非無，相非實非幻，纔著有無實幻，便落斷常辟之弄，丸不著一處不離一處，是謂懸同”。(*There is no presence or absence in our mind. Appearances are neither real, nor illusionary. If there were presence and absence, or reality and illusion, they would stop the eternal oscillation, which is like a rolling ball, touching and not touching a certain point at the same time. I call this floating identity*) [Li xue zong zhuan, 1989, 2003].

Although Wang Ji's epistemology follows the idea of mind (*xin* 心), its central quality is emptiness (*xu* 虛). In essence, this was a Daoist and later on also a chan – Buddhist notion. Before Wang Ji, this term was never applied in Neo-Confucian systems in a function of any relevant concept<sup>5</sup>. Experiencing this basic quality of mind, i.e. experiencing (and admitting respectively) its transformation into the state of emptiness was seen by him as a basis for any kind of learning, i.e. as the first step upon the path, leading to recognition.

“人心要虛，惟虛集道，常使胸中豁無些子積滯，方是學”。(*The human mind should be empty. Only in a state of emptiness it can concentrate upon dao. Therefore, the best way to learn is in the first place to remove all obstacles in our chest in to breath freely and openly*) [Ming ru xue'an 1987, 244].

In his opinion, this very state of emptiness (*xu* 虛) is precisely the thing, which connected our mind (*xin* 心) with the innate knowledge (*liang zhi* 良知), i. e. the concreteness with the universality and, at the same time, the present moment with eternity.

“萬物之變，不可勝窮，無不有以應之，是萬物之變備於吾之良知也。。。良知之能備萬物之變，以其虛也，致虛則自無物欲之間，吾之良知自以萬物相為流通，而無所凝滯”。(*The changes of all existing beings are inexhaustible. There is nothing, which is not in accordance with them... These changes of all, that exists, have been stored in my innate knowledge... My innate knowledge possesses the potential of these changes due to its own emptiness. In the utmost emptiness the border between wishes and things disappears and my innate knowledge becomes interwoven in the changes of everything that exists. In this state, all kinds of obstacles vanish*) [Ming ru xue'an 1987, 243].

Besides, Wang equalises the idea of innate knowledge with another central Daoist concept, which epistemological roots can be found already at some ontologically crucial passages from Laozi's *The Way and its Power* (道德經), namely with the concept of solitude or of (external and inner) peace (*ji* 寂)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The notion *xu* 虛 in such crucial epistemological sense can not be found in the idealistic, and, of course, even less in the realistic current of Neo-Confucian systems of thought.

<sup>6</sup> The notion *ji* 寂 in the sense of an epistemological category is actually not at all misplaced [see Lenk 1993, 7]. Of course, we are accustomed, that dialogues with other people, knowledge arising from books, Internet and Mexican soap operas, etc. also belonged to processes of comprehension. But let us remember certain situations, in which we feel inclined to get down to rock bottom of some important problems, and are in this process continually disturbed by locksmiths, who always finally come to repair the broken keyhole in the most unsuitable moment, by telephone calls of friends, which are bored at the moment and try to find a chatting partner, by screaming children, who quarrel on the last fruit yoghurt in the fridge and by the unbearable squealing and creaking of our neighbour's violin, because nobody dares to tell him to stop playing, since he is tone deaf anyway. At least in such moments, I have the feeling, the states of solitude and emptiness were important preconditions for any genuine comprehension....

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“良知即是神明之德，即是寂” 。 “*Innate knowledge is a virtue of spiritual clearness, above all, it is solitude*” [Ming ru xue’an 1987, 268].

Even the very inherent development of Wang Ji’s idealism certainly resembles to Daoism, since the concepts of the Neo-Confucian School of Mind (心學), which were consequently applied by him, hereby led to the centre of the very being, which is empty with exception of the most illustrious human individuality in the form of void mind and of completely seized innate knowledge.

“良知是造化之精靈，吾人當以造化為學，造著自無而顯於有，化著自有而歸於無，吾之精靈生天生地生萬物，而天地萬物復歸於無，無時不造，無時不化，。 。 。 ，如此則造化在吾手” 。 (*Innate knowledge is the vital spirit of creation and change. If I want to learn about creation and change, I recognise, that creation arises from absence and shows itself in presence, while change arises from presence and returns to absence. There is no single moment without creation and change... Consequently, creation and change are well in my hands*) [Ming ru xue’an 1987, 246].

This presumption is naturally followed by another, radically idealistic supposition:

“萬物皆備於我，非意之也” 。 (*All things are within myself, not only in my thought*) [Ming ru xue’an 1987, 243].

### 3. A new Interpretation of the Method of Exploring Things (*ge wu* 格物)

This supposition enabled him finally also to establish an idealistic reinterpretation of the method of “exploring things (*ge wu* 格物)”, which represented the crucial method of comprehension within the realistic current of Neo-Confucianism, i.e. within the “School of Principles 理學”. In Wang Ji’s system of thought, this method was limited to the function of one of the minor exercises in cultivating ethical aspects of human personality:

“若知物生於意，格物正是誠意” 。 (*Since we know that all things were born from meanings, exploration of things is merely a method of /obtaining/ sincere meaning*) [Ming ru xue’an 1987, 260].

Although Wang often applied central terminology of the Neo-Confucian School of Mind (Xin xue 心學), his essays still strongly resemble Daoist and Buddhist disputes. In his work, the genuine Confucian tradition becomes evident only at the formal – stylistic level, since he used – as a proper, decent Confucian – quotations of classical examples to prove certain elements of his philosophic system. So he explained his epistemology by alleging Wang Yangmin’s 王陽明 theory of the non-existence of substantial receptors. Simultaneously, he quoted Wang’s presupposition of the a priori ethical quality, inherent to the concept of innate knowledge (*liang zhi* 良知), which he, again, linked to two famous examples of Mencius’ 孟子 argumentation of the innate goodness of human nature<sup>7</sup>.

“吾之目遇色，自能辨青黃，是萬物之色備與目也。吾之耳遇聲，自能辨清濁，是萬物之聲備於耳也，吾心之良知遇夫，自能知孝，遇兄，自能知弟，遇君上，自能知敬，遇孺子入井，自能知怵惕，遇堂下之牛，自能知覈觫。” (*When my eyes perceive colours, they can automatically distinguish green from yellow. That means, that all existing colours are preserved in my eyes. When my ears perceive sounds, they can automatically distinguish clear tunes from vague buzzing. That*

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<sup>7</sup> As we already know, the Neo-Confucian doctrine was based upon Mencian interpretative patterns of archaic Confucianism. In the present text, Wang Ji was referring to two stories, written by Mencius, in which the author tried to prove his presupposition about the inherent goodness of human nature. The first one is about the phenomena that every man, who sees a child, falling into a well, automatically feels compassion, and the second about the ruler, who could not allow his servants to kill the bull, which he previously saw trembling of fear of dying.

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means, that all existing sounds are preserved in my ears. When my innate knowledge perceives the father, it will automatically know the meaning of filial piety<sup>8</sup>. When it perceives the elder brother, it will automatically know the meaning of fraternal love. When it perceives the ruler, it will automatically know the meaning of respect. When it perceives a child, falling into a well, it will automatically make me feel fear and irritation. When it perceives a bull in the slaughterhouse, it will automatically make me feel pity and dread) [Ming ru xue'an 1987, 243].

#### 4. Social and Political Implications of Later Neo-Confucian Epistemologies

Although in the context of Neo-Confucian philosophy it is possible to see the later developments of the School of Mind (Xin xue 心學) as an opposition or even a rebellion against the ruling doctrines of the realistic School of Principles (Li xue 理學), this kind of “rebellion” was, of course, extraordinarily subtle and apolitical. It didn't proclaim its critique of the regime from the housetops. This critique was expressed merely in an implicit form as negation of any social or political significance. Since this completely passive opposition didn't represent any threat to the Ming 明despotism itself, and even less to its concrete holders, it was much easier accepted by the ruling elite, than any kind of direct criticism. Instead of a tendency towards a change it namely propagated only the escape into individual inwardness, which could be carried out within the framework of existing, but in essence “illusionary, false and therefore irrelevant” concrete social actuality. This situation offered a fertile basis for the development and complete exuberance of the above mentioned “School of Mind 心學”, which arose as an ideal counterweight to the Neo-Confucian realism and which was rooted in idealistic currents of the Song 宋 dynasty.

Although such tendencies thus apparently negated the existing regime, since they proclaimed that it was – same as the rest of entire physical reality – Illusionary, they actually supported it. So the representatives of suchlike streams overtook from Buddhism – in the political sense – its most reactionary function, i.e. the function of the “opium for the people”. Linked to the fact, that it didn't directly arise from the framework of the political suspect Buddhist religion, which was from the 10th Century on – at least potentially – seen as a kind of “inner enemy” by Confucians, this function (because of its open propagation of impolitic attitude) nevertheless represented the ideal ideology, which the ruling elite needed just by that time. Therefore it is not surprising, that the main representatives of the School of Mind 心學, i.e. the idealistic current of late Neo-Confucianism, mostly didn't come to an end on the pyres of orthodox ideologies<sup>9</sup>. On the contrary: this school, which reached for idealistic patterns within the early Neo-Confucianism, obtained just in this period of the iron hand by great effort an elitist position and remained during almost the entire period of the Ming 明 dynasty in highly renowned condition as a kind of “updated” Neo-Confucianism in the forefront of ruling ideologies.

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting, that innate knowledge (*liang zhi* 良知), according to Wang Ji, belonged to sensual organs, since it was comparable to the senses of sight and of hearing.

<sup>9</sup> An exception was the most radical wing of this current, which was known as the Longxi 龍溪 stream. The radicalism of ideas, represented by this group, was not apolitical and some of their representatives, as for example Li Zhi 李贄, often expressed a rather direct critique of Confucian hypocrisy, for which they had to pay with their own lives.

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