

On Wang Yangming's Philosophy of Mind (Xinxue)

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Abstract

Wang Yangming, a Chinese philosopher of the Ming Dynasty, synthesized the philosophical traditions of ancient Confucianism and Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism to establish *The Philosophy of Mind (Xinxue)*, a system with a history exceeding five hundred years. Its theories and practical applications have profoundly influenced social philosophy in East Asian nations such as China, Japan, and Korea, and it is even credited with indirectly contributing to Japan's Meiji Restoration. While scholars worldwide have continuously researched and discussed Xinxue theoretical foundations, a comprehensive and systematic investigation of remains lacking. Employing a systems-based approach, this paper integrates the core tenets of Xinxue with global philosophical, and constructs a universal, logical, and complete systemic framework for Xinxue through analysis, synthesis, and conceptual expansion. This framework is articulated as the "Tao as One, Morals as Two, and Practice as Three." philosophical system, corresponding to the Tao Layer "Mind is Principle" (*Xin Ji Li*), the Morals Layer "Extending Innate Conscience" (*Zhi liangzhi*), and the Practice Layer "Unity of Knowledge and Action" (*Zhixing Heyi*). Meanwhile, it is deduced according to Xinxue logic that the "Mind" is the determining factor for artificial products (including both artificial materials and spiritual wealth).

Keywords: Xinxue (The Philosophy of Mind), System, Trilogy (Tao, Morals, Practice), Artifact, Synthetic Substance, Spiritual Wealth, Bright.

1. Introduction

Xinxue (The Philosophy of Mind) is a discipline concerned with the human mind and spiritual cultivation, originating in ancient Chinese philosophy. It explores issues pertaining to the inner world, psychological activity, and moral development. Emphasizing introspection and self-cultivation, it posits that by observing and understanding one's own inner world, one can achieve moral enlightenment and elevate one's spiritual state. Its intellectual lineage can be traced to pre-Qin Confucian discourses on human nature, morality, and cultivation by figures like Confucius and Mencius. Later, through the development of Chan (Zen) Buddhism and Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, Xinxue gradually evolved into a comprehensive philosophical system with Wang Yangming as its pivotal exponent.

Wang Shouren (472–1529), courtesy name Bo'an, art name Yangming, was a native of Yuyao, Zhejiang Province. A preeminent philosopher, literatus, military strategist, and educator of the Ming Dynasty, he is recognized as the founder of Xinxue. He inherited and developed ideas from Confucian-Mencian doc-

trine, Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, and Buddhism—such as Mencius's theory of innate goodness, the Heart Sutra, and Cheng Hao's concept that "The mind is the universe." (Cheng Hao, Chinese Neo-Confucian scholar of the Song Dynasty, 1032-1085). He elevated Xinxue theory to its peak by revising, supplementing, and expanding upon these foundations.

The concept of "Mind" originates from and was initially circumscribed by Buddhist and Confucian thought in Xinxue. This limitation stemmed partly from Wang Yangming's social context, dominated by the Confucian paradigm essential for his livelihood, and partly from his own cognitive constraints, which restricted the breadth and depth of his theorizing. However, an examination of the practical processes and outcomes of "Unity of Knowledge and Action" reveals that the connotations of his concept of "Mind" transcended its original theoretical confines. It comprehensively engages the entire field of social philosophy, possessing the philosophical attributes of universality, logic, and completeness.

2. The System of Xinxue

The term “System” (Greek: σύστημα) was originally used to describe celestial arrangements (e.g., Ptolemy's geocentric system), grammatical structures (e.g., Dionysius Thrax's Art of Grammar), and political organizations (e.g., Plato's Republic). Aristotle (384–322 BCE) was among the first to apply “σύστημα” to natural systems. While ancient scholars did not widely adopt it as a formal concept, the idea that “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” encapsulates the core systemic principle. The modern scientific revolution and Enlightenment prompted the clarification of the “System” concept. European philosophers and scientists began adopting and applying it within theoretical frameworks. For instance, René Descartes (1596–1650) proposed the “Four Rules of the System of Knowledge” in his *Discourse on the Method* (1637), advocating for breaking complex problems into simpler parts and then systematically reconstructing the whole.

Modern disciplinary theories place greater emphasis on systems thinking and their applications. Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1901–1972) proposed “General System Theory” in 1937 with his 1945 paper *On General System Theory* marking its formal inception. He defined a “System” as an organic whole composed of interrelated elements, with the core idea remaining that “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” Since then, system theory has become an independent field of study, gaining widespread recognition. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has issued dozens of standard systems since it released the first Quality Standard System (ISO9001) in 1987, such as Environmental Management system (ISO14001), Occupational Health and Safety (ISO45001) systems, Service Management System (ISO20000), and Food Management System (ISO22000). etc. Over the past few decades, it has played a significant role in the development and progress of society.

For this paper, the concept is unified as follows: a System is a whole composed of a set of interrelated and interacting elements. Examples include biological systems (elements: populations + environment), the solar system (elements: sun + planets + gravitational field), social systems (elements: strategies + institutions + resources), and management systems (elements: concepts + institutions + resources). The elements of a philosophical system are: Ideas + Hierarchies + Domains.

Based on Wang Yangming's *Inquiry on the Great Learning, Complete Works, and Instructions for Practical Living*, the core ideas of Xinxue can be summarized into three hierarchical levels: 1) “Mind is Principle.” (Xin Ji Li), 2) “Extending Innate Conscience” (Zhi liangzhi) and 3) “Unity of Knowledge and Action” (Zhixing Heyi). These correspond to the Tao Layer, the Morals Layer, and the Practice Layer respectively. This tripartite structure succinctly termed the “Trilogy” of Xinxue, and forms a philosophical system possessing universality, logic, and completeness—namely, the “Tao as One, Morals as Two, and Practice as Three” system, which belongs to the category of social philosophy. Here, universality refers to applicability to any social activity; logic refers to the rationality of any social activity; and completeness refers to the sufficiency of any social activity.

2.1 The Tao Layer: “Mind is Principle.” (Xin Ji Li)

The first core idea “Mind is Principle.” occupies the supreme

Tao Layer in the Xinxue system. Building upon Lu Jiuyuan's (1139–1193) view that “The universe is my mind, and my mind is the universe.” Wang Yangming advanced propositions like “Nothing exists outside the mind” and “No principle exists outside the mind.” These ideas constitute the theoretical foundation—the “Tao” of the system. A famous anecdote illustrates this: While mountain climbing with friends, Wang Yangming was asked about a flowering tree—if it existed independently of the mind. He replied, “Before you saw this flower, it and your mind were in a state of silent non-existence. Once you saw it, the flower's color and vitality suddenly became clear in your mind.” The point is that the flower's “Beauty” is only cognized because the concept of “Flower” and “Beauty” pre-exists in the mind. To an infant without such concepts, the flower is perceptually “silent.” Thus, “What is in the mind exists; what is not in the mind does not exist” [1].

“Mind is Principle.” means that “Principle” resides within the mind only that which is present can be called “Principle” in the mind. Here, “Principle” encompasses heavenly principle, human nature, and normative rules. One can apprehend the truth and laws governing the universe's operation by cultivating one's mind, emphasizing the connection between the individual's inner mind and cosmic Principle. This is a foundational tenet of Xinxue: the original mind unobscured by selfish desires is wholly congruent with heavenly principle and innate human goodness, naturally possessing virtues like benevolence, righteousness, and wisdom. “Principle” is apprehended through “Investigating the mind”, and a process of constant introspection. Mind and Principle are co-existent, and it is futile for seeking Principle outside the mind. Subsequent ideas like “No affair is outside the mind” further clarify the relationships between Mind, Principle, Affairs, and Things: Principle only exists as Principle when stored in the mind. If the mind contains true, good, and beautiful thoughts, then external affairs and things may be perceived as such, and vice versa. This is because all human cognition of external things is acquired through direct or indirect experience.

For example, we know the sun is red because we were told, and we know $1+1=2$ because we were taught. These are subjective perceptions derived from personal or shared experience. Therefore, this argument holds that there is no pure “objective existence” in the world, and all existence arises from human understanding of the world through direct or indirect means. In sociology, external “Affairs” or “Things” may have an objective status, but they only gain meaning and value when a concept of them exists in the mind. Without that concept, the external world remains irrelevant.

The philosopher George Berkeley (Ireland, 1685–1753) proposed the principle that “To be is to be perceived” which posits that the existence of the world depends entirely on individual human perception. In fact, the so-called “Substance” is merely a collection of sensory ideas in the human mind, such as color, shape, and hardness. For example, an apple exists because people perceive its color (visual idea) and touch its roundness (tactile idea); a radio exists because people perceive the stimulation of sound waves (auditory perception); pain exists because we perceive the discharge of nerve cells after being struck (pain perception); Newton's laws exist because we store them in our brains (memory perception) after learning physics, and so on [2].

Clearly, human understanding of things is a collection of ideas. Since things are merely collections of ideas, they must exist within the minds of perceiving individuals. Without perceiving individuals, the world either does not exist or exists without meaning. He established the identity and coexistence of “Perception” and “Existence”. Here, “Perception” is what is known to the mind. Evidently, “Perception” is a manifestation of the “Mind”. Therefore, the “Affairs” and “Things” outside the mind are all related to whether they exist within the mind. From this perspective, the existence of the world is subjective. This is because as long as someone believes the world is “Objectively existing” this belief itself arises from subjective human cognition, and attempting to prove “Objective existence” with subjective cognition is illogical. Thus, “Objective existence” is the result of perception, meaning it is all subjective existence. This is especially true for the attributes of “Existence” such as color, weight, size, sound, bitterness, pain, as well as human knowledge, experience, and cognition—they merely differ in the degree of cognition. A higher degree may bring one closer to facts and truth, and vice versa.

For example, when we open our eyes and see a colorful world, we may think that colors in the world are objectively existing. This, however, is a severe scientific and philosophical error. In reality, there are no colors in the world, and they are merely perceptions formed by the human eyes and brain processing different frequencies of visible light (electromagnetic waves). Moreover, human eyes cannot perceive invisible light, so this perception is also partial. In other words, the perceptions of the world seen by human eyes are all subjective existences, representing subjective reflections of the objective world and simulated perceptions after processing external information—that is, electromagnetic waves are objective existence, while colors are subjective existence.

Similarly, when humans hear sounds, they may believe that sounds are objectively existing in the world. In fact, there are no sounds in the world, and they are merely simulated perceptions formed by the ears and brain processing different vibration frequencies in the air—that is, air vibration waves are objective existence, while sounds are subjective existence. The same applies to other perceptions, such as pain, suffering, happiness, and well-being, which will not be elaborated here. Clearly, when humans perceive the world through their own organs, the results are inevitably “False” or simulated and is subjective.

In addition to using their own organs to perceive the real world, humans also employ technology and methods to perceive. This is also a form of subjective perception to gain the results may be closer to the reality of the world with them. For example, we learn that there are worlds beyond our own with telescopes to be a cognition that is closer to the objective world than before; we learn about the internal structure of the human body with X-ray equipment to be a cognition that is also closer to reality than before; we are less likely to believe hearsay and instead seek to understand the full picture of events from multiple perspectives with systems theory, and being a perception that is closer to the truth than before, and so on. Regardless, all these human perceptions originate from the “Mind” and cannot be placed elsewhere.

Mencius (Ancient Chinese philosophers, 372 BC–289 BC) said, “The official of the heart is to think, to think is to gain, and not to think is not to be able.” All “Gains” material or spiritual, come from the mind [3]. It should be noted that the phrase “The heart is the organ of thought” reflects the limitations of scientific and technological knowledge at the time, as the heart was long believed to be the organ of human thought—a clear misconception. Modern science has proven that the brain (Mind) is the actual organ responsible for thinking. However, the Chinese language still retains the conventional usage with “Heart” to represent brain (Mind) in linguistic expressions.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (Austria, 1889–1951) noted, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” Language is a product of the mind and structures our reality. Its description is inherently temporal, relative, and subjective, and shaped by the speaker's intent and dissemination [4]. Human language and the relational structure of its internal narratives are shaped by human thought which itself is derived from the cognition of the external world. Because humans inhabit diverse spatiotemporal environments, they develop distinct languages across different regions and periods. Coupled with inherent genetic differences, this inevitably prevents individuals from attaining a comprehensive understanding of the world, thereby leading to cognitive biases—specifically, deviations from objectivity. When language is used to describe the objective world, it inevitably gives rise to subjective reflections: what is deemed objective today may be recognized as subjective tomorrow; what is considered reasonable today may be found unreasonable tomorrow. For instance, in the Middle Ages, it was widely believed that the Earth was the center of the solar system—this was a fact at the time—but later scientific advances have shown that the Sun is the center. Similarly, time was once viewed as absolute and speed as constant, yet subsequent scientific discoveries demonstrated that time is relative and speed variable. Evidently, human cognitive language possesses the attribute of temporality.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of language is also influenced by the speaker's intent, as well as the intensity and scope of its dissemination. The stronger the intensity and the broader the reach, the higher the trust recipients place in its content, leading them to perceive it as their own “world” Thus, from a societal perspective, whoever controls the right to disseminate language controls the world. Clearly, language exhibits attributes of relativity and subjectivity. “Language” originates from the “Mind” and its attributes—such as temporality, relativity, and subjectivity—belong to the domain of “Principle”.

In essence, a person's life is their own with little or no direct connection to others or external matters, because the only constant companion throughout one's existence is the “Mind”. Everything else is merely a reflection of the external world within it. The mind is the core that governs all life activities: as long as the mind exists, life exists; the greatness of the mind determines the greatness of life; a kind mind yields a kind life; a beautiful mind yields a beautiful life; a truthful mind yields a truthful life, and so on. A person's life is a journey of the mind. Some perceive their lives as thrilling, others as uneventful as still water; some feel lost and confused, while others see themselves trapped in lifelong poverty. All these “Perceptions” are products of the “Mind” and “Principle” arising from different minds and prin-

ciples yielding different outcomes. If you perceive yourself as wealthy, then you are wealthy even in poverty; if you believe yourself to be healthy, you remain healthy even when afflicted with serious illness; if you consider yourself happy, you are happy even amidst suffering. Thus, what exists in the mind truly exists, and what is absent from the mind does not. The presence or absence of external “Affairs” or “Things” is either irrelevant or of minimal significance. The “Mind” and “Principle” one holds determine the path one takes. The former serves as the carrier, the form; the latter as the connotation, the content. They are inseparable, and their union constitutes the “Tao”. In summary, while the principles of Xinyue appear superficially rooted in Confucian and Buddhist thought, they have in fact transcended their original scope and entered the entire domain of social philosophy, demonstrating universality, logic, and completeness. “Mind is Principle.” is the Tao Layer—the source and cause of all things.

2.2 The Morals Layer: “Extending Innate Conscience” (Zhi liangzhi)

The second core idea, “Extending Innate Conscience”, occupies the middle Morals Layer. Wang Yangming believed that human nature is fundamentally good. Conscience refers to the innate values of kindness, ethics, and morality deep within the human heart. For instance, “Upon seeing one's father, one naturally knows filial piety; upon seeing one's elder brother, one naturally knows fraternal respect; upon seeing a child about to fall into a well, one naturally feels compassion.” This means that moral principles (such as filial piety, fraternal respect, and compassion) should be understood, recognized, and practiced instinctively.

Aristotle a representative proponent of the theory of innate human goodness. In his works *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, he wrote that humans are by nature “Political animals” and “Rational animals” Human nature inherently possesses the potential for sociality, and this potential is realized and refined through education and life experiences to achieve states of “Happiness” and “Goodness”.

John Locke (17th-century British philosopher, 1632 –1704) proposed the “*Tabula rasa*” theory in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. He argued that the human mind is initially like a blank slate with all knowledge and ideas originating from subsequent experiences and learning.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (18th-century French philosopher, 1712 –1778) wrote in his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*: “Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains.” He believed that humans are inherently endowed with self-love and compassion in the original “State of nature”. Evil, inequality, and moral corruption do not stem from human nature but rather from social institutions, private property, and the corrupting influence of the environment.

The theory of innate goodness is Xinyue’s starting point: everyone possesses an inherent conscience capable of distinguishing right from wrong, though it may be obscured by external temptations. “Extending Innate Conscience” means awakening and realizing this innate moral faculty through self-reflection and cultivation, aligning one's behavior with moral values. This requires constant examination, removing selfish desires to re-

store inner clarity. “Extending” implies both “Achieving” and an ongoing process of introspection aimed at forming conscience and guiding behavior toward expected results. It is an evolution from “Tao” (Mind is Principle) toward “Morals” (conscience), and following the original mind and heavenly principle.

Wang Yangming's “Four-Sentence Teaching” elucidates this: 1) The substance of the mind is neither good nor evil; 2) When intentions arise, good and evil appear; 3) Innate conscience knows good and evil; 4) Doing good and eliminating evil is the work of “Investigating things.” For example, a mirror itself (The substance of the mind) is clean and capable of reflecting the true nature of things (neither good nor evil). When it reflects objects (The activity of the will), such as money, dust (Selfish desires) may accumulate on its surface, causing a distorted reflection (Good and evil arise). Recognizing the dirt (Innate knowledge): by looking at the mirror, you notice the blurry reflection and realize the mirror is dirty (Knowing good and evil). Wiping it clean (The investigation of things): you take a cloth and wipe away the dust from the mirror (Doing good and removing evil), restoring its clarity [1].

“Innate conscience” can also be understood broadly as cognition, values, or ideas, expanding Xinyue’s scope to all social philosophy— “Extending values” like fairness, humanity, justice, impartiality, kindness, freedom, faith, democracy, and the rule of law. Meanwhile, the philosophical community also upholds the perspective of innate human evil with the following representative figures:

Xunzi (ancient Chinese philosopher, c. 313 BCE – 238 BCE): “Human beings are born with a base nature.” This means that human nature inherently contains desires such as those for food, sex, joy, anger, preferences, aversions, and profit-seeking. These desires are innate to all regardless of whether one is a noble person or a petty individual. Without the constraints of morality and order, humans will exhibit their vulgar side, reflecting their essential tendency to pursue gain and avoid harm.

Augustine (ancient Roman Christian theologian, 354–430 CE) proposed the “Original sin” theory, arguing that ever since the first ancestors Adam and Eve sinned, human nature has been corrupted. Humans are born with an innate inclination toward evil and thus require God’s redemption.

Thomas Hobbes (medieval English philosopher, 1588–1679) posited in *Leviathan* that in the state of nature (a condition without government or civilization), human nature is selfish, greedy, and fearful. Life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. To ensure self-preservation, people engage in mutual conflict, initiating a “War of all against all”

Sigmund Freud (Austrian psychologist, 1856–1939) introduced the concept of the “Id” in *The Ego and the Id*. The Id operates on the “Pleasure principle” and is composed of primitive desires, impulses, and instincts (particularly sexual instincts). It is innate, irrational, seeks pleasure, and strives to avoid pain, disregarding the rules of reality or moral norms, for example, in how an infant cries when hungry or snatches a toy it wants. The logic of “Extending Innate Conscience” applies even within a framework of innate evil. Its opposite would be “Extending

evil thoughts”, such as greed, selfish desires, wickedness, and envy, which would lead to correspondingly negative behaviors and results. According to incomplete statistics, the most profound harms inflicted upon humanity throughout history have been greed and selfishness (particularly the greed for power, manifesting in conflicts such as wars and killings), followed by natural disasters (including floods, earthquakes and similar events), and human ignorance (seen in decisions driven by collective ignorance etc.). Therefore, the purpose of “Extending innate knowledge” is to eliminate evil and uphold goodness which represents the direction of civilizational progress. The principle can be generalized to “Extending XXX” where XXX represents any dichotomy like right and wrong, good and evil, beauty and ugliness etc., granting Xinxue theoretical universality across social philosophy.

In short, “Extending Innate Conscience” is the Morals Layer—the strategy for achieving purpose.

2.3 The Practice Layer: “Unity of Knowledge and Action” (Zhixing Heyi)

The third core idea--“Unity of Knowledge and Action” (Zhixing Heyi), forms the foundational practice layer. It means that once innate knowledge is formed, it must be put into practice uniting cognition and action so that thought, words, and deed are consistent. One actively practice based on learning and reflection, constantly refine both knowledge and ability in a holistic process. Wang Yangming stated, “Knowledge is the beginning of action; action is the completion of knowledge.” True knowledge inherently entails action and they are inseparable [1].

A parable illustrates: In ancient times, there lived an old woman with two sons. The eldest son dyed cloth, while the younger son sold umbrellas. She worried about her sons all day long. Whenever it rained, she worried for her eldest son because he couldn’t sundry the cloth; when the weather cleared, she worried for her younger son because he couldn’t sell his umbrellas. As a result, the old woman was constantly frowning and hardly had a happy day, eventually falling ill and becoming gaunt.

Later, a wise man told her, “Why not look at it the other way? When it rains, you can be happy for your younger son, because he can sell umbrellas; when it’s sunny, you can be happy for your eldest son, because he can sundry his cloth.” Hearing this, the old woman found it reasonable. From then on, she lived cheerfully every day and naturally regained her health. The same situation, once viewed from the beneficial side rather than the disadvantageous one, led to a change in her mindset—from worry and anxiety to calmness and ease; her behavior also changed, from staying indoors all day to living freely; and the outcome shifted as well, from a sickly, dispirited state to a healthy, sunny one.

Clearly, “Knowing” is the starting point of “Action” and determines the results brought about by “Action” Different ways of “Knowing” in the mind lead to different ways of “Action” In other words, what one “Knows” shapes what one “Action”—the two are inseparable. Furthermore, “Knowing” is not merely about understanding or being aware; it also encompasses its scope and depth, such as true knowledge, insight, and profound understanding. Each person’s level of cognition exists at different elementary, middle school, high school, university, and post-

graduate levels. In daily life and interactions, this determines one’s behaviors and, in turn, the results that follow. All actions arise from knowledge, and such actions are confined within the limits of one’s cognition; it is difficult to surpass them. In other words, one can only act within the scope of what one knows—no more, no less. Only when one’s cognition is elevated to a higher level can one’s actions also rise to a greater height. This requires returning to the cycle of “Extending Innate Knowledge” --engaging once more in the process of “Extending”.

Often, the innate moral sense within is obscured by selfish desires—such as laziness, fear, and greed—which block the triggering of that inner moral awareness, making action unable to follow, resulting in a disconnection between knowing and acting. This reflects insufficient cognition, not true knowledge. In essence, “Extending innate knowledge” means continuously clearing away selfish desires within the heart, allowing the innate moral sense to shine forth. In doing so, one naturally achieves the “Unity of Knowing and Acting” For example, knowing that smoking is harmful to health is a matter of “Knowing” -- being aware of the harm. If one still continues the habit of smoking, it indicates that the depth of “Knowing” is insufficient. Similarly, knowing that exercising every morning is beneficial is also a matter of “Knowing” yet many people do not do it, which again shows that the level of “Knowing” is inadequate.

In short, certain factors, particularly those related to desire, can lead to insufficient depth in “Knowing” and thus prevent one from “Action”. Wang Yangming said, “It is easy to defeat the bandits in the mountains, but difficult to defeat the bandits in one’s heart (mind).” Evil thoughts are precisely these bandits within, requiring the rectification of the mind to attain the state of supreme goodness. External enemies are easily overcome, but the enemies within are far more challenging. The true adversary is not others but one’s own “Mind” [1]. The ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi said, “He who knows others is wise; he who knows himself is enlightened.” This means that understanding others is wisdom, while understanding oneself is clarity [5]. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates’ famous saying, “Know thyself”, is a renowned aphorism inscribed in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, and admonishing the world that knowing oneself is the most important task in life.

“Unity of Knowledge and Action” is the Practice Layer—the result of following that momentum.

3. Applications in Sociology

Every human “Action” produces a “Result,” which is an artifact. Artifact refers to any outcome produced through human social activity. comprising Synthetic Substances (material wealth.) and Spiritual Wealth. Synthetic Substance refers to substance outcomes produced through human social activities. Examples include money, tools, assets, land, products, and health, which can be understood as material wealth. Its characteristics are tangible and formed through the transformation and re-transformation of natural substances and exist objectively.

The nature of synthetic substances is that they possess value. They are substances (or products) derived from natural substances through human activity with their source still being natural substances. They may involve changes in the form of natural substances or alterations in their material composition.

For instance, tools for hunting are made from natural materials like tree trunks through human processing—here, only the form changes, not the material composition. Similarly, coal is a natural substance in the mountains, but it becomes a synthetic substance after human extraction and transportation with only its form altered while its material composition remains unchanged. Alternatively, natural substances may undergo human processing that changes their composition and resulting in new materials. For example, grains ferment under the action of enzymes to produce rice wine, as illustrated in the following process: Starch ($C_6H_{10}O_5$) + Water (H_2O) —Enzyme→ Glucose ($C_6H_{12}O_6$) —Enzyme→ Rice Wine (C_2H_5OH) + Carbon Dioxide (CO_2). The rice wine (C_2H_5OH) is then sold as a product or consumed personally.

Spiritual Wealth refers to spirit outcomes produced through human social activities. Examples include happiness, knowledge, faith, enjoyment, and satisfaction. This concept can also be interpreted as humanistic spirit.

Its characteristics are intangible, arising from the inner activities of the human mind and exist subjectively.

The generative process can be simplified as: Thought → Behavior → Result.

- **Thought** is the cause. For example: encompassing principles, conscience, desires etc.
- **Behavior** is the transformation of thought into activity and commanded by thought.
- **Result** is the artifact (either synthetic substance or spiritual wealth).

Thus, all results produced by a social entity (individual, group, organization, nation) are determined by its prior thoughts—specifically, its degree of cognition regarding things, human nature and material nature.

Here, “Thought” belongs to the category of consciousness, encompassing principles, innate moral awareness, goodwill, selfish desires, and evil intentions. It serves as the cause and pertains to the “Tao” and “Virtues” levels in Xinxue. “Behavior” refers to the transformation of “Thought” into concrete human activities, carried out by various organs of the body—under the command of the Mind—and falls under the “Practice” level in Xinxue. “Result” is the artifact resulting from the completion of action and includes synthetic substances (material wealth) and spiritual wealth. In other words, all “Result” derived by a social entity are determined by its prior “Thoughts”. Although Xinxue does not explicitly address this issue, the result must inevitably arise following the progression from Tao to Morals to Practice and it shall be artifact, comprising synthetic substances (material artifacts) and spiritual wealth.

Case Analyses:

• Wang Yangming’s Awakening at Longchang

In the first year of the Zhengde era (1506), Emperor Wuzong of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Houzhao, ascended the throne, and the eunuch Liu Jin seized power. Censorate officials in Nanjing, such as Dai Xian and Bo Yanhui, were imprisoned for submitting memorials impeaching Liu Jin. Wang Yangming, who was then serving as a secretary in the Ministry of War, wrote a memorial in defense of Dai Xian and others out of a sense of justice. This

angered Liu Jin to result in Wang Yangming being subjected to forty blows of the rod in court and demoted to the position of a stationmaster at Longchang Station in Guizhou—a minor official overseeing a courier station.

Liu Jin did not stop there and sent assassins to pursue Wang Yangming. In Hangzhou, sensing he was being tracked, Wang Yangming faked his own death by drowning (Leaving his clothes and shoes by the riverbank while secretly swimming across the Qiantang River), thereby deceiving the assassins. The authorities briefly declared him dead, and his family even held a funeral for him. After enduring countless hardships, he finally arrived at the dilapidated Longchang Station. At that time, Longchang (Present-day Xiuwen, Guizhou) was an uncivilized, desolate land—surrounded by mountains, overgrown with thorns, and filled with miasma, making living conditions extremely harsh. The local inhabitants were mostly ethnic minorities, and communication was impossible due to the language barrier. Wang Yangming had to take shelter in a cave. Faced with such an adverse environment, he felt that life was worse than death, and his spirits were nearly crushed.

While suffering physically, Wang Yangming plunged into a spiritual crisis even more painful than death. His hopes for “Achieving merit” were shattered: his political aspirations were completely destroyed, his official career was cut off, and he was abandoned by mainstream society. His pursuit of “Cultivating virtue” was thwarted: he was punished for speaking out honestly, and his loyalty to the emperor and love for the country had ironically turned him into a criminal, causing his moral convictions to collapse. He was lost in “Establishing principles”: though he had extensively studied Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucianism in his youth and had once tried to “Investigate the bamboo” for seven days until falling ill, he had never been able to fully grasp the “Principle of things” or the “Nature of the mind”. Clearly, Wang Yangming was facing an unprecedented crisis of survival and spirit. At this moment, he asked himself: “What would a sage do if he were in my situation?” After repeatedly posing this question, he gradually realized that worldly concerns like honor, disgrace, gain, loss, life, death, and wealth could all be transcended. However, as long as the attachment to “Life and death” remained unbroken, true liberation was impossible. Thus, he sat in silent meditation day and night, seeking inner stillness and unity.

It was precisely against this backdrop of “Rebirth in the face of death”, late one night in the third year of Zhengde (1508), while sitting silently in a stone coffin, he suddenly experienced an awakening: “The way of the sage is inherent in my own nature. I was mistaken in seeking principles in external things” (“The mind is principle.”). This marked the birth of the School of Mind. Truth (heavenly principle) does not reside in external things but within the original nature of the human mind. Previously, following Zhu Xi’s doctrine of “investigating things to extend knowledge” was clearly unreasonable. What one should truly do is “Investigating the mind to extend knowledge”—to seek within oneself. The transformation and sublimation of the “Mind” culminated in the Awakening at Longchang [1].

• Results of the Imperial Examination:

In an ancient village, there were three farming households—

Household A, Household B, and Household C. Each had a son who took the imperial examinations in the same year. The son of Household A passed the county-level exam and became a Xiucan (Scholar), the son of Household B passed the provincial-level exam and became a Juren (Provincial graduate), and the son of Household C passed the metropolitan-level exam and became a Gongshi (Tribute scholar). Each household felt joy and pride in their son's achievement and celebrated accordingly.

A few days later, news reached Household B that the son of Household C became a Gongshi. Immediately, Household B began to feel that his own son was inferior to the son of Household C, believing that his son's future prospects would be dimmer and less promising. At that moment, the father's psychological state shifted from initial happiness to disappointment, and from disappointment to jealousy, leaving him sullen and unhappy all day long. Meanwhile, the same news about the son of Household C becoming a Gongshi also reached Household A. Household A, however, felt genuinely happy and admiring the son of Household C. He personally visited Household C to offer congratulations, proud that the village had gained such honor, and regarded the achievement as an example for his own son. This left him content and at ease all day long.

After the news reached Households A and B, the objective outcomes of their sons' examination results had not changed. It was only after the information entered their hearts and minds that their psychological states shifted. In other words, it was the arrival of this news in their hearts that led to the subsequent changes in their emotional states. If the news had never reached Households A and B, they would have remained in their original state of happiness, and the shift to sullenness in Household B and contentment in Household A would not have occurred. Furthermore, even if Households A and B received the same information, their mental states changed differently. This demonstrates that when the same information about an event enters the hearts of different people, it is processed differently, leading to varied outcomes. What is in mind, what is the result.

• **Bill Gates's Wealth Accumulation:**

The world-renowned billionaire Bill Gates currently possesses wealth exceeding 100 billion. Twenty years ago, his fortune might have been around 5 billion, and thirty years ago, perhaps only 500 million. Back on a certain day in 1976, when he was deep in thought in an underground garage, pondering how to start a business, his material wealth was essentially zero. However, once a business idea was born, with the passage of time and the expansion of space, his venture continuously developed and succeeded, and he gradually began accumulating material wealth—starting from 0 and eventually amassing \$100 billion.

Clearly, that original idea was the source and starting point of his wealth, playing a decisive role in the subsequent accumulation of material riches. Without that idea, there would have been no wealth afterward. If the idea had been flawed, the resulting wealth would have been less; if the idea had been mistaken, not only would there have been no wealth, but it might even have led to debt. From this, it becomes evident that the decisive "Idea" belongs to the realm of the "Mind" and is the key factor determining the number of Gates' synthetic substances. The birth of a thought gives rise to wealth.

• **The Power of Habit:**

In Jack D. Hodge's best-selling book, *The Power of Habit*, it is written: "Thoughts give rise to actions; actions become habits; habits shape character; character determines destiny." This can be simply understood as: Change in thoughts leads to change in actions; change in actions leads to change in habits; change in habits leads to change in character; change in character leads to change in destiny. The book provides numerous illustrative cases. For example, Lisa smoked for a long time, had irregular eating and sleeping habits, and was in a sub-healthy state. While traveling in Cairo, she developed the idea to quit smoking and cultivated good habits in eating, sleeping, and saving. A few years later, she entered a healthy life trajectory. Clearly, the starting point of Lisa's change in destiny was a shift in her thoughts.

Here, "Thoughts" refer to human thinking, which includes ideas, conscience, experiences, goodwill, selfish desires, and evil intentions, serving as the cause. "Behavior" is the process of transforming "Thoughts" into specific human activities, carried out by various organs of the body. Naturally, this is a process that integrates knowledge and action under the command of the brain. All instances of "Behavior" inevitably produce "Results" refer to artifact, comprising synthetic substances (material artifacts) and spiritual wealth. Evidently, all "Results" produced by an entity are determined by its prior "Thoughts" which include the principles of the "Tao" and "Morals", both originating from the "Mind" Here, the entity can be understood as an individual, a team, a family, an organization, a nation, and so on. These entities, through engaging in various social activities, produce results—that is, synthetic outcomes, including both material wealth and spiritual wealth.

All artifacts possessed by entities worldwide—nations, corporations, individuals—vary greatly. These differences can be traced back, through reverse deduction, to the "Mind" of the entity. The thoughts it generates produce behaviors which produce results (artifacts). Different minds yield different results. Xinxue emphasizes returning to the original goodness of the mind through introspection and practice. Its core is recognizing "Mind is Principle." through inner cognition, actualizing "Unity of Knowledge and Action" through the process of "Extending Innate Conscience" to pursue supreme goodness. While becoming a sage may be unattainable for most, the universal, logical, and complete attributes of Xinxue offer a path toward an enlightened, wise, and fulfilling life.

Therefore, Xinxue's essence is congruent with sociology.

4. **Practice of Xinxue**

Wang Yangming applied the "Tao-Morals-Practice" system concept in practical endeavors like suppressing bandits, quelling rebellions, and establishing academies.

• **Suppressing Bandits in Southern Jiangxi:**

In the Gannan region, the mountains were high and the forests were dense, and banditry was rampant. Bandits looted homes and robbed travelers, with their numbers reaching tens of thousands. They frequently attacked cities and seized territories, killing officials and commoners alike. Since the bandits were all locals, they had many informants and spies everywhere. The imperial court dispatched troops multiple times to suppress them, but they could never be completely eradicated or pacified. The

authorities were at a loss, and the situation became a chronic concern for the Ming government.

Wang Yangming was tasked with this crisis mission. Without any soldiers or generals, he arrived in Gannan with nothing but an empty title. He quickly identified the spies planted by the bandits and successfully subdued them. Then, he implemented the Baojia system to eliminate the conditions that bred banditry. Finally, he recruited and trained an anti-bandit militia, organizing a new army composed of his disciples and students. During the campaigns, he employed various military tactics to inflict heavy losses on the bandits, leaving them trapped and demoralized. Ultimately, they lost confidence, and most of them returned home to become honest farmers.

As for the remaining bandit strongholds, Wang Yangming adopted a persuasion approach based on moral conscience, writing letters to urge their surrender. The letters said: “You were not born evil; rather, it was desperation due to hardship or oppression by officials that forced you onto this path. If there were a way to survive in this world, who would willingly become a bandit and tarnish the reputation of their descendants? Moreover, when you first decided to become bandits, you had the courage to seek a path of death. Now, if you can abandon evil and pursue good, that would be a path of life for the dead. Yet you dare not take it? If you could break free from the bandit dens as courageously as you once became bandits, why would the officials insist on killing you? If we were to kill you so casually, we would invite retribution in the unseen realm, bringing disaster upon our descendants. Why would we do such a thing?” Finally, through a combination of benevolence and authority, rewarding those who surrendered first and pardoning past offenses, Wang Yangming successfully eradicated the bandits in Gannan [1].

- **Pacifying the Ning Prince Rebellion:**

Prince Ning Zhu Chenhao led a rebellion in Nanchang with 100,000 troops in an attempt to seize the throne. At the time, Wang Yangming was on his way to Fujian to suppress a rebellion. Upon learning the news, he immediately returned to Jiangxi and promptly took the following actions:

Recruiting Troops: Without formal authorization from the court to mobilize troops, he relied on temporary conscription, recruiting over 20,000 righteous soldiers and militiamen from Jiangxi.

Spreading False Information: He disseminated misinformation, claiming that the imperial court had dispatched a large army to suppress the rebellion. Additionally, he forged official documents, such as fake imperial edicts and secret letters urging surrender, which sowed discord and demoralized the rebel forces, making them hesitant to advance northward.

Besieging Wei to Rescue Zhao: Avoiding Prince Ning’s main force, Wang Yangming directly attacked the rebel base in Nanchang. When Prince Ning turned back to defend his base, Wang Yangming set an ambush at Poyang Lake, where he employed fire attacks to inflict a crushing defeat on the rebel army.

Capturing Prince Ning: In the Battle of Poyang Lake, Wang Yangming captured Prince Ning alive in just 35 days, swiftly quelling the large-scale rebellion and demonstrating his excep-

tional military prowess. Wang Yangming’s suppression of the rebellion embodied Xinxue principle of the “Unity of Knowing and Acting” This involved applying theoretical knowledge from the mind faithfully and completely to actual combat, including the successful implementation of psychological warfare. Ultimately, he achieved the greatest results with minimal cost, minimizing the damage caused by the rebellion to society and the people’s livelihoods. His success in quelling the rebellion made a significant contribution to the social stability of the mid-Ming dynasty [1].

Through establishing schools, suppressing banditry, delivering lectures, and pacifying rebellions, Wang Yangming became a sage who established principles, achieved merits, and cultivated virtue. He fulfilled the mission articulated by Zhang Zai (a Northern Song thinker, educator, and Neo-Confucian scholar): “To establish the heart for Heaven and Earth, to set the destiny for the people, to continue the lost teachings of past sages, and to open peace for all future generations.”

- **The Meiji Restoration in Japan:**

For centuries after its emergence, Xinxue deeply influenced the social, military, and cultural development of Japan and the Korean Peninsula, including indirectly contributing to the emergence of Japan’s Meiji Restoration. The Japanese Zen monk Ryōan Keigo, at the age of 83, was dispatched to China in 1510 by the shogun Ashikaga Yoshizane to meet Wang Yangming. Before Ryōan Keigo’s departure, Wang Yangming wrote a preface for him. Upon returning to Japan, Ryōan Keigo did not immediately disseminate Wang Yangming’s teachings, as he was nearly 87 years old. The true pioneer in spreading Xinxue in Japan was Nakae Tōju. At around the age of 37, he obtained the Recorded Sayings of Wang Longxi and the Complete Works of Wang Yangming. After studying them, he gained profound insights and became the founding figure of Japan’s Wang Yangming School. In the centuries after the new school emerged, it profoundly influenced the sociocultural development of Japan and the Korean Peninsula, and also indirectly contributed to Japan’s Meiji Restoration.

Nakae Tōju (1608–1648) is acclaimed as the “Founder of Wang Yangming studies in Japan.” He delved into Wang Yangming’s Xinxue, embracing the doctrines of “The mind is the principle.” and the “Unity of Knowing and Action” In Ōmi Province, he established the Nakae Dō Academy, localizing Wang Yangming’s teachings and emphasizing moral practice and inner awareness. One of his famous lines is, “My body comes from the void, and my mind is like heaven.” which embodies the spirit of cultivating oneself and aligning with the Way of Heaven [6].

Saigō Takamori (1828–1877), one of the three great heroes of the Meiji Restoration, integrated the spirit of Wang Yangming’s teachings, Buddhist principles, and the Bushidō ethos into his philosophy of “Revere Heaven, Love People.” emphasizing the guidance of inner conscience in action. The practical power of the “Unity of knowing and Acting” was evident in his role in the anti-shogunate movement and subsequent reforms [7].

Ōshio Heihachirō (1793–1837), an official and scholar in the Osaka city government, authored the Notes from the Water Cave. He blended Wang Yangming’s philosophy with Bushidō,

advocating the application of “Innate Knowledge” in social reform, and is regarded as an “Action-oriented Wang Yangming scholar” His spirit of “Innate knowledge” symbolized a practical approach to resisting injustice, and his actions and ideals influenced later reformers. In the Notes from the Water Cave, he called for applying “Knowledge” to the practice of social reform. As an “Action-oriented” scholar, his practice of resisting injustice through his “Innate knowledge” had a profound impact on later reformers [8].

Yoshida Shōin (1830–1859) was a key theorist of the Meiji Restoration and the founder of the Shōson Village School (Matsushita Village School), deeply influenced by Satō Issai. He advocated the “Unity of Knowing and Acting” adhered to the principle that “The way of the gentleman lies in action.” and integrated Wang Yangming’s thought with the idea of “Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians.” His famous saying is “To know without acting is not true knowledge” [9].

The Black Ships Incident (1853–1854): Commodore Matthew Perry of the U.S. East India Squadron led four black steamships into Edo Bay (present-day Tokyo Bay), forcing Japan to open its doors under the threat of naval power. The Japanese people witnessed the overwhelming technological gap of the Western “Strong ships and powerful cannons” shattering the illusion that “Japan is a divine land.” The initial reaction, especially among the samurai class (Particularly lower-ranking samurai), was an outward-focused mindset: xenophobia. They launched the “Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians” movement to defend the homeland, even resorting to assassinating foreigners.

However, after the 1863 Anglo-Satsuma War between Satsuma Domain and Britain, and the 1864 Shimonoseki War between Chōshū Domain and the Four-Nation Fleet, Japan was thoroughly defeated by the West in actual combat, forcing the shogunate to abandon its “Closed country” policy. They realized that reliance on outward solutions was futile and gradually shifted to an inward-focused approach, seeking answers within themselves through reflection and introspection. The three heroes of the Meiji Restoration—Saigō Takamori, Ōkubo Toshimichi, and Kido Takayoshi—played crucial roles in this.

Saigō Takamori: He was a direct successor to the ideas of Nakae Tōju, the father of Wang Yangming studies in Japan. His motto, “Revere Heaven, Love People.” stemmed from the innate knowledge of Wang Yangming’s teachings. At the most perilous moment of the anti-shogunate movement, facing the shogunate’s elite troops, he relied on Wang Yangming’s “Longchang spiritual method” and the ability to maintain “An unmoving mind” in desperate situations, making him the pillar of stability for his army.

Ōkubo Toshimichi: A close friend and fellow countryman of Saigō Takamori, Ōkubo took a completely opposite “Pragmatic” path. Originally a follower of Zhu Xi’s philosophy, which emphasized institutions and norms, he was deeply influenced by Wang Yangming’s “Polishing through affairs” during his long collaboration with Saigō. He avoided abstract moral debates and firmly believed that “Knowing is the beginning of action, and action is the completion of knowing.” Faced with Japan’s backwardness, his logic was: “Stop empty talk, act first” (e.g., forc-

bly implementing land tax reforms). This determination to push forward reforms, even at the cost of being labeled a “Butcher” reflected a strong Wang Yangming-style “Action-oriented” spirit.

Kido Takayoshi: As a leader of the Chōshū Domain, he was the brother-in-law and comrade of Yoshida Shōin, a Wang Yangming follower. Yoshida Shōin taught Instructions for Practical Living in prison, exclaiming, “To know without acting is not true knowledge.” and was eventually executed by the shogunate. Kido Takayoshi inherited his legacy, believing that building a new Japan began with “Extending innate knowledge” [10].

The three heroes of the Meiji Restoration was a dissemination network for Wang Yangming’s Xinxue. Saigō Takamori embodied the “Mind”, Ōkubo Toshimichi embodied “Action” and Kido Takayoshi embodied the “Principle” collectively influencing the entire process of the Meiji Restoration. In addition, Itō Hirobumi, who served as Japan’s first prime minister and president of the Privy Council, also played a crucial role in spreading Wang Yangming’s teachings. His prominent political status further promoted the influence of Wang Yangming’s Xinxue during the Meiji Restoration.

In summary, Japan’s visionary individuals at the time realized that without overthrowing the corrupt shogunate and pursuing self-strengthening reforms, Japan would end up like the Qing dynasty after the Opium Wars—a colony at the mercy of foreign powers. Thus, they initiated the Meiji Restoration in 1868, shifting rapidly from an outward-focused “Expel the barbarians” approach to an inward-focused “Open the country, overthrow the shogunate” strategy. Decades of reform revealed: the mind changed, actions changed, the nation changed, and the environment changed.

It can be said that the starting point of modern Japan’s development was Xinxue. The renowned modern Chinese scholar Liang Qichao also remarked, “The governance of Japan’s Restoration is the application of Xinxue.” Furthermore, Xinxue profoundly influenced notable figures such as the Ming dynasty Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng, the Korean Confucian scholar Yi Hwang, the modern Japanese military strategist Tōgō Heihachirō, the Japanese entrepreneur Kazuo Inamori, and the Qing dynasty minister Zeng Guofan.

5. Conclusion

The three-tiered philosophical system of Xinxue—“Mind is Principle” (Tao), “Extending Innate Conscience” (Morals), and “Unity of Knowledge and Action” (Practice)—the “Tao as One, Morals as Two, Practice as Three” system—possesses the attributes of universality, logic, and completeness. The greatness of Wang Yangming’s Xinxue lies in elevating the principle that the mind determines artifacts (synthetic substances and spiritual wealth) to the perspective of a creator, forging it into a pinnacle of social philosophy. This echoes Laozi: “Tao gives birth to One, one gives birth to Two, Two gives birth to Three, and Three gives birth to all things.” Here, “All things” are the artifacts with their starting point in the Tao—“Mind is Principle.” In summary, “Mind is Principle.” (Tao) is the source and cause of all things; “Extending Innate Conscience” (Morals) is the strategy for achieving purpose; “Unity of Knowledge and Ac-

tion” (Practice) is the result of following that momentum. Wang Yangming's final words were: “My mind is now bright and clear, what more is there to say?”

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