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Liangzhi and Gan Tong: Wang Yangming's Theory of Liangzhi and Its Contemporary Implications

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Abstract. Centring on the mechanism of 'Gan Tong' within Wang Yangming's doctrine of 'Realising the Liangzhi', this study aims to address the ethical dilemma of contemporary society, characterised by highly developed rationality yet marked by interpersonal alienation and emotional indifference. The article points out that Wang Yangming, through the proposition 'the mind is the Principle', shifted the foundation of 'Gan Tong' entirely from the external Heavenly Principle to the internal mind-substance, thereby establishing the agency of the moral subject and the ontological status of emotion. The study delves deeply into the essence of 'Liangzhi' as an ontological capacity for 'Gan Tong'; that is, Liangzhi is not merely the 'heart that distinguishes right from wrong', but rather a vital ontological entity capable of directly perceiving external objects and manifesting as 'sincere and compassionate' emotions. The article further elaborates on the practical path to realising 'Gan Tong', including 'contemplation in stillness' to clarify the mind-substance, and 'Sincerity of intention and investigation of things' to hone one's practice through engagement with the world, ultimately attaining the authentic experience of 'the oneness of all things'. The conclusion argues that Wang Yangming constructed a system of Gan Tong in an ontological sense through the concept of 'the free flow of the One Qi', transforming Gan Tong from a realm of self-cultivation into an essential function of Liangzhi.

Keywords: Liangzhi, Gan Tong, mind

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, people find themselves in an environment where rationality is highly developed, yet interpersonal relationships are becoming increasingly estranged. Issues such as emotional indifference, moral decline and ethical dilemmas are becoming increasingly prominent. Against this backdrop, a re-examination of Wang Yangming's doctrine of 'realising the liangzhi', particularly with the internal mechanism of 'Gan Tong' as its linchpin, can provide profound intellectual resources for healing contemporary ethical and psychological dilemmas.

This study focuses on the interactive relationship between 'Gan Tong' and 'Realising the Liangzhi' in Wang Yangming's philosophy. 'Gan Tong' is the direct response mechanism of 'Liangzhi'; as Wang Yangming stated, 'Upon seeing one's father, one naturally knows filial piety; upon seeing one's elder brother, one naturally knows how to be a younger brother; upon seeing a child falling into a well, one naturally feels compassion' [1]. The activation of 'Liangzhi' does not involve rational

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deliberation, but rather occurs directly through a phenomenological response. Another reason for selecting 'Gan Tong' as the entry point for this article is that Yangming utilised 'Gan Tong' to break away from the subject-object dichotomy characteristic of Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism, which is more in line with contemporary demands for addressing emotional issues.

Current research is primarily unfolding along two lines: in the philosophical and phenomenological dimensions, scholars compare Yangming's 'Liangzhi' with phenomenological concepts such as 'intentionality' and the 'lifeworld' to explore the constitution of moral consciousness. Shan Hongze points out that Yangming's School of Mind, by elevating emotions to the status of the ontological foundation and advocating that 'the natural flow of the seven emotions is all a manifestation of Liangzhi', has achieved the 'naturalisation of moral emotions' [2]. Meanwhile, Jiang Qing also notes that, according to Yangming,'the point at which natural, clear awareness of knowledge manifests is nothing other than a sincere and compassionate response; this is its ontological basis' [3]. The ontological basis of Liangzhi is emotion, rather than li divorced from'xing'. However, existing research has tended either to emphasise theoretical comparison or to focus on the internal logical structure of intellectual history. There remains scope for further exploration in specialised research centred on 'Gan Tong' and focused on the concept of 'realising the Liangzhi' within Wang Yangming's philosophy. Consequently, this paper will focus on discussing the connection between 'Gan Tong' and Wang Yangming's thought, and from this, explore its practical application and implementation in contemporary society.

2. The mind is the principle

2.1. The evolution of the Confucian concept of 'Gan Tong'

The concept of 'Gan Tong' occupies a significant position within Wang Yangming's School of Mind, particularly in relation to the doctrines of 'The Mind is the Principle' and 'Realising the Liangzhi'; simultaneously, its development within Confucian thought is equally significant. The term 'Gan Tong' derives from the "Book of Changes: The Appended Sayings, Part I": 'In stillness and immobility, upon being moved, one attains Gan Tong [4].' This expresses the notion that, before people perceive the world, it is still, motionless, latent and in a state of potentiality; yet when people perceive the world, it gives rise to infinite transformations. This illustrates that the universe is a dynamic field of energy that is interconnected, imbued with spirit and responsive. Furthermore, the "Tuan Commentary" on the "Xian Hexagram" of the "Book of Changes" states: 'Heaven and Earth respond to one another, and all things are thus transformed and brought into being' [4] to construct a cosmological vision of the oneness of all things, viewing 'response' as the fundamental interplay of the two poles of Yin and Yang that gives rise to all things, thereby establishing the universality and inevitability of 'response'. In Mencius's thought, however, the concept of 'response and communication' shifts from a cosmological perspective to one of the nature of the mind. In Mencius's view, 'emotions arise from mutual response', and the very foundation of human nature lies in 'emotions'—that is, the 'Four Beginnings'—thereby establishing the subjectivity and agency of the human heart in this process of interaction. Consequently, in the development of pre-Qin Confucianism, the concept of 'Gantong' had already taken shape, providing scope for the subsequent expansion of the ideas of 'the oneness of all things' and 'moral emotions'.

Following the Pre-Qin period, Dong Zhongshu reinterpreted the concept of 'Gan Tong' from Pre-Qin Confucianism, interpreting it directly as 'Gan Tong' whilst replacing the moral subject of 'humanity' within 'Gan Tong' with the political subject of 'Heaven'. 'Therefore, the principles of benevolence, righteousness and institutional order are all derived from Heaven. … The Three

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Cardinal Principles of the Way of the King may be sought in Heaven [5].' This exemplifies the approach taken by Han Confucians to political intervention: in the name of 'Heaven', they linked celestial phenomena to human conduct in order to achieve 'political correctness'. Consequently, the inherent moral significance of 'sensory communication' was transformed into an authoritative tool of 'correspondence' for political expediency. Consequently, by the Han dynasty, the Confucian concept of 'sensing and communicating' had lost its moral subjectivity and subjective agency; this transformation foreshadowed the subsequent involvement of Confucian philosophy in the political sphere.

By the Song dynasty, the School of Neo-Confucianism had gradually come to the fore, and the concept of 'Gantong' reached its final stage of deepening and refinement. Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao stated: "'Still and unmoving, yet responding and thus communicating'—this is the inherent principle of Heaven… Though unmoving, upon being stimulated, communication occurs; this stimulation does not come from without [6]." This illustrates the cosmological significance of the concept of 'response and communication', namely that it provides a basis and pathway for the potential of all things in the world to develop from the stillness of Heavenly Principle. At the same time, Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao's proposal of 'Benevolence as a Single Entity'—a theory at the ontological level—also demonstrates the ontological importance of 'Gantong'. Meanwhile, Zhu Xi interpreted the phrase 'Silent and unmoving, yet responsive and thus communicative' from the "Book of Changes" as follows: 'No thought, no action—this refers to the mind. "Silent and unmoving" is the essence of responsiveness; "responsive and communicative" is the function of stillness [7].' This demonstrates that Zhu Xi distinguished between 'stillness' and 'response and communication' as a relationship between 'essence' and 'function'; at the same time, he regarded 'Gantong' as a bridge between the 'manifest' and the 'unmanifest'—that is, 'response and communication' connects 'Heavenly Principle and human nature' with 'moral principles and emotions'. Consequently, Zhu Xi broke down 'response and communication' into the two levels of 'response' and 'communication'; yet he established that 'response and communication' serves as the channel connecting 'humanity' and 'Heaven', as well as the a priori condition for 'Heaven' to give rise to 'humanity'. This provided the theoretical foundation for Wang Yangming's subsequent discourse on 'the oneness of all things'.

2.2. Gantong and the mind

Wang Yangming's greatest contribution to the Confucian concept of 'Gantong' lies in his thorough shift of its foundation from the external 'Heavenly Principle' or cosmology to the internal 'Mind-Substance'. Centring on the principle that 'the Mind is the Principle', he re-established the subjective basis and dynamic source of 'Gan Tong', thereby freeing it from the rigidity of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism and restoring its vibrant moral vitality.

The mind is the subjective basis and source of dynamism that makes 'Gan Tong' possible. Within the Cheng-Zhu School of Neo-Confucianism, whilst 'Gantong' was regarded as a crucial mechanism linking the 'manifest' and the 'unmanifest', as well as 'essence' and 'function', its ultimate ontological foundation was attributed to the transcendent 'Heavenly Principle'; individuals could only passively achieve Gan Tong through the long-term accumulation of 'investigating things to exhaust their principles'.This mode of thinking, characterised by a 'dichotomy between mind and principle', resulted in 'sensation' often being reduced to external textual exegesis and the accumulation of knowledge, making it difficult to truly touch the depths of the human heart.After attaining enlightenment at Longchang, Wang Yangming deeply reflected on this shortcoming and resolutely advocated that 'the mind is the Principle', establishing the 'mind' as the fundamental ontological basis of 'sensing'. As Xiang Kaiming points out, by taking the mind as the first principle, Wang

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Yangming thoroughly resolved the problems of rigidity and dogmatism in 'sensing' caused by the Cheng-Zhu 'psychological dichotomy', thereby restoring to 'sensing' the lively, active and autonomous nature inherent in the human heart [6].

This ontological shift is most directly reflected in Yangming's classic exposition on the relationship between Liangzhi and emotions. Yangming repeatedly emphasised: 'Liangzhi is nothing but the heart that distinguishes right from wrong; right and wrong are nothing but likes and dislikes [1].' The knowledge of right and wrong and the emotions of likes and dislikes are completely unified at the ontological level. Shan Hongze points out that the emotional dimension of Yangming's moral philosophy lies in elevating 'likes and dislikes' to the core dimension of moral judgement, and in asserting that 'the natural flow of the seven emotions is all a manifestation of Liangzhi', thereby naturalising and ontologising moral emotions [3]. Emotions are no longer mere appendages to rational judgement, but rather a mechanism of 'Gan Tong' directly manifested by 'Liangzhi'. Wang Zhenyu, drawing on a contemporary moral emotional intuitionist perspective, further interprets this 'likes and dislikes' not as a purely subjective emotional state, but as 'emotional intuition' that combines cognitive functions with behavioural drive.'Liangzhi', as the 'heart of right and wrong', is simultaneously the emotion of 'likes and dislikes'; the two are two sides of the same coin, jointly constituting a reliable source of moral knowledge and the intrinsic driving force behind moral behaviour [2]. Therefore, the subjective basis of 'Gan Tong' lies not in 'Tianli', but in the sincerity, compassion and natural likes and dislikes inherent in the human heart—the subjective basis of 'Gan Tong' is the 'heart'.

Secondly, 'Gan Tong' constitutes the essence of the relationship between the mind and external objects.Wang Yangming's assertion that 'there is nothing outside the mind' does not deny the objective reality of things, but rather emphasises that external things can only truly enter the human moral world and realm of meaning through the mind's 'Gan Tong'. Here, 'Gan Tong' becomes the fundamental manner in which the 'mind' reflects 'things': the 'mind', with its 'spiritually luminous nature', perceives 'things', whilst 'things', through their 'principle', respond to the 'mind', thereby realising the benevolence of 'the oneness of all things'. Xiang Kaiming points out that what is constructed through 'sensing' is a non-dualistic, seamless 'unity' of the intellectual world—encompassing 'subject and object', 'mind and things', and 'knowledge and action'—which is precisely the core feature distinguishing Yangming's School of Mind from the Cheng-Zhu School of Neo-Confucianism [1]. Shan Hongze emphasises that Yangming, through the dimension of emotion, broke the long-standing 'subject-object dichotomy' mindset prevalent in Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism, making 'Gan Tong' the direct reactive hub connecting the subject's inner moral emotions with the external world [8]. The theory of emotional intuition provides a solid epistemological foundation for this: emotional intuition not only endows 'Gan Tong' with a powerful driving force, but also endows it with objectivity and a high degree of fault tolerance, thereby avoiding both the 'arrogance of Liangzhi' found in purely rational intuitionism and the purely subjective arbitrariness of emotionalism [7].

Wang Yangming's 'Gan Tong' is not an abstract symbol, but rather manifests a sequential process progressing from the near to the far and from the superficial to the profound. First comes direct 'Gan Tong' at the level of moral emotions—namely, the four fundamental emotions of 'compassion', 'shame and aversion', 'modesty and restraint', and 'discernment of right and wrong'—which constitute the concrete manifestation of the 'ontological principle of Liangzhi'.Yangming frequently used the phrase 'piercing pain' to metaphorically describe the 'inevitability' of the benevolence inherent in the 'oneness of all things' in heaven and earth, thereby sublimating physiological sensations into the stirring of moral emotions. Secondly, these individual moral emotions are further

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elevated to a sense of the 'oneness of all things'—that is, extending from 'benevolence towards one's kin' to 'benevolence towards the people and love for all things', and from one's own sense of communion to a connection with the universe and all things.As Xiang Kaiming analyses, this hierarchical unfolding not only affirms the diversity of 'Gan Tong' but also, through the 'Way of Loyalty and Forbearance' and the principle of 'acting in accordance with one's station', realises the process of democratising 'the application of Gan Tong', enabling everyone to achieve 'Gan Tong' in accordance with their 'Liangzhi' [9].

In summary, Wang Yangming's philosophy of 'Gan Tong', with the 'mind' as its ontological foundation, thoroughly reversed the tendency of Confucian thought on 'Gan Tong' to become objectified—shifting from cosmology to the theory of mind and nature, and then to political instrumentalisation—and restored its essence as a moral practice characterised by the lively and active human mind and the unity of knowledge and action.This embodies the metaphysical status of 'the heart's Gan Tong' and provides a flexible interpretative framework for the further development of the concept of 'Gan Tong'.

3. Realising the Liangzhi

3.1. Liangzhi and Gan Tong

In Wang Yangming's doctrine of Liangzhi, Liangzhi is first and foremost an ontological capacity for 'Gan Tong'. This 'Gan Tong' is not merely sensory perception, but rather the mind's inherent capacity for awareness and responsiveness to external phenomena. Xiang Kaiming points out that Wang Yangming's concept of 'Gan Tong' embodies the proactivity and openness of the mind; as the ontological foundation of the mind, Liangzhi possesses an innate capacity to commune with all things [8]. This capacity for communion is a priori and intrinsic, forming the basis for human interaction with the world.

The responsive nature of li zhi is manifested in its qualities of 'vivid, lucid awareness'. It is not a closed self-consciousness, but a vitalised ontological principle capable of responding to external objects and comprehending the principles of things. Li Chenggui maintains that li zhi possesses the characteristic of 'functional vitalisation' in Wang Yangming's School of Mind, a function that manifests primarily as the capacity to respond to all things [10]. As Wang Yangming stated: 'Liangzhi is simply the point where the natural, lucid awareness of Heavenly Principle manifests'; this lucid awareness is in itself a manifestation of this capacity for communion [1]. In specific contexts, the 'Principle' of Liangzhi manifests as the principle of 'that which is sensed'. Lu Yinghua conducted an in-depth analysis of Liangzhi's capacity for judging right and wrong, pointing out that Liangzhi is not only receptive but also encompasses cognitive implications, enabling it to distinguish between good and evil in specific contexts [11]. This discernment is not an abstract rational deduction, but rather is based on the direct manifestation of the ontological essence of Liangzhi within specific contexts.

'Realising the Liangzhi' is the specific path proposed by Wang Yangming to achieve this communion. This process does not involve seeking externally, but rather awakening the innate capacity for communion within oneself. Li Chenggui points out that the process of realising the Liangzhi is, in fact, the process of activating and realising the functions of the Liangzhi [10]. Through the practice of realising the Liangzhi, one can restore the innate capacity for communion inherent in the mind-substance and attain communion with the Heavenly Principle and all things.The practice of 'Realising the Liangzhi' comprises two levels: firstly, removing the veils of self-interest to restore the Liangzhi to its original state of lucid awareness; and secondly, through the

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refinement of concrete actions, enabling the Liangzhi to continually manifest its capacity for communion in practice. Lu Yinghua maintains that 'Realising the Liangzhi' embodies the unity of the Liangzhi's perceptive and cognitive aspects; through this process, one is able to discern between good and evil in specific contexts [11].

Wang Yangming emphasised the 'unity of knowledge and action'; the process of Realising the Liangzhi is, in itself, the realisation of Gan Tong. When a person acts in accordance with their Liangzhi in a specific situation, they achieve a true Gan Tong between their Liangzhi and external objects, as well as with the Principle of Heaven. This Gan Tong is not merely cognitive in nature, but rather a practical integration of life.

3.2. Specific paths to cultivating Gan Tong

Communion is not a mystical experience arising out of thin air, but rather a cultivative practice with a traceable path. Wang Yangming stated that the three characters 'Realising the Liangzhi' were gained through a hundred deaths and a thousand hardships; this implies that the cultivation of the capacity for communion likewise requires a concrete point of entry. Drawing on Wang Yangming's own discourses and the analyses of scholars such as Xiang Kaiming and Cheng Zhihua, the practice of communion can broadly be unfolded in sequence along the following three paths.

The practice of stilling the mind manifests specifically as a state of constant vigilance characterised by 'caution and reverence'—not tension or anxiety, but rather the constant presence of Heavenly Principle within the mind, enabling one to discern right from wrong the very moment a thought arises. When stillness reaches its ultimate point, the mind is like a clear mirror: it reflects whatever comes before it, and through this receptivity, true communion is achieved. Cheng Zhihua also points out that Yangming's practice of seated meditation is not an end in itself, but rather lays the foundation for the subsequent 'refinement through practical affairs'—only when the mind is crystal-clear can this communion truly manifest in the daily practice of human relations [12].

When applied to concrete matters, Sincerity of intention manifests as 'investigating things'. Yangming's concept of investigating things is not Zhu Xi's approach of seeking the principles of the external world, but rather 'correcting what is not right so that it returns to what is right'—in every matter, rectifying one's thoughts through the judgement of one's Liangzhi, so that every expression of intention is in harmony with the principles of Heaven. Sui Sixi astutely pointed out that Yangming's practice of investigating things is essentially a form of 'emotional rectification'—it does not involve exhaustively exploring the objective laws of things at the cognitive level, but rather adjusting the relationship between the individual and the world at the emotional level, so that the expression of emotions tends towards moderation [13]. Every instance of 'investigating things' is a training exercise in the capacity for empathetic communion: when faced with a specific matter, do you truly sense the needs of others? Do you align your own likes and dislikes with the Principle of Heaven? This process of repeated refinement through practical experience transforms empathetic communion from an abstract realisation into a concrete capacity.

Every instance of investigating things is a reconstruction of the relationship between the self and others. The ultimate culmination of the practice of communion is a visceral realisation of 'the oneness of all things'. In "The Great Learning", Yangming states unequivocally: 'The great person is one who regards heaven, earth and all things as one.' This is not merely a philosophical declaration, but the fulfilled form of the practice of Gan Tong [14]. When a person, having undergone the cultivation of a tranquil mind and the refinement of sincere intention, has attained a state where their mind can perceive all things without obstruction, they will naturally experience that innate sense of connection with others, and even with plants, trees, tiles and stones.

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4. Conclusion

Wang Yangming's revolutionary contribution lay precisely in transforming this communion from an external state into an intrinsic function of the ontological principle of Liangzhi. He grasped the deepest metaphysical question of Confucian philosophy: how can human beings enter into genuine communion with Heaven, Earth and all things? Traditional Confucianism answered with 'sincerity'—utmost sincerity is akin to divinity, enabling foreknowledge.However, during his enlightenment at Longchang, Wang Yangming arrived at the proposition that 'there is nothing outside the mind', and subsequently established the Liangzhi as the 'spirit of creation'—the absolute subject upon which heaven, earth and all things depend for their 'coming into being'. Gan Tong is thus no longer the result of self-cultivation, but rather an essential characteristic of the Liangzhi: the Liangzhi itself is resonant. As discussed in the preceding chapters of this essay, the 'Gan Tong' of the Liangzhi is innate, inevitable and requires no external source.

Consequently, Wang Yangming's philosophy of communion offers us an exceptionally profound philosophical resource for understanding the contemporary ecological crisis.Zemian Zheng said 'The individual's liangzhi partakes in the ceaseless creativity of the all-encompassing universal Dao, which implies that nothing is external to liangzhi or the mind [15].' The deep-rooted cause of the modern ecological crisis lies not so much in the abuse of technology or economic greed as in a 'rupture of communion'—whereby humans have severed themselves from the web of nature, approaching it through a subject–object dualistic framework, reducing nature to a resource to be calculated and exploited rather than a living community with which to coexist. As Ye Yun points out, the inner knowing does not exclude knowledge derived from observation and experience, but rather provides the source of its value orientation; similarly, the inner knowing's communion with nature does not exclude scientific knowledge, but rather provides an insurmountable ethical baseline for the application of science and technology [16]. Gao Zhengle, meanwhile, emphasises that the 'immanence' of Liangzhi implies that communion is not a distant ideal, but a present possibility—every individual can, at this very moment, restore a communion with all things through the cultivation of Liangzhi [17].

Through the three propositions—'there is nothing outside the mind', 'all things are one', and 'the free flow of the One Qi'—Wang Yangming constructed an ontological-ethical system centred on communion.Within this system, one's attitude towards nature is not an external, coercive moral constraint, but an internal, ontological self-imposed requirement—for the destruction of nature is the destruction of one's own living being. True ecological harmony lies not in technical measures such as emissions reduction or recycling, but in the reconstruction of the bond of communion between humankind and all things.

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