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Negotiating Orthodoxy: Wang Shouren's Buddhist and Daoist Engagements in the Making and Reception of a Confucian Identity

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Abstract

This thesis re-examines the Ming Confucian Wang Shouren 王守仁, better known as Wang Yangming (1472–1529), through the twin lenses of self-presentation and reception history. It shows how his recorded encounters with Buddhism and Daoism served—first as retrospective narratives in his own writings, later as malleable evidence for Ming–Qing interpreters—to construct, contest, and perpetually renegotiate a Confucian identity. The argument unfolds in three interlocking movements. Self-presenting: close readings of official memorials, prefaces, letters, and recorded dialogues reveal Wang staging his "detours" through non-Confucian teachings to claim the authority of one who has tested, transcended, and thus validated the Confucian Way. Engaging: drawing on disciples' notes to corroborate these claims, the study reconstructs Wang's evolving engagement with non-Confucian traditions—from exploratory syncretism to a hierarchical model that treats Buddhism and Daoism as provisional aids rather than rivals. Being received: a survey of Ming–Qing biographies and polemics shows later scholars selectively quoting, omitting, and re-ordering his life to advance their own doctrinal and political agendas. Methodologically, the thesis models a "negative-definitional" approach: it clarifies Confucian identity by tracing the boundaries negotiated with rival traditions. More broadly, it offers a framework for analysing intellectual identity as a historically contingent process shaped by self-articulation and external reinterpretation. Substantively, it reintroduces Wang not as a fixed exemplar of syncretism or orthodoxy but as a mobile site of doctrinal contestation—one whose meaning was, and remains, produced in the very act of being read.

Lay Summary

This thesis takes a fresh look at the Ming-dynasty thinker Wang Yangming (given name Wang Shouren, 1472–1529), focusing on how he portrayed himself and how others interpreted him after his death. It explores how his writings about Buddhism and Daoism—two traditions outside Confucianism—were used by both him and later scholars to shape the image of him as a Confucian. The study unfolds in three parts. First, it studies Wang's own writings—such as official documents, letters, and conversations—to show how he described his experiences with Buddhism and Daoism as temporary steps that helped him better understand and confirm Confucian ideas. Second, it examines how his followers supported this image by presenting his interest in other teachings as part of a journey that ultimately placed Confucianism above the rest. Third, it shows how later scholars in the Ming and Qing dynasties reinterpreted Wang's life, sometimes picking and choosing details to suit their own beliefs or political goals. Overall, the thesis argues that Confucian identity was not fixed. Instead, it was constantly shaped and reshaped through interactions with other traditions and through how people viewed those interactions. Wang was not just a figure with one clear message; his meaning changed depending on who was reading or writing about him.

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Introduction

Scholars of late imperial Chinese intellectual history have long examined how thinkers navigated multiple traditions in their philosophical discussions, socio-political engagements, and everyday lives.[1] Despite this ongoing interest, the question of how such navigations shaped an intellectual's self-presentation and public perception remains underexplored—especially in the case of the Ming 明 (1368–1644) Confucian Wang Shouren 王守仁 (1472–1529).[2] Widely studied for his relationship with Buddhism and Daoism, Wang is frequently cited for his retrospective remark, "since I was young, I was also earnestly devoted to the two schools", a quote often taken as evidence of his closeness to non-Confucian thought.[3] Existing scholarship tends either to trace the influence of these traditions on his philosophy or to recount his lived experience through Buddhist and Daoist episodes. What remains largely overlooked, however, is how these interactions operated not merely as external influence or

[1] A significant work is Liu Ts'un-yan's study on the doctrines of Lin Zhao'en 林兆恩 (1517–1598), who was the first intellectual to promulgate the amalgamation of the Three Teachings (*sanjiao* 三教) as a single entity. See Liu Ts'un-yan 柳存仁, "Lin Chao-Ên 林兆恩 (1517–1598), the Master of the Three Teachings", *T'oung Pao* 53, no. 4/5 (1967): 253–278. A more recent study is Yu Yingshi's monograph on Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) and the Song-dynasty political and intellectual culture, see Yu Yingshi 余英時, *Zhu Xi de lishi shijie: Songdai shidafu zhengzhi wenhua de yanjiu* 朱熹的歷史世界：宋代士大夫政治文化的研究 [*The Historical World of Zhu Xi: A Study on the Political Culture of Song-Dynasty Scholar-officials*] (Taipei: Yunchen wenhua, 2003).

[2] Wang Shouren is also commonly referred to as Wang Yangming 王陽明, his art name (*hao* 號). In traditional Chinese scholarship, scholars were conventionally addressed by their art names, courtesy names (*zi* 字), or other titles rather than their given names (*ming* 名), which is still a common practice in modern Chinese-language studies. In English, Japanese, and other scholarships, there are no consistent rules, and both "Wang Shouren" and "Wang Yangming" are widely used. However, other scholars of the Ming dynasty, particularly the less influential, are often referred to by their given names, especially in English scholarship. For the convenience of this thesis, all historic figures are referred to by their given names to ensure consistency and avoid confusion.

[3] This remark appears, with variations, in both *Chuanxi lu* 傳習錄 [*Instructions for Practical Living*] and "Wang Yangming xiansheng nianpu" 王陽明先生年譜 ["The Chornological Biography of Master Wang Yangming"]. Both texts are examined in greater detail in the following chapters. The version cited here is from *Chuanxi lu*, translated from 吾亦自幼篤志二氏, see Wang Shouren 王守仁 (1472–1529), *Wang Yangming quanji* 王陽明全集 [*The Complete Works of Wang Yangming*], eds. Wu Guang 吳光, Qian Ming 錢明, Dong Ping 董平, and Yao Yanfu 姚延福 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2014), vol. 1, 42.

biographical context, but as active components in the formation and reception of Wang's intellectual identity.

This thesis, grounded in a historical analysis of different representations of Wang's Buddhist and Daoist activities, examines how he framed his engagements with non-Confucian traditions as part of his scholarly self-presentation, and how that self-articulation has been received and reinterpreted over time. Particular attention is given to the divergent interpretations of Wang's legacy and the ways they invite a re-examination of his self-fashioned intellectual identity. Framed through a historical lens, this study speaks primarily to scholars of Chinese intellectual history, Ming studies, and Ming–Qing Neo-Confucianism. For historians of late imperial intellectual life, it provides a methodological model for tracing scholarly identity in contexts where doctrinal boundaries blur. For Ming specialists, it sheds light on how Ming Confucians situated themselves within a pluralistic intellectual landscape. And for philosophers of Neo-Confucianism, it offers a historically grounded perspective on how Confucianism responded to—and was shaped by—its non-Confucian interlocutors.

To begin this research with conceptual precision, several key terms must first be clarified. The following definitions are offered specifically for the purposes of this thesis. They are descriptive and historically grounded, reflecting how the terms functioned within particular intellectual and cultural contexts. These definitions are not intended to be prescriptive or to establish universal meanings.

The term "intellectual identity" refers to the constructed profile of an educated individual, primarily determined by intellectual characteristics as expressed through thinking, writing, learning, and teaching. Scholarship over the past two decades has increasingly treated identity

as constituted and represented in discourse.[4] In the case of pre-modern Chinese thinkers, such discourse frequently centres on how individuals position themselves in response to prevailing intellectual currents.[5] More specifically, in the context of late imperial Confucian literati, intellectual identity is also understood to encompass political activity and moral character. This broader scope reflects the Confucian conception of education and governance as interdependent, and the central role of moral self-cultivation within the tradition.[6]

In adopting this framework, the present study does not engage deeply with modern theories of identity; instead, it focuses on scholarly identity in late imperial China as a historically contingent construct. Within this setting, Confucian orthodoxy emerges as a central arena in which scholarly identity was both asserted and contested. Competing schools and sects of the Ming–Qing period often defined themselves by challenging one another's claims to orthodoxy, making debates over legitimacy a crucial site where a scholar's self-positioning was negotiated and redefined.[7]

The "self-presentation" of intellectual identity refers to the dynamic expression of how a thinker understands and positions themselves within the broader intellectual field, shaped by personal experience, philosophical commitments, and historical circumstances.[8] In Wang's

[4] For a study on the concept of identity, see Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe, "Theorising Discourse and Identity", in *Discourse and Identity,* eds. Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 17–47. See also Michael Bamberg, Anna De Fina, and Deborah Schiffrin, "Discourse and Identity Construction", in *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, eds. Koen Luyckx, Seth J. Schwartz, and Vivian L. Vignoles (New York: Springer, 2011), 177–199.
[5] A notable study of this kind is: Lionel M Jensen, "Zhu Xi's World-Picture and the Mythistory of 'Imperial Confucianism'", *Oriens Extremus* 49 (2010): 79–113.
[6] William Theodore de Bary, "Introduction", in *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, eds. William Theodore de Bary and the Conference on Ming Thought (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 5–8.
[7] For a study on the debates over Confucian orthodoxy during the Ming dynasty, see Hellmut Wilhelm, "On Ming Orthodoxy", *Monumenta Serica* 29 (1970): 1–26.
[8] For an example of how modern sinologists may analyse the self-conception of pre-modern Chinese intellectuals, see Stephen Durrant, "Self as the Intersection of Traditions: The Autobiographical Writings of Ssu-ma Ch'ien", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106, no. 1 (1986): 33–40. Durrant examined the role of Confucius 孔子 (551–479 BCE) in dominating the historian Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (c. 190–110 BCE) self-

case, an analysis of his self-presentation entails close attention to his reflections on Confucian legitimacy, his engagements with non-Confucian traditions, and the coherence of his life and work as an exemplar of Confucian learning.

The "reception" of intellectual identity refers to the evolving interpretations of a thinker's life and thought by diverse communities across time. In Wang's case, reception is examined through the ways in which various cohorts of readers, situated within shifting ideological and political contexts, have interpreted his intellectual contributions, particularly with respect to his position vis-à-vis Confucian orthodoxy.

Although today's common perception regards Wang Shouren as a Confucian, this was not necessarily a premise on which scholars in earlier periods assessed him. To some Qing-dynasty 清 (1644–1911) intellectuals, Wang's Confucian status was far from self-evident.[9] There were debates over whether Wang was genuinely Confucian, resulting in contrasting conclusions about his intellectual legacy. Below are two divergent depictions of Wang regarding the nature of his teachings:

> "Wang Wenchenggong wenchao xu" 王文成公文鈔序 ["A Preface to the Selected Works by Master Wang Wencheng"] (c. late seventeenth century) by Zhu Yizun 朱彝尊 (1629–1709) :[10]
> 嗚呼！大道之不明，釋、老之言充塞乎天下。幸而有講聖賢之學者，其門人弟子同異之辨，復紛呶不置，舉同室之人，日事爭鬪，我道無全人，無惑乎異學

conception, demonstrating how Sima Qian assimilated into the tradition while compiling his work *Shiji* 史記 [*Records of the Grand Historian*].

[9] Founded as a unified Manchu state by Nurhaci in 1616, the Qing became a Chinese empire after conquering the capital Beijing 北京 in 1644. The latter date is usually considered the start date of the Qing dynasty among historians, see William T. Rowe, "Conquest", in *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing*, ed. William T. Rowe (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 11–12.

[10] The date appended to this preface is not found in either Zhu Yizun's collected writings *Pushu ting ji* 曝書亭集 [*The Collected Works of Pushu ting*] or his chronicle. For the full text, see Wu Guang 吳光, Qian Ming 錢明, Dong Ping 董平 et al., eds., *Wang Yangming quanji xinbianben* 王陽明全集 新編本 [*A New Edition of the Complete Works of Wang Yangming*] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2010), vol. 53, 2184–2185.

之日盛矣。文成王先生揭良知之學，投荒裔，禦大敵，平大難，文章卓然成一家之言，傅所稱三不朽者，蓋兼有之。世儒講學率寓之空言，先生則見諸行事者也。議者或肆詆諆，謂近于禪學。夫棄去人倫事物之常而謂之學者，禪也，使禪之學能發于事業，又何病乎禪也邪？

Alas! The Great Way is obscured as the world is filled with the sayings of Buddha and Laozi. Even though we are fortunate to have scholars who teach the learning of the sages, their disciples' discussions about their own similarities and differences repeat the same mess and noise endlessly. Since every member of this school engages in daily wrangling, there is presently no person representing the whole of our [Confucian] doctrine, it is therefore no wonder that heterodox teachings are thriving by the day.

Master Wang Wencheng clarified the learning of innate knowledge, throwing himself into remote regions, resisting formidable enemies, conquering tremendous turmoil.[11] His thoughts in writing were so outstanding that they have become an independent school of his own. He surely possessed all "three imperishable achievements".[12] While mediocre scholars gave their teachings in vacuous words,[13] Master Wang was the one whose teachings can be seen in his action.[14] Some defamed or maligned him recklessly in their discussions, claiming that his teachings were close to Chan Buddhism. Chan Buddhism is what calls the abandonment of the norms of ethical relations and worldly affairs learning. And yet, if Chan learning can be [successfully] employed in one's action and enterprise, then why worry about Chan Buddhism?

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[11] Wencheng 文成 was the posthumous title conferred upon Wang Shouren in 1567, see Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525–1582) et al., *Muzong Zhuanghuangdi shilu* 穆宗莊皇帝實錄 [*Veritable Records of Emperor Muzong-Zhuang*] (National Library of Peiping 國立北平圖書館 photographic facsimile), vol. 7, 0218. Since this is a summary of Wang's political and military achievements, the nouns "regions" and "enemies" are used in the plural as Wang visited several remote regions and was appointed to subjugate bandits and rebels on multiple missions. The word "turmoil", by comparison, is used as an uncountable mass noun in this sentence.

[12] See *Zuozhuan* 左傳 [*The Zuo Tradition*] Lord Xiang 襄公 24.1. The "three imperishable achievements" (*sanbuxiu* 三不朽) refer to the three types of imperishable achievements one may establish in character (*lide* 立德), in deeds (*ligong* 立功), and in words (*liyan* 立言). The Confucian philosopher and commentator Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648) believed that Confucius and ancient sages such as King Wen of Zhou (*Wenwang* 文王) and the Duke of Zhou (*Zhougong* 周公) were among those who established the highest imperishable achievements in character. See *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義 [*The Correct Meaning of the Zuo Tradition of the Spring and Autumn Annals*], ed. Shisanjing zhushu bianweihui 十三經注疏編委會 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), vol. 35, 1152. For a discussion on the "three imperishable achievements", see Liu Chang 劉暢, "Sanbuxiu: huidao xianqin yujing de sixiang shuli" 三不朽: 回到先秦語境的思想梳理 ["Three Immortal Deeds: Returning Back to the Context of Pre-Qin's Ideology", English title given by the author], *Wenxue yichan* 文學遺產 no. 5 (2004): 16–27, 157.

[13] The word *shiru* 世儒 is commonly used in two senses: a neutral reference to contemporary scholars, or a disapproving reference to mediocre scholars. As this sentence contrasts the vacuous words (*kongyan* 空言) of some scholars with the alignment of Wang's theories and actions, a negative judgement on the former is implied. Therefore, the term *shiru* is translated as "mediocre scholars" in this context.

[14] The mentions of "vacuous words" (*kongyan* 空言) and "action" (*xingshi* 行事) suggest that this sentence may reference a Confucius saying quoted by the historian Sima Qian in "Taishigong zixu" 太史公自序 ["Self-Narration of the Grand Historian"]. This saying is 我欲載之空言 不如見之於行事之深切著明也, which Burton Watson translated as "If I wish to set forth my theoretical judgments, nothing is as good as illustrating them through the depth and clarity of actual events." See Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien: Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 51.

"Yu Chen Yuli" 與陳玉立 ["Letter to Chen Yuli"] (c. late seventeenth century) by Zhang Boxing 張伯行 (1651–1725):[15]
[羅欽順]三寓書於陽明，力排其說，陽明强答之而已。予以為足下所得者，猶是此心虛靈之妙，即羅整菴幼年所得之道，程子張子朱子早歲學焉而棄之者也。惟陽明執而不悟，遂成異學。夫二氏之學，猶各尊其教而不肯從吾儒。今吾儒之學，竟舍聖賢之道而入於二氏，且以三教歸一之說，混吾道於異端。吾恐此說一倡，為世道人心之害非淺鮮也。抑吾更有說焉。三教者，二氏巧立之名色以抑吾儒者也，且曰釋道儒，則二氏儼然超吾儒而上之。

[Luo Qinshun, art name Zheng'an] sent letters to Yangming several times to strongly refute his theories, to which Yangming merely struggled to reply.[16] I believe what you have obtained is still the charm of an empty and nimble mind. This was the doctrine that Luo Zheng'an grasped during his youth and that Master Cheng, Master Zhang, as well as Master Zhu had learned in their earlier years but then discarded.[17] Only Yangming adhered to it rather than recognising its errors, causing his ideas to become heterodox teachings.

Regarding the theories of the two schools [of Buddhism and Daoism], they still uphold their teachings and refuse to comply with us Confucians. Today, theories of our Confucianism have abandoned the way of the sages and entered the realm of the two schools. They even adopt the idea of "the three teachings going back to one",[18]

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[15] Chen Yuli, also known as Chen Zongzhi 陳宗之 (fl. 17th century), was a late-Ming scholar who participated in the civil examination in 1633, during the Chongzhen 崇禎 (1628–1644) reign. See Jiang Qingbai 江慶柏 ed., *Jiangsu yiwenzhi: Suzhou juan* 江蘇藝文志：蘇州卷 [*Treatise on Arts and Letters in Jiangsu: The Volume on Suzhou*] (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2019), 660. Given the average life expectancy at the time, it is unlikely that Chen lived into the 18th century. The letter addressed to him was therefore most likely written in the late 17th century. See the full letter in *Zhengyi tang wenji* 正誼堂文集 [*The Collected Writings of Zhengyi tang*], Qing Qianlong 乾隆 (1735–1796) block-printed ed., juan 6, 12a–12b.

[16] The numeral *san* 三 is more likely a fictitious number which means "several times" rather than "three times", although both meanings are common use of this word. While extant historical records prove that Luo Qinshun 羅欽順 (1465–1547) and Wang Shouren corresponded about their different opinions on certain Confucian concepts, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that Luo sent three letters to Wang. The modern edition of Luo's written works only includes two letters to Wang. The second letter had not been sent by the time Wang died in 1529. The first letter was received by Wang, whose reply to Luo in 1520 is the only correspondence between them included in the collection of Wang's written works. For the two letters written by Luo, see Luo Qinshun 羅欽順 (1465–1547), *Kunzhi ji* 困知記 [*Knowledge Acquired Through Difficulties*], ed. Yan Tao 閻韜 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), 141–148. For Wang's reply, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 84–89. Wing-tsit Chan gave a full translation of this letter; see Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 157–165. Wang's reply to Luo will be examined in greater detail in Chapter Two.

[17] These masters refer to Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), Zhang Zai 張載 (1020–1077), and Zhu Xi, respectively.

[18] The idea of uniting the three teachings–namely, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism–became popular during the Sui 隋 (581–618) and Tang 唐 (618–907) dynasties. During the mid-Ming and late-Ming periods, multiple proponents of the Yangming School of Mind (*Yangming xinxue* 陽明心學), such as He Xinyin 何心隱 (1517–1579) and Guan Zhidao 管志道 (1536–1608), advocated for the "the three teachings going back to one". Moreover, the late Ming religionist Lin Zhao'en (see footnote 1) was greatly influenced by the Yangming School (*Yangming xue* 陽明學). For the emergence and evolution of uniting the three teachings, and its development during the Ming dynasty, see Hong Xiuping 洪修平, "Sanjiao heyi zhiyu de chuxian yu liuxing luekao: jianlun yu quanzhenjiao sanyijiao deng de guanxi" "三教合一"之語的出現於流行略考：兼論與全真教、三一教的關係 ["A Study on the Emergence of the Notion of 'Uniting the Three Teachings': And its

> mixing our doctrine with alien thoughts. I fear that once this claim is promoted, its harm on prevailing customs and popular sentiment will not be insignificant. On the other hand, I have the understanding that the notion of "[a unity of] the three teachings" was a pretext cleverly devised by the two schools to supress us Confucians. Moreover, when referring to them in the sequence of "Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism",[19] the two schools indeed appear to surpass us.

While both texts evaluated Wang's achievements within a Confucian framework, they diverged in their conclusions regarding his Confucian legitimacy. Zhu acclaimed Wang's thought as "an independent school of his own" (*yijia zhiyan* 一家之言),[20] acknowledging his accomplishments as an exemplification of the "three imperishable achievements"—in character, in deeds, and in words—a reference to the Confucian classic *Zuozhuan* 左傳 [*The Zuo Tradition*].[21] Furthermore, by contrasting Wang's teachings with mediocre scholars' "vacuous words" and emphasising his actions as demonstrations of his teachings, Zhu implicitly referenced a Confucius saying that prioritised actions over words.[22] In this sense, he implied that even if Chan elements were present in Wang's thought, they were not detrimental so long as they produced results aligned with Confucian values. What ultimately matters is not doctrinal purity but the manifestation of Confucian virtues in one's conduct; words are secondary to deeds, which serve as the true measure of a great Confucian.

Connections with Quanzhen School and Sanyi School"], *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 世界宗教研究 no. 10 (2024): 21–26.

[19] In Chinese, the order of coordinated items often reflects a hierarchy of urgency, importance, or natural sequence. In this context, the sequence of conjuncts—"Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism" (*shidaoru* 釋道儒) versus "Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism" (*rushidao* 儒釋道)—indicates a cultural and ideological hierarchy.

[20] This is likely a quotation from the historian Sima Qian, who expressed in a letter to his friend that he wished his work *Shiji* "will become an independent discourse that is entirely my own" (*cheng yijia zhiyan* 成一家之言). For a translation and analysis of this letter, see Reinhard Emmerich, "Sima Qian: Letter to Ren An" in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, ed. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), vol. 3, 1312–1327

[21] *Zuozhuan* was a canonised Confucian text central to the Confucian education. It is a commentary on *Chunqiu* 春秋 [*Spring and Autumn Annals*], one of the "Five Classics" (*wujing* 五經). See quote at Lord Xiang 24.1 (1). See also footnote 14. For an English translation of the *Zuozhuan* text, see Stephen Durrant, Wai-yee Li, and David Schaberg, *Zuo Tradition/Zuozhuan: Commentary on the "Spring and Autumn Annals"* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 1125.

[22] See footnote 14.

Zhang, however, deemed Wang heterodox precisely because he blended Confucian doctrine with alien Buddhist and Daoist thought. Believing that Confucians should not "have abandoned the way of the sages and entered the realm of the two schools", Zhang's criticism of Wang's "heterodox teachings" reflected his rejection of syncretism. This stance is further elaborated in his claim that the idea of "the three teachings going back to one" was a strategy devised by non-Confucian schools to undermine Confucian hegemony. In this context, Zhang may have viewed Wang not merely as a scholar promoting heterodox theories, but more essentially as a heretic whose teachings posed a threat to Confucianism.

In this sense, the crux of their disagreement lies in their respective attitude towards the integration of non-Confucian elements into Confucianism—a divergence that can be further understood through a comparison of their use of the term *yixue* 異學. For Zhu, *yixue* meant explicitly "other traditions", namely Buddhism and Daoism, thus drawing a clear boundary between Confucianism and external philosophical competitors. At the same time, however, Zhu also employed *yi* 異 to criticise internal debates within certain Confucian communities, particularly what he described as "discussions about their own similarities and differences" (*tongyi zhibian* 同異之辨). He found such "daily wrangling" not only unhelpful but actively harmful, arguing that it weakened Confucianism as a whole and inadvertently lent strength to heterodox teachings outside the tradition. Thus, even when addressing disputes among Confucians themselves, Zhu criticised this situation as generating endless mess and noise without real benefit. Zhang, in contrast, adopted a stricter and narrower definition, applying *yixue* to internal doctrinal divergences within Confucianism, designating all strands deviating from the Cheng–Zhu orthodoxy as heterodox. In this stricter sense, *yixue* no longer merely implied "other traditions" but took on the harsher meaning of "heterodox teachings",

specifying that internal departures from the Cheng–Zhu tradition were not only different but, fundamentally, incorrect.

Despite their divergent conclusions, both Zhu and Zhang assessed Wang's Confucian status using the same criterion: the nature of his engagements with Buddhism and Daoism. This shared evaluative framework shapes how each defines his intellectual identity. Zhu defended Wang against criticisms of his supposed Buddhist leanings by arguing that Chan Buddhism could be "employed in one's cause and enterprise". In this way, Zhu implied that Wang remained a genuine Confucian, as his engagement with Buddhism served a higher Confucian purpose—one that, according to Zhu, yielded "imperishable" accomplishments, as noted in the Confucian classic *Zuozhuan*. Similarly, Zhang applied the same evaluative method, but to a different end. He argued that Wang adhered to ideas he had absorbed from Buddhism and Daoism, which Zhang believed should have been rejected. As such, Wang became heterodox in Zhang's eyes, since the boundaries between Confucianism and non-Confucian traditions, in his view, must remain clearly delineated. Thus, in both cases, the central mechanism for assessing Wang's position in relation to the Confucian orthodoxy lies in their evaluation of his genuine stance towards Buddhism and Daoism. During the Ming–Qing period, with the Cheng–Zhu doctrine established as orthodox, Wang's proximity to Buddhism and Daoism was assessed to determine whether—and to what extent—he deviated from the Cheng–Zhu School.[23]

[23] Zhu Xi's commentaries on the Four Books (*sishu* 四書) were authorised as canonical readings of the Confucian classics in 1313 under the rule of the Yuan 元 dynasty (1271–1368). In the succeeding Ming dynasty, the founding emperor, Taizu 太祖 (1328–1398), endorsed Zhu Xi's commentaries as the standard guidelines for the civil examination (*keju* 科舉)—a tradition maintained by subsequent emperors. During the Qing dynasty, the commentaries on Confucian classics compiled by Song-dynasty 宋 (960–1279) Confucians of the School of Principle (*lixue* 理學)—especially those by Zhu Xi—continued to be regarded as orthodox. For a study on the role of imperial power in the civil examination, see Benjamin Elman, "Imperial Power, Cultural Politics, and Civil Examinations in the Early Ming", in id., *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 66–124.

To present the two contrasting perceptions of Wang more succinctly, the table below summarises his portrayal in the respective texts, with notes on their major points of disagreement and alignment:

	Zhu	Zhang
Wang's profile as a scholar	Wang was a genuine Confucian who established an independent school within Confucianism.	Wang was a heretic who mingled Confucianism with non-Confucian traditions, thereby undermining Confucian hegemony.
Disagreement	Non-Confucian traditions can be integrated into Confucianism to enrich the Confucian enterprise.	Non-Confucian traditions must be rejected from entering the Confucian sphere or blurring the boundaries in between.
Alignment	Central mechanism: determine Wang's Confucian legitimacy through evaluation of his relation to non-Confucian traditions.	

The two portrayals present a strikingly contradictory understanding of the same historical figure. Such discrepancies give rise to a series of questions: In what respects do the authors' personal perspectives or intellectual commitments affect their assessments? On what sources are these evaluations based? What criteria are employed to determine Wang's scholarly status? What accounts for the divergence between the two representations? Can one determine the reliability of any given account, and if so, how?

Several more implicit questions may be overlooked, as their central concerns are not addressed in either text: How do these accounts portray Wang's self-positioning as a scholar? More importantly, what is Wang's self-described scholarly profile? In other words, any substantial consideration of Wang's own articulation is notably absent from both texts. While each text briefly outlines aspects of his biography or philosophy, neither quotes directly from Wang's own words in constructing an image of him as a Confucian scholar.

As a result, both interpretations represent endpoints of a long process of reception and reinterpretation, significantly removed from Wang's initial self-presentation. These interpretive trajectories have diverged over time, ultimately producing two contrasting conceptions of what kind of scholar Wang was. In the process, Wang's self-proclaimed identity may become obscured, as it is often neither sufficiently consulted nor critically examined. Under such circumstances, how Wang understood himself may differ significantly from how he has been received by later interpreters. Therefore, a careful examination of how these two diverging trajectories emerged over time is essential for addressing the earlier questions: in what respects did the authors' intellectual commitments shape their portrayals, what sources and criteria informed their evaluations, and to which intellectual contexts they were responding.

I. Research Theme and Significance

The thesis explores how Wang Shouren positioned himself as a scholar and how that self-positioning has been received and reinterpreted over time. This focus highlights a key tension in both his life and his legacy: while his Confucian status was self-consciously asserted, it was also continually assessed and contested through his perceived proximity to other traditions. Methodologically, this study adopts what might be termed a "negative definitional" approach: clarifying Wang's Confucian identity by tracing how he positioned himself in relation to Buddhism and Daoism, the two major non-Confucian traditions of his time. This requires resisting simplistic dichotomies of acceptance versus rejection and instead emphasising the nuanced strategies through which he negotiated his place across traditions.

Although the most direct method for assessing Wang's Confucian identity is to examine his explicit contributions to Confucian discourse, a perspective focusing on his non-Confucian engagements is no less valuable. Its significance lies in two dimensions. First, it situates Wang within the syncretic intellectual climate of Ming China, where scholars often developed their thought in active dialogue with multiple traditions. In this setting, understanding Wang requires examining how he mediated intellectually between Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, rather than treating these teachings as mutually exclusive. Second, it addresses the fact that Wang's engagements with the two non-Confucian schools have long stood at the centre of debates about his legitimacy as a Confucian scholar and, by extension, about the character of the Confucian tradition itself.

On this basis, the overarching research question can be summarised as follows: In what ways did the reception of Wang's self-described Confucian identity evolve during the Ming–Qing period—particularly through reinterpretations of his historical engagements with Buddhism and Daoism—and how does this evolution invite a re-examination of his self-presented intellectual identity, offering a more nuanced reconsideration of traditional readings?

In addressing this question, self-presentation and reception are not treated as consecutive stages of a linear process, nor as entirely separate dimensions of identity. Rather, they are approached as interactive dynamics that together contribute to the divergent portrayals of Wang's intellectual profile. The emphasis, however, falls on self-presentation, which is crucial for several reasons. First, Wang was deeply invested in articulating what it meant to be a Confucian. His discourse was not merely philosophical but also a means of establishing his legitimacy within the Confucian tradition. Second, analysing his self-presentation allows

for a reconstruction of the intellectual strategies he employed to protect himself from accusations of heterodoxy and to assert his place within the Confucian lineage.

Foregrounding self-presentation, this thesis treats Wang's biography not simply as background, but as a primary arena in which intellectual identity took shape. In Wang's case, it is particularly through his actions that his self-established identity emerges.[24] His Confucian teachings explicitly united knowledge and action, suggesting that his intellectual practice is inseparable from his understanding of what it meant to be a Confucian.[25] His historical activities thus serve as sites where his identity as learner, teacher, and writer within the Confucian tradition was embodied and defended.

From this biographical focus, the analysis turns to Wang's engagements with Buddhism and Daoism. As demonstrated earlier, for both critics and defenders, these encounters became a key measure of his legitimacy: proximity to non-Confucian traditions was cited as evidence of heterodoxy, while affirmation of his Confucian achievements likewise addressed his perceived Buddhist and Daoist tendencies. Even when comparatively limited in scope or duration, these episodes carried disproportionate weight in shaping how Wang was regarded as either orthodox or heterodox.

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[24] The interrelation between Wang's philosophical theories and everyday activities has been widely noted in modern scholarship. Monographs on Wang's life experiences often highlight the importance of his biography as the foundation of his philosophy. One example is Dong Ping's 董平 monography on Wang's everyday lifeworld. In the introduction, Dong Ping argues that Wang's daily practice is the demonstration of his philosophical teachings, thereby serving as a premise for understanding his intellectual world. See Dong Ping 董平, *Wang Yangming de shenghuo shijie* 王陽明的生活世界 [*The Everyday Lifeworld of Wang Yangming*] (Beijing: Zhonggguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2009), 1–4.

[25] The unity of knowledge and action (*zhixing heyi* 知行合一) is one of the central concepts of Wang's philosophy. Wang developed this concept to modify the earlier teachings of Zhu Xi that regarded knowledge and action as two parts with the former proceeded the latter (*zhixian xinghou* 知先行後) in the study of Confucianism. For a succinct study of the difference between Wang and Zhu regarding knowledge and action, see Weixiang Ding 丁為祥, "Song–Ming lixue de sanzhong zhixingguan—dui lixue sixiang puxi de yizhong nixiang bawo" 宋明理學的三種知行觀——對理學思想譜系的一種逆向把握 ["Three Ideas of Knowing and Practicing in Confucianism of Song and Ming Dynasties—An Inverse Knowing of Confucian Ideological Lineage"], *Xueshu yuekan* 學術月刊 no. 3 (2009): 5–16.

Reassessing these engagements also reveals their formative role in Wang's own intellectual development. His youthful involvement with Buddhism and Daoism left enduring marks on his later Confucian trajectory, even as subsequent interpreters reframed these episodes as signs of sageness or heresy. Methodologically, this research uses these debates to model a historically grounded approach to intellectual identity construction, particularly in contexts where Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist boundaries blur and sources are fragmentary or strategically constructed.

Although the primary orientation of this thesis is historical rather than philosophical, selected aspects of Wang's thought are considered insofar as they reflect his positioning vis-à-vis non-Confucian traditions. One example is his teaching of "innate knowledge" (*liangzhi* 良知), which he often framed in contrast to Buddhist doctrines.[26] Rather than offering a systematic explication of this theory in comparison with other Confucian interpretations, this study selectively examines those texts in which Wang explicitly evaluated how the Confucian concept of *liangzhi*, as he understood it, was superior to Buddhist teachings.[27] This selective engagement with philosophy underscores how Wang's self-presentation drew on doctrinal claims as well as lived practice.

[26] In the following chapters, the thesis will analyse how Wang's understanding of *liangzhi* is connected to his self-positioning in relation to competing traditions. There have been debates among modern scholars on the translation of *liangzhi.* Wing-tsit Chan generally translated it as "innate knowledge", while Julia Ching read it as "the capacity of *hsin* 心 (commonly translated as "the mind") to know and do good". For Ching's translation, see Julia Ching, "To Acquire Wisdom: The 'Way' of Wang Yang-Ming (1472–1529)" (PhD diss., Australian National University, 1971), 207. Tang Chu-I understood it as "moral consciousness" of *li* 理; see Tang Chun-I, "The Spirit and Development of Neo-Confucianism", *Inquiry* 14 (1971): 80. Tzu-li Chang stated that *liangzhi* is often described by Wang as "the original state of *xin* 心 (the mind)", which is the moral agency that guides one's actual act. Tzu-li Chang also examined common mistranslations and misconceptions regarding *liangzhi*; see Tzu-li Chang, "*Liangzhi* and the Interpretative Obstruction regarding knowledge", *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 12, no. 3 (September 2017): 450–465. Owing to ongoing debates surrounding the term, this thesis adopts the Chinese *pinyin* in the analysis below. Its meaning will be clarified either in context or in a footnote as appropriate.

[27] One of these texts is Wang's conversation with students, in which he compared the Daoist understanding of emptiness, the Buddhist understanding of nothingness, and the Confucian teaching of innate knowledge. See *Wang Yangming quanji,* vol. 1, 121. This conversation will be examined in greater detail in Chapter Four.

To structure this enquiry, the thesis is organised in three parts. The first part focuses on Wang's self-presentation as articulated in his own writings where he presented a carefully constructed image of himself as a Confucian scholar. Two key texts—his memorial on welcoming Buddhism and preface to Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130–1200) final conclusions—serve as case studies, offering the clearest self-articulation of his positions vis-à-vis Buddhism and Daoism. These texts reveal how Wang presented himself, as modern readers encounter him at the endpoint of a long process of transmission and reception.

Building on this self-presentation, the second part shifts to the historical experiences that shaped it. It reconstructs Wang's engagements with Buddhism and Daoism during his formative years, reassessing these encounters not as marginal episodes, but as pivotal experiences that contributed to the formation and reception of his intellectual profile. The final part explores the later reception of Wang's identity. It examines how his Confucian status has been reinterpreted over time, especially during the Ming and Qing periods, when scholars debated his relation to Confucian orthodoxy through the lens of his non-Confucian affiliations.

Although these three parts unfold in broadly chronological order, the thesis concludes by returning to the origins of his self-proclaimed image, offering a historical synthesis that reassesses how he positioned himself within the Confucian tradition. Taken together, these chapters approach Wang's intellectual identity not as a fixed essence, but as a historically contingent construct—one whose meaning emerges through the very act of being read, interpreted, and contested.

II. Modern Scholarship

Modern scholarship on Wang's engagements with Buddhism and Daoism has pursued two primary objectives: exploring Buddhist and Daoist influences on his philosophy and examining Buddhist and Daoist experiences in his biography. Despite differing angles and emphases, these studies consistently grapple with an overarching question: how should Wang's non-Confucian engagements be understood in relation to his Confucian learning and teaching experiences? While this question remains implicit in many analyses, some scholars explicitly address how deeply Wang's philosophical theories or historical activities reflected Buddhist or Daoist elements.

Wing-tsit Chan was the first scholar in English-language academia to question the extent of Wang's engagement with Buddhism, doing so as early as 1962—earlier than many other Chinese scholars.[28] He identified a tendency, not only among Ming–Qing proponents of the Yangming School (*Yangmingxue* 陽明學) but also among modern academics, particularly Japanese scholars, to overstate Wang's acceptance of Buddhism while downplaying his opposition to it. Chan argued that despite Wang's adoption of Chan Buddhist idioms and techniques within a Confucian context, Wang had "little actual contact" with Buddhism. He supported this claim by analysing Wang's visits to Buddhist temples, interactions with Buddhist monks, and familiarity with Buddhist scriptures, concluding these engagements were relatively minor when compared to Wang's "very vigorous" criticism of Buddhism. It should be noted, however, that Chan summarised these interactions briefly, especially in comparison to later, more detailed studies produced within Chinese scholarship.

[28] For Chan's account, see Wing-tsit Chan, "How Buddhistic is Wang Yang-ming?", *Philosophy East and West* 12, no. 3 (October 1962): 203–215.

Two Chinese articles included in the 1972 publication *Yangmingxue lunwen ji* 陽明學論文集 [*The Collected Essays on the Yangming School*] respectively examined Wang's relationship with Buddhism and Daoism.[29] Wu Yi juxtaposed Wang's seemingly Buddhist engagements with his explicit opposition to Buddhism, concluding that Wang remained fundamentally Confucian, despite interactions with Buddhism shaped by cultural and personal circumstances.[30] In contrast, Liu Ts'un-yan argued in his paper that Wang maintained a sustained interest in Daoism, asserting that Daoist influence persisted throughout Wang's philosophical development.[31] Although both studies extensively utilised historical sources, Liu's argument appears more contentious, as it tends to overemphasise the religious dimension of Wang's activities, neglecting or downplaying their secular and pragmatic aspects.[32]

The three articles above collectively raise an important but still contested issue: how did Wang navigate his engagements with non-Confucian traditions? While these studies tended to emphasise either his interaction with Daoism or his appropriation of Buddhist thought, this

[29] This is a special publication issued in Taipei to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Wang's birth.
[30] Wu Yi 吳怡, "Yangming sixiang yu chanxue" 陽明思想與禪學 ["The Yangming Thought and Chan Buddhism"], in *Yangmingxue lunwen ji* 陽明學論文集 [*The Collected Essays on the Yangming School*], eds. Zhang Qiyun 張其昀 et al. (Taipei: Zhonghua xueshuyuan, 1971), 81–91.
[31] Liu Ts'un-yan (or Liu Cunren in Chinese pinyin) 柳存仁, "Wang Yangming yu daojiao" 王陽明與道教 ["Wang Yangming and Daoism"], in *Yangmingxue lunwen ji*, 306–330.
[32] An example is Liu's reference to Wang's reply to a request that asked him to pray for rain. Liu saw this request as evidence that contemporaries viewed Wang as a Daoist. However, historical records of the Ming dynasty show that Confucian scholar-officials also engaged in such activities. The chronicle of Confucian scholar-official Kong Tianyin 孔天胤 (1505–1581) includes multiple entries about him sending congratulatory poems to officials who successfully prayed for rain. Similarly, the diary of another scholar-official, Qi Biaojia 祁彪佳 (1602–1645), records several events of praying for rain. These records suggest that praying for rain is not a distinguishing feature of Daoist practitioners over Confucian scholars and therefore cannot prove that Wang was seen as a Daoist. The same deficiency appears in another study by Liu, see Liu Ts'un-yan 柳存仁, "Wang Yangming yu fodao erjiao" 王陽明與佛道二教 ["Wang Yangming and the Two Teachings of Buddhism and Daoism"], *Qinghua xuebao* 清華學報 no. 13 (1981): 27–52. For Kong's chronicle, see Kong Tianyin 孔天胤 (1505–1581), *Kong Tianyin quanji* 孔天胤全集 [*The Complete Works of Kong Tianyin*] (Taiyuan: Sanjin chubanshe, 2018), vol. 4, 1286, 1448, 1466. For Qi's diary, see Qi Biaojia 祁彪佳 (1602–1645), *Qi Biaojia riji* 祁彪佳日記 [*The Diary of Qi Biaojia*] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2016), 533, 672, 752–753.

thesis approaches the question through a more integrated lens. It examines both traditions in tandem, especially in light of Wang's own retrospective claim that he was "earnestly devoted to the two schools" during his youth.[33]

Since these pioneering articles first examined the characteristics of Wang's non-Confucian engagements in 1960s and 1970s, a growing body of scholarship has emerged, analysing the Buddhist or Daoist influences on Wang's life and thought. Given this thesis's historical focus, the existing scholarship is categorised according to how authors investigate Wang's Buddhist and Daoist experiences historically and philosophically.

The first category includes studies that examine historical activities as background to the Yangming School's philosophy. Because of the broad philosophical scope, Wang's historical experiences often become subordinate to discussions about the philosophical trajectory of his teachings and their subsequent reception. Pioneers of this scholarship include Fung Yu-lan, Qian Mu, Carsun Chang, William Theodore De Bary, and David Nivison, whose studies offer valuable insights into Wang's philosophical theories and intellectual practices, although their analyses emphasise Wang's Confucian endeavours rather than deeply examining his Buddhist and Daoist activities.[34] By comparison, Julia Ching's monograph *To Acquire Wisdom: The "Way" of Wang Yang-ming* investigated these non-Confucian activities in greater detail.[35]

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[33] See footnote 3.

[34] Fung Yu-lan (or Feng Youlan in Chinese *pinyin*) 馮友蘭, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), vol. 2. Qian Mu 錢穆, *Yangming xue shuyao* 陽明學述要 [*Introduction to Yangming Studies*] (Beijing: Jiuzhou chubanshe, 2011). Carsun Chang, *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought Volume Two* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1962), 15–159. Several papers of de Bary are included in *Sources of Chinese Traditions* first published in 1960; see Wing-tsit Chan, William Theodore de Bary, and Irene Bloom et al., *Sources of Chinese Tradition. Volume I: From Earliest Times to 1600* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), chap. 24. See also David Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy* (LaSalle: Open Court Publishing, 1996).

[35] This monograph is based on Ching's PhD dissertation "To Acquire Wisdom: The 'Way' of Wang Yang-Ming (1472–1529)". For the published version, see Julia Ching, *To Acquire Wisdom: The Way of Wang Yang-Ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).

However, Ching's work is limited by her occasionally uncritical treatment of historical sources, particularly her insufficient examination of the original purpose and function of texts within their historical contexts. For instance, when discussing Wang's official memorial advising the emperor against welcoming Buddhism from a remote region, Ching overlooked crucial aspects such as the memorial's official format, political agenda, and persuasive tactics.[36] Similar limitations appear in influential Chinese scholarship, including Yang Guorong's *Wangxue tonglun* 王學通論 [*Comprehensive Discussion of Wang Learning*], which often cited historical descriptions of Wang's learning experiences as straightforward evidence without critically analysing the authorship, date, genre, style, or intended function of these texts.[37] This thesis therefore draws upon the insights of such studies while remaining cautious about their handling of historical context.

Japanese scholars such as Araki Kengo 荒木見悟 and Okada Takehiko 岡田武彦 contribute additional insights, highlighting the syncretic nature of Ming intellectual culture within the Yangming School's development. While Okada examined the broader cultural and philosophical syncretism between the Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist teachings (*sanjiao heyi* 三教合一), Araki argued that Wang envisioned a "great way" (*dadao* 大道) incorporating and transcending Buddhism and Daoism, thus surpassing sectarian boundaries.[38] These works have clarified how Wang and his proponents engaged culturally

[36] Ching, "To Acquire Wisdom", 247. This memorial will be examined in detail in Chapter One.
[37] Yang Guorong 楊國榮, *Wangxue tonglun* 王學通論 [*Comprehensive Discussion of Wang Learning*] (Taipei: Wunan tushu chuban gongsi, 1997).
[38] Okada Takehiko 岡田武彦, *Wang Yangming yu mingmo ruxue* 王陽明與明末儒學 [*Wang Yangming and the Late-Ming Confucianism*], trans. Wu Guang 吳光, Qian Ming 錢明, and Tu Chengxian 屠承先 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2000). Araki Kengo 荒木見悟, *Yangmingxue de weixiang* 陽明學的位相 [*The Status of Yangming Learning*], trans. Jiao Kun 焦堃, Chen Xiaojie 陳曉傑, Liao Mingfei 廖明飛 et al. (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2022). For the Japanese edition of Okada's work, see Okada Takehiko 岡田武彦, *Yōmei to Minmatsu no jūgaku* 王陽明と明末の儒学 [*Wang Yangming and Late-Ming Confucianism*] (Tokyo: Meitoku, 1971). See also Araki Kengo 荒木見悟, *Yōmeigaku no isō* 陽明學の位相 [*The Status of Yangming Learning*] (Tokyo: Kenbun Shuppan, 1992).

and philosophically with non-Confucian traditions. However, they did not sufficiently explore how Wang himself articulated his position between traditions—an issue central to his intellectual identity. This thesis addresses that gap by foregrounding Wang's own efforts to navigate and reconcile diverse teachings through his intellectual practices.

The second category contains scholarship viewing historical activities as formative influences on Wang's philosophy and character. Compared to the first category, this approach is narrower, directly investigating how Wang's Buddhist and Daoist activities shaped his philosophical and personal development. Rather than focusing on the historical development of the Yangming School, this literature emphasises Wang's individual philosophical attributes, though scholars diverge in their conclusions about the nature and impact of his non-Confucian interactions. The three articles by Wing-tsit Chan, Wu Yi, and Liu Ts'un-yan belong to this category, as they explored the extent of Wang's involvement in non-Confucian traditions, questioning how religiously oriented his philosophy and character were. Another notable contribution is Tu Wei-ming's *Neo-Confucian Thought in Action: Wang Yang-Ming's Youth*, which treated biography and philosophy as complementary lenses to explore Wang's quest for Confucian sagehood.[39] Tu argued that achieving sagehood requires integrating self-cultivation and social engagement, thus examining Wang's personal struggles—particularly his youthful encounters with Buddhism and Daoism—as crucial formative experiences influencing his personality and philosophy. However, Tu's arguments occasionally appear speculative due to his reliance on problematic sources and his misinterpretation of certain historical events.[40] Additionally, Tu tended to over-emphasise specific events in Wang's life

[39] Tu Wei-ming, *Neo-Confucian Thought in Action: Wang Yang-Ming's Youth (1472–1509)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

[40] One example is Tu's mention of Wang's "inability to speak" until he was six years old, based on a miraculous tale first recounted in "The Chronological Biography of Master Wang Yangming" (see footnote 3). The original ending of this tale is particularly significant, as it claims that a monk advised Wang's family to change his name because he was a child of exceptional ability. Stories with such hagiographical features are common in

as deliberate steps towards an overarching spiritual quest for Confucian sagehood. While sagehood may indeed have been Wang's ultimate aspiration, interpreting every event as driven by this spiritual goal risks oversimplifying his motivations and neglecting more immediate, tentative, or pragmatic considerations behind his actions.[41]

Qian Ming's analysis of Wang's non-Confucian engagements provided a clear contrast to Tu on this point.[42] Although agreeing with Tu on Wang's ultimate pursuit of Confucian sagehood during his youth, Qian highlighted Wang's secular and practical motivations in his interactions with Daoist life-nourishing (*yangsheng* 養生) theories and practices. Qian's study, therefore, offers a more nuanced interpretation of Wang's Buddhist and Daoist activities. Nonetheless, it treated these activities primarily as parallel or complementary to Wang's Confucian commitments, without fully addressing how they shaped either the self-presentation or public reception of his Confucian legitimacy. This thesis builds on Qian's insights while arguing that Wang's non-Confucian engagements constituted the critical sites for the interpretation and negotiation of his Confucian identity.

biographies of political and spiritual leaders. Therefore, they should not be taken at face value without critical examination. Although Tu briefly acknowledged the risks of using "unprovable hagiography" in his introduction, he nevertheless relied on problematic sources without thoroughly examining their hagiographical characteristics. For a study of biographical writing in pre-modern China, see Brian Moloughney, "From Biographical History to Historical Biography: A Transformation in Chinese Historical Writing", *East Asian History* 4 (1992): 1–30.

[41] For instance, Tu challenged the traditional epistemological interpretation of Wang's seven-day investigation in the bamboo grove, instead suggesting Wang's intention was "ethico-religious", reflecting a lifelong spiritual quest for self-realisation. See Tu, *Neo-Confucian Thought in Action*, 49–51. However, such an interpretation risks neglecting Wang's intellectual engagement with existing Confucian scholarship—particularly Zhu Xi's epistemological theories—and Wang's practical preparation for the following year's metropolitan examination (*huishi* 會試) after his success at the provincial (*xiangshi* 鄉試) level. The latter consideration is particularly relevant. It is reasonable to suggest that Wang, a Confucian learner preparing for the civil examinations during that period, may have naturally prioritised familiarity with Zhu's influential understanding of the investigation of things (*gewu* 格物).

[42] Qian Ming 錢明, *Yangmingxue de xingcheng yu fazhan* 陽明學的形成與發展 [*The Formation and Development of the Yangming School*] (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 2002), chap. 2.

The third category comprises studies that reconstruct historical activities as components of Wang's intellectual biography. Unlike the previous two categories, scholarship in this group adopts a primarily historical-biographical approach, explicitly treating Wang's Buddhist and Daoist engagements as integral parts of his personal intellectual trajectory. Major works in this category include two full-length biographies by Okada Takehiko and Shu Jingnan, Zhu Xiaopeng's monograph of Wang's interactions with the philosophical Daoism (*daojia* 道家) and religious Daoism (*daojiao* 道教), Dong Ping's study on Wang's everyday experiences, and several journal articles and book chapters examining his non-Confucian activities.[43] These studies extensively engage historical sources to ground their analyses, focusing particularly on Wang's close involvement with Buddhism and Daoism during his youth in investigating his relationship with these non-Confucian traditions. The major deficiency observed in scholarship of the first two categories—the lack of critical scrutiny of primary sources—appears less frequently here, likely owing to the historical method's emphasis on assessing source materials before interpretation.

Nevertheless, scholarship in this category often lacks clear timelines or defined milestones marking Wang's shifts between Confucian and non-Confucian traditions, especially regarding the beginning and end of his comparatively deeper engagement with Buddhism and Daoism during his youth. Some scholars justified this absence of milestones by arguing that

[43] Okada Takehiko 岡田武彥, *Wang Yangming dazhuan* 王陽明大傳 [*A Biography of Wang Yangming*], trans. Yang Tian 楊田, Feng Yingying 馮瑩瑩, Yuan Bin 袁斌, and Sun Fengming 孫逢明 (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2014). Shu Jingnan 束景南, *Yangming dazhuan: Xin de jiushu zhilu* 陽明大傳: 心的救贖之路 [*A Biography of Wang Yangming: The Path to Xin Salvation*] (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2020). Zhu Xiaopeng 朱曉鵬, *Wang Yangming yu daojia daojiao* 王陽明與道家道教 [*Wang Yangming and the Philosophical and Religious Daoism*] (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2009). Dong Ping 董平, *Wang Yangming de shenghuo shijie* 王陽明的生活世界 [*The Everyday Lifeworld of Wang Yangming*] (Beijing: Zhonggguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2009). Notable book chapters include: Chen Yongge 陳永革, *Yangming xuepai yu wanming fojiao* 陽明學派與晚明佛教 [*Yangming School and Late-Ming Buddhism*] (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2009). Chen Lai 陳來, *Youwu zhijing: Wang Yangming zhexue de jingshen* 有無之境: 王陽明哲學的精神 [*The Realms of Being and Non-being: The Spirit of Wang Yangming's Philosophy*] (Beijing: sanlian shudian, 2009), 306–380.

Wang's eventual return to Confucianism was a gradual process.[44] While this explanation is reasonable, it remains both practical and necessary to analyse this process by identifying significant events, even if exact starting or ending points cannot be precisely determined. Without such analysis, existing studies struggle to fully capture the evolution of Wang's intellectual identity over time. This thesis therefore seeks to reconstruct a more detailed chronology of his Buddhist and Daoist engagements and to highlight the significant transitions that shaped his intellectual development.

While these three categories of modern scholarship offer valuable insights, they leave significant gaps unaddressed. Wang's Buddhist and Daoist engagements are often either marginalised as historical background or described without systematic analysis of their impact on his intellectual identity. The absence of clear timelines and critical reception histories further obscures the complexity of his non-Confucian experiences. This thesis addresses these gaps by reconstructing the occurrence and reception of Wang's Buddhist and Daoist engagements, offering a more historically grounded account of the formation, challenge, and redefinition of his intellectual identity.

III. Primary Sources

To support this analysis, the thesis draws on two types of primary sources that shed light on Wang's historical engagements with Buddhism and Daoism: records documenting his Buddhist and Daoist experiences, and discussions regarding his relationship to these two non-Confucian traditions. These categories are distinguished by genres, focuses, and primary purposes, but they often overlap and thus should not be treated as entirely separate. The first

[44] Zhu, *Wang Yangming yu daojia daojiao*, 44–45.

category, including numerous biographies and chronicles, reflects events and contexts in which Wang interacted with non-Confucian theories and practices. The second category, often more philosophical in nature, provides insights into how these interactions were later evaluated by Ming–Qing scholars, influencing judgements about Wang's Confucian legitimacy. Analysing both categories enables a more comprehensive understanding of Wang's historical and intellectual positioning.

Among all primary sources, Wang's own accounts of his involvement in Buddhism and Daoism are the most significant. They are found in Xie Tingjie's 謝廷傑 (b. 1520, d. c. 1500s) *Wang Wencheng gong quanshu* 王文成公全書 [*The Complete Works of Mister Wang Wencheng*] (hereafter *Complete Works*, 1572), which collects records of Wang's teaching and writing into multiple volumes.[45] As direct expressions of his experiences and self-reflections, these accounts offer crucial insight into how Wang himself conceptualised his engagements with the two non-Confucian traditions. Prioritising these sources allows an understanding of Wang's self-conception through his own words, without filtering them through the perspectives of later proponents, critics, or layers of retrospective interpretation. Key texts of this kind will be introduced and analysed in the following Chapters One and Two, which focus on Wang's reflections on his Buddhist and Daoist engagements as recorded in his own accounts.

One of the most significant sources from the first category is "Wang Yangming xiansheng nianpu" 王陽明先生年譜 ["The Chronological Biography of Master Wang Yangming"]

[45] The version published by Xie Tingjie in 1572 is known as the "Longqing edition by Xie" (*Longqing Xieshi keben* 隆慶謝氏刻本). It is the foundation for modern editions of Wang's complete works. For a textual biography, see "Bianjiao shuoming" 編校說明 ["Edition Notes"], in *Wang Yangming quanji,* vol. 1, 1–6.

(hereafter "Chronological Biography") compiled by Qian Dehong 錢德洪 (1496–1574), a detailed chronological biography of Wang.[46] As this text was written, edited, and proofread by a group of disciples who followed Wang closely in both academic and personal pursuits, it provides a comparatively credible account of his life, despite potential bias in his favour.[47] In addition to "Chronological Biography", shorter biographical accounts written by Wang's disciples, contemporaries, and later advocates offer supplementary perspectives. Many such biographies are preserved in modern editions such as *Wang Yangming quanji* 王陽明全集 [*The Complete Works of Wang Yangming*] and *Wang Yangming quanji xinbian ben* 王陽明全集新編本 [*A New Edition of the Complete Works of Wang Yangming*].[48]

Shifting to sources more external to the Yangming School, records of Wang's historical activities also appear in *Ming shilu* 明實錄 [*Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty*], organised chronologically, and in the biographical entries included in *Mingshi* 明史 [*The History of Ming*].[49] Both represent official historical records of the Ming dynasty, though

[46] For a modern edition, see "Wang Yangming xiansheng nianpu" 王陽明先生年譜 ["The Chronological Biography of Master Wang Yangming"], in *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1365. Shu Jingnan published an extended compilation of Qian's "Chronological Biography", including editorial commentaries, supplements, and corrections to Qian's accounts. See Shu Jingnan 束景南, *Wang Yangming nianpu changbian* 王陽明年譜長編 [*Extended Chronological Biography of Wang Yangming*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2017).

[47] "Chronological Biography" was compiled by Qian Dehong, co-edited by Luo Hongxian 羅洪先 (1504–1564), and proofread by Wang Ji 王畿 (1498–1583), Zhang Yuanchong 張元沖 (1502–1563), and a later proponent Wang Zongmu 王宗沐 (1524–1592). See *Wang Yangming quanji,* vol. 4, 1499–1508.

[48] The two modern editions are published by different publishers, with *Wang Yangming quanji* first issued in 1992 and *Wang Yangming quanji xinbian ben* in 2010. The former has been cited in this thesis. The latter added a number of Ming–Qing scholars' biographies, prefaces, postscripts, and epitaphs into the new edition; see Wu Guang 吳光, "Bianjiao shuoming" 編校說明 ["Edition Notes"], in *Wang Yangming quanji xinbianben*, 1–7.

[49] *Ming shilu* is a collection of historical records compiled chronically. The majority of entries concerning Wang's life activities can be found in the records of Emperor Wuzong 武宗 (1491–1521) and Emperor Shizong 世宗 (1507–1567). *Mingshi*, the official dynastic history of the Ming dynasty, was compiled and edited by a number of Qing-dynasty scholar-officials. It was published in 1739 during the reign (1735–1796) of Qianlong 乾隆 Emperor (1711–1799). For a short introduction to the compilation of *Mingshi*, see Editorial Board of Zhonghua shuju 中華書局編輯部, "chuban shuoming" 出版說明 ["Publishing Instructions"], in *Mingshi* 明史 [*The History of Ming*], ed. Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 1–4. For the *Ming shilu* records, see Fei Hong 費宏 (1468–1535) et al., *Wuzong Yihuangdi shilu* 武宗毅皇帝實錄 [*Veritable Records of Emperor Wuzong-Yi*] (Taipei: Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1962). See also Xu Jie 徐階

Mingshi was commissioned by the subsequent Qing dynasty. These official histories compile various pre-existing sources to reconstruct Wang's activities, though relevant entries in *Ming shilu* are dispersed across volumes due to its chronological structure. The collaborative efforts of eminent historians involved in these projects contribute to their overall reliability. However, since these projects were supervised by political authorities and influenced by contemporary ideological debates, they require careful textual criticism to account for inherent biases. In examining these sources, this thesis will prioritise cross-referencing disciple accounts with official records to better assess the historical credibility of Wang's engagements with non-Confucian traditions.

Despite their varied genres and lengths, the biographical accounts mentioned above will be examined in Chapter Three, which historically reconstructs Wang's Buddhist and Daoist experiences during his youth. However, problematic materials such as miraculous tales and legendary anecdotes embedded within disciple narratives require special attention. Rather than treating these accounts as reliable reports of Wang's life, this thesis will analyse them as strategic narratives crafted to construct particular versions of him—whether to exalt him as a Confucian sage marked by divine portents or to lionise him as a legendary protagonist in popular literature. Recognising the rhetorical functions of these tales is crucial for distinguishing historical reconstruction from hagiographical embellishment.

It is worth highlighting that these sources reflect the dynamic nature of Wang's intellectual identity rather than presenting a fixed or neatly separated account of either his self-presentation or its reception. As noted in the previous section, self-presentation and reception

(1512–1578), Zhang Juzheng 張居正(1525–1582) et al., *Ming Shizong shilu* 明世宗實錄 [*Veritable Records of Emperor Shizong*] (Taipei: Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1962).

are best understood as interrelated and interactive dynamics that together construct Wang's intellectual profile. In this context, biographical accounts—even when quoting Wang directly or citing his writings—should be viewed as components of reception narratives that interpret, adapt, and often reframe his self-fashioned identity. These texts should therefore not be treated as neutral records that faithfully preserve Wang's self-articulated position in navigation between Confucian doctrine and non-Confucian traditions. Their active roles in shaping the reception of Wang must also be critically considered.

Other genres, such as anthologies and genealogical studies (*xue'an* 學案) of the Confucian scholarship, also offer biographical sketches preceding analyses of Wang's philosophical characteristics. Major works in these genres—including Zhou Rudeng's 周汝登 (1547–1629) *Shengxue zongzhuan* 聖學宗傳 [*Orthodox Transmission of the Learning of the Sages*] (1605), Sun Qifeng's 孫奇逢 (1585–1675) *Lixue zongzhuan* 理學宗傳 [*Orthodox Transmission of the Learning of Principle*] (1666), and Huang Zongxi's 黃宗羲 (1610–1695) *Mingru xue'an* 明儒學案 [*The Records of the Ming Scholars*] (1676)—appeared decades after Wang's death in 1529 and thus relied heavily on earlier sources, particularly accounts written by Wang's disciples.[50] Accordingly, biographies authored directly by Wang's disciples are more suitable as primary sources compared to those included in later compilations, as the latter often draw extensively from the former. Nevertheless, the selective ways in which later authors incorporated earlier disciple accounts merit examination, as this selection process not only reveals their assessments of earlier narratives but may also reflect

[50] For modern studies of these compilations that examine them within the emergence of genealogical studies as well as the development of history of scholarship, see Chen Zuwu 陳祖武, *Zhongguo xue'anshi* 中國學案史 [*The History of Genealogical Studies in China*] (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1994). See also Thomas Wilson, *Genealogy of the Way: The Construction and Uses of the Confucian Tradition in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

personal judgments about which events in Wang's life warranted inclusion. Understanding these layers of reception will be essential for interpreting how Wang's historical engagements with non-Confucian traditions were reimagined over time, a key concern of Chapter Four.

Sources from the second category—discussions regarding Wang's relationship to Buddhism and Daoism—are scattered across compilations of various genres. Some appear embedded within philosophical analyses in genealogical studies; others are found in texts and speeches by scholars discussing Wang's non-Confucian engagements in assessing his Confucian status. An example of the former is the chapter on Wang in *Mingru xue'an*, which demonstrates the distinctive features of his philosophy while positioning him both horizontally—within the doctrinal landscape of Ming academia—and vertically, in relation to the transmission lineage of Confucian teachings.[51] Examples of the latter are dispersed across anthologies, collections of letters, and recorded dialogues, often published by the scholars themselves, their descendants, or their disciples. In addition to the dispersed nature, another challenge posed by these sources is their potential bias for or against Wang, since debates over his non-Confucian affiliations widely revolved around doctrinal disputes within Confucianism. Wang's Buddhist and Daoist experiences were frequently mobilised as evidence to either prove or disprove the non-Confucian character of his philosophy. This issue will be further examined in Chapter Four, which analyses the Ming–Qing discourse on Wang's relations to Buddhism and Daoism.

Some primary sources concerning Wang have been translated into English, with his teachings and writings, especially in *Chuanxi lu* 傳習錄 [*Instructions for Practical Living*], receiving

[51] For a study of *Mingru xue'an*, especially its structure, style, and principles of authorship, see Julia Ching, "The Records of the Ming Philosophers: An Introduction", *Oriens Extremus* 23, no. 2 (1976): 191–211.

particular attention among modern scholars.[52] Frederick Henke produced a partial translation of Wang's work in 1916, followed by Wing-tist Chan's complete translation of *Chuanxi lu* in 1963.[53] However, both works exhibit limitations. Chan criticised Henke's version as containing "too many mistakes to be of any use", a harsh yet justified assessment given Henke's frequent reliance on overly modern English equivalents rather than contextually nuanced translations.[54] This deficiency extends beyond philosophical concepts, appearing in Henke's biography of Wang, which selectively translates records of "Chronological Biography" and displays inaccuracies in rendering terminology such as governmental organisations, official titles, and religious designations. Chan's translation, while more sophisticated overall, has also received criticism from recent scholars for its handling of certain philosophical terms.[55]

Other translators similarly emphasise Wang's philosophical writings. Julia Ching, for example, translated selected philosophical letters and included a chapter on Wang in her translation of *Mingru xue'an*.[56] However, partly due to this persistent focus on explicitly philosophical texts, many chronicles, biographies, and official historical documents pertaining to Wang's Buddhist and Daoist engagements remain untranslated. Similarly overlooked are philosophical discussions by less-known Ming–Qing scholars who examined Wang's non-Confucian interactions. Given the scarcity of translations of these less prominent

[52] For a detailed study of modern scholarship on Wang—including translations of his works and evaluations of major translators such as Henke and Cham—see George L. Israel, *Studying Wang Yangming: History of a Sinological Field* (independently published, 2022), 37–39, 73–77.
[53] See Frederick Henke, *The Philosophy of Wang Yang-ming* (Chicago: Open Court, 1916). Chan's translation—*Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*—is cited in footnote 16.
[54] Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, xiii.
[55] A notable challenge to Chan's translation is from Tzu-li Chang, who specifically questioned Chan's conception of *liangzhi*; see footnote 26. See also Tzu-li Chang, "Re-Exploring Wang Yangming's Theory of *Liangzhi*: Translation, Transliteration, and Interpretation", *Philosophy East and West* 66, no. 4 (October 2016): 1196–2017.
[56] Julia Ching, trans., *The Philosophical Letters of Wang Yang-ming* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1972). Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695), *The Records of Ming Scholars,* trans. Julia Ching (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 100–107.

sources, along with existing limitations in translations of better-known texts, this thesis will independently translate primary sources when they are closely analysed.

When translations are provided, the original Chinese texts will appear in the main chapters if the sources serve as core case studies or are compared for textual variation. In contrast, certain texts are placed in the Appendix to maintain argumentative focus. These include (1) ancillary materials such as postscripts, letters, and dialogues related to key case studies, and (2) primary sources used to reconstruct Wang's historical activities—due to the volume of such material, the Chinese originals are relocated to the Appendix to preserve narrative clarity. For ease of reference, major works central to the argument—such as Wang's accounts articulating his Confucian self-positioning and disciples-compiled biographies outlining his intellectual activities—are referred to by their English titles after first mention, while other works remain in pinyin.

IV. Methodology

Building on the trends and gaps identified in the previous review of modern scholarship, the following section outlines the methodological framework of this thesis. Scholarly approaches to Wang's engagements with Buddhism and Daoism have generally followed two main paths: philosophical analysis and historical reconstruction. Philosophical studies, long dominant, focus on how Wang's thought responded to major Confucian discourses and how his ideas aligned with or diverged from Buddhist and Daoist doctrines. While overlapping with the history of ideas, this research primarily interprets Wang's philosophy within a broader doctrinal framework.

This philosophical approach has deep roots, notably influenced by Huang Zongxi, whose discussion of Ming philosophy positioned Wang within a Confucian lineage through systematic doctrinal comparison.[57] Modern scholarship largely continues this tradition, situating Wang's philosophy within the Confucian landscape while noting non-Confucian elements derived from Buddhism and Daoism. However, by prioritising doctrinal alignment, philosophical studies sometimes reduce historical processes to mere background, neglecting their active roles in shaping Wang's intellectual identity.

This methodological imbalance has consequences. First, in Ming–Qing scholarship, religious motivations were frequently ascribed to Wang without sufficient historical evidence, often to attack his Confucian orthodoxy. Second, although modern scholars increasingly question such doctrinal judgments,[58] assumptions about the religious nature of Wang's non-Confucian activities persist.[59] As a result, these activities are often accepted at face value as signs of Buddhist or Daoist influence, without critical examination of their historical contexts or later reinterpretations. Addressing this methodological gap is therefore essential, as uncritically accepting the religious framing risks distorting Wang's self-perceived identity and overlooking how his non-Confucian activities were historically constructed and contested.

In contrast, historical studies of Wang reconstruct his engagements with Buddhist and Daoist traditions within the political, social, and intellectual context of his time. This approach foregrounds Wang's lived experience—his travels, encounters, official duties, and personal

[57] Chen, *Zhongguo xue'anshi*, 111–160.
[58] Chan, "How Buddhistic is Wang Yang-ming?", 203–215. Liu, "Wang Yangming yu fodao erjiao", 13–14. Wu, "Yangming sixiang yu chanxue", 91.
[59] Some examples are Liu Ts'un-yan's analysis of Wang's seemingly Daoist experiences and Tu Weiming's interpretation of Wang's early engagements with Buddhism and Daoism. Both accounts have been mentioned in the previous review of modern scholarship. George L. Israel addressed this issue in his review of the religious studies of Wang; see Israel, *Studying Wang Yangming*, chap. 6.

crises—over abstract doctrinal analysis. However, with the rise of genealogical studies mapping philosophical lineages, the historical mode of enquiry has become relatively marginalised. Consequently, certain aspects of Wang's life experience—most notably his relatively brief early devotion to Buddhism and Daoism—have been underexplored or relegated to peripheral status.

Even when employed, the historical approach faces persistent challenges. The fragmentary nature of sources, the brevity of Wang's deeper Buddhist and Daoist engagements, and the blurred boundaries between Confucian and non-Confucian elements complicate efforts to isolate distinct phases in his intellectual trajectory. As a result, historical studies often either downplay these engagements as youthful diversions or treat them as incidental background to his ultimately Confucian profile, rather than analysing them as active forces shaping his intellectual identity.

This thesis seeks to build on the strengths of the historical approach while addressing these limitations, offering a reassessment of Wang's Buddhist and Daoist engagements not as minor detours but as crucial sites for understanding the contested formation and reception of his intellectual identity. As noted earlier, philosophical concepts are discussed only when they dominate Wang's evaluation of Confucianism and non-Confucian traditions, thereby revealing his stance on these doctrines. Rather than devoting separate sections to doctrinal comparisons, observations about Wang's philosophy will be integrated into the historical narrative. When discussing particular episodes, Wang's approaches will be compared to Buddhist or Daoist doctrines.[60] These comparisons will enrich the analysis without displacing

[60] One example is Wang's instruction on meditation (*jingzuo* 靜坐), which drew criticism from his contemporaries for its perceived Buddhist tendency. In this context, Wang's meditation practice will be compared with the Buddhist practice of *dhyāna* (*chanding* 禪定 in Chinese Buddhism) to explore the extent of Buddhist influence on his teachings. This comparative analysis will be offered in Chapter Three where Wang's

the historical grounding that anchors this study. By weaving such insights into the broader analysis, this thesis explores how Wang's self-perceived Confucian identity has been reframed through interpretations of his non-Confucian engagements during the reception process.

This thesis treats sources not as transparent reflections of Wang's life and thought but as situated interventions shaped by doctrinal, political, and personal imperatives. To assess their reliability, four criteria are employed: first, authorship, with emphasis on the writer's doctrinal stance, political agenda, and personal concerns; second, genre and purpose, since biographical, instructional, commemorative, or polemical forms condition how Wang's identity is represented; third, historical context, including the debates over orthodoxy that directed or constrained portrayals of him; and fourth, corroborative evidence, whereby claims about his non-Confucian engagements are cross-checked against independent accounts to detect editorial or interpretive interventions.

Particular emphasis is given to textual form and function, not as neutral containers but as active forces in shaping intellectual identity. The analysis draws on a wide range of genres—including autobiographical accounts, personal letters, recorded dialogues, official memorials, disciples' biographies, later doctrinal commentaries, and official histories—each with its own rhetorical and structural affordances. These sources vary in texture, from bureaucratic formality to intimate retrospection, and serve diverse purposes: correspondence, instruction, publication, or historical record. Together, they show how rhetorical and structural conventions conditioned not only Wang's self-positioning but also the ways later thinkers

specific instruction on meditation, written in his letter "Yu chenzhong zhusheng" 與辰中諸生 ["Letter to Students in Chenzhong"] (1509), is examined. For this letter, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol.1, 162–163.

reconfigured his identity. In this way, the thesis demonstrates that both self-presentation and reception were embedded in textual practices that defined—and often contested—the boundaries of Confucian legitimacy.

In exploring Wang's Confucian identity, this thesis approaches the terms "Confucian", "Buddhist", and "Daoist" as both emic and etic classifications: labels that reflect evolving self-positioning as well as contested external positioning under changing circumstances. Wang's own writings consistently framed his non-Confucian engagements as formative detours—necessary trials that led to a deeper recovery of the Confucian doctrine. His model of tradition comparison did not dismiss the partial value of Buddhism and Daoism but subordinated them to reasserted vision of Confucian superiority. Accordingly, these categories are treated not as fixed descriptors but as strategic acts of positioning within a contested intellectual terrain.

Chapter One: Persuasion and Self-Positioning: Wang Shouren's Memorial of Advising Against Welcoming Buddhism from U-Tsang

I. Introduction

This thesis begins its exploration of Wang Shouren's intellectual identity by examining his self-presentation as articulated in his own reflections on Buddhism and Daoism—the two major non-Confucian traditions of his time. His first-person reflections offer a valuable lens through which to consider two central questions: how Wang positioned himself in relation to non-Confucian traditions, and how he constructed a Confucian image through that positioning. Notably, extant records suggest that Wang rarely discussed his early engagements with Buddhism and Daoism in detail. Of the few instances where he did, even fewer were composed for a broader audience; most appear to be private correspondence. Those public-facing accounts therefore warrant particular attention.

At the same time, it is important to note that Wang was not operating in a vacuum: models for framing non-Confucian experiences within a Confucian representation already existed. For instance, Zhu Xi reflected on his youthful encounter with Buddhism by remarking, "When I was young and unknowledgeable, I used to learn Chan Buddhism as well."[61] Precedents of this kind provided strategies for presenting early Buddhist or Daoist affiliations in ways that ultimately reinforced a Confucian identity, and such strategies could be employed both for self-presentation and for later reinterpretation. Chapter Four will consider one further case—how Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) described his brother Cheng Hao's 程顥

[61] The Chinese text is: 某少時未有知, 亦曾學禪. See Li Jingde 黎靖德 (fl. 13th century) ed., *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 [*The Collected Dialogues of Master Zhu*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), vol. 104, 2620.

(1032–1085) Buddhist and Daoist engagement—as an example of the discursive resources available for framing non-Confucian experiences within Confucian identity construction.

Under these circumstances, the chapter begins with an official memorial Wang drafted to the emperor—likely the earliest extant text in which he reflected explicitly on his past devotion to non-Confucian belief. Wang recalled his earlier commitment to Buddhism, stating that he "revered and believed [its teachings] immensely", as part of his effort to dissuade the emperor from endorsing Buddhist practices.[62] This memorial serves as a central case study in this chapter, alongside other contemporary texts that will be examined in light of it, here and in the following chapter.

In 1515, Wang Shouren drafted "Jian yingfo shu" 諫迎佛疏 ["A Memorial of Advising Against Welcoming Buddhism"] (hereafter "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism"), the compilation of which was recorded by his disciple Qian Dehong in "Chronological Biography".[63] In this memorial, Wang sought to dissuade Emperor Wuzong 武宗 (1491–1521) from welcoming Buddhism from U-Tsang 烏斯藏.[64] Drawing on his earlier devotion to Buddhism as a basis for advising against escorting the Buddhist delegation to the imperial court, "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" serves as a valuable first-hand account that reveals Wang's personal stance on Buddhism and his self-positioning in relation to the belief.

Accordingly, this chapter will examine "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" from several angles. It first outlines the historical context, then considers the text's authorship,

[62] See the translation of the text below (p. 45).
[63] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1365.
[64] The year 1515 is the tenth year of Zhengde 正德, the reign title (*nianhao* 年號) of Emperor Wuzong. U-Tsang is a region that covered the south-central of Tibet. For the full Chinese text of this memorial, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 325–329. For official historical records of U-Tsang, see *Mingshi*, vol. 331, 8571–8575.

genre, content, and key characteristics. Additionally, memorials by Wang's contemporaries on the same issue are analysed to highlight what distinguishes Wang's text.

Among Wang's writings, "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" has received relatively less inspection from modern scholars. Two of the few scholars who have conducted in-depth research on this document are Okada Takehiko and Shu Jingnan.[65] Nevertheless, as their studies on the memorial were parts of their biographies of Wang, their analyses focused on the causes and effects of this writing, thus locating its position in Wang's life and thought. More precisely, by studying the memorial, Okada and Shu placed the related events in Wang's life history and the presented arguments in Wang's thought system. As a result, the genre, format, and content of the text were only briefly introduced. This study therefore undertakes a closer examination of the memorial's compilation—particularly its deliberate style and intended purpose—as these elements reveal not only Wang's stance on Buddhism but also how he chose to articulate it.

Furthermore, this chapter engages with scholarly debates on the memorial's composition date and submission status, focusing on the divergent interpretations of Okada and Shu. Okada followed Qian Dehong's account, while Shu challenged its reliability and proposed alternative theories. This chapter will argue that Shu's case is weakened by internal inconsistencies and contradictions and will explain why Qian's narrative remains the most credible basis for understanding the text.

[65] For Okada's monography on Wang's life, see Okada, *Wang Yangming dazhuan*, 169–175. Shu's monography was one of the most recent studies on Wang's life and thought; see Shu, *Yangming dazhuan*, 757–776.

Finally, this chapter examines how Wang carefully mediated between Confucian doctrine and Buddhist belief when arguing that the emperor's decision to welcome Buddhism from U-Tsang was not the most appropriate response to his fondness for the religion. By exploring Wang's approach to this sensitive issue, this chapter highlights a specific dimension of his intellectual identity, examining how he, as a Confucian scholar-official, positioned himself within the tension between the emperor's attraction to Buddhism and the imperative to uphold Confucian hegemony in the officialdom.

II. Welcoming Buddhism from U-Tsang: A Series of Events

As the title indicates, "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" centres on the event of welcoming Buddhism (*yingfo* 迎佛). To analyse Wang's views, it is first necessary to understand the historical context in which the memorial was written. The event was recorded to occur in 1515 during the reign of Emperor Wuzong, who issued an edict to welcome Buddhism from U-Tsang, a remoted area in the Western Region (*xiyu* 西域).[66] This decision was reportedly prompted by news of a "living Buddha" (*huofo* 活佛) in U-Tsang. The emperor appointed the eunuch Liu Yun 劉允 (fl. late 15th and early 16th century) as envoy to escort the figure and transmit his teachings to the court.

The edict included detailed instructions: Liu was to receive funds at courier stations, distribute money and goods to the monastic community, and escort several renowned monks to the capital. More importantly, he was granted discretionary authority over the mission.

[66] During the Ming dynasty, there were regular tributes from U-Tsang to the imperial capital Beijing. There were also envoys sent from the capital to U-Tsang. In Emperor Wuzong's edict, previous envoys from the capital such as Chen Cheng 陳誠 (1365–1458) and Hou Xian 侯顯 (fl. 15th century) were mentioned. See *Mingshi,* vol. 331, 8571–8575.

Despite the emperor's clear intent, the proposal was widely disfavoured by the officialdom. Numerous officials submitted memorials opposing the plan. These debates were initially recorded in *Ming shilu*, with further references found in *Guoque* 國榷 [*Discussion About the State*] and *Mingshi*.[67]

Although the final decree was issued in the eleventh lunar month of 1515, Emperor Wuzong's intent to welcome Buddhism from U-Tsang had emerged years earlier.[68] Three preceding events reflects his growing devotion. The first occurred in the first lunar month of 1514, when a fire at Qianqing Palace 乾清宮 prompted the emperor to order officials to self-reflect.[69] Of the seventeen memorials submitted in response, twelve criticised his excessive favour towards U-Tsang Buddhism, including the lavish treatment of monks and envoys through gifts, titles, and privileges—indicating his devotion well before the decree.[70]

The second event took place in the second lunar month of 1515, when the emperor conferred the title "national teacher" (*guoshi* 國師) on two U-Tsang monks, despite opposition from the

[67] For some memorials submitted by officials, see *Wuzong Yihuangdi shilu*, vol. 132. In *Mingshi*, this event was recorded in both "Xiyu zhuan" 西域傳 ["The Biographies of the Western Region"] and "Huanguan zhuan" 宦官傳 ["The Biographies of the Eunuchs"]. See *Mingshi*, vol. 331, 8573–8575; vol. 304, 7795. For the record in *Guoque*, see Tan Qian 談遷 (1594–1658), *Guoque* 國榷 [*Discussion About the State*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), vol. 49, 3094–3096.

[68] The date is based on the traditional lunisolar calendar of ancient China, which is 31 December 1515 when converted to the Gregorian calendar. According to *Ming shilu*, the decree of welcoming Buddhism was issued on the day *jiyou* 己酉 in the eleventh month of the tenth year of Zhengde. The word *jiyou* is one of the terms that constitute the Chinese sexagenary cycle (*ganzhi* 干支). For an online calendar conversion tool, see Academia Sinica Centre for Digital Cultures, *Liangqiannian zhongxili zhuanhuan* 兩千年中西曆轉換 [*Chinese-Western Calendar Conversion for Two Thousand Years*], last modified 28 October 2013, https://sinocal.sinica.edu.tw., accessed 30 April 2022.

[69] Qianqing Palace, translated as the "Palace of Heavenly Purity", is one of the largest palaces in the Forbidden City in Beijing. As this palace served as the residence of the emperor during the Ming dynasty, it symbolised the imperial throne on many occasions. For a record of this fire, see *Wuzong Yihuangdi shilu*, vol. 108, 2203. After the grave incident at Qianqing Palace, the emperor acknowledged by imperial decree his responsibilities for this disaster and requested all officials to reflect on it. For another historical record of this conflagration, see Xia Xie 夏燮 (1800–1875), *Ming tongjian* 明通鑑 [*Comprehensive Mirror of the Ming Dynasty*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), vol. 45, 1540.

[70] *Wuzong Yihuangdi shilu*, vol. 108, 2205–2220, 2235.

officialdom.[71] These monks were disciples of a Buddhist dignitary closely associated with the emperor. According to *Mingshi*, this dignitary, sent as an envoy from U-Tsang, was received at the palace with exceptional honour.[72] The same source recorded the emperor's personal engagement with Buddhist practices: he read scriptures, adopted monastic attire, and worshipped in the inner court. The third event occurred in the fifth lunar month of 1515 when the emperor granted arable land to a "national teacher" and presented lavish gifts to U-Tsang envoys, overriding officialdom objections.[73] This assertive generosity further signalled his deepening commitment.

Together, these episodes demonstrate that the decree was not issued impulsively but emerged from a sustained pattern of imperial favour towards U-Tsang Buddhism. In other words, it was not a single incident but a significant outcome of the emperor's deepening devotion. While his devotion intensified, officials persistently expressed concern. Several memorials submitted prior to the decree criticised his religious inclinations, establishing a precedent of official remonstrance. Wang Shouren's own memorial thus aligned with this critical tradition, reflecting a broader discourse within the officialdom.

III. Wang Shouren's Memorial Draft: Basic Features and Recent Dispute

As the historical context and thematic background have been outlined above, this section now turns to "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" itself. A full translation is first provided for reference in the analysis that follows. Before engaging with the content, confirming Wang's authorship is essential for any discussion of the attitudes expressed in the text.

[71] *Guoque*, vol. 49, 3077.
[72] *Mingshi*, vol. 331, 8575–8577.
[73] *Wuzong Yihuangdi shilu*, vol. 125, 2499. See also *Guoque*, vol. 49, 3083.

Likewise, identifying the memorial's genre helps determine its formal characteristics and rhetorical strategies, shaping how Wang presented his arguments. Accordingly, this section will focus on analysing the authorship and genre of the text.

1. Full translation of "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism"

The full text was archived by Qian Dehong, one of Wang's disciples, in *Yangming xiansheng wenlu* 陽明先生文錄 [*The Collected Writings of Master Yangming*] (hereafter *Collected Writings*).[74] Below is the complete translation.

> 臣自七月以來，切見道路流傳之言，以為陛下遣使外夷，遠迎佛教，郡臣紛紛進諫，皆斥而不納。臣始聞不信，既知其實，然獨竊喜幸，以為此乃陛下聖智之開明，善端之萌蘖。郡臣之諫，雖亦出於忠愛至情，然而未能推原陛下此念之所從起。是乃為善之端，作聖之本，正當將順擴充，遡流求原。而乃狃於世儒崇正之說，徒爾紛爭力沮，宜乎陛下之有所拂而不受，忽而不省矣。愚臣之見獨異於是，乃惟恐陛下好佛之心有所未至耳。誠使陛下好佛之心果已真切懇至，不徒好其名而必務得其實，不但好其末而必務求其本，則堯、舜之聖可至，三代之盛可復矣。豈非天下之幸，宗社之福哉！臣請為陛下言其好佛之實。
>
> 陛下聰明聖知，昔者青宮，固已播傳四海。即位以來，偶值多故，未暇講求五帝、三王神聖之道。雖或時御經筵，儒臣進說，不過日襲故事，就文敷衍。立談之間，豈能遽有所開發陛下聽之，以為聖賢之道不過如此，則亦有何可樂？故漸移志於騎射之能，縱觀於游心之樂。蓋亦無所用其聰明，施其才力，而偶託寄於此。陛下聰明，豈固遂安於是，而不知此等皆無益有損之事也哉？馳逐困憊之餘，夜氣清明之際，固將厭倦日生，悔悟日切。而左右前後又莫有以神聖之道為陛下言者，故遂遠思西方佛氏之教，以為其道能使人清心絕欲，求全性命，以出離生死；又能慈悲普愛，濟度群生，去其苦惱而躋之快樂。今災害日興，盜賊日熾，財力日竭，天下之民困苦已極。使誠身得佛氏之道而拯救

[74] Qian Dehong compiled and published *Collected Writings* in the mid-fifteenth century. His compilation drew on Huan Wan's 黃綰 (1480–1554) *Yangming xiansheng cungao* 陽明先生存稿 [*The Extant Manuscripts of Master Yangming*]. For a study on the editions of Wang's collected writings, see Yang Cheng-hsien 楊正顯, "Housi youze: cong *Yangming xiansheng wenlu* dao *Wang Wenchenggong quanshu* de shijiao yanbian" 後死有責：從《陽明先生文錄》到《王文成公全書》的師教衍變 ["The Responsibility of Those Who Live on: The Evolution of Teaching from *Literary Record of Master Yangming* to *Complete Works of Mister Wang Wencheng*", English title given by the author], *Mingdai yanjiu* 明代研究 36, no. 6 (2021): 51–101. For the original text of "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism", see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 325–329.

之，豈徒息精養氣，保全性命？豈徒一身之樂？將天下萬民之困苦，亦可因是而蘇息！故遂特降綸音，發幣遣使，不憚數萬里之遙，不愛數萬金之費，不惜數萬生靈之困斃，不厭數年往返之遲久，遠迎學佛之徒。是蓋陛下思欲一洗舊習之非，而幡然於高明光大之業也。陛下試以臣言反而思之，陛下之心，豈不如此乎？然則聖知之開明，善端之萌蘖者，亦豈過為諛言以佞陛下哉！陛下好佛之心誠至，則臣請毋好其名而務得其實，毋好其末而務求其本。陛下誠欲得其實而求其本，則請毋求諸佛而求諸聖人，毋求諸外夷而求諸中國。此又非臣之苟為遊說之談以誑陛下，臣又請得而備言之。

夫佛者，夷狄之聖人；聖人者，中國之佛也。在彼夷狄，則可用佛氏之教以化導愚頑；在我中國，自當用聖人之道以參贊化育，猶行陸者必用車馬，渡海者必以舟航。今居中國而師佛教，是猶以車馬渡海，雖使造父為御，王良為右，非但不能利涉，必且有沈溺之患。夫車馬本致遠之具，豈不利器乎？然而用非其地，則技無所施。陛下若謂佛氏之道雖不可以平治天下，或亦可以脫離一身之生死；雖不可以參贊化育，而時亦可以導群品之囂頑；就此二說，亦復不過得吾聖人之餘緒。陛下不信，則臣請比而論之。臣亦切嘗學佛，最所尊信，自謂悟得其蘊奧。後乃窺見聖道之大，始遂棄置其說。臣請毋言其短，言其長者。夫西方之佛，以釋迦為最；中國之聖人，以堯、舜為最。臣請以釋迦與堯、舜比而論之。夫世之最所崇慕釋迦者，慕尚於脫離生死，超然獨存於世。今佛氏之書具載始末，謂釋迦住世說法四十餘年，壽八十二歲而沒，則其壽亦誠可謂高矣；然舜年百有十歲，堯年一百二十歲，其壽比之釋迦則又高也。佛能慈悲施捨，不惜頭目腦髓以救人之急難，則其仁愛及物，亦誠可謂至矣；然必苦行於雪山，奔走於道路，而後能有所濟。若堯、舜則端拱無為，而天下各得其所。惟“克明峻德，以親九族”，則九族既睦；平章百姓，則百姓昭明；協和萬邦，則黎民於變時雍；極而至於上下草木鳥獸，無不咸若。其仁愛及物，比之釋迦則又至也。佛能方便說法，開悟羣迷，戒人之酒，止人之殺，去人之貪，絕人之嗔，其神通妙用，亦誠可謂大矣，然必耳提面誨而後能。若在堯、舜，則光被四表，格於上下，其至誠所運，自然不言而信，不動而變，無為而成。蓋“與天地合其德，與日月合其明，與四時合其序，與鬼神合其吉兇”，其神化無方而妙用無體，比之釋迦則又大也。若乃詛咒變幻，眩怪捏妖，以欺惑愚冥，是故佛氏之所深排極詆，謂之外道邪魔，正與佛道相反者。不應好佛而乃好其所相反，求佛而乃求其所排詆者也。陛下若以堯、舜既沒，必欲求之於彼，則釋迦之亡亦已久矣；若謂彼中學佛之徒能傳釋迦之道，則吾中國之大，顧豈無人能傳堯、舜之道者乎？陛下未之求耳。陛下試求大臣之中，苟其能明堯、舜之道者，日日與之推求講究，乃必有能明神聖之道，致陛下於堯、舜之域者矣。故臣以為陛下好佛之心誠至，則請毋好其名而務得其實，毋好其末而務求其本；務得其實而求其本，則請毋求諸佛而求諸聖人，毋求諸夷狄而求諸中國者，果非妄為遊說之談以誑陛下者矣。

陛下果能以好佛之心而好聖人，以求釋迦之誠而求諸堯、舜之道，則不必涉數萬里之遙，而西方極樂，只在目前；則不必縻數萬之費，斃數萬之命，歷數年之久，而一塵不動，彈指之間，可以立躋聖地；神通妙用，隨形隨足。此又非臣之繆為大言以欺陛下；必欲討究其說，則皆鑿鑿可證之言。孔子云：“我欲仁，斯仁至矣。”“一日克己復禮，而天下歸仁。”孟軻云：“人皆可以為

堯、舜。”豈欺我哉？陛下反而思之，又試以詢之大臣，詢之羣臣。果臣言出於虛繆，則甘受欺妄之戮。

臣不知諱忌，伏見陛下善心之萌，不覺踊躍喜幸，輒進其將順擴充之說。惟陛下垂察，則宗社幸甚！天下幸甚！萬世幸甚！臣不勝祝望懇切殞越之至！專差舍人某具疏奏上以聞。

Since the seventh month, I have closely listened to the rumours circulating around the streets. They said that your majesty sent an envoy to foreign tribes to welcome Buddhism from a distant land. Officials advised you against it one after another but were all dismissed with their proposals rejected. I did not believe it when I first heard it. But I was secretly delighted after I realised it was true. I thought this signified that your divine wisdom has awoken, and the roots of virtue have sprouted. As for the advice of those officials, although they also came from a genuine feeling of loyalty and love, they failed to trace the origin of your intention. This is the beginning of goodness and the foundation of becoming a sage.[75] One should rightly follow, extend, and fulfil it—tracing it back upstream to seek its source. However, a theory claimed by mediocre scholars of revering the correct doctrine constrained those officials. They wrangled over your scheme and tried in vain to discourage you. It was natural that your majesty felt defied by them, rejected their suggestions, ignored their counsel, and refused to introspect.

My opinion alone is different from theirs. I only fear that your majesty's fondness for Buddhism is not deep enough. Suppose this affection for Buddhism is indeed exceedingly genuine and sincere. In that case, your majesty would not merely cherish the name but commit to the substance; not merely value what is peripheral but attend to the fundamental. Then the sagely realm of Yao and Shun could be realised, and the prosperity of the Three Dynasties would reappear.[76] Is it not the fortune of the realm and the blessing of the ancestral temples? I beg your majesty to let me explain the substance and foundation of fondness for Buddhism.

The intelligence and wisdom of your majesty have long been known to the world since you were the crown prince. [77] After you succeeded to the throne, you accidentally encountered many incidents, leaving you no time to delve into the divine Way of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors.[78] Although you have often been present at the lectures on the Confucian classics, scholars' speeches were nothing more than repetitious old stories. Those scholars only scratched the surface of the classics perfunctorily. How could these lectures suddenly inspire you in a brief time? As your majesty listened to them, you felt that the doctrine of the sage was no better

[75] The concepts of "the beginning of goodness" (*shanduan* 善端) and "the foundation of becoming a sage" (*zuosheng zhiben* 作聖之本) can also be found in Wang's philosophical discourse. Notably, Wang explained "the foundation of cultivating wisdom" as having the mind "completely identified with the Principle of Nature" (*chunhu tianli* 純乎天理), which reflects his doctrine of the unity of principle and mind. See Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, 61.

[76] Yao 堯 was a legendary ruler of ancient China and one of the sage-kings (*shengwang* 聖王) worshiped by Confucianism. Shun 舜 was another sage-king who succeeded Yao as the ruler. The Three Dynasties are Xia 夏 (c. 2070–c. 1600 BCE), Shang 商 (c. 1600–c. 1046 BCE), and Zhou 周 (c. 1046–256 BCE).

[77] It is originally written as "Qinggong 青宮", which was the palace where the crown prince live.

[78] The Chinese phrase is *Sanhuang wudi* 三皇五帝. They were the deities or rulers of ancient China.

than this. Then how could there be any pleasure in learning the sacred Way? Hence, you shifted your interest to the skills of horsemanship and archery. You surveyed the joy thoroughly while letting your mind wander freely. You have temporarily placed your interest in these activities because there has been no way to use your intelligence and talent. With your majesty's wisdom, how could you feel fully contented in these activities without knowing they are useless and harmful? On clear nights when you grew weary of chasing pleasure, surely you would be tired of your pursuit of happiness and increasingly awake to your errors. Since no one among the entourage of courtiers could explain the sacred Way, your majesty has profoundly reflected on the western belief of Buddhism. You feel that Buddhist principles can purge the minds of desires and perfect the souls and lives, leading to the transcendence of life and death; can disseminate benevolence and compassion and deliver all living creatures from suffering, relieving misery and offering comfort. Now the natural disasters happen constantly, the thieves and bandits spread widely like a flame, the financial power tends to be exhausted gradually, and people in the realm are enduring hardship to the extreme. If a ruler himself attains wisdom from Buddhism to save the people, will he only preserve his energy and protect his life? Will he only obtain happiness for himself? Considering this assumption, millions of people in the realm can also recuperate from their suffering.

Therefore, your majesty has issued a special edict of sending gifts and envoys to welcome Buddhism. You do not stint an expedition of thousands of miles nor an expense of tons of money. You receive Buddhist disciples from a long distance, despite the fatigue of many thousands of living creatures and the permanence of ages of the round journey. It is because your majesty wishes to completely clear your errors of old habits and decisively choose a bright and broad path. Please consider my words and rethink your intention. Was your mind thinking any differently?

However, when your divine wisdom awakes and the roots of virtue sprout, how can one flatter you excessively with unctuous words? I understand your affection for Buddhism is exceedingly earnest. Hence, I beg your majesty to strive for the substance and foundation instead of the mere names and the peripheral. If you are willing to strive for the substance and foundation, I suggest learning from the sages rather than Buddhas and looking into our realm rather than foreign tribes. Moreover, I am not lobbying to deceive your majesty with my words. I wish you to let me explain them thoroughly. To us, Buddhas in the barbarian regions are the equivalents of sages. To those barbarians, sages in our country are the equivalents of Buddhas. As to the foreign tribes, the theory of Buddhas can be adopted to civilise and instruct the ignorant. As to our realm, we ought to employ the doctrine of sages to help nurture and educate people. For example, we use carriages to travel on land and ships to travel by sea. Following Buddhist teachings in our country is just like using carriages to sail across the ocean. Even though we make Zaofu the charioteer and Wang Liang the guard on the chariot, we cannot sail the sea successfully. Nor can we diminish the risk of drowning.[79] Given that carriages are designed for reaching remote places, are

[79] Zaofu 造父 (c. 900s BCE) was a skilful charioteer during the Zhou Dynasty. According to *Shiji*, Zaofu drove the King Mu 穆王 (c. 900s–c.922 BCE) to the west land. When they learnt of a rebellion in Xu 徐, they drove back swiftly to fight their enemies. Following their victory, the King granted Zaofu a city named Zhao 趙, which became the surname of Zaofu's descendants. For the life of Zaofu, see Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c. 190–110 BCE), *Shiji* 史記 [*The Records of the Grand Historian*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), vol. 43, 1779. Wang

they not valuable tools? But because they are not employed in the right place, their usage is minimal.

Your majesty might think that by following Buddhist doctrine, even though one cannot rule a country, one can still break free from life and death. And even though one cannot assist the natural cultivation of living creatures, one can still guide the arrogant and the stubborn among all people. Nevertheless, these aspects only amount to the minor issues of the sages' doctrine. If your majesty is not convinced, I wish to use myself as an example to demonstrate it.

I used to learn Buddhist theories as well. I revered and believed them immensely, and I thought I had grasped the essence. Later I got a glimpse of the broadness of the sages' doctrine, then started to discard these theories. I wish to describe their strong points instead of weak points. As for Buddhas in the west, Shijia is in the first place. [80] As for the sages in our realm, Yao and Shun are in the first place. In this case, let me compare Shijia with Yao and Shun.

The world adores and admires Shijia immensely. People worship him as he broke free from life and death and stood aloof from the rest of the world. According to those Buddhist classics of today, which record the beginning and end of Shijia's life, Shijia expounded his doctrine in the secular world for over forty years and died at the age of eighty-two. His longevity is indeed remarkable. However, Shun lived for a hundred and ten years while Yao lived for a hundred and twenty years. Compared with Shijia, their longevity is even more remarkable.

The Buddha could distribute alms with mercy and compassion, not hesitating to give away his body and organs to people in emergent need. His kindness to others is indeed comprehensive. But he had to follow the ascetic principle on the snowy mountains, and he had to rove around the streets. Only by these means could he be able to succour others. By comparison, Yao and Shun sat on their thrones and greeted their courtiers at a sedate pace, letting things take their natural course: They "appointed virtuous scholars to unite the kin" so that they could assemble their clans in harmony. They clarified the duties of officials of all ranks, and these officials' obligations were manifest. Then they cemented friendly relationships with other countries, so the multitude could gradually live in concord.[81] Their virtue was inclusive to the extreme that all creatures in the world lived harmoniously by their nature. Accordingly, their kindness is more comprehensive compared with the Buddha's.

The Buddha could adopt different teaching methods convenient to specific situations, enlightening all the deluded. He admonished people against drinking, forbade them from killing, suppressed their greed and eliminated their antipathy. The effects of his

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Liang 王良 (c. 900s BCE) was a charioteer during the Spring and Autumn period (c. 770–c. 481 BCE). Wang Liang and Zaofu were both believed to be adroit at driving chariots. Mencius mentioned Wang Liang in his teachings, see *Mengzi zhushu* 孟子注疏 [*The Commentaries on The Mencius*], ed. Shisanjing zhushu bianweihui 十三經注疏編委會 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 189–193.

[80] Shijia 釋迦 or Shijia Mouni 釋迦牟尼 is the Chinese transliteration of Shakyamuni.

[81] These three sentences are quotations from *Shangshu* 尚書 [*The Book of Documents*]. For the full text in Chinese, see *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 [*The Correct Meaning of the Book of Documents*], ed. Shisanjing zhushu bianweihui 十三經注疏編委會 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 31–33.

supernormal abilities are indeed magnificent. However, he had to exhort people earnestly and constantly to exert his influence. As for Yao and Shun, their virtue extended in all directions and reached both heaven and earth. The results of their earnest virtue could convince people without self-advertisement, influence things without radical movements, and accomplish aims without unnecessary interference.[82] "Unite with the goodness of heaven and earth, the brightness of sun and moon, the orders of four seasons, and the omens of gods and spirits."[83] Thus Yao and Shun have ineffable abilities whose effects are beyond physical limits. Their influence is even more magnificent than Buddha's.

In addition, there are other aspects such as using curses, changing shapes, flaunting peculiar magic, and fabricating strange arts. These tricks are used to deceive and confuse the ignorant, so they are rejected and condemned by Buddhism. They are regarded as non-Buddhist evil means that are contrary to the Buddha's doctrine. If one appreciates Buddhism, one shall not relish the contrary. If one pursues Buddhist enlightenment, one shall not seek what it condemns.

Suppose your majesty thinks that since the times of Yao and Shun has gone, you will seek the true doctrine somewhere else. Then the times of Buddha has gone far ago as well. If Buddhists in those foreign tribes can pass on Buddha's teachings, will there not be any scholar who can pass on the teachings of Yao and Shun in our great country? I presume that your majesty has not searched for these scholars. I wish your majesty could try to seek among those officials. If you find someone with explicit knowledge of the sages' teachings, studying and discussing with him every day, you will grasp the divine Way without a doubt. By this means, your majesty will enter the realm of Yao and Shun. Therefore, as I have stated earlier, given that your affection for Buddhism is exceedingly earnest, I beg you to strive for the substance and the foundation instead of the mere names and the peripheral. If you are willing to do so, I suggest learning from the sages rather than Buddhas and looking into our realm rather than foreign tribes. Now I have proven that I was not lobbying to deceive your majesty with my words.

Suppose you can appreciate the sages just as you have appreciated the Buddha and follow the doctrine of Yao and Shun just as you have followed the wisdom of Buddhism. In that case, you will not have to travel thousands of miles because the Pure Land in the west is just in front of you. You will not have to spend tons of money, cost thousands of lives, or endure ages of years. You will not have to make the slightest move. Within a second of snapping your fingers, you will stand in the divine realm. You will obtain those supernormal abilities with magnificent effects, and your power will be apparent and sufficient wherever you go. Then again, I am not exaggerating to deceive you. If my words must be tested further, they will be proved undoubtedly reliable. Confucius once said, "I crave for virtue and thus enter the realm

[82] This is a quotation from the chapter "Zhongyong" 中庸 ["The Doctrine of the Mean"] in *Liji* 禮記 [*The Book of Rites*], see *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義 [*The Correct Meaning of The Book of Rites*], ed. Shisanjing zhushu bianweihui 十三經注疏編委會 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 1694–1696.

[83] This sentence was quoted from *Zhouyi* 周易 [*The Book of Changes*], see *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 [*The Correct Meaning of The Book of Changes*], ed. Shisanjing zhushu bianweihui 十三經注疏編委會 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 27–28.

of virtue."[84] Mencius once said, "everyone could become someone like Yao and Shun."[85] How can these sages deceive us? I wish your majesty to consider my words and rethink your intention. And perhaps you may try consulting the officials. If my opinions come from false and absurd assumptions, I will be willing to receive severe punishment for deception.

I might have unknowingly talked without enough propriety. I saw that your majesty's virtue awakened, and I was unconsciously enthusiastic with this fact. Therefore, I presented my opinions of preserving and extending your virtue in the passages above. Your approval will be a blessing to the ancestral temples! It will be a blessing to the whole realm! It will be a blessing to later generations! I humbly and earnestly wish to have your consent! To have my words reach your majesty, I assign an officer to present this memorial.

2. Authorship and related discussions

Among modern studies of "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism", there is little dispute regarding its authorship. As Qian Dehong—a disciple of Wang with direct access to his writings—recorded the memorial in his account, most scholars accept that Wang is indeed the author. Accordingly, the following discussion does not centre on establishing authorship, but rather on how this text relates to Wang's broader corpus, particularly his writings that address the tension between engaging with non-Confucian traditions and upholding Confucian principles.

Wang's engagement with non-Confucian traditions is also evident in another two writings from the same period: "Zhuzi wannian dinglun xu" 朱子晚年定論序 ["A Preface to Master Zhu's Final Conclusions Arrived Late at Life"] (hereafter "Preface to Final Conclusions", 1515) and a recorded conversation with students on Buddhism and Daoism in 1514. The close proximity of these texts suggests that the views expressed reflect Wang's characteristic

[84] For this quotation, see *Lunyu zhushu* 論語注疏 [*The Commentaries on The Analects*], ed. Shisanjing zhushu bianweihui 十三經注疏編委會 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 106.
[85] *Mengzi zhushu*, 377.

attitude towards Confucianism and the two major non-Confucian schools at the time. Together, the three records help trace how Wang navigated competing traditions, thereby illuminating his self-fashioned identity as a scholar. The following table presents selected translations of these texts for comparison.

The preface[86]	The memorial	The conversation[87]
"(In my early years,) I sought answers in Daoism and Buddhism, and I was pleased to understand something in my heart. I felt here was where the teachings of the sage lay." "(After I was demoted and banished to Longchang,) I realised with emotion that the path of the sage is as level as a broad road. But scholars of today preposterously open holes and footpaths, going through thorns and falling into pits. Delving into their theories, I found them even inferior to the two schools [of Buddhism and Daoism]."	"If your majesty is not convinced, I wish to use myself as an example to demonstrate it. I used to learn Buddhist theories as well. I revered and believed them immensely, and I thought I had grasped the essence. Later I got a glimpse of the broadness of the sages' doctrine, then started to discard these theories." "Those scholars (who lectured on the Confucian classics) only scratched the surface of the classics perfunctorily. How could these lectures suddenly inspire you in a brief time?" "Since no one among the entourage of courtiers could explain the sacred Way, your majesty has profoundly reflected on the western belief of Buddhism."	"Xiao Hui was fond of Daoism and Buddhism. The teacher warned, "Since I was young, I was also earnestly devoted to the two schools. I thought that I had already understood something. And I thought that the teaching of the Confucians was not worth studying. Later I lived among the barbarians for three years. I realised how concise and comprehensive was the teaching of the sages. Then I started to sigh and regret that I had wasted my energy for thirty years. In general, the essence of the two schools' teaching is only slightly away from that of the sages' teaching."

Three key features emerge across the records above. First, Wang consistently referenced his prior engagement with Buddhism and Daoism, noting that he had studied these traditions and gained internal insight. Second, he did not reject these two non-Confucian strands outright; rather, he acknowledged their intellectual value with discernment. Third, Wang constructed a

[86] This is an original translation of the text. For the Chinese text, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 127–128. For Wing-tsit Chan's translation, see Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian*, 264–267.
[87] This text is independently translated. For the original Chinese text, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 42. For Wing-tist Chan's translation, see Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, 81–82.

hierarchical framework of thought. In both “Preface to Final Conclusions” and “Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism”, he argued that while the teachings of mediocre Confucians fell below those of Buddhism and Daoism, the true Confucian doctrine ultimately surpassed all others. In his conversation with students, he likewise affirmed the merits of Buddhism and Daoism, while emphasising the superior wisdom of the Confucian sages. In this way, Wang positioned Confucianism above Buddhism and Daoism, and both non-Confucian schools above lesser forms of Confucian learning.

This brief analysis of the three texts highlights Wang’s nuanced approach to Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. The following chapter will further examine the remaining two texts, particularly “Preface to Final Conclusions”, in greater detail. It will be argued that the stance Wang adopted in “Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism” aligns closely with the views articulated in the other two texts, reflecting a coherent self-positioning in his navigation between Confucian and non-Confucian traditions.

3. Genre and style

Although most Ming dynasty memorials shared the purpose of presenting the memorialists’ opinion on specific matters, they varied in both content and style. These differences were shaped, in part, by the genre conventions of the memorial form. In Wang’s case, the content and perspective of “Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism” were also closely tied to its formal expectations. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the memorial’s genre and stylistic conventions to identify the structural constraints and rhetorical techniques informing Wang’s argumentation. Through this lens, Wang’s self-positioning as a Confucian scholar-official becomes legible, as he formulated advice that was both appropriately deferential and

strategically persuasive in response to the emperor's devotion to Buddhism. Such an examination helps reveal the personal dimension of Wang's argument within the institutional framework of official memorial writing.

Two genres of memorials were most used for administrative and supervisory purposes during the Ming dynasty: *zouben* 奏本 and *tiben* 題本.[88] According to *Ming huidian* 明會典 [*Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty*], *tiben* were designed for routine affairs of the governmental operations while *zouben* were for personal affairs of the memorialists. [89] Because of this definition, *tiben* is sometimes translated as "official memorial" and *zouben* as "personal memorial".[90] *Ming huidian* also stated that when an officer wished to request, advise, or appeal, he should write a *zouben* rather than *tiben*.[91]

Moreover, a variety of honorific expressions were used in several types of memorials. In *tiben*, honorific expressions commonly included the character *ti* 題, meaning "to inform". In *zouben*, the character *zou* 奏 was used instead, meaning "to memorialise". More importantly, as the use of *ti* was a characteristic feature of *tiben* and the use of *zou* of *zouben*, honorific phrases such as "to submit for information" (*tizhi* 題知), "to respectfully inform" (*jinti* 謹題), "to memorialise for imperial attention" (*zouwen* 奏聞), and "to respectfully memorialise"

[88] Hu Yuande 胡元德, *Gudai gongwen wenti liubian* 古代公文文體流變 [*The Development of Literary Genres: A Study on the Official Documents in Ancient China*] (Yangzhou: Guangling shushe, 2012), 24–32.
[89] This design is known as *gongti sizou* 公題私奏. See *Ming huidian* 明會典 [*Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty*], *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 ed., juan 75, 1a–3b, accessed via Diaolong Full-text Database of Chinese and Japanese Ancient Books, https://hunteq.com/ancientc/ancientkm, accessed 28 March 2025.
[90] Silas Wu translated these two types of memorials as "personal memorial" (*zouben* 奏本) and "official memorial" (*tiben* 題本). Wu explained that "official memorials" were used for memorialising the emperor on official matters and "personal memorials" on personal matters. This explanation was in accord with the definition in *Ming huidian*. See Silas Wu 吳秀良, "Transmission of Ming Memorials, and the Evolution of the Transmission Network, 1368–1627", *T'oung Pao* 54 (1968): 275–287. However, since the term "official memorial" in Wu's translation of *tiben* overlaps with the general English usage of "official memorial" for memorials as a whole, this chapter adopts the pinyin terms *tiben* and *zouben* to avoid confusion.
[91] *Ming huidian*, juan 212, 5a–5b.

(*jinzou* 謹奏) could become indicators of genres, which might help scholars distinguish between *tiben* and *zouben*.

Apart from these two genres, another type of memorial was specially devised for confidential purposes—confidentiality memorials (*mishu* 密疏).[92] Their submission procedure was simplified to enhance efficiency and ensure confidentiality. More specifically, they were sealed by the authors and presented directly to the emperor. In addition, it is worth noting that honorific phrases such as "to submit for information" and "to memorialise for imperial attention" might also be seen in this category of memorials. Nevertheless, other characteristics of confidential memorials could help differentiate them from *tiben* and *zouben*. These characteristics will be demonstrated in the following paragraphs.

It is highly likely that Wang's draft was intended as a confidential memorial, as suggested by its content and style. First, the text contains phrases characteristic of confidential memorials, which in the Ming dynasty employed specialised terminology. For example, in "Bian Fang Zheng beiwu" 辨方政被誣 ["Memorial to Argue That Fang Zheng was Falsely Accused"] submitted by Yang Shiqi 楊士奇 (1365–1444), the phrase "to seal and present" (*fengjin* 封進) revealed that this document was presented to the emperor in secrecy.[93] Another example is a confidential memorial of Wang titled "Zouwen Chenhao weizao xibang shu" 奏聞宸濠偽造檄榜疏 ["Memorial to Memorialise that Chenhao has Fabricated a Public

[92] A study on the confidential memorials of the Ming dynasty is Wang Jian 王劍, "Mingdai mishu yanjiu" 明代密疏研究 ["Study on the Secret Memorial System of Ming Dynasty", English title given by the author] (PhD diss., University of Jilin, 2004), 80–245. Wang Jian also writes an article on how confidential memorials were handled in the Ming dynasty, see Wang Jian 王劍, "Lun Mingdai mishu de chuli" 論明代密疏的處理 ["On the Check and Approval of Secret Memorials in the Ming Dynasty", English title given by the author], *Shixue yuekan* 史學月刊 no. 10 (2004): 36–41.

[93] *Dongli bieji* 東里別集 [*The Collected Writings of Dongli*], *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 ed., juan 3, 2a, accessed via Diaolong Full-text Database of Chinese and Japanese Ancient Books, accessed 25 March 2025.

Announcement"]. In this memorial, Wang wrote that he had "sealed that public announcement firmly at once to submit" and "sealed this memorial with the announcement and specially assigned officer Qin Pei to present".[94] The phrases "seal" (*feng* 封) and "specially assign" (*zhuanchai* 專差) both indicated a high degree of confidentiality. In Wang's "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism", likewise, the phrase "specially assign" could be found in the content. At the end of his draft, Wang wrote, "To have my words reach your majesty, I specially assign an officer to present this memorial."[95] "Specially assign" in this sentence suggests that the document is likely to be confidential.

One may argue that terms such as "specially assign" may also appear in non-confidential memorials.[96] Nevertheless, those non-confidential memorials were submitted mainly by officials outside the capital since they required their juniors to deliver the documents. According to "Chronological Biography", Wang stayed in the capital in the year when "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" was written.[97] In this case, the purpose of "specially assign" might be presenting the memorial to the emperor in secrecy rather than delivering it to the capital from a distance.

Furthermore, the writing style of this draft also displayed a degree of confidentiality. Confidential memorials allowed a greater degree of flexibility in the way content was

[94] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 2, 438–440.
[95] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 325–329.
[96] One example is a memorial written by Yang Yiqing 楊一清 (1454–1530) when he was the Supreme Commander of Military Affairs in the Three Frontiers (*sanbian zongzhi* 三邊總制) during the reign of Jiajing 嘉靖 (1522–1566). At the end of this document, Yang Yiqing wrote that he "specially assign" an officer named Ma Tingzhang 馬廷璋 to submit it. He also stated that this document was *tiben*, a non-confidential memorial used for routine civil affairs. See Yang Yiqing 楊一清 (1454–1530), *Yang Yiqing ji* 楊一清集 [*The Collected Works of Yang Yiqing*], eds. Tang Jingshen 唐景紳 and Xie Yujie 謝玉傑 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 409.
[97] Qian Dehong recorded that Wang stayed in the capital Beijing during the tenth year of Zhengde. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1364–1365. Shu Jingnan differed from Qian in stating that Wang remained in Nanjing during the year. See Shu, *Wang Yangming nianpu changbian*, vol. 2, 796–873.

presented, while other memorials normally followed the established rules.[98] In other words, the authors of confidential memorials could adopt elastic styles and omit some honorific expressions.

The beginnings and endings of many confidential memorials revealed more flexibility and less formality. For instance, *Yang Yiqing ji* 楊一清集 [*The Collected Works of Yang Yiqing*] collected a substantial number of memorials of several types. This collection, consequently, has long been an asset to the study of Ming official documents. As for Yang Yiqing's 楊一清 (1454–1530) confidential memorials, their introductions and conclusions were generally succinct with fewer honorific expressions.[99] They often introduced the circumstances of memorialising plainly at the beginning and then neatly proceeded to demonstrate the main arguments, concluding the matters briefly in the end.[100] By comparison, Yang's *tiben* usually started with quotations from other decrees or documents, proceeded to raise the themes of the memorials, and ended with certain honorific terms such as "to require an edict" (*qingzhi* 請旨) and "to submit for information". Meanwhile, Yang's *zouben* usually explained the reasons for memorialising in the first paragraphs, sometimes referring to related events and documents. They often concluded with some honorific terms, including "respectfully memorialise" and "to memorialise for imperial attention". In summary, Yang Yiqing's

[98] The official rules of writing *tiben* and *zouben* during the early periods of the Ming dynasty were recorded in *Ming huidian*. See *Ming huidian*, juan 74. For a modern study of Ming documents' writing styles, see Qin Guojing 秦國經, *Mingdai wenshu dangan zhidu yanjiu* 明代文書檔案制度研究 [*A Study on the Governmental System of Documents and Archives in the Ming Dynasty*] (Beijing: Gugong chubanshe, 2019), 95–105.
[99] About a hundred confidential memorials were recorded in the "confidential correspondence" (*miyu* 密諭) section of *Yang Yiqing ji*. See *Yang Yiqing ji*, 918–1067.
[100] An example is a piece of confidential "response memorial" (*zoudui* 奏對) concerning the appointment of the leaders of provincial military divisions (*tidu* 提督) and integrated divisions (*tuanying* 團營). "Response memorial" is one that answers the emperor's questions. This memorial did not adopt the strict style of *tiben* or *zouben*. Its introduction and conclusion were brief and candid, with very few honorific expressions. See the text in *Yang Yiqing ji*, 1003–1004.

confidential memorials appeared to show more flexibility and less formality than his non-confidential memorials.

Likewise, among Wang's memorials, the writing style of "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" stands out for its distinctive style, especially when compared to his non-confidential memorials. For example, in a 1518 *tiben* reporting the suppression of bandits in the southeast, Wang opened with three lengthy paragraphs quoting documents from other officials.[101] Each citation follows a consistent structure: identifying the author, recording key passages, and acknowledging receipt. This text concludes with highly formal language, including the conventional closing phrase "to submit for information". Similarly, in a 1520 *zouben* titled "Siqi xingzang shu" 四乞省葬疏 ["Memorial to Beg to Visit the Grave [of My Grandmother] for the Fourth Time"], Wang began by reviewing earlier petitions and responses from the emperor.[102] The conclusion follows typical features of *zouben*: a summary of the request, an expression of gratitude, and the honorific phrase "to memorialise for imperial attention".

In contrast, "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" begins with a brief and direct statement of purpose, without quoting other documents or decrees. Its conclusion is emotionally charged rather than formally restrained.[103] It also omits honorific expressions commonly found in non-confidential documents, such as "to submit for information" and "to memorialise for imperial attention". Taken together, the relatively less formal tone and omission of standard honorific language align with the distinctive features of confidential memorials. It is therefore highly plausible that the memorial was intended as a confidential

[101] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 2, 412–417.
[102] Ibid., 484–487.
[103] See p. 47.

communication. In this case, its confidential nature is crucial for understanding its content, as the stylistic freedom may have shaped both the arguments Wang chose to present and the way he articulated them.

4. Recent dispute over "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism"

The "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" attracted little scholarly debate until recently. As noted earlier, it was first recorded by Qian Dehong, who dated it to the eighth lunar month of 1515 and claimed it was never submitted. While Okada Takehiko accepted Qian's account in his biography of Wang,[104] Shu Jingnan proposed a different interpretation in his 2020 monograph.[105] Challenging the accuracy of Qian's record, Shu advanced two main claims: first, that Wang drafted the memorial no earlier than the eleventh lunar month of 1515; and second, that it was ultimately submitted to Emperor Wuzong. Thus, the central disagreement between Okada and Shu concerns the date of composition and whether the document was ever submitted.

Both issues merit close examination. The date of composition may indicate which stage the imperial discourse on welcoming Buddhism from U-Tsang had reached when Wang wrote "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism". Furthermore, in light of the other two contemporary texts—Wang's recorded conversation with students (1514) and his "Preface to Final Conclusions" (eleventh lunar month, 1515)—precise dating may also further reveal the development of Wang's views on non-Confucian traditions. While Wang consistently upheld

[104] Okada, *Wang Yangming dazhuan*, 169–175.
[105] Shu, *Yangming dazhuan*, 757–776. Shu made similar arguments in his earlier work *Wang Yangming nianpu changbian* (2017). As the 2020 monograph reflects his more recent views, the following discussion references this analysis. For his earlier argument, see Shu, *Wang Yangming nianpu changbian*, vol. 2, 802–803.

a hierarchical framework of thought, his stance towards Buddhism and Daoism appears to have evolved. For instance, in the 1514 conversation, he remarked that "the essence of the two schools was only slightly away from that of the sages". In contrast, the memorial draws a sharper distinction, describing the doctrine of the sages as "substance" and "foundation", and Buddhist wisdom as "mere names" and "the peripheral". This shift suggests a progression in his thinking. Establishing the text's date may therefore help identify the point at which Wang arrived at this more clearly defined position in navigating between Confucianism and its Buddhist and Daoist counterparts.

The question of submission is equally significant. If "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" was never submitted, it may indicate that Wang considered the views expressed in the draft still tentative and not yet fit for imperial remonstrance. If, however, the memorial was submitted, this would imply that he regarded its arguments as sufficiently mature and persuasive. Determining whether or not Wang presented the memorial to the emperor is thus key to understanding the level of confidence he placed in the position articulated therein—and, by extension, the stage he had reached in formulating his response to the tension between Confucian hegemony and non-Confucian strands.

Regarding the memorial's writing date, Shu has argued that it was composed in response to a specific event dated to the twenty-sixth day of the eleventh lunar month.[106] Based on this, he claims the text must have been composed after that date, rejecting Qian's account that it was written in the eighth lunar month. Shu's method—dating the memorial by identifying the date of its central event—is a common and often effective historical approach. However, his application of this method reveals some flaws.

[106] Shu, *Yangming dazhuan*, 757–776.

The event Shu identifies is Emperor Wuzong's edict to receive a living Buddha from the western region, issued in the eleventh month. If Wang was referring to this, it is difficult to explain why he wrote that he had heard rumours of the decision as early as the seventh month.[107] This statement of Wang conflicts with Shu's timeline. To resolve the inconsistency, one might argue that the emperor's decision was a gradual process rather than a single event. On this view, rumours in the seventh month anticipated a decision not formally enacted until the eleventh, and Wang responded to the early stages of that development.

While this explanation accounts for the presence of rumours, it undermines Shu's own premise that the memorial responds to a discrete, datable event. Wang's text, in fact, suggests a broader temporal framework: he recalls initially dismissing the rumours, recognising their truth over time, and observing that multiple officials had repeatedly advised the emperor against the plan. This indicates an evolving situation rather than a single trigger. Shu's method, which rests on pinpointing a singular event, is thus at odds with Wang's narrative and internally inconsistent.

In light of these issues, it is more plausible to date the memorial between the eighth and twelfth lunar months of 1515, based on Wang's own account. His opening phrase— "since the seventh month"—rather than "recently" or "this month", suggests a reflection on prior months and supports composition from the eighth month onward. The absence of year-markers like "last year" or "this year" further suggests the memorial was completed within that year. [108] On this basis, Qian's dating of the eighth month appears more credible.

[107] See p. 43.
[108] In official documents of the Ming dynasty, when referencing dates of the former year, the year-markers would normally be included. The absence of year-markers suggests that this document was most likely written within the year.

Although Qian's account is not without problems—such as his misidentification of "U-Tsang" as a personal name, and the fact that he did not become Wang's disciple until six years later—his "Chronological Biography" remains a vital source.[109] It was compiled with the assistance and approval of other close followers of Wang, and Qian spent decades collecting, editing, and annotating Wang's writings.[110] While he lacked first-hand access to the drafting of this particular memorial, his familiarity with Wang's thought and the peer-reviewed nature of his work lend his account substantial weight. A single error in describing a related event does not necessarily discredit the dating of the text. Therefore, the eighth lunar month, as recorded in *"*Chronological Biography", remains the most likely date of composition.

Apart from the dating of the memorial, Shu has proposed a new hypothesis regarding its submission. Contrary to Qian's claim that "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" was never submitted, Shu argues that Wang did present it to the emperor. He explains that Qian may have failed to recognise its confidential status, which would account for its absence from official records. According to Shu, Qian's account was speculative: because the memorial was submitted in secrecy, no official documentation survived. Moreover, this text was written in 1515, whereas Qian's "Chronological Biography"—the source of this claim—was compiled decades later in 1563.[111] Given this temporal gap, Shu suggests that Qian was unaware of both the context of Emperor Wuzong's reception of Buddhism and the actual

[109] Shu has pointed out that Qian mistook "U-Tsang" as a person's name; see Shu, *Yangming dazhuan*, 769. According to "Chronological Biography", Qian became a disciple of Wang in 1521. Since the memorial was drafted in 1515, one could argue that Qian could not bear witness to its drafting as he was not Wang's disciple until six years later. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1416.
[110] See discussion of the "Chronological Biography" above (pp. 24–25).
[111] According to Qian's preface to "Chronological Biography", he finished the compilation in 1563. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1499.

submission of the memorial. Lacking supporting evidence in official records, Qian may have assumed the memorial was never submitted, unaware of its possible confidentiality. Nevertheless, while Shu questions the reliability of Qian's record, his own theory also rests on speculation—namely, the assumption that Qian failed to recognise the memorial's confidential nature. However, Qian, an official who passed the imperial examination and later served as Director of Justice (*xingbu langzhong* 刑部郎中, rank 5a), would likely have been familiar with the established use and handling of confidential memorials in the Ming bureaucracy.[112] Moreover, "Chronological Biography" was co-edited and reviewed by several of Wang's other students, all of whom held official posts; some even served as Provincial Administration Commissioners (*buzheng shi* 布政使, rank 2b).[113] Given their collective expertise, it seems unlikely that such a fundamental error—mistaking a submitted memorial for an unsubmitted draft—would have gone unnoticed. Therefore, Shu's critique appears less persuasive, and Qian's account remains the most credible record available: it was produced by a close disciple of Wang and reviewed by a circle of contemporaries familiar with the historical context.

Ultimately, whether the memorial was submitted remains unresolved. This ambiguity, however, does not hinder a close analysis of the text. Submitted or not, the memorial offers valuable insight into Wang's thinking at a pivotal moment. At the same time, the high possibility that it remained a draft may suggest that Wang's views on Buddhism were still evolving. He may have withheld submission because he felt the argument was not yet fully formed. This possibility points to a tentativeness in Wang's stance at that stage.

[112] *Mingshi*, vol. 283, 7271.
[113] Provincial Administration Commissioners took charge of the routine governance of a province. For a study on the provincial administration during the Ming dynasty, see Charles O Hucker, "Governmental Organization of The Ming Dynasty", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 21 (1958): 38–44. Zhang Yuanchong (see footnote 47) was appointed the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Jiangxi 江西; see *Guoque*, vol. 63, 3941.

Furthermore, across the three key texts—the conversation with students (1514), "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" (most possibly written in the eighth lunar month of 1515), and the later "Preface to Final Conclusions" (from the eleventh lunar month of 1515)—Wang's views on Buddhism and Daoism shows signs of development. As briefly discussed in the previous sub-section, the memorial differs in tone and substance from the preface written several months later, while the conversation presents a subtly different account of his earlier fascination with "the two schools" (*ershi* 二氏). Building on this observation, the present and subsequent chapters trace the process of intellectual refinement in greater detail, focusing on the shifts in Wang's perspective over the course of this formative period.

IV. A Comparison with Contemporaneous Memorials

Multiple officials submitted memorials to remonstrate with the emperor over his intention to welcome Buddhism from U-Tsang.[114] As Wang was part of this broader discourse—regardless of whether his memorial was ultimately submitted—an analysis of all these related documents is essential. Examining the full range of official responses will demonstrate the spectrum of views within the officialdom and allow Wang's position to be situated in relation to his contemporaries. This comparative approach not only clarifies the dominant perspectives among Ming officials but also reveals whether Wang's views stood apart, thereby shedding light on the distinctive features of his response to Buddhism. Furthermore, given Wang's primary role as a Confucian scholar-official when drafting his memorial, close attention to how he constructed his argument—particularly in contrast to other officials addressing the same issue—can offer deeper insight into how he negotiated political tensions while articulating his intellectual identity within the framework of Confucian officialdom.

[114] *Wuzong Yihuangdi shilu*, vol. 131–132, 2613–2626; vol. 137, 2699.

1. Basic information about the five memorials

Among the memorials regarding welcoming Buddhism from U-Tsang, five were recorded in official historical accounts with excerpts from the original texts.[115] These memorials were wholly or partially archived in *Ming shilu*, some of them were also mentioned in other sources such as *Mingshi*, *Guoque*, and *Ming tongjian* 明通鑑 [*Comprehensive Mirror of the Ming Dynasty*]. Although these memorials' titles were not cited from the original documents, their authors and submission dates were recorded in detail. Below is a table showing some basic information about the authorship, submission date and sources of the five memorials.

Authors Named	Official Positions[116]	Submission Dates[117]	Sources
Liang Chu 梁儲 (1451–1527)	Grand Secretary (*daxueshi* 大學士)	The eleventh lunar month, the tenth year of Zhengde	Text: *Ming shilu*[118] Mention: *Guoque*[119]
Mao Ji 毛紀 (1463–1545)	Minister of Rites (*libu shangshu* 禮部尚書)	The twelfth month, the tenth year	Text: *Ming shilu*[120] Excerpt: *Mingshi*[121]
Xu Wenhua 徐文華(1480–1537)	Investigating Censor (*jiancha yushi* 監察御史)	The twelfth month, the tenth year	Text: *Ming shilu*[122]

[115] Several officials were said to have submitted memorials to the emperor in *Mingshi*, although the content of their memorials were not recorded. One example is a censor named Lin Younian 林有年 (1464–1552). See *Mingshi*, vol. 192, 5096.
[116] These official positions will be discussed in detail in the following analysis. For English translations of these positions, see Charles O Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, Taiwan ed. (Taipei: Southern Material Centre, 1988).
[117] These documents are dated according to the Chinese lunisolar calendar. When converting a lunar date into the Gregorian calendar, the first and last few lunar months may overlap two Gregorian years. For example, the eleventh lunar month of the tenth year of Zhengde spans from 5 December 1515 to 3 January 1516. To avoid confusion, all dates in this table are kept in the lunisolar calendar format.
[118] *Wuzong Yihuangdi shilu*, vol. 131, 2613–2616.
[119] *Guoque*, vol. 49, 3096.
[120] *Wuzong Yihuangdi shilu*, vol. 132, 2624–2626.
[121] *Mingshi*, vol. 190, 5045.
[122] *Wuzong Yihuangdi shilu*, vol. 132, 2619–2620.

			Mention: *Mingshi*[123], *Guoque*[124]
Ye Xiang 葉相 (1559–1627) and Zhou Lun 周倫（綸）(1463–1542)	Supervising Secretary-in-chief, Office of Scrutiny for the Six Ministries (*liuke jishizhong* 六科都給事中) and Investigating Censor, The Thirteen Circuits (*shisandao yushi* 十三道御史)	The twelfth month, the tenth year	Text: *Ming shilu*[125]
Zhou Jin 周金 (1473–1546) and Qian Rujing 錢如京 (1478–1544)	Staff of the Office of Scrutiny and Circuits (*kedao guan* 科道官)	The fifth month, the eleventh year	Text: *Ming shilu*[126] Mention: *Ming tongjian*[127], *Mingshi*[128]

These documents could be classified into three categories: three memorials submitted by censorial officials, a memorial submitted by an administrative minister, and a memorial submitted by Grand Secretaries. This classification is based on the official positions and duties of the authors, which were the determining factors behind the forms and functions of their memorials.

2. Three memorials submitted by censorial officials from the surveillance agencies

The first category comprises three memorials written by officials who held the positions of Investigating Censors and Supervising Secretaries. Investigating Censors were granted the

[123] *Mingshi*, vol. 191, 5072–5073.
[124] *Guoque*, vol. 49, 3097.
[125] *Wuzong Yihuangdi shilu*, vol. 132, 2625–2626.
[126] *Wuzong Yihuangdi shilu*, vol. 137, 2699.
[127] *Ming tongjian*, vol. 46, 1580.
[128] *Mingshi*, vol. 201, 5319.

supervisory power to oversee the entire officialdom, inspecting all personnel and mechanism of the state apparatus. Likewise, Supervising Secretaries were given the authority to superintend the governmental divisions. In addition to this surveillance function, Supervising Secretaries were charged with examining official documents, including memorials sent from the Ministries and decrees issued by the emperor. When they considered a document inappropriate, they were entitled to request it be reconsidered.[129] In this sense, the three memorials submitted by Supervising Secretaries and Investigating Censors functioned as the advice against the imperial decree of welcoming Buddhism.

It is worth highlighting that these officers frequently cooperated in undertaking surveillance duties. They were collectively regarded as staff of the Office of Scrutiny and Circuits.[130] In the case of advising the emperor against welcoming Buddhism, they often submitted several memorials jointly. Below are translations of their three memorials.

(1) A memorial written by Xu Wenhua:[131]
The eunuch Liu Yun has recently gone to U-Tsang to give offerings to the monks. Some officials commented that your majesty initially intended to welcome a living Buddha. They claimed that this intention was concealed. Is it true that there is a living Buddha in the Western Region? The fact is that some courtiers wished to sell their wicked ideas but found no other excuses. Therefore, they exaggerated the doctrine of a monk to interest your majesty. Your majesty thought their statement was true and thus intended to welcome the living Buddha. This is again a mistake.

U-Tsang is a remote area in the Western Region, surrounded by mountains and rivers. Few travellers can reach this area. In the valleys and the forest, there are vicious serpents and beasts. There are poisonous miasma and vapours that will kill everyone who touches them. I am afraid that the envoy sent to welcome Buddhism may never return to report their success.

[129] Hucker, "Governmental Organization of The Ming Dynasty", 27–31.
[130] Since the reign of Emperor Chengzu 成祖 (1360–1424) of the Ming Dynasty, positions in the surveillance agencies consisted of Censors-in-chief (*du yushi* 都御史), Investigating Censors and Supervising Secretaries of the Six Offices of Scrutiny (*liuke jishizhong* 六科給事中). Investigating Censors were arranged into Circuits (*dao* 道), while Supervising Censors were assigned to the Offices of Scrutiny (*ke* 科). Therefore, officials with these positions were collectively called the staff of the Office of Scrutiny and Circuits. See Hucker, "Governmental Organization of The Ming Dynasty", 48–56.
[131] See Appendix 1 for the original Chinese text.

As to the current affairs, many places are war-torn where the bandits have just been suppressed. The construction of new buildings has begun after the conflagration at Qianqing Palace. People in the realm, especially those in Sichuan, are exhausted. Suppose people are troubled further with the affair of welcoming Buddhism. Then how can they survive this situation? They will either die in the gutter or gather around to become bandits. Suppose some traitors stir up chaos by taking advantage of this situation. There are examples such as *Baiyun* teachings, Maitreyanism, and White Lotus.[132] If these heresies widely emerge, how can we subdue them?

I humbly beg your majesty to dismiss the envoy. Moreover, those who falsely raised this matter in the first place shall be executed by law. By this means, their crimes of deceiving your majesty will be punished.

(2) A memorial written by Ye Xiang, Zhou Lun, and others:[133]
U-Tsang was initially a barbarian region, not connected with the central land until the reign of Zhenguan of the Tang dynasty.[134] Mountains in U-Tsang are difficult to cross, while the roads to this area are exceedingly long. As your majesty is sending envoy to this distant land to welcome Buddhism, the news has been known to people within and outside the realm. People are overwhelmed and confused by this decree. Envoys have been sent to U-Tsang several times during the reigns of Yongle and Xuande.[135] However, no one has heard of the efficacy of such activities.

As to the foreign monks in the capital, they are received in houses, provided with food and clothes, and honoured with official ranks. They are treated this way because we wish to learn from their foreign belief. Nevertheless, please test this belief by using it to deal with some contemporary problems. Nowadays, the rivers are too warm in the winter, and the weather seems extremely unusual. Can the Buddhist belief change the weather condition to set right the climate? There is a shortage of funds while the imperial treasury is running out. Can the Buddhist belief work out miracles to generate revenue? There are bandits constantly emerging as several alarms of rebellion have reached the capital. Can the Buddhist belief use incantations and curses to watch out for the realm? If the Buddhist belief can produce a single effect, welcoming Buddhism from the remoted region will be acceptable. If it cannot, please abolish the decree of welcoming Buddhism.

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[132] The teachings of *Baiyunzong* 白雲宗 were regarded as heresies by the orthodox Buddhism. Believers of Maitreyanism (*Mile jiao* 彌勒教) worshipped the future Buddha Maitreya. Members of White Lotus (*bailian zong* 白蓮宗) not only believed in the advent of Maitreya but also conducted political movements to advocate their beliefs. These religious groups were all suppressed by the Ming government as their teachings were condemned as heresies. For a study on Ming–Qing folk religions, see Hubert Michael Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 438–465.
[133] See Appendix 2 for the original Chinese text.
[134] Zhenguan 貞觀 (627–649) is the reign title of Tang 唐 (618–690 and 705–907) Emperor Taizong 太宗 (598–649).
[135] Yongle 永樂 (1403–1424) and Xuande 宣德 (1426–1435) are the reign titles of two previous Ming emperors. In *Mingshi*, the names of these envoys were recorded as Chen Cheng and Hou Xian (see footnote 66). See *Mingshi,* vol. 331, 8571–8575.

(3) A memorial written by Zhou Jin, Qian Rujing, and others:[136]
The eunuch Directors of Silk Manufactories Shi Xuan and Cui Tong, along with the eunuch Liu Yun who was sent to U-Tsang, shall cease all their activities.[137] The particular Salt Tax that Liu Yun requested shall be abolished. These eunuchs shall be deprived of the privilege of obtaining state-sold salt as the Directors of Silk Manufactories. They shall be granted the amount of state-sold salt according to the established tradition. They shall also be forbidden to use salt trade as an excuse to seek profit, as the corruption brought by contraband shall not be allowed.

3. A memorial submitted by a minister from the administrative department

The memorial by Mao Ji falls into the second category: those submitted by administrative ministers. As Minister of Rites—a senior officer in charge of the imperial rituals and sacrifices—Mao was responsible for managing tributary relations and supervising religious communities.[138] Consequently, he and his colleagues were bound by the emperor's edict of welcoming Buddhism from U-Tsang. Since Mao's memorial will be compared with other documents in the subsequent analysis, only its translation is provided here; detailed discussion follows later.

(4) A memorial written by Mao Ji:[139]
The Great Jewel King of Dharma of U-Tsang used to send the national teacher Suonan-jianshen-bazangbu to offer tribute, which breached the tradition.[140] Your majesty was gracious enough not to fix responsibility for this misdeed but reduce the number of gifts to U-Tsang instead. Nevertheless, these foreigners were not satisfied as they asked for a full bestowal. They also asked for items such as the coloured portraits of Buddhas. Their requests were all satisfied by your majesty.

[136] See Appendix 3 for the original Chinese text.
[137] The named eunuchs—Shi Xuan 史宣 (fl. late 15th and early 16th century), Cui Tong 崔通 (fl. late 15th and early 16th century), and Liu Yun were appointed Directors of Silk Manufactories (*zhizao tianjian* 織造太監) by the emperor.
[138] Hucker, "Governmental Organization of The Ming Dynasty", 33–35.
[139] See Appendix 4 for the original Chinese text.
[140] For a biography of the Great Jewel King of Dharma of U-Tsang (*dabao fawang* 大寶法王), see *Mingshi*, vol. 331, 8571–8575. The original text recorded the national teacher's name as 鎖南堅參巴藏卜.

Now your majesty has recently issued a decree, sending an envoy to cater to a foreign monk of the Great Jewel King of Dharma. Why does your majesty favour them this much? Moreover, since U-Tsang is thirty thousand *li* away from the capital, a return expedition will take several years and cost incalculable money.

In addition, it is said that a leg of the journey will be surrounded by the territories of the barbarians.[141] When the envoy go westwards along the river from Yazhou in Sichuan, heading to U-Tsang, there will be no post or courier station.[142] Neither will there be towns and villages. As to the money, food, guards, and horses that support the journey, they will all be provided by the Chief Military Commission, the Provincial Administration Commission, and other local departments of Sichuan Province.[143] There have been military operations in Sichuan for years. The rebels in Sichuan were slightly suppressed recently, but the barbaric bandits in the western area have just re-emerged. In Sichuan, there is a more acute shortage of revenue and supplies and a more significant weariness among the masses compared to other regions. If pressure is put on this region again, some unexpected incidents might occur. Who shall then be blamed for these incidents?

I humbly beg your majesty to withdraw the announced decree, given the situation in Sichuan, which is an important precinct, shall be considered. Please follow the precedents and issue an edict regarding the gifts prepared for the foreign monks. This edict may ask the national teacher sent to the capital to bring them back. Thus, your majesty's decree will be a blessing to the people.

4. A memorial submitted by Grand Secretaries

A memorial submitted by Liang Chu and his peers differs from the preceding official documents and should therefore be categorised separately. As Senior Grand Secretary (*shoufu* 首輔) in the tenth year, Liang was responsible for reviewing memorials from various departments, drafting rescripts in response, and preparing imperial decrees for the emperor.[144]

[141] In the original text, people that resided in these territories were called "yellow-hair wild barbarians" (*huangmao ye dazi* 黃毛野達子).
[142] Yazhou 雅州 was in the west of Sichuan 四川 nearby the Dadu River 大渡河. For the historical geography of this region, see Tan Qixiang 譚其驤, *Zhongguo lishi dituji* 中國歷史地圖集 [*The Historical Atlas of China*] (Beijing: Zhongguo ditu chubanshe, 1996), vol. VII, 62–63.
[143] The Chief Military Commission (*du zhihuishi si* 都指揮使司) and the Provincial Administration Commission (*buzhengshi si* 布政使司) were the two top-level agencies inside a province. See Hucker, "Governmental Organization of The Ming Dynasty", 48–49. In the original text, these two agencies were collectively called *dubu ersi* 都布二司.
[144] The Grand Secretaries were members of the Ming highest governmental institution the Grand Secretariat (*neige* 內閣). For a concise study on the emergence and evolution of the Grand Secretariat, see Hucker, "Governmental Organization of The Ming Dynasty", 27–31. See also *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, s.v. "*shǒu-fǔ* 首輔".

According to *Ming shilu*, this particular memorial was submitted by "Grand Secretary Liang Chu and others". This text thus reflects the Grand Secretariat's collective opposition to the emperor's decision.[145] Its full translation is provided below.

(5) The memorial written by Liang Chu and other Grand Secretaries:[146]
A recent memorial from the Ministry of War has requested an imperial decree concerning Liu Yun, the eunuch Director of the Imperial Regalia. As we understand it, when officers from either the inner court or the outer court execute an imperial decree, their exact affairs must be recorded in the decree. Liu Yun is now sent to Sichuan, but his affairs remain unknown to us. Therefore, we do not have any reference to draft a decree. We have later received a memorial from the Ministry of Rites. It states that according to an order of the emperor, Liu Yun will follow the precedents of the envoys sent during the reigns of Yongle and Xuande, such as Deng Cheng and Hou Xian.[147] He will bring religious offerings to U-Tsang.

A memorial from the Ministry of Revenue states that according to an order of the emperor, Liu Yun has requested accompanying officials. These officials include Liu Zong and seven other eunuchs. Apart from these eunuchs, there are Wei Lu and other a hundred and thirty-two officers, who are Commanders, Associate Administrators, or other officers from agencies such as the Brocade Guards. Moreover, the relevant agencies in Sichuan will use their discretion to provide supplies for this expedition. These supplies will include not only rations, horses, carriages, and ships, but also things used for passing through the foreign land. Additionally, two valiant military officers will be selected to escort the envoy. Finally, ten thousand Salt Certificates of Changlu and sixty thousand Salt Certificate of Lianghuai will be offered to the envoy.[148] The instructions for selling and using these certificates will be given in the emperor's order.

Please forgive our ignorance, but we dare not conceal our worries from your majesty since we fill the posts of counsellors. The western belief is, in fact, barbarian worship. It is vile, false, and absurd. It was known to no one in the ancient era of sages. Nevertheless, this belief has gradually spread to our realm with a lasting influence. Consequently, we are unable to discard it swiftly.

Envoys have indeed been sent to U-Tsang during the reigns of Yongle and Xuande. However, our ancestors' intention was to use these expeditions to guide the unenlightened and pacify the uncivilised, given that stability had just been brought to the realm. They did not believe U-Tsang religion, nor did they worship it. After decades of stability, our emperors gave plentiful gifts to U-Tsang envoys when they brought tributes to the court following the precedents. Their diligence was rewarded by this means. Nonetheless, our emperors never sent our envoys to undertake a degrading affair, which would lead them to a remote journey to the barbarian land. Your majesty now sends personal attendants in

[145] In 1510 (the fifth year of Zhengde), Liang Chu was appointed as Grand Secretary. He became the Senior Grand Secretary in 1515. See *Mingshi*, vol. 192, 5040.
[146] See Appendix 5 for the original Chinese text.
[147] *Mingshi,* vol. 331, 8571–8575.
[148] Changlu 長蘆 and Lianghuai 兩淮 were the names of the salterns.

the inner court to bring offerings to the foreign tribes. People in and out of government are shocked when they hear the order, wondering if the throne shall not act rashly like that. Furthermore, some clauses seem inappropriate because they are unprecedented in terms of laws and traditions. These clauses include: Liu Yun will receive thousands of Salt Certificates and hundreds of horses and ships, as he has requested; he can use his discretion to allocate funds and supplies; he will be accompanied by an escorting army.

Moreover, the Kaizhong Salt Certificates policy is designed to provide supplies for the borders.[149] The hazard of bandits has not been entirely resolved. The borders have a shortage in rations while the imperial revenue is not ample. Therefore, emergency support and financial assistance depend exclusively on this solution, namely the Kaizhong Salt Certificates policy. The relevant agencies all strictly enforce the policy. If people are permitted to bring salt with them, they will purchase illegal salt, seek profit by selling salt to a third party, and smuggle contraband salt. Consequently, there will be countless corrupt practices. The salt policy will be damaged while the borders will not receive sufficient supplies. Additionally, ships carrying annual rations and construction woods to the capital all travel in the rivers. There have already been worries about how to alleviate traffic pressure. If the clauses above are activated, salt ships will frequently travel in the rivers, causing constant pressure and disturbance. Local regions will be affected, while the transport of annual rations and construction woods will be hindered.

Furthermore, the bandits in Sichuan have recently been suppressed, but the weariness among the masses has not been eased. Now Liu Yun is entitled to use his discretion to allocate funds and supplies according to the imperial order. Given that there are no more savings in the local governments, the funds and supplies may likely come from the payment of soldiers and peasants. If the poor become bandits, the potential troubles in the future will be unpredictable. Additionally, Tianquan Bandit Suppression Commission travelled thousands of *li* to U-Tsang for several years beyond the borders.[150] The contemporary expedition to U-Tsang is undertaken by numerous officers and soldiers. It will go through the barbarian areas. Under these circumstances, the journey will not always be provided with workers, horses, and rations by the imperial courier stations. It will be hard to calculate the enormous travel expense in advance. If the supplies are cut off during the journey, we will have no solution to handle it.

Finally, we have heard that the areas this journey passes are close to the tribes of the yellow-hair barbarians.[151] They frequently rob the travellers and disturb the envoys. If our envoy is attacked and harmed by these people, our empire's prestige will be hurt while we receive insults from these barbarians. Therefore, this is a situation that we must consider. We will be hindering the crucial matters while conducting an unnecessary expedition, facing the risks of unpredictable incidents. The officialdom know that it is unreasonable. Hence, we are unable to conceal our opinions. Liu Yun has received the order of travelling to the remote western area. He has no choice since he has been bound by the gains and losses of the expedition. We deeply understand the dilemma. Consequently, we dare not draft the imperial decree concerning this matter.

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[149] During the Ming dynasty, Kaizhong 開中 was a policy that encouraged merchants to transport rations to the borders. The merchants would receive Salt Certificates (*yanyin* 鹽引) as their rewards. See *Mingshi*, vol. 80, 1931–1957.

[150] The term *li* 里 is a unit of distance (approximately half a kilometre) in ancient China.

[151] During the Ming dynasty, the term yellow-hair barbarians often referred to people of Tibetan or Mongolian descent who lived near the borders.

> We humbly beg your majesty to consider our empire's prestige and feel for people in poverty. We wish your majesty would withdraw the announced order. Instead of commanding our officials to bring offerings to U-Tsang, we could ask U-Tsang envoys who have been sent to the capital on tribute trips to bring back these offerings. By this means, propriety will be served, and problems will be resolved. Your majesty's divine virtue will be glorified, while great rule will be accomplished without hindrance.

Above is the translation of the memorial. The first section states that the Grand Secretariat (*neige* 內閣) had received memorials from several ministries concerning the implementation of the emperor's order. It further explains that the Grand Secretaries were unable to draft the required imperial edicts, as doing so would amount to endorsing a policy they advised against. In other words, the Grand Secretariat—at the apex of the Ming administrative hierarchy—expressed opposition to the emperor's initiative to welcome Buddhism from U-Tsang.

As the Grand Secretaries were widely regarded as opinion leaders within the officialdom, their dissent likely represented broader bureaucratic sentiment. Moreover, given that several officials had already advised against the emperor's fondness for Buddhism following the fire at Qianqing Palace in the ninth year (1514), there appears to have been a sustained disapproval among officials regarding the emperor's growing Buddhist devotion.[152] Thus, when Wang composed his memorial to remonstrate with the emperor—sometime between the eighth and twelfth month of the tenth year—the prevailing view among the political elite seems to have been that the imperial order should be rescinded. In this context, the stance of the Grand Secretariat warrants particular attention, as it may have intersected with Wang's own position.

[152] See the earlier discussion on the series of events regarding welcoming Buddhism (pp. 38–40).

V. Rhetorical Redirection and Doctrinal Hierarchy: Wang Shouren's Confucian Identity in a Time of Buddhist Appeal

As the previous section introduced five memorials submitted by Wang's contemporaries, the following analysis turns to examine the distinctive characteristics of Wang's draft. By comparing Wang's particular mode of argumentation with other responses within the wider officialdom, this section explores how he positioned himself in navigating several tensions: between the emperor and his officers, between the defence of Confucian hegemony and the reception of Buddhist belief, and potentially, between sharing individual opinion with personal experience and conforming to prevailing stance among officials.

Although the comparison will focus primarily on Wang's "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" in relation to the other five, it is first necessary to examine the features and internal differences of those five memorials. This preliminary analysis will clarify the prevailing opinions within the officialdom as well as the key points of contention surrounding the emperor's decision to welcome Buddhism from U-Tsang. Such contextualisation will help assess whether Wang's memorial stands out in terms of its argumentation or rhetorical approach. Accordingly, the table below summarises the five memorials' main arguments, supporting reasons, proposed actions, and submission outcomes.

Authors Named	Arguments	Reasons	Proposals	Results
Ye Xiang and Zhou Lun	U-Tsang Buddhism could not benefit the state.	a. Falsity of Buddhism b. Difficulties of the expedition	Abolish this order	No reply[153]

[153] The Chinese text is *bubao* 不報, which means the Emperor made no official reply to this document.

Zhou Jin and Qian Rujing	The emperor should put a stop to the expedition.	Financial constraints	Halt the expedition	Not accepted
Xu Wenhua	The emperor was deluded into making a wrong decision.	a. Falsity of the news about a living Buddha b. Difficulties of the expedition c. Fatigue among the people d. Latent troubles such as rebellion and heresy crimes	Prosecute and execute the officer who deluded the emperor	No reply
Mao Ji	This decision would worsen the fiscal and military conditions.	a. The emperor's indulgence in U-Tsang Buddhism b. Difficulties of the expedition c. Financial constraints d. Weariness among the people e. Latent trouble concerning rebellions	Withdraw the announced order and command foreign envoys to return to U-Tsang	No reply
Liang Chu	This decision is unnecessary, negative, and risky.	a. Falsity of Buddhism b. Financial constraints c. Fatigue among the people d. Latent troubles such as rebellion and conflicts with neighbouring countries e. Risk of tarnishing the empire's prestige	Withdraw the announced order and command foreign envoys to return to U-Tsang	Not accepted

The memorials' proposals were shaped by the unfolding sequence of events, making their chronology a crucial factor. Four were submitted in the tenth year, shortly after the emperor's final decision to welcome Buddhism. Three of these urged the revocation of the order, while the fourth, by Xu Wenhua, called for the execution of the official who had allegedly misled the emperor. Although framed differently, Xu's proposal effectively sought to overturn the decree by targeting its origin and thus shared the same underlying objective as the other three. The fifth memorial, submitted in the eleventh year by Zhou Jin, Qian Rujing, and others, requested the termination of the expedition to U-Tsang. By then, the decree had already been

enacted, and the proposal focused on halting its implementation rather than reversing the decision itself.

Notably, none of these proposals was accepted. Despite receiving multiple remonstrations, the emperor either rejected them outright or offered no response. Two were denied; the remaining three received no reply—a practice known as "retained in the inner palace" (*liuzhong* 留中), meaning the documents were kept in the inner palace and not transmitted to the relevant agencies.[154] During the Ming dynasty, *liuzhong* was often viewed as a breach of bureaucratic protocol and could provoke tension between the throne and the officialdom.[155]

As the table shows, these memorials frequently emphasise practical obstacles to executing the emperor's decision, especially fiscal strain and popular fatigue. These concerns suggest that the memorialists regarded limitations in state resources and labour capacity as major barriers to enforcing the imperial decree.

Moreover, as the memorialists employed multiple lines of reasoning to support their arguments, an opposition to U-Tsang Buddhism emerged as a dominant theme, appearing in four of the five texts. The perceived falsity of the Buddhist doctrine was explicitly articulated by several officials. Liang Chu denounced it as "barbarian worship", characterising it as false and absurd in contrast to the Confucian doctrine.[156] Censorial officials such as Ye Xiang and Zhou Lun further illustrated its inadequacy by posing rhetorical questions that challenged its practical efficacy—questioning, for instance, whether it could improve weather conditions or

[154] Hucker, "Governmental Organization of The Ming Dynasty", 64.
[155] During the Ming dynasty, the phenomenon of *liuzhong* was most commonly seen in the historical records regarding Emperor Shenzong 神宗 (1563–1620). For a prominent collection of *liuzhong* memorials, see Dong Qichang 董其昌, *Shenmiao liuzhong zoushu huiyao* 神廟留中奏疏彙要 [*A Collection of the Memorials Kept in the Inner Circle During the Shenzong Reign*] (Shanghai: Shanghai huashu chubanshe, 2013).
[156] See pp. 67–69.

increase state revenue.[157] This opposition reflected not only cultural contempt for foreign religious practices beyond the Han-centric worldview but also a deeper ideological resistance to Buddhism as a tradition incompatible with Confucian values. Together, these concerns formed the basis of a broader rejection of non-Confucian beliefs deemed remote from the cultural and political centre.

This resistance was further linked to a strong desire to uphold imperial prestige. Several memorialists—most notably Liang Chu—intertwined ideological and political concerns, emphasising the humiliation entailed in engaging with U-Tsang. Liang reminded the court that "our [previous] emperors never sent envoys to undertake a degrading affair", [158] warning that such a mission would subject the dynasty to ridicule by the "barbarian" peoples along the route, including the so-called "yellow-hair barbarians" (*huangmao dazi* 黃毛達子).[159] Similarly, Mao Ji, Minister of Rites, invoked the presence of "barbarians" along the proposed route as a subtle caution against damaging the empire's standing in the western frontier. [160] While Mao did not explicitly describe the expedition as degrading, his remarks carried the implicit message that the Ming Empire should maintain distance to safeguard its dignity. In summary, concerns over U-Tsang Buddhism were entangled with broader anxieties about cultural authority and imperial prestige, forming a powerful case against the emperor's proposed engagement.

[157] See p. 64.
[158] See pp. 67–69.
[159] See p. 68.
[160] See pp. 65–66.

1. The generic difference between Wang Shouren's draft and the five memorials

It is important to note that, unlike Wang's draft, the five contemporaneous memorials appear to belong to the genre of *zouben*—a form that adhered to stricter stylistic conventions than confidential memorials. Two methods may be used to determine the genre of a memorial: examining the text itself for genre markers such as specific terminology and stylistic features; and analysing the historical context in which it was composed. In this case, the first method proves inconclusive, as several of the five memorials survive only in excerpted forms within official records. Crucial genre indicators—typically found in the opening and closing formulae—are missing. For example, phrases distinctive to either confidential or non-confidential memorials, such as "to memorialise for imperial attention", "to submit for information", and "to seal and present", are absent in these documents. As a result, their genre must be inferred through contextual analysis. On this basis, the historical evidence suggests that all five were *zouben*. As noted earlier, *Ming huidian* outlines the appropriate use of different memorial types, stating that *zouben* were employed when submitting requests, remonstrations, or policy advice.[161] Given that these documents were submitted in direct response to an imperial edict, their function aligns with that of *zouben*.

This genre distinction may help explain the notable differences in tone and content between Wang's draft and those of his contemporaries. As discussed above, Wang's "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" displays greater rhetorical flexibility and informality—traits characteristic of confidential memorials. Moreover, Wang incorporated personal reflections rarely found in formal submissions. Most notably, he reflected his prior engagement with

[161] *Ming Huidian*, juan 212, 1a–5b.

Buddhism to articulate the superiority of Confucian doctrine, a strategy that reflects a more personalised and discursive approach than the formal remonstrations of his peers:

> If your majesty is not convinced, I wish to use myself as an example to demonstrate it. I used to learn Buddhist theories as well. I revered and believed them immensely, and I thought I had grasped the essence. Later I got a glimpse of the broadness of the sages' doctrine, then started to discard these theories.

In this passage, Wang invokes his former devotion to Buddhism to persuade the emperor, implicitly likening his past belief to the emperor's current fondness. Such self-referential rhetoric is rare in Ming official documents. Among the officials who remonstrated on this issue, Wang alone grounded his argument in personal experience—a distinctive feature that marks his memorial.

This use of personal narrative was likely enabled by the memorial's confidential nature, which allowed a more informal and candid mode of address, accommodating sensitive or introspective content. By contrast, *zouben*—subject to broader bureaucratic circulation—were constrained by formal conventions and rhetorical decorum, limiting scope for personal expression. In this context, it is worth considering whether Wang intentionally chose the confidential form to exploit these characteristics, thereby enabling the inclusion of personal experience and individual judgement. If so, a further question arises: why did Wang deem his personal history with Buddhism so relevant that it warranted disclosure to the emperor?

Given that "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" aimed to dissuade the emperor from welcoming Buddhism, this becomes a question of rhetorical strategy: how could Wang's own engagement with Buddhist belief serve as a persuasive tool? Unlike other Confucian officials who asserted ideological distance by condemning the falsity of U-Tsang Buddhism and

framing it as a foreign doctrine remote from the cultural centre, Wang openly acknowledged his former devotion. Rather than drawing a sharp boundary between Confucianism and Buddhism, he positioned himself as someone who had personally navigated between the two. In doing so, Wang set himself apart from his contemporaries, suggesting that his self-presentation as a Confucian scholar-official included the capacity to engage critically—but not dismissively—with non-Confucian traditions. His rhetorical stance thus offers valuable insight into a distinctive model of intellectual identity.

2. The key arguments in "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism"

In Wang's memorial, his main argument is encapsulated in a single sentence that recurs throughout the text, serving as a unifying thread:

> Given that your affection for Buddhism is exceedingly earnest, I beg you to strive for the substance and the foundation instead of the mere names and the peripheral.[162]

This sentence appeared at the beginning, was elaborated in the main body, and was reiterated in the conclusion. When Wang repeated the phrase, he clarified that "the substance and the foundation" referred to the Confucian sages of the realm, while "the mere names and the peripheral" pointed to the Buddhas of foreign lands.[163] In this way, he did not oppose the emperor's pursuit of wisdom outright. Instead, he redirected the emperor's intention,

[162] This quotation is excerpted from the conclusion of the draft. There are slight variations in phrasing this argument. For example, the phrase "exceedingly earnest" (*chengzhi* 誠至) in this quotation was replaced by "exceedingly genuine and sincere" (*zhenqie kenzhi* 真切懇至) in the draft's beginning. These variations did not affect the meaning of the sentence.

[163] "If you are willing to strive for the substance and foundation, I suggest learning from the sages rather than Buddhas and looking into our realm rather than foreign tribes." See the translation provided above (p. 44).

proposing Confucian doctrine as a superior and more appropriate alternative. This rhetorical strategy thus centred on redirection rather than confrontation.

Wang's approach differs significantly from that of his contemporaries, whose memorials exhibit direct opposition to the imperial decree. For example, Xu Wenhua accused courtiers of manipulating the emperor by "exaggerating the doctrine of a monk", claiming that they aimed to "sell their wicked ideas but found no other excuses" and that the emperor was misled into issuing the order.[164] Wang, by contrast, acknowledged the emperor's sincere intentions and proposed an improved course of action to pursue the true Confucian doctrine.[165] In this sense, rather than rejecting the emperor's plan, he offered a refined vision of its fulfilment.

To reinforce this redirection, Wang developed a series of comparisons between Confucianism and Buddhism. He explicitly named Shakyamuni Buddha and the Confucian sages Yao and Shun as representatives of the two traditions. While acknowledging the Buddha's merits—longevity, compassion, and supernormal abilities—Wang asserted the superiority of Yao and Shun in each corresponding aspect. Though he claimed to focus on the Buddha's "strong points", he consistently framed the Confucian sages as surpassing them.[166] This rhetorical move not only affirmed Confucian superiority but also built a hierarchy of traditions in which Confucianism firmly occupied the highest place.

[164] See pp. 63–64.
[165] See p. 46.
[166] See p. 45.

Wang also adopted several Buddhist metaphors and concepts in framing his advice. Notably, in urging the emperor to pursue the Confucian doctrine rather than embarking on an expedition, he wrote:

> You will not have to spend tons of money, cost thousands of lives, or endure ages of years. You will not have to make the slightest move. Within a second of snapping your fingers, you will stand in the divine realm. You will obtain those supernormal abilities with magnificent effects, and your power will be apparent and sufficient wherever you go.

This passage draws directly from Buddhist metaphors: the phrase "snapping your fingers" (*tanzhi* 彈指) is a well-known Buddhist metaphor for instantaneity,[167] and the term "divine realm" (*shengdi* 聖地) frequently appears in Buddhist scriptures to describe stages of enlightenment.[168] The adaptation of these metaphors demonstrates Wang's rhetorical sensitivity. By expressing Confucian goals through Buddhist language, he made his argument more palatable to an emperor already inclined towards Buddhism.

This synthesis of Confucian content and Buddhist form also reflects a theological proposition: that enlightenment or spiritual arrival can occur without physical movement—through inner transformation alone. The same concept appears in the *Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經 [*Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*], where Huineng 惠能 (638–713), the Sixth Patriarch, told an official that one may reach the Pure Land "within a second of snapping your fingers"

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[167] Frequently phrased as "the instant of snapping your fingers" (*tanzhi zhiqing* 彈指之頃) or "in the midst of snapping your fingers" (*tanzhi zhijian* 彈指之間), this metaphor appears in scriptures such as *Dīgha Nikāya* (長阿含經 in Chinese), see *Taishō Tripitaka* 大正新脩大蔵経, T0001, 01: 125a24. It can also be found in *Ānāpānasmṛti Sūtra* (大安般守意經 in Chinese), see *Taishō Tripitaka*, T. 0602, 15: 163a16. For an online database, see SAT Daizōkyō Text Database, *Taishō Tripitaka* 大正新脩大蔵経 [*Taishō Revised Tripitaka*], last modified 2018, http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/index_en.html, accessed 28 April 2022.

[168] An example of its usage can be found in Mahayana Buddhist scripture *Brahmajāla Sūtra* (梵網經 in Chinese). The word *shengdi* 聖地 appears in the sentence 入聖地智近解脱位, meaning "to arrive in the divine realm with wisdom close to the stage of liberation". See *Taishō Tripitaka*, T.1448, 24: 1000a27.

by purifying the mind.[169] Wang's proposition, likely derived from this Chan Buddhist text, reframes Buddhist thought to support a Confucian message. If the emperor could attain spiritual fulfilment instantly through the Confucian doctrine, then the costly and symbolically fraught expedition to U-Tsang would be unnecessary.

In contrast to Wang's persuasion through Buddhist language, other officials distanced themselves sharply from Buddhist ideas. Ye Xiang and his peers questioned Buddhism's practical value, asking whether it could solve fiscal problems, alter the weather, or suppress rebellions.[170] The Grand Secretaries invoked historical precedent, contending that earlier imperial missions to Buddhist regions were pragmatic rather than devotional.[171] As these memorials directly challenged the emperor's belief, the dismissal of their proposals seems unsurprising.

3. The distinctive features of Wang Shouren's draft

Through comparison with the five memorials, the distinctive features of Wang's draft become more apparent. First, it bears a closer resemblance to an essay than to an official document. While the other memorials focused on political critique and administrative concerns, Wang's draft offered a theoretical reflection on the superiority of Confucianism over Buddhism. This difference may be partly attributed to genre: as a confidential memorial,

[169] Huineng was the sixth patriarch of Chan Buddhism, see Daoyuan 道原 (fl. late 10th–early 11th century), *Jingde chuandeng lu yizhu* 景德傳燈錄譯注 [*Commentary on The Jingde Record of the Transmission of the Lamp*], ed. Gu Hongyi 顧宏義 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 2009), vol. 5, 279–295. *Liuzu Tanjing* is one of the most important scriptures of Chan Buddhism. It contains records of Huineng's life and thought, especially his teachings. For this particular dialogue, see *Taishō Tripitaka*, T48, 2008: 352a.
[170] See the translation "(2) A memorial written by Ye Xiang, Zhou Lun, and others" (p. 64).
[171] See the translation "(5) The memorial written by Liang Chu and other Grand Secretaries" (pp. 67–69).

Wang's draft was afforded greater flexibility and less formal constraints, enabling the articulation of personal views in a discursive manner.

Second, Wang's approach to advising against welcoming Buddhism reflects a unique rhetorical strategy. Whereas the other officials expressed outright opposition to the imperial decree, Wang acknowledged the emperor's well-intentioned desire and redirected it towards a higher purpose—the realisation of Confucian sageliness. Instead of questioning the emperor's devotion to Buddhism, he recognised its merits and argued that the true Confucian doctrine offered something greater. This persuasive method highlights both his tactful engagement with imperial sentiment and his nuanced attitude towards Buddhist belief.

Third, Wang's memorial expressed a perspective on Buddhism that diverged significantly from that of his contemporaries. He not only acknowledged the certain merits of Buddhism but also demonstrated a deep familiarity with Buddhist concepts and metaphors. His description of attaining the divine realm "within a second of snapping your fingers", for instance, drew directly on Buddhist teachings, echoing themes found in the Buddhist scriptures. Such rhetorical choices were notably absent from other memorials. Additionally, Wang's invocation of his own past devotion to Buddhism—admitting that he had studied it in his youth—further marks him apart. None of the other officials referenced personal engagement with Buddhist tradition, nor did they employ autobiographical reflection as part of their argumentation.

Nevertheless, despite this openness, Wang ultimately reasserted the superiority of Confucianism. He attributed the emperor's interest in Buddhism to the inadequacy of certain

Confucian scholars, whose teachings failed to convey the true essence of the tradition.[172] In Wang's view, although Buddhism appeared more compelling than these mediocre interpretations of Confucianism, it remained inferior to the authentic doctrine of the sages. His comparisons—framing Yao and Shun as superior to the Buddha even in those areas where the Buddha was most revered—reinforced this hierarchical vision, affirming Confucianism's ultimate primacy.

VI. Conclusion

Debates on "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" have led this chapter to re-examine both its date and its genre. Dating the draft situates it within the political context of Emperor Wuzong's devotion to U-Tsang Buddhism, while analysis of its form, submission status, and possible confidential nature has revealed how these circumstances shaped Wang's rhetorical strategies in recounting his past Buddhist devotion to the emperor. These features become especially distinctive when set against other memorials on the same issue of welcoming Buddhism from U-Tsang.

This analysis has reaffirmed the necessity of reading texts in relation to their historical conditions and formal conventions, with close attention to the unfolding of events and to the composition and transmission of sources. Such scrutiny enables a more critical engagement with Wang's self-accounts before employing them as evidence for his self-positioning. Moreover, the close reading demonstrates that textual form and function are never neutral: they embody both genre conventions and external interventions such as political pressures, doctrinal positions, and personal concerns. Wang's self-presentation, therefore, cannot be

[172] See p. 44.

separated from these historical and textual conditions. His stance was itself a historical construct.

On this basis, the chapter has shown that “Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism” operated on two levels. On the one hand, it was a confidential draft that cautiously redirected the emperor’s attention away from Buddhism and towards the pursuit of Confucian doctrine. On the other hand, it was a discourse asserting Confucian superiority through comparative analysis. In its genre, tone, and content, it differs markedly from the memorials submitted by Wang’s peers. Even if never formally presented, the memorial offers a distinctive expression of Wang’s intellectual stance: Buddhism could appear preferable to the diluted teachings of mediocre Confucians, yet it remained firmly subordinate to the true doctrine of the sages.

Through “Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism”, Wang distinguished himself from his contemporaries in both tone and strategy. Rather than opposing the emperor’s interests, he worked within them—empathising with Buddhist devotion, acknowledging its merits, and recasting its ideals to advocate for Confucian priorities. This approach further underscores the complexity of Wang’s intellectual self-positioning: a Confucian scholar-official capable of engaging non-Confucian traditions not with hostility, but with both critique and empathy.

Chapter Two: From Misguided Devotion to Confucian Awakening: Wang Shouren's Preface to Compilation of Zhu Xi's Final Conclusions

I. Introduction

In the previous chapter, Wang Shouren's "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" was examined to explore how he positioned himself between the emperor's devotion to Buddhism and the imperative to uphold Confucian superiority in the official sphere, drawing on his own prior engagement with Buddhism as part of his argumentation. This chapter now turns to a second text written in the year of 1515— "Preface to Final Conclusions"—to consider how he situated himself with the Confucian tradition while reflecting on his earlier experiences with Buddhism and Daoism. [173]

The preface—written for Wang's compilation of Zhu Xi's philosophical letters titled *Zhuzi wannian dinglun* 朱子晚年定論 [*Master Zhu's Final Conclusions Arrived Late at Life*] (hereafter *Final Conclusions*, first printed in 1518)—was referenced in the previous chapter as one of three key texts marking the evolution of Wang's stance towards the "two schools".[174] It will now be examined in light of "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" (1515) and the recorded conversation on Buddhism and Daoism (1514), in order to better trace the development of his attitudes towards these traditions.

[173] For the full Chinese text, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol.1, 144–145.
[174] See "Authorship and related discussions" in Chapter One (pp. 47–49).

Since its composition, the preface has been widely regarded as a philosophical commentary on the tensions between Wang's teachings and Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian orthodoxy.[175] Modern scholarship has accordingly focused on Wang's elaboration on Zhu's so-called "final conclusions arrived late at life".[176] However, while the philosophical importance of the text is well established, less attention has been paid to its value as a first-hand historical account—particularly in how it narrates Wang's Buddhist and Daoist experiences during his formative years. Foregrounding these often-overlooked dimensions, this chapter examines how Wang positioned himself both in affirming his alignment with Zhu and in reflecting on his earlier engagements with Buddhism and Daoism.

Focusing on Wang's articulation of his non-Confucian engagements in "Preface to Final Conclusions", this analysis draws on four categories of source materials. The primary text is the preface itself, which provides a direct, first-hand account of Wang's self-positioning in relation to Buddhism and Daoism. The second category includes ancillary texts within *Final Conclusions*, which are closely connected to the preface, since the latter introduces the entire

[175] In *Mingru xue'an*, Wang's writings on Zhu Xi's "final conclusions arrived late at life" were regarded as the clarification of the ultimately shared opinion between Wang and Zhu. See Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695), *Mingru xue'an* 明儒學案 [*The Records of the Ming Scholars*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 7. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, there were debates among scholars on Wang's philosophical arguments made in *Final Conclusions*. Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682) carried out a concise study on these debates, see Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682), *Rizhi lu jishi* 日知錄集釋 [C*ollected Commentaries of The Records of Daily Gains in Knowledge*], ed. Luan Baoqun 欒保群 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2020), 950–957.

[176] Wing-tsit Chan regarded this preface as one of the most important documents on the differences between the two Neo-Confucian philosophers (Zhu Xi and Wang Shouren). See Wing-tsit Chan, "Wang Yang-Ming: Western Studies and an Annotated Bibliography", *Philosophy East and West* 22 (1972): 75–92. Chan gave a translation and a brief analysis of this text; see Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, 263–267. Okada Takehiko also discussed the writing and publishing of Wang's selection of Zhu's philosophical texts, focusing on Wang's lines of argument and other scholars' doubts in response. See Okada, *Wang Yangming dazhuan*, 295–300. Furthermore, recent Chinese scholarship has produced several articles focusing on Wang's preface and his selection of Zhu's texts. These studies generally highlight how Wang's writings on Zhu's "final conclusions" served to counter other scholars' criticisms, defend his academic project, and respond to the contemporary debates among various Confucian schools and sects. See Qu Hui 曲輝, "*Zhuzi wannian dinglun* yu Yangming xinxue chuanbo de tupo" 朱子晚年定論與陽明心學傳播的突破 ["*Zhuzi wannian dinglun* and the Breakthrough of Xinxue", English title given by the author], *Qilu xuekan* 齐鲁学刊 no. 3 (2010): 16–19. See also Shu Jingnan 束景南, Jiang Mei'ai 姜美愛, "Zhu Lu zhixue lunzhan yu *Zhuzi wannian dinglun* de dansheng" 朱陸之學論戰與朱子晚年定論的誕生 ["The Debate Between the Schools of Zhu and Lu and the Birth of *Zhuzi wannian dinglun*"], *Kongzi yanjiu* 孔子研究 no. 5 (2018): 39–53.

compilation and outlines its intellectual purpose. Other passages in *Final Conclusions* thus shed light on the broader context of Wang's reflections on Zhu Xi's Confucian teachings as well as Buddhist and Daoist thought. The third category comprises additional writings by Wang related to *Final Conclusions*, such as his letters and recorded dialogues with students. In these texts, Wang continued to engage with Zhu's "final conclusions", often developing themes introduced in "Preface to Final Conclusions". Finally, relevant historical sources, such as biographical records and later compilations, will be used to cross-reference and contextualise Wang's accounts of his Buddhist and Daoist engagements.

This chapter adopts historical textual analysis as its principal method for reconstructing Wang's engagement with Buddhism and Daoism and examining his attitude towards these traditions. The analysis proceeds in four stages. First, "Preface to Final Conclusions" will be closely read to understand how Wang describes his former engagements with the two non-Confucian schools. Second, the narrative's immediate context will be established through an examination of *Final Conclusions* and other writings by Wang on the same theme, in order to assess why he chose to present this reflection in that particular setting. Third, relevant historical records—including biographies and chronicles—will be consulted to corroborate and expand upon the account given in the preface. This comparative reading aims to trace the development of Wang's engagement with Buddhism and Daoism across both internal and external sources. Finally, drawing on this reconstruction, the chapter will explore how Wang's personal experiences informed his intellectual profile. This concluding analysis contributes to a central question of the thesis: how did Wang's engagement with non-Confucian traditions shape how he positioned himself as a Confucian scholar?

II. Wang Shouren's Account of His Previous Engagements with Buddhism and Daoism

To examine "Preface to Final Conclusions" as a first-hand account of Wang's earlier engagement with Buddhism and Daoism, the following section begins with a general analysis of the text, accompanied by a full translation. This provides the foundation for a focused study of Wang's reflection on his past devotion—a central element of the preface. The analysis addresses both the content and purpose of this reflection, aiming to clarify how and why Wang chose to recount his experiences, and thereby offering deeper insight into his self-positioning vis-à-vis the two non-Confucian traditions.

1. Full translation of "Preface to Final Conclusions"

According to Qian Dehong's "Chronological Biography", the preface was written in 1515 and later published as a part of *Final Conclusions* in 1518.[177] The full text appears in several editions of Wang's writings, with few variations. The 1992 edition of *Quanji* is selected as the source text for translation.[178] Below is a complete translation of the preface.[179]

> 陽明子序曰：洙、泗之傳，至孟氏而息；千五百餘年，濂溪、明道始復追尋其緒；自從辨析日詳，然亦日就支離決裂，旋復湮晦。吾嘗深求其故，大抵皆世儒之多言有以亂之。
>
> 守仁早歲業舉，溺志詞章之習，既乃稍知從事正學，而苦於眾說之紛擾疲癉，茫無可入，因求諸老、釋，欣然有會於心，以為聖人之學在此矣！然於孔子之

[177] The writing date given in the text is 正德乙亥冬十一月朔, meaning "the first day of the eleventh month in the winter of the *yihai* year of Zhengde". This date is equivalent to 5 December 1515 CE. For a record of the publishing of the preface, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1384.
[178] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 144–145.
[179] This text is independently translated in the chapter. Regarding pre-existing translations, Wing-tsit Chan's translation is frequently cited. See Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, 264–267.

教間相出入，而措之日用，往往缺漏無歸；依違往返，且信且疑。其後謫官龍場，居夷處困，動心忍性之餘，恍若有悟，體驗探求，再更寒暑，證諸五經、四子，沛然若決江河而放諸海也。然後嘆聖人之道坦如大路，而世之儒者妄開竇逕，蹈荊棘，墮坑塹，究其為說，反出二氏之下。宜乎世之高明之士厭此而趨彼也！此豈二氏之罪哉！間嘗以語同志，而聞者競相非議，目以為立異好奇；雖每痛反探抑，務自搜剔斑瑕，而愈益精明的確，洞然無復可疑。獨於朱子之說有相牴牾，恆疚於心，切疑朱子之賢，而豈其於此尚有未察？及官留都，復取朱子之書而檢求之，然後知其晚歲固已大悟舊說之非，痛悔極艾，至以為自誑誑人之罪，不可勝贖。世之所傳《集注》、《或問》之類，乃其中年未定之說，自咎以為舊本之誤，思改正而未及，而其諸《語類》之屬，又其門人挾勝心以附己見，固於朱子平日之說猶有大相謬戾者，而世之學者局於見聞，不過持循講習於此。其餘悟後之論，概乎其未有聞，則亦何怪乎予言之不信、而朱子之心無以自暴於後世也乎？

予既自幸其說之不謬於朱子，又喜朱子之先得我心之同，然且慨夫世之學者徒守朱子中年未定之說，而不復知求其晚歲既悟之論，競相呶呶，以亂正學，不自知其已入於異端。輒採錄而裒集之，私以示夫同志，庶幾無疑於吾說，而聖學之明可冀矣！正德乙亥冬十一月朔，後學餘姚王守仁序。

In this preface, Master Wang says: The transmission of Confucius' teachings was ceased by the time of Mencius.[180] Over one thousand and five hundred years, Lianxi (Zhou Dunyi) and Mingdao (Cheng Hao) began to seek its thread again.[181] The teachings of Confucianism had been analysed in detail day by day from then on, but they became fragmented and divided at the same time, sinking into obscurity soon after. I used to search deeply for the reason; it is probably that mediocre scholars talk so much that they disrupt the system.

When I prepared for the civil examination in my early years, I drowned myself in the practice of literature. Then I slightly realised that I should engage in the correct learning, but I was troubled by the confusion and exhaustion caused by the various theories, not knowing where to start. Hence, I sought answers in Daoism and Buddhism, and I was pleased to understand something in my heart. I felt here was where the teachings of the sage lay. However, the teachings of Daoism and Buddhism were sometimes at variance with those of Confucius. When I applied them to daily life, they were often inadequate and inconclusive. I wavered between reliance and rejection, between approaching and retreating, half believing and half doubting.

Later I was demoted and banished to Longchang.[182] I resided among the barbarians and lived in difficult circumstances. Apart from getting my mind stimulated and my

[180] The original text is 洙泗之傳, in which 洙泗 refers to Confucius' teachings. These two characters are the names of two rivers near Qufu 曲阜, where Confucius used to lecture his disciples.
[181] Lianxi 濂溪 is the art name of the Northern Song 北宋 (960–1127) Confucian Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073). Mingdao 明道 is the art name of Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085), a Northern Song Confucian philosopher and politician.
[182] Longchang 龍場 is located in Guizhou 貴州, a southwest multiethnic region. Wang was demoted to officer of Longchang Relay Station (*Longchang yi* 龍場驛) in 1506. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1352–1353.

nature hardened, I seemed to realise some truths.[183] I experienced and explored them while witnessing two changes of four seasons, seeking verification in the Five Classics and the Four Masters.[184] It was like a surging flood breaching the riverbanks and rushing into the sea. Subsequently, I realised with deep feeling that the path of the sage is as level and calm as a broad road. But scholars of today preposterously open holes and footpaths, going through thorns and falling into pits. Delving into their theories, I found them even inferior to the two schools of Buddhism and Daoism. No wonder intelligent scholars of the world are tired of their theories and lean towards the two schools. How can this be a fault of the two schools? I have occasionally said this to my like-minded colleagues. But my audience rushed to criticise me, seeing me as someone being maverick and seeking novelty. Each time, I engaged in deep retrospect and restraint, trying to identify and eliminate my own flaws. And thus, my thinking became even more refined, distinct, and definite. It became clear that there was no more doubt left in my mind, except that my ideas sometimes conflicted with the doctrines of Master Zhu, which often filled my heart with remorse. I strongly doubted that Master Zhu, with his wisdom, could still have failed to notice this.

When I was an official in Liudu (Nanjing), I picked up the works of Master Zhu again to inspect and investigate them.[185] Then I realised that he had already woken up to the errors of his old ideas in later years. He repented greatly and did his utmost to reform. He even thought that he could not fully atone for the sin of having deceived himself and others. Works such as "Collected Commentaries" and "Questions"—his collected commentaries as well as questions-and-answers exchanged on the Four Books, passed down through generations—reflect the tentative ideas of his middle years.[186] He blamed himself for not having been able to correct the mistakes of those old texts, despite his wish to do so. As for his *Dialogues* and the like, since his disciples, driven by competitiveness, inserted their own views into his ideas, certain passages still seem vastly false and absurd when compared with Master Zhu's usual teachings.[187] Scholars of today, due to their limited knowledge, only followed and lectured these [old and tentative] texts. As to the insights he gained after his awakening, they remained largely unknown to the world. No wonder, then, that people did not believe my words, and Master Zhu could not reveal his true intentions to later generations.

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[183] The original text is 動心忍性, which is derived from *Mengzi* 孟子 [*Mencius/The Book of Mencius*]. See 6B.15.

[184] The Five Classics 五經 are *Shijing* 詩經 [*The Book of Songs/The Classic of Poetry*], *Shangshu* (cited earlier in footnote 81), *Liji* (footnote 82), *Zhouyi* 周易 (footnote 83), and *Chunqiu* (see footnote 21). The Four Masters 四子—more commonly known as the Four Books 四書—are *Lunyu* 論語 [*The Analects*], *Mengzi* (footnote 183), *Zhongyong* (footnote 82), and *Daxue* 大學 [*The Great Learning*].

[185] Liudu 留都 refers to Nanjing 南京, meaning "the Southern Capital". Nanjing used to be the capital of the Ming dynasty before 1421. See *Mingshi*, vol. 4, 909–912. According to Qian Dehong's "Chronological Biography", Wang became an official in Nanjing in 1514. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1363–1365.

[186] "Collected Commentaries" (*jizhu* 集註) refers to Zhu Xi's commentaries on the Four Books: "Lunyu jizhu" 論語集註 ["Collected Commentaries on *The Analects*"], "Mengzi jizhu" 孟子集註 ["Collected Commentaries on *The Book of Mencius*"], "Zhongyong zhangju" 中庸章句 ["Chapter-and-verse Commentaries on *The Doctrine of the Mean*"], and "Daxue zhangju" 大學章句 ["Chapter-and-verse Commentaries on *The Great Learning*"]. "Questions" (*huowen* 或問) refers to Zhu Xi's questions and answers about the Four Books, including "Lunyu huowen" 論語或問 ["Questions on *The Analects*"], "Mengzi huowen" 孟子或問 ["Questions on *The Book of Mencius*"], "Zhongyong huowen" 中庸或問 ["Questions on *The Doctrine of the Mean*"], and "Daxue huowen" 大學或問 ["Questions on *The Great Learning*"].

[187] *Dialogues* (*yulei* 語類) refers to *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 [*The Collected Dialogues of Master Zhu*], which is a collection of conversations between Zhu Xi and his disciples.

> I feel fortunate that my ideas are not in conflict with those of Master Zhu, and I am pleased that Master Zhu grasped our shared ideas before me. Still, I regret that scholars today cling in vain to the tentative ideas held by Master Zhu in his middle years. They no longer strive to seek the doctrines he arrived at after awakening late at life. They compete with so much noise that they obscure the correct learning, unaware that they have fallen into heterodoxy. I therefore selected and collected [passages from Master Zhu's later thought], showing them to like-minded friends. They will probably no longer doubt my theories, and we may see the doctrine of the sage made clear to the world.
>
> Written by humble student Wang Shouren of Yuyao on the first day of the eleventh month in the winter of the *yihai* year of Zhengde.[188]

2. An analysis of "Preface to Final Conclusions"

With the translation provided above, this section analyses "Preface to Final Conclusions" to identify its central argument and lines of reasoning, focusing in particular on the role of Wang's reflection on his past engagements with Buddhism and Daoism. By examining how this reflection on non-Confucian involvement is integrated into a discussion centred on Zhu Xi's Confucian teachings, the chapter further investigates how Wang's earlier non-Confucian engagements shaped his intellectual identity—particularly as he re-evaluated them within a Confucian framework.

The preface's main argument is summarised in its final paragraph, where Wang explained his purpose in compiling *Final Conclusions*. He claimed that his own philosophical outlook aligned with that of Zhu Xi, particularly with what he regarded as Zhu's later-life "final conclusions". On this basis, Wang presented the compilation as a means of demonstrating his convergence with Zhu, while also seeking to clarify the true doctrine of the Confucian sages.

[188] Yuyao 餘姚, now lying in the northeast of Zhejiang 浙江 province, is Wang's native place. See *Mingshi*, vol. 44, 1107. The word *yihai* 乙亥 is a term of the Chinese sexagenary cycle.

The claim that his ideas were in accord with Zhu Xi's "final conclusions" was supported through Wang's reconstruction of his learning experience. In retrospect, Wang described how he became devoted to Buddhism and Daoism, how he reflected on these past experiences, and how he eventually awakened to Zhu Xi's mature philosophy. This account traces a trajectory beginning with Wang's early interest in literature and culminating in his recent realisation of Zhu's final conclusions.

A unifying thread throughout this narrative is Wang's persistent pursuit of Confucian learning.[189] The structure of his intellectual journey is designed to show how he gradually arrived at what he considered the correct path of Confucianism—through earlier engagements with non-Confucian traditions and the careful study Zhu Xi's writings. Wang presented his literary interest, his past involvement in Buddhism and Daoism, and his initial doubts about potential contradictions with Zhu's thought as sequential stages in a broader process of learning. These episodes collectively form the context for his intellectual development, concluding with his recognition of Zhu's "final conclusions" as both the culmination and validation of his own ideas. By foregrounding this continuous effort, Wang's retrospective narrative provides an evidential foundation for his central claim: that his thought ultimately converges with Zhu Xi's mature philosophy.

Moreover, as Wang's narrative is interwoven with reflections on key turning points, it reveals not only the trajectory of his learning but also the evolution of his understanding of the "correct learning" (*zhengxue* 正學). It is thus both descriptive and introspective, combining a chronological account of experience with an analytical perspective on its meaning. In this

[189] In his narrative of past learning experience, Wang mentioned or implied an effort to grasp the correct learning repeatedly. See pp. 87–89.

way, Wang constructed a coherent and purposeful argument, grounded in a detailed examination of what he learned and how he came to interpret that learning over time.

As Wang introduced his discovery of Zhu Xi's "final conclusions", he raised an implicit question: why had earlier Confucians failed to arrive at similar insights, despite the extensive discourse on Zhu's philosophy by his time? He answered by attributing their failure to a fundamental misunderstanding. According to Wang, earlier scholars had not recognised that Zhu reached his "final conclusions" only after a personal awakening—a process Wang implicitly likened to his own. In this case, Wang presented his awakening as legitimate and even orthodox, paralleling that of Zhu Xi, the authoritative model of Confucian orthodoxy.

Wang further explained this oversight of earlier scholars as arising from two factors: first, some of Zhu's earlier writings reflected tentative ideas formed in midlife; and second, many of his teachings had been distorted by his disciples' misinterpretations. As a result, later scholars, possessing only partial knowledge, focused on outdated or misrepresented texts and failed to grasp Zhu's mature thought. Wang not only criticised these scholars for neglecting Zhu's final conclusions but also accused them of intellectual rivalry and confusion, claiming that they had fallen into "heterodoxy" without realising it. This critique underscores a practical goal of compiling *Final Conclusions*: to make Zhu's more mature insights accessible and to help restore the clarity of Confucian learning.

This criticism of fellow Confucians also appears in "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" written the same year as "Preface to Final Conclusions". There, Wang argued that scholars at Emperor Wuzong's court had failed to inspire the ruler due to their shallow engagement with the Confucian classics. Because they "only scratched the surface of the

classics perfunctorily", the emperor could not find "any pleasure in learning the divine Way".[190] In both texts, Wang held contemporary Confucians accountable for undermining the vitality of Confucianism—either by failing to guide the ruler or by obscuring its true teachings. These critiques reflect a consistent position: Wang perceived the academic climate of his time as intellectually stagnant and in need of reform.

Given the force of his critique, Wang's attack on certain Confucian scholars likely served purposes beyond simply asserting his discovery of Zhu Xi's final conclusions or correcting doctrinal errors. Since he regarded their decline into "heterodoxy" as one reason for compiling *Final Conclusions*, his criticism also functioned as a rhetorical strategy to promote his own philosophy.[191] In challenging contemporaries of neglecting Zhu's mature teachings, Wang advanced three interlinked claims: first, that his own ideas aligned with Zhu's final conclusions; second, that mainstream interpretations had distorted Confucian learning; and third, that his own awakening paralleled with Zhu's path to the Confucian truth. These claims together distinguished Wang's thought from prevailing views and positioned it as a legitimate continuation of correct learning. As the preface circulated with *Final Conclusions*, this effort should have contributed to the broader dissemination and reception of Wang's ideas.

3. Wang Shouren's description of his previous engagements with Buddhism and Daoism

As the preceding analysis has situated Wang's reflection on his earlier Buddhist and Daoist engagements within the broader context of "Preface to Final Conclusions", the following

[190] See the translation of "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" (pp. 43–47).
[191] See pp. 89–92.

discussion turns to how Wang narrated these episodes. By tracing the development of his experiences and reflections, the following discussion explores both his lived encounters with the two non-Confucian schools and his retrospective interpretations of them.

Wang presented these Buddhist and Daoist episodes as a central component of his broader intellectual development. His account unfolds chronologically, intertwined with moments of self-reflection. This narrative thus reveals not only what he experienced in navigating across traditions, but also how he came to understand those experiences. To clarify this transformation, Wang's recounted engagement with Buddhism and Daoism can be divided into three stages.

The first stage marks the beginning of Wang's interest. He explained that when he began pursuing the "correct learning", he was confused by competing Confucian theories and thus turned to Buddhism and Daoism in search of clarity. At this stage, confusion is presented as the primary motivation for his turn to non-Confucian traditions. Notably, he conveyed a sense of helplessness in phrases such as "I slightly realised that I should engage in the correct learning" and "I was troubled by the confusion and exhaustion caused by the various theories".[192] These expressions suggest that, by the time he wrote the preface, Wang felt compelled to justify his earlier engagement in Buddhism and Daoism. By highlighting both his good intentions and his disorientation, he framed this phase as an immature, albeit sincere, attempt that was later corrected.

The second stage centres on Wang's deeper involvement with the Buddhism and Daoism, marked by both attraction and emerging doubts. Initially, he believed he had found "where

[192] See p. 87.

the teachings of the sage lay" in these traditions, indicating deep admiration. However, he began to waver "between reliance and rejection" for two reasons: the occasional contradiction between these teachings and Confucianism, and their perceived inadequacy in addressing the practical demands of daily life.[193] Despite growing doubts, his earlier conviction that the "teachings of the sages" could be located in Buddhism and Daoism signals a phase of serious devotion. Within the larger arc of the preface, which charts his eventual return to Confucian doctrine, this stage appears as a pivotal moment in his intellectual journey.

The third stage shifts away from earlier attachment to Buddhism and Daoism and focuses instead on Wang's realisation of the Confucian "path of the sages". He described this discovery as "as level and calm as a broad road", achieved through hardship, contemplation, and verification in Confucian classics. His metaphor of "a surging flood breaching the riverbanks and rushing into the sea" suggests a moment of spiritual resolution, free from previous uncertainty. At this stage, Wang did not reject Buddhism or Daoism explicitly; rather, he implied that his former devotion faded not because these teachings were false, but because Confucianism ultimately proved more complete.

Furthermore, Wang offered an additional explanation for his earlier engagement in Buddhism and Daoism: the inadequacy of contemporary Confucian scholarship. He claimed that "intelligent scholars of the world" were drawn to Buddhism and Daoism because they had grown tired of the superficial theories of incompetent Confucians. By aligning himself with these "intelligent scholars", Wang hinted that he too was misled by the poor quality of prevailing Confucian teachings. This rhetorical move functions as a broader justification for his past alignment with non-Confucian traditions. Moreover, his pointed question—"how can

[193] See p. 87.

this be a fault of the two schools?"—shifted the blame from Buddhism and Daoism to ineffective Confucian teachers. In doing so, Wang adroitly deflected potential criticism of his past devotion, reframing it as a symptom of a wider intellectual crisis rather than a personal failing.

III. Reconstructing Identity: Wang Shouren's Reflection on Buddhism and Daoism in His Compilation of Zhu Xi's Final Conclusions

Although "Preface to Final Conclusions", which traces Wang's earlier engagement with Buddhism and Daoism, is the focus of this chapter, other relevant writings also warrant close examination. These include other sections of *Final Conclusions,* Wang's letters to his contemporaries, and recorded dialogues between Wang and his students. All these texts centre on Wang's interpretation of Zhu Xi's so-called "final conclusions arrived late at life"—the central theme of the preface.

Examining related texts is essential for understanding the purpose and impact of Wang's reflection on Buddhism and Daoism in the preface. In particular, these sources help clarify why Wang included such a personal account and how he used it to strengthen his overall argument. Notably, Wang devoted a substantial portion of the text—approximately 30 percent—to recounting his earlier engagements with the two non-Confucian traditions.[194] This suggests that the section was intended as a central component of the text, rather than a digressive aside.

[194] The preface has 599 Chinese characters, while Wang's narrative of his past devotion—containing 174 Chinese characters—occupies 29 percent of the whole text.

This arrangement raises a crucial question: why does such a significant portion of the preface focus on Buddhism and Daoism, given that *Final Conclusions* itself contains no further mention of either tradition? Since a preface typically outlines a work's purpose, Wang's extensive discussion of seemingly unrelated material appears unusual. These discrepancies point to unresolved questions about the function of Wang's personal narrative within the preface.

Accordingly, the following section examines texts related to Zhu Xi's "final conclusions" to better contextualise Wang's reflections. Building on the previous discussion of how Wang recounted his experiences, this analysis shifts to why he did so. Together, these enquiries shed further light on the significance of Wang's reconstruction of his past, thereby clarifying how it contributes to his broader self-positioning as expressed in the preface.

The relevant sources fall into three categories: (1) the foreword and postscript to the preface, (2) recorded dialogues between Wang and his disciples on Zhu Xi's final conclusions, and (3) letters in which Wang explained his discovery to fellow scholars. These texts will be translated independently, followed by a table summarising their key features. These efforts help clarify the aims and functions of *Final Conclusions*, thereby shedding further light on Wang's decision to embed an extended personal narrative within the preface, where it plays a significant rhetorical and intellectual role.

1. Translations of the texts related to Zhu Xi's "final conclusions"

This section provides translations and basic contextual information for the three categories of texts, which will be examined in greater detail in the subsequent analysis. The first category

consists of two key texts included in the disciple-published edition of *Final Conclusions*: Qian Dehong's foreword and Yuan Qinglin's 袁慶麟 (c. 1440s–c. 1500s) postscript. Qian's foreword, written for the 1572 edition of Wang's collected works, was composed more than fifty years after the preface. The translation is as follows:[195]

> *Final Conclusions* was first printed in the Nan Gan region.[196] Master Zhu had been taking a long rest due to his eye disease when he suddenly perceived the great sources of the teaching of the sages.[197] Hence, he deeply regretted that his writings and commentaries compiled in his middle age had misled himself and others. He informed his like-minded colleagues everywhere.
>
> When the teacher read the final conclusions, he was delighted that his ideas were in accord with those of Huiweng (Zhu Xi).[198] He made a hand-written copy of Master Zhu's final conclusions. This copy was published and circulated by his disciples. Since then, few people have debated the similarities and differences between Master Zhu and the teacher. The teacher once said that this publication helped him unexpectedly.
>
> In the *renshen* year of the Longqing era (1572), Mister Xie Tingjie of Qiufeng published the teacher's *Complete Works*.[199] He requested that *Final Conclusions* should be attached to "The Record of Sayings" and published.[200] Hence, it would be clearly seen that the teachings of the teacher are not in conflict with those of Master Zhu and that the right ways of learning have the same origin for thousands of years. In addition, there are several texts including the teacher's first preface and Yuan Qinglin's postscript. I apologise for exceeding my authority when quoting their works.

[195] See the Chinese text at Appendix 6 and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 144.
[196] The Nan Gan 南贛 region refers to the area of Nan'an 南安, Ganzhou 贛州, and other neighbouring places. Since 1516, Wang had been designated a grand coordinator and assigned to this region. The full title of Wang's position was "Grand Coordinator and Superintendent of Military Affairs in Nan Gan and Tingshao" (*xunfu Nan Gan Ting Shao dengchu difang tidu junwu* 巡撫南贛汀韶等處地方提督軍務). For an introduction to the positions of grand coordinators, see Charles O. Hucker, "T'ai-Tsu's Legacy: The Mature Ming Autocracy", in *The Ming Dynasty: Its Origins and Evolving Institutions* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978), 87–88.
[197] In the original Chinese text, the term *yuansou* 淵藪 was used to describe the sources of the sages' teaching. In literary Chinese, this term initially referred to the gathering place of fish or birds. See *Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary*, R. H. Mathews, Revised American ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1943), s.v. "淵".
[198] Huiweng 晦翁 is a respectful form of address to Zhu Xi, who chose "Hui'an 晦庵" as his art name.
[199] Longqing 隆慶 is the reign title of Emperor Muzong 穆宗 (1537–1572). Qiufeng 虯峰 is a place in Jiangxi.
[200] "Yulu" 語錄 ["The Record of Sayings"] is a part of Xie Tingjie's edition of *Complete Works*.

Compared to Qian's foreword, Yuan's postscript—written as early as in 1518—is particularly noteworthy. Yuan introduced himself as an avid follower of Zhu Xi's teachings before becoming Wang's disciple. This background gave him a unique advantage in illustrating the alignment between Zhu and Wang—an advantage Qian did not share. Drawing on his experience of hearing Wang clarify Zhu's mature thought, Yuan described how this guidance resolved his confusion and led him to true understanding. His testimonial thus reinforced Wang's central argument: that Zhu's final conclusions, rather than earlier, tentative teachings represent the true path to correct learning. [201]

> *Master Zhu's Final Conclusions Arrived Late at Life* was selected and copied by my teacher Master Wang when he was in Liudu (Nanjing). Xue Shangqian (Xue Kan) of Jieyang once made a copy of this book.[202] When like-minded friends saw it, some even put it in their sleeves and took it away as they did not have enough time to copy down the words. Because many feared to reprint the book on their own, we discussed and sent it to the press. Others told me that I should write a postscript since I was a senior.
>
> Master Zhu was diligent in his lifetime work to benefit students of later times. Every word of Master Zhu should thus be followed. However, only some words of Master Zhu were selected and commended because they were regarded as Master Zhu's settled opinions. Instead of learning from these settled opinions, scholars of today have continued to follow the path that Master Zhu regretted. Since they have gone astray, are they genuinely scholars excelling in the teachings of Master Zhu?
>
> I am not like those scholars. I followed the teachings of Master Zhu for more than thirty years. Even though I did not regard myself as lacking in devotion or sincerity, I failed to reach the stage where I could be at ease while enriching myself with profound wisdom. I still thought it was because I did not learn more carefully or read more broadly.
>
> In the summer of the year *wuyin* (1518), I brought several pieces of writings with me to see the teacher. When I heard the teacher's words, I felt that I understood them clearly and effortlessly, just like I saw the sun so easily as it was in the middle of the sky. It was also like sowing the field with seeds. The crops grew quickly after being planted. I understood that I would not need to seek wisdom outside myself, and I suddenly realised something real and simple.

[201] See Appendix 7 for the original Chinese text. According to his statements in this postscript, Yuan Qinglin used to learn from the theories of Zhu Xi before he became a student of Wang. See also *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 160–161.

[202] Xue Shangqian 薛尚謙 was the courtesy name of Xue Kan 薛侃 (1486–1545). Jieyang 揭陽 is a place in Guangdong 廣東, a coastal region in South China.

I returned to my place to look for the reasons, but I did not find answers that could satisfy me. Thus, I could not help feeling bewildered. When I read this selection of Master Zhu's texts, I started to feel that my doubts were dissolved. I devoted all my efforts to learning from the teacher, taking advantage of this place of study. After three months of study, I felt I was about to understand some knowledge. Since then, I realised what I had learned were Master Zhu's tentative ideas in his middle years. For this reason, I did not gain anything in thirty years.

Now thanks to the spiritual power of Heaven, I have started to devote myself to those teachings regarded as Master Zhu's mature opinions. Accordingly, I can understand some knowledge after three months. I would almost be in despair without help from the teacher. Then I dare to tell my experience to like-minded friends, so they will not have any regrets later in their lives as I did. Suppose some people find the origin of learning directly outside the spoken words. And if this truth can be proven to be inevitable and beyond doubts and thus be preserved by their very own efforts, then this selection's purpose is to show them how to get on the right way.

Respectfully written by student Yuan Qinglin on the fifteenth day of the sixth month, the *renyin* year of Zhengde (1518).[203]

The second category includes two recorded conversations in which Wang explained Zhu Xi's final conclusions to his students. Unlike the foreword and postscript—compiled by disciples several decades later—these dialogues took place between 1514 and 1518, reflecting Wang's own accounts during the same period in which he wrote the preface. The translated texts are presented below:

Text 1: A conversation on some students selecting the words of Master Zhu for criticism: [204]

When friends studied books, many of them selected the words of Hui'an (Zhu Xi) for criticism. [205] The teacher said, "It is not right to purposely find differences. On the occasions when my ideas are different from those of Hui'an, I have to make arguments since slight variations at the beginning will become huge divergences in the end. However, ultimately my purpose has never been different from that of

[203] The date is written as 正德戊寅六月望 in Chinese. The character *wang* 望 refers to the fifteenth day of a month that is thirty days long. This date here is equivalent to 22 July 1518 CE.

[204] For the Chinese text, see Appendix 8 and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 31. This conversation was untitled in *Chuanxi lu*. It must have taken place after May 1514 when Xue Kan, the student who recorded this conversation, stayed with Wang in Nanjing. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1363–1364. Moreover, its date should not be later than the end of 1518 when *Chuanxi lu* was first published. For another English translation provided by Wing-tsit Chan, see Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, 59–60.

[205] Hui'an 晦庵 refers to Zhu Xi (see footnote 198).

Hui'an. As to the occasions when his expressions of facts and views are explicit and appropriate, how could a single word of him be altered?"

Text 2: A conversation with Yang Shide:[206]
Shide asked, "The theory of investigating things as you have taught is clear, simple, and easy. Everyone can get that. Wengong's (Zhu Xi) intelligence was unrivalled.[207] Why did he fail to make a close inspection of this matter?"

The teacher said, "Wengong's mental attitude and force were strong. In his youth, he had already decided to follow the past tradition and lead future generations. For this reason, he focused his efforts on investigating things and writing books. If he had started with intense self-cultivation earlier, he would naturally have had no time to spare for these activities. When he came to the state of great virtue, naturally, he worried that the doctrine had not been made clear. An example is that Confucius retired to edit the Six Classics.[208] Confucius removed superfluous texts and focused on concise ideas so that future scholars could be enlightened. Generally speaking, not many efforts in the investigation were needed in this case. Wengong had already written many books in his youth, but he regretted that he had put last things first in his old age."

Shide said, "As for his regrets that arrived late at life, there are some examples.[209] He said that he realised his mistake of clinging to the traditionally recognised versions of texts.[210] He said that reading books did not help him with his task.[211] He also said this task did not actually involve sticking to books and words.[212] These examples show that he began to repent for misdirecting his previous efforts in his old age. Hence, he turned to self-cultivating himself."

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[206] For the Chinese text, see Appendix 9 and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol.1, 32–33. This conversation was untitled in *Chuanxi lu*. Shide 士德 is the courtesy name of Yang Ji 楊驥 (c. 1400s–c. 1500s), one of Wang's disciples. This name is written as 仕德 in some historical records. This conversation most likely took place between 1515 and 1518, as the content of the preface (1515) was mentioned and *Chuanxi lu*—which included this dialogue—was published in 1518.
[207] Wengong 文公 refers to Zhu Xi, whose posthumous name is *wen* 文.
[208] The Six Classics (*liuji* 六籍), more commonly known as *liujing* 六經, consist of the Five Classics and *Yuejing* 樂經 [*The Classic of Music*). In ancient China, Confucius was believed to have edited the Six Classics, see Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), *Hanshu* 漢書 [*Book of Han*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), vol. 30, 1701.
[209] The following three examples are references to Zhu Xi's letters included by Wang in *Final Conclusions*.
[210] The Chinese text is 向來定本之誤. These words were quoted from Zhu Xi's letter "Da Huang Zhiqing shu" 答黃直卿書 ["Letter in Reply to Huang Zhiqing"]. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 145–146. Huang Zhiqing 黃直卿 was the courtesy name of Huang Gan 黃幹 (1152–1221), a scholar of the Southern Song 南宋 (1127–1279) period. There were debates on the term *dingben* 定本 among Ming scholars. For example, Luo Qinshun (also known as Luo Zheng'an, see footnote 16) once wrote to Wang to argue that this term was not seen in the most accepted edition of Zhu Xi's letters. Luo enquired about the reason why it was added to in Wang's copy of the letter.
[211] The Chinese text is 雖讀得書何益於吾事. These words were quoted from Zhu Xi's letter "Yu Lü Ziyue" 與呂子約 ["Letter to Lü Ziyue"]; see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 146. Lü Ziyue 呂子約 was the courtesy name of Lü Zujian 呂祖儉 (1146–1200), a scholar and official of the Southern Song dynasty.
[212] Ibid., 146–147. This sentence was quoted from Zhu Xi's letter "Da He Shujing" 答何叔京 ["Letter in Reply to He Shujing"] . He Shujing was the courtesy name of the Southern Song scholar He Hao 何鎬 (1128–1175).

> The teacher said, "Yes, and this is where we can see that Wengong surpassed all others. His mental power was so great that he turned around right after he repented. It is a pity that he passed away shortly after his repentance. He did not have enough time to correct the mistakes he had made in his life."

In addition to dialogues with his disciples, Wang exchanged letters with his contemporaries to discuss the discovery of Zhu Xi's so-called "final conclusions". Three letters that contain explicit references to Zhu's mature teachings are selected for translation and analysis. These letters exhibit varied writing styles, reflecting their distinct purposes. One of them, most likely written in 1519 and addressed to a friend, features Wang's reflections upon the reception of *Final Conclusions*, published the previous year. This letter is translated as follows:

> "Yu Anzhi" 與安之 ["Letter to Anzhi"][213]
> After I heard that you would be willing to strive for knowledge, I was overwhelmed with joy. Given you would exert yourself to study like that, we could not fail the friendship between us. When I was in Liudu (Nanjing), I talked too much due to my occasional chatter.[214] As a result, I was surrounded by critics. I selected texts of Master Zhu's regrets in his old age, editing them into a collection of Master Zhu's final conclusions. I did this just to save myself from some trouble.
>
> Some students have published this book in Yudu lately.[215] I was rather annoyed when I first heard of that. However, since many scholars were inspired when they read it, it has helped me unexpectedly. It could save me greatly from some efforts of talking and arguing. Some scholars have recently published their works on Master Zhu's thought, such as Huangdun's (Cheng Minzheng) *Collection of the Oneness of the Way*.[216] Nevertheless, the readers of these books were prejudiced with the thought of shielding the like-minded while attacking others. Consequently, the readers were eventually enraged at the ideas in those books instead of absorbing them. Now, I only select and show the words spoken by Master Zhu without adding a single word

[213] For the original Chinese text, see Appendix 10 and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 194. Given Wang's mention of friendship in the first paragraph, Anzhi 安之 may be the courtesy name of a friend of his. According to Qian Dehong, this letter was written in the *jimao* 己卯 year of Zhengde. When converted into the Gregorian calendar, this year spans from 31 January 1519 to 19 January 1520.
[214] Wang referred to his stay in Nanjing in 1514 in this sentence. See footnote 185.
[215] Yudu 雩都 was a town in Ganzhou, Jiangxi. See *Mingshi*, vol. 43, 1065.
[216] Huangdun 篁墩 was the art name of Cheng Minzheng 程敏政 (1446–1499), a scholar-official of the Ming dynasty. His compilation *Daoyi bian* 道一編 [*Collection of the Oneness of the Way*] compared the similarities and differences between Zhu Xi's teachings and those of Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–1193). For more information on Cheng Minzheng and his compilation, see Zhao Chunning 趙春寧 et al. *Mingshi wenyuanzhuan jianzheng* 明史文苑傳箋證 [*Commentaries on Biographies of Literati of The History of Ming*] (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2012), 542–557.

myself. Even though my readers still hold their prejudice, they cannot find an excuse for their anger. What do you think about this?

I am sending some copies of my book just to enlighten those people of determination. It is not that I do not wish to take the responsibilities to write more on Master Zhu's final conclusions. But because I have neglected my practice in writing, I do not know where to start. My case is like a poor man finding it very hard to get things done. How can a rich man understand this feeling?

In contrast to the letter to Anzhi, which was addressed to a friend, two other letters were written in response to scholars who challenged Wang's claims about Zhu Xi's shift of thought later in life. In his reply to Gu Lin 顧璘 (1476–1545), Wang defended his position by further elaborating his understanding of the "investigation of things" (*gewu* 格物), a core concept in Zhu Xi's philosophy. This letter is translated below, while Chapter Four will examine Wang's interpretation of the concept in greater detail, situating it within the broader historical context of later debates.

"Da Gu Dongqiao shu" 答顧東橋書 ["Letter in Reply to Gu Dongqiao"]:[217]
Your letter says, "As I have heard, you told some students that the theory of investigating things to thoroughly understand the principles was like indulging in leisure while losing ambition.[218] I have also heard that you selected some teachings of Master Zhu, such as turning to the concise while getting tired of the complicated and nourishing the nature.[219] You marked these texts and showed them to other scholars, seeing them as the final conclusions of Master Zhu in his old age. I am afraid this is also not right."

[217] Gu Lin, also known as Dongqiao 東橋, was a scholar-official at Wang's time. As the whole letter is considerably long (approximately 10,000 words), only paragraphs concerning Zhu Xi's "final conclusions" (approximately 550 words) are translated here. Wing-tsit Chan provided a full translation of this letter, see Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, 91–117. Regarding its writing date, Qian Dehong mentioned this letter under the year 1525 in "Chronological Biography", yet he did not specify if it was written during that particular year. Given that the letter was first published in the later 1524 edition of *Chuanxi lu* and the preface mentioned in the text was written in 1515, this letter was most likely written between 1515 and 1524. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1427–1432. For the Chinese text, see Appendix 11 and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 50–51.

[218] In this sentence, Gu Lin quoted Zhu Xi's theory of "investigating things to thoroughly understand the principles" (*jiwu qiongli* 即物窮理). Zhu elaborated on this in his commentaries on *Daxue*, see Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集註 [*Chapter-and-Verse Commentaries on the Four Books*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 6–7.

[219] The text concerning "turning to the concise while getting tired of the complicated" was selected from Zhu Xi's letter "Yu Liu Zicheng" 與劉子澄 ["Letter to Liu Zicheng"]. The text "nourishing the nature" was from "Da Lü Ziyue" 答呂子約 ["Letter in Reply to Lü Ziyue"]; see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 146.

The theory of investigating things told by Master Zhu is about "investigating things to thoroughly understand the principles".[220] It refers to seeking the definite principles inside all things and affairs. This theory means that one shall set one's mind to search for the principles inside things and affairs. In this case, the "mind" and the "principles" are separated.

The idea of seeking principles inside things and affairs is like seeking the principle of filial piety in family relationships. If we seek the principle of filial piety in family relationships, will we eventually find it in our minds? Or will we eventually find it in our family members? Suppose it exists with our family members, then when they pass away, will we then lose the principle of filial piety? When we see a young child about to fall into a well, we all feel the principle of compassion. Does this principle of compassion exist with the young child? Or does it exist within the original consciousness of our minds?[221] Can we not let the child fall into the well?[222] Can we lend a hand and help the child? These situations are all related to the principle. Is it ultimately found in the young child? Or is it ultimately found in the original consciousness of our minds? Use this example above to see the principles of all things and affairs. They are all the same cases. Accordingly, we can see it is wrong to separate the mind and the principle.

Separating the mind and the principle was Gaozi's theory of external righteousness, which was seriously criticised by Mencius.[223] This theory represents "seeking after the external while neglecting the internal" and "noticing few essential points though having a broad knowledge", which you already knew.[224] Then why did this theory have such defects? Do you still think I was wrong when I said some people "indulge in leisure while losing ambition"? My understanding of acquiring knowledge by investigating things means extending the original consciousness of my mind to all things and affairs. The original consciousness of my mind is the principle of nature. When I extend the principles of my mind's original consciousness to all things and affairs, the principles of all things and affairs will have their positions. Extending the consciousness of my mind is acquiring knowledge. Letting the principles of all things and affairs have their positions is the investigation of things and affairs. In this case, the mind and the principle are united as one. Since the mind and the principle are united, my humble opinions above and my ideas about Master Zhu's final conclusions in his old age become self-evident.

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[220] See footnote 218.

[221] The Chinese text is 抑在於吾心之良心歟. In this sentence, *liangzhi* 良知 is one of the most characteristic concepts of Wang's philosophy. As mentioned in footnote 26, there are several translations of *liangzhi* as scholars give different interpretations of this concept in various contexts, such as "pure knowing" (David Nivison), "innate knowledge" (Wing-tsit Chan), and "original consciousness" (Tang Chun-I). Because Wang referred to the compassion people would naturally feel for a child in danger, the meaning of *liangzhi* was closer to "original consciousness" in this context. For the explanation of this translation given by Tang Chun-I, see Tang Chun-I, "The Development of the Concept of Moral Mind from Wang Yang-ming to Wang Chi", in *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, eds. William Theodore de Bary and the Conference on Ming Thought (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 101.

[222] This example was first used by Mencius 孟子 (c. 372–289 BCE) to elaborate on the idea of everyone having a mind that cannot bear to see others suffering. See *Mengzi*, 2A.6.

[223] In *Mengzi*, a conversation between Mencius and the philosopher Gaozi 告子(c. 400s–c.350s BCE) was recorded, in which the latter argued that righteousness was external rather than internal. See *Mengzi*, 6A.5.

[224] The words in quotation marks were written by Gu Lin in his letter to Wang. Apart from mentioning these words here, Wang also copied them from Gu Lin's letter at the beginning of his reply.

In contrast to his reply to Gu Lin, where Wang focused on theoretical interpretations of key Confucian concepts, his letter to another scholar, Luo Qinshun, places greater emphasis on clarifying his primary intention behind proposing Zhu Xi's "final conclusions".[225] Rather than directly addressing Luo's specific questions—particularly regarding his criteria for selecting Zhu's texts as proof of more mature thought—Wang stressed his overall alignment with Zhu. The letter is translated below:

> "Da Luo Zheng'an shaozai shu" 答羅整庵少宰書 ["Letter in Reply to the Vice Minister of Personnel, Luo Zheng'an"]:[226]
> The reason you have doubts about my theory of the investigation of things must be that you believe it affirms the internal and opposes the external. You must think that it focuses only on the efforts of self-reflection and self-examination but neglects the benefits of explanation, study, and discussion. You must feel that it concentrates entirely on the most fundamental and essential principles but loses sight of the additional and minor details. And you must feel that it indulges itself in the strange teachings of lifeless introspection and emptiness, failing to thoroughly understand the changes in things, principles, and human affairs.[227] If that were the case, would it only be a crime against Confucianism and Master Zhu? It would be an evil belief that could deceive people, betray the doctrine, and disturb the right path. I would be destined for death, a punishment everyone, especially someone as honest as you, should impose upon me. If that were the case, all people would realise its wrongness, as long as they understand anything about the textual examination or know anything about the introductory comments of wise men of the past. No doubt someone as knowledgeable as you would realise that as well.
>
> Every time I share my opinions on the investigation of things, I include the nine rules concluded by Master Zhu.[228] However, our ideas slightly differ in the priority and

[225] See footnote 16 for basic information about Luo Qinshun. For Luo's earlier letter addressed to Wang, see *Kunzhi ji*, 141–146.
[226]The word *shaozai* 少宰 was a title used to address the vice minister of personnel (*libu shilang* 吏部侍郎) during the Ming dynasty. Zheng'an 整庵 was Luo's art name. According to "Chronological Biography", Wang's reply to Luo was written in 1520; see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1404–1406. Given the length of the letter and the range of issues addressed in Wang's reply to Luo, only the paragraphs directly relevant to Zhu Xi's "final conclusions" are translated here. For the Chinese text, see Appendix 12 and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 84–89. Wing-tsit Chan provided a full translation of this letter; see Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, 157–165.
[227] The teachings of "lifeless introspection and emptiness" (*kugao xuji* 枯槁虛寂) might possibly refer to the theories of Buddhism and Daoism. Wang criticised Buddhism and Daoism for turning to emptiness on several occasions. For example, he once told his students that the state could not be ruled by Buddhism as the Buddhist belief would lead people gradually to emptiness. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 121.
[228] Zhu Xi summarised several rules of the investigation of things in *Daxue huowen* (see footnote 186). These rules were quoted from Cheng Yi's sayings, see Cai Mo 蔡模 (1188–1246), *Jinsi xulu* 近思續錄 [*Further Reflections on Things at Hand*] (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2015), 29–31.

functions of these rules. Although the difference is inappreciable, it should be demonstrated since a slight difference would eventually lead to a huge error.

Mencius argued against Yang (Yangzi/Yang Zhu) and Mo (Mozi/Mo Di) for having no regard for the father and the ruler.[229] These two scholars were both wise men of their times. If they had been born in the same era as Mencius, Mencius would possibly have acknowledged their good qualities. The theory of "universal love" upheld by Mozi went too far in practising benevolence, while the theory of "self-preservation" advocated by Yangzi went too far in practising righteousness. Did these theories extinguish the true principles and disturb the standard rules so profoundly that they have confounded everyone in the world? The harm brought by the schools of Yang and Mo had developed, and thus Mencius compared them to beasts and barbarians.[230] Hence, they were called "destroying later generations of the world with their teachings".[231]

As for the defects in present learning, are they caused by over-practising benevolence? Are they caused by over-practising righteousness? Or are they caused by over-practising the unkind and the unjust? I am not sure how present learning will look if we compare it to a fierce flood or savage beats. Mencius said, "Am I fond of arguing? I have no choice but to do so."[232] The theories of Yang and Mo permeated the world. People who revered the teachings of Yang and Mo in Mencius's time could not have been fewer than people who honoured the teachings of Master Zhu in our time. But Mencius alone argued relentlessly among those people. Alas, how sad to think about that!

Han Yu said, "The harm brought by Buddhism and Daoism is greater than that by Yang and Mo."[233] Mencius could not have retrieved the situation before it was impaired, yet Han Yu tried to save it after it was damaged. Han Yu overestimated his ability and thus put himself in danger. He would perish with no one rescuing him.[234] Alas! I have overestimated my ability even more. No wonder I would put myself in danger. I would perish without anyone saving me as well. Among those who are laughing merrily, I am the only person who weeps and sighs. While all others are following the false theories pleasantly, I alone worry with an aching head and knit eyebrows. If it is not caused by my absolute madness, then a great bitterness must be hidden somewhere in this situation. Except the most humane people of the world, who else can notice that?

When I wrote the book *Master Zhu's Final Conclusions Arrived Late at Life*, I had no choice but to do so. It is true that I did not successfully verify all passages to find out

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[229] Yang and Mo refer to Yang Zhu 楊朱 (c.440–c.360 BCE) and Mo Di 墨翟 (c.470–c.391 BCE), also known as Yangzi 楊子 (Master Yang) and Mozi 墨子 (Master Mo). In *Mengzi*, Mencius criticised their followers for "not acknowledging their fathers and rulers" (*wufu wujun* 無父無君). He regarded this situation as "a state of the beasts" (*shi qinshou ye* 是禽獸也). See *Mengzi*, 3A.9.

[230] Ibid.

[231] Wang quoted Lu Jiuyuan in this sentence, see *Xiangshan xiansheng quanji* 象山先生全集 [*Complete Works of Master Xiangshan*], *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 ed., juan 1, 3a.

[232] *Mengzi*, 3A.9.

[233] This is quoted from a letter written by Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), see Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), *Changli wenji* 昌黎文集 [*The Collected Writings of Changli*], *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 ed., juan 18, 10a–14b.

[234] Ibid. These are also quotations from Han Yu.

whether they were written in the earlier or later stage of Master Zhu's life. However, although not every passage was assuredly written in Master Zhu's late life, most passages certainly were. Nevertheless, my main idea was to settle the dispute with some concessions. By this means, I could clarify that the theory of investigating things was of great importance. I have seen the doctrine of Master Zhu just like the revelation from the deities all my life.[235] If I ever go further apart from his doctrine, I will truly feel uneasiness in my heart. Therefore, I cannot help but write this book. "Those who understand me say my heart is worried, and yet those who do not understand me think I am after something."[236] As a matter of fact, my true intention is that I cannot bear to contradict Master Zhu. When I have no choice but to contradict him, it is because the Way is unalterable, and the Way cannot be known to people if I do not correct him. Regarding your comment that I disagree with Master Zhu on purpose, how could I dare to deceive myself?

The Way is the shared doctrine of the world. The Learning is the shared learning of the world. Neither Master Zhu nor Confucius can make them their private possession. As the Way and the Learning belong to the whole world, all we should do is discuss them openly. Accordingly, if an opinion is right, it will benefit us even though it differs from our ideas. If an opinion is wrong, it will do harm to us even though it coincides with our views. We will undoubtedly like those opinions that benefit us while disliking those that do harm to us. As to my present theories, Master Zhu might not dislike them even if they possibly differ from his. The errors of the true gentlemen are like the eclipses of the sun and moon. When they redress their errors, all people will look up to them. Nevertheless, the mean fellows will no doubt cover up their faults. Although I am not as wise as those gentlemen, I surely do not dare to treat Master Zhu with a mean person's mind.

The above translations present key texts related to Wang's writings on Zhu Xi's so-called "final conclusions". While these translations serve as primary sources, it is also useful to categorise and summarise their key features to provide an overview. The table below outlines the basic characteristics of each source.

Titles or topics	Dates	Authors or participants	Arguments concerning Zhu Xi's final conclusions
"Preface to Final Conclusions"	1515	Author: Wang Shouren	a. Wang's teachings aligned with those of Zhu. b. Scholars of that time had vain adherence to the tentative ideas of Zhu's midlife.

[235] The Chinese text is 平生於朱子之說如神明蓍龜. The original meaning of the term *shigui* 蓍龜 was "the stalks and the tortoise shell", which were used in divination in ancient China. This term here referred to the revelation from the deities (*shenming* 神明).

[236] The Chinese text is 知我者, 謂我心憂, 不知我者, 謂我何求. These lines were quoted from the poem *Shuli* 黍離 in *Shijing*. See quotation at Airs of the Royal Domain 王風.65.

			They failed to pursue his more mature teachings. c. Contemporary scholars obscured the correct learning.
A foreword to the preface	1572	Author: Qian Dehong	a. Wang's teachings aligned with those of Zhu.
A postscript to the preface	1518	Author: Yuan Qinglin	a. Wang's teachings aligned with those of Zhu. b. Wang's compilation showed other students how to arrive at the correct path of learning.
A conversation on students selecting the words of Master Zhu for criticism	1514–1518	Participants: Wang Shouren and some of his students (unnamed)	a. Wang's ultimate purpose had never been different from that of Zhu.
A conversation between Wang and Yang Shide	1515–1518	Participants: Wang Shouren, Yang Shide, and some other students (unnamed)	a. Zhu regretted prioritising writing books rather than self-cultivating in his later life.
"Letter to Anzhi"	1519	Author: Wang Shouren Recipient: a friend called Anzhi	a. The compilation of *Final Conclusions* saved Wang from the disturbance brought by criticism. b. Critics could not find an excuse for their anger as *Final Conclusions* only included Zhu's own words.
"Letter in Reply to Gu Dongqiao"	1515–1524	Author: Wang Shouren Recipient: Gu Lin	a. An elaboration on Wang's understanding of the mind and the principle, which had been challenged by the recipient.
"Letter in Reply to the Vice Minister of Personnel, Luo Zheng'an"	1520	Author: Wang Shouren Recipient: Luo Qinshun	b. Wang did not successfully verify if all passages were from earlier or later stages of Zhu's life but argued most were. c. Wang's main aim was to settle the dispute with concessions, in order to emphasise the theory of investigating things.

The table makes clear that after composing the preface to his selection of Zhu Xi's final conclusions, Wang continued to discuss this theme over the next decade (1515–1524). While the conversation concerning students criticising Zhu's writings may have taken place slightly earlier, the table shows that Wang returned to Zhu's final conclusions on at least four

subsequent occasions: in his dialogue with Yang Shide, his letter to Anzhi, and his replies to Gu Lin and Luo Qinshun. These instances demonstrate that "Preface to Final Conclusions" was not an isolated statement, but part of a sustained engagement central to Wang's intellectual development. The translated texts and accompanying summaries above thus provide essential context for the more detailed analysis of the preface that follows—particularly the passage in which Wang reflected on his close involvement in Buddhism and Daoism.

With the additional materials translated and their key features outlined, the next section turns to examine how these discussions relate to the preface. It begins by exploring the aims and functions of *Final Conclusions*, as stated or implied in the texts above.

2. The aims and functions of *Final Conclusions*

The primary aim of *Final Conclusions* was clearly articulated by Wang in the preface and reiterated by Qian Dehong in the foreword: to demonstrate that Wang's teachings did not conflict with those of Zhu Xi.[237] This claim rested on the argument that Zhu, in his later years, revised some of his earlier ideas—an evolution that aligned his "final conclusions" with Wang's views. Wang further elaborated on this goal in later letters. For instance, he wrote to his friend Anzhi that *Final Conclusions* was compiled to shield himself from the disturbance caused by critics.[238] Similarly, in another letter, he stated that he had no choice

[237] In the preface, Wang wrote "I feel fortunate that my ideas are not in conflict with those of Master Zhu, and I am pleased that Master Zhu grasped our shared ideas before me", following his argument that Zhu had arrived at his final conclusions through a process of awakening. See p. 89. In the foreword by Qian Dehong, it is similarly stated that Wang expressed joy upon confirming his alignment with Zhu Xi's mature insights. See p. 97.
[238] Wang also explained that the publication of *Final Conclusions* had helped him unexpectedly as it could save him greatly from some efforts of talking and arguing. See pp. 101–102.

but to compile *Final Conclusions*.[239] He explained his aim as to "settle the dispute with some concessions" and to reaffirm "the theory of investigating things".[240] These statements indicate that *Final Conclusions* was written and published in response to criticism and controversy surrounding Wang's teachings, particularly regarding his potential deviation from Zhu's doctrine.

Wang appears to have believed that *Final Conclusions* succeeded in both demonstrating his discovery of Zhu Xi's final conclusions and deflecting criticism from opponents. He remarked that the compilation had "unexpectedly" helped him avoid direct confrontation, since he had merely presented "the words spoken by Master Zhu without adding a single word".[241] He was confident that even those with strong prejudices could not "find an excuse for their anger".[242] Beyond countering criticism, the work also served a pedagogical purpose: to clarify the true path of Confucian learning. In his preface, Wang explained that *Final Conclusions* was written in response to the widespread distortion of Zhu Xi's teachings by contemporary scholars.[243] In this context, his compilation functioned both a corrective and as a reaffirmation of the true Confucian doctrine—a role later echoed by Yuan Qinglin in his postscript, where he praised the compilation as a model of correct learning.[244]

Despite Wang's confidence in *Final Conclusions*—as a means of presenting his findings, addressing criticism, and educating others—it did not receive universal acceptance. As shown in two of Wang's letters translated above, both Gu Lin and Luo Qinshun expressed doubts

[239] See the translation of "Letter in Reply to the Vice Minister of Personnel, Luo Zheng'an" above (pp. 105–106).
[240] See p. 106.
[241] See the translation of "Letter to Anzhi" above (pp. 101–102).
[242] See p. 102.
[243] See p. 89.
[244] See the translation of Yuan Qinglin's postscript above (pp. 98–99).

about his selection of Zhu Xi's texts. Gu Lin's objections centred on the interpretation of specific philosophical concepts. He questioned whether Zhu's theory of investigating things should be understood as "indulging in leisure while losing ambition", and whether certain texts could legitimately be regarded as Zhu's final conclusions in old age.[245] In response, Wang addressed the investigation of things in his reply, ultimately concluding that his interpretation of Zhu's later views was self-evident.[246] In doing so, he directly countered Gu's objections regarding both his selection of texts and his reading of Zhu's philosophy, offering a firm clarification and defence of his position.

In contrast to Gu Lin—who questioned whether the selected texts reflected a shift in Zhu Xi's later thought—Luo Qinshun challenged their dating.[247] Specifically, he doubted whether certain passages included in *Final Conclusions* were in fact written during Zhu's final years.[248] Since Wang's central claim rested on the premise that these texts represented Zhu's "final conclusions arrived late at life", Luo's challenge posed a serious threat to the credibility of Wang's work.

In his reply, Wang acknowledged errors in verifying the dates of some texts.[249] Given that his argument depended on accurately identifying Zhu's later writings as evidence of a shift in thought, this admission weakened the foundation of his claim. Although Wang insisted that

[245] See p. 103.
[246] This discussion focused on the relationship between the mind and the principle. Wang argued that in Zhu Xi's old theory, the mind and the principle were separated. He then demonstrated his theory of how these two elements were united, which was in accord with Zhu's texts of "turning to the concise while getting tired of the complicated" and "nourishing the nature". See p. 103.
[247] See pp. 104–106.
[248] Wang responded to the question of dating at the end of his rely to Luo; see pp. 105–106. For Luo's full challenge, see *Kunzhi ji*, 141–146.
[249] See pp. 105–106.

most of the selected texts were indeed written late in Zhu's life—and that all supported his broader thesis—he offered no substantive rebuttal to Luo's critique.[250]

As a result, despite Wang's assertion that *Final Conclusions* effectively demonstrated his findings, addressed criticism, and clarified Confucian learning, this flaw significantly undermined the strength of his argument. Moreover, beyond Luo Qinshun and Gu Lin, later Qing scholars also questioned the credibility of *Final Conclusions* —among them the Confucian Zhang Boxing, previously introduced in the thesis' Introduction.[251] In Zhang's account, Wang "merely struggled to reply" to Luo's forceful challenge.[252] Therefore, the compilation does not appear to have succeed in deflecting further critique, as shown by the responses of both contemporary Ming scholars and later figures such as Zhang Boxing.

3. Wang Shouren's self-positioning through his reflection on Buddhism and Daoism

Having analysed the texts related to Zhu Xi's "final conclusions", this section returns to an earlier question: why did Wang include a detailed account of his Buddhist and Daoist engagements in his preface, when no other passage in *Final Conclusions* mention either religion? In this context, the previously discussed aims and functions of *Final Conclusions* help clarify Wang's reasoning.

[250] Wang's explanation was that "although not every passage was assuredly written in Master Zhu's late life, most passages certainly were." He also highlighted that his main idea was to "settle the dispute with some concessions". See p. 106.
[251] See the translation of Zhang Boxing's "Letter to Chen Yuli" above (pp. 6–7).
[252] See p. 6.

One possible explanation is that Wang used his personal narrative to demonstrate a broader critique of Confucian scholars who had distorted the correct learning—a theme consistent throughout *Final Conclusions*. As noted earlier, Wang's engagement with non-Confucian traditions culminated not in a direct rejection of Buddhism or Daoism, but in an awakening to Confucianism. He attributed his diversion to the inadequacy of prevailing Confucian theories, which had pushed many—including himself—towards the alternative traditions. This view aligns with his claim in "Preface to Final Conclusions" that neglect of Zhu's mature views had led to the confusion of correct learning. While Wang refrained from explicitly criticising individual scholars, he consistently asserted that *Final Conclusions* was intended to clarify Zhu's doctrine and guide others back to the correct path. His narrative of Buddhist and Daoist engagements thus served as an autobiographical example reinforcing his broader argument: that internal distortions within Confucianism—not the lure of Buddhism and Daoism—were the ultimate source of intellectual misdirection.

A second explanation is rhetorical: Wang's personal narrative served to legitimise his own theory of Confucian learning. By contrasting his interpretation, grounded in Zhu Xi's final conclusions, with the inadequate readings of his contemporaries, he framed his position as both orthodox and authoritative. Since Zhu's teachings remained dominant in Wang's time, claiming alignment with Zhu's mature thought lent credibility to Wang's doctrinal stance. The narrative of Buddhist and Daoist engagements thus became a strategic tool: distinguishing his intellectual development, defending it against criticism, and promoting it as a path culminating in Confucian awakening—the same destination, Wang asserted, that the widely respected Master Zhu Xi had ultimately reached.

Finally, Wang's narrative may serve a deeper philosophical purpose. As discussed in Chapter One, Wang argued that even Buddhist teachings surpassed those of incompetent Confucians—a point made both in "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" and reiterated here. The consistency between these two texts suggests that Wang was articulating a hierarchical framework: inferior forms of Confucianism fell below Buddhism and Daoism, while authentic Confucian doctrine remained supreme. From this perspective, "Preface to Final Conclusions" does more than recount personal experience; it contributes to Wang's larger intellectual project of grading multiple traditions—exposing misguided Confucianism as not only internally flawed, but less compelling than rival schools.

IV. Conclusion

This chapter has conducted a close examination of "Preface to Final Conclusions" and related sources concerning its key theme—Zhu Xi's final conclusions—to understand Wang Shouren's self-positioning as a Confucian in light of his prior engagements with Buddhism and Daoism. The inclusion of additional materials—Wang's letters discussing Zhu Xi's "final conclusions", as well as his disciples' foreword and postscript to its publication—has provided a more comprehensive picture of how he mapped both the identity of a Confucian and the character of Confucian scholarship. The findings show that in explaining his Buddhist and Daoist experiences, Wang not only presented himself as a true Confucian but, more significantly, actively revalued contemporary Confucian tradition.

The detailed analysis of the preface suggests that Wang ultimately situated himself within Confucianism, framing his earlier engagements with Buddhism and Daoism—though non-Confucian in appearance—as a misguided yet sincere pursuit of correct learning that

culminated in an awakening to the highest Confucian doctrine. In this sense, he fashioned himself as a Confucian learner who, like many of his contemporaries, had been drawn to non-Confucian traditions because of inadequacies within prevailing Confucian interpretations. Cross-reading the preface with Wang's letters shows that, upon realising these inadequacies, he redefined his role as one who not only corrected his own path but also exposed the deeper problem: the distortions of the Confucian discourse itself. He clarified authentic doctrine for others, using his personal experience as proof. While he blamed certain Confucian scholars for these distortions, he was careful to position his critique not against Confucianism itself, but against its debased versions. In his hierarchical framework, authentic Confucianism remained supreme, while Buddhism and Daoism appeared relevant only because flawed Confucian interpretations had temporarily made them seem more reliable guides for seekers of truth.

This hierarchy was not merely defensive. It was a bold revaluation that redefined both Zhu Xi's authority and the place of non-Confucian traditions in Wang's intellectual journey. By claiming that Zhu himself reached his final conclusions only after a process of awakening, Wang argued that some of Zhu's earlier ideas were provisional and that later generations of Zhu's followers had further distorted his teachings. In this framing, Wang not only leveraged Zhu's orthodoxy to legitimise himself but also positioned his own insights as surpassing Zhu's early works. Most importantly, this allowed him to cast his temporary turn towards Buddhism and Daoism not as a betrayal of Confucianism, but as a step forward towards its truest form. His engagement with non-Confucian traditions thus became reinterpreted as evidence of fidelity—proof that he, more than his peers, had grasped the Confucian Way.

Chapter Three: A Historical Reconstruction of Wang Shouren's Earlier Engagements with Buddhism and Daoism

I. Introduction

In the previous two chapters, two key texts by Wang regarding his earlier engagements with Buddhism and Daoism have been examined. Both texts reveal Wang's characteristic views of a hierarchical framework of thought, demonstrating how he gradually situated himself within the Confucian tradition through sustained reflection on his engagements with non-Confucian beliefs. Nevertheless, while the matter of how Wang retrospectively evaluated his Buddhist and Daoist commitments has been discussed, the question of what he actually experienced during those periods of devotion remains open. Whereas the earlier analysis has focused on Wang's attitudes towards Buddhism and Daoism, the present chapter turns to the historical activities that shaped those attitudes. Together, these lines of enquiry provide a more thorough picture of Wang's self-positioning vis-à-vis the two non-Confucian traditions, demonstrating how he constructed and presented his intellectual identity through both lived experience and retrospection.

This chapter investigates Wang's involvement in Buddhism and Daoism in light of the two texts analysed earlier—"Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" and "Preface to Final Conclusions". As the memorial sought to dissuade the emperor from a Buddhist inclination and the preface aimed to align Wang's teachings with Zhu Xi's "final conclusions", one may ask how Wang's reflections on his past Buddhist and Daoist affiliations functioned within these discussions. Arguably, his autobiographical narrative served more as a strategic device

than as a central concern, deployed either to remonstrate with the emperor or to respond to certain critics. Under these circumstances, a more comprehensive reconstruction of Wang's actual Buddhist and Daoist engagements—based on a close analysis of historical sources—can help assess the extent to which his lived experience aligns with his retrospective accounts. Such a reconstruction offers further insights into how his personal narrative contributed to broader discourses around his own position within the Confucian tradition, particularly in relation to the dominant Cheng–Zhu orthodoxy of his time.

This chapter draws on two types of historical sources: records of Wang's lived experience and sources of his teachings and writings. Both are essential for examining his engagements with Buddhism and Daoism in his youth. The first category, focusing on Wang's biography, sheds light on the events and circumstances that contributed to his early interest in these traditions, as well as on his later reflection upon them. The second category—texts authored by Wang—demonstrates the intellectual trajectory that led to the transformation of his views. Together, these sources enable a comprehensive reconstruction of Wang's past devotion to Buddhism and Daoism.

The primary source in the first category is the comprehensive "Chronological Biography", compiled by his disciples who closely followed him in both intellectual and personal spheres.[253] As a product of those intimately familiar with Wang's life and thought, "Chronological Biography" offers a relatively credible account. Supplementary materials include historical records compiled by later scholars, such as a chapter in *Mingshi* and a biography in *Mingru xue'an*.[254] As these authors consulted pre-existing documents to

[253] See pp. 24–25. Relevant entries are independently translated in this chapter; the corresponding Chinese texts are provided in the Appendix.
[254] See pp. 27–28.

construct biographies of Wang, their accounts provide further insight into the broader historical context of Wang's experiences with Buddhism and Daoism.

The second category comprises Wang's own writings, particularly his philosophical letters, in which he offers retrospective reflections on his earlier devotion to Buddhism and Daoism. These first-person narratives are invaluable for tracing the evolution of his attitudes. In addition, certain teachings recorded by his disciples in *Chuanxi lu* may contain recollections of informal conversations in which Wang reflected on his past experiences.[255] The following section will examine the genres, styles, and credibility of these sources in greater detail.

Grounded in a close examination of historical sources, this chapter first investigates the trajectory of Wang's youthful devotion to Buddhism and Daoism as recorded in "Chronological Biography", focusing on its inception and eventual decline. It then turns to Wang's later reflections on these experiences, as articulated in his own teachings and writings. This analysis lays the foundation for the subsequent chapter, which includes an examination of how Wang's disciples transmitted and reshaped the narrative of his past devotion in their efforts to promote his thought. Understanding these interpretive processes is essential not only to assessing how Wang reflected on the two non-Confucian traditions, but also to evaluating how his reflections were received and reconfigured within and beyond his intellectual lineage. By integrating Wang's self-presentation with the reception by his followers and critics, this thesis presents a detailed, critically informed reconstruction of his involvement with Buddhism and Daoism—thereby exploring both the self-presentation and the evolving reception of his intellectual identity through the lens of these non-Confucian engagements.

[255] See pp. 28–30.

II. An Analysis of the Related Historical Sources

To initiate this chapter's engagement with historical materials, the following section outlines the criteria for selecting sources used to reconstruct Wang's early engagement with Buddhism and Daoism. Among the two source categories—biographical records and Wang's own accounts—those that meet three specified criteria will be prioritised. These selected texts will be translated and analysed in the pages that follow.

1. Criteria for selecting sources of Wang's earlier experiences with Buddhism and Daoism

The first criterion is that the text should reflect Wang's personal experience with Buddhism or Daoism. A text will not be selected if it solely describes a family tradition or primarily discusses another person's experience. For instance, Wang commented on another individual's devotion to these religions his "Da Ganquan" 答甘泉 ["Letter in Reply to Ganquan"].[256] This letter will not be used as a primary source, as it lacks reference to Wang's own experiences. However, comments of this kind will be discussed in the next chapter, which examines Wang's reflections on the broad appeal of non-Confucian traditions among his contemporaries.

[256] According to Wang, this person had been devoted to Daoism and Daoism but was lately filled with deep remorse. For the Chinese text, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol.1, 241. Ganquan 甘泉 was the art name of Zhan Ruoshui 湛若水 (1466–1560), a scholar-official and a friend of Wang. Wang and Zhan exchanged multiple letters, which can be found in the modern edition of Wang's *Collected Works*. For a biography of Zhan Ruoshui, see *Mingshi*, vol. 283, 7266–7268.

Other examples can be found in "Chronological Biography". The 1476 record includes a story of Wang's grandfather changing Wang's name after encountering a Buddhist monk.[257] Despite the indication of family influence under Buddhism, this text will not be chosen to examine Wang's personal experiences with Buddhism as Wang did not personally interact with the Buddhist monk in the story. In contrast, the following text excerpted from the 1488 record demonstrates one of Wang's earliest personal experiences with Buddhism and Daoism:[258]

> The first year of Hongzhi during Emperor Xiaozong's reign, *wushen* (1488).[259] The teacher was seventeen *sui*, living in Yue.[260]
>
> In the seventh month, the teacher personally welcomed his bride Madame Zhu at Hongdu.[261] The teacher's father-in-law Mister Zhu Yanghe was Assistant Administration Commissioner of Jiangxi.[262] The teacher went to the official bureau to send betrothal gifts. On his wedding day, the teacher went leisurely into Tiezhu Palace by chance.[263] He met a Daoist monk who was sitting cross-legged on a crouch. Then he kowtowed and hence was instructed on the doctrines of nourishing life. Thus, he sat opposite the monk and forgot to return. Mister Zhu sent people to chase after him. He did not return to Mister Zhu's residence until the next morning.

In this record, Wang personally visited a Daoist temple and encountered a Daoist monk from whom he learned about the Daoist life-nourishing doctrines. He was fascinated by this Daoist practice as he "sat opposite the monk and forgot to return". As this text shows Wang's own

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[257] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1346. This record has been briefly discussed in footnote 40.
[258] See Appendix (the 1488 entry) and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1347.
[259] Hongzhi 弘治 is the reign title of Ming Emperor Xiaozong 孝宗 (1470–1505).
[260] "Seventeen *sui*" follows traditional Chinese age reckoning (*xusui* 虛歲), in which a person is one at birth and adds a year at each Lunar New Year; it therefore usually corresponds to sixteen years old by modern reckoning. The place Yue 越 refers to Yuecheng 越城, Shanyin 山陰 County. Wang's family had been living in Shanyin until they moved to Beijing in 1482; see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1345.
[261] Hongdu 洪都 was an old name of Nanchang 南昌, Jiangxi. See *Mingshi*, vol. 43, 1054.
[262] The official rank of Assistant Administration Commissioner (*buzhengshi canyi* 布政使參議) was 4b during the Ming dynasty. For the English translation of this official title, see *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, s.v. "ts'ān-ì 參議".
[263] Tiezhu Palace 鐵柱宮, also known as Wanshou Palace 萬壽宮, was a Daoist temple in Nanchang, Jiangxi. See Fang Zhiyuan 方志遠 et al., eds., *Daming yitongzhi* 大明一統志 [*Records of the Unity of the Great Ming*] (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2017), 2173.

interest and involvement in Daoism, it can be considered a source of his early engagement with Daoism.

The second criterion is that a text should have at least one direct reference to Buddhism or Daoism, which could be a theory or practice of either religion. This is a pre-requisite for the discussion of Wang's actual engagement with Buddhism or Daoism, essential for examining the extent of Wang's involvement in non-Confucian belief. By this standard, a text will be selected if it provides a clear account of Wang's participation in Buddhism or Daoism. However, it will be approached more cautiously if it focuses on a place or person rather than a theory or practice of these traditions. It is worth noting that both cases mentioned above might appear in the same text. This text excerpted from the 1501 record is an example:[264]

> The fourteenth year, *xinyou* (1501). The teacher was thirty *sui*, living in the capital.
>
> The teacher was appointed to inspect the situation of the criminals in Jiangbei.[265] When the teacher inspected the convicts of the criminals, he redressed many mishandled cases. After he finished the mission, the teacher visited Mount Jiuhua and wrote "A Rhapsody of Travelling in Jiuhua".[266] He stayed in several Buddhist temples, such as Wuxiang Temple and Huacheng Temple.[267] At that time, there was a Daoist monk Cai Pengtou who was good at discussing Daoism.[268] The teacher treated him as an honourable guest and asked him for advice. Cai said, "It is not the right time yet." Some moments later, Cai dismissed people beside him and led the teacher to a room in the back. The teacher paid obeisance to him again and asked once more. Cai said, "It is not the right time yet." The teacher asked the third time. Cai said, "You have shown solemn courtesy in the back rooms, but you have never lost the appearance of an official." He smiled and left.

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[264] See Appendix (the 1501a entry) and *Wang Shouren quanji*, vol. 4, 1350–1351.
[265] Jiangbei 江北 was an area north of the Yangtze River.
[266] Mount Jiuhua 九華山 was located in Qingyang 青陽 County, Chizhou 池州 Prefecture. It is in today's Anhui 安徽 Province. See *Mingshi*, vol. 40, 927. For this rhapsody, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 2, 727–730.
[267] Wuxiang Temple 無相寺 and Huacheng Temple 化城寺 were both Buddhist temples in Mount Jiuhua. See Cai Lishen 蔡立身 (fl. 16th century), *Jiuhua shan zhi* 九華山志 [*Treatise on Mount Jiuhua*], Ming Wanli 萬曆 23rd year (1595) ed., juan 2, 4a–4b.
[268] As the phrase *pengtou* 蓬頭 means "dishevelled hair", it was likely a nickname for this Daoist monk. The real name of Cai Pengtou 蔡蓬頭 remains unknown. The word "Daoism" here is a tentative translation of *xian* 仙, which generally refers to the Daoist celestial beings and immortal persons. In this text, *xian* is likely a shortened term for *xianjia* 仙家 or *xianxue* 仙學, referring to the Daoist school.

The text above describes two stories that may indicate some connections with Buddhism or Daoism: First, Wang stayed in several Buddhist temples while visiting Mount Jiuhua, one of the Chinese Buddhism sacred mountains. Second, Wang asked for advice from a Daoist monk, Cai Pengtou. The first story may hint at some connections with Buddhism. Nevertheless, staying at Buddhist places may not necessarily demonstrate a religious devotion to the Buddhist belief, as touring renowned religious sites could be an ordinary activity for non-religious visitors. Since the relevant text did not elaborate on the purpose of Wang's stay in the Buddhist temples of Mount Jiuhua, this story would not be treated as a direct source for examining his involvement in Buddhism. By comparison, the second story—centring on the interaction between Wang and Cai Pengtou—may suggest a more tangible link to Daoism. As Wang approached Cai, a Daoist monk renowned for his insights into Daoism, for advice, Wang displayed a strong interest in Daoist teachings, which was proven further by his persistence in asking the monk three times. Therefore, the second story in this record is particularly useful for reconstructing Wang's engagements with non-Confucian schools.

It is worth noting that any text containing a direct reference to Buddhism or Daoism will be considered potentially relevant, regardless of whether it affirms Wang's personal involvement or explicitly denies it. In other words, texts in which Wang disclaimed any connection to these traditions are equally valuable for examining his experiences with them. By analysing what Wang considered not to be Buddhist or Daoist, this chapter explores how he drew boundaries between Confucian and non-Confucian traditions. One such example is the letter "Yu chenzhong zhusheng" 與辰中諸生 ["Letter to Students in Chenzhong"]

(1509), which may represent Wang's earliest known reflection on his engagement with Buddhism.[269] The translation is as follows:[270]

> What I have discussed earlier about meditating in a Buddhist temple is not meant as wishing to enter into *samādhi* through sitting meditation.[271] Because we are distracted by numerous things in daily life and thus unable to take care of ourselves, I wish to recommend this method to mend our learning by releasing and recollecting our thoughts. Mingdao (Cheng Hao) said, "When you just start to learn, you should know where you could put forth effort. When you have already learned, you should know where you have put forth effort."[272] My friends, you shall put your effort here so that you can make progress. You will later see that you have found the right place to put forth your effort.

In this letter, Wang argued that his earlier discussion about "meditating in a Buddhist temple", which seemed to resemble the Buddhist practice of *samādhi* in appearance, did not serve any Buddhist purpose. As he explained that his meditation was a method to "mend our learning by releasing and recollecting our thoughts", he reduced this activity's resemblance to Buddhism by defining it as a practical instruction of learning in everyday life—which he found recommendable to more people. Meanwhile, his quotation from the eminent Confucian Cheng Hao further reinforced the non-Buddhist nature of his meditation, lending authority to the claim that meditation, as a pragmatic method, could serve Confucian learning. Accordingly, this letter can be a valuable source for examining how Wang delineated the boundaries between Confucian and non-Confucian traditions, thereby revealing his evolving self-positioning in navigating across schools of thought. Hence, it will be analysed in more detail later in this chapter.

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[269] For the Chinese text, see Appendix 15 and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol.1, 162–163.
[270] The following paragraph is excerpted from the letter and independently translated. For another English translation, see Ching, *The Philosophical Letters of Wang Yang-ming*, 6–7.
[271] Wang used the Buddhist concept of "entering into *samādhi*" (*ruding* 入定) here, which referred to a state of equipoise achieved through meditation. *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, s.v. "入定", http://www.buddhism-dict.net, accessed 6 March 2022.
[272] Mingdao 明道 is Cheng Hao's art name. For this quotation, see Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), *Er Cheng ji* 二程集 [*Collected Works of the Two Chengs*], ed. Wang Xiaoyu 王孝魚 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 5.

The third criterion requires that a source present a historical narrative of the relevant event, as such accounts are essential for reconstructing of Wang's lived experience. This criterion will be used to assess the reliability of certain episodes in "Chronological Biography", distinguishing between factual reporting and possible hagiographical narrations or dramatised tales. For example, the following passage from the 1507 entry describes Wang's stay in a deserted Buddhist temple but does so in a stylised and likely embellished manner.[273]

> The second year, *dingmao* (1507). The teacher was thirty-six *sui*, living in Yue.
>
> In the summer, the teacher arrived in Qiantang in his exile. When the teacher came to Qiantang, Liu Jin sent some people to follow and spy on him.[274] The teacher reckoned that he might not be spared, so he spread a rumour that he had jumped into the river to get away. Thus, the teacher boarded a merchant ship to visit Zhoushan.[275] The trip met accidentally with a fierce hurricane. One evening, the ship reached the border with Min.[276] When the teacher went ashore, he ran dozens of miles on mountain paths. At night, he knocked at the door of a Buddhist temple to ask for lodging, but the monk did not let him in. He ran to an abandoned temple and slept there, leaning against the incense burner table. That temple was a tiger's den. At midnight, the tiger roared, wandering in the court. But it dared not enter the temple. At dawn, the monk thought that the teacher must have been killed by the tiger, so he was meant to pick up the teacher's luggage. When he saw the teacher was still asleep until awakened by his call, he said in astonishment, "You are not an ordinary person. Otherwise, how could you turn up safe and sound?" Then he invited the teacher to his temple.

From a historical-critical perspective, this story of Wang's miraculous survival after sleeping overnight in a tiger's den appears largely fictitious. Its narrative style resembles hagiography or popular literature more than factual reporting. Framed as the dramatic climax of Wang's adventure, the episode depicts him overcoming danger—presumably with supernatural assistance—which aligns more with the conventions of myth-making than with sober

[273] For the Chinese text, see Appendix (the 1507 entry) and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1353.
[274] Liu Jin 劉瑾 (1451–1510) was a eunuch official whom Wang defied. See *Mingshi*, vol. 304, 7786–7792.
[275] Zhoushan 舟山 is a region that consisted of several islands of Hangzhou Bay 杭州灣. During the Ming dynasty, it was under the administration of Ningbo Prefecture 寧波府, Zhejiang 浙江. See *Mingshi*, vol. 44, 1109–1110.
[276] Min 閩 is another name of Fujian 福建, a coastal province in southeast Ming China. Given that Fujian is the south of Zhejiang, Wang may have taken the trip heading south along the coastline.

biography. Such a portrayal may serve to elevate Wang as a figure of extraordinary virtue or to enhance the compilation's appeal through sensational storytelling. Given that the story's dramatic and literary elements undermine its credibility as a historical source, it will be excluded from the analysis of "Chronological Biography" in this chapter's reconstruction of Wang's involvement with Buddhism and Daoism.

Apart from historical sources that meet the three criteria mentioned above, some texts regarding Wang's relation to Confucianism will be discussed as well. In previous chapters, the thesis has demonstrated how Wang explained his Buddhist and Daoist engagements within a Confucian framework. According to Wang's accounts in "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" and "Preface to Final Conclusions", his earlier "confusion and exhaustion" caused by inadequate Confucian teachings drove him to "seek answers in Daoism and Buddhism"; and his later realisation of the authentic Confucian doctrine led him to "discard" those Buddhist and Daoist theories.[277] These statements suggest that Wang's involvement with Buddhism and Daoism was profoundly affected by his experiences with Confucianism. Accordingly, texts that may reveal Wang's progression along the Confucian path will be examined to understand his evolving attitudes towards Buddhism and Daoism. For instance, "Chronological Biography" marks 1505 as the beginning of Wang's teaching career:[278]

> The eighteenth year, *yichou* (1505). The teacher was thirty-four *sui*, living in the capital.
>
> This is the year when the teacher started to receive disciples. Scholars were fond of reading and reciting literature to excess. They no longer realised that there existed the studying of mind and body. The teacher was the first one to advocate it. He asked people to establish firm resolve to become sages in the first place. Those who heard of

[277] See the translation above (pp. 87–89).
[278] See Appendix (the 1505 entry) and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1352.

> it became gradually interested in the teacher's theory. Some of them were willing to bring gifts to the teacher's door. Therefore, the teacher concentrated on accepting students and giving lectures.
>
> However, as the way of becoming teachers and friends had long been abandoned, everyone saw the teacher as someone who, with a fondness for reputation, attracted attention by being unique. Only Mister Zhan Ruoshui, a bachelor in the Hanlin Academy, established his friendship with the teacher the moment they met.[279] They both pursued the ideal of promoting the teaching of the sages.

Unlike the previously discussed records of 1488 and 1501, which show Wang's endeavours to learn from several Daoists, this text above suggests that he established himself as a Confucian teacher when he started to receive disciples in 1505. Despite some negative reactions from other scholars, Wang found a like-minded friend Zhan Ruoshui 湛若水 (1466–1560) and continued the educational undertaking, which was regarded as a mission to promote Confucian doctrine.[280] This transition from a mere learner to a teacher and champion of Confucian doctrine indicated a deepened understanding and a strengthened involvement in Confucianism, given that Wang originated his pedagogical method of advocating "the studying of mind and body" and pursued his ideal of "promoting the teaching of the sages". It also poses the question of whether Wang transformed himself in a few years from a Daoism enthusiast seeking advice from Daoists into a Confucian educator promoting Confucianism, or if his identity was more complex, with his experiences in Daoism and Confucianism being intertwined. Therefore, this text regarding Wang's engagement in Confucianism can be valuable to the examination of his involvement in Buddhism and Daoism, as it will help evaluate how his relation to Confucianism might have influenced his stance on those non-Confucian traditions.

[279] A bachelor (*shujishi* 庶吉士) in the Hanlin Academy (*Hanlin yuan* 翰林院) held a junior position, sometimes without an official rank. See *Mingshi*, vol. 49, 1785–1789. See also *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, s.v. "Hàn-lìn yüàn 翰林院".
[280] See footnote 256.

2. The genres, styles, and functions of the historical sources

Before turning to the content of the selected historical sources, it is essential to briefly examine their genres, styles, and possible functions. These formal characteristics shape how Wang's past devotion to Buddhism and Daoism was presented and understood. A clear grasp of the textual structure and narrative style enables a more nuanced interpretation of how these sources frame Wang's self-positioning in relation to the two traditions.

As noted, two primary groups of sources underpin this reconstruction: biographical records of Wang's life and thought, and his own teachings and writings. Among these, "Chronological Biography", a chronological record of Wang's life, warrants particular attention. In the historiography of imperial China, chronicles of historical figures are typically classified as biographical texts that organise an individual's life events in chronological order.[281] Within this genre, "general chronicles" (*tongpu* 通譜) offer comprehensive coverage of diverse aspects of a subject's life.[282] The "Chronological Biography" conforms to this type, documenting a broad range of events—including Wang's early education, political career, scholarly activities, public recognition, and personal relationships—making it a foundational source for reconstructing both his lived experience and intellectual development.

Compiled, edited, and prefaced by Wang's disciples,[283] "Chronological Biography" was acclaimed by Liang Qichao as an "unprecedented fine work" of significant historical value.[284]

[281] Lai Xinxia 來新夏 and Xu Jianhua 徐建華, *Zhongguo de nianpu yu jiapu* 中國的年譜與家譜 [*Chinese Chronicles and Family Genealogies*] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1997), 1–2.
[282] Lai and Xu, *Zhongguo de nianpu yu jiapu*, 31–33.
[283] See pp. 24–25.
[284] Liang Qichao 梁啓超, "Zhongguo lishi yanjiufa bubian" 中國歷史研究法補編 ["Supplement to Research Methods for Chinese History"], in *Zhongguo lishi yanjiufa* 中國歷史研究法 [*Research Methods for Chinese History*], ed. Liang Qichao 梁啓超 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2011), 211–212.

Liang also credited it with pioneering the "main thread and subdivisions" (*gangmu* 綱目) format: each year's entries are unified around central events (main threads), followed by elaborative details (subdivisions), allowing for both chronological clarity and thematic coherence.[285] This structural innovation enhances this work's utility for tracing the development of interconnected events, making it indispensable for understanding the contours of Wang's intellectual evolution.

Among the extant editions of "Chronological Biography", Qian Dehong's five-volume compilation is widely regarded as one of most valuable accounts of Wang's life.[286] Despite its reputational authority, however, this work contains notable flaws in narrating unusual events. As seen in the translated passage above, Qian vividly recounted extraordinary incidents—such as Wang's miraculous survival after sleeping in a tiger's den—in a manner more evocative of hagiography than historical documentation. Such dramatisation raises doubts about the reliability of certain episodes and prompts the question of whether these accounts should be read as historical records or as hagiographical portrayals of a revered figure.

This narrative style is not unique to Qian. The same tiger-den episode appears in four other chronological accounts compiled by subsequent scholars, as well as in a biography by another Wang's disciple Huang Wan 黃綰 (1480–1554).[287] The consistency of these accounts

[285] Liang, *Zhongguo lishi yanjiufa*, 231.
[286] According to Qian's preface, the first edition of "Chronological Biography" was completed in the *guihai* 癸亥 year, which is equivalent to 1563 on the Gregorian calendar. See *Wang Yangming quanji,* vol. 4, 1499. See also Zhang Kewei 张克伟, "*Wang Yangming nianpu* wenti suoyi" 《王陽明年譜》問題瑣議 ["A Detailed Discussion on 'The Chronological Biography of Wang Yangming'"], *Guji zhengli yanjiu xuekan* 古籍整理研究学刊 no. 4 (1992):12–14.
[287] Huang Wan's biography was included in the modern edition of Wang's collected works, see Wang, *Wang Yangming quanji,* vol. 4, 1556–1557. For those later chronicles, see: Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602), *Yangming xiansheng nianpu* 陽明先生年譜 [*The Chronological Biography of Master Yangming*], Ming Jiajing 嘉靖 42rd

suggests that Wang's followers may have shared a consensus that extraordinary tales were acceptable—perhaps even desirable—in shaping their teacher's public image. Moreover, the similarity in both content and style between Qian's version and later chronicles implies that subsequent compilers may have drawn directly from Qian's text, preserving not only its narrative elements but also its tone. This pattern points to a broader literary convention: dramatised storytelling was a common stylistic feature in Ming–Qing biographical writing. In light of this, any use of "Chronological Biography" for reconstructing Wang's early engagement with Buddhism and Daoism requires critical scrutiny of credibility and genre.

Wang's letters—originally preserved by his disciples in *Collected Writings*—constitute another important body of historical sources.[288] Many of those letters, addressed to Wang's students and close associates, reflect Wang's private thoughts on a range of issues, including Buddhism and Daoism. Despite their private nature, they were later published, both to preserve Wang's legacy and to disseminate his philosophy. Publishing private correspondence has been a longstanding tradition in the transmission of Chinese intellectual writings,[289] though it often provokes debate about what forms of personal expression were

year (1563) ed., juan 1, 9a–9b. Chen Longzheng 陳龍正 (1585–1645) and Ye Shaoshun 葉紹順 (c. 1550s–c. 1650s), *Yangming xiansheng nianpu* 陽明先生年譜 [*The Chronological Biography of Master Yangming*], Ming Chongzhen 崇禎 (c. 1630s) ed., juan 1, 11a–11b. Shi Bangyao 施邦曜 (1585–1644) ed., "Yangming xiansheng nianpu" 陽明先生年譜 ["The Chronological Biography of Master Yangming"], in *Yangming xiansheng jiyao sanbian* 陽明先生集要 [*The Collection of Important Works of Master Yangming*], *Sibu congkan* 四部叢刊 ed., 2. Yu Lin 俞嶙 (fl. 17th century), *Wang Yangming xiansheng nianpu* 王陽明先生年譜 [*The Chronological Biography of Master Wang Yangming*], Qing Kangxi 康熙 12th year (1673) ed., juan 1, 7a.

[288] Disciples such as Qian Dehong, Wang Ji, Zou Shouyi 鄒守益 (1491–1562), and Ouyang De 歐陽德 (1496–1554) compiled *Collected Writings* (see footnote 74), which included "Zhenglu" 正錄 ["Main Collection"], "Bielu" 別錄 ["Additional Collection"], and "Waiji" 外集 ["Supplement"]. In Xie Tingjie's *Complete Works*, he recollected *Collected Writings* and other compilations of Wang's works, adding texts from other scholar's writings as supplements. He also gathered a large number of Wang's letters and placed them in various volumes. Xie Tingjie's edition was the basis of the modern edition *Wang Yangming quanji.* For a textual biography, see "Bianjiao shuoming", in *Wang Yangming quanji,* vol. 1, 1–6.

[289] For example, the Song edition of *Hui'an xiansheng Zhu Wengong wenji* 晦庵先生朱文公文集 [*The Collected Writings of Master Hui'an Zhu Wengong*] contained a large number of Zhu Xi's letters, many of which were addressed to Zhu's family members and friends. The Ming edition of *Xiangshan xiansheng quanji* 象山先生全集 [*The Complete Works of Master Xiangshan*] also contained several volumes of Lu Jiuyuan's letters. The tradition of including private correspondence in the collected works of renowned intellectuals is

suitable for public consumption.[290] In this context, the publication of Wang's letters thus implies a shared view among his disciples that his reflections on Buddhism and Daoism were not only personal but also publicly meaningful. These letters, in other words, were not merely preserved but actively positioned to respond to contemporaneous challenge on Wang's teachings as overly Buddhist or Daoist.

This phenomenon raises the further question of whether Wang himself anticipated an eventual publication of his letters. Given that students frequently published their teacher's correspondence, and that Wang was already accepting disciples by the time the earliest of these letters regarding his reflection on Buddhism and Daoism was written, it is plausible that he wrote with an awareness of their future circulation.[291] In this case, both the composition and the publication of these letters may have served the same purpose: to clarify Wang's position on Buddhism and Daoism, and to present his past engagement with these non-Confucian traditions in a way that aligned with his evolving Confucian identity.

This possibility complicates Wang's intellectual self-positioning, as self-presentation and reception become increasingly intertwined. If Wang was already conscious of potential politicisation when articulating his position in seemingly private correspondence, then the process of reception may, in some sense, precede or even shape the acts of self-articulation.

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followed by modern scholars as well, see Chen Pingyuan 陳平原, "Quanji bianzuan de zongzhi, lichang, yu bianjie" 全集編纂的宗旨、立場與邊界 ["The Aims, Standpoints, and Borderline in Compiling the Collected Works"], *Nanfang wentan* 南方文壇 no. 6 (2022): 17–26.

[290] Fu Xiangxi 付祥喜, "Zhongguo xiandai zuojia shuxin de 'gong' yu 'si': yi Lu Xun shuxin yu wenji quanji bianzuan weili" 中國現代作家書信的"公"與"私"：以魯迅書信與文集、全集的編纂為例 ["The 'Public' and 'Private' Elements of the Letters of Chinese Modern Writers: A Study of the Letters of Lu Xun and the Compilations of *The Collected Writings* and *The Collected Works*"], *Wenxue pinglun* 文學評論 no. 3 (2022): 70–80.

[291] The "Chronological Biography" states that Wang started to receive disciples in 1515. As noted earlier, "Letter to Students in Chenzhong" probably marked the earliest occasion when Wang commented on his experience relating to "the two schools" (see p. 123). According to the *Collected Writings*, it was written in 1509, four years after Wang started to receive disciples.

This hypothesis invites broader critical reflection on the nature of historical sources, especially letters. If Wang's letters were composed not only to communicate personal views but also to shape public perception, then they contain elements of rhetorical construction despite their ostensibly private form. Their value lies not only in what they reveal about Wang's inner life, but in how they functioned to justify his earlier interest in Buddhism and Daoism. In doing so, they helped establish a Confucian identity that acknowledged such non-Confucian engagements as part of a legitimate—and ultimately transcended—intellectual journey. This dual function, shaped by both Wang's authorial intent and his followers' editorial interventions, will be examined in the following sections.

III. The Start and End of Wang Shouren's Devotion to Buddhism and Daoism in His Youth

With the preceding overview of key characteristics of the relevant historical sources, the next section turns to a close analysis of the texts themselves to reconstruct the timeline of Wang's past devotion to Buddhism and Daoism. This reconstruction draws primarily on Qian Dehong's "Chronological Biography", which highlights major milestones in Wang's life and provides detailed accounts of key events.

1. The beginning of an interest in Buddhism and Daoism

It can be difficult to pinpoint the start of Wang's interest in Buddhism and Daoism, as neither he nor his disciples named a particular event as the beginning of a close involvement in these traditions. Nevertheless, several records in "Chronological Biography" may shed light on his earlier experiences in his youth. As translated and discussed in the previous section, the 1488

record described a story of Wang learning the Daoist doctrine of nourishing life from a monk at Tiezhu Palace. This event, which occurred when Wang was sixteen, marks one of his earliest experiences with Buddhism and Daoism.[292] The following sentences are worth highlighting as they described Wang's interaction with the Daoist monk:

> On his wedding day, the teacher went leisurely into Tiezhu Palace by chance. He met a Daoist monk who was sitting cross-legged on a crouch. Then he kowtowed and hence was instructed on doctrines of nourishing life. Thus, he sat opposite the monk and forgot to return. Mister Zhu sent people to chase after him. He did not return to Mister Zhu's residence until the next morning.

This text shows Wang's strong interest in Daoism as it depicted a young individual fascinated by the Daoist teachings during an unplanned visit to a Daoist temple. More specifically, it noted that Wang stayed at the temple on his wedding day, sitting opposite a Daoist monk until retrieved by his father-in-law. The fact that this incident happened on his wedding day indicates that he might have been more interested in exploring Daoist doctrines than obliging by social norms, given that his behaviour might be deemed unconventional by Confucian wedding rituals.[293]

Considering Wang's evident interest in Daoism in 1488, the question arises as to whether his interest had already commenced prior to that year. There are two stories of Wang's earlier experiences in "Chronological Biography" that might contain references to Buddhism or Daoism, which could help to answer whether Wang had been under the influence of these

[292] Wang was seventeen *sui* (see footnote 260) during that year, which usually corresponds to sixteen years old in modern (Western) age calculation.
[293] *Ming huidian* recorded a set of rituals as official instructions on wedding ceremonies. During the Ming dynasty, the scholar-official society widely followed these instructions, which were rooted in Confucian etiquette, although ordinary uneducated people might not strictly adhere to those rituals. See *Ming huidian*, juan 69. 1a–8b.

traditions before his encounter with the Daoist monk at Tiezhu palace. The relevant events were recorded to happen in 1482:[294]

> The eighteenth year, *renyin* (1482). The teacher was eleven *sui*, living in the capital.[295]
>
> The teacher's father, the honourable Longshan, wished to receive the teacher's grandfather, the elder Zhuxuan, in the capital to look after him.[296] Hence, the teacher's grandfather brought him to the capital. He was only eleven years old. The teacher's grandfather visited Jinshan Temple on his way where he contentedly drank with some guests.[297] They intended to compose some poems. But before they had completed them, the teacher had created a poem that said: "I spotted Mount Jin, a mountain the size of a fist.[298] It smashed the reflection of the sky on Weiyang waters.[299] One could lean on Miaogao Terrace in inebriation to admire the moon.[300] Or play the flute in Long Cave to sleep.[301]" The guests were greatly astonished, then asked the teacher to write a poem about Biyue Lodge.[302] The teacher casually answered, "As the mountain is closer and the moon is farther, people feel the moon is smaller. Thus, they say this mountain is larger than the moon. If someone had eyes as large as the sky, one would have seen the mountain is small, and the moon is even larger."

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[294] See Appendix (the 1482a entry) and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1346.

[295] The capital (*jingshi* 京師) refers to Beijing, which replaced Nanjing as the capital of the Ming dynasty after 1421.

[296] Wang's father Wang Hua 王華 (1446–1522) was known as the honourable Longshan (Longshan gong 龍山公) as he used to study in Mount Longquan 龍泉山. Wang's grandfather Wang Lun 王倫 (fl. 15th century), also known as Wang Tianxu 王天敘, was addressed as the elder Zhuxuan (Zhuxuan weng 竹軒翁) as his art name was Zhuxuan 竹軒. Independent biographies of Wang Hua and Wang Lun have been collected in *Wang Yangming quanji*. The biography of Wang Hua was an epitaph written by the celebrated scholar Yang Yiqing; see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1531–1537. For the biography of Wang Lun, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1530.

[297] Jinshan Temple (*Jinshan si* 金山寺) was a famous Buddhist temple in Dantu 丹徒 County, Zhenjiang 鎮江 Prefecture. It is located in today's south-west Jiangsu 江蘇. For the geography of Dantu in the Ming dynasty, see *Mingshi*, vol. 40, 922–923. Qian Dehong recorded that before Wang travelled to Beijing, he lived in Shanyin County, Zhejiang. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1345. As Shanyin was to the southeast of Dantu while Dantu was to the southeast of Beijing, Mount Jin Temple was on the route to the capital. For historical maps of the peripheral areas of Beijing, the peripheral areas of Nanjing, and the province of Zhejiang, see Tan, *Zhongguo lishi dituji*, vol. VII, 44–46, 47–49, 68–69.

[298] The Jinshan Temple was built on a mountain called Mount Jin 金山.

[299] Weiyang waters (*weiyang shui* 維揚水) was the waters of the Yangtze River near Weiyang 維揚, which was another name of Yangzhou 揚州. The Yangtze River was chosen to be the dividing line between Yangzhou Prefecture and Zhenjiang Prefecture. As Mount Jin Temple was in the north of Zhenjiang by the Yangtze River, Weiyang waters were visible to Wang. For a historical map showing the locations of Yangzhou and Zhenjiang, see Tan, *Zhongguo lishi dituji*, 49.

[300] Miaogao Terrace 妙高臺 was a construction in Mount Jin Temple. He Shixue 何世學 (b. 1534), *Dantu xianzhi* 丹徒縣志 [*Gazetteer of Dantu County*], Ming Wanli 萬曆 (c. 1500s) ed., juan 1, 13a–15a.

[301] Long Cave 龍洞 referred to Bailong Cave 白龍洞, a touristic spot near Mount Jin Temple.

[302] Biyue Lodge 蔽月山房 was a building in Jinshan Temple.

> The next year, the teacher went to school. Because the teacher carried himself in an untrammelled heroic manner, his father often had worries about him. Only his grandfather understood the teacher's true character. One day, when the teacher and his schoolmates walked on Chang'an Street, they encountered a fortune-teller who said in surprise:[303] "I am going to read your face and you must remember my following words. When your beard reaches your collar, you will enter the divine realm. When your beard reaches your chest, you will form a divine embryo within yourself.[304] When your beard covers your navel, you will complete the process of divinisation.[305]" The teacher was moved by those words. So he started to meditate whenever he sat in front of books.[306]

The first event—Wang writing two poems at Jinshan Temple—suggests that he may have been exposed to Buddhism from a young age. In his second poem, Wang offered a dialectical argument of two sets of contradictory concepts. He demonstrated that the perception of distance (far or close) and size (small or large) depended on people's vision and perspectives, using the moon and the mountain as metaphors. In this case, the mechanism and the metaphors of Wang's poem writing might be derived from Buddhism. In the Buddhist sutra *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* 大般涅槃經, there is a dialogue of people observing the moon with limited fields of vision and from different perspectives.[307] It explains that some

[303] Chang'an Street 長安街 was a street in central Beijing, the capital of the Ming dynasty. See Long Wenbin 龍文彬 (1824–1893), "fangyu" 方域 ["Territorial Administration"], in *Ming huiyao* 明會要 [*Collection of Important Matters of the Ming*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1926), 1460. The term "fortune-teller" is a translation of *xiangshi* 相士, who could tell people's fortune and fates by reading their appearance and complexions. This skill was called "the art of physiognomy" (*xiangren shu* 相人術). It was one of the arts (*fangshu* 方術) in Chinese Daoism that foretold the auspicious (*ji* 吉) and the inauspicious (*xiong* 凶) through observation of natural phenomena. See *Zhonghua daojiao dacidian* 中華道教大辭典 [*Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Chinese Daoism*], ed. Hu Fuchen 胡孚琛, 5th ed. (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1995), s.v. "相人術".

[304] The phrase "your chest" is a translation of the Chinese text *shang dantai* 上丹臺. Judging by the context, this term should be an acupoint (*xuedao* 穴道) lower than the collar and yet higher than the other acupoint *xia dantian* 下丹田, which is translated as "your navel" in the following sentence. However, the term *shang dantai* 上丹臺 is not seen in Daoist classics or traditional Chinese medicine manuscripts. There is a possibility that *shang dantai* 上丹臺 was a spelling mistake of *shang dantian* 上丹田 or *dantai* 丹臺. Nevertheless, neither of *shang dantian* or *dantai* could fit the context here, because *shang dantian* is an acupoint on the face and *daitai* generally refers to the place where gods reside. See Li Shuhuan 李叔還 ed., *Daojiao dacidian* 道教大辭典 [*Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Daoism*] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1987), 27, 34.

[305] The phrase "your navel" is a translation of the Chinese text *xia dantian* 下丹田, an acupoint below the navel.

[306] In this sentence, "meditate" is the translation of *jingzuo ningsi* 靜坐凝思. This phrase refers to a practice of sitting motionlessly and concentrating attention, which was commonly seen in both Daoism and Buddhism. See Li ed., *Daojiao dacidian*, 655.

[307] *Taishō Tripitaka*, T. 0374, 12: 041a18–b20.

people falsely believed the moon as a celestial body would disappear and reappear because they failed to understand that Mount Meru, the sacred mountain in Buddhist cosmology, obscured their vision.[308] It also elaborates on how people could be confused by varied perceptions of the moon's size due to their different observing perspectives.[309] While the resemblance between Wang's poem and Buddhist dialogue does not confirm a direct connection, it does indicate a likelihood of early exposure. The fact that the poem was composed during a visit to a Buddhist temple—even if the visit was not religious in nature—further implies that Wang did not avoid Buddhist environments.

The second event from the same year—Wang's encounter with a fortune-teller—bears the features of a hagiographic narrative. Similar accounts of prodigious youths appearing in the biographies of eminent Confucians are common.[310] Although the image of Wang as an ten-year-old moved by prophetic words is of uncertain reliability, the detail that he began meditating afterwards merits attention. A later entry, from 1488, describes Wang approaching a Daoist monk meditating cross-legged at Tiezhu Palace—an interaction that suggests active interest. Given Wang's initiative, it is plausible that his curiosity about Daoism had earlier roots, potentially traceable to the 1482 episode.[311] Even if the fortune-teller narrative is partly

[308] This sutra was translated into Chinese during the Northern Liang 北涼 (397–460) time. See the Chinese translation at *Taishō Tripitaka*, T. 0374, 12: 041a18–a21.
[309] *Taishō Tripitaka*, T. 0374, 12: 041b15–b20.
[310] Compiling chronological biographies for eminent Confucians was an established tradition among Ming–Qing scholars. These biographies, often written by students of relevant Confucians, commonly contained hagiographic narratives of those Confucians who received acknowledgement or inspiration from unusual individuals during their youth. In "Baisha xiansheng xingzhuang" 白沙先生行狀 ["A Brief Biographical Sketch of Master Baisha"], Chen Xianzhang 陳獻章 (1428–1500) was praised for his skill in playing a stringed instrument and was asked, "You could play such a harmonious sound; would you not attain true wisdom one day?" See Ruan Rongling 阮榕齡 (fl. 19th century), *Bianding Baisha xiansheng nianpu* 編定白沙先生年譜 [*The Edited Chronological Biography of Master Baisha*], Qing Xianfeng 咸豐 (c. 1850s) ed., juan 1, 14a–15a. In *Huangzi nianpu* 黃子年譜 [*The Chronological Biography of Master Huang*], Huang Zongzhou 黃道周 (1585–1646) crossed a dangerous river with an "eccentric individual ", astonishing local people who regarded his adventure "miraculous". See Hong Si 洪思 (fl. 17th century), *Huangzi nianpu* 黃子年譜 [*The Chronological Biography of Master Huang*], Qing Daoguang 道光 24th year (1844) ed., 3–4.
[311] See the translation of the 1488 record (p. 119).

embellished, it may reflect Wang's initial encounter with Daoist ideas. The act of fortune-telling through physiognomy, as well as references to Daoist concepts like acupuncture points, point to a Daoist cultural context. In this light, the meditation Wang reportedly practiced may have been a Daoist technique aimed at cultivating attention and preserving health, rather than a secular form of quiet sitting. Despite doubts about the story's factual accuracy, it offers a possible glimpse into Wang's early engagement with Daoist meditation and a prelude to his later interaction with Daoist practitioners.

Although neither event from 1482 directly confirms Wang's participation in Buddhist or Daoist practice, both suggest that he may have been exposed to non-Confucian traditions at an early age. His 1488 encounter with the Daoist monk at Tiezhu Palace likely marks the first historically verifiable instance of such involvement. As the earliest well-attested event indicating his non-Confucian experience, it represents a milestone in Wang's intellectual development beyond Confucian tradition.

Nevertheless, while "Chronological Biography" indicates that Wang was intrigued by Daoist teachings in 1488, other sources from this period suggest that this interest remained exploratory. Despite his exposure to non-Confucian traditions, Wang continued to follow the conventional Confucian educational path: studying the classics, visiting established scholars, and preparing for the metropolitan examination (*huishi* 會試). The following texts, extracted from the 1482, 1489, and 1492 entries in "Chronological Biography", demonstrate Wang's Confucian journey:[312]

[312] See Appendix (entries for 1482b, 1489, and 1492, respectively). See also *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1346–1349.

The eighteenth year, *renyin* (1482). The teacher was eleven *sui*, living in the capital.

The teacher once asked his schoolmaster, "What is the foremost task?" The schoolmaster answered, "It will only be studying and becoming an official." The teacher doubted, "Becoming an official might not be the foremost task. Perhaps it is studying and learning to become a sage." When the teacher's father heard that, he laughed and said, "Do you wish to become a sage?"

The second year, *jiyou* (1489). The teacher was eighteen *sui*, living in Jiangxi.

This was the year when the teacher started to admire the teachings of the sages. The teacher returned with Madame Zhu. When this boat trip reached Guangxin, the teacher visited Mister Lou Liang, who spoke of the Song-Confucian theory of investigating things and said, "One can learn and reach the state of the sages".[313] Hence, they became close friends with each other.

The fifth year, *renzi* (1492). The teacher was twenty-one *sui*, living in Yue.

The teacher passed the provincial examination of Zhejiang.[314] …This was the year when the teacher practised the Song scholars' theory of investigating things.[315] He began to attend upon his father in the capital. Meanwhile, he searched everywhere for the manuscripts left by Kaoting (Zhu Xi) to read. One day, he thought of the saying of previous Confucians: "All things must have an outside and an inside, fineness and roughness. Every plant and tree have the ultimate principle inside themselves."[316] Because there were many groves of bamboo planted in the bureau, the teacher chose the bamboo to investigate the principle inside them. He contemplated on the principle of the bamboo, but he failed to comprehend it. Then he fell ill. The teacher resigned himself to the thought that sagehood was not his portion, so he followed the trend for joining the study of literature.

The next spring, the teacher did not pass the metropolitan examination. Members of the gentry who knew him all came to show their kindness and consideration. Prime

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[313] Guangxin 廣信 was a prefecture in the north-east of Jiangxi, see *Mingshi*, vol. 43, 1058. Lou Liang 婁諒 (1422–1491), also known as Lou Yizhai 婁一齋, was a renowned Confucian from Guangxi 廣西. For a biography of Lou Liang, see *Mingshi*, vol. 283, 7263.

[314] The provincial examination (*xiangshi* 鄉試) was one of the civil examinations (see footnote 41) that examinees took to become candidates for the state bureaucracy. It was held in the capital city of each province. Because Wang's registered native place was Yuyao County of Zhejiang Province (see footnote 188), he took the provincial examination in Zhejiang. For the official regulations for Ming–dynasty civil examinations, see *Mingshi*, vol. 195, 5159.

[315] The theory of investigating things (*gewu zhixue* 格物之學) was regarded as a fundamental principle of learning by Song Neo-Confucianists such as the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi. It was derived from *zhizhi zai gewu* 致知在格物 in *Daxue*, which could be translated as "extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things". In Zhu's commentary on *Daxue*, this concept was interpreted "investigating things to thoroughly understand the principles" (see footnote 218). For Zhu Xi's commentary, see *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, 6–7. Wang's understanding of this theory will be examined in greater detail in Chapter Four, which will situate it within broader doctrinal debates.

[316] This may be derived from Zhu Xi's commentary of *Daxue*. See *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, 7.

> Minister Li Xiya (Li Dongyang) joked,[317] "You did not pass this year, then you must be the top scorer the next year. Now you try writing the top-scorer prose for the next examination." The teacher raised his pen and finished the prose at once. Those old gentlemen said in astonishment, "What a genius, what a genius." When others left, a jealous person said, "If he passed as a high scorer, he would have seen us as nobodies." When the teacher participated in the metropolitan examination of the *bingchen* year (1496), unsurprisingly, he was put out by the jealous.[318] One of his schoolmates saw failing the examination as a shame, but the teacher comforted him and said, "The world sees failing the examination as a shame, but I see getting my mind disturbed by the failure as a shame." And so convinced this person.
>
> The teacher returned to Yuyao afterwards. He founded a poetry club with friends at the Longquanshan Temple.[319] Retired Commissioner Wei Han was greatly talented and thus self-indulgent in his daily life. When he climbed Mount Long with the teacher, playing chess and composing poems, he found that the good lines were always written by the teacher. Hence, he apologised, "I, the old man, shall retreat several miles when seeing you in a battle."[320]

A consistent thread that runs through Wang's Confucian experiences from 1482 to 1492, as shown in the three records translated above, was his pursuit of "learning to become a sage" (*xue shengxian* 學聖賢).[321] Over these eleven years, his understanding of this pursuit evolved from a lofty ideal to a more pessimistic realisation. When he was ten, Wang regarded sagehood as a higher pursuit than becoming an official. His 1489 visit to Lou Liang affirmed this goal, as their friendship was founded on the shared belief that "one can learn and reach the state of the sages". However, his unsuccessful attempt to grasp the principle of the bamboo—an exercise in "investigating things" drawn from Song Confucians—resulted in

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[317] Li Xiya 李西涯 was the art name of Li Dongyang 李東陽 (1447–1516). Li Dongyang was appointed the Senior Grand Secretary, the top official position of the bureaucracy. During the Ming dynasty, the Senior Grand Secretary was commonly addressed as "Prime Minister" (*zaixiang* 宰相) informally. See *Mingshi*, vol. 181, 4820–4825. The official title and duty of Grand Secretaries have been discussed in Chapter One (see footnote 144).

[318] Wang took the metropolitan examination during this year, but he did not pass.

[319] Longquanshan Temple 龍泉山寺, more commonly known as Longquan Temple 龍泉寺, was a Buddhist temple in Yuyao County, Shaoxing Prefecture, Zhejiang. See Shao Youlian 邵友濂 (1840–1901), *Yuyao xianzhi* 余姚縣志 [*Gazetteer of Yuyao County*], Qing Guangxu 光緒 (1875–1908) ed., juan 16, 4a–6b.

[320] The Chinese text is 老夫當退數舍. The term *tui shushi* 退數捨 is an adaptation of the Chinese idiom *tuibi sanshe* 退避三舍, which means withdrawing from the opposite part in a combat. It generally refers to a situation where people retreat to avoid conflict out of respect for the opponent's strength.

[321] Modern scholars, such as Tu Wei-ming and Qian Ming, argue that attaining Confucian sagehood was consistently pursued by Wang, especially in this youth (see pp. 20–21). See Tu, *Neo-Confucian Thought in Action*, 49–51. See also Qian, *Yangmingxue de xingcheng yu fazhan*, 17–30.

illness and a sobering realisation that sagehood lay beyond his allotted share. Although this incident dampened his idealism, it did not divert him from the path of becoming an official: he took the metropolitan examinations twice afterwards, indicating that despite his growing scepticism towards achieving Confucian sagehood, he remained within the tradition.

Given that Wang maintained a Confucian trajectory while developing an interest in non-Confucian traditions, his engagements with Buddhism and Daoism may have been shaped by his Confucian experiences. In this context, the 1492 entry merits further attention, as it reveals potential frustration in Wang's Confucian journey. The record notes that after realising the immense difficulty of attaining sagehood, Wang turned to literary study. His founding of a poetry club after failing the metropolitan examination further suggests that his turn to literary pursuits was closely tied to his evolving relationship with Confucianism. If Confucianism shaped Wang's literary development, it is worth considering whether it also influenced his turn towards Buddhism and Daoism. This question will be explored in the following section through additional records of Wang's engagement with the two non-Confucian traditions.

2. A devotion to the two non-Confucian schools

After narrating Wang's study of Daoist teachings at Tiezhu Palace (1488), possibly marking his earliest direct involvement in Daoism, "Chronological Biography" includes another reference to his life-nourishing practice in the 1498 entry. This record demonstrates a closer involvement in Daoism, suggesting that Wang's interest may have become a deeper commitment. Qian's "Chronological Biography" states:[322]

[322] For the Chinese text, see Appendix (the 1498 entry) and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1349–1350.

> The eleventh year, *wuwu* (1498). The teacher was twenty-seven *sui*, living in the capital.
>
> This is the year when the teacher talked about nourishing life. The teacher thought by himself that the arts of literature could not be enough to arrive at the ultimate way. He sought answers from his teachers and peers, but he seldomly met them. Thus, he felt uneasy and perplexed in his heart.
>
> One day, the teacher read Huiweng's (Zhu Xi) memorial to Song Emperor Guangzong.[323] There was a quote, "Keep respectful and hold your determination. That is the basis of studying. Learn in proper order and proceed to the finest. That is the way of studying."[324] The teacher regretted that although he had discussed extensively on studying before, he had not followed the order to reach the finest. Naturally, he did not gain any results. Then he learned in proper order and thought he was immensely imbued with studying. However, he felt that the principle of the outer things and his own mind were still separated as two things. As this matter depressed him for a long time, his old illness came back again, and he increasingly resigned himself to the thought that sagehood was not his portion. After he heard a Daoist monk talk about nourishing life, he intended to retreat to the mountains while casting aside worldly cares.

With the description that Wang "intended to retreat to the mountains while casting aside worldly cares" after hearing a Daoist monk's speech of "nourishing life", the record above suggests that Wang's feelings towards Daoism may have grown beyond pure interest. In contrast to the period from 1489 to 1492, in which Wang followed the Confucian academic path while possessing a fondness for Daoism, the year 1498 indicates a shift in Wang's involvement in Daoism as he had a clear intent of choosing the Daoist way of a recluse over the Confucian way of a scholar-official. This intent suggests that by 1498, Wang's long-standing interests in Daoist practice may have developed into a devotion to Daoism.

As in the 1492 entry, the 1498 entry in "Chronological Biography" notes Wang's realisation of the difficulties in attaining sagehood. In 1492, his intense but fruitless self-cultivation in a bamboo grove led to illness. Confronted with the difficulty of attaining sagehood, he redirected his efforts towards literary pursuits. Similarly, six years later, his continued

[323] The Emperor Guangzong 光宗 (1147–1200) was the third emperor of the Southern Song dynasty.
[324] For Zhu Xi's memorial, see Wang Maohong 王懋竑 (1668–1741), *Zhu Xi nianpu* 朱熹年譜 [*The Chronological Biography of Zhu Xi*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 233–237.

frustration on the Confucian path triggered a recurrence of illness and deepened his conviction that sagehood was beyond the reach of ordinary people. This disillusionment, coupled with hearing a Daoist speak of "nourishing life", led him to consider retreating into the mountains. Both entries demonstrate how Wang's shifting interests were closely tied to his struggles along the Confucian path.

Not only was his perception of "becoming a sage" modified in accordance with his experiences in studying Confucianism, but his illness, which was connected to his Confucian learning experiences, may have also driven him to engage in non-Confucian activities. His intent to live as a recluse in remote mountains, inspired by an encounter with a Daoist speaking of life nourishment, suggests a direct influence of old illness on his particular interest in the Daoist life-nourishing doctrines. In this sense, Wang's embrace of Daoism is likely prompted by both the frustration along the Confucian path and the practical need to improve health.

Regarding Wang's experiences in Buddhism during this time, such events can be found in the 1501 record, which has been partly translated in the previous section.[325] According to this entry, Wang visited the Chinese Buddhism sacred site Mount Jiuhua, wrote a rhapsody of his travel, and stayed in several Buddhist temples. It is necessary to note that Buddhism and Daoism often co-existed in renowned religious places, as they were intertwined and integrated into popular religion of that time.[326] This characteristic of ancient Chinese religious landscape may help understand "Chronological Biography" narrative of Wang visiting a Daoist monk and a recluse while touring the Buddhist sacred mountain and staying

[325] See p. 120.
[326] Since the Jin 晉 dynasty (266 –420), Buddhism and Daoism had been intertwined in religious teaching and practising, see Wang Zhixin 王治心, *Zhongguo zongjiao sixiangshi dagang* 中國宗教思想史大綱 [*An Outline History of Chinese Religions*] (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1933), 4–8, 96–105.

at several Buddhist temples. It also suggests that Wang's interest in both Buddhism and Daoism may have grown into a deeper affection by the time he toured Mount Jiuhua. Compared to the year 1482 when Wang visited a Buddhist temple with his family, the 1501 entry highlights an occasion when Wang himself explored the Buddhist sacred mountain and stayed in several Buddhist temples. As he designed this trip and arranged these activities, he may have been devoted to Buddhism at this time. Given the 1498 entry concerning Wang's involvement in Daoism, it appears that Wang harboured a devotion to non-Confucian traditions from that point onward.

It is worth noting that even during his close involvement with non-Confucian traditions—particularly Daoist life-nourishing doctrines—Wang remained deeply influenced by Confucianism. While engaging with Daoist practitioners, Confucian ideas continued to surface in their exchanges. For instance, the 1501 entry also records Wang's visit to an eccentric individual (*yiren* 異人):[327]

> The teacher had heard about an eccentric individual in the Dizang Grotto who sat and lay on a pine-needled mat, never eating cooked food.[328] The teacher travelled through dangerous steep hills to visit that person. When the teacher arrived, that person was sleeping soundly, so the teacher sat beside him and touched his foot. After a while, he woke up and asked in surprise, "How did you get here through such a dangerous road?" He then discussed the highest doctrine with the teacher, "Zhou Lianxi (Zhou Dunyi) and Cheng Mingdao (Cheng Hao) were two good scholars of Confucianism." When the teacher came the next time, that person had already left. The teacher later sighed that someone who understood him was now far away.

This record not only underscores Wang's keen interest in the recluse's lifestyle and ideas but also reveals his continuing affinity with Confucian values. By endorsing the praise of Zhou

[327] See Appendix (the 1501b entry) and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1351.
[328] The term "eccentric individual" is a translation of *yiren* 異人, which was commonly seen in Daoist manuscripts to describe someone with unusual talents. See Li ed., *Daojiao dacidian*, 469.

Dunyi and Cheng Hao—pillars of Confucian thought—and describing the recluse as "someone who understood him", Wang affirmed his alignment with Confucian ideals even in a Daoist context. As previously noted, Wang's engagement with Buddhism and Daoism did not mark a departure from Confucianism. Rather, this episode further suggests that his non-Confucian interests remained embedded within a Confucian intellectual trajectory.

3. Growing doubts about Buddhism and Daoism

It is worth highlighting that "Chronological Biography" annotates 1502 as the year when Wang gradually realised the errors of Buddhism and Daoism. This realisation occurred only one year after his stay in Mount Jiuhua, during which time he is said to have closely engaged with the two non-Confucian traditions. Below is the translation of this record:[329]

> The fifteenth year, *renxu* (1502). The teacher was thirty-one *sui*, living in the capital. …This is the year when the teacher gradually realised the errors of the two schools of Daoism and Buddhism. Early in the fifth month, the teacher returned to the capital to report on the mission.[330] Old friends in the capital, famed for their talents, all socialised with each other. They practised classical poetry and prose. The teacher sighed, "How can I use my limited energy to write useless vain words?"
>
> Therefore, the teacher asked for sick leave and returned to Yue.[331] He built a room in the Yangming Grotto and practised the exercises of guiding and pulling.[332] After a while he became prescient. One day, when he was sitting in his grotto, Wang Siyu and three other friends came to visit him. Soon after they had left Wuyun Gate, the teacher asked a servant to welcome them and told the servant in detail the ways they came. The servant met those visitors on his way. When he told them about the ways they

[329] For the original Chinese text, see Appendix (the 1502 entry) and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1351–1352.
[330] Wang returned to the capital to report his inspection of the situation of the criminals.
[331] Yue 越 referred to Yuecheng, see footnote 260.
[332] Yangming Grotto 陽明洞 was a place in Mount Kuaiji 會稽山, Shaoxing Prefecture, Zhejiang. According to the local history of Shaoxing during the Ming dynasty, the name "Yangming" was derived from one of the heavenly grottoes (*dongtian* 洞天) in Daoism. See Xiao Lianggan 蕭良幹 (1534–1602), *Shaoxing fuzhi* 紹興府志 [*Gazetteer of Shaoxing Prefecture*], Ming Wanli 萬曆 (1573–1620) ed., juan 6, 10a–15b. The editor of *Shaoxing fuzhi* believed that Wang chose "Yangmingzi 陽明子" as his art name because of this place. Chen Lai carried out a detailed study of Wang's stay in Yuecheng, see Chen Lai 陳來, "Wang Yangming yu Yangming dong—Wang Yangming Yuecheng huodong kao" 王陽明與陽明洞—王陽明越城活動考 ["Wang Yangming and Yangmingdong: A Study of Wang Yangming's Activities in Yuecheng"], *Kongzi yanjiu* 孔子研究 no. 2 (1988): 87–93. The term "guiding and pulling" is a translation of *daoyin* 導引, a series of Daoist exercises including breathing, moving, and stretching. See Li ed., *Daojiao dacidian*, 259.

> came, matching the fact very well, the visitors were all astounded. They thought the teacher must have achieved enlightenment.[333] After a while, the teacher realised, "This is like fiddling away my energy. This is not enlightenment." Again, he casted aside the thought of getting enlightened.
>
> Later, after remaining long in stillness, the teacher considered going to a remote place away from the secular world. But thinking of his grandmother Ms Cen and his father, he hesitated to make a decision. After a while, he suddenly realised that "this is a thought that comes from our childhood. If this thought could be removed, that would be an extermination of our seed nature." [334]
>
> The following year, the teacher moved to West Lake in Qiantang for his sick leave.[335] He considered serving in society again. He visited temples such as Nanping and Hupao several times.[336] One day, he met a Chan monk who had isolated himself for meditation for several years, forbidding himself to chat or look around. The teacher shouted to him, "This monk opened his mouth every day. But what does he say? He opened his eyes every day. But what does he see?" The monk rose in surprise. Then he started to talk with the teacher. When the teacher asked about his family, he answered, "My mother is still alive." And then the teacher asked, "Do you think of her?" He answered, "I cannot help thinking of her." Therefore, the teacher pointed out to him that family love was people's nature, and the monk thanked the teacher in tears. The next day, the teacher asked others about the monk and learned that the monk had already left the temple.

This record suggests that Wang became critical of at least some aspects of Buddhism and Daoism during that period. Given that Wang had intended to "retreat to the mountains while casting aside worldly cares" in 1498, his realisation of "the errors of the two schools" signified a shift in his attitude towards Buddhism and Daoism. From favouring Daoist teachings over the Confucian path to recognising certain flaws within Buddhism and Daoism, Wang's engagement with these traditions may have entered a new stage, wherein he harboured increasing doubts about their principles.

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[333] The Chinese text is 以為得道. In this context, the term *dedao* 得道 refers to the awakening to the essential wisdom of Daoism. See Li ed., *Daojiao dacidian,* 310.

[334] The term "seed nature" 種性 is a Buddhist concept referring to the intrinsic nature or potentiality of people. See *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, s.v. "種性".

[335] The West Lake (*xihu* 西湖) was in Qiantang 錢塘 County, Hangzhou 杭州 Prefecture, Zhejiang. It is a renowned freshwater lake and tourist spot in modern-day Hangzhou City. See *Mingshi*, vol. 44, 1101.

[336] Nanping Temple 南屏寺 and Hupao Temple 虎跑寺 were both Buddhist temples near the West Lake in Hangzhou. See Liu Bojin 劉伯縉 (fl. 16th century), *Hangzhou fuzhi* 杭州府志 [*Gazetteer of Hangzhou Prefecture*], Ming Wanli 萬曆 7th year (1579) ed., juan 22, 25a–25b; juan 99, 15a–15b.

Apart from realising some errors in Buddhism and Daoism, Wang reflected on his previous experiences with these religions. This reflection could be found in the story of him disclaiming "enlightenment" despite his friends' astonishment at his foreknowledge. According to the 1502 record, Wang gained this supernatural ability by practising "guiding and pulling" (*daoyin* 導引), a series of Daoist exercises including breathing, moving, and stretching to cultivate health and spirit. However, he believed that prescience did not equate to enlightenment, despite his friends presuming that he had achieved enlightenment when he accurately predicted their visit. In that case, he denied that his practice had enabled him to attain the ultimate cultivation of health and spirit, indicating that this Daoist practice, although appearing fruitful, did not lead to enlightenment. Furthermore, he viewed this experience as a waste of energy, realising that he had squandered his time in pursuit of enlightenment. Wang's realisation that he had not achieved enlightenment through Daoist practice, along with his reflection on the effort invested into this process, demonstrated his doubts about certain aspects of Daoism and his regret over his involvement with this religion.

In addition to the account of Wang reflecting on his Daoist experience, the 1502 record provides another narrative of Wang re-evaluating his involvement with Buddhism. According to this narrative, Wang hesitated to start a life of solitude due to his deep care for his grandmother and father. Eventually, he realised that he could not forsake his filial affection and duty to his family without eradicating his "seed nature". Since "seed nature" was a term generally associated with Buddhism and the conflict between filial piety and monastic life was a heated debate regarding Buddhist belief, it is likely that Wang was contemplating Buddhism when considering retreating from the secular world.[337] Recognising that severing

[337] Since the Three Kingdoms 三國 (220–280) period, Buddhism as an imported religion aroused debates on its conflict with traditional principles such as filial piety and etiquette in Chinese society, despite the effort of some monks adapting Buddhist teachings to Confucian or Daoist traditions. For a study of Buddhist monks' effort of

family ties equated to destroying one's intrinsic nature, he discovered a paradox within Buddhism that could not justify the abandonment of filial piety in pursuit of a life in seclusion. Hence, Wang may have found errors in Buddhist teachings and revised his views on Buddhism during this period.

Furthermore, not only did Wang reflect on his experiences with Buddhism and Daoism, but he used his reflection on these religions to influence others as well. The 1502 record describes an occasion when Wang awakened a Buddhist monk from his meditation practice, prompting him to return home with a realisation that "family love was people's nature". Wang employed the same line of reasoning that had triggered his reflection on Buddhism to inspire the monk. Recognising his deep care for his grandmother and father, Wang realised that forsaking filial affection would result in the extinction of seed nature. Using this perspective, Wang asked the monk whether he ever thought of his mother. Through this enquiry, the monk contemplated his connection to his mother and discovered that his familial care was rooted in his nature. The subsequent departure of the monk from the temple indicates the profound impact of Wang's words, as they prompted him to retreat from his Buddhist practice. Similarly, the following record demonstrated another effort of Wang aiming to influence others through his reflection on Buddhism and Daoism:[338]

> The seventeenth year, *jiazi* (1504). The teacher was thirty-three *sui*, in the capital.
>
> In the autumn, the teacher was the examiner of Provincial Examination of Shandong.[339]

this kind, see Ren Jiyu 任繼愈, *Zhongguo fojiao shi* 中國佛教史 [*A History of Chinese Buddhism*] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1993), vol.1, 156–182. The "lack of filial piety" (*buxiao* 不孝) was commonly used as a justification for the extensive suppressions of Buddhism ordered by the rulers, such as the Jiande 建德 abolition of Buddhism order by Emperor Wu 武帝 (543–578) of Northern Zhou 北周 (557–581). For a study of the suppressions of Buddhism, see Ren, *Zhongguo fojiao shi*, vol.3, 1–13, 55–75.

[338] For the original Chinese text, see Appendix (the 1504 entry) and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1352.

[339] Shandong 山東 was a coastal province of the Ming dynasty.

> Touring Investigating Censor of Shandong Lu Cheng appointed the teacher as the examiner of the provincial examination.[340] The examination papers were all set by the teacher.[341] The questions and answers on politics discussed the etiquette system of the reigning dynasty: The reason for Buddhism and Daoism harming the right teachings was that Confucianism was obscure. The reason for law and order lacking vitality was that titles and ranks were excessive. The government put too much pressure on its personnel and was too eager for instant effect. Moreover, there were pre-existing methods of conferring titles and lands, riding country of bandits, resisting barbarians, and settling disputes. When the examination papers were published, people consulted the teacher's studies on the art of government.

According to the 1504 record, when designing the provincial examination paper, Wang included a question-and-answer set that stated, "The reason for Buddhism and Daoism harming the right teachings was that Confucianism was obscure." Although modern scholars have raised doubts about Wang's authorship of this examination paper, its attribution to him in "Chronological Biography" remains significant.[342] Even if Wang did not draft it personally, the record reflects a shared understanding among his disciples—either of his views at the time or of how they wanted him to be seen. In either case, the paper offers insight into how Wang's evolving stance on Buddhism and Daoism was interpreted and publicised within his circle.

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[340] Touring Investigating Censors (*xu'an jiancha yushi* 巡按監察御史) of provinces were responsible for nominating candidates for examiners of the provincial examinations. See "xuanju zhi" 選舉志 ["Treatise on Selection and Appointment of officials"], in *Mingshi*, vol. 69, 1688. For the English translation of the official title, see *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, s.v. "chien-ch'a yu-shih 監察御史", "hsun-an yu-shih 巡按御史".

[341] As Qian Dehong used the term *jie* 皆 here, which means "all" in English, it appears that Wang wrote both the questions and answers of the examination.

[342] Despite Qian's implication that Wang authored the questions and answers of the examination papers, modern scholars have been debating on whether Wang composed the standard answers. See Zhan Kang 詹康, "Cong Wang Shouren zuo *Shandong xianshilu* tan mingdai xianghui shilu de zuozhe wenti" 從王守仁作《山東鄉試錄》談明代鄉會試錄的作者問題 ["A Discussion on the Authorship of the Ming Dynasty Provincial and Metropolitan Examination Papers, from Studying Wang Shouren's Work *Shandong xiangshi lu*"], *Guji zhengli yanjiu xuekan* 古籍整理研究學刊 no. 5–6 (2013): 54–68, 46–53. See also Peng Peng 彭鵬, "*Shandong xiangshilu* fei chuyu Wang Yangming zhishou bian" 《山東鄉試錄》非出於王陽明之手辨 ["A Discussion that *Shandong xiangshilu* was not Written by Wang Yangming"], *Kongzi yanjiu* 孔子研究 no. 4 (2015): 145–151.

Given that Wang had failed to grasp the teachings of Confucius before he considered a life of seclusion in 1498, this statement in the examination paper, where he concluded that Buddhism and Daoism had undermined the correct teachings, probably derived from his reflections on his past experiences with these two religions. By incorporating his assessment of how Buddhism and Daoism had threatened the Confucian teachings into the examination paper, Wang may have sought to publicise his revised opinions on Buddhism and Daoism and their relationship with Confucianism.

At the same time, he rearticulated his understanding of Confucianism itself—distinguishing between a vague, diluted version and a clear, authentic form. This dual reassessment suggests that his break from Buddhism and Daoism was inseparable from his discovery of what he saw as a purer Confucian path. His rejection of non-Confucian traditions and his re-commitment to Confucianism were mutually reinforcing, each movement making the other possible. Notably, Wang's growing doubts about Buddhism also led him to distance himself from practices commonly associated with it, particularly meditation. A series of events recounted in two sources below suggest that Wang sought to clarify his position on meditation, a seemingly Buddhist practice:

> "Chronological Biography":[343]
> The fifth year, *gengwu* (1510). [344] The teacher was thirty-nine *sui*, living in Ji.[345]…The teacher told scholars about the success of awakening others. Previously, while on his way to Longchang, the teacher gave lectures anywhere he found convenient. When he left Longchang and travelled past Changde and Chenzhou, he saw that disciples such as Ji Yuanheng, Jiang Xin, and Liu Guanshi could all stand out among scholars. He said delightfully, "When I lived in banishment for two years, there was no one I could talk to. Now I am lucky to have friends like you on my

[343] See the original Chinese text at Appendix (the 1510 entry) and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1356–1357.
[344] Ibid. "Chronological Biography" includes this event under the year 1510. However, as it reads, "Previously, the teacher was on his way to Longchang", the related event may have occurred before 1510. In *Collected Writings*, the letter titled "Letter to Students in Chenzhong" (see p. 122)—which mentions this event—is dated to 1509. Therefore, it is more likely that the event took place in 1509.
[345] Ji 吉 refers to Ji'an 吉安 Prefecture, Jiangxi. See *Mingshi*, vol. 43, 1053.

return trip." He then regretted that when he raised the teaching of uniting knowledge and action in Guiyang, students formed a confusing variety of opinions, not knowing where to start. Since then, he has meditated with students in a Buddhist temple, letting them awaken to their own nature. Therefore, some students seemed to get the point.

"Letter to Students in Chenzhong" (1509):[346]
What I have discussed earlier about meditating in a Buddhist temple is not meant as wishing to enter into *samādhi* through sitting meditation. Because we are distracted by numerous things in daily life and thus unable to take care of ourselves, I wish to recommend this method to mend our learning by releasing and recollecting our thoughts.

According to "Chronological Biography", Wang used to mediate with students in a Buddhist temple to help them "awaken to their own nature".[347] However, in a letter to his students, he clarified that his aim was not to attain the Buddhist state of equipoise, but rather to use meditation as a secular method for recollecting thoughts. In doing so, Wang explicitly distinguished his practice—as a technique of mental concentration—from the Buddhist meditation grounded in religious belief. Although he did not directly refute Buddhist practices, he intentionally detached himself from their doctrinal foundations. This rhetorical detachment reflects a growing scepticism towards Buddhism, strongly suggesting that his earlier devotion was waning at this stage.

After 1502, Wang's involvement with non-Confucian traditions appears to have diminished, while his commitment to the Confucian path notably deepened. The most significant development was the beginning of his teaching career, as recorded in the previously translated 1505 entry. This transition from learner to teacher marked a major step forward in his engagement with Confucian doctrine. His new role also signalled a shift in his long-

[346] As this letter has been translated earlier (see p. 122), only the passage regarding Wang's clarification of "meditating in a Buddhist temple" is selected here.
[347] This practice of meditation likely happened between 1508 (when Wang arrived in Guiyang) and 1509 (when Wang wrote the letter). See Wang Yangming quanji, vol. 4, 1354–1357.

standing aspiration to “become a sage”, which now entered a more practical and pedagogical phase. In particular, he began guiding his students to pursue their studies with the explicit goal of “becoming sages” themselves:

> Scholars were fond of reading and reciting literature to excess. They no longer knew that there was the studying of mind and body. The teacher was the first one to advocate it. He asked people to establish firm resolve to become sages in the first place.

In contrast to his earlier view that sagehood was beyond the reach of ordinary people, Wang later urged his students to “establish firm resolve to become sages in the first place”, reflecting a return to his youthful aspiration. This shift marks a significant progression along his Confucian path, as it coincided with his growing distance from Buddhism and Daoism. By 1502, Wang had reportedly “gradually realised the errors of the two schools”, suggesting that his renewed commitment to sagehood was closely tied to his rejection of non-Confucian traditions.

4. The end of Wang Shouren’s devotion to Buddhism and Daoism

As Wang’s engagement with Buddhism and Daoism declined after 1502, the question arises: when did his commitment to these traditions fully cease? To address this, it is more appropriate to identify the turning point through Wang’s own recollections of his past, supplemented by the accounts of his students in “Chronological Biography”. This approach enables a more reliable reconstruction of the conclusion of his devotion, grounded in both personal reflection and historical documentation.

As discussed in previous chapters, Wang reflected on his earlier commitment to Buddhism and Daoism on three notable occasions: the conversation with students in 1514, the drafting of "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" in 1515, and the writing of "Preface to Final Conclusions" in the same year. Among these, the conversation and the preface offer the clearest self-accounts of how he came to renounce his earlier devotion. In dialogue with his disciples, he expressed regret over having "wasted energy" on the two schools—a remark recorded in both *Chuanxi lu* and "Chronological Biography", which situate his remorse shortly after his "three years among the barbarians".[348] As these sources differ in how they recount Wang's reflection, the next chapter will explore them in greater detail, addressing questions such as what accounts for these variations. The excerpts below highlight the specific moments when Wang began to reassess his past commitments.

> 1514 dialogue recorded in *Chuanxi lu*:[349]
> "Since I was young, I was also earnestly devoted to the two schools. I thought that I had already understood something. And I thought that the teaching of the Confucians was not worth studying. Later I lived among the barbarians for three years. I realised how concise and comprehensive was the teaching of the sages. Then I started to sigh and regret that I had wasted my energy for thirty years."

> 1514 entry in "Chronological Biography":[350]
> "When I was young, I was unable to grasp the teachings of the sages. I was once earnestly devoted to the two schools as well. Later I lived among the barbarians for three years. I started to see the concentration of the sages' teachings. I regretted that I had wasted my energy for twenty years."

These two records document Wang expressing regret for his past devotion to "the two schools" following a period of living "among the barbarians for three years". Furthermore,

[348] In both sources, Wang describes his earlier engagement with Buddhism and Daoism as being "earnestly devoted to the two schools". This remark stands as one of the clearest self-articulations of his closeness to these non-Confucian traditions (see footnote 3).
[349] For the original Chinese text, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol.1, 42. For another translation by Wing-tsit Chan, see Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, 81–82.
[350] For the original Chinese text, see Appendix (the 1514 entry) and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1364.

"Chronological Biography" notes Wang's arrival in Longchang 龍場, the site of his banishment, in the spring of 1508. Thus, the third year of his stay—1510—marks the moment when he began to repent his previous devotion to Buddhism and Daoism.[351]

The preface offers a similar account, in which Wang recounted having attained a deeper understanding of Confucianism during his stay "among the barbarians".[352] He described how this realisation led him to recognise that incomplete interpretations of Confucian doctrine had driven scholars towards Buddhism and Daoism. He noted that these insights came to him after "witnessing two changes of four seasons", again pointing to 1510 as the pivotal year.[353] Taken together, these sources indicate that Wang's devotion to Buddhism and Daoism concluded in 1510. Through reflection and remorse, he brought this chapter of his intellectual life to a contemplative close.

Accordingly, the timeline of Wang's early engagement with Buddhism and Daoism in his youth can be summarised as follows:

Periods	Stages
1488–1497	Early interest in Buddhism and Daoism
1498–1501	Devotion to Buddhism and Daoism
1502–1509	Doubts about Buddhism and Daoism
1510 onwards	Remorse for past devotion

As outlined in the introduction, this chapter aims to reconstruct Wang's past engagements with Buddhism and Daoism, thereby tracing the evolution of his self-positioning vis-à-vis these non-Confucian traditions. In this light, one stage in particular—Wang's active devotion

[351] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1354.
[352] See pp. 87–88.
[353] See p. 88.

between 1498 and 1502—warrants closer examination. This period marked Wang's most intensive involvement with Buddhism and Daoism and later became a central point of contention in debates over his Confucian identity. Two features of this phase are especially noteworthy.

First, Wang's devotion to Buddhism and Daoism was brief, lasting only four years. This stands in contrast to the ten years during which he showed interest in these traditions and the eight years over which he gradually distanced himself from them. In this sense, his full devotion appears as a relatively short-lived episode.

Second, Wang's turn to Buddhism and Daoism seems to have been prompted less by doctrinal attraction than by frustration with the Confucian path—likely compounded by health concerns. As noted in the 1498 entry, Wang felt he had failed to achieve results in his studies, attributing this to his inability to follow "the order" in Confucian learning. Even after correcting his approach, he still found himself unable to grasp the core teachings, concluding that he was inherently inadequate. This sense of failure coincided with the recurrence of a chronic illness, which, though not detailed in "Chronological Biography", may have shaped his contemplations of withdrawal and engagement with Daoist health practice.[354] His exposure to Daoist notions of "nourishing life" during this same period likely influenced his thoughts of retreating into seclusion. Modern scholars such as Qian Ming and Zhu Xiaopeng have also linked Wang's interest in Daoist life-nourishing doctrines to his deteriorating health.[355] Under these circumstances, Wang's turn to non-Confucian traditions should not be

[354] See p. 139.
[355] Qian, *Yangmingxue de xingcheng yu fazhan*, 28–29. See also Zhu, *Wang Yangming yu daojia daojiao*, 43–45.

viewed as the product of a long-standing doctrinal interest alone, but as a response shaped by both the internal dynamics of his Confucian journey and practical concerns such as illness.

These two features—the brevity of Wang's devotion and its apparent cause—raise important questions. Why did his commitment to Buddhism and Daoism last such a short time? And was this devotion genuinely rooted in religious conviction, or was it a response to temporary frustration and disillusionment with the Confucian path? It is possible that Wang turned to the two schools less out of belief and more as a refuge from the despair of unfulfilled Confucian aspirations. In this context, the following section turns to Wang's own letters to investigate how he retrospectively explained his past devotion—offering insight into his motivations, justifications, and evolving self-understanding.

IV. Wang Shouren's Reflection on Buddhism and Daoism after the End of His Devotion

As outlined in the chapter's introduction, two categories of historical sources are essential to reconstructing Wang's early engagement with Buddhism and Daoism. The first—chronological records of his personal involvement—documents the events and timing of his engagements. The second, composed primarily of Wang's letters, offers more detailed insight into how he later reflected on these experiences. This section focuses on the latter, examining Wang's letters related to his early engagement with the two traditions. Through these reflections, it explores how his evolving attitudes towards Buddhism and Daoism informed his broader self-positioning as a scholar navigating multiple intellectual currents.

Six letters are selected according to the criteria discussed in the previous section. These letters can be categorised into three groups, each focusing on different aspects regarding Wang's involvement in Buddhism and Daoism. First, Wang shared his engagement in Daoism with the recipients in two letters, reflecting on his prior interactions with "the theories of the deities and immortals". Letters of this category are: (1) "Da renwen shenxian" 答人問神仙 ["Letter in Reply to the Question of Spiritually Immortals"] (1508); and (2) "Yu Lu Yuanjing" 與陸原靜 ["Letter to Lu Yuanjing") (1521). Second, Wang clarified the distinctions between Confucian doctrine and non-Confucian teachings in three other letters: (3) "Yu Chenzhong zhusheng" 與辰中諸生 ["Letter to Students in Chenzhong"] (1509); (4) "Da Huang Zongxian Ying Yuanzhong" 答黃宗賢應原忠 ["Letter in Reply to Huang Zongxian and Ying Yuanzhong"] (1511); and (5) "Da Xu Chengzhi" 答徐成之 ["Letter in Reply to Xu Chengzhi"] (1511). Third, within a letter to his friend Zhan Ruoshui, Wang provided an in-depth analysis of the multiple strands of thought at his time. This letter is (6) "Bie Zhan Ganquan xu" 別湛甘泉序 ["Farewell Wishes to Zhan Ganquan"] (1511–1512).

1. Wang Shouren's use of his prior engagement with Daoism as advice to others

In two of the six letters, Wang reviewed his past involvement in Daoism to offer advice to the recipients. Both letters centred around the Daoist "theories of the deities and immortals" with a thirteen-year gap between them. The translation of the first letter is as follows:

(1) "Letter in Reply to the Question of Spiritually Immortals", 1508[356]
You have asked whether the deities and immortals exist, wishing me to discuss that.[357] You have written to me three times, and I have not replied. The reason for my silence was that I did not know what to say, not that I did not wish to answer. Yesterday, your younger brother visited, determined to get an answer. The fact is that I have taken an interest in the matters of deities and immortals since I was eight years old, which was over thirty years ago. Now I start to have some loose teeth and grey hair, while my eyesight and hearing are beginning to fail. Not to mention that I fall ill so often that I may stay indoors for several months, with a growing need for medicine. These are the results of my interest in deities and immortals. Nevertheless, some of my acquaintances still rashly say this can be the way to immortality, and you, believing such talk, have come to ask me. That leaves me no choice but to say some baseless words to you.

In ancient times, the perfect men of unsophisticated virtue and solidified comprehension of *dao* could be in harmony with *yin* and *yang* and the changing seasons, leaving behind mundane affairs to concentrate their spirits and energies.[358] They wandered freely between Heaven and Earth, seeing and hearing from far distance. Guang Chengzi lived for a thousand and five hundred years, still not withered by his age.[359] Li Boyang (Laozi) lived through the dynasties of Shang and Zhou. He was said to travel west through the Hangu Pass.[360] These stories really happened. If I denied that, it would look like a deception to you. Nevertheless, certain accomplishments, such as integrating oneself into *dao* through breathing and movements, preserving one's energy and bones, and retaining one's inherent nature obtained at the outset of life, are bestowed by Heaven. One cannot forcibly attain these.

Stories of later times such as ascending into the air with the whole family, transforming objects, and resuming life in another body are strangely deceptive and dreadful. These secretive cunning arts are what Yin wenzi called illusion and what the Buddhists called heterodoxy.[361] If I said such stories were real, it would look like a deception to you. Alas, I could not find words to describe something between existence and non-existence. One could come to a clear realisation after long contemplation and deep introspection. Nonetheless, one could not force such understanding without reaching that state.

We Confucians also have our doctrine of deities and immortals. Yanzi (Yan Hui) died at thirty-two, but his legacy still lives on.[362] Would that convince you? Some people of later

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[356] For the original Chinese text, see Appendix 13 and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 3, 887. For another English translation, see Ching, *The Philosophical Letters of Wang Yang-ming*, 1508–1509.
[357] "Deities and immortals" is a translation of *shenxian* 神仙, which was used in Daoism to address deities with supernatural powers or immortals who achieved Daoist sainthood. See Li ed., *Daojiao dacidian*, 489.
[358] "The perfect men" (*zhiren* 至人) was believed to be people of most perfect virtue in Daoism, see Li ed., *Daojiao dacidian*, 529. The term *dao* 道, in this context, may refer to the ultimate wisdom of Daoism. In ancient Chinese philosophy, *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 were a pair of opposing forces that interconnected and interacted with each other.
[359] Guang Chengzi 廣成子 was first introduced as a Daoist deity in by Zhuang Zhou 莊周 (c. 369–c. 286 BCE), also known as Zhuangzi 莊子. See *Zhuangzi*, 11.3.
[360] Li Boyang 李伯陽 is another name given to Laozi 老子 (c. 571–c. 470 BCE). According to *Shiji*, Laozi travelled west through the Hangu Pass 函谷關 during the times of upheaval; see *Shiji* (Zhonghua shuju ed.), vol. 63, 2139.
[361] Yin Wenzi 尹文子 (c. 360–c. 280 BCE) is a Daoist scholar during the Eastern Zhou 東周 times (770–221 BCE). See *Zhuangzi*, 33.3.
[362] Yanzi 顏子 refers to Yan Hui 顏回 (c. 521–481 BCE), a disciple of Confucius.

> times, such as Shang Yangzi, were men of special skills which could not by regarded as *dao*.[363] Other people such as Bodhidharma and Huineng came closer to *dao*, but one could not be sure to say that.[364] If you wish to learn about their doctrine, you will have to retreat to the mountains and forests for thirty years, concentrating your hearing, seeing, and thinking to a state where your mind is devoid of even the tiniest speck of dust. Only then will you be able to discuss such matters. Now you are rather far from the way of the immortals. Please forgive my impertinence.

In this letter, Wang expressed reluctance to engage directly with specific Daoist notions of deities and immortals. Although he acknowledged that the persistence of his correspondent—who had written to him three times—obliged him to respond, he indicated that he did not willingly enter into such discussions. This hesitation likely reflects his growing scepticism towards these doctrines, reinforced by his retrospective judgement that his earlier engagement with them had yielded no meaningful results. Alternatively, his tone may suggest agnosticism: while he admitted some familiarity with theories of longevity, he offered no evidence of their validity and refrained from endorsing them. Whether sceptical or agnostic, Wang appeared unwilling at this stage to invest further trust in these beliefs. Compared to his earlier enthusiasm for Daoist life-nourishing practices, his reflections here reveal a more critical and detached stance.

Moreover, Wang's avoidance of a definite stance and his advice for the recipient to engage in self-contemplation suggest a reluctance to continue discussing Daoist doctrines. According to "Chronological Biography", Wang began to recognise the shortcomings of Buddhism and Daoism after 1502 and started accepting disciples by 1505.[365] His hesitation to engage with

[363] Shang Yangzi 上陽子 is the art name of Chen Zhixu 陳致虛 (born 1290), a Daoist scholar famous for his theory of internal alchemy (*neidan* 內丹) during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368).
[364] Bodhidharma (382–536) was the first patriarch of Chinese Chan Buddhism. Bodhidharma, known as Puti damo 菩提達摩 to Chan Buddhists, was believed to come from the Western Regions (*xiyu* 西域). See Yang Xuanzhi 楊衒之 (fl. 6th century), *Luoyang qielan ji jiaoshi* 洛陽伽藍記校釋 [*Commentaries on The Monasteries of Luoyang*], ed. Zhou Zumo 周祖謨 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), vol. 1, 11–12. Huineng was the sixth patriarch of Chan Buddhism, see footnote 169.
[365] See the translations of the 1502 record (pp. 142–143) and the 1505 record (pp. 124–125).

the Daoist concepts of deities and immortals in this letter—paired with his expressed doubts about earlier involvement—aligns with his more critical views on non-Confucian traditions and his progression along the Confucian path. As such, the letter offers further evidence of Wang's scepticism towards Buddhism and Daoism, and of his efforts to distance himself from their doctrines.

Compared to letter (1), letter (2) "Letter to Lu Yuanjing"—written thirteen years later—offers a more explicit rebuttal of the Daoist doctrine of deities and immortals, urging the recipient to abandon his interest in such beliefs. While both letters contain reflections on Wang's personal experience, letter (2) repurposes these reflections as a cautionary device, aimed at dissuading the recipient from repeating his earlier errors. This letter is translated below:

> (2) "Letter to Lu Yuanjing", 1521[366]
> I have heard that you (Lu Cheng) would engage in the life-nourishing activities because of your ill health. This is where I had wasted my effort in the past. Then I realised it was unnecessary and thus reconcentrated on the doctrine of the sages. Perhaps cultivating virtue and nourishing health are the same thing. As to what you said about "the real self", if we could stay vigilant over what is not seen and apprehensive over what is not heard so as to focus on our virtue, we would be able to collect our Spirit, Breath, and Essence.[367] This is also the state where the Daoist doctrine of immortality lies. The doctrine of the deities and immortals is different from the doctrine of the sages. Nevertheless, they both begin with guiding people to *dao*, which is their ultimate purpose. As a saying in the epilogue of *Treatise on Awakening to Reality* goes, "The Yellow Emperor and Laozi were saddened to see people's insatiable greed, so they guided people gradually using the arts of deities and immortals."[368] You may try reading that, and naturally you will find its

[366] For the original Chinese text, see Appendix 14 and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol.1, 208–209. For another English translation, see Ching, *The Philosophical Letters of Wang Yang-ming*, 1521–1522. Lu Yuanjing 陸原靜, also known as Lu Cheng 陸澄 (fl. 16th century), was a student of Wang.

[367] The terms spirit (*shen* 神), breath (*qi* 氣) and essence (*jing* 精) were the vital elements of the Daoist internal alchemy. For the translation of these terms, see Fabrizio Pregadio, "Jing, qi, shen", in *The Encyclopaedia of Taoism* (London: Routledge, 2008), 562–565.

[368] Wang was paraphrasing rather than quoting the exact words in *Wuzhen Pian* 悟真篇 [*Treatise on Awakening to Reality*], a Daoist classic on internal alchemy written by Zhang Boduan 張伯端 (987–1082). Wang changed "the arts of self-cultivation" (*xiushen zhishu* 修身之術) in the original text into "the arts of deities and immortals" (*shenxian zhishu* 神仙之術), probably in order to fit into the context of his letter. This paraphrasing is not a serious deviation from the original meaning, as Wang discussed the Daoist life-nourishing doctrine in

> profound meaning. Sages from Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, King Wen, and King Wu to the Duke of Zhou and Confucius all possess the overarching love of all people and things.[369] If any of them had been immortal, would they have been unwilling to show up to people? Other people such as Laozi and Peng Jian might have been given by nature the propensity to longevity, a thing that we cannot gain by asking.[370] People of later times such as Bai Yuchan (Ge Changgeng) and Qiu Changchun (Qiu Chuji) were admired as patriarchs among the Daoists, and yet they only lived for fifty or sixty years.[371] In this case, what they called physical immortality must have been referring to something else.
>
> Considering your ill health, you only need to forsake the pursuits of fame and reputation, purging your mind of desires and ambitions so as to concentrate on the teachings of the [Confucian] sages. This is the theory that you have mentioned as "the true self". It would not be wise to believe easily in those heterodox opinions that could lead you to unnecessary confusion and waste of energy and time. If you go so far on that road till you cannot return, you will easily become a frenzied man. Some used to say, "one will become a good doctor after breaking one's arm many times."[372] But many people have broken their arms many times and yet have not even become doctors. Please be careful and do not neglect my advice.

In letter (2), Wang firmly rejected Lu Cheng's interest in Daoist "life-nourishing" practices. Although both men suffered from health issues that made such practices appealing, Wang notably refrained from recounting his own past efforts or outcomes—marking a sharp contrast with the more detailed and personal reflections on unsatisfactory results in letter (1). Instead, he redirected the discussion to question Daoist tales of immortality and to affirm a Confucian path towards attaining "the true self". Compared to the cautious tone of letter (1), Wang adopted a more forceful stance in letter (2), advising against "heterodox opinions" that lead to "unnecessary confusion and waste of energy and time". This shift in tone and focus

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general while *Wuzhen Pian* demonstrated "the arts of self-cultivation" as the life-nourishing practices focusing on internal alchemy. For the Chinese text in *Wuzhen Pian*, see Zhang Boduan 張伯端 (987–1082), *Wuzhen Pian qianjie* 悟真篇淺解 [*An Elementary Commentary on Treatise on Awakening to Reality*], ed. Wang Mu 王沐 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), vol. 3, 175.

[369] King Wu of Zhou 周武王 (c.1076–1043 BCE) is the founding king of the Zhou dynasty.

[370] Peng Jian 彭篯, also known as Peng Zu 彭祖, is a legendary figure and a Daoist saint who was believed to have lived over several hundred years. He was said to be more than seven hundred years old by the end of the Shang dynasty. See Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343), *Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳 [*Biographies of the Deities and Immortals*], ed. Xie Qingyun 謝青雲 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), vol. 1, 44–47.

[371] Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (1134–1229), whose given name was Ge Changgeng 葛長庚, was a Daoist during the Song dynasty. He was renowned for his theories of internal alchemy. See Li ed., *Daojiao dacidian*, 543. Qiu Changchun 丘長春 (1148–1227), also known as Qiu Chuji 丘處機, was a celebrated Daoist during the Jin 金 (1115–1234) and Yuan times. For a historical biography, see Song Lian 宋濂 (1310–1381) et al., *Yuanshi* 元史 [*The History of Yuan*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), vol. 202, 4524–4525.

[372] This is a quotation from *Zuozhuan*; see Lord Ding 定公 13. 2b.

suggests that his earlier scepticism towards Daoist life-nourishing doctrines had developed into clear opposition.

It is possible that Wang's firmer tone in letter (2) was also influenced by contextual urgency—particularly his concern for Lu Cheng, whose poor health and expressed interest in Daoist life-nourishment may have signalled a drift from the Confucian path. Unlike letter (1), which responds to a more abstract, speculative enquiry, letter (2) addresses a real-life situation with potential consequences, warranting more urgent language. However, this rhetorical shift reflects more than situational concern. Wang's decision to label the Daoist doctrine of the deities and immortals as "heterodox" and to urge a return to "the teachings of the [Confucian] sages" suggests a deepening contemplation: by this point, he regarded engagement with those Daoist practices as incompatible with Confucian cultivation—a deviation that demanded immediate correction.

Wang's changing attitude towards Daoism is supported by other historical sources as well. As discussed in the previous section, his initial turn to Daoism was likely prompted by practical concerns—specifically, the need to improve his health. His intention to live in seclusion, as recorded in the 1498 entry, suggests that his recurring illness played a direct role in shaping his interest in Daoist life-nourishing doctrines. In this context, letter (2) implies that Wang's eventual disappointment with the outcomes of these practices may have contributed to his rejection of Daoist teachings. Given that his involvement was originally motivated by the pursuit of health, the failure to achieve this goal would reasonably explain his later disillusionment.

Nonetheless, Wang's relationship with Confucianism appears to have been the more decisive factor in shaping his ultimate stance on non-Confucian traditions. As noted earlier, his initial frustration with Confucian learning between 1492 and 1498 led him first to literary pursuits, then to Daoist health-improving practices. However, in letter (2), he emphatically urged the recipient to prioritise the Confucian path over "heterodox opinions", drawing on his own regret over past engagements with Daoism. On that account, Wang came to view his earlier turn to Daoist practices not merely as a failed experiment but as a deviation from the true Way. His principal lesson from that experience was to remain committed to Confucian learning—a conviction he sought to impress upon his correspondent. Therefore, Wang's Confucian commitment ultimately shaped and overrode his engagements with other traditions. Despite his earlier explorations of Buddhism and Daoism, he consistently positioned—and presented—himself within the Confucian tradition.

2. The boundaries between Confucianism and the two non-Confucian schools

The three letters in the second category—those distinguishing Confucianism from the two non-Confucian schools—were written between 1509 and 1511. Placed within the timeline of Wang's evolving engagement with Buddhism and Daoism, these texts reflect a period during which his initial scepticism deepened into eventual remorse. The first of these, letter (3) "Letter to Students in Chenzhong" from 1509 (translated earlier), clarifies that Wang's meditation was intended as a tool for Confucian self-cultivation, not a pursuit of Buddhist *samādhi*. In doing so, he draws a clear boundary between non-religious practices compatible with Confucianism and religious practices characteristic of Buddhism. This raises the question of whether Wang further developed this distinction in his subsequent letters. Such

enquiry is especially relevant given his increasing distance from the two schools and his later expression of regret for "wasting energy" on them, as recorded in "Chronological Biography" (the 1514 entry). The following texts offer translations of these later letters.

(4) "Letter in Reply to Huang Zongxian and Ying Yuanzhong", 1511[373]
The mind of the sage is not receptive for the trivial and the obscure. Naturally, it does not need polishing or scraping. As to the mind of an ordinary person, it is like a dirty spotted mirror which needs harsh polishing and scraping to remove the dirt and dust. Then the tiny flecks of dirt become visible and can thus be removed by a simple wipe, which similarly needs less effort. At this stage, we already recognise the substance of virtue. Even if the flecks of dirt are not yet removed, there will still be natural clean spots in between. The falling flecks of dirt and dust will still be visible and thus can be removed by a simple wipe. But if things pile up on top of the dirt, they will not be visible after all. These facts tell us the difference brought by the situation where learning can benefit from adversity and diligence. We should not doubt that because of any difficulty.

People naturally prefer the easy and loathe the hard, with the impacts of our tempers and habits. But after gaining insight into a situation, all by itself it no longer seems as difficult. Amongst the people in antiquity, we can see those people who were happy to risk their lives ten thousand times. As in the past we had yet to comprehend the meaning of seeking inside our minds, we were unable to discuss this effort before. Now, we have come to realise its significance. However, I fear that our tendency to prefer the easy and loathe the hard may mislead us into the practice of Chan Buddhism.

Regarding the difference between Confucianism and Buddhism, as we discussed yesterday, Mingdao (Cheng Hao) said that "while Buddhism taught people to uphold their internal virtue through reverence, it did not tell them to improve their external conduct by righteousness."[374] Ultimately, Buddhism could also not achieve the goal of upholding internal virtue through reverence. Mingdao has revealed only about eighty or ninety per cent of the truth.

[373] See the original Chinese text in Appendix 16 and *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol.1, 164. For another English translation, see Ching, *The Philosophical Letters of Wang Yang-ming*, 9–10.
[374] This is a quotation of Cheng Hao from *Er Cheng ji*. When Wang quoted this saying, he altered a few words. Wang's quotation is: "敬以直内"則有之，"義以方外"則未。Cheng Hao's original saying is: 彼釋氏之學，於"敬以直内"則有之矣，"義以方外"則未之有也, which can be translated into "as to the school of Buddha, while it taught people to uphold their internal virtue through reverence, it did not tell them to improve their external conduct by righteousness". See *Er Cheng ji*, 74.

(5) "Letter in Reply to Xu Chengzhi", 1511[375]

Yu'an affirmed Xiangshan (Lu Jiuyuan) and described his teaching as "focusing on honouring virtuous nature".[376] When I look at *The Collected Writings of Xiangshan*, I find that Xiangshan did not fail to teach his students to fully investigate the principles through reading.[377] As to what he said about himself as "being very different from others in understanding words", he meant that he experienced those words in real life. What he kept saying to teach people was: "In retirement, to be sedately grave; in the management of business, to be reverently attentive; in social intercourse with others, to be strictly sincere."[378] "Subdue oneself and return to propriety."[379] "All things are already complete in us. There is no greater delight than to be conscious of sincerity on self-examination."[380] "The great end of learning is nothing else but to seek for the lost mind."[381] "Let a man first stand fast in the supremacy of the nobler part of his constitution, and the inferior part will not be able to take it from him."[382] These are the sayings of Confucius and Mencius. Are they empty words?

Among Xiangshan's teachings, only "gain enlightenment with ease and freedom" was doubted by scholars of his times.[383] But the concept of "ease and freedom" is derived from "The Great Treatise".[384] And although the idea of "enlightenment" bears a similarity to Buddhism, there are Buddhist concepts that bear some similarity to our Confucians' teachings and yet remain different in some ways. The difference only lies in tiny details. Moreover, why should we conceal their similarity, not daring to discuss it? Why should we feel uneasy about the difference, not willing to examine it? Even though Yu'an affirms Xiangshan's teachings, he has not fully discovered what is right in it.

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[375] Chengzhi 成之 was the courtesy name of Xu Shoucheng 徐守誠 (fl. 16th century), a disciple of Wang. For this letter's Chinese text, see Appendix 17 and *Wang Yangming quanji,* vol. 3, 889–893. This letter was originally dated to *renwu* 壬午 year in "Waiji" (a section of *Collected Writings*, see footnote 288), which may be an error. There was no *renwu* year during the reign of Zhengde. The nearest *renwu* year was 1522 (the first year of Jiajing), twelve years later than 1511 (the date given in Qian Dehong's chronicle). In Julia Ching's translation, this letter was dated 1522. Nevertheless, given that Wang discussed the theories of Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan frequently between 1509 and 1515, comparing these two schools on several occasions, it seems more likely that this letter was written in 1511 than in 1522. For Wang's discussion of the teachings of Zhu and Lu, see *Wang Yangming quanji,* vol. 1, 102–115. Huang Wan and Shao Tingcai 邵廷采 (1648–1711), both disciples of Wang, also mentioned that Wang studied and discussed the schools of Zhu and Lu around 1514 and 1515. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1558, 1719. For Julia Ching's translation, see Ching, *The Philosophical Letters of Wang Yang-ming*, 73–78.

[376] Yu'an 輿庵 was a student of Wang. His surname was Wang 王, and Yu'an may be his art name.

[377] *Xiangshan wenji* 象山文集 [*The Collected Writings of Xiangshan*] was a compilation of Lu Jiuyuan's written works. Lu Jiuyuan was also known as Xiangshan 象山.

[378] The Chinese text is 居處恭，執事敬，與人忠, which is derived from *Lunyu*. See *Lunyu,* 13.19.

[379] The Chinese text is 克己復禮, a concept derived from *Zuozhuan*. See Lord Zhao 昭公 12.11. Confucius also discussed this idea in his teachings; see *Lunyu*, 12.1.

[380] This is a saying of Mencius; see original saying at *Mengzi*, 7A.4.

[381] See the quotation at *Mengzi*, 6A.11.

[382] This is another saying of Mencius; see *Mengzi*, 6A.15.

[383] "Gain enlightenment with ease and freedom" is a translation of 易簡覺悟. Lu Jiuyuan mentioned "ease and freedom" (*yijian* 易簡) on several occasions, see Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–1193), *Lu Jiuyuan ji* 陸九淵集 [*The Collected Works of Lu Jiuyuan*], ed. Zhong Zhe 鍾哲 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 4–5, 65–66, 301.

[384] The concept of "ease and freedom" was mentioned several times in "Xici" 繫辭 ["The Great Treatise"], a section of *Zhouyi* (cited early in footnote 83).

In (4) “Letter in Reply to Huang Zongxian and Ying Yuanzhong”, Wang expanded on his earlier reflections regarding the distinction between Confucianism and Buddhism. Citing Cheng Hao, he argued that Buddhism, unlike Confucianism, failed to lead people to “improve their external conduct by righteousness”, despite its effort in instructing them “to uphold their internal virtue through reverence”. Beyond invoking Cheng Hao’s authority, Wang further criticised Buddhism by claiming it could not even fulfil its own internal ideal—thus underscoring a fundamental flaw that, in his view, set it apart from Confucianism.

Similarly, in (5) “Letter in Reply to Xu Chengzhi”, Wang reaffirmed the essential difference between Confucianism and Buddhism, even while acknowledging certain surface similarities. In defence of Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–1193), whose teachings of gaining enlightenment with ease and freedom had drawn suspicion for sounding Buddhist, Wang clarified that resemblance in terminology may not imply doctrinal alignment. He stated, “There are Buddhist concepts that bear some similarity to our Confucians’ teachings and yet remain different in some ways.” This position recalls letter (3), where Wang recognised the superficial resemblance between his meditation and Buddhist *samādhi*, while insisting that the purpose behind his practice was not Buddhist.[385]

However, compared to letter (3), letter (5) reflects a broader and more flexible approach to the relationship between Buddhism and Confucianism. Wang encouraged his student to examine similarities critically and to attend to subtle doctrinal differences—a move that also responds to a broader intellectual tendency among Ming thinkers to conflate the three teachings under the ideal of their unity. He argued that shared features across traditions did not erase their fundamental distinctions. In this context, his willingness to engage with non-

[385] See p. 122.

Confucian traditions without compromising Confucian identity reveals not only a more nuanced stance but also a growing confidence in the integrity and coherence of Confucianism as a distinct, independent tradition.

It is worth underscoring that Wang's endeavour to delineate the boundaries between Buddhism and Daoism, as reflected in the letters discussed above, aligns closely with his progression along the Confucian path, as documented in Qian Dehong's "Chronological Biography". As noted in the previous section, Wang's transformation—from a Confucian learner drawn to Buddhism and Daoism to a Confucian teacher guiding students to "become sages" by 1505—marks a key milestone in his intellectual development.[386] Furthermore, the 1510 record suggests that he had gained satisfactory results in Confucian teaching, having shared his "success of awakening others". Wang's advancement in Confucian learning and teaching between 1505 and 1510—together with the doubts about Buddhism and Daoism expressed in the 1502 record—corresponds with the boundaries he drew between Confucianism and Buddhism in the three letters written between 1509 and 1511. As a Confucian teacher, Wang not only distanced himself physically from Buddhist practices, but also made a deliberate effort to articulate doctrinal distinctions. In other words, he reinforced the separation between Confucianism and non-Confucian traditions in both his personal conduct and his intellectual outlook.

3. A re-emphasis on the hierarchical framework of multiple traditions

Letter (6) "Farewell Wishes to Zhan Ganquan", unlike the other five, offers a broader reflection on contemporary strands of thought. Written as "farewell wishes" to his friend

[386] See pp. 124–125.

Zhan Ruoshui, Wang contrasted Confucian scholarship with non-Confucian schools, including Buddhism and Daoism. The letter concludes by affirming the shared aspiration between Wang and Zhan to promote the teachings of Confucian sages. Below is a translation of this text.

> (6) "Farewell Wishes to Zhan Ganquan", 1511 or 1512[387]
> The teachings of the sages were first lost when Yanzi (Yan Hui) died, then halted after Zengzi (Zeng Shen) handed down the idea of all-pervading unity to Mencius and finally resumed by Zhou (Zhou Dunyi) and Cheng (Cheng Hao) after another century.[388] Since then, while the words have been more detailed, the doctrine has become more obscure. While the theories have been more delicately analysed, the studies have become more fragmented and lost its basis, with people increasingly pursuing other paths and causing significant challenges. Yang (Yang Zhu) and Mo (Mozi/Mo Di) caused worries for Mencius, and Buddha and Laozi greatly prevailed at the times of Zhou and Cheng. Now scholars are all aware of revering Confucius and Mencius, disdaining Yang Zhu and Mozi, and dismissing Buddha and Laozi. Hence, the sages' doctrine seems to manifest to the world.
>
> However, when I follow those scholars and study their works, I cannot find out the doctrine of the sages. Among those works, is there anything like the universal love of the school of Mozi? Is there anything like the self-preservation of the school of Yang Zhu? Is there anything like the clean and quiet life in the solitude of Daoism or the self-examination of one's mind, human nature, and fate of Buddhism? Why am I thinking of Yang Zhu, Mozi, Laozi, and Buddha? Because although they are different from the doctrine of the sages, they still achieve some things by themselves.
>
> Nevertheless, scholars of today embellish their writings to show off to the mundane world. They are crafty in pretending to pursue the doctrine, praising each other hypocritically. They state that grasping the doctrine of the sages is toilsome and fruitless, which is beyond the ability of common people, and thus only debate on the

[387] See Appendix 18 for the original Chinese text. This letter was written by Wang on the occasion of seeing off his friend Zhan Ruoshui, whose art name was Ganquan. According to "Chronological Biography", Wang wrote this letter in 1511 (the *xinwei* 辛未 year) just before Zhan was on his way to Annan 安南 as an ambassador. However, *Collected Writings* dated this letter to 1512, the *renshen* 壬申 year. Because the date of Zhan Ruoshui being sent on the diplomatic mission was not mentioned in the official history of the Ming dynasty, records in both "Chronological Biography" and *Collected Writings* are insufficient to establish the exact year when this letter was written. For the record in "Chronological Biography", see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1360–1361.

[388] The term "sages" (*shengren* 聖人) possibly refers to Confucian sages such as Yao, King Wen of Zhou, and Confucius. Yanzi (Yan Hui) was believed to be one of the favourite disciples of Confucius. Zengzi 曾子(given name Zeng Shen 曾參, 505–432 BCE) was another a disciple of Confucius. Zengzi summarised "my doctrine is that of an all-pervading unity" (*wudao yiyiguanzhi* 吾道一以貫之)—one of the most essential teachings of Confucius—as "the principles of our nature and the benevolent exercise of them to others" (*zhongshu* 忠恕). See *Lunyu*, 4.15. Zhou and Cheng referred to Song dynasty Neo-Confucians Zhou Dunyi and Cheng Hao, respectively. Wang took up the Neo-Confucian concept of "the transmission of the Way" (*daotong* 道統) that was first formulated by Han Yu and then further propagated by later Neo-Confucian scholars. This concept will be examined in greater detail in Chapter Four.

words of the sages. They think that since they can briefly discuss what past scholars could not fully master throughout their lives, they have already satisfied their needs. Consequently, the teachings of the sages are neglected. Is this not the old habit of learning and chanting pieces of literature the foremost problem of our times? And where did this problem come from? Is that not a fault of those over-detailed discussions and over-delicate analyses?

As a matter of fact, Yang Zhu, Mozi, Laozi, and Buddha studied benevolence and righteousness while probing into human nature and fate. And even though they went astray as they could not find the right way, it is certainly not as held by contemporary scholars that benevolence and righteousness are not worth learning or human nature and fate are useless. Suppose some scholars nowadays study benevolence and righteousness, investigate human nature and fate, yet refuse to recite literature works, even though they drown themselves in the off-centre schools of Yang Zhu, Mozi, Laozi, and Buddha, I would still see them as wise men because they still pursue knowledge to be contented in their minds. Only after they seek to achieve some things by themselves can I discuss the doctrine of the sages with them.

When I was young, I did not probe into the correct learning. Instead, I drowned myself in those unorthodox teachings for twenty years, and I began to concentrate my mind on Daoism and Buddhism. Due to heavenly inspiration, I woke up and started pursuing the correct learning, following the paths of Zhou and Cheng. I felt I understood something but could not get help except from one or two equally minded friends. How dangerous it was when I kept falling and picking myself up. Later, I was able to forge a friendship with Mister Zhan Ganquan, which has hardened my mind, making my will unyielding and irrepressible.[389] In this case, I have benefited so much from my friendship with Ganquan.

The learning of Ganquan concentrates on achieving some things by himself. It is questioned for resembling Chan Buddhism by those who have not understood his insights. But I would not be able to grasp his learning even if it was Chan Buddhism, not to mention his determination, which is so outstanding. Who else can be compared to Ganquan except for the disciples of Confucius? As to those numerous rumours, they cannot harm Ganquan. I can confirm that rumours have not been able to harm Ganquan and people around Ganquan have not been affected by rumours. Ganquan and I, as friends, need no asking or explaining to understand each other's feelings. Our opinions always coincide without prior discussion. We both wish to devote ourselves to the doctrine of the sages till the end of our lives.

As we part today, how can I have no words to say? While the teachings of the sages are difficult to clarify but easy to misunderstand, our customs are increasingly degenerating into an irretrievable situation. Therefore, our burden is heavy, and our course is long.[390] Although Ganquan does not need to wait for my words, I have something I cannot withhold when I face my true self. Perhaps Ganquan will think my words serve more as ornamentation.

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[389] Zhan Ruoshui was addressed by Wang as "Ganquan Zhanzi 甘泉湛子". Because "Ganquan" was Zhan's art name and "zi" was commonly used as suffixes to scholars' surnames, this title is translated as "Mister Zhan Ganquan" here.

[390] The Chinese text is 任重道遠. It is a quotation from *Lunyu*. see *Lunyu*, 8.7.

The boundaries between Confucianism and the two non-Confucian schools are clearly articulated in this letter. While Wang acknowledged that Buddhism and Daoism pursued concepts such as benevolence, righteousness, human nature, and fate—fundamental to Confucianism—he argued that these schools "went astray as they could not find the right way". The distinction, then, lies not in their aims but in their methods. Under these circumstances, Wang presented a hierarchical framework in which Confucianism would retain primacy as the correct path towards shared ideals. This approach represents a further step beyond the distinctions outlined in letters (3), (4), and (5), moving from differentiation to evaluation. His acknowledgement of certain merits with Buddhism and Daoism does not blur boundaries; rather, it reinforces a Confucian-centred hierarchy grounded in doctrinal correctness.

This hierarchical framework is also implicit in letter (4), where Wang asserted that Buddhism fails to guide people either in "upholding internal virtue through reverence" or in "improving external conduct by righteousness".[391] By asserting that the differences between Confucianism and Buddhism rested upon these two aspects, which were considered defects, Wang not only distinguished Buddhism from Confucianism but also positioned Buddhism as inferior.

Letter (6), however, presents this hierarchy in a more comprehensive form. While affirming Confucianism's superiority over Buddhism and Daoism, Wang also criticised the misguided doctrines of contemporary Confucians, which he claimed obscured rather than transmitted the sages' true teachings. As a result, he argued, the non-Confucian traditions sometimes appeared more coherent than the diluted Confucianism of his day. Wang went so far as to

[391] See p. 161.

praise non-Confucian thinkers who upheld core virtues like benevolence and righteousness, suggesting that they were preferable to Confucian scholars who failed to represent the Confucian tradition accurately. Thus, the full hierarchy becomes apparent: while Confucianism remained supreme in principle, poorly executed Confucian teachings ranked below even the better-articulated ideas of rival non-Confucian schools.

In addition to criticising his contemporaries, Wang also implicitly attributed his own past engagement with Buddhism and Daoism to the failings of Confucian instruction. In describing how he abandoned Daoist and Buddhist thought to return to "correct learning", Wang credited not a teacher, but "heavenly inspiration".[392] He portrayed this shift as a lonely path taken without support from contemporary scholars, suggesting that the lack of proper Confucian guidance hindered his intellectual development. Given that he also described on several occasions how others were drawn to non-Confucian schools due to the inadequacy of prevailing Confucian teachings, Wang subtly assigned blame to incompetent Confucians for the broader fascination with alternative traditions—including his own.

These analyses reveal that the hierarchical framework articulated in letters (4) and (6), both written around 1511, aligns with similar arguments presented in "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" and "Preface to Final Conclusions", both composed in 1515. The question of how discussions of Buddhism and Daoism functioned in these texts can now be more fully answered. Wang's repeated articulation of a hierarchy between Confucianism and the two non-Confucian schools, presented in multiple accounts from 1510 to 1515, suggests a consistent viewpoint rather than isolated rhetorical strategies. These discussions were likely intended not merely to advise the emperor or rebut critics, but to promote his broader vision

[392] See the translated letter (6) above (pp. 165–166).

of intellectual order. As noted earlier, Wang may have anticipated the publication of his letters;[393] the memorial, being an official document, and the preface, composed for a printed collection, were explicitly written for wider dissemination. Taken together, these writings likely served the strategic purpose of publicly asserting Wang's position on Buddhism and Daoism—specifically, the Confucian superiority embedded within a broader hierarchy of thought.

V. Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, it should now be clear that Wang's later reflections on Buddhism and Daoism—following the end of his earlier commitment—exhibit two defining features: a deliberate delineation of the boundaries between Confucianism and the two non-Confucian schools, and a reaffirmation of a hierarchical framework in which Confucianism remained superior. These features have been analysed through Wang's retrospective accounts of his earlier experiences with Buddhism and Daoism, which, in turn, were contextualised by a prior examination of his actual engagements with these traditions.

Within this structure, historical sources—primarily "Chronological Biography"—have helped to reconstruct the timeline of Wang's involvement, while his personal letters and recorded conversations reveal how he subsequently reinterpreted and reassessed that involvement. Together, these lines of enquiry allow for a coherent reconstruction of his early engagements with Buddhism and Daoism.

[393] See pp. 126–130.

The significance of this reconstruction lies not only in tracing Wang's intellectual development but also in showing how his retrospective accounts and hierarchical framework functioned as strategies of self-presentation. By expressing consistent regret over his past affiliations with the two non-Confucian traditions, Wang ultimately positioned himself as a defender of the authentic Confucian Way (*dao* 道). In this move, his reflections transformed what could have been a liability—his Buddhist and Daoist engagements—into evidence of his authority to distinguish genuine Confucianism from both heterodox traditions and superficial Confucian interpretations.

Chapter Four: Ming–Qing Reception of Wang Shouren's Self-Presented Position on Buddhism and Daoism

I. Introduction

As explored in the previous chapters, Wang Shouren actively positioned himself as a Confucian scholar through retrospective reflections on his earlier engagements with Buddhism and Daoism. By distinguishing his mature intellectual commitments from past explorations of non-Confucian traditions—and by reframing those experiences as formative steps along a Confucian journey—he presented himself as someone who, despite prior deviations, ultimately upheld and defended the Confucian Way. However, self-presentation alone does not determine intellectual identity. Whether Wang was recognised as a Confucian depended on how his identity was received, interpreted, and reconfigured by contemporary and later scholars. Reception during the Ming and Qing dynasties, in this regard, plays a critical role: external recognition could affirm, reshape, or contest Wang's self-representation, significantly influencing how modern scholars understand his intellectual legacy through accumulated layers of reinterpretation. This chapter, therefore, shifts focus from Wang's self-narrative to the ways in which Ming–Qing intellectuals received his Confucian identity—particularly through their debates over his engagement with the two non-Confucian schools.

Two factors may impact the Ming–Qing debates over Wang's self-positioning: the particular period related to an account and the specific perspective presented by an author. The former reflects the temporal dimension of significant shifts in attitudes towards Wang among Confucian literati, while the latter demonstrates the doctrinal divergence between contrasting

parties within Confucian academia. Only by considering both factors can an author's account discussing Wang's Confucian identity be fully examined, thereby revealing not only what a scholar thought of Wang but also why this scholar perceived him as such and how this perception was conveyed in the text.

Regarding shifts in attitudes towards Wang Shouren over time, the primary influence seems to be the enduring discourse on his official posthumous recognition during the mid- to late-Ming dynasty. This perception of Wang, determined by the officialdom and decreed by the emperor, reflects the prevailing attitude of the Ming government. Furthermore, because Ming officials were generally grounded in Confucian scholarship—and some, such as Grand Secretaries, held key government positions and were affiliated with specific Confucian communities—any periodic decisions on Wang's recognition, in which these officials played a significant role, reveal the most influential perspectives on Wang's achievements within both government circles and the academic spheres.[394] Consequently, this chapter will provide a timeline with notable milestones in Wang's official posthumous recognition, exploring how this temporal factor may have shaped perceptions of his Confucian identity.

Regarding the divergence of opinions among various philosophical schools, debates generally arose between Yangming scholars (*Yangming xuezhe* 陽明學者) and critics from the School of Principle (*lixue* 理學). In a similar way to Wang's followers, who were inclined to defend his Confucian status as shown in previous analysis, his critics probably aligned their interpretations of his theories and activities with their established stance on him, though often

[394] During the mid- to late-Ming dynasty, several Grand Secretaries, such as Fang Xianfu 方獻夫 (1485–1544), Xu Jie 徐階 (1503–1583), and Zhao Zhenji 趙貞吉(1508–1576), were affiliated with the School of Mind. There were also some Grand Secretaries who were scholars upholding the Cheng–Zhu teachings, such as Liu Jian 劉健 (1433–1526) and Jiang Mian 蔣冕 (1463–1532). *Mingshi* includes biographies of these officials and tables of their years in office.

for opposing reasons.[395] In light of the Ming authority's evolving perception of Wang, this chapter will also examine selected accounts by scholars from different schools as case studies, analysing how varied perspectives may have led to contrasting conclusions about his Confucian identity.

Given the temporal and doctrinal factors that can lead to significant divergence among Ming–Qing scholars' opinions on Wang's Confucian identity, each account reflects its author's distinct perspective, shaped either by the evolution of Wang's official recognition or by affiliations with specific Confucian communities. In this context, it is impractical to cover every scenario in a comprehensive examination of Ming–Qing Confucians' reception of Wang. More specifically, fully addressing what these scholars discussed regarding his Confucian achievements is challenging to accomplish through case studies, as selected cases may lack representativeness needed to support generalised conclusions. However, by shifting the focus from content to methodology, it becomes possible to trace how Wang's self-fashioned identity was variously affirmed, reconfigured, or contested. While the substance of each account varies, a comparative analysis of their interpretive strategies—especially how they employed historical and textual sources—reveals recurring patterns.

This section therefore focuses on how Ming–Qing scholars treated source materials. These sources—comprising Wang's own teachings and writings—are themselves acts of self-positioning: they construct his identity as a Confucian vis-à-vis Buddhism and Daoism. Examining how later thinkers engaged with these materials—what they chose to cite,

[395] See the analysis of the two contrasting Qing-dynasty portrayals of Wang (by Zhu Yizun and Zhang Boxing, respectively) in the thesis' Introduction (pp. 4–11).

rephrase, omit, or emphasise—reveals not only whether they accepted Wang's self-presentation, but how they received, reinterpreted, or resisted it.

This methodological approach is supported by earlier discussions in this thesis, particularly Chapter Two on "Preface to Final Conclusions". In that case, both disciples and critics cited Wang's words to underscore perceived divergences or affinities with Zhu Xi's teachings—either to defend his Confucian credentials or to cast doubt on them. Thus, despite differences in content, these comments reveal a shared methodological characteristic: Wang's own statements were not treated as definitive truths but as raw material to be analysed, framed, and debated in accordance with the commentator's doctrinal stance. In this interpretive process, the use of source material became a rhetorical strategy, with historical fidelity often subordinated to the aims of persuasion. Therefore, the reception of Wang's intellectual identity was not merely a matter of doctrinal disagreement, but a dynamic process of textual reinterpretation that both reflected and reshaped his philosophical legacy.

As this thesis aims to offer a historical analysis of Wang's self-perceived identity and its evolving reception, the following chapter adopts an etic approach to Ming–Qing scholars' debates over his Confucian status, identifying any non-factual elements within these discussions that complicate a historically grounded examination of Wang's relationship to Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Given that Ming–Qing interpretations have exerted lasting influence on modern scholarship—shaping both biographical and philosophical assessments of Wang—they must be critically examined as sources of reception rather than transparent accounts of historical act. A historically critical approach is thus essential for recovering Wang's intellectual activities with awareness of the interpretive layers

accumulated over time, thereby peeling back the multiple narratives that have shaped his identity.

In addition to the etic framework, incorporating emic insights can enhance the analysis by clarifying how and why Ming–Qing responses to Wang's Confucian and non-Confucian engagements varied across different intellectual groups and historical contexts. Through close reading and contextualisation, this chapter deconstructs selected sources to examine not only how Wang was evaluated, but also the motives, assumptions, and interpretive strategies that shaped those evaluations. It seeks to deepen the enquiry into how his intellectual identity was received and reframed in relation to the Confucian tradition and the two non-Confucian schools.

The following analysis is organised into six main parts. The first (Section II) outlines the basic criteria used by later scholars to assess Wang's relations to non-Confucian traditions—a necessary foundation for investigating his reception. The second addresses the temporal factor, situating his posthumous recognition within shifting political and ideological contexts. Building on these preliminaries, Sections IV–VI turn to doctrinal debates over orthodoxy that shaped divergent portrayals of Wang's intellectual stance. The final section (Section VII) considers the official representation of Wang in the *Mingshi* compiled under the Qing dynasty.

The Ming–Qing debates on Wang's Confucian identity involved three principal groups of interpreters. The first were his immediate disciples, whose works—such as "Chronological Biography" and *Chuanxi lu*—functioned both as records of his self-presentation and as early acts of reception. These texts reflect interpretive choices that could strategically reframe

Wang's image, especially during periods when his teachings were condemned as "heterodox". The second group, later Yangming scholars, relied on such disciple narratives in the absence of personal contact. Their interpretations diverged further from Wang's original context and often served to legitimise their own authority within the School of Mind by defending him against critics. The third group, critics from the Cheng–Zhu School of Principle, challenged Wang's credentials more directly, questioning both his philosophy and the reconstructions of his life. Their objections were not only doctrinal but also political, particularly regarding the private mode of teaching associated with Wang and his followers.

Sections IV–VI analyse selected texts from these competing perspectives, with particular attention to the accounts of Liu Zongzhou 劉宗周 (1578–1645), Geng Dingxiang 耿定向 (1524–1596), and Luo Zenan 羅澤南 (1807–1856).[396] While no single text can represent the full opinion of its community, each reveals methodological choices that demonstrate how Wang's identity was reconstructed across different contexts. The greater the diversity of positions, the clearer it becomes that similar interpretive strategies operated under varied circumstances. By tracing these methodological patterns, the chapter aims to deconstruct the layers of interpretation imposed on Wang over time and clarify how his self-presentation was received, reconfigured, and transmitted.

Finally, Section VII addresses whether any relatively neutral or historically critical position existed. In a landscape dominated by competing Confucian factions, such balance would have required detachment from school affiliations or, more plausibly, the authority of an institution surpassing them. The Qing-dynasty *Mingshi* Compilation Institute (*Mingshiguan* 明史館),

[396] The selection of case studies is explained in greater detail in the following sections.

charged with compiling the official history of the Ming, was one such body. The chapter therefore concludes with an analysis of Wang's portrayal in the *Mingshi*, assessing how an officially sanctioned narrative positioned him in relation to the broader Confucian tradition.

II. Basic Criteria Used by Ming–Qing Scholars in Assessing Wang Shouren's Intellectual Identity

To explore how Confucian intellectuals generally determined another scholar's qualifications as a Confucian, the first step is to identify the standards used for such assessments—specifically, the evaluative criteria applied during the examination or the exemplary Confucians to whom the examinee was compared. An efficient way to uncover these standards is to review how Wang's disciples reinforced his Confucian status. Although these accounts may be biased in framing Wang's ideas and activities within the structure of a Confucian, they reflect elements emphasised by the Yangming scholars as essential characteristics of a Confucian master. For critics of the Yangming School, these very traits became the grounds on which Wang's Confucian status—as constructed by his followers—was contested.

Some of the criteria may have appeared briefly in the previous chapter, which has provided a reconstruction of Wang's early Buddhist and Daoist activities based on his accounts and his disciples' narratives. Referring to that reconstruction, it is evident that Wang underwent several changes during his learning years, such as engaging in literature creation and immersing himself in Buddhism and Daoism before eventually awakening to the Confucian doctrine. Furthermore, his involvement in the two non-Confucian schools was significantly influenced by his progress on the Confucian path, a milestone of which was the start of his

teaching career in 1505. This transition from learner to teacher, aligned with his growing doubts about Buddhism and Daoism between 1502 and 1509, signalled a return to Confucianism. It is therefore clear that while Wang's engagements with Buddhism and Daoism were closely connected to his Confucian activities, his learning experiences and teaching career were also intertwined. Given that Wang's own accounts and his disciples' interpretations—on which the reconstruction is based—both suggest that his learning experiences and teaching career were significant aspects of his Confucian path, it is essential to examine whether these aspects were used as criteria by Ming–Qing scholars in evaluating Wang's Confucian identity.

Moreover, the transition from learner to teacher of Confucianism is a common theme in the life stories of eminent Confucians in pre-modern China, who were often revered as exemplifying the inherent characteristics of Confucianism. When Confucians began their teaching careers, they joined the tradition of private teaching (*sixue* 私學) that dates back to the time of Confucius.[397] By receiving instruction from established scholars and imparting knowledge to disciples and the public, they contributed to the transmission of Confucian teachings. Generally, significant recognition for their contributions would affirm their special positions within the transmission of the Way (*daotong* 道統).[398] It is therefore necessary to explore how Wang's learning and teaching paths were compared to those of exemplary

[397] Confucius has been generally regarded as the pioneer of the spread of education. See Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Derk Bodde (New York: Free Press, 1948), 40–41. Private teaching thrived during the Northern and Southern Song dynasties, when renowned Confucians such as Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, Zhu Xi, and Lu Jiuyuan gave lectures and received disciples at private schools. In contrast to the Song period, private teaching was less popular during the early Ming period. Wang Shouren is commonly acknowledged as one of the Confucians who revived private teaching in the mid to late Ming period. See Zhu Hanmin 朱漢民, "Songru de shidao jingshen yu zhuti yishi" 宋儒的師道精神與主體意識 ["Song Ruist Identity-Consciousness and the Spirit of the Masterly Way", English title given by the author], *Zhexue yu wenhua* 哲學與文化 49, no. 1 (2022): 111–123. See also Okada, *Wang Yangming dazhuan*, vol. 1, 285–289.

[398] For a discussion of definition and evolving use of "transmission of the Way", see Guo Tian 郭畑, "Tangsong daotong gainian de yanjin" 唐宋"道統"概念的演進 ["The Evolution of the Concept *Daotong* during the Tang and Song Dynasties"], *Zhexue yanjiu* 哲學研究 no. 4 (2022): 54–64.

scholars within the context of Confucian transmission, as this may provide more context for the assessments of his academic identity during the Ming–Qing period.

The transmission of the Confucian doctrine has aroused continuous discussions among scholars.[399] Tang Confucian Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) proposed in "Yuandao" 原道 ["The Origin of the Way"] that the transmission started from Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 and ended with the death of Mencius 孟子 (c. 372–289 BCE).[400] This statement was revised by Cheng Yi and his disciples during the Northern Song 北宋 (960–1127) dynasty, emphasising that the transmission had paused after Mencius but was later restored by Cheng Hao.[401] During the Southern Song 南宋 (1127–1279) dynasty, Zhu Xi included the Cheng brothers in the transmission of the Way, which was widely accepted in the School of Principle afterwards.[402] It is worth mentioning that in the cases of the Cheng brothers, they were believed to relay the Confucian doctrine from the remote teacher Mencius rather than any more recent Confucians. The fact that the lineage of transmission includes few scholars with huge gaps between their active times indicates that a position within this lineage was regarded as an exceptional honour conferred solely to Confucians with momentous achievements.

[399] The transmission of the Way remains a focus in modern scholarship. Twentieth-century Confucian thinkers such as Xiong Shili and Mou Zongsan studied the transmission of the Way in light of western philosophy. See Xiong Shili 熊十力, *Yuanru* 原儒 [*Enquiry on Ru*] (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2009). See also Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, *Xinti yu xingti* 心體與性體 [*Essential Heart and Essential Substance*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999).

[400] Han Yu noted the sage-kings such as Yao, Shun, Tang 湯 (c. 1600s–1500s BCE), and the King Wen of Zhou and sages such as Confucius and Mencius. For their significant positions in the Confucian lineage, see Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), *Han Changli wenji* 韓昌黎文集 [*The Collected Writings of Han Changli*], ed. Yan Qi 閻琦 (Xi'an: *Sanqin chubanshe*, 2004), vol. 1, 22.

[401] *Er Cheng ji*, vol. 36, 640.

[402] Zhu Xi demonstrated the transmission of the Way in his preface to *Zhongyong zhangju.* See *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, 14–15. For an analysis of Zhu Xi's theory of the transmission of the Way, see Yuan Su 袁素, "Zhuzi daotong shangsu sanhuang xinjie: yi gewuzhizhilun wei shijiao" 朱子道統上溯三皇新解: 以格物致知論為視角 ["A New Interpretation of Zhu Xi's Transmission of the Way Tracing Back to the Three Sovereigns: From the Perspective of the Theory of Investigating Things to Extend Knowledge"], *Zhongguo zhexue shi* 中國哲學史 no. 3 (2023): 78–84.

Under the circumstances, it is important to note that Wang was placed by his disciples in the lineage after eminent Confucians such as Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073) and Cheng Hao. For example, Qian Dehong indicated that despite the gaps between Confucian masters in the lineage, Wang re-clarified the Confucian Way which had been obscured after the time of Cheng Hao.[403] Another example is Chen Jiuchuan's 陈九川 (1494–1562) discussion of the development of Confucian teachings, which shows a different understanding of the position of the Lu–Wang School of Mind (*Lu–Wang xinxue* 陸王心學) in the lineage.[404] In contrast to Qian's account, in which Wang was noted to have followed the path of Zhou Dunyi and Cheng Hao, Song Confucians from the School of Principle, Chen depicted Wang as the Confucian who relayed the Way from Lu Jiuyuan and his student Yang Jian 楊簡 (1141–1226), both renowned for their School of the Mind.[405]

Although disciples of Wang held varied opinions about his relation to past Confucians from different schools, their accounts suggest that Wang's learning outcomes and teaching achievements qualified him for a position in the Confucian lineage.[406] This finding supports the earlier hypothesis that Wang's learning and teaching paths may have been used as criteria in assessing his academic identity, with his disciples specifically viewing these factors as

[403] This is summarised from Qian Dehong's demonstration of the Way in his preface to "Chronological Biography". See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1500.
[404] According to "Chronological Biography", Chen Jiuchuan frequently attended Wang's teaching sessions in Ganzhou since 1520. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1406. For a brief biography of Chen Jiuchuan, see Zhang Tingyu et al., *Mingshi*, vol. 189, 5023. For Chen's account of the Confucian transmission, see Chen Jiuchuan 陳九川 (1494–1562), *Mingshui Chen xiansheng wenji* 明水陳先生文集 [*The Collected Writings of Master Chen Mingshui*], *Siku cunmu* 四庫存目 ed., juan 7, 5a–5b.
[405] Huang Zongxi discussed the teachings of Lu Jiuyuan and Yang Jian in his widely acclaimed work *Songyuan xue'an* 宋元学案 [*The Records of the Song and Yuan Scholars*]. See Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695), "Xiangshan xue'an" 象山學案 ["The Records of Xiangshan"] and "Cihu xue'an" 慈湖學案 ["The Records of Cihu"], in *Songyuan xue'an* 宋元學案 [*The Records of the Song and Yuan Scholars*], ed. Xia Guiqi 夏瑰琦 and Hongbo 洪波 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2012), vol. 58, 2111–2116; vol. 74, 2782–2783.
[406] Some more examples are Wang Ji's "Ke Yangming xiansheng nianpu xu" 刻陽明先生年譜序 ["A Preface to the Publication of the Chronological Biography of Master Yangming"] and Zou Shouyi's 鄒守益 (1491–1562) "Yangming xiansheng wenlu xu" 陽明先生文錄序 ["A Preface to the Collection of Writings of Master Yangming"]. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1503–1504, 1738–1739.

intertwined elements in establishing his Confucian status. Therefore, a brief overview of the related texts may shed light on how Wang's Confucian achievements were evaluated in terms of learning and teaching outcomes among Ming–Qing scholars.

Qian Dehong, one of the leading disciples of Wang, was probably the first scholar to discuss the different phases of Wang's learning and teaching activities to illustrate his Confucian identity. His discussion was a part of his preface to *Collected Writings*.[407] Another disciple, Wang Ji 王畿 (1498–1583), also demonstrated the changes in Wang Shouren's learning and teaching progression.[408] Apart from these two accounts given by students of Wang, the chapter "Yaojiang xue'an" 姚江學案 ["The Records of Yaojiang"] in Huang Zongxi's *Mingru xue'an* is a later record that has been influential in understanding Wang's philosophy.[409]

Among the discussions on different phases of Wang's Confucian path, Qian Dehong's account warrants particular attention, as it likely represents the earliest reinterpretation of Wang's identity and may have set the terms for subsequent debates. As such, it offers a critical starting point for tracing the reception history of Wang's Confucian status and understanding how later interpretations were shaped by this foundational discourse. Qian's account was published in 1535, eighteen years earlier than Wang Ji's account written in 1553, and over one hundred years earlier than Huang Zongxi's *Mingru xue'an* compiled in 1676.[410]

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[407] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1744–1752.
[408] Wang Ji 王畿 (1498–1583), "Shu 'Chuyang huiyu' jian shi Shuixi Wanling zhu tongzhi" 書滁陽會語兼示水西宛陵諸同志 ["To Note on *Chuyang huiyu* and to Show Like-minded Friends in Shuixi and Wanling"], in *Wang Ji ji* 王畿集 [*The Collected Works of Wang Ji*], ed. Wu Zhen 吳震 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), 692–695.
[409] *Mingru xue'an*, vol. 10, 187–190.
[410] Qian Dehong included the date *yiwei* 乙未 year (1535) in his preface. Wang Ji also mentioned a date—*guichou* 癸丑 year (1553)—in his account. For the publication of the early editions of *Mingru xue'an*, see

While Qian summarised multiple stages of Wang Shouren's learning and teaching progression, Wang Ji and Huang also highlighted several phases but marked the milestones differently. In this context, there is a strong possibility that Wang Ji and Huang might have adopted Qian's structure of Wang Shouren's learning and teaching experiences into three phases each, incorporating revisions based on their interpretations of Wang Shouren's philosophy. Moreover, Qian's discussion of Wang Shouren's learning and teaching paths was a significant component of his preface to *Collected Writings*, the editing and publishing of which was a collective work of Wang Shouren's disciples.[411] Consequently, given that Wang Ji interacted constantly with Qian, participated in the compilation of *Collected Writings* by 1535, and compiled a memorial biography of Qian in 1574, it should be clear that he was familiar with Qian's major activities and ideas.[412] Under these circumstances, there is a strong possibility that Wang Ji was well aware of Qian's discourse on the different phases of their teacher's learning and teaching experiences, which indicates that Wang Ji's account was likely his refinement of Qian's earlier work. Hence, Qian's version is probably the earliest statement on this topic with a long-lasting influence that can be traced in relevant discussions of later times. As this chapter traces the reception of Wang's intellectual development, Qian's account provides a fitting case for detailed analysis. Below is the text and translation, excerpted from his preface to *Collected Writings.*[413]

> 先生之學凡三變，其為教也亦三變：少之時，馳騁於辭章；已而出入二氏；繼乃居夷處困，豁然有得於聖賢之旨：是三變而至道也。居貴陽時，首與學者爲

Huang Zongxi, "Zaiban qianyan" 再版前言 [Foreword to the Second Edition], in *Mingru xue'an*, ed. Shen Zhiying 沈芝盈, 4–6.

[411] A group of disciples engaged in the editing of *Collected Writings*. For a brief list, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1752.

[412] For this memorial biography of Qian Dehong, see *Wang Ji ji*, vol. 20, 584–593. In his biography of Qian, Wang Ji reminisced about their learning experiences as Wang Shouren's students and reflected on their meetings and correspondence after Wang Shouren's death. This record shows that Wang Ji had constant interaction and close communication with Qian.

[413] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1745–1746.

> “知行合一”之說；自滁陽後，多教學者靜坐；江右以來，始單提“致良知”三字，直指本體，令學者言下有悟：是教亦三變也。讀《文錄》者當自知之。
> Regarding the Master’s (Wang Shouren) learning experience, there were three phases of change in total. Similarly, his teaching activities underwent three phases of change. In his youth, he was exuberant in literary creation; later, he wandered in and out of the two schools; subsequently, while residing among the barbarians under difficult circumstances, he suddenly gained insights into the essential ideas of the sages. This is how he arrived at the doctrine through three previous phases. While in Guiyang, he introduced learners to the theory of uniting knowledge and action; after moving to Chuyang, he taught learners to meditate; since arriving in Jiangxi, he began exclusively promoting the three words “extending innate knowledge”, precisely indicating the substance to awaken learners in an instant. This is how his teaching path reflected three phases. Readers of the *Collection of Writings* should be aware of these.

It is essential to highlight that Qian Dehong’s discourse on Wang Shouren’s learning and teaching experiences centres around the Chinese character *bian* 變, which, in this context, is used as a noun rather than a verb, referring to a phase of a changing progression rather than an act of change. In other words, the compound 三變 should be understood as “three phases of change” (implying two changes) instead of “changing three times”. Although the character 變 means “to change” in many historical texts, the latter reading may lead to a misinterpretation that Qian’s summary of Wang’s learning and teaching activities contradicts his subsequent elaboration on several milestones in his teacher’s life experiences.

In the foreword to a modern edition of *Yangming xiansheng jiyao* 陽明先生集要 [*Collection of Important Works of Master Yangming*],[414] the contemporary editor Wang Xiaoxin reads *sanbian* 三變 as “changing three times” and argues that Wang Shouren’s learning and teaching paths only changed twice in Qian Dehong’s discussion.[415] Nevertheless, interpreting

[414] Wang Shouren, “Qianyan” 前言 [Foreword], in *Yangming xiansheng jiyao* 陽明先生集要 [*Collection of Important Works of Master Yangming*], ed. Shi Bangyao 施邦曜 (1585–1644), Wang Xiaoxin 王曉昕, and Zhao Pinglüe 趙平略 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 2–4.
[415] Based on this reading, Wang Xiaoxin indicates that Qian Dehong’s account is less accurate than Wang Ji’s, further stating that Wang Ji’s account is the “original” (*yuanchuang* 原創) theory focusing on changes of Wang Shouren’s learning and teaching experiences. More specifically, he has noted three acts of change, namely four

三變 as "three stages of a changing progression" is more consistent with the context, given that the word *bian* 變 can be used as a noun to describe a changed phase or aspect. A prominent example is the Confucius saying "a gentleman gives different impressions in three different situations" (*junzi you sanbian* 君子有三變).[416] Although modern scholars have provided varied translations of the character *bian* 變, it is generally interpreted as a noun indicating a different situation or aspect.[417] Furthermore, there were multiple occasions during the Ming–Qing period where *sanbian* 三變 was used to describe three phases of change regarding scholars' learning experiences or literature creations.[418] As these examples suggest that *bian* 變 often refers to a phase of change, Qian Dehong's account shows an emphasis on the different stages that constitute Wang Shouren's learning and teaching progression over time. These stages can be summarised as follows:

different stages, in Wang Ji's discussion. However, Wang Xiaoxin's division of those stages is arguable. Wang Ji's notion on Wang Shouren's unsuccessful effort in investigating things is more likely the reason for Wang Shouren's fondness for Buddhism and Daoism, rather than a specific phase separated from the period of Buddhist and Daoist fascination. This interpretation is more aligned with Wang Shouren's own narrative in the preface, in which he described his unsuccessful progression on the Confucian path as a reason for turning to Buddhism and Daoism. In addition, it is highly questionable to consider Wang Ji's account as the original discourse, since it was written eighteen years later than the widely circulated preface by Qian Dehong.

[416] The Chinese text is: 君子有三變：望之儼然，即之也溫，聽其言也厲。See quote at *Lunyu*, 19.9.

[417] James Legge translated this phrase as "the superior man undergoes three changes", while Arthur Waley read it as "a gentleman has three varying aspects". D. C. Lau's translation, "in the three following situations the gentleman gives a different impression", suggests that he interpreted 三變 as referring to three different situations. For their studies, see: James Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean* (Newburyport: Dover Publications, 2013), 342. Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938), 226. D. C. Lau, *Confucius: The Analects (Lun yü)* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 154.

[418] The practice of using *sanbian* 三變 to summarise phases of intellectual development was not common until the Ming and Qing dynasties. In the Tang dynasty, it more often referred to different literary styles in an academic context. Ming–Qing scholars particularly applied this term to describe previous scholars' Confucian journeys. Wang Shouren himself used *sanbian* to describe three learning phases in his letter to Fang Xianfu (see footnote 394). See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 258. For some examples, see Xu Shichang 徐世昌 et al., "Fan xiansheng Guangyang" 范先生光陽 ["Master Fan Guangyang"] and "Chen xiansheng Yongguang" 陳先生用光 ["Master Chen Yongguang"], in *Qingru xue'an* 清儒學案 [*The Records of the Qing Scholars*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), vol. 35, 1341; vol. 89, 3513.

	Learning[419]	Teaching[420]
Phase 1	Engagement in literature creation, 1492–1497	The uniting of knowledge and action, 1509–1512
Phase 2	Engagement in Buddhism and Daoism, 1498–1509	Meditation, 1513–1517
Phase 3	Grasp of the Confucian doctrine, 1510–	The extension of *liangzhi*, 1518–

According to Qian Dehong's summary of Wang Shouren's learning and teaching progression, Wang's instruction on meditation—central to his second teaching phase (1513–1517)—began after his attainment of Confucian insight in 1510. This suggests that Wang's meditative practice was rooted in Confucian contemplation rather than Buddhist *samādhi* and should therefore be distinguished from the Buddhist practices he engaged in during the earlier learning phase (1498–1509). From a Confucian perspective, this later form of meditation aligns with the description in the "Letter to Students in Chenzhong" (1509),[421] in which Wang explicitly stated that he used sitting meditation to recollect thoughts—not to enter *samādhi*.[422] Both Wang's letter and Qian's summary present meditation as a Confucian method for reflective learning. Similarly, the modern scholar Dong Ping has argued that the apparent Buddhist features of Wang's meditation stem from his use of non-Confucian methods in pursuit of Confucian goals.[423] In doing so, Wang's appropriation of Buddhist terms and techniques raised doubts among some of his contemporaries.

[419] Based on Wang Shouren's written accounts and Qian Dehong's "Chronological Biography", Chapter Three has reconstructed a timeline of Wang's learning path between 1488 and 1510. Accordingly, a rough date could be assigned to the start of each phase. It is worth mentioning that the start of the final phase is determined according to Wang's own narratives rather than Qian's chronicle. While Qian placed the event of awakening to the theory of investigating things and extending knowledge in the passage of 1508 in "Chronological Biography", Wang stated that he began to grasp the sages' teachings in 1510 in both his preface and his conversation with students. Comparing these two versions, the year 1510 seems to be more accurate as it is corroborated by more than one first-hand account.

[420] In light of "Chronological Biography", which noted the dates when Wang moved to Guiyang, Chuyang, and Jiangxi, the start of the first two teaching phases can be decided. Regarding the final phase, the "Chronological Biography" stated that Wang was occupied with official affairs after his arrival in Jiangxi and left few direct instructions to his students until the next year. In this case, the third phase of Wang's teaching career more likely started from 1518, the second year of his stay in Jiangxi. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1352–1355, 1363–1364, 1383.

[421] See p. 122.

[422] See pp. 147–148.

[423] Dong, *Wang Yangming de shenghuo shijie*, 40–41.

Seen in this light, Wang's second teaching phase (1513–1517), which emphasised meditation, resonates with the *Daxue*'s 大學 [*The Great Learning*] model of self-cultivation—specifically, the stage in which "only after deliberation can [the highest good] be attained" (*lü erhou nengde* 慮而後能得).[424] In his "Daxue wen" 大學問 ["Enquiry on the Great Learning"] (1527), Wang writes, "The *liangzhi* in our mind is able to thoroughly examine and carefully observe [the thoughts], and thus we can contemplate." Here, *liangzhi* functions as the moral faculty that enables careful self-examination, through which the "highest good" (*zhishan* 至善) could be reached.[425] Julia Ching's interpretation— "the capacity of *hsin* (the mind) to know and do good"—captures well its role in this context.[426]

Wang's instruction on meditation, framed as a method of recollecting and evaluating thoughts, thus appears to refer to this form of moral self-examination. Unlike Chan-Buddhist seated meditation, which the sixth patriarch Huineng described as "no thoughts arising from external good or evil circumstances" and "an internally imperturbable self-existing nature", Wang's practice welcomed the arising of thoughts as natural and essential.[427] Whereas Huineng explicitly called for transcending moral judgement of good or evil—regarding the absence of thoughts as the essence of meditation—Wang urged active reflection: thoughts must be assessed in light of whether they accord with the moral standards that lead to the

[424] See quote at *Daxue*, I.A. For an English translation, see Ian Johnston and Wang Ping, *Daxue and Zhongyong: Bilingual Edition* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2012), 19–40.
[425] The Chinese text is: 吾心之良知自有以詳審精察之，而能慮矣。See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 3, 1068. For Wing-tsit Chan's full translation, see Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, 271–280. Chan read the first part of this sentence as "the mind with its innate knowledge will thoroughly sift and carefully examine". However, translating *zi youyi* 自有以 as "will" may be inaccurate, as the term *youyi* 有以 more commonly refers to possessing the necessary qualities or conditions. This better fits the context where self-examination of thoughts enables "contemplation" (*lü* 慮). An example of *youyi* referring to having necessary qualities or conditions is 自故用兵之法，无恃其不来，恃吾有以待也 in *Sunzi* 孫子 [*Master Sun/The Art of War*] (c. 5th century BCE). In this sentence, 恃吾有以待 can be translated into "relying on our preparations for [the enemies' coming]".
[426] Ching, "To Acquire Wisdom", 207.
[427] Huineng's teaching is: 何名坐禪。此法門中無障無礙。外於一切善惡境界心念不起名爲坐。内見自性不動名爲禪。See *Taishō Tripitaka*, T48, 2008: 353b18–b20.

highest good. This contrast underscores Wang's assertion that his seated practice diverged fundamentally from Buddhist meditation.

Wang's third teaching phase, centred on "extending *liangzhi*" (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知), further reflects his distinctive reinterpretation of *Daxue*'s principle of extending knowledge (*zhizhi* 致知).[428] In his *Daxue wen*, Wang defines this term as cultivating innate consciousness through sustained moral attentiveness in daily life.[429] Taken together, the second and third phases—summarised by Qian as a progression from inner scrutiny to outward practice—form a coherent pedagogical arc that mirrors the *Daxue*'s path of self-cultivation. In this sense, Qian's summary presents Wang's intellectual development as an exemplary enactment of Confucian learning, reinforcing his identity as both learner and teacher of the Way.

Another important feature is that Qian Dehong treated Wang's learning experience and teaching career as two significant facets rather than two successive chapters of his life. As the table shows, the timelines of Wang's learning and teaching experiences overlap. Moreover, it is relevant to add that as Wang started to receive disciples in 1505, the overlap between his learning and teaching activities was probably five years, from 1505 to 1510, longer than one year (1509–1510) reflected in this table. In this case, Qian's foremost criterion in classifying Wang's life experiences seems to have been the purpose, rather than the timing, of the corresponding activities. Nevertheless, his account might obscure a potential issue: Wang began instructing disciples while still engaged with Buddhism and Daoism, which could raise questions among Confucian literati about the nature of those instructions and thus intensify debates over Wang's Confucian identity.

[428] See the *Daxue*, II.B.1–2
[429] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 3, 1069–1070.

Although the issue of the intersecting years might not have been completely resolved in Qian Dehong's discussion, it was tackled carefully with a meticulous choice of wording. Qian's statement that Wang wandered "in and out of the two schools" (*churu ershi* 出入二氏) implies that Wang engaged in Confucian activities in the meantime. Additionally, Qian concluded that Wang "arrived at the doctrine" (*zhidao* 至道) through the three learning phases. This wording implies that the phase when Wang wandered in and out of Buddhism and Daoism resembles an experimental effort necessary for a more mature grasp of Confucian learning. In other words, Wang's involvement in Buddhism and Daoism was a significant step towards his final realisation of the Confucian doctrine. Given this situation, Qian seemed to direct the focus to Wang's eventual achievement on the Confucian path, while downplaying the influence of Buddhism and Daoism on Wang's learning experiences. As a result, Wang's ultimate identity as a Confucian is somewhat protected from potential questions about the nature of his teachings between 1505 and 1510.

Furthermore, although Qian Dehong did not directly mention the Confucian transmission in his discussion of the different stages of Wang's learning and teaching experiences, he specifically noted it in another text where these activities were divided into similar phases. In the first half of his preface to "Chronological Biography", written in 1563, he outlined a transmission lineage in which Wang was said to have relayed the doctrines from Cheng Hao.[430] The same preface then proceeded to elaborate on Wang's learning and teaching outcomes, emphasising his significant contributions to Confucianism. Additionally, there is a brief mention of the "three phases of change" at the end of the preface, though this is a quotation from another disciple, Luo Hongxian 羅洪先 (1504–1564), rather than Qian's own

[430] See p. 180.

writing. In this context, Wang's disciples seemed to regard his place within the Confucian transmission as a significant issue related to his Confucian learning and teaching paths. Though obscured or absent in certain cases, it was highly likely one of the ultimate aims disciples wished to affirm in their narratives of Wang's learning and teaching activities.

As the case above reflects how Qian Dehong demonstrated Wang's Confucian status by examining his learning and teaching outcomes, it appears that criteria such as the learner and teacher roles of a Confucian served as a means of defending Wang's stature rather than merely reconstructing his activities. The latter purpose is more questionable given the intersecting years between Wang's learning and teaching experiences, which critics of the School of Mind could challenge regarding the accuracy of Qian's narrative. Accordingly, the following sections will examine additional texts by scholars from various groups over time to determine whether similar features appear in other contexts.

III. The Posthumous Recognition of Wang Shouren: the Political and Ideological Context of the Discourse

While the discussion above has demonstrated how Wang Shouren's Confucian status was assessed, this chapter will take a further step to explore the formation of these assessments under changing circumstances and across various groups, focusing on the impact of the temporal and doctrinal factors mentioned previously. Accordingly, the following analysis will first examine the evolving debates over Wang's posthumous recognition during the Ming–Qing period, delving into the political and ideological context surrounding Wang's academic identity. With a timeline of Wang's posthumous perception established in this section, the next section can then explore the methods scholars from different Confucian communities

used to evaluate Wang's academic activities in the light of any significant shifts in attitudes towards him over time.

1. The established tradition of determining posthumous perceptions of officials and scholars

During the Ming dynasty, posthumous perceptions of renowned individuals were decreed by the emperors after being formulated by the officialdom. Accompanied by imperial commendations or denunciations, this form of recognition could affect not only individual opinions on the recipient among Confucian literati but also the academic activities of the corresponding philosophical school. In this context, one of the most common forms of official recognition bestowed upon officials and scholars was the posthumous title (*shihao* 諡號), which signified the authorised perception of the recipients' political, military, or academic merits. This act of recognition is known as "granting posthumous titles" (*cishi* 賜諡). The verb "grant" (*ci* 賜), typically implying a superior giving something to an inferior, not only reflects a hierarchy between the giver and the recipient but also underscores the significance of a favourable title as an honour awarded by the emperor. [431] During the reigns of the sixteen Ming emperors, all posthumous titles bestowed on officials were positive, despite a perceived hierarchy within these titles.[432]

[431] Posthumous titles were also conferred on most members of the imperial family and some rulers of tributary states. Any former emperor, grand emperor, or empress dowager would also receive a posthumous title from the ruling emperor. However, this process was referred to as "the bestowal of venerable titles (to superior persons)" (*shang zunhao* 上尊號), which reflects the hierarchy of positions from another perspective.

[432] Tian Bing 田冰, "Mingdai guanyuan jishi zhong de teshu xianxiang jiedu" 明代官員給謚中的特殊現象解讀 ["On the Special Phenomenon of Conferring Posthumous Titles on Officials in the Ming Dynasty", English title given by the author], *Shixue yuekan* 史學月刊 no. 6 (2010): 28–29.

There were established rules for conferring posthumous titles during the Ming dynasty. According to *Mingshi*, the privilege of receiving posthumous titles was generally restricted to officials who ranked 3b or above.[433] Nevertheless, exceptions were made for low-ranking or unranked individuals with exceptional achievements, such as supporting the emperor's ascension to the throne or sacrificing themselves for the state. In addition to these instances of special service to the Ming empire, there were numerous cases where Confucian scholars without high official ranks were granted posthumous titles for their significant contributions to Confucianism.[434]

Furthermore, while these cases above were commonly initiated by official memorials to the ruling emperor recommending special recognitions for prominent Confucians, those memorials might request not only the bestowal of posthumous titles but also certifications qualifying the recipients for "receiving sacrifices offered at the Confucius Temple" (*congsi kongmiao* 從祀孔廟). An example is the belated posthumous recognition in 1588 for the esteemed scholar Cai Qing 蔡清 (1453–1508), who died shortly after his appointment as Chancellor of the Nanjing Directorate of Education (*Nanjing guozijian jijiu* 南京國子監祭酒, rank 4b) eighty years earlier.[435] In an official memorial submitted to Emperor Shenzong 神宗 (1563–1620), requests were made for offering Cai Qing both a posthumous title and a subordinate position at the Confucius Temple. After a discussion in the Ministry of Rites

[433] *Mingshi*, vol. 60, 1488–1490. More detailed records can be found in "Shifa" 謚法 ["Rules of Posthumous Titles"] of *Ming huiyao*, which collected a number of posthumous titles and their recipients. See *Ming huiyao*, vol. 19–20, 309–331.
[434] For a study on the special cases in which posthumous titles were conferred on Confucian scholars without high ranks, see Tian, "Mingdai guanyuan jishi zhong de teshu xianxiang jiedu", 26–28.
[435] For a biography of Cai Qing, see *Mingshi*, vol. 282, 7233–7234. For an historical record of the rank of Chancellor of the Nanjing Directorate of Education, see "zhiguan zhi" 職官志 ["Treatise on State Offices"], in *Mingshi*, vol. 73, 1789–1791. For the English translation of this official title, see *Mingdai zhiguan zhongying cidian* 明代職官中英辭典 [*Chinese-English Dictionary of Ming Government Official Titles*], ed. Zhang Ying 張穎, Susan Xue 薛燕, and Xue Zhaohui 薛昭慧 et al., 3rd ed. (Irvine: eScholarship, University of California, 2020), s.v. "國子監".

(*libu* 禮部), the former request was granted by the emperor's decree, whereas the latter, probably the highest honour a Confucian could receive during imperial times of China, was left undecided for further examination.[436] This decision suggests that although the Ming authorities generally used the bestowal of posthumous titles as special recognitions for eminent scholars regardless of their ranks, they were more cautious when determining qualifications for receiving sacrifices offered at the Confucius Temple as this honour signified essential positions in the transmission of Confucianism. While displaying respect for eminent Confucians and thereby reinforcing Confucianism as the state ideology, the Ming empire sought to ensure rigorous control over Confucian ideology by strictly supervising the discourse on the lineage of Confucian doctrine, known as the transmission of the Way.

2. The debate over the posthumous recognition of Wang Shouren

Similar to the case of Cai Qing, the discourse on the official recognition of Wang Shouren involved both the bestowal of a posthumous title and the qualification as a "true Confucian" (*zhenru* 真儒) for receiving sacrifices at the Confucius Temple. Therefore, relevant debates can provide insights into how the Ming authorities assessed Wang's academic achievements and, more significantly, his status in the Confucian transmission. In this context, the year 1529 is particularly notable as it marks Wang's death and thus prompts continuous discussions about his posthumous perception. Given Wang's prestigious official position

[436] Gu Bingqian 顾秉谦 (b. 1500) et al., *Shenzong Xianhuangdi shilu* 神宗顯皇帝實錄 [*Veritable Records of Emperor Shenzong-Xian*] (National Library of Peiping 國立北平圖書館 photographic facsimile), vol. 199, 3737.

(rank 2a) and distinguished Confucian career, he would normally qualify for official recognition.[437]

However, despite Wang's senior rank and illustrious achievements, the eventual decision regarding his posthumous title and his qualification as a true Confucian underwent long-term deliberation. It was not until 1567, during Emperor Muzong's 穆宗 (1537–1572) reign, that the posthumous title *wencheng* 文成 was conferred upon him and the first request to certify his Confucian status was made.[438] Furthermore, issues concerning Wang's certification as a true Confucian were not settled until 1584, during Emperor Shenzong's reign.[439] The official recognition of Wang therefore stretched into a fifty-five-year debate spanning the rules of three emperors. Given the scale of the debate, it is reasonable to assume that different phases of this official recognition potentially influenced individual discussions of Wang's Confucian path among Ming literati, especially his disciples whose active time generally overlapped with the progression.

[437] According to *Mingshi*, Wang Shouren was the Nanjing Minister of War (*Nanjing bingbu shangshu* 南京兵部尚書); see *Mingshi*, vol. 195, 5166–5168. For an English translation of this title, see *Mingdai zhiguan zhongying cidian*, s.v. "兵部". See also *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, s.v. "pīng-pù 兵部".For the rank of this official position, see "zhiguan zhi", in *Mingshi*, vol. 72, 1750

[438] There is little clear explanation of this title's meaning among the existing records of Wang Shouren's official recognition during the Ming dynasty. Generally, the character *wen* 文 was often bestowed upon individuals who had served at the Hanlin Academy, with Wang's case being one of the few exceptions. The character *cheng* 成 was commonly used to praise an individual's accomplishments, and the compound *wencheng* 文成 as a title was widely regarded as high form of approval. For a detailed account on how posthumous titles were decided during the Ming dynasty, see Long Wenbin, "Shifa" 謚法 ["The Rules of Posthumous Titles"] and "Zalu" 雜錄 ["Other Notes"], in *Ming huiyao*, vol. 19–20, 309–338. Both Qian Dehong's "Chronological Biography" and the official history *Ming shilu* stated that the posthumous title was bestowed on Wang in 1567, the first year of Longqing, although these two accounts differ on the exact month the official decision was made (the fifth month and the fourth month, respectively). See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1494–1496. See also *Muzong Zhuanghuangdi shilu*, vol. 7, 0218. Regarding the request to certify Wang for receiving sacrifices in Confucius Temple, it was first suggested by Geng Dingxiang 耿定向 (1524–1596) later that year (the sixth lunar month), according to *Ming shilu*. See *Muzong Zhuanghuangdi shilu*, vol. 9, 0261–0262.

[439] *Shenzong Xianhuangdi shilu*, vol. 155, 2865–2867.

Regarding the posthumous recognition of Wang Shouren, particularly the discussions of his qualification for receiving sacrifices at the Confucius Temple, there exists a considerable number of historical records from Ming scholars and significant studies by modern researchers. Not only did Qian Dehong detail the posthumous perception of Wang in "Chronological Biography", but Ming historians also recorded the official discussions and imperial decrees concerning this issue as significant governmental matters in *Ming shilu*, the annals of the Ming emperors compiled officially by committees of scholar-officials.

Although Qian was able to provide a detailed account of this discourse, as he had been observing the related debates including the efforts of his peers in advocating for their teacher's political, military, and academic accomplishments, it is important to note that, as written by a disciple, this account was probably an attempt to establish Wang's Confucian achievements per se. By comparison, historical texts in *Ming shilu* appear to record relevant events from a more neutral perspective, collecting official documents without commenting on the opinions within. However, these texts were scattered over different volumes in three parts of the enormous collection, in which records were amassed chronologically rather than classified by themes or events. Under these circumstances, a combined use of both "Chronological Biography" and *Ming shilu* can help explore the long-term discourse on Wang's posthumous recognition while being vigilant about any partial views.

In terms of modern studies, a number of scholars have discussed how continuous debates over Wang's qualification for receiving sacrifices at the Confucius Temple reflected changing attitudes towards Wang's philosophy during the mid to late Ming era.[440] In this

[440] For some historical studies of the posthumous recognition of Wang Shouren, see the following articles of Zhu Honglin 朱鴻林 (Hung-Lam Chu in Wade-Giles style) who works on the tradition of eminent Confucians receiving sacrifices offered at the Confucius Temple: Hung-Lam Chu, "The Debate Over Recognition of Wang Yang–Ming", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 1(1998): 47–70. Zhu Honglin 朱鴻林, "Yangming congsi

case, the following section will not reconstruct the entire discourse, which has been widely addressed by recent scholarship. Instead, it will summarise a timeline that is particularly useful to this chapter on the Ming–Qing interpretations of Wang's learning and teaching experiences. Considering the changes that occurred throughout the long discourse on Wang's posthumous recognition, a brief timeline can provide the historical context for understanding how different opinions on his relation to Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism might have been shaped over time. The following table outlines four different phases with corresponding dates, events, and outcomes.

Rounds of debates	Events marking new phases	Periodical outcomes
1529, the eighth year of Jiajing 嘉靖[441]	Wang's death and the subsequent officialdom's discussion on his achievements	Imperial decree banning Wang's teachings as "heretical" and ending the inheritance of Wang's rank of nobility
1567, the first year of Longqing 隆慶[442]	Emperor Muzong's order to discuss the granting of retrospective posthumous titles upon officials of earlier times	Official memorials requesting to certify Wang as a "true Confucian" and the imperial decree bestowing a posthumous title on Wang
1574, the second year of Wanli 萬曆[443]	Emperor Shenzong's approval of Wang's qualification for receiving sacrifices at the Confucius Temple	Imperial decree qualifying Wang as a "true Confucian"

dianli de zhengyi he cuozhe" 陽明從祀典禮的爭議和挫折 ["The Controversies and Frustrations Regarding the Ceremony of Recognising Yangming as a True Confucian Master"], *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiusuo xuebao* 中國文化研究所學報 no. 5 (1996): 167–182. Zhu Honglin 朱鴻林, "Wang Yangming congsi kongmiao de shiliao wenti" 王陽明從祀孔廟的史料問題 ["On the Issue of Historical Materials about Wang Yangming's Co-Presiding over Sacrificial Rites at the Confucian Temple"], *Shixue jikan* 史學集刊 no. 6 (2008): 35–44. These articles are collected in his book *Kongmiao congsi yu xiangyue* 孔廟從祀與鄉約 [*Co-presiding over Sacrificial Rites at the Confucius Temple and the Community Compact*] published in 2015. For an account examining how the compilation of "Chronological Biography" served to establish Wang Shouren's qualification as a true Confucian, see Yang Cheng-hsien 楊正顯, "Wang Yangming nianpu yu congsi kongmiao zhi yanjiu" 王陽明年譜與從祀孔廟之研究 ["Wang Yangming's Chronicle and the Placing of His Tablet at the Confucius Temple"], *Hanxue yanjiu* 漢學研究 29, no.1 (2011): 153–187. Another piece of research that covers this continuous discourse is: Wang Lifang 王黎芳 and Liu Cong 刘聪, "Mingdai xinxuejia Wang Shourencongsi Kongmiao shulun" 明代心學家王守仁從祀孔廟述論 ["A Discussion of the Ming Scholar of Mind Wang Shouren Receiving Sacrifices at the Confucius Temple"], *Lishi dang'an* 歷史檔案 no. 1 (2017): 61–71.

[441] This discussion began two months after Wang Shouren's death. See *Ming Shizong shilu*, vol. 98, 2299–2300. See also *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1464–1466.

[442] *Muzong Zhuanghuangdi shilu*, vol. 7, 0218; vol. 9, 0261–0262. See also *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1495–1496.

[443] *Shenzong Xianhuangdi shilu*, vol. 32, 0758.

1584, the twelfth year of Wanli[444]	Ceremony performed at the Confucius Temple	Ritual ceremony demonstrating Wang as a "true Confucian"

It is notable in the table that the second and third rounds of debates began in the first few reigning years of two succeeding emperors. This phenomenon indicates a high possibility that the official perception of Wang was deeply influenced by the changes of political landscape. More specifically, Ming rulers and the heads of the Grand Secretariat, namely Senior Grand Secretaries, tended to align posthumous recognitions with their opinions on different Confucian schools and policies relating to private Confucian teachings (*jiangxue* 講學).[445] Modern scholars have noted the role of Senior Grand Secretary Xu Jie 徐階 (1503–1583), who was known for his connection with the Yangming School and his support for private teachings, in lifting the ban on Wang's "heretical" ideas.[446] However, despite some memorials submitted during this period recommending recognition of Wang as a true Confucian, these requests were met with significant opposition from numerous scholar-officials. This opposition in officialdom seemed to decrease in 1574 when another round of debate was initiated by several advocates for qualifying Wang as a true Confucian, greatly promoted by the continuous effort of scholars within the Yangming School.[447] Nevertheless,

[444] *Shenzong Xianhuangdi shilu*, vol. 155, 2865–2868.
[445] *Mingshi*, vol. 181, 4820–4825.
[446] According to *Mingru xue'an*, Xu Jie studied with Wang Shouren's disciple Nie Bao 聶豹 (1487–1563) in his earlier years and began supporting private teachings while holding high office in the government. See *Mingru xue'an*, vol. 27, 616–617. For a brief account of how Xu Jie used his political influence to promote Wang Shouren's ethical thinking while sponsoring private-teaching gatherings, see John W. Dardess, "As Grand Secretary: On *jiangxue* and on War in the North", in *A Political Life in Ming China: A Grand Secretary and His Times* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 35–40. For Chinese scholarship regarding Xu Jie's role in altering the previous perception of Wang Shouren in officialdom, see Zhu, "Yangming congsi dianli de zhengyi he cuozhe", 178–180. See also Yang, "Wang Yangming nianpu yu congsi kongmiao zhi yanjiu", 156.
[447] According to "Chronological Biography", numerous disciples had advocated for Wang Shouren's qualification as a true Confucian since 1529; see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1468. Several official memorials written by disciples—such as Xue Kan 薛侃 (1486–1545) and Huang Zongming 黃宗明 (d. 1536)—regarding the recognition and rank inheritance of Wang can be found in the collection of Wang's works. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1648–1658. In addition, although not included in *Complete Works*, there was a significant memorial submitted by Xie Tingjie that requested official recognition of Wang as a true Confucian, as recorded in *Ming shilu*. See *Shenzong Xianhuangdi shilu*, vol. 155, 2865–2868. As mentioned earlier, Xie was a scholar of Yangming School who edited and published the *Complete Works*, one of the most circulated complete collections of Wang's works, in 1572. For a study of disciples' effort in advocating for Wang's recognition as a true Confucian, see Zhu Honglin 朱鴻林, *Kongmiao congsi yu xiangyue* 孔廟從祀與鄉約 [*Co-*

although Wang's qualification was authorised by decree in 1574, the corresponding sacrificial ceremony was not performed until 1584. In this context, the delay of the ritual ceremony was possibly due to the lack of support from Senior Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525–1582), who was reluctant to endorse ceremonies honouring contemporary Confucians because of his disfavour of private teachings by scholar-officials.[448] Accordingly, this gap between the third and fourth phases, as shown in the timeline above, is another example of how individuals in crucial political positions held leverage over the official perception of a school of Confucian ideology. Using the timeline above, the following sections will delve into specific texts by scholars from various groups that assessed Wang's academic identity based on his learning and teaching activities, with analyses of these sources grounded in their historical contexts.

IV. Disciples' Interpretations of Wang Shouren's Non-Confucian Experiences

As noted earlier, Ming–Qing debates over Wang's relations to the two non-Confucian schools involved four groups of scholars, beginning with his own disciples, who were the first to receive his teachings and writings. Accordingly, this section begins with their discussions of Wang's Confucian status.

Presiding over Sacrificial Rites at Confucius Temple and the Community Compact] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2015), 125–150.

[448] By contrast, Shen Shixing 申時行 (1535–1614), the Grand Secretary in 1584, endorsed sacrificial ceremony honouring Wang Shouren at the Confucius Temple. For historical records regarding Shen Shixing's involvement in this discussion, see *Shenzong Xianhuangdi shilu*, vol. 155, 2865–2868. See also *Guoque*, vol. 72, 4492–4493.

1. Disciples' choices of wording and their reasons for rephrasing Wang Shouren's non-Confucian experiences

Before turning to how disciples portrayed Wang's non-Confucian engagements, it is crucial to revisit Wang's own reflections on these experiences. This helps identify potential points of tension or ambiguity that may have compelled his disciples to reinterpret, soften or strategically reframe his words. In particular, Wang repeatedly referenced his past involvement with Buddhism and Daoism—often described collectively as "the two schools"—in writings spanning 1508 to 1521.[449] He was especially outspoken in expressing regret between 1514 and 1515, a sentiment that may be linked to the widespread concern in officialdom regarding Emperor Wuzong's fondness for Buddhism at that time.[450] As discussed in Chapter One, while many scholar-officials endeavoured to dissuade the emperor from welcoming Buddhism by criticising Buddhism and upholding Confucian doctrine, Wang emphasised a hierarchy wherein Buddhism and Daoism were superior to mediocre teachings of incompetent Confucians but still deemed inferior to the true doctrine of Confucianism. He demonstrated both a more tolerant attitude towards the two non-Confucian schools and a less exclusive allegiance to Confucian scholarship. As a result, his written accounts discussing his past engagement with Buddhism and Daoism might pose delicate challenges for his disciples.

[449] Among Wang Shouren's written accounts, "Letter in Reply to the Question of Spiritually Immortals" (1508) might probably be the earliest record in which he reviewed prior engagement with non-Confucian belief. There are another seven written works of Wang that contain reflection on Buddhist or Daoist experiences, which could be dated to the period between 1508 and 1523. For more details, see the section "The Start and End of Wang Shouren' Devotion to Buddhism and Daoism in His Youth" above (pp. 130–153).
[450] See pp. 47–49.

The first challenge for Wang's disciples was to reconstruct his earlier engagement with Buddhism and Daoism. This was addressed differently across disciples' records, where such reconstructions often relied on recollection rather than Wang's own written accounts. As noted in the thesis introduction, Wang is frequently cited for his remark, "I was also earnestly devoted to the two schools", recorded in two major sources by his disciples. Both accounts describe the same 1514 conversation between Wang and his students on Buddhism and Daoism, yet their textual differences are significant. These variations shed light on how each source interpreted Wang's self-described involvement in non-Confucian traditions—and what may account for the divergences. The translated excerpts are presented below.

> *Chuanxi lu*:[451]
> 蕭惠好仙、釋。先生警之曰："吾亦自幼篤志二氏，自謂既有所得，謂儒者為不足學。其後居夷三載，見得聖人之學若是其簡易廣大，始自歎悔錯用了三十年氣力。大抵二氏之學，其妙與聖人只有毫釐之間。……"
> Xiao Hui was fond of Daoism and Buddhism. The teacher warned, "Since I was young, I was also earnestly devoted to the two schools. I thought that I had already understood something. And I thought that the teachings of the Confucians were not worth studying. Later I lived among the barbarians for three years. I realised how concise and comprehensive was the teaching of the sages. Then I started to sigh and regret that I had wasted my energy for thirty years. In general, the essence of the two schools' teaching is only slightly away from that of the sages' teaching.

> "Chronological Biography":[452]
> 王嘉秀、蕭惠好談仙佛，先生嘗警之曰："吾幼時求聖學不得，亦嘗篤志二氏。其後居夷三載，始見聖人端緒，悔錯用功二十年。二氏之學，其妙與聖人只有毫釐之間，故不易辨，惟篤志聖學者始能究析其隱微，非測憶所及也。"
> Wang Jiaxiu and Xiao Hui were fond of discussing Daoism and Buddhism. The teacher once warned, "When I was young, I was unable to grasp the teachings of the [Confucian] sages. I was once earnestly devoted to the two schools as well. Later I lived among the barbarians for three years. I started to see the threads of the sages' teachings. I regretted that I had wasted my energy for twenty years. The essence of the two schools' teachings is only slightly away from that of the sages' teachings. Hence, it is not easy to distinguish between them. Only those earnestly devoted to the teachings of the sages could delve deep into their hidden subtleties, which could not be reached through conjectures."

[451] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 42. For Wing-tsit Chan's translation, see Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, 81–82.
[452] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1364.

In both texts, Wang was recorded claiming that he was "earnestly devoted to the two schools" (*duzhi ershi* 篤志二氏). However, while in *Chuanxi lu* Wang stated that he had thought "the teachings of Confucians were not worth studying" (*wei ruzhe wei buzuxue* 謂儒者為不足學), in "Chronological Biography", he did not make such statement. Instead, he explained that his involvement in Buddhism and Daoism was driven by his failure to grasp "the teachings of the [Confucian] sages" (*shengxue* 聖學). The contrast between these two versions suggests that, in *Chuanxi lu*, Wang admitted to discarding the teachings of some Confucians at a certain stage of his learning journey.

This divergence in narration becomes more comprehensible when considered within a broader context. The disciples-compiled "Chronological Biography" (1563) was created over thirty years after Wang's death in 1529 and forty-five years after *Chuanxi lu* was first published in 1518. Considering the timeline of the continuous discussion on Wang's posthumous recognition, which has been provided in Section III, this time gap is significant, as new directions in the discourse may have influenced disciples' narratives of Wang's life and thought. Disciples, tasked with both recording the instructions of their teacher and promoting the ideas of their school, may have faced a dilemma in discussing Wang's accounts of his prior involvement in Buddhism and Daoism. They may also have become more cautious regarding their teacher's controversial view that certain teachings by mediocre Confucians were inferior to those of Buddhism and Daoism. In this context, the primary challenges they encountered were denunciations of Wang's scholarship and a ban on his teachings.

More specifically, the debate over the posthumous perception emerged in the government around two months after Wang's death.[453] Following Emperor Shizong's 世宗 (1507—1567) directive for a discussion on Wang's political accomplishments and academic activities, the Ministry of Personnel (*libu* 吏部) concluded that his rank of nobility should be preserved, but his "heretical theories" (*xieshuo* 邪說) were to be banned.[454] This stance from the Ministry of Personnel, responsible for evaluating the conduct of state officials, reflects an ambivalent perception of Wang. While acknowledged his achievement as an official, it denounced his performance as a scholar.

The emperor's comments on Wang carried a sharper tone, with a decision on Wang's teachings banned in harsh measures. According to the Ministry of Personnel, Wang opposed Zhu Xi's teachings to attract attention and compiled *Final Conclusions* after failing to gain wide support. In that case, his defect was described as "not following the ancient way in acts" (*shi bushigu* 事不師古) and "not commending the past masters in words" (*yan buchengshi* 言不稱師), revealing his teachings as heretical. The emperor, in contrast, stated that Wang "defamed previous Confucians" (*dihui xianru* 詆毀先儒), "spoiled people's mind" (*huairen xinshu* 壞人心術), and led his disciples in "circulating heretical theories" (*chuanxi xieshuo* 傳習邪說). Beyond censuring Wang as a scholar for his heretical teachings, the emperor appeared to downplay Wang's achievements as an official. Despite briefly acknowledging his accomplishments, the emperor decided to end the inheritance of Wang's rank of nobility. The wording of the emperor was not only more rigid but his decision, particularly regarding the cessation of the inheritance of Wang's rank and the declaration of harsh punishment for

[453] See pp. 195–196.
[454] *Ming Shizong shilu*, vol. 98, 2299–2300.

followers of heretical teachings, delivered a more severe blow to Wang's philosophical school.

The imperial decree suggested that a crucial criterion for identifying Wang's teachings as heretical was Zhu Xi's theories, which were upheld as the orthodox doctrines of Confucianism to distinguish Wang from true Confucians. This insight addresses the previously raised question about the exemplary figures to whom Wang was generally compared, particularly in regard to his qualifications for a position within the Confucian transmission lineage. In this context, Wang was censured for his deviation from the exemplary Confucian Zhu Xi. Although his compilation of *Final Conclusions* was, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, his significant effort to emphasise the agreement between his ideas and those of Zhu, it was denounced by the emperor as evidence of self-acknowledged inadequacy and a further harm to Confucian education. Given the significance of the imperial decree as a state-wide official denunciation, this statement—namely, that Wang's teachings being heretical due to their deviation from Zhu's doctrines— probably had a serious influence on how Ming–Qing scholars, especially those of the Cheng–Zhu School, assessed Wang's Confucian status. This issue will be further discussed in the following analyses of certain cases where Confucians outside the Yangming School examined Wang's learning and teaching activities.

It is necessary to note that the debate over the perception of Wang was documented differently in the written works of his disciples. In "Chronological Biography", Qian Dehong recorded a challenging situation where the teachings of Wang were banned in 1529 during

Gui E's 桂萼 (1478–1531) time as the Grand Secretary.[455] According to Qian, several disciples either submitted memorials to the emperor or attending audiences at court to argue against the ban on Wang's teachings. Additionally, Qian quoted a memorial from Huang Wan—friend and disciple of Wang—in which Gui was held responsible for denouncing Wang's teachings.[456] In this memorial, Huang refuted the accusation of Wang's theories being heretical, attributing it to jealousy and ignorance.[457] He advised the emperor to reinstate Wang's hereditary rank and lift the ban on Wang's teachings. Given that Qian's "Chronological Biography" was co-edited, proofread, and prefaced by a group of Wang's disciples, there appears to be a consensus among them: Gui's denunciation of Wang's theories was the reason behind the ban on Wang's teachings. This viewpoint was adopted by Qing historians in *Mingshi* but has been questioned in modern scholarship.[458]

Several scholars, referencing records in *Ming shilu*, have argued that the denunciation of Wang Shouren's "heretical teachings" was likely a decision made by Emperor Shizong. The emperor had been critical of Wang's scholarship since 1522 and was particularly dissatisfied with Wang leaving his post due to illness in 1529.[459] There are reasonable grounds to support this theory. A comparison of the texts in "Chronological Biography" and *Ming shilu* reveals a discrepancy in Qian Dehong's narrative regarding the role of Gui E in denouncing Wang's

[455] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1468. Gui E was appointed Grand Secretary earlier that month; see *Mingshi*, vol. 110, 3354.
[456] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1464–1466. In "Chronological Biography", Huang Wan was Supervisor of the Household Administration of the Heir Apparent (*zhanshi* 詹事). This high-rank title (3a) is more likely the one Huang Wan held when Qian Dehong wrote "Chronological Biography" (finished in 1563). The official position of Huang Wan in 1529 is probably Vice Minister of the Court of Imperial Entertainments (*guanglu shaoqing* 光祿少卿), rank 5a, as recorded in *Mingshi*. See *Mingshi*, vol. 197, 5219–5220. Although Huang Wan was not a high-rank official at that time, he was believed to have earned the trust of the emperor by *Mingshi*. In that case, his opinion of Gui discrediting Wang Shouren's scholarship might have considerable influence at court and among Wang Shouren's disciples.
[457] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1464–1466.
[458] For an argument against this viewpoint, see Zhu, "Yangming congsi dianli de zhengyi he cuozhe", 167–182.
[459] Zhu, "The Debate Over Recognition of Wang Yang-Ming", 47–70. See also Wang and Liu, "Mingdai xinxuejia Wang Shourencongsi Kongmiao shulun", 61–71.

teachings. *Ming shilu* documented the denunciation as an imperial decree issued after reviewing the suggestion of the Ministry of Personnel, whereas "Chronological Biography" held one official, namely Gui E, directly accountable. However, "Chronological Biography" did not elaborate on Gui E's involvement in this process, nor did it mention the emperor's strong-worded decree. The record in "Chronological Biography", demonstrating a consensus among Wang's disciples, suggests they were more inclined to assign accountability to one official, avoiding implicating either the emperor or the entire officialdom.

Under these circumstances, while Wang's deviation from the officially sanctioned Zhu Xi orthodoxy served as the formal justification for the denunciation, it was not the sole factor.[460] The reception of his teachings was also shaped by political dynamics within the officialdom, factional rivalries, and the personal sensitivities of influential figures—likely including the emperor himself. His eventual condemnation as a "heretical" thinker thus cannot be attributed to doctrinal disagreement alone. Rather, it reflects the complex entanglement of intellectual authority with political calculation and personal interest.

In this context, Qian Dehong's meticulous treatment of the posthumous perception of Wang reflects the disadvantageous circumstances that disciples faced in presenting careful narrations and interpretations of Wang's philosophical theories. As shown in the timeline of Wang's posthumous recognition, since Emperor Shizong's denunciation of his scholarship as heretical and the subsequent ban on his teachings in 1529, the official perception of him remained unchanged until 1567. Over nearly four decades between 1529 and 1567, disciples were confronted by the challenge of studying their teacher's theories under unfavourable circumstances. Given the charge of heretical theories, they probably exercised caution in

[460] See pp. 8–9.

discussing Wang's written accounts related to any non-Confucian elements, aware that mishandling such discussions could fuel criticisms of Wang's "heretical theories".

Accordingly, the disparity between the two records of Wang's conversation about Buddhism and Daoism could be attributed to the evolving political context. The record in *Chuanxi lu*, dating back to 1518 when Wang was actively teaching and publishing, might not require delicate wording as it did not face immediate suspicion of heretical theories from imperial authorities. In contrast, the record in "Chronological Biography", published in 1563, was created during a period marked by a more sensitive political atmosphere. Hence, *Chuanxi lu* record is likely a more accurate reconstruction of Wang's conversation, considering it was made during a time when disciples were less inclined to adjust the original dialogue, and Wang could provide input on the reconstruction of his teachings in his later life.

The differences between "Chronological Biography" and *Chuanxi lu* may be where Qian Dehong adjusted the narration to befit the more sensitive circumstances. It is plausible that he intentionally omitted Wang Shouren's statement of "the teachings of Confucians were not worth studying"—a quote that would have been particularly problematic in light of the denunciation of Wang's teachings as "heretical"—and added the notion that Wang tried yet failed to learn from Confucians before turning to Buddhism and Daoism. This adjustment portrays Wang as a scholar who inadvertently entered non-Confucian realm due to unfortunate Confucian progression, rather than someone who consciously discarded Confucianism after finding fulfilment in non-Confucian experiences. In his delicate reconstruction, Qian selectively used the source materials, namely his teacher's own words, to emphasise Confucian experiences while downplaying non-Confucian elements, thereby clarifying Wang's identity as a Confucian.

1. The most common choice of wording among disciples

As mentioned earlier, disciples might be in a dilemma when reconstructing Wang's Buddhist and Daoist experiences under unfavourable conditions. This dilemma could lead to situations where narratives vary across records from different time. In addition to the problem of different reconstructions in a dynamic historical context, disciples could encounter another challenge related to the wording of these reconstructions. Given that Wang elaborated on his past involvement in Buddhism and Daoism in his written works, quoting him directly might appear to be a simple way for his disciples to ensure authenticity and accuracy. However, it might be surprising to find that disciples tended to rephrase Wang's descriptions of previous Buddhist and Daoist experiences rather than citing his exact words. Despite the fact that Wang's accounts formed the basis of his students' interpretations, these disciples preferred to phrase his involvement in Buddhism and Daoism according to their own understandings, potentially altering the original tone in the process. This act of rewording suggests that they might consider some reasons more important, or some needs more urgent than displaying credibility through direct quotations from their teacher.

Across disciples' choices of their own wording, some phrases appeared repeatedly in different texts. The most popular phrase chosen by disciples was "wander in and out of (Buddhism and Daoism)" (*churu* 出入). Some examples are:

Author	Source	Wording
Xu Ai 徐愛 (1487–1517)[461]	*Chuanxi lu*, likely between 1514 and 1517[462]	出入二氏之學 Wander in and out of the theories of the two schools
Qian Dehong 錢德洪 (1496–1574)	"Ke Wenlu xushuo" 刻文錄敘說 ["Notes on Publishing	已而出入二氏

[461] Xu Ai was one of the first students of Wang Shouren. For a short biography, see *Mingshi*, vol. 283, 7272.
[462] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 1.

	The Collected Writings"], 1535[463]	Later wander in and out of the two schools
Huang Wan 黃綰 (1480–1554)	"Yangming xiansheng cungao xu" 陽明先生存稿序 ["A Preface to the Extant Drafts of Master Yangming"], publication date unknown[464]	出入儒、老、釋之間 Wander in and out between Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism
Chen Jiuchuan 陳九川 (1494–1562)	"Yangming xiansheng jilue xu" 陽明先生集略序 ["A Preface to the Selected Collection of Master Yangming"], publication date unknown[465]	出入二氏 Wander in and out the two schools

The term "wander in and out of" bears some similarity with Wang Shouren's statement of "I wavered between reliance and rejection, between approaching and retreating" (*yiwei wangfan* 依違往返) in "Preface to Final Conclusions".[466] This statement is relatively the mildest version of describing his prior engagement among his own narratives. Nevertheless, it is more likely that "wander in and out" was a term chosen by his disciples for a specific reason rather than a shortened paraphrase of Wang's words. A possible reason for this choice could be its previous use by Cheng Yi in compiling a brief biography of Cheng Hao, subsequently adopted by other Confucian scholars.[467] As shown in the imperial decree denouncing Wang's teachings, Zhu Xi's orthodox doctrines, representing the eminent Cheng–Zhu School of Principle, were used as a crucial criterion for determining the nature of Wang's philosophy. In this context, disciples may have employed an indirect reference to Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, two other prominent scholars of the School of Principle, as an adroitly calculated technique to underscore their teacher's Confucian stature. In other words, Cheng Yi's use of

[463] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1745.
[464] Ibid., 1755.
[465] Wang Shouren, *Wang Yangming quanji xinbianben*, vol. 53, 2155.
[466] Wang Shouren, *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 144–145.
[467] See "Mingdao xiansheng xingzhuang" 明道先生行狀 ["A Brief Biographical Sketch of Master Mingdao"] in *Er Cheng ji*, 638.

"wander in and out of Daoism and Buddhism (*churu yu Lao Shi* 出入於老釋)" to describe Cheng Hao's involvement in Buddhism and Daoism may have inspired Wang's disciples to adopt the same wording. This allowed them to present Wang's engagement with non-Confucian schools in a manner more palatable to most Confucians. By employing this shared terminology, these disciples established a link between Wang Shouren and Cheng Hao, both esteemed Confucians despite their prior associations with Buddhism and Daoism. This strategic choice enabled the disciples to downplay Wang's connections to these traditions, minimising their impact on his primary identity as a Confucian.

Furthermore, it is reasonable to suggest that the wording regarding Wang's non-Confucian involvement was in response to the changing political and ideological environment during the mid and late Ming period. Given the involvement of multiple disciples in the continuous discourse surrounding their teacher's posthumous recognition, it appears they endeavoured to portray Wang as a "true Confucian" who followed the examples of officially acclaimed scholars such as Cheng Hao and Zhu Xi. This image, crafted through their interpretations, was introduced to other scholars with the aim of gaining broader approval form the Confucian literati. In doing so, they sought to create more favourable conditions under which their teacher's official recognition as a "true Confucian" could eventually become a reality.[468]

[468] Most of the disciples listed in the table above died before 1567, the year when Emperor Muzong's decree raised discussions about certifying Wang Shouren as a true Confucian.

2. Divergence of interpretation within the disciple community and its consequent effect

Although there seemed to be a consensus among disciples to carefully downplay the Buddhist or Daoist influence on Wang's Confucian path, it is important to highlight that the Yangming School was not always a coherent philosophical group. Disciples such as Wang Ji and Wang Gen 王艮 (1483–1541) have been criticised for exhibiting more pronounced tendencies towards Chan Buddhism among Wang's students.[469] As these disciples began their own teaching careers, criticism of their Buddhist inclinations intensified with the expansion of the Yangming School and the increasing complexity of the School of the Mind. These scholars faced not only external criticism from proponents of the opposing Cheng–Zhu School of Principle but also internal challenge from their peers within the Yangming School regarding their interpretations of Wang's teachings.[470] The latter is particularly noteworthy, as it demonstrates that while the Yangming School was frequently criticised for its Buddhist inclination, this criticism was not uniformly distributed among Wang's followers; certain scholars received more criticism than others. This suggests the necessity of distinguishing the more Buddhist-leaning students of Wang from their peers—a distinction that scholars within the Yangming School themselves recognised, as evidenced by internal critiques of certain disciples' tendencies towards Buddhism.

[469] For a study of late-Ming criticism on Yangming School for its Chan Buddhist inclination, see Chen Yongge, "Yangming Chan yu wanming kuangchan lun" 陽明禪與晚明狂禪論 ["Yangming Chan and the Late-Ming Discussion of wild Chan"], in *Yangming xuepai yu wanming fojiao*, 236–263.
[470] Regarding how scholars of the Yangming School viewed their peers' Buddhist inclinations, the following discussion on the Wang Shouren's students' interactions with Buddhism can be useful: Chen Yongge, "Wang Yangming jiqi dizi de conglin jiaoyou" 陽明及其弟子的叢林交遊 ["Wang Yangming's and his Disciples' Interactions with Buddhism"], in *Yangming xuepai yu wanming fojiao*, 20–117.

A prominent example of this internal differentiation—and its broader implications—can be found in Liu Zongzhou's discussion of the Yangming School. An eminent Confucian during the late-Ming period, Liu played a major role in shaping the reception of the School of Mind among literati during the late-Ming and Qing dynasties. His critique is especially valuable for understanding both the causes and consequences of certain disciples' Buddhist leanings. Through a two-layered approach, Liu first separated the interpretations of Wang's disciples from Wang's own teachings and then identified specific individuals for misrepresenting his philosophy.

The text concerning Wang Shouren and his philosophical school is extracted from Liu Zongzhou's letter (1638) to Wang Chaoshi 王朝式 (c.1607–c.1644), which focuses on demonstrating the transmission of Confucianism while distinguishing Confucian theories from Buddhist ideas for the recipient.[471] Given that this text constitutes a significant portion of the letter, it is worth examining how the discussion centred around Wang functions within the boarder context of Confucian transmission. This requires an overview of the general argumentation presented by Liu in his letter.

Liu Zongzhou framed the transmission of Confucian doctrines as a continuous contest with non-Confucian schools, particularly Chan Buddhism. This method of reconstructing Confucian transmission in relation to doctrinal contestation may have originated with Han Yu's "Yuandao" (c. 803), which outlines a confrontation with non-Confucian traditions

[471] Liu Zongzhou's letter was titled "Da Wang Jinru*"* 答王金如 ["Letter in Reply to Wang Jinru"]. Jinru 金如 was the courtesy name of Wang Chaoshi. For a brief biography of Wang Chaoshi, see Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽 (1844–1927) et al., *Qingshi gao* 清史稿 [*Draft History of Qing*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), vol. 480, 13112. In this letter, Liu Zongzhou used the term "the passing on of this Way" (*sidao zhichuan* 斯道之傳) to summarise the transmission of Confucianism. For the Chinese text of the letter, see Liu Zongzhou 劉宗周 (1578–1645), *Liu Zongzhou quanji* 劉宗周全集 [*The Complete Works of Liu Zongzhou*], eds. Wu Guang 吳光 and Zhong Caijun 鍾彩鈞 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2012), vol. 4, 304–308.

before presenting a brief Confucian genealogy.[472] This analytical structure was further developed in the Song dynasty, when scholars such as Cheng Yi positioned earlier Confucians within the Confucian lineage based on their efforts to counter non-Confucian influences. Following this tradition, Liu assessed the contributions of Confucian scholars by their success in "arguing against Buddhism" (*pifo* 闢佛), using this criterion to determine their place in the transmission of the Way.

Given that his letter was a response to Wang Chaoshi, a scholar of the Yangming School that constantly received criticism for its Buddhist tendencies, it is possible that Liu chose to focus on this Confucian competition with non-Confucian schools to clarify his opinion on the nature of Wang Shouren's teachings. This focus may have been intended to express his views on how much Buddhist influence the Yangming School exhibited and whether Wang Shouren's philosophy was fundamentally Confucian. It is also possible that these issues were concerns Wang Chaoshi had expressed in an earlier letter, although there is a lack of historical records regarding the content of that letter.

By highlighting both the effective and insufficient outcomes of various scholars, Liu Zongzhou argued that Confucians should not oppose others' engagements with Buddhist theories, as those individuals would eventually return to Confucianism upon realising the inadequacies within Buddhism. Although he did not specify what Confucians should do instead in his letter, his encouragement to the recipient suggests support for a moderated transmission of Wang Shouren's teachings, whom he regarded as a proficient teacher within

[472] See the earlier discussion on the Transmission of the Way (pp. 179–181). For a study on the written date of "Yuandao", see Fang Jie 方介, "Yan Yu wuyuan zuoyu heshi: jianlun Yan Yu daotongshuo zhi fazhen shicheng" 韓愈五原作於何時？兼論韓愈道統說之發展時程 ["The Time When Han Yu Wrote the Five Articles on "Tracing the Cause" and the Developing Procedure of Han's Confucian Orthodoxy Theory"], *Taida zhongwen xuebao* 臺大中文學報 no. 2 (2010): 267–294.

the Confucian lineage. Given this context, it appears that Liu's discussion of Wang Shouren served to analyse his relation to Buddhism, thereby determining his position within the Confucian transmission. To explore how Liu reached this assessment, the relevant text is translated as follows:

> 又三百餘年而陽明子出，始固嘗求之二氏之説矣，久而無所得，始反而求之六經，特舉前日所讓棄於佛氏者而恢復之。且周旋於宋儒之説，相與彌縫其隙，兩收朱、陸，以求至是。良知之説，有功後學，斯文賴以一光。繇今讀其恢復之辭，如曰："佛氏本來面目，即吾聖人所謂良知。"[473] 又曰："工夫本體，大略相似，只佛氏有箇自私自利之心，所以不同。"[474]又曰："佛氏外人倫、遺物理，固不得謂之明心。"[475] 可謂良工苦心。吾意後之學聖人者，繇陽明子而朱子，及於明道、濂溪，溯之孔、孟，如是而已矣。然學陽明之學者，意不止於陽明也。讀龍溪、近溪之書，時時不滿其師説，而益啟瞿曇之祕，舉而歸之師，漸躋陽明而禪矣。則生於二溪之後者，又可知矣。至是而禪之與儒是一是二？永不可問矣。
>
> Master Yangming (Wang Shouren) entered the stage after another three centuries. Initially, he had indeed pursued the doctrines of the two schools. As time passed with him gaining nothing, he turned back to delve into the Six Classics. He specifically gathered and restored those theories once dismissed as and relegated to Buddhism.[476] Moreover, he mediated between the theories of the Song Confucians, reconciling their differences. He integrated the teachings of both Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan to pursue the acme of correct doctrines. His theory of innate knowledge was worth being credited by later scholars for enhancing our great culture.
>
> From my current reading of the words he restored, there are examples such as "The Buddhist original state is what our Confucian sages call innate knowledge", "The two methods regarding the Buddhist and Confucian conceptions of nature are generally similar; it is only that the Buddhists have a self-centred and self-serving heart, which makes them different from us",[477] and "The Buddhists exclude ethical relations and desert the principles of things, which surely cannot be seen as understanding the mind". It may be said that Master Yangming invested great effort and deep thought into these words.

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[473] This is a quotation from Wang Shouren's letter "Da Lu Yuanjing" 答陸原靜［"Letter in Reply to Lu Yuanjing"] with minor textual variations. See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 75.

[474] This is also a quotation from "Letter in Reply to Lu Yuanjing", incorporating some textual differences.

[475] This is a quotation from Wang Shouren's letter "Yu Xia Dunfu" 與夏敦夫 ["Letter to Xia Dunfu"] with slight textual alterations; see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 200. For an English translation of this letter, see Ching, *The Philosophical Letters of Wang Yangming*, 55.

[476] This sentence will be explained in greater detail later in the analysis of the text.

[477] Wing-tsit Chan's translation is: "The original state is what our Confucian school calls innate knowledge … In broad outline the two methods are about the same. However, the Buddhists are different from us because they have the mind that is motivated by selfishness." Given that Chan translated *tiduan gongfu dalüe xiangsi* 體段工夫大略相似 as "in broad outline the two methods are about the same", he seemed to omit *tiduan* 體段 while interpreting *gongfu* 工夫 as the methods of Buddhism and Confucianism regarding what they call "original state" and "innate knowledge", respectively. As both terms centre around the understanding of human nature, *tiduan gongfu* 體段工夫 is translated into "the two methods regarding the Buddhist and Confucian conceptions of nature" here.

> I think those who learn from the sages in later times follow Master Yangming to reach Master Zhu, coming to Mingdao (Cheng Hao) and Lianxi (Zhou Dunyi), and tracing back to Confucius and Mencius—this is their only path. Nevertheless, the intentions of the scholars following Yangming's teachings go beyond Yangming's theories. When I read the works of Longxi (Wang Ji) and Jinxi (Luo Rufang), I find they were often unsatisfied with their teacher's (Wang Shouren) instructions, yet they increasingly raised the obscure theories of Buddhism.[478] As they attributed these Buddhist ideas entirely to their teacher, they gradually stepped beyond Yangming's teachings into the realm of Chan Buddhism. Given these circumstances, we can also understand the situation of scholars born after Longxi and Jinxi. Are Chan Buddhism and Confucianism one thing or two things at this point? This is forever impossible to examine.

In this discussion, Liu succinctly assessed Wang's general learning experience and primary teaching theory. More specifically, his examination of the former concluded with Wang's eventual return to Confucian doctrines, while his evaluation of the latter—the theory of "innate knowledge"—underlined Wang's significant contribution to the enrichment of Confucian ideas. Additionally, Wang's relation to Buddhism was analysed through his effort to distinguish Confucian theories from Buddhist ones when addressing complex issues that had attracted attention from both sides.

These analyses, which collectively emphasised a Confucian dominance in Wang's learning and teaching achievements, reflected a distinctive method employed by Liu Zongzhou to approach the non-Confucian elements in Wang's theories and activities. This method can be summarised as neutralising the seemingly Buddhist ideas and experiences. An example is the description of Wang as having "restored those theories once dismissed as and relegated to Buddhism". Liu's statement can be better understood in the light of an earlier argument made before his comments on Wang. Specifically, Liu argued that when addressing the similarities between Buddhism and Confucianism, some scholars misclassified certain Confucian ideas

[478] Luo Rufang 羅汝芳 (1515–1588) was a follower of the Yangming School. His ideas were classified into the Taizhou School (*Taizhou xuepai* 泰州學派) by Huang Zongxi. For a biography of Luo, see *Mingru xue'an*, vol. 34, 760–763.

as Buddhist, thereby distancing themselves from further discussions.[479] Similarly, phrases such as "restored" (*huifu* 恢復) and "dismissed as and relegated to" (*rangqi* 讓棄) in the sentence above imply a prior misclassification. In other words, it appears that Wang had initially discarded some theories and classified them as Buddhist before realising their Confucian nature. The verbs "restored", "dismissed" and "relegated" suggest that the objects of these actions—namely, the theories Wang viewed differently over time—were essentially neutral rather than exclusive to either Buddhism or Confucianism.

Furthermore, Liu Zongzhou's quotations from Wang Shouren, noted as "the words he (Wang Shouren) restored" (*qi huifu zhici* 其恢復之辭), suggest that there were common issues addressed by both Confucianism and Buddhism. In this context, Wang attempted to clarify the nuances of complex issues and distinguish the Confucian explanations from their Buddhist counterparts. Liu described this attempt as reflecting "great effort and deep thought", implying that he regarded it as a more mature approach to the contest between Confucianism and Buddhism compared to Wang's earlier choice of discarding certain theories as Buddhist—a choice that Liu believed was less developed and eventually replaced by reclassifying those ideas as Confucian. Liu's efforts above suggest that, when assessing Wang's achievement in "arguing against Buddhism", he neutralised the apparent influence of Buddhism on Wang's learning and teaching paths. This method aligns with Liu's argument that common ground between Buddhism and Confucianism existed, where scholars might misclassify and misinterpret certain theories. Through this process, Liu clarified the

[479] The Chinese quote is 舉聖人之真者而歸之禪不敢一置喙, which can be translated into "they selected certain true teachings of the sages and classified them as Chan Buddhist, not daring to further comment on them." See *Liu Zongzhou quanji*, vol. 3, 305–306.

Confucian nature of Wang's learning and teaching outcomes, portraying Wang as a prominent scholar in the transmission of Confucianism.

However, it appears that when addressing some seemingly Buddhist theories and activities, Liu Zongzhou's primary purpose was to emphasise Wang Shouren's Confucian contributions rather than to counter any criticism of Wang's Buddhist inclinations. While the technique of neutralising the apparent Buddhist influence might have clarified the Confucian nature of Wang's teachings, it did not directly respond to the contemporary debate over the Buddhist tendencies of the Yangming School. Although this might not have been the main focus of Liu's letter—which centred on demonstrating the Confucian transmission—it remains a notable issue that could have enriched his explanation of the contest between Buddhism and Confucianism for Wang Chaoshi. Wang Chaoshi was a scholar of the Yangming School, which had been frequently criticised for leaning towards Chan Buddhism. In this context, it is significant that Liu chose to address, rather than avoid, this issue, suggesting his awareness of and concern about the Buddhist inclinations within Wang Shouren's philosophy. Nonetheless, he identified the teachings of the Wang's followers rather than Wang himself as the chief cause of the confusion among scholars between Wang's theories and Buddhist doctrines.

As Liu Zongzhou attributed the alleged Chan Buddhist inclinations of certain Yangming scholars to their misrepresentations of Wang's teachings, his analysis of divergence within Yangming scholars should be read in contrast to a different effort that sought to emphasis internal unity. Notably, differences among Wang's disciples had long existed, exemplified by the widely discussed "Colloquy at the Tianquan Bridge" (*Tianquan zhengdao* 天泉證道), in which Wang Ji and Qian Dehong—two of Wang's leading disciples—offered divergent

interpretations of his remarks.[480] Both disciples recorded this event in their respective accounts. While their details vary slightly, they agreed that Wang's response urged each to learn from the other, thereby guiding students with different aptitudes in accordance with his teachings.[481] This effort towards unity was further reinforced by Zhou Rudeng in *Shengxue zongzhuan* and other writings, where he interpreted Wang's response as an embodiment of a balanced and unifying doctrine.[482] In his reading note on this colloquy, Zhou argued, "The awakened find [the Way] united, while the confused find it divided. It is their personal views that diverges; the Way itself does not increase or decrease."[483] In this sense, Zhou presented apparent disagreements with the Yangming School as byproducts of individual confusion, asserting that the true Way—grasped by the awakened—remains consistent and undivided.

In contrast, Liu Zongzhou's critique in effect challenged this ideal of unity. By identifying Wang Ji and Luo Rufang as representatives of Buddhist-leaning distortions, Liu explicitly distinguished their teachings from the authentic doctrine of Wang, thereby emphasising

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[480] The disagreement between Wang Ji and Qian Dehong centred on Wang's "four-sentence teaching" (*siju jiao* 四句教). As this chapter does not focus on divergent interpretations of Wang's philosophical doctrines among his disciples—and given the existence of substantial modern scholarship on this topic—the details of this colloquy will not be examined here. For further discussion, see, for example: Tu Wei-ming, "An Inquiry into Wang Yang-Ming's Four-Sentence Teaching", *The Eastern Buddhist* 7, no. 2 (1974): 32–48. See also Chung-ying Cheng, "Consistency and Meaning of the Four-Sentence Teaching in 'Ming Ju Hsüeh An'", *Philosophy East and West* 29, no. 3 (1979): 275–94.

[481] Qian Dehong recounted Wang's words in *Chuanxi lu* as 二君相取為用 則中人上下皆可引入於道, while Wang Ji phrased it as 互相取益 使吾教法上下皆同. Despite these variances, both accounts emphasise learning from each other so as to guide people of higher or lower levels into the Confucian doctrine taught by Wang Shouren. See also Wang Ji 王畿 (1498–1583), *Wang Longxi xiansheng quanji* 王龍溪先生全集 [*The Complete Work of Master Wang Longxi*], ed. Wu Zhen 吳震 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2013), vol. 1, 7–9.

[482] *Shengxue zongzhuan* places significant emphasis on the Yangming School, which comprises approximately one-third of the entire compilation. Zhou included twenty-three Yangming scholars in his genealogical account of the Confucian Way—a lineage that begins with the legendary sage-kings and extents to mid- and late- Ming scholars, encompassing figures from a range of doctrinal traditions. Zhou mentioned the "Colloquy at the Tianquan Bridge" in his respective chapters on Wang Ji and Qian Dehong, yet he offered a more detailed account in the chapter on Wang Ji. For this more detailed account, see Zhou Rudeng 周汝登 (1547–1629), *Shengxue zongzhuan* 聖學宗傳 [*Orthodox Transmission of the Learning of the Sages*], eds. Zhang Mengxin 張夢新 and Zhang Weizhong 張衛中 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2015) vol. 14, 810, 821–822. For an introduction to Zhou's compilation, see Chen, *Zhongguo xue'an shi*, 64–71.

[483] The Chinese text is: 悟則同，迷則異，彼見自殊，道何增損哉！See Zhou Rudeng 周汝登 (1547–1629), *Zhou Haimen xiansheng wenlu* 周海門先生文錄 [*The Collected Writings of Master Zhou Haimen*], eds. Zhang Mengxin 張夢新 and Zhang Weizhong 張衛中 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2015), vol. 4, 107–108.

internal fragmentation within the Yangming tradition. This suggests that Wang's followers were not necessarily seen as a cohesive group by later scholars—particularly by those outside the Yangming School.

V. Testimonials from the Yangming School: A Case Study of Geng Dingxiang's Biography of Wang's Learning and Teaching Experiences

Given the disciples' cautious efforts to defend Wang's Confucian stature, it is worth examining how later Yangming scholars, many of whom were students of these disciples, continued to reinforce Wang's Confucian identity. Unlike the disciples who had followed Wang in both their academic and personal lives, Yangming scholars lacked personal interaction with Wang or direct access to his teaching sessions, which deprived them of opportunities to enquire about his theories or verify certain facts directly. This raises the question of how Yangming scholars utilised the available source materials on Wang's life and work to sustain his Confucian legacy.

More specifically, much of the material accessible to them consisted of secondary sources, particularly disciples' narratives of Wang's life experiences. As a result, Yangming scholars may have encountered issues regarding the reliability of these sources, which reflected individual interpretations rather than unembellished reports of what Wang actually experienced. Under these circumstances, it is worth asking whether Yangming scholars would adopt a historical perspective in evaluating the historicity of certain secondary narratives before referencing them as evidence of Wang's activities. One efficient way to explore this question is through a case study of a historical biography of Wang, as historical methods and perspectives are more likely to be found in this genre of writing.

In this context, the historical biography "Xinjianbo Wencheng Wang xiansheng shijia" 新建伯文成王先生世家 ["The Biography of Master Wang Wencheng, Earl of Xinjian"] written by Geng Dingxiang serves as an especially inclusive example: [484] First, the text belongs to a genre that aspires to reconstruct historical events. Second, the author was influenced by the philosophy of Wang Gen—a more radical follower of Wang Shouren—who was frequently criticised for his Chan-Buddhist tendencies. Geng's position within this intellectual lineage may reveal how multiple strands of the Yangming School engaged with Wang's Confucian legacy, potentially offering varied perspectives on his non-Confucian affiliations. The fact that Geng's account takes the form of a historical biography further complicates this engagement, raising the question of how Geng negotiated the tension between faithfully recounting Wang's non-Confucian activities and effectively reinforcing Wang's Confucian status.

1. Geng Dingxiang's selection of source materials

Geng Dingxiang was a renowned Yangming scholar who actively engaged in Confucian teachings and writings, especially after retiring from the official position in 1582.[485] His academic and political careers, particularly his association with Wang's disciples and involvement in championing Wang's recognition as a true Confucian, distinguish him as a

[484] For the full Chinese text, see *Wang Yangming quanji xinbianben*, vol. 54, 2247–2265. This biography is also included in the modern collection of Geng Dingxiang's written works, see Geng Dingxiang 耿定向 (1524–1596), *Geng Dingxiang ji* 耿定向集 [*The Collected Works of Geng Dingxiang*], ed. Fu Qiutao 傅秋濤 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2015), vol. 13, 519–542. However, this biography is punctuated differently in the two modern publications above. As Geng Dingxiang quoted from earlier records written by Wang Shouren's disciples, such as Qian Dehong and Wang Ji, with cross-referencing to those disciples' records, the punctuation given in *Geng Dingxiang ji* appears problematic. In this case, the punctuated text in *Wang Yangming quanji xinbianben* will be used in the following analysis.
[485] *Mingshi*, vol. 221, 5816-5817.

prominent advocate of the Yangming School among Ming literati.[486] His thought was believed to be deeply rooted in Wang's teachings, with a particular admiration for the Taizhou School (*Taizhou xuepai* 泰州學派) of Wang Gen—one of Wang Shouren's leading disciples—who emphasised "the daily practices of common people" (*baixing riyong* 百姓日用) as the Way of Confucianism.[487] Huang Zongxi later classified Geng within the Taizhou School,[488] a lineage often criticised by the Donglin 東林 scholars as a "wild Chan" (*kuangchan* 狂禪) strain of the School of Mind.[489] Nevertheless, unlike Wang Ji—whose interpretation of *liangzhi* drew on Chan concepts such as Buddha-nature (*foxing* 佛性) and faced sharp rebuke from Liu Zongzhou—Geng advocated a more pragmatic, grounded approach.[490] He urged scholars to test the extension of knowledge through concrete practice rather than through abstract speculation, which he saw as leading to aloofness and

[486] Geng Dingxiang advocated for Wang Shouren's recognition as a true Confucian in 1567; see *Muzong Zhuanghuangdi shilu*, vol. 9, 0261–0262. See also *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1495–1496.
[487] For an account of Wang Gen's philosophical school, see *Mingru xue'an*, vol. 31–32, 703–711. For modern scholarship regarding the characteristics of the Taizhou School, see Yang, *Wangxue tonglun*, 107–113.
[488] *Mingru xue'an*, vol. 35, 815. Huang Zongxi criticised both Wang Gen and Wang Ji for deviating from Yangming's teachings and entering into Chan Buddhism". Huang's critique aligns with that of his teacher Liu Zongzhou, although Liu specifically named Wang Ji and Luo Rufang—rather than Wang Gen—as those who had deviated from Wang Shouren's teachings. See earlier discussion of Liu Zongzhou's assessment of the Yangming School. Modern scholars have discussed the dissimilarities between the philosophical ideas of Geng Dingxiang and Wang Gen in greater details, see "Dianjiao zhengli shuoming" 點校整理說明 ["Edition Notes"], in *Geng Dingxiang ji*, 6–11.
[489] Gu Xiancheng 顧憲成 (1550–1612), a leading figure in the Ming Donglin School, criticised the Taizhou School for incorporating Buddhist epistemological ideas into its interpretation of *liangzhi* as the substance of the mind. For a study on the key teachings of the Taizhou School, see Hong Yu and Deyuan Huang, "All Things Are Already Complete in My Body: An Explanation of the Views of the Taizhou School on the Human Body", *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 5, no. 3 (2010): 396–413. For a study on Donglin scholars' critique of the *liangzhi* teachings, see Okada, *Wang Yangming yu mingmo ruxue*, 356–361.
[490] Liu Zhouzong argued that while Wang Gen adhered to Wang Shouren's instructions, his emphasis on "awakening" (*wu* 悟) introduced an abstract, Chan-inflected dimension. In contrast, Liu saw Wang Ji's interpretation of *liangzhi*—drawing parallels to Buddha nature—as fundamentally damaging to Confucian teachings. From Liu's perspective, it was Wang Ji who posed the greater threat to the ontological framework of Confucianism by integrating doctrines central to Chan Buddhism. This may explain why Liu critiqued Wang Ji explicitly, while leaving Wang Gen unmentioned. For a study that compares the philosophy of Wang Ji and Wang Gen, see Qian Ming 錢明, "Dui Er Wang sixiang tongyi wenti de zaisikao" 對"二王"思想同異問題的再思考 ["Rethinking the Differences and Similarities in the Philosophy of the Two Wangs"], in *Yangmingxue yanjiu* 陽明學研究 [Studies on the Yangming School], ed. Wu Guang 吳光 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2000), 182–204.

emptiness.[491] This emphasis was seen as a corrective to the "wild Chan" influence embodied in the work of his contemporary Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602), whose radical reinterpretations of Confucianism Geng sought to restrain.[492]

As the use of sources is a crucial element in the design of a biography, Geng Dingxiang's approach to source materials is particularly noteworthy in his biography of Wang Shouren. His careful selection and presentation of sources are key aspects of how he constructed the narrative. In this context, his biography is significant for arranging Wang's learning and teaching activities chronologically to present a progression along the Confucian path. This historical approach, compared to the more evaluative judgements about Wang's Confucian status found in other scholars' diaries or letters, may generally ensure a higher degree of historicity in interpreting Wang's life activities. Below is an excerpt most relevant to this discourse from Geng's account.

> 壬戌秋，請告歸越，年三十二，究心二氏之學，築洞陽明麓，日夕勤修習，靜中內照，形軀如水晶宮，忘己忘物，忘天忘地，混與太虛同體。有欲言而不得者，常思遺棄世累而不能置。念於祖母岑及尚書公，久之，悟此念生自孩提，人之種性，滅絶種性，非正學也。
>
> In the autumn of 1502, at the age of thirty-two, the teacher requested to return to Yue.[493] He concentrated on the theories of the two schools and built a grotto at the Yangming foothills, where he practised diligently day and night.[494] When he introspected in his meditation, he felt his body like a crystal palace, oblivious of inner self and outer affairs, aloof from heaven and earth, completely merged with the void cosmos.[495] He sensed something but could not put it into words. He often considered

[491] Geng stated that he wished to "bring [the teachings] back to the concrete ground" (*guizhi shidi* 歸之實地) in order to remedy the abstract and aloof tendencies in the work of contemporary scholars learning the extension of knowledge (*jinwei zhizhi zhi xuezhe* 今為致知之學者). For the full quote, see *Mingru xue'an*, vol. 35, 818–819.
[492] For a study of Li Zhi's wild Chan leaning and Geng Dingxiang's effort to rectify it, see Wen-fang Mao 毛文芳, "Wanming kuangchan tanlun" 晚明"狂禪"探論 ["Late Ming Dynasty's Wild *Chan*"], *Hanxue yanjiu* 漢學研究 19, no. 2 (2001): 171–200.
[493] Wang Shouren's family had been living in Yuecheng until they moved to Beijing in 1482, see footnote 260.
[494] In light of the 1502 record in "Chronological Biography", what Wang Shouren practised in this year was likely the exercises of guiding and pulling. The "Chronological Biography" also recorded that Wang built a room in Yangming Grotto in Mount Kuaiji, Shaoxing Prefecture. See footnote 332.
[495] In this context, given that Wang felt aloof in his meditation, *taixu* 太虛 probably refers to the cosmos, especially in the sense of its emptiness. See Li ed., *Daojiao dacidian*, 216.

> setting aside wordily worries but could not lay them down. As he continued to think of his grandmother and father, he eventually realised that this feeling originated from childhood, as the seed of human nature.[496] The extermination of this seed nature would not be the correct learning.

It is relevant to note that this biography was compiled after the long-lasting discourse on Wang Shouren's posthumous recognition was eventually settled in 1584. Despite the absence of writing date in the text, Geng Dingxiang recorded that during "the twelfth year of Wanli" (1584), the sacrificial ceremony was performed to honour Wang at the Confucius Temple.[497] Since Geng died in 1596, it is safe to say this biography was written sometime between 1584 and 1596. In this context, given that Geng did not write this account until his later life, at least fifty-five years after Wang's death, it is possible that the settlement of the discourse on Wang's official perception prompted Geng to feel either the need or the readiness to compile a historical biography of Wang. Under this scenario, it would appear that Geng regarded Wang as a true Confucian, with the biography serving as a tribute to Wang's Confucian path. On that account, he treated the 1584 imperial endorsement of offering sacrifices to Wang at the Confucius Temple as the ultimate validation of Wang's Confucian achievements.

A prominent feature of this biography excerpt is that the majority of its content consists of quotations or paraphrases from two pre-existing disciples' records of Wang's activities. More specifically, the text, which recorded Wang's self-introspection under the date "the autumn of 1502", demonstrated his three stages of realisation gained through this experience: his initial feeling of aloofness, his hesitation in discarding worldly affairs, and his final realisation that "the extermination of this seed nature would not be the correct learning". The description of the first stage closely resembles the previously mentioned account by Wang Ji, in which he

[496] The term "seed nature" is a Buddhist concept referring to the intrinsic nature or potentiality of people (see footnote 334).
[497] *Wang Yangming quanji xinbianben*, vol. 54, 2264.

discussed different phases of Wang's learning and teaching paths.[498] Meanwhile, the text related to the second and third stages, as well as the first sentence of this excerpt recording the date and place of the event, appears to be paraphrases of the 1502 record in Qian Dehong's "Chronological Biography".[499] Hence, it seems that Geng Dingxiang's narrative of Wang's involvement in the two schools was a rephrased combination of two pre-existing disciples' accounts with little original composition.

It is understandable that, since Geng Dingxiang did not have direct interaction with Wang Shouren, his compilation of Wang's biography relied heavily on earlier sources detailing Wang's activities, particularly those written by disciples who followed Wang in their academic and personal lives.[500] However, in contrast to Geng's choice of intensively paraphrasing disciple narratives, there were some accounts by other scholars, also written in biographical styles and related to Wang's self-introspection in 1502, that contained more original content from the authors or exhibited less repetitive material from earlier disciples. An example is Zha Jizuo's 查繼佐 (1601–1676) "Wang Shouren zhuan" 王守仁傳 ["A Biography of Wang Shouren"], in which the author concisely summarised the story of Wang practising Daoism in Yangming Grotto in his own language.[501]

Furthermore, even among later scholars' accounts that generally quoted from Wang Shouren's disciples, there was a divergence in the choices of particular quotations. For instance, compared to Geng Dingxiang, Zhou Rudeng selected sources differently when compiling his biography of Wang in *Shengxue zongzhuan* (1605).[502] Although both Geng and

[498] For the Chinese text, see *Wang Ji ji*, 692–695.
[499] See pp. 142–143.
[500] Geng Dingxiang was born only five years before Wang Shouren's death. No historical record has been found that suggests any direct contact or correspondence between Geng and Wang.
[501] For this biography, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1712–1716.
[502] *Shengxue zongzhuan*, vol. 13, 780.

Zhou stated that Wang practised the exercises of the two schools in Yangming Grotto in 1502, they chose different sources to elaborate on the details of this practice. While Geng paraphrased Wang's feeling of aloofness through meditation from Wang Ji's account, Zhou quoted Qian Dehong's "Chronological Biography" to describe another story in which Wang realised his previous practice would not lead to enlightenment.[503]

One possible reason Geng Dingxiang chose Wang Ji's version over Qian Dehong's when describing Wang Shouren's practice in the Yangming Grotto is that he found Wang Ji's account of Wang Shouren's meditative experience more personally meaningful or practically useful. Specifically, Wang Shouren's realisation of being "completely merged with the void cosmos", as described by Wang Ji, might have resonated with Geng's own meditation experiences, thus prompting him to prioritise this account when selecting materials for his compilation. In particular, Geng had a similar realisation during his meditation practice in the mountains in 1558, when he perceived that "the substance of the innate knowledge could be perceived from head to foot".[504] This experience bore notable similarities to Wang Shouren's account in Wang Ji's narrative, which might have probably influenced Geng's decision. Not only did Geng review this earlier realisation in his 1593 memoir, but later scholars such as Jiao Hong 焦竑 (1540–1620) and Liu Yuanqing 劉元卿 (1544–1609) also included it in their biographies of Geng.[505] Therefore, it appears that gaining insights through meditation was commonly regarded as a characteristic of Geng by both himself and others. Under these

[503] Zhou selectively quoted the texts regarding Wang practising guiding and pulling exercises, becoming prescient, and realising his practice was not enlightenment from Qian's "Chronological Biography". See *Shengxue zongzhuan*, vol. 13, 780. For Qian Dehong's earlier record, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1351.
[504] Geng Dingxiang phrased his realisation as "feeling the substance throughout my body" (*hunshen jie zhiti ye* 渾身皆知體也). Given that he discussed his contemplation of Wang Shouren's *liangzhi* theories earlier in this text, the substance (*ti* 體) he referred to was probably the mind's original substance. For the Chinese text, see *Geng Dingxiang ji*, vol. 20, 802.
[505] Ibid., 891–899. The two biographies written by Jiao Hong and Liu Yuanqing are included in the modern edition of Geng Dengxiang's written works.

circumstances, it is reasonable to suggest that Geng specifically selected Wang Ji's narration of Wang Shouren reaching realisation through meditation to underscore the significance of this type of event in a scholar's life experience and, more allusively, imply a parallel between his and Wang's learning paths. This effort seems to echo the discussion in Section IV, where some basic characteristics of Yangming scholars have been outlined. More specifically, Geng's implied connection to Wang Shouren may have served to affirm his status as a Yangming scholar to other Confucians, which reflected a need among Wang's later followers to establish their legitimacy within the Yangming School of Mind.

2. Geng Dingxiang's use of selected sources

While the analysis above has discussed how Geng Dingxiang selected source materials for his biography of Wang, a remaining question is how he utilised those sources. In this regard, the considerable proportion of paraphrases suggests that he slightly reworded the source materials, restating pre-existing accounts with moderate rephrasing to establish a fluent narration. This approach indicates his tendency to comply with disciples' narratives of Wang's engagements in Buddhism or Daoism without inserting individual judgement about the nature of those non-Confucian activities.[506] Moreover, this point can be further supported by the term Geng applied to summarise Wang's overall involvement in the two schools. His choice of wording, "(Wang) concentrated on the theories of the two schools" (*jiuxin ershi zhixue* 究心二氏之學), was most likely a paraphrase of "(Wang) concentrated on the theories

[506] Geng Dingxiang wrote some comments on Wang Shouren at the end of his biographical account. Similar to Qian Dehong and Wang Ji, he also summarised several phases of Wang Shouren's learning and teaching paths. However, he did not mention Wang Shouren's involvement in Buddhism or Daoism in his comments. In other words, Geng Dingxiang did not provide a personal understanding of Wang Shouren's Buddhist or Daoist activities neither in the main body or at the end of the biography. For Geng Dingxiang's comments, see *Wang Yangming quanji xinbianben*, vol. 54, 2264–2265.

of Laozi and the Buddha" (*jiuxin yu laofo zhixue* 究心於老佛之學) in Wang Ji's account, from which he constantly quoted.[507] Considering his attempt to highlight Wang Shouren's experience shared by himself when selecting sources, Geng's effort to adhere to the existing disciple narratives in reconstructing Wang's learning path further illustrates his position as a follower of Wang and his inclination to preserve and promote Wang's learning experience through the compilation of a biography. By assigning himself with Wang and the School of Mind, Geng Dingxiang reinforced the established image of Wang that was initially presented by leading disciples and generally accepted by Yangming scholars.

However, Geng Dingxiang's method of using sources, specifically his selective quoting of two pre-existing disciples' accounts to construct his narrative, can be questioned for potentially being biased, as it may accommodate historical evidence to the author's personal opinion by highlighting particular events and omitting relevant context. It appears that Geng condensed several events into a single entry in his chronological biography. Despite similarities between Geng's biography and Qian Dehong's "Chronological Biography" records in terms of historical narrative style, Qian provided detailed accounts of the events, clearly indicating the passage of time with words and phrases such as "previously" (*xianshi* 先是) and "later" (*yi'er* 已而).[508] In contrast, Geng combined multiple events occurring during the same period without specifying when each event occurred or whether one event immediately succeeded another.

[507] *Wang Ji ji*, 692–693.
[508] See "later, after remaining long in stillness" in the 1502 record (pp. 142–143) and "previously, while on his way to Longchang" in the 1510 record (pp. 147–148). For the Chinese text, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1351, 1357.

This feature is evident in Geng Dingxiang's account, which, as discussed earlier, demonstrated three stages of Wang Shouren's realisation gained through his self-inspection. The two events— (1) Wang's meditation in Yangming Grotto and (2) Wang's awakening to the errors of discarding filial affection—were condensed into the chronological entry for 1502, with the latter implied as the successive event of the former. Consequently, while (1) seems to be a Buddhist practice in appearance, as suggested by the Buddhist terminology in the text, (2) reflects a Confucian nature, emphasising the Confucian value of filial affection and family duty. This condensation can give the impression that (1) and (2) constituted an essentially Confucian contemplation, albeit using methods and terms borrowed from Buddhism.

By contrast, Qian Dehong included another story between his descriptions of (1) and (2). According to Qian, Wang realised that Daoist "guiding and pulling" practice was not the correct learning after experiencing prescience one day in Yangming Grotto. Qian also included, a "later, after remaining long in stillness" (*yi'er jingjiu* 已而靜久), to indicate a period between this additional event and event (2).[509] Qian's description suggests two key points: first, (1) and (2) did not occur in quick succession; and second, (2) might not have been the direct consequence of (1) but rather of the additional event involving Wang's reflection on his prior practice. In this context, there is little indication that (1) and (2) amounted to a continuous contemplation of Confucianism.

Given that Geng Dingxiang heavily relied on Qian's account as a major source, one may question why Geng arranged his quotations in a way that implied a particular meaning that was not present in the original context. This arrangement may be an unintended flaw of

[509] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1351.

Geng's narrative, where clarity was sacrificed for conciseness, considering his consistent tendency to quote selectively in his relatively short biography. In other words, Geng might have omitted the necessary context between events (1) and (2) to compress more content into fewer words, probably without anticipating that this would imply a cause-and-effect relationship between two non-successive events. However, another possibility is that Geng intentionally designed his narrative to connect what appeared to be a Buddhist meditation with a progress on the Confucian path, thereby neutralising a non-Confucian activity while emphasising a Confucian presence.

This second hypothesis appears more plausible. If Geng's intention were simply to condense the narrative, he could have selected fewer sources from the disciples' accounts or excluded more of the meditation details, rather than combining three distinct events into a single chronological entry and omitting indications of time gaps between them. It is more likely that Geng tailored his narration to create the impression that Wang's seemingly non-Confucian activities led to a Confucian outcome. This framing echoes Wang's own retrospective account in "Letter to Students in Chenzhong" (1509), written seven years after the events labelled (1) and (2), which Geng recorded as having occurred in Yuecheng in 1502.[510] In the letter, Wang explained that his meditation practice with students in Guiyang (between 1508 and 1509) was a pragmatic method for gathering thoughts, rather than a Buddhist practice such as *samādhi.*[511]

Geng's approach aligns with his own self-identification as a Confucian of the Yangming School—an identity he reinforced by referencing Wang Ji's description of Wang Shouren's

[510] See p. 122.
[511] See pp. 147–148.

meditation to draw parallels with his own learning path. In this light, Geng's editorial strategy appears aimed at strengthening Wang's Confucian identity, even at the risk of compromising the credibility of a historical biography.

This addresses the previously raised question of whether Yangming scholars would adopt any historical perspectives and approaches in their discussions of Wang's life and work. In the case of Geng's biography, an unusual phenomenon can be observed: even within the genre of historical biography—which typically requires the author to prioritise objectivity and historicity—a Yangming scholar may have placed greater emphasis on proving a pre-existing viewpoint through a meticulously framed narrative. Under such circumstances, neither the reconstruction of Wang's life experiences nor the assessment of his Confucian status could be considered historically critical, as facts were significantly subordinated to opinions.

In this sense, Geng's reception of Wang's Confucian legacy was not faithful reflection of Wang's self-presented identity, but a strategic reinterpretation. By carefully reframed Wang's learning experience, Geng portrayed a normative image of the ideal Confucian master—one who, in pursuit of "the correct learning", ultimately refuted non-Confucian theories and practices along the way.[512] This reinterpretation also casts Wang's intellectual trajectory to mirror Geng's own ideals and to legitimise a particular vision of the Yangming School.

[512] After recounting Wang's engagements in Buddhism and Daoism, Geng concluded with Wang's realisation that abandoning filial love would be exterminating "the seed of human nature", which was not "the correct learning". See the translation in "Geng Dingxiang's selection of source materials" above (pp. 220–221).

VI. Challenges from the Cheng–Zhu School of Principle: A Case Study of Luo Zenan's Discussion of Wang's Buddhist and Daoist Activities

As explained in the chapter's Introduction, it is impractical to provide a comprehensive review of the Ming–Qing discourse on Wang's academic identity through case studies alone. Due to length constraints, only a limited number of texts can be examined in detail. However, this limitation does not necessarily lead to isolated findings confined to specific circumstances. The analysis of several disciples' choices of wording in Section IV and Geng Dingxiang's biography of Wang's learning and teaching paths in Section V demonstrates that certain common methodological features appear across different texts by multiple authors. These include strategies such as neutralising Wang's non-Confucian engagements to reinforce a Confucian identity and framing selective source material in alignment with predetermined interpretative goals.

This pattern prompts a broader question: were such techniques unique to the Yangming School, or were they more widely employed across Confucian communities, including those critical of Wang's teachings? To explore this, the next section turns to a text authored by a prominent critic of Wang, examining whether similar methodological features appear in accounts shaped by doctrinal opposition. It also investigates the specific criteria used by rival Confucian strands to assess Wang's philosophical legitimacy—particularly how his non-Confucian activities were mobilised to challenge his Confucian status. In doing so, the section sheds light on evolving interpretive trajectories amid intellectual competition, offering insight into how Wang's self-fashioned identity was reconfigured across divergent receptions.

As discussed in earlier sections, eminent figures such as Cheng Hao and Zhu Xi were upheld as paragons of Confucian orthodoxy within the Cheng–Zhu tradition, and their legacies became standards against which Wang Shouren's intellectual identity was evaluated. In this context, a critique of Wang's philosophy by a prominent Cheng–Zhu scholar is especially revealing—not only for what it says about Wang, but for what it reflects about the intellectual tensions underlying his reception. One such critique can be found in Qing Confucian Luo Zenan's "Yaojiang xuebian" 姚江學辨 ["Discourse on the Yaojiang School"], a text of particular importance.[513]

Luo, a scholar-official of wide influence and a staunch advocate of Cheng–Zhu teachings, was known for his sustained opposition to Wang's ideas.[514] His status as a prolific teacher with numerous disciples—and the fact that his scholarship was occasionally compared with that of Wang and the Yangming School—makes his perspective both relatively authoritative and strategically positioned within Confucian debates.[515] As such, Luo's account offers a distinct counterpoint to the views of Wang's disciples—such as Qian Dehong and Wang Ji—and sympathetic interpreters like Geng Dingxiang. If methodological parallels emerge across these otherwise opposing camps—for instance, in the selective framing of biographical details or the rhetorical construction of Confucian legitimacy—they are especially worth noting for what they reveal about shared methodological and historiographical patterns across doctrinal divides.

[513] For the full Chinese text, see Luo Zenan 羅澤南 (1807–1856), "Yaojiang xuebian" 姚江學辨 ["Discourse on the Yaojiang School"], ed. Fu Jing 符靜 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2010), vol. 1–2, 209–272.
[514] For a biography of Luo Zenan, see *Qingshi gao*, vol. 407, 11944–11949. For a scholarly discussion of his philosophy, see Xu, *Qingru xue'an*, vol. 170, 6547.
[515] *Qingshi gao*, 11948–11949.

Moreover, Luo's critique is notable for engaging both Wang's formative learning experiences and his mature teaching instructions. In this context, it not only echoes but also subverts Qian Dehong's influential "three phases of change" narrative of Wang's intellectual journey. Luo's challenges to key teachings—particularly Wang's reinterpretation of "investigation of things"—directly respond to core claims established in earlier accounts. In this way, Luo's text functions as both a continuation of and a rebuttal to the narratives previously examined in Section IV and Section V, making it a crucial site for understanding how Wang's identity was reshaped through continuous debate.

1. Luo Zenan's consistent argument regarding Wang Shouren's teachings

Luo Zenan's "Discourse on the Yaojiang School" is particularly significant in that it seeks to define the nature of Wang's philosophy through a sustained critique of his learning and teaching. Unlike Geng Dingxiang's historical biography, which reconstructs Wang's intellectual trajectory as a form of legitimation, Luo's reference to Wang's experiences serves as a primarily rhetorical function within a broader philosophical attack on the Yangming School. His treatment of Wang's non-Confucian engagements appears less concerned with historical accuracy than with furnishing evidence for a pre-established conclusion: that Wang's philosophy diverged fundamentally from orthodox Confucianism.

This raises a methodological question—whether Luo's historical evidence led him to this conclusion, or whether his conclusion shaped his selection and framing of that evidence. Throughout his analysis of Wang's key teachings—particularly *liangzhi* in relation to the investigation of things—Luo systematically contrasted Wang's views with those of canonical Confucians such as Mencius, the Cheng brothers, and Zhu Xi, as well as with Buddhist and

Daoist ideas. References to Wang's earlier engagements with Buddhism and Daoism are deployed not as neutral background but as signs of lingering influence, reinforcing Luo's contention that Wang's teachings veered towards heterodoxy.[516]

In each case, Luo concluded that Wang's doctrines align more closely with non-Confucian philosophies than with the Cheng–Zhu orthodoxy, thus disqualifying him as a true Confucian in Luo's terms.[517] This evaluative framework mirrors the one used in the Ming imperial decree denouncing Wang's teachings under Emperor Shizong, which also relied on Zhu Xi's doctrines as a benchmark of orthodoxy. While this similarity does not necessarily imply direct influence, the shared method highlights a broader pattern among Ming–Qing scholars outside the Yangming School: using the Cheng–Zhu paradigm as both the standard of judgement and the basis for marginalising intellectual rivals.

Furthermore, in the concluding section of his discussion, Luo Zenan asserted that despite their outward Confucian appearance, Wang Shouren's teachings were essentially Buddhist in nature. He argued that Wang absorbed elements from the Confucian sages only to integrate them into a fundamentally Buddhist and Daoist framework.[518] Having established the contours of Luo's overall critique, this section now turns to his treatment of Wang's learning experiences—specifically, how Luo constructed a narrative of Wang's intellectual

[516] *Yaojiang xuebian*, 211–265.
[517] Some examples are "Yangming (Wang Shouren) was fond of discussing the principles of the Heaven, and yet what he discussed cannot be separated from the emptiness of Buddhism" and "By starting with the two words (*liangzhi*), it was therefore not difficult [for Wang Shouren] to completely integrate the ideas of Confucius, Mencius, the Cheng brothers, and Zhu Xi into Buddhism". These quotes are independently translated here. For the original Chinese text, see *Yaojiang xuebian*, 217, 220.
[518] Ibid., 266–267. Luo's claim also highlights a comparison between theories of earlier scholars who incorporated some Buddhist or Daoist ideas into Confucianism and those of more recent scholars, including Wang, who infused their Buddhist and Daoist teachings with some Confucian ideas.

development that reinforces his broader claim. The following is the relevant text and its translation.[519]

> 陽明自幼酷好二氏，十七歲入鐵柱宮，見有道者叩之，得聞養生之術；後又聞地藏洞有異人，坐卧松毛，不火食，歷巖險訪之，因論最一上乘，乃築室陽明洞中，行導引術；三十七歲，居龍場驛中，夜悟大學格物之旨，始謂大學之道，吾性自足，向之求理于事物者誤也；五十歲居南昌，始揭良知之學教人，自謂千聖相傳一點骨血，聖賢實有之旨，盡從而變亂之。蓋其浸淫于二氏者深矣。
>
> Yangming (Wang Shouren) had been extremely fond of the two schools since his youth. At seventeen, he went to Tiezhu Palace, where he kowtowed to a Daoist monk and was thus instructed in the techniques of nourishing life.[520] Later, he heard of an eccentric individual in the Dizang Grotto who sat and lay on a pine-needled mat, never eating cooked food.[521] He travelled through dangerous, steep hills to visit this person and then discussed the highest doctrines with him. Afterwards, he built a room in the Yangming Grotto and practised the exercises of guiding and pulling.[522]
>
> At thirty-seven, one night during his stay at the Longchang Relay Station, he awakened to the essential ideas of investigating things of the Great Learning.[523] He began to claim that, concerning the Way to the Great Learning, one's own nature is self-sufficient and those who seek principles in things and affairs are wrong.[524]
>
> When he was fifty, living in Nanchang, he began to introduce others to the theories of innate knowledge as his teachings.[525] He asserted these theories to be the few remnants of bone and blood preserved through thousands of generations of sages. He completely altered and confused the true ideas of the sages ever since. This was due to his deep indulgence in the two schools.

[519] For the Chinese text of this excerpt, see *Yaojiang xuebian*, 232. A large proportion of this text consists of quotations from chronological records in Qian Dehong's "Chronological Biography", the majority of which have been translated in Chapter Three.
[520] See *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1347.
[521] Ibid., 1351.
[522] See the translation of 1502 entry (pp. 142–143).
[523] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1354.
[524] The Chinese character *xiang* 向 in this sentence may be ambiguous, as it can function either as a preposition indicating direction ("in", "to", or "towards") or as an adverb referring to the past ("previously", "formerly", or "in earlier days"). Both interpretations appear to fit the context in which Wang realises that seeking principles in things and affairs is wrong, although they place emphasis respectively on direction and temporality. Given that the sentence contrasts seeking principles in external things with recognising the self-sufficient internal nature, the directional reading appears more consistent with the original intent. The phrase is therefore interpreted here as indicating orientation rather than temporal reference. The clause 向之求理於事物 is translated as "those who seek principles in things and affairs".
[525] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1411.

It is notable that this excerpt, focusing on assessing Wang's Buddhist and Daoist activities, references four events from his earlier life and one from his later teaching career.[526] More specifically, Wang either engaged in the practices or interacted with the practitioners of Buddhism or Daoism in the first three stories, while he "awakened" to essential Confucian theories in the fourth story. These four events, occurring over a twenty-year span, reflect Wang's learning path where he involved himself in Buddhism and Daoism but eventually realised the Confucian doctrine. In comparison, the last story, where Wang began to "introduce others to the theories of innate knowledge as his teachings", emphasised "innate knowledge" as significant characteristic of Wang's teaching rather than learning activities.

This arrangement of events suggests that, while Luo foregrounded Wang's learning experiences in his critique, he also viewed Wang's later teaching activities as an extension of those formative encounters with Buddhism and Daoism. Luo's narrative presents a trajectory in which non-Confucian influences continued to shape Wang's intellectual path. Notably, Luo used the phrase "began to claim" (*shilu* 始論) when referring to Wang's interpretation of the Way to the Great Learning. This formulation casts doubt on the origins of Wang's understanding. In the context of earlier episodes Luo recounted—such as Wang's adoption of life-nourishing doctrines and practice of "guiding and pulling"—this phrasing implies suspicion that Wang's so-called Confucian insights were in fact shaped by prior immersion in non-Confucian traditions. In other words, while Luo acknowledged Wang's moment of "awakening", he portrayed it not as a return to orthodox Confucian teachings, but as a misguided revelation inspired by heterodox traditions.

[526] Each note of Wang Shouren's age at the beginning serves as an indicator of a new event.

In this context, Luo's approach to assessing Wang's philosophy concur with the views among Wang's disciples discussed in Section II, despite arriving at opposing conclusions. In both cases, Wang's learning experience and teaching career served as key criteria for determining his Confucian status. While Wang's followers emphasised these aspects to defend his legitimacy within the Confucian tradition, Luo invoked the same evidence to argue for his deviation from it. This shared evaluative framework highlights a methodological continuity across different intellectual communities, even as their interpretations of Wang's identity diverged.

In Luo Zenan's assessment of Wang's Buddhist and Daoist activities, his conclusion was explicit in stating that Wang "altered and confused" (*bianluan* 變亂) Confucian theories due to his "deep indulgence" (*jinyin* 浸淫) in the two non-Confucian schools. Although Luo did not specify which "true ideas of the sages" he believed were distorted—perhaps because the particular passage focused narrowly on Wang's non-Confucian engagements—he nonetheless argued that Wang's philosophical views were compromised in their capacity to convey authentic Confucian teachings. By evaluating the legitimacy of Wang's philosophy through his proximity to Buddhism and Daoism, Luo framed his final judgment within a doctrinal hierarchy, in which Confucian orthodoxy was defined by its distance from heterodox influences. This closing argument reinforced Luo's overarching claim: that Wang had been "extremely fond of the two schools since his youth", a statement now substantiated by a selective recounting of Wang's Buddhist and Daoist activities.

It is worth highlighting that in assessing Wang's teachings by their proximity to heterodox influences, Luo may have regarded these influences as encompassing both non-Confucian beliefs and Confucian interpretations that diverged from the orthodox framework established

by Zhu Xi. As noted earlier, this broader stance mirrors the rationale behind the imperial decree that denounced Wang's philosophy for straying from the Cheng–Zhu orthodoxy. In this specific passage of Luo's critique, his core objection appears to centre on Wang's alleged awakening to the Way to Great Learning—specifically, the assertion that "one's own nature is self-sufficient and those who seek principles in things and affairs are wrong". Given that this statement directly contradicts Zhu Xi's authoritative interpretation of *gewu* (investigation of things) as the means to extend knowledge by discerning principles within things, it likely represents, for Luo, one of the teachings through which Wang had "altered and confused" the Confucian doctrine.

However, while Luo implied this quotation as proof of Wang's deviation from orthodox doctrine—namely, Zhu Xi's commentary on *Daxue*—the quote itself is not drawn from Wang's own writings but from "Chronological Biography", compiled by Wang's disciple Qian Dehong.[527] The more radical claim—that "those who seek principles in things and affairs are wrong"—is Qian's formulation.[528] Wang's own accounts convey a more measured stance. In letters such as "Letter in Reply to Gu Dongqiao", Wang avoided explicitly refuting Zhu's interpretations.[529] Instead, he interpreted Zhu's conception of *gewu* as "investigating things to thoroughly understand the principles" (*jiwu qiongli* 即物窮理), which, according to Wang, based on a dualistic model, wherein principles are located in external objects and are separate from the mind.[530] In contrast, Wang argued that *gewu* involves the extension of

[527] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1354.
[528] Ibid. This is a verbatim quotation from "Chronological Biography". The Chinese text is: 向之求理於事物者誤也. See footnote 524 for the reading of the text.
[529] See the translation of this letter above (pp. 102–103).
[530] "This theory means that one shall set one's mind to search for the principles inside things and affairs. In this case, the 'mind' and the 'principles' are separated." See p. 103.

principles already present in the mind, describing the act as extending the principles of the mind's *liangzhi* to all things and affairs.[531]

In this context, Wang referred to *liangzhi* as the guiding agency in the act of extending principles to external objects and situations, highlighting its inseparability from the mind. Accordingly, *liangzhi* may be understood here as the innate moral consciousness that constitutes the mind's original state and serves as the active agency in moral practice—specifically, in the practice of *gewu*. Because these principles are not external but intrinsic to the mind's original state, their application to things and affairs does not separate mind from principle but rather enacts their unity.

Wang's letter reveals that, although his interpretation of *gewu* indeed diverged from Zhu Xi's, he avoided using the explicitly oppositional terms attributed to him by Qian Dehong in "Chronological Biography". Furthermore, rather than directly refuting Zhu, Wang aimed to show a deeper continuity between his teachings and what he considered to be Zhu's mature views—an effort most clearly articulated in his references to "Master Zhu's final conclusions". The previously discussed *"*Letter in Reply to Gu Dongqiao*"*, written in response to Gu Lin's doubts about Zhu's shift in thought, reflects this strategy. It seems that Wang's goal was to demonstrate alignment with Zhu's later ideas, using the comparison of their interpretations not to contrast them directly, but as a means of showing convergence.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Wang argued that his teachings aligned with Zhu's final conclusions, formed after a shift in Zhu's thinking during his later years. In this framing, the

[531] See the letter "Letter in Reply to Gu Dongqiao" (pp. 102–103). See Appendix 11 for the original Chinese text.

contrast is not between Wang and Zhu, but between Wang's post-awakening thoughts (from 1510 onwards) and Zhu's earlier, less mature thoughts. To support this, Wang cited the letter "Da Lü Ziyue" 答呂子約 ["Letter in Reply to Lü Ziyue"] from Zhu included in *Final Conclusions*, in which Zhu stressed "nourishing the nature and being mindful to distinguish between heavenly principles and human desires",[532] which Wang took to reflect Zhu's final conclusions. Wang may have interpreted this emphasis on "the nature" (*benyuan* 本原) as analogous to his own conception of *liangzhi*—the innate moral consciousness that guides everyday action. In this sense, Zhu's call to nourish "the nature" in discerning principles and identifying desires resonates Wang's emphasise on extending the principles of the mind's original consciousness to external affairs. Therefore, by highlighting this shared concern for internal moral agency, Wang recast his teachings not as a rupture with Zhu's orthodox doctrine, but as a refinement of its later stage.

Under these circumstances, it is particularly noteworthy that in the excerpt above, Luo Zenan did not reference Wang's proposed alignment with Zhu Xi's "final conclusions" when citing sources to demonstrate how Wang "altered and confused" the Confucian Way. Instead, Luo chose to quote Qian Dehong's account, which more radically asserted that "those who seek principles in things and affairs are wrong"—a claim more explicitly oppositional than Wang's own writings. This selective citation deserves special attention. As noted in Chapter Two, *Final Conclusions*, which Wang compiled to demonstrate alignment between his teachings and Zhu's mature thoughts, did not succeed in deflecting criticism from Cheng–Zhu Confucians. In addition to direct rebuttals, such as those by Luo Qinshun discussed earlier, Luo Zenan's decision to cite Qian's more provocative phrasing—while ignoring

[532] The Chinese text is: 涵養本原而察於天理人欲之判. For the Chinese text, see *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 1, 146.

Wang's more nuanced appeal to Zhu's "final conclusions"—may reflect a broader resistance to any claim that Wang's philosophy could be reconciled with orthodox Confucianism. This rhetoric suggests a deliberate refusal to legitimate Wang's teachings by acknowledging their proposed continuity with Zhu's.

2. Luo Zenan's selective use of disciple narratives

Building on the previous observation regarding Luo Zenan's selective engagement with existing narratives, it is also notable how he handled these sources when recounting Wang Shouren's learning path. Like Geng Dingxiang's and Qian Dehong's accounts, Luo's narrative closely parallels the disciple tradition—particularly Qian's "Chronological Biography". However, rather than rephrasing or reinterpreting Qian's records, Luo generally favoured condensed and direct quotations. He tended to repeat relevant records from "Chronological Biography" instead of rewording them, omitting some sentences in the process. While quoting selectively from Qian, Luo made relatively few alterations to the original text. Under these circumstances, his narration of five specific events, as shown in the text and footnotes above, seems to be an abridged version of several chronological records in Qian's compilation. The following table can better demonstrate this feature.

Events	Corresponding records in "Chronological Biography"	Omissions of the texts in "Chronological Biography"
Wang learning life-nourishing theories from a monk	Slight paraphrase of the 1488 record[533]	The phrase "going leisurely (into Tiezhu Palace) by chance" (*ou jianxing* 偶間行)
Wang discussing the highest doctrines with an "eccentric individual"	Quotation from the 1501 record[534]	Details about the exchanged conversation including the eccentric individual wondering

[533] See the translation above (p. 119). For the Chinese text, see Appendix (the 1488 entry).
[534] See the translation above (p. 120). For the Chinese text, see Appendix (the 1501 entry).

		at Wang's visit and stating that Zhou Dunyi and Cheng Hao were "two good scholars of Confucianism"
Wang practising "guiding and pulling" in Yangming Grotto	Quotation from the 1502 record[535]	The summary statement that Wang "gradually realised the errors of the two schools of Daoism and Buddhism" since the year 1502
Wang awakening to the essential ideas of investigating things	Quotation from the 1509 record[536]	Details about Wang's excitement and other people's reaction
Wang teaching the theories of *liangzhi*	Quotation from the 1521 record[537]	Details about Wang's instructions on *liangzhi* to his disciples[538]

In reference to the table above, it should be clear that when quoting from Qian's records, Luo Zenan quoted the relevant texts verbatim in most cases, with the slight paraphrase of Wang learning life-nourishing theories from a monk being an exception. This tendency to cite sources accurately indicates that Luo aimed to base his criticism of Wang's Confucian philosophy on the historical reconstruction of Wang's Buddhist and Daoist activities. As this reconstruction was provided by Wang's disciples and generally acknowledged by scholars of the Yangming School, Luo implied a gesture of objectivity in assessing the nature of Wang's learning and teaching experiences.[539] By this means, he moderated the tone and yet intensified the challenge to the Yangming School, as the evidence he provided could scarcely be refuted in terms of accuracy and credibility.

While his accurate quotations from "Chronological Biography" reflect an objective attitude in assessing Wang's non-Confucian activities, Luo's omission of certain content from Qian's

[535] See the translation above (pp. 142–143). For the Chinese text, see Appendix (the 1502 entry).
[536] *Wang Yangming quanji*, vol. 4, 1354–1355.
[537] Ibid., 1411–1412.
[538] The "Chronological Biography" contains more details about how Wang Shouren explained *liangzhi* to his students, citing a letter of Wang and a conversation between Wang and Chen Jiuchuan.
[539] As "Chronological Biography" was edited, proofread, and prefaced by a group of disciples, its reconstruction of Wang Shouren's life experience was most likely agreed by these scholars of the Yangming School.

records indicates that he might have considered some materials unsuitable for this assessment. As shown in the table above, a typical instance of omitting some content was when Luo extracted Wang's pivotal act from the circumstantial narration of the complete event, excluding subsidiary descriptions of other individuals' reactions to Wang.[540] Given that Luo designed his examination of Wang's Buddhist and Daoist activities as evidence to demonstrate Wang's "deep indulgence" in the two non-Confucian schools, it is reasonable to suggest that this type of omission was made to ensure a succinct analysis with the most relevant information on Wang's direct engagement in Buddhism or Daoism. Nevertheless, the consideration of conciseness might not be the only reason for the omission of certain content from "Chronological Biography", as some omitted texts share similarities in another regard.

As noted earlier, regarding the Ming–Qing discourse on Wang Shouren's learning and teaching experiences, scholars' doctrinal positions significantly influenced their interpretations of Wang's non-Confucian engagements. This influence has been demonstrated in Section IV, which focuses on how the most common wording "wander in and out (of the two schools)"—chosen by disciples who aimed to establish Wang's Confucian status—downplayed the roles of Buddhism and Daoism in Wang's Confucian path. Likewise, the records in "Chronological Biography" consulted by Luo Zenan, which were compiled and edited by Wang's disciples upholding their teacher's Confucian achievements, contained some content that either downplayed an involvement in Buddhism and Daoism or highlighted a connection to Confucianism.

[540] Examples are Luo Zenan's descriptions of the second and fourth events, in which texts regarding the monk wondering at Wang Shouren's visit and other people astonished by Wang's excitement were omitted.

For example, the phrase "going leisurely (into Tiezhu Palace) by chance" in "Chronological Biography" suggests that Wang entering a Daoist temple was not a carefully planned pilgrimage, implying that Wang had not been religiously devoted to Daoism despite his interest in some Daoist theories such as the life-nourishing doctrines. Another example is the mention of Zhou Dunyi and Cheng Hao, two prominent Confucians, in the conversation between Wang and the eccentric individual in 1501. This conversation shows that although Wang was meeting a Daoist practitioner, their discussion of "highest doctrines" (*zuishangcheng* 最上乘) concluded by acclaiming two Confucians rather than any Daoist figure, theory, or practice. Moreover, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, "Chronological Biography" states that Wang "gradually realised the errors of the two schools of Buddhism and Daoism" in 1502 marked a milestone in Wang's attitude towards Buddhism and Daoism, indicating his reflection on prior involvement in these non-Confucian schools that led to an eventual return to Confucianism.[541]

Luo Zenan's omission of certain records in "Chronological Biography"—particularly those that downplay the influence of Buddhism and Daoism or highlight Confucianism's role—appears deliberate. Given the nature of his text as a piece of philosophical criticism, aimed at proving that Wang "altered and confused" Confucian teachings due to his deep involvement with non-Confucian traditions, it is highly plausible that Luo excluded sources that could weaken this argument. Rather than evaluating Wang's non-Confucian experiences on their own terms, Luo filtered them through his prior judgment of Wang's Confucian theories.

This selective use of evidence addresses the earlier question of whether Luo's conclusion preceded his analysis. His omission and framing strongly suggests that he shaped the

[541] See pp. 142–143.

biographical accounts to validate a pre-existing disapproval of Wang's philosophy. When compared with Geng Dingxiang's account in Section V, a striking methodological parallel emerges. Despite standing on opposite sides of the doctrinal divide, both authors curated sources to affirm their predetermined views on Wang's Confucian identity—Geng by softening Wang's non-Confucian affiliations to craft a normative image of a Confucian master, Luo by emphasising them to argue for doctrinal deviation. In both cases, efforts to display historicity or objectivity functioned less as genuine enquires of Wang's self-presentation and more as rhetorical strategies serving the authors' needs and positions.

What emerges from these contrasting yet methodologically aligned accounts is a pattern in which Wang's self-presentation is not faithfully preserved but strategically reinterpreted to serve broader intellectual or doctrinal agendas. These reception accounts, though often cloaked in the language of critical scholarship, centre less on understanding Wang than on positioning the interpreter within an ongoing contest of Confucian orthodoxy. The result is that Wang's intellectual identity, as he sought to articulate it, is often altered, repurposed, or obscured. This dynamic reinforces the argument introduced at the beginning of the thesis: that Wang's self-presented intellectual identity must be re-examined not merely as a historical artefact, but as a contested construct whose meaning has been continually reshaped by layers of reception.

VII. The Portrayal of Wang Shouren in Official Dynasty History: Perspectives of Qing-Dynasty Historians

The previous analysis has shown that the texts from three groups of scholars on two opposing sides are all, to some extent, biased in their evaluation of Wang Shouren's Confucian identity. This raises the question of whether any historically critical party participated in the Ming–Qing discourse. If such a perspective existed, it would most likely be found in the *Mingshi* compiled by Qing-dynasty historians, who were somewhat removed from the immediate polemics of Wang's contemporaries and writing under a higher political authority that tended to override sectarian disputes.

The compilation of *Mingshi* was a monumental project that spanned ninety-five years, marked by multiple phases, frequent personnel changes, and the creation of several draft versions.[542] Regarding the biography of Wang, numerous historians contributed to its writing and editing, resulting in at least six extant versions with variations in their narrations of his life activities. Despite significant studies by modern scholars, the complexities of the compilation process remain insufficiently clarified, likely due to the loss of earlier drafts and the challenges in identifying the original sources for specific narratives, as citations or

[542] The compilation of *Mingshi* was initiated by the Shunzhi 順治 Emperor (1638–1661) in 1645 but did not fully commence until 1679 during the reign of the Kangxi 康熙 Emperor (1654–1722). This project progressed through several phases, including the distribution of tasks, the compilation of the first draft, and the refinement and supplementation of the draft edition. The final version was completed in 1739 during the Qianlong reign. For a detailed monography of the compilation of *Mingshi*, see Li Jinhua 李晉華, *Mingshi zuanxiu kao* 明史纂修考 [*A Study of the Compilation of The History of Ming*] (Beiping: Hafo Yanjing xueshe, 1933). For a more concise study, see Huang Aiping 黃愛平, "Mingshi zuanxiu yu qingchu shixue: jianlun Wan Sitong Wang Hongxu zai Mingshi zuanxiu zhong de zuoyong" 《明史》纂修與清初史學：兼論萬斯同、王鴻緒在《明史》纂修中的作用 ["The Compilation of *The History of Ming* and the Historiography of Early Qing Dynasty: With a Discussion on Wan Sitong's and Wang Hongxu's Roles in the Compilation of *The History of Ming*"], *Qingshi yanjiu* 清史研究 no. 2 (1994): 83–93.

reference notes were often absent in the draft versions.[543] In this regard, the following section will focus on the final version rather than earlier drafts.[544] As the authorised edition for publication, this version represents the official outcome of a comprehensive evaluation of previous historians' use of sources and narrative construction, culminating in an additional comment on Wang at the end. By analysing the content relevant to his academic activities and the conclusion on his overall achievement in this biography, the officially endorsed attitudes towards Wang during the Qing dynasty can be uncovered. This finding, in turn, facilitates an assessment of how neutral Qing historians were in their accounts of Wang's life experiences.

It is worth highlighting that in the final version, only a small proportion of Wang's biography is dedicated to his academic achievements, such as his learning experiences, teaching career, and posthumous recognition.[545] Within this brief narration, which constitutes less than ten percent of the full text, the reconstruction of the debates over Wang's posthumous recognition is twice as long as the succinct summary of his learning and teaching activities. This narrative focus on Wang's political and military accomplishments rather than academic activities is understandable, given the text's genre as an independent biography centred on one significant official rather than a collective biography of several individuals. A notable example of the latter genre is "Rulin zhuan" 儒林傳 ["The Biography of Confucian Scholars"], a common feature in Chinese official dynastic histories, which records the lives

[543] For an account of the compilation of Wang's biography in *Mingshi*, see Duan Runxiu 段潤秀, "*Mingshi Wang Shouren zhuan* bianzuan kaolun" 《明史王守仁傳》編纂考論 ["A Comment on the Compiling of *Wang Shouren's Biography Of the Ming History*"], *Shixue jikan* 史學集刊 no. 3 (2007): 82–87.
[544] The final version was published as part of *Qinding mingshi* 欽定明史 [*The History of Ming Approved by Imperial Order*] in 1739, also known as the *Wuying dian* 武英殿 edition. This version was included in the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 [*The Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*] collection with some edition notes and an additional comment. See Duan, "Mingshi Wang Shouren zhuan bianzuan kaolun", 83–84.
[545] The complete biography consists of more than five thousand Chinese characters, yet the section describing Wang Shouren's academic achievements accounts for approximately 450 characters.

and works of renowned Confucian intellectuals. In the case of *Mingshi*, brief biographies of some disciples of Wang were categorised under "Rulin zhuan".[546] Nevertheless, one may question the rationale behind the decision of compiling an independent biography for Wang, especially since many other Ming scholars, including his disciples and later followers, were categorised based on their Confucian identity, with their biographies focusing primarily on the academic activities.

The categorisation of Wang's biography in *Mingshi* sparked disputes among Qing historians from the outset of compilation process. For these historians, the key question was whether to include it in the proposed "Daoxue zhuan" 道學傳 ["The Biography of Those Who Studied the Way"], categorise it under "Rulin zhuan", or designate it as an independent biography.[547] The Compilation Institute ultimately decided to separate Wang's biography from "Rulin zhuan" and compile it as an independent chapter, while rejecting the suggestion to establish a "Daoxue zhuan", which, in *Songshi* 宋史 [*The History of Song*], had been dedicated to Song-dynasty orthodox Confucians such as the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi of the School of Principle.[548]

While the related debates have been addressed in modern scholarship, this section will not delve into those details.[549] However, the occurrence of such debates is significant, as it

[546] Several disciples mentioned earlier in this chapter are included in "Rulin zhuan", such as Qian Dehong, Xu Ai, Wang Ji, and Wang Gen. For their brief biographies, see *Mingshi*, vol. 171, 7271–7275.
[547] Duan, "Mingshi Wang Shourenzhuan bianzuan kaolun", 83–84.
[548] For a discussion on the "Daoxue zhuan" in *Songshi*, see Lu Zhongfeng 盧鍾鋒 , "Yuandai lixue yu songshi daoxue zhuan de xueshu tese" 元代理學與《宋史道學傳》的學術特色 ["The Yuan-dynasty School of Principle and the Academic Characteristics of *The Biography of Those Who Studied the Way* in *The History of Song*"], *Shixueshi yanjiu* 史學史研究 no. 3 (1990): 26–31, 52.
[549] Apart from Li Jinhua's monography and Duan Runxiu's article cited earlier, another relevant discussion is: Wu Hailan 吳海蘭, "Shixi Qingchu mingshi lixuezhuan de lunzheng" 試析清初《明史理學傳》的論爭 ["On the Debate on *Mingshi Lixuezhuan* During the Early Qing Dynasty"], *Nankai xuebao* 南開學報 no. 4 (2011): 89–99.

highlights differing perspectives among historians that often aligned with their positions within Confucian academia. This alignment suggests that at least some historians were not entirely neutral in their narratives of Wang's life and work. Moreover, the final decision to designate Wang's biography as an independent chapter warrants special attention. While this choice appears neutral on the surface, prioritising adherence to historiographical conventions over taking a side in academic disputes, it effectively excluded Wang from being officially recognised as an orthodox Confucian by inclusion in "Daoxue zhuan". This outcome, even if unintended, significantly shaped Wang's portrayal in official historiography.

The neutrality of *Mingshi* Compilation Institute could be further questioned through an examination of the closing comment on Wang, the second half of which was directed at his academic activities:[550]

> 矜其創獲，標異儒先，卒為學者譏。守仁嘗謂胡世寧少講學，世寧曰："某恨公多講學耳。"桂萼之議雖出於媢忌之私，抑流弊實然，固不能以功多為諱矣。
> He took pride of his new discoveries, flaunting them in front of other Confucians. In the end, he was censured by scholars. Shouren once remarked that Hu Shining lectured too little on academic subjects, to which Shining responded, "I regretted that you lectured too much."[551] Although Gui E's comments stemmed from personal jealousy, the shortcomings [of Wang Shouren's teachings] are the facts, which indeed should not be concealed despite his many contributions.[552]

In this final assessment of Wang's academic activities, the *Mingshi* Compilation Institute clarified its stance on presenting the full facts to its audience with the statement that Wang's shortcomings "should not be concealed despite his many contributions". However, the final comment did not specify what these shortcomings referred to, nor did the preceding sections

[550] *Mingshi*, vol. 195, 5169.
[551] According to *Mingshi*, Hu Shining 胡世寧 (1470–1531) spoke very little in front of other people but wrote fluently in his official documents. See *Mingshi*, vol. 199, 5258–5263.
[552] These comments refer to Gui E's accusations of Wang Shouren's teachings being heretical. See pp. 202–205.

elaborate on any faults or flaws in Wang's learning and teaching experiences. It can only be surmised that the shortcomings alluded to the nearest mention of his learning or teaching characteristics: the statement, "He took pride of his new discoveries, flaunting them in front of other Confucians." Nevertheless, while this description indicates that Wang's theories were new, in other words, different from those of previous Confucians, it does not explicitly claim that his theories were wrong. Such a direct critique would have aligned more closely with the concept of shortcoming in most contexts. In this case, it appears that the *Mingshi* Compilation Institute regarded the originality and corresponding influence of Wang's ideas as his shortcomings, implying that the spread of these new and distinct theories was, to some extent, inappropriate.

In light of the debates over whether to include Wang in the proposed "Daoxue zhuan", the final comment on Wang concurs with the decision not to compile such as chapter. This reflects an overall perception of Wang as a scholar distinct from previous and contemporary figures of the School of Principle. Given that the compilation of *Mingshi* was overseen by the Qing imperial authority and shaped by ideological and political considerations, this perception represents the officially sanctioned attitude towards Wang and his philosophical school. Although Wang was not endorsed as part of the orthodox Confucian transmission lineage, the Yangming School of Mind was ultimately, though indirectly, acknowledged as another major Confucian school alongside the School of Principle.

VIII. Conclusion

This chapter has examined how Wang's Confucian status was evaluated in light of his Buddhist and Daoist tendencies. The analysis considered the criteria employed by his

commentators, the changing political and ideological debates, divergent Ming–Qing doctrinal assessments, and the later Qing historiographical narrative. In doing so, the chapter has highlighted not only Ming–Qing scholars' opposing evaluations of Wang's Confucian status but also their interpretive methods underpinning those evaluations. Members of the Cheng–Zhu School condemned him as "heterodox" in order to defend orthodoxy, while followers of the Yangming School emphasised continuity to secure their positions within the Confucian tradition. Moreover, later commentators such as Luo Zenan employed selective citation to reshape his self-representation for new contexts.

Taken together, these case studies show that the issue was not merely one of bias but of reception: Wang's intellectual identity—self-fashioned through retrospective accounts of his non-Confucian engagements—was appropriated, resisted, and reconfigured within a contested doctrinal landscape. References to his Buddhist or Daoist affiliations, or to his interpretation of Confucian doctrines, functioned not as neutral recollections but as interventions designed to reinforce or undermine his claim to legitimacy. Even when quoting directly from sources such as "Chronological Biography", later scholars altered meaning through omission, sequencing, or subtle rewording.

Within the conceptual framework outlined at the beginning of this chapter, these findings demonstrate that Wang's self-fashioned identity did not persist as a stable entity but evolved through successive layers of reception. His profile as a Confucian was continually renegotiated at the crossing of historical recollection, philosophical allegiance, doctrinal affiliation, political change, and personal concern. The chapter thus underscores that it was this dynamic process of reception—rather than any fixed self-presentation—that continued to shape how Wang's place within the Confucian tradition was defended and contested.

Conclusion

The thesis has re-examined Wang Shouren's intellectual identity by following how his self-accounts were received and reinterpreted. The overarching question posed in the Introduction—how did Wang's self-articulation and its reception evolve to construct and recast his Confucian identity, and how does this evolution invite a re-examination of his self-presentation? —can now be answered.[553]

The findings demonstrate that Wang's intellectual identity was neither a fixed essence, nor a straight path from non-Confucian leanings to Confucian awakening. It was an ongoing act of construction: first articulated by Wang himself, then continually reinterpreted by later readers. His involvements in Buddhism and Daoism were persistently argued within a language of Confucian orthodoxy, particularly that of the Cheng–Zhu School of Principle. Ming–Qing interpreters, pursuing their own doctrinal agendas, recast that identity into divergent portraits that often departed significantly from Wang's originals. These layers of reinterpretations, through which modern scholarship continues to view Wang's intellectual legacy, urge a return to his identity not as inherited or given, but as repeatedly produced through processes of self-articulation and reception.

This conclusion thereby highlights a broader significance: that "Confucian identity" itself is not a natural category, but a historical argument. Wang's intellectual selfhood, and its reconfigurations in later generations, reveal how identity was negotiated through lived practice, textual intervention, and historiographical reinterpretation.

[553] See p. 12.

I. Wang Shouren's Intellectual Identity as Constructed and Received

This thesis has studied Wang's intellectual identity through three interrelated dimensions: his self-presentation in his own writings, his engagements with non-Confucian traditions as traced through historical sources, and the evolving reinterpretation of his identity by Ming–Qing thinkers. This long process of transformation—conditioned by shifting historical moments and changing rhetorical strategies—reveals how Wang's Confucian status became a site of negotiation across generations.

Across the corpus, a consistent logic of hierarchical differentiation between Confucianism and alternative traditions emerges: Wang frames Buddhism and Daoism not as parallel paths or major contenders but as provisional stations on the journey to the Confucian awakening—demonstrations of Confucian superiority over rival schools. The character of this framing evolves over time: from the cautious comparison between traditions in "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism", to the autobiographical realignment with orthodox Confucianism in "Preface to Final Conclusions", to the retrospective consolidation of Confucian superiority in personal letters. This developing logic was neither linear nor predetermined but the product of continuous reflection and changing circumstance. The final chapter extends this arc by showing how later readers continued the process—reconfiguring Wang's Confucian identity through citation, omission, and selective narration. In this sense, each chapter reveals a different moment in an ongoing negotiation over the boundaries of Confucian identity in late imperial China.

Wang's writings reveal a deliberate strategy of asserting his Confucian identity through contrast with rival traditions. "Memorial Against Welcoming Buddhism" offers the earliest

documentary baseline of this evaluative: Buddhism, though ranked above what he regarded as diluted teachings of "mediocre" Confucians, still remained subordinate to the authentic doctrine of Confucianism. Carefully composed to remonstrate with the emperor, the memorial differs in genre, tone, and content from other official documents submitted by Wang's peers. Its retrospective account of personal engagement with Buddhism served both as a rhetorical strategy to redirect the imperial attention towards Confucian doctrine and as a statement of Wang's intellectual stance on non-Confucian traditions. Whether or not it was formally submitted, the memorial established a pattern of invoking other traditions only to reaffirm Confucian primacy—a strategy that resurfaced throughout Wang's later works.

The preface to Wang's compilation of Zhu Xi's philosophical texts continued this self-positioning. Recounting his earlier attraction to Buddhism and Daoism as necessary but regrettable steps, Wang cast his return to Confucianism as an intellectual awakening. This autobiographical narrative transformed personal journey into evidence of Confucian superiority, while also demonstrating a conscious effort to reconcile his teachings with Cheng–Zhu School—particularly Zhu's "final conclusions". By proposing this alignment, Wang not only situated himself within the Confucian orthodoxy but also redefined orthodox doctrine as represented not by Zhu's widely circulated teachings, but by his later, revised thoughts—ideas that Wang rediscovered from obscurity at a time when inadequate Confucian teachings had distorted the true doctrine. At the same time, Wang presented his non-Confucian engagement not as a lapse, but as a response to misinterpretations of Confucianism that had obscured the Confucian Way and inadvertently redirected seekers like himself towards alternative paths. In this sense, Wang not only leveraged Zhu's orthodoxy to legitimise his own place within the Confucian sphere, but more importantly, sought to redefine the contemporary Confucianism itself.

Later reconstructions—from letters, recorded dialogues, and biographical compilations—further developed this pattern. These sources suggest that Wang's non-Confucian experiences initially reflected a search for clarity in alternative traditions, but over time gave way to a more rigid delineation of the Confucian Way. Through sustained reflection on these earlier explorations, his sense of doctrinal hierarchy solidified, reinforcing his image as a Confucian who had tested and transcended alternative teachings.

Biographical materials compiled by disciples and later editors supplement these self-accounts while layering them with retrospective interpretation. Cross-readings of these sources indicate that Wang's Buddhist and Daoist experiences sharpened his awareness of doctrinal shortcomings within the contemporary Confucian scholarship. He ultimately cast himself as a restorer of the Confucian Way, whose earlier immersion in rival traditions deepened his grasp of contemporary discourse. In moving beyond these explorations, he not only reasserted Confucian authority but also articulated a clarified vision of its core principles. This trajectory shows that Wang's identity was shaped through the interplay of lived experience and reflective reinterpretation. His model of intellectual authority depended not on unbroken orthodoxy but on experiential testing and subsequent reaffirmation—a pattern that would prove controversial in later receptions.

Subsequent interpreters reconfigured Wang's identity according to their own agendas. Their divergent accounts reveal how intellectual identity is continually negotiated rather than passively inherited. Defenders of Cheng–Zhu orthodoxy emphasised Wang's Buddhist and Daoist involvements to question his legitimacy, while followers in the Yangming school reinterpreted the same episodes as evidence of sageness. These readings were deeply strategic, relying on selective citation, reordering, omission, and strategic emphasis.

Reception thus extended Wang's self-presentation while transforming it into divergent portraits, often far removed from his original accounts. Under these circumstances, the cumulative effect is that Wang's Buddhist and Daoist affiliations became a central mechanism through which his Confucian identity was debated. Retellings of his intellectual journey were not designed to evaluate Wang's position on its own terms, but to validate pre-committed stances on orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Confucian discourse.

II. Rethinking Sources and Identity Construction

A key contribution of this thesis lies in its methodological approach. By treating texts not as transparent reflections of experience but as situated interventions, the study has shown how both Wang's writings and later accounts actively constructed intellectual identity. This approach to historical texts has combined historical reconstruction with source criticism, guided by four considerations: authorship, genre and purpose, historical context, and corroboration.[554] These criteria helped disentangle self-presentation from later reception and assess how doctrinal, political, and personal imperatives shaped narratives of Wang's life. While earlier chapters have demonstrated the details of this approach, the conclusion highlights its significant payoff: it enables a more nuanced reconstruction of Wang's intellectual trajectory without reducing non-Confucian episodes to either youthful errors or signs of heterodoxy.

This historically grounded reconstruction offers a more critical framework for understanding Wang's intellectual identity, less distorted by the doctrinal biases accumulated through layers of reception. It yields two key insights. First, Wang's non-Confucian engagements were not

[554] See p. 33.

diversions from his Confucian path, but formative phases within it. Biographical records by disciples suggest that these turns emerged from his deep frustration with prevailing Confucian discourse. In his own writings, they appear not as signs of conversion to Buddhism or Daoism, but as provisional and instrumental efforts to seek clarity when the Confucian Way seemed obscured. These encounters functioned less as spiritual commitments than as experiential tests, ultimately leading to a reaffirmation of Confucian authority. This framing, shared across Wang's retrospective self-narratives and his followers' accounts, reveals a coherent trajectory in which non-Confucian affiliations formed part of a larger Confucian progression.

Second, Wang's evolving stance towards Buddhism and Daoism mirrors the arc of his lived experience.[555] Between 1502 and 1509, he expressed growing doubt while engaging with these traditions. His hierarchical evaluation of various teachings—Buddhism, Daoism, inadequate Confucianism, and the true Confucian Way—only reached maturity between 1514 and 1515, after his formal disengagement and recorded expression of remorse in 1510. This development reveals a close correspondence between reflection and lived action, echoing Wang's own teaching on the unity of knowledge and action. As this teaching is central to his Confucian philosophy, such consistency further suggests that his non-Confucian experiences were not peripheral deviations, but formative episodes that deepened his understanding of the Confucian doctrine and strengthened his position as a Confucian.

In summary, Wang's strategy was not to deny his non-Confucian involvement, but to present it as evidence of a more discerning Confucianism—one grounded in personal exploration and practical testing. By acknowledging the limited insights of Buddhism and Daoism while

[555] See pp. 151–153.

exposing the shortcomings of prevailing Confucian discourse, he positioned himself as a restorer of the authentic Confucian Way: a figure whose authority stemmed not from unbroken adherence but from critical engagement and experiential validation.

In addition to providing a framework for understanding identity making and reception, this thesis contributes more specifically to the study of the Yangming School of Mind. Its critical reconstruction of Wang's intellectual development, anchored in a precise timeline, provides a reference point not only for future work on Wang himself but also for research on the broader Yangming School. For historically oriented studies, it presents a model for contextualising key moments in Wang's early navigation across multiple traditions. For philosophically oriented work, it offers a basis for reading Wang's teachings in conjunction with the lived experience through which those ideas were formed, tested, and redefined. By treating intellectual experience as an active force in shaping and reshaping identity, the thesis advances a more integrated approach—addressing a gap in recent scholarship, where historical activity is often relegated to background context or absorbed uncritically into biographical narrative.

III. Understanding Confucian Identity

The findings of this thesis extend beyond Wang himself. They challenge certain assumptions about intellectual identity in late imperial China, particularly the idea that Confucian identity was an attribute rather than a negotiated construct. More broadly, they suggest that intellectual self-presentation in this period rested not only on doctrinal contribution but also on the ability to narrate one's position across multiple traditions. The broader significance of the thesis can be summarised in four points.

First, this study reveals how intellectual identity is continually constructed by self-articulation and external reinterpretation, embedded in textual practices. A critical analysis must not only distinguish these two processes but also understand them as interrelated forces that together constitute the whole. Reception, in this light, is not simply a distortion of self-presentation but a continuation of it: an ongoing interpretive act that may draw on the original account yet diverge into different discursive trajectories. Under these circumstances, textual form—whether a memorial, preface, letter, or biography—shapes how the author's stance is articulated and received. In addition to textual form, the representation of identity is conditioned by external interventions prompted by political agendas, doctrinal debates, and personal concerns, which demand careful examination of the relevant historical circumstances. In Wang's case, such circumstances include his officially sanctioned posthumous image, as well as the historiographical projects undertaken by the succeeding dynasty. These factors—sometimes overlooked—may prove relevant in future studies of late imperial intellectual identity.

Second, the findings demonstrate that categories like "Confucian", "Buddhist", and "Daoist" cannot be taken as stable descriptors. The ways through which Wang's identity were mediated reflect emic perspectives on Confucian legitimacy, centring around the question of what it meant—at a given moment—to be a true Confucian. In Wang's case, not only did he establish his own Confucian credentials, but later interpreters also positioned themselves within the Confucian tradition in their appraisals of him—whether by aligning with or distancing themselves from his legacy. However, their assessments on his proximity to non-Confucian schools suggest that the term "Confucian" also functioned as etic labels imposed by others, often with different standards and aims. Intellectual identity was thus negotiated at the intersection of self-assertion and external categorisation.

Third, the study highlights the dynamics of reception history. In tracing the evolving reception of Wang's Confucian identity, it finds that while his disciples carefully rephrased his retrospective accounts of earlier engagement with Buddhism and Daoism, later Yangming scholars reframed even these mediated narratives through selective citation and strategic narration—moving still further from Wang's original self-presentation. In this sense, many primary sources are functionally secondary in portraying Wang's scholarly profile: they reflect interpretations of his self-positioning rather than preserve it in an unaltered or undiluted form. Recognising this distinction is crucial. Only by identifying the presuppositions embedded in traditional readings—many of which continue to influence modern scholarship—can a more critically reflective approach to intellectual identity be developed.

Finally, the case of Wang underscores a broader pattern in late imperial thought: Confucian authority was often asserted through contrast with rival traditions, framed as provisional trials or necessary detours. This observation suggests possibilities for comparative studies with other Confucian thinkers who negotiated across traditions. At the same time, the present study remains deliberately focused on Wang as a single case, and it is here that certain limitations arise. These are not shortcomings in method, but consequences of the available sources and the case-based nature of the enquiry. Clarifying these constraints helps refine the study's parameters and suggest directions for future research.

Given that Wang did not compose a full-length autobiography or oversee such a project during his lifetime, this thesis necessarily relies on later compilations such as "Chronological Biography". These sources, layered with editorial interventions, incorporate retrospective interpretation into the preservation of his lived experience. Although cross-checking with

Wang's own writings has helped mitigate the risk of distortion, such compilations nonetheless shape the narrative by framing events and quotations through a posthumous lens. Even when recounting Wang's intellectual activities or referencing his teachings, these accounts reflect reception extended from self-presentation rather than self-presentation itself. Recognising this influence is essential for understanding Wang's intellectual life not as a fixed historical record but as a composite image formed through successive acts of selection, interpretation, and memorialisation.

Moreover, this thesis adopts a case study approach centred on Wang himself, without extensively examining how his intellectual self-positioning may have drawn on earlier models or analogues. Although the focus on Wang allows for close textual and contextual analysis, a broader comparative lens—such as investigating scholars he may have emulated or responded to—could yield deeper insight into how intellectual identity was constructed across generational lines. Future research might, for instance, explore how Wang's intellectual trajectory aligns with or diverges from those of Song-dynasty Confucians facing similar doctrinal dilemmas. Taken together, these limitations, while shaping the contours of this study, also point towards new pathways for expanding the understanding of intellectual identity in late imperial China—both through broader comparative enquiry and through critical reassessment of source transmission.

Wang Shouren's intellectual journey—negotiated across traditions, refracted through layered reinterpretations, and embedded in text—offers a vivid example of how selfhood and orthodoxy were crafted in late imperial China. By analysing his self-presentation and its reception, this thesis has shown that intellectual identity is not a fixed property but a contested site of meaning, shaped by experience, narrative, and historical debate. While

focused on Wang's Confucian identity and his relations to Buddhism and Daoism, this approach opens wider possibilities for exploring intellectual negotiation across time, region, and doctrinal affiliation. In tracing how a scholar's identity was continually revised, reframed, and reinterpreted, the thesis affirms the enduring insight that identity is never merely given—it is always, in part, a historical argument.

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Appendix

This appendix provides the original Chinese texts corresponding to the English translations made by the author in the main chapters.

Five contemporaneous memorials translated in Chapter One:

1. A memorial written by Xu Wenhua:

丙辰，監察御史徐文華言：近太監劉允往烏思藏齎送番供，議者謂陛下本欲迎佛，複諱之耳。且西域豈真有所謂佛子者？特近幸欲售其奸而無由，乃神其術以動聖聽，陛下以為實然遂欲迎之，亦誤矣。烏思藏遠在西域，山川險阻，人跡少通，溪谷叢篁之間，多蝮蛇猛獸，瘴癘山嵐之氣，觸之者無不死亡。臣恐迎佛有日，報命無期也。今盜賊甫寧，瘡痍未愈，乾清被燼，營建方興，天下苦之，而蜀土尤甚。今複益以迎佛之擾凋弊餘黎何以堪命，不轉死溝壑，則複嘯聚為盜而已。或有奸人伺釁鼓亂，如元李白云宗、彌勒教、白蓮會之類紛然而起，將何以救止之邪？伏望亟罷中使將造言起事之人，置諸刑戮，以正罔上之罪。不報。

2. A memorial written by Ye Xiang, Zhou Lun, and others:

六科都給事中葉相、十三道御史周綸等言：烏思藏本以番羌戎地，迨唐貞觀始通中國，山川險阻，道里遼逖。今皇上遠遣使求佛，傳播中外，人心眩惑。永樂宣德曾再遣使，不聞徵驗，比見番僧在京者，安之以居室，給之以服食，榮之以官秩，為其能習番教耳。請以其促試之今冬暖河流，天時失候，彼能調燮二氣，以正節令乎？曰方告乏帑藏空虛，彼能神輸鬼運以贍國用乎？虜寇不庭警報數至「彼」能說法咒咀以靖邊難乎？試有徵驗，則遠求之可也。如其不然，請即罷止。俱不報。

3. A memorial written by Zhou Jin, Qian Rujing, and others:

戶部覆，科道官周金、錢如京等論奏：織造太監史宣崔通及差往烏思藏太監劉允，皆宜停止。允所乞鹽課宜革，罷其織造鹽斤，止令照例支給，不許借稱買補以恣夾帶之弊。上不納。

4. A memorial written by Mao Ji:

禮部尚書毛紀言：頃者烏思藏大寶法王違例差大國師鎖南堅參巴藏卜進貢，蒙恩不加深究，量減賞賜，本夷觖望，又求全賞，及求五彩佛軸等物，複俱賜給。今又奉特旨遣人齎送番供大寶法王一番僧爾。何乃上廑寵遇之隆如此，且問自京師至烏思藏約三萬餘里，往返動經三五年，供應煩費不可勝言。又聞自四川雅州出境過長河西迤西至烏思藏，約有數月程，皆黃毛野達子之地，無州縣驛遞，亦無市鎮村落，一切供應錢糧護送軍馬俱四川都布二司並各土官衙門出辦差撥。四川連年用兵，即今流賊稍平，而西番蠻賊複起，其財用之乏，軍民之困，比之他處尤甚。若重加此

累，恐生意外之變，咎將誰歸？伏望皇上軫念四川重地，追寢成命，將番供等物，照例請敕付原差大國師領還，生民之福也。不報。

5. The memorial written by Liang Chu and other Grand Secretaries:

大學士梁儲等言：近兵部手本為司設監太監劉允請敕。臣等竊以內外官員欽奉敕內必備載所行事務。今允往四川，未知何事。無憑撰寫。既而禮部手本稱奉旨令，允如永樂宣德年差鄧成侯顯等例，往烏思藏齎送番供。而戶部覆本內謂允奏帶太監劉宗等八員，錦衣等衛官舍指揮同知韋祿等一百三十三員，應付廩給口糧馬匹車輛馬快船只，及應用過番物件，令四川鎮巡三司聽其便宜指置，及選差驍勇官二員往回護送，又給長蘆見鹽一萬引，兩淮正課鹽六萬引，變賣應用俱欲載之敕內。臣等愚昧備員輔導不敢不言。西番本夷狄之教，邪妄不經，古先聖王之世，未聞有此。顧其說流入中國，浸淫已久，未能遽革。永樂宣德年間雖嘗有遣使之舉，我祖宗之意，以天下初定，特藉之以開導愚迷，鎮服夷狄，非真信其教而崇奉之也。承平之後，累朝列聖止是因其年例遣人朝貢，厚加賞賚，答其勤渠，未嘗輕辱命使，遠涉夷境。陛下今遣近侍內臣，往送番供，朝野聞之，相顧駭愕，以為不應有此輕舉。而允奏討鹽引數萬動撥馬快船至於百隻，又欲聽其便宜處置錢物，差撥官軍護送等項，於法於例，俱非所宜。蓋開中鹽引本為供邊，今虜患未寧，三邊糧草缺乏，帑藏空虛，緩急接濟惟此一策。且各運司鹽課俱開中盡絕，若許具帶鹽，不過收買私鹽，發賣射利，乘機夾帶之弊，不知幾何。鹽法為之大壞，邊方何以仰給？況京儲歲運與營建大木並在裹河，議者猶恐不能疏通，若又添此等，鹽船往來，其間挾勢騷擾不止，地方受害，而糧運大木二事亦為阻滯。且四川大盜初息，民困未蘇，所奏便宜指置錢物，在官已無積蓄，未免科派軍民，窮盜起將來之變，殆不可測。況自天全招討司出境涉歷數萬里之程，動經數年，方達烏思藏。地方今所帶官軍人役數多沿途俱是化外，非有驛傳供給人馬芻糧俱載而行，所費鉅萬，難以逆料，途間倘有不給，不知何以為處。又聞查地多與黃毛達子相鄰，時出剽掠，為患使臣。所至萬一被其突出，有所傷害，虧中國之體，納外夷之侮，不可不慮。夫以無益之事，而妨至要之事，且貽意外之虞，舉朝皆知其不可。此臣等不能已於言也。允受命遠出番境，利害切身，又非得已。臣等深見事勢之難，所下敕書，未敢撰寫，伏望皇上慎重國體，憫恤人窮，收回成命，不必差官番供等物，就令朝貢使臣齎回，則禮意不失，事體無礙，而聖德益光，治功無累矣。不聽。

Texts related to Zhu Xi's final conclusions, discussed in Chapter Two:

6. Qian Dehong's foreword to *Final Conclusions*:

《定論》首刻於南贛。朱子病目靜久，忽悟聖學之淵藪，乃大悔中年注述誤己誤人，遍告同志。師閱之，喜已學與晦翁同，手錄一卷，門人刻行之。自是為朱子論異同者寡矣。師曰："無意中得此一助！"隆慶壬申，虬峰謝君廷傑刻師《全書》，命刻《定論》附《語錄》後，見師之學與朱子無相謬戾，則千古正學同一源矣。并師首敘與袁慶麟跋凡若干條，洪僭引其說。

7. Yuan Qinglin's postscript to *Final Conclusions*:

《朱子晚年定論》，我陽明先生在留都時所採集者也。揭陽薛君尚謙舊錄一本，同志見之，至有不及抄寫，袖之而去者。眾皆憚於翻錄，乃謀而壽諸梓，謂“子以齒，當志一言”。惟朱子一生勤苦，以惠來學，凡一言一字，皆所當守；而獨表章是、尊崇乎此者，蓋以為朱子之定見也。今學者不求諸此，而猶踵其所悔，是蹈舛也，豈善學朱子者哉？麟無似；從事於朱子之訓餘三十年，非不專且篤，而竟亦未有居安資深之地，則猶以為知之未詳，而覽之未博也。戊寅夏，持所著論若干卷來見先生。聞其言，如日中天，睹之即見；象五穀之藝地，種之即生；不假外求，而真切簡易，恍然有悟。退求其故而不合，則又不免遲疑於其間。及讀是編，始釋然，盡投其所業，假館而受學，蓋三月而若將有聞焉。然後知嚮之所學，乃朱子中年未定之論，是故三十年而無獲。今賴天之靈，始克從事於其所謂定見者，故能三月而若將有聞也。非吾先生，幾乎已矣！敢以告夫同志，使無若麟之晚而後悔也。若夫直求本原於言語之外，真有以驗其必然而無疑者，則存乎其之自力，是編特為之指迷耳。正德戊寅六月望，門人雩都袁慶麟謹識。

8. Wang Shouren's discussion on some students selecting the words of Master Zhu for criticism:

朋友觀書，多有摘議晦庵者。先生曰：“是有心求異即不是。吾說與晦庵時有不同者，爲入門下手處有毫釐千里之分，不得不辯。然吾之心與晦庵之心未嘗異也。若其餘文義解得明當處，如何動得一字？”

9. Wang Shouren's conversation with Yang Shide:

士德問曰：“格物之說，如先生所教，明白簡易，人人見得。文公聰明絶世，於此反有未審，何也？”先生曰：“文公精神氣魄大，是他早年合下便要繼往開來，故一向只就考索著述上用功。若先切己自修，自然不暇及此。到得德盛後，果憂道之不明。如孔子退修六籍，删繁就簡，開示來學，亦大段不費甚考索。文公早歲便著許多書，晚年方悔是倒做了。”士德曰：“晚年之悔，如謂：‘向來定本之悟。’又謂：‘雖讀得書，何益於吾事？’又謂：‘此與守書籍，泥言語，全無交涉。’是他到此方悔從前用功之錯，方去切己自修矣。”曰：“然。此是文公不可及處。他力量大，一悔便轉，可惜不久即去世，平日許多錯處皆不及改正。”

10. “Letter to Anzhi” (excerpt):

聞安之肯向學，不勝欣願！得奮勵如此，庶不負彼此相愛之情也。留都時偶因饒舌，遂致多口，攻之者環四面。取朱子晚年悔悟之說，集為定論，聊藉以解紛耳。門人輩近刻之雩都，初聞甚不喜；然士夫見之，乃往往遂有開發者，無意中得此一助，亦頗省頰舌之勞。近年篁墩諸公嘗有《道一》等編，見者先懷黨同伐異之念，故卒不能有人，反激而怒。今但取朱子所自言者表章之，不加一辭，雖有偏心，將無所施其怒矣。尊意以為何如耶？

11. “Letter in Reply to Gu Dongqiao” (excerpt):

來書云：“聞語學者乃謂即物窮理之說，p 亦是玩物喪志，又取其厭繁就約，涵養本原數說，標示學者，指為晚年定論，此亦恐非。”

朱子所謂“格物”云者，在即物而窮其理也。即物窮理，是就事事物物上求其所謂定理者也，是以吾心而求理於事事物物之中，析“心”與“理”而為二矣。夫求理於事事物物者，如求孝之理於其親之謂也。求孝之理於其親，則孝之理其果在於吾之心邪？抑果在於親之身邪？假而果在於親之身，則親沒之後，吾心遂無孝之理歟？見孺子之入井，必有惻隱之理，是惻隱之理果在於孺子之身歟？抑在於吾心之良知歟？其或不可以從之於井歟？其或可以手而援之歟？是皆所謂理也，是果在於孺子之身歟？抑果出於吾心之良知歟？以是例之，萬事萬物之理，莫不皆然。是可以知析心與理為二之非矣。夫析心與理而為二，此告子“義外”之說，孟子之所深闢也。“務外遺內，博而寡要”，吾子既已知之矣。是果何謂而然哉？謂之玩物喪志，尚猶以為不可歟？若鄙人所謂致知格物者，致吾心之良知於事事物物也。吾心之良知，即所謂天理也。致吾心良知之天理於事事物物，則事事物物皆得其理矣。致吾心之良知者，致知也。事事物物皆得其理者，格物也。是合心與理而為一者也。合心與理而為一，則凡區區前之所云，與朱子晚年之論，皆可以不言而喻矣！

12. “Letter in Reply to the Vice Minister of Personnel, Luo Zheng’an” (excerpt):

凡執事所以致疑於格物之說者，必謂其是內而非外也；必謂其專事於反觀內省之為，而遺棄其講習討論之功也；必謂其一意於綱領本原之約，而脫略於支條節目之詳也；必謂其沉溺於枯槁虛寂之偏，而不盡於物理人事之變也。審如是，豈但獲罪於聖門，獲罪於朱子，是邪說誣民，叛道亂正，人得而誅之也，而況於執事之正直哉？審如是，世之稍明訓詁，聞先哲之緒論者，皆知其非也，而況執事之高明哉？凡某之所謂格物，其於朱子“九條”之說，皆包羅統括於其中；但為之有要，作用不同，正所謂毫釐之差耳。然毫釐之差而千里之謬實起於此，不可不辨。

孟子闢楊、墨，至於“無父，無君”。二子亦當時之賢者，使與孟子並世而生，未必不以之為賢。墨子“兼愛”，行仁而過耳；楊子“為我”，行義而過耳。此其為說，亦豈滅理亂常之甚而足以眩天下哉？而其流之弊，孟子至比於禽獸夷狄，所謂“以學術殺天下後世”也。今世學術之弊，其謂之學仁而過者乎？謂之學義而過者乎？抑謂之學不仁不義而過者乎？吾不知其於洪水猛獸何如也！孟子云：“予豈好辨哉？予不得已也！”楊、墨之道塞天下，孟子之時，天下之尊信楊、墨，當不下於今日之崇尚朱說，而孟子獨以一人呶呶於其間，噫，可哀矣！韓氏云：“佛、老之害甚於楊、墨。”韓愈之賢不及孟子，孟子不能救之於未壞之先，而韓愈乃欲全之於已壞之後，其亦不量其力，且見其身之危，莫之救以死也矣！嗚呼！若某者其尤不量其力，果見其身之危，莫之救以死也矣！夫眾方嘻嘻之中，而獨出涕嗟若，舉世恬然以趨，而獨疾首蹙額以為憂，此其非病狂喪心，殆必誠有大苦者隱於其中，而非天下之至仁，其孰能察之？其為《朱子晚年定論》，蓋亦不得已而然。中間年歲早晚，誠有所未考，雖不必盡出於晚年，固多出於晚年者矣。然大意在委曲調停以明此學為重，平生於朱子之說如神明蓍龜，一旦與之背馳，心誠有所未忍，故不得已而為此。“知我者，謂我心憂；不知我者，謂我何求”，蓋不忍牴牾朱子

者，其本心也；不得已而與之牴牾者，道固如是，不直則道不見也。執事所謂決與朱子異者，僕敢自欺其心哉？

夫道，天下之公道也；學，天下之公學也。非朱子可得而私也，非孔子可得而私也。天下之公也，公言之而已矣。故言之而是，雖異於己，乃益於己也；言之而非，雖同於己，適損於己也。益於己者，己必喜之；損於己者，己必惡之。然則某今日之論，雖或於朱子異，未必非其所喜也。君子之過，如日月之食，其更也，人皆仰之，而小人之過也必文。某雖不肖，固不敢以小人之心事朱子也。

Six letters concerning Wang's early engagement in Buddhism and Daoism, presented in Chapter Three:

13. "Letter in Reply to the Question of Spiritually Immortals":

詢及神仙有無，兼請其事，三至而不答，非不欲答也，無可答耳。昨令弟來，必欲得之。僕誠生八歲而即好其說，今已餘三十年矣，齒漸搖動，髮已有一二莖變化成白，目光僅盈尺，聲聞函丈之外，又常經月臥病不出，藥量驟進，此殆其效也。而相知者猶妄謂之能得其道，足下又妄聽之而以見詢。不得已，姑為足下妄言之。

古有至人，淳德凝道，和於陰陽，調於四時，去世離俗，積精全神；遊行天地之間，視聽八遠之外，若廣成子之千五百歲而不衰，李伯陽歷商、周之代，西度函谷，亦嘗有之。若是而謂之曰無，疑於欺子矣。然則呼吸動靜，與道為體，精骨完久，稟於受氣之始，此殆天之所成，非人力可強也。若後世拔宅飛升，點化投奪之類，譎怪奇駭，是乃秘術曲技，尹文子所謂"幻"，釋氏謂之"外道"者也。若是謂之曰有，亦疑於欺子矣。夫有無之間，非言語可況。存久而明，養深而自得之；未至而強喻，信亦未必能及也。蓋吾儒亦自有神仙之道，顏子三十二而卒，至今未亡也。足下能信之乎？後世上陽子之流，蓋方外技術之士，未可以為道。若達磨、慧能之徒，則庶幾近之矣，然而未易言也。足下欲聞其說，須退處山林三十年，全耳目，一心志，胸中灑灑不掛一塵，而後可以言此，今去仙道尚遠也。妄言不罪。

14. "Letter to Lu Yuanjing" (excerpt)::

聞以多病之故，將從事於養生，區區往年蓋嘗弊力於此矣。後乃知其不必如是，始復一意於聖賢之學。大抵養德養身，只是一事，原靜所云"真我"者，果能戒謹不睹，恐懼不聞，而專志於是，則神住氣住精住，而仙家所謂長生久視之說，亦在其中矣。神仙之學與聖人異，然其造端託始，亦惟欲引人於道，《悟真篇後序》中所謂："黃老悲其貪着，乃以神仙之術漸次導之"者。原靜試取而觀之，其微旨亦自可識。自堯、舜、禹、湯、文、武，至於周公、孔子，其仁民愛物之心，蓋無所不至，苟有可以長生不死者，亦何惜以示人？如老子、彭篯之徒，乃其稟賦有若此者，非可以學而至。後世如白玉蟾、丘長春之屬，皆是彼學中所稱述以為祖師者，其得壽皆不過五六十，則所謂長生之說，當必有所指矣。原靜氣弱多病，但遺棄聲名，清心寡慾，一意聖賢，如前所謂"真我"之說。不宜輕信異道，徒自惑亂聰

明，弊精勞神，廢靡歲月。久而不返，將遂為病狂喪心之人不難矣。昔人謂“三折肱為良醫”，區區非良醫，蓋嘗“三折肱”者。原靜其慎聽毋忽！

15. “Letter to Students in Chenzhong” (excerpt):

前在寺中所云靜坐事，非欲坐禪入定。蓋因吾輩平日爲事物紛拏，未知爲己，欲以此補小學收放心一段工夫耳。明道云：“纔學便須知有著力處，既學便須知有著力處。”諸友宜於此處着力，方有進步，異時始有得力處也。

16. “Letter in Reply to Huang Zongxian and Ying Yuanzhong” (excerpt):

聖人之心，纖翳自無所容，自不消磨刮。若常人之心，如斑垢駁雜之鏡，須痛加刮磨一番，盡去其駁蝕，然後纖塵卽見，纔拂便去，亦自不消費力。到此已是識得仁體矣。若駁雜未去，其間固自有一點明處，塵埃之落，固亦見得，亦纔拂便去。至於堆積於駁蝕之上，終弗之能見也。此學利困勉之所由異，幸弗以爲煩難而疑之也。凡人情好易而惡難，其間亦自有私意氣習纏蔽，在識破後，自然不見其難矣。古之人至有出萬死而樂爲之者，亦見得耳。向時未見得向裏面意思，此工夫自無可講處。今已見此一層，卻恐好易惡難，便流入禪釋去也。昨論儒釋之異，明道所謂“敬以直內”則有之，“義以方外”則未。畢竟連“敬以直內”亦不是者，已説到八九分矣。

17. “Letter in Reply to Xu Chengzhi” (excerpt):

輿庵是象山，而謂其“專以尊德性爲主”，今觀《象山文集》所載，未嘗不教其徒讀書窮理。而自謂“理會文字頗與人異”者，則其意實欲體之於身。其亟所稱述以誨人者，曰“居處恭，執事敬，與人忠”，曰“克己復禮”，曰“萬物皆備於我，反身而誠，樂莫大焉”，曰“學問之道無他，求其放心而已”，曰“先立乎其大者，而小者不能奪”。是數言者，孔子、孟軻之言也，烏在其爲空虛者乎？獨其“易簡覺悟”之説頗爲當時所疑。然“易簡”之説出於《繫辭》，“覺悟”之説雖有同於釋氏，然釋氏之説亦自有同於吾儒，而不害其爲異者，惟在於幾微毫忽之間而已。亦何必諱於其同而遂不敢以言，狃於其異而遂不以察之乎？是輿庵之是象山，固猶未盡其所以是也。

18. “Farewell Wishes to Zhan Ganquan”:

顔子没而聖人之學亡。曾子唯一貫之旨，傳之孟軻終，又二千餘年而周、程續。自是而後，言益詳，道益晦；析理益精，學益支離無本，而事於外者益繁以難。蓋孟氏患楊、墨；周、程之際，釋、老大行。今世學者，皆知宗孔、孟，賤楊、墨，擯釋、老，聖人之道，若大明於世。然吾從而求之，聖人不得而見之矣。其能有若墨氏之兼愛者乎？其能有若楊氏之爲我者乎？其能有若老氏之清净自守、釋氏之究心性命者乎？吾何以楊、墨、老、釋之思哉？彼於聖人之道異，然猶有自得也。而世之學者，章繪句琢以誇俗，詭心色取，相飾以僞，謂聖人之道勞苦無功，非復人之

所可爲，而徒取辯於言詞之間。古之人有終身不能究者，今吾皆能言其略，自以爲若是亦足矣，而聖人之學遂廢。則今之所大患者，豈非記誦詞章之習！而弊之所從來，無亦言之太詳、析之太精者之過歟！夫楊、墨、老、釋，學仁義，求性命，不得其道而偏焉，固非若今之學者以仁義爲不可學，性命之爲無益也。居今之時而有學仁義，求性命，外記誦辭章而不爲者，雖其陷於楊、墨、老、釋之偏，吾猶且以爲賢，彼其心猶求以自得也。夫求以自得，而後可與之言學聖人之道。某幼不問學，陷溺於邪僻者二十年，而始究心於老、釋。賴天之靈，因有所覺，始乃沿周、程之説求之，而若有得焉。顧一二同志之外，莫予翼也，岌岌乎仆而後興。晚得友於甘泉湛子，而後吾之志益堅，毅然若不可遏，則予之資於甘泉多矣。甘泉之學，務求自得者也。世未之能知其知者，且疑其爲禪。誠禪也，吾猶未得而見，而況其所志卓爾若此。則如甘泉者，非聖人之徒歟！多言又烏足病也！夫多言不足以病甘泉，與甘泉之不爲多言病也，吾信之。吾與甘泉友，意之所在，不言而會；論之所及，不約而同；期於斯道，斃而後已者。今日之別，吾容無言。夫惟聖人之學難明而易惑，習俗之降愈下而益不可回，任重道遠，雖已無俟於言，顧復於吾心，若有不容已也。則甘泉亦豈以予言爲綴乎？

Records of "Chronological Biography" translated in Chapter Three

1482a: 十有八年壬寅，先生十一歲，寓京師。龍山公迎養竹軒翁，因攜先生如京師，先生年纔十一。翁過金山寺，與客酒酣，擬賦詩，未成。先生從傍賦曰："金山一點大如拳，打破維揚水底天。醉倚妙高臺上月，玉簫吹徹洞龍眠"客大驚異，復命賦蔽月山房詩。先生隨口應曰："山近月遠覺月小，便道此山大於月。若人有眼大如天，還見山小月更闊。"明年就塾師，先生豪邁不羈，龍山公常懷憂，惟竹軒公知之。一日，與同學生走長安街，遇一相士。異之曰："吾為爾相，後須憶吾言：鬚拂領，其時入聖境；鬚至上丹台，其時結聖胎；鬚至下丹田，其時聖果圓。"先生感其言，自後每對書輒靜坐凝思。

1482b: 嘗問塾師曰："何為第一等事？"塾師曰："惟讀書登第耳。"先生疑曰："登第恐未為第一等事，或讀書學聖賢耳。"龍山公聞之笑曰："汝欲做聖賢耶？"

1488: 孝宗弘治元年戊申，先生十七歲，在越。七月，親迎夫人諸氏於洪都。外舅諸公養和為江西布政司參議，先生就官署委禽。合巹之日，偶閒行入鐵柱宮，遇道士趺坐一榻，即而叩之，因聞養生之說，遂相與對坐忘歸。諸公遣人追之，次早始還。

1489: 二年己酉，先生十八歲，寓江西。十二月，夫人諸氏歸余姚。是年先生始慕聖學。先生以諸夫人歸，舟至廣信，謁婁一齋諒，語宋儒格物之學，謂"聖人必可學而至"，遂深契之。

1492: 五年壬子，先生二十一歲，在越。舉浙江鄉試。.....是年為宋儒格物之學。先生始待龍山公于京師，遍求考亭遺書讀之。一日思先儒謂"眾物必有表裡精粗，一草一

木，皆涵至理”，官署中多竹，即取竹格之；沉思其理不得，遂遇疾。先生自委聖賢有分，乃隨世就辭章之學。明年春，會試下第，縉紳知者咸來慰諭。宰相李西涯戲曰：“汝今歲不第，來科必為狀元，試作來科狀元賦。”先生懸筆立就。諸老驚曰：“天才！天才！”退有忌者曰：“此子取上第，目中無我輩矣。”及丙辰會試，果為忌者所抑。同舍有以不第為耻者，先生慰之曰：“世以不得第為耻，吾以不得第動心為耻。”識者服之。歸余姚，結詩社龍泉山寺。致仕方伯魏瀚平時以雄才自放，與先生登龍山，對弈聯詩，有佳句輒為先生得之，乃謝曰：“老夫當退數捨。”

1498: 十一年戊午，先生二十七歲，寓京師。是年先生談養生。先生自念辭章藝能不足以通至道，求師友于天下又不數遇，心持惶惑。一日讀晦翁上宋光宗疏，有曰：“居敬持志，為讀書之本，循序致精，為讀書之法。”乃悔前日探討雖博，而未嘗循序以致精，宜無所得；又循其序，思得漸漬洽浹，然物理吾心終若判而為二也。沉鬱既久，舊疾復作，益委聖賢有分。偶聞道士談養生，遂有遺世入山之意。

1501a: 十有四年辛酉，先生三十歲，在京師。奉命審錄江北。先生錄囚多所平反。事竣，遂游九華，作《游九華賦》，宿無相、化城諸寺。是時道者蔡蓬頭善談仙，待以客禮。請問。蔡曰：“尚未。”有頃，屏左右，引至後亭，再拜請問。蔡曰：“尚未。”問至再三，蔡曰：“汝後堂後亭禮雖隆，終不忘官相。”一笑而別。

1501b: 聞地藏洞有異人，坐臥松毛，不火食，歷巖險訪之。正熟睡，先生坐傍撫其足。有頃醒，驚曰：“路險何得至此！”因論最上乘曰：“周濂溪、程明道是儒家兩個好秀才。”後再至，其人已他移，故後有會心人遠之嘆。

1502: 十有五年壬戌，先生三十一歲，在京師。 .....是年先生漸悟仙、釋二氏之非。先是五月復命，京中舊遊俱以才名相馳騁，學古詩文。先生嘆曰：“吾焉能以有限精神為無用之虛文也！”遂告病歸越，築室陽明洞中，行導引術。久之，遂先知。一日坐洞中，友人王思輿等四人來訪，方出五雲門，先生即命僕迎之，且歷語其來迹。僕遇諸途，與語良合。眾驚異，以為得道。久之悟曰：“此簸弄精神，非道也。”又屏去。已而靜久，思離世遠去，惟祖母岑與龍山公在念，因循未決。久之，又忽悟曰：“此念生於孩提。此念可去，是斷滅種性矣。”明年遂移疾錢塘西湖，復思用世。往來南屏、虎跑諸剎，有禪僧坐關三年，不語不視，先生喝之曰：“這和尚終日口巴巴說甚麼！終日眼睜睜看甚麼！”僧驚起，即開視對語。先生問其家。對曰：“有母在。”曰：“起念否？”對曰：“不能不起。”先生即指愛親本性諭之，僧涕泣謝。明日問之，僧已去矣。

1504: 十有七年甲子，先生三十三歲，在京師。秋，主考山東鄉試。巡按山東監察御史陸偁聘主鄉試，試錄皆出先生手筆。其策問議國朝禮樂之制：老、佛害道，由於聖學不明；綱紀不振，由於名器太濫，用人太急，求效太速。及分封、清戎、禦夷、息訟，皆有成法。錄出，人占先生經世之學。

1505: 十有八年乙丑，先生三十四歲，在京師。是年先生門人始進。學者溺於詞章記誦，不復知有身心之學。先生首倡言之，使人先立必為聖人之志。聞者漸覺興起，有願執贄及門者。至是專志授徒講學。然師友之道久廢，咸目以為立異好名，惟甘泉湛先生若水時為翰林庶吉士，一見定交，共以倡明聖學為事。

1507: 二年丁卯，先生三十六歲，在越。夏，赴謫至錢塘。先生至錢塘，瑾遣人隨偵。先生度不免，乃託言投江以脫之。因附商船游舟山，偶遇颶風大作，一日夜至閩界。比登岸，奔山徑數十里，夜扣一寺求宿，僧故不納。趨野廟，倚香案臥，蓋虎穴也。夜半，虎繞廊大吼，不敢入。黎明，僧意必斃於虎，將收其囊；見先生方熟睡，呼始醒，驚曰：“公非常人也！不然，得無恙乎？”邀至寺。

1510: 五年庚午，先生三十九歲，在吉。.....語學者悟人之功。先是先生赴龍場時，隨地講授，及歸，過常德、辰州，見門人冀元亨、蔣信、劉觀時輩俱能卓立，喜曰：“謫居兩年，無可與語者，歸途乃幸得諸友！”悔昔在貴陽舉知行合一之教，紛紛異同，罔知所入。茲來乃與諸生靜坐僧寺，使自悟性體，顧恍恍若有可即者。

1514: “吾幼時求聖學不得，亦嘗篤志二氏。其後居夷三載，始見聖人端緒，悔錯用功二十年。二氏之學，其妙與聖人只有毫釐之間，故不易辨，惟篤志聖學者始能究析其隱微，非測憶所及也。”