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Water, Plant, Light, and Mirror: On the Root Metaphors of the Heart-Mind in Wang Yangming’s Thought

Abstract Clarifying Wang Yangming’s thought through a study of his root metaphors of heart-mind is an important step toward explaining his further concepts of the human world. Along with the root metaphors of water and mirror, the metaphors of plant and light work together for Wang to form a coherent theoretical and practical system of xin (heart-mind). This method is also a good way to unravel the various theories of the “three teachings” that are intermingled in his thinking. By using this methodology Wang’s attempts to harmonize several ancient traditions of heart-mind that appear as possibly polarized to modern readers, are illuminated (though they did not appear contradictory to the Neo-Confucians).

Keywords Wang Yangming, root metaphor, heart-mind, innate knowledge, human nature, self-cultivation

1 Introduction

Since 1972, a significant number of new interpretative accounts of Wang Yangming’s life and ideas have appeared in Western and Chinese philosophical circles, including notable works by Ching (1976), Tu (1976), Yang (1990), Chen (1991), Ivanhoe (2002), and Kern (2010).1 These studies have relied on methods

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1 In March 1972, during the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in New York, a special panel was organized to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Wang Yangming’s birth; in June of the same year, an international research seminar under the sponsorship of the East-West Philosopher’s Conference was held at the University of Hawaii to celebrate the same event (see Moore 1973). Also notable exception is Wing-tsit Chan’s systematic inquiry into Yangming’s thought and life in a series of annotated translations and monographic studies. His pioneering work on Neo-Confucianism provides the necessary foundation for further inquiry into Wang Yangming’s life and thought (see Chan 1963, 1965, 1967, 1986).

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such as historical sociology, term definition, and phenomenological analysis, and have clarified Wang’s ideas of *xin* (heart-mind) and its transformation over time, as well as the nature of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. Each attempt has yielded important new insights and has also revealed some unsystematic patterns of thought. In fact, the very originality and creativity of Wang’s thought, and the long and fluctuating history of his influence in East Asia, have made it difficult to untangle the intricacies of his philosophical doctrines.

This article consists of three interlocking parts. First, it will argue for the usefulness of a new methodology, namely the systematic analysis of conceptual metaphor, in the comparative study of Wang’s doctrine as a cross-cultural dialogue. Second, using a genealogical examination of such metaphors as water, plant, light, and mirror in Wang’s ideas which involve important sources from the three teachings (*sanjiao* 三教), the article will identify and analyze the above-mentioned root metaphors which reveal Wang’s conceptions of the heart-mind (*xin* 心), human nature (*xing* 性), innate knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知), and self-cultivation (*gongfu* 工夫). Finally, it will offer a brief analysis of the dilemmas and shortcomings of Wang’s philosophy, illustrating the difficulties of his endeavor to fit together disparate positions based on different metaphor models.

2 A New Methodology: Conceptual Metaphor Analysis

In recent years, as Western philosophers have become increasingly aware of the particularity of their own tradition and the shakiness of many of its foundations (e.g. see Rorty 1979 and Abrams 1971), many scholars have turned to China in the pursuit of new questions and different answers. In so doing, they have tended to recast Chinese and Western philosophical discourses, using such new categories as “conceptual scheme” (Davidson 1984), “correlative thinking” (Graham 1986) or “correlative cosmology” (Ames and Hall 2003), “structural image” (Munro 1988), and “root metaphor” (Allan 1997) to analyze ancient Chinese philosophical works. These studies have pointed out that the emerging cognitive science of language (Lakoff 1987, Lakoff and Johnson 1980), especially conceptual metaphor theory, is a good way whereby to consider the distinctiveness of Chinese traditions relative to Western philosophical traditions, and also to hear the echoes of ancient philosophy in the modern age.

The comparative study of conceptual metaphors in Chinese and Western philosophy, therefore, is becoming a meaningful field of inquiry. Following the revival of new cognitive metaphor studies in the West, more and more scholars, especially those with a background in Chinese philosophy, have begun to take metaphors more seriously as a foundational bearer of philosophical meaning, and
have started to focus on the use in Chinese traditions (especially Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism) of these root metaphors (e.g. water, light, lamps, the sun, plants, seeds, etc.). Representatives of this trend not only include scholars born and raised in the West, such as Demiéville (1987), Cline (2008), Lai (1979), Oshima (1983), Munro (1988), Allan (1997), Ivanhoe (2002), and Slingerland (2004, 2011, and 2013), but also those born and raised in China and Taiwan, such as Liu (2004), Chen (2005, and 2009), and Deng (2007).

3 Four Root Metaphors of Heart-Mind and Yangming’s Philosophy

The two major works of Wang Yangming, Instructions for Practical Living (Chuanxi Lu 講習錄) and Inquiry on the Great Learning (Daxue Wen 大學問), contain an enormous number of metaphors. The metaphors focused upon here were chosen based on the frequency of their use and on their use in philosophically significant contexts—for instance, metaphors which yielded related, subsidiary metaphors are deemed significant. Using these two criteria, this article identifies four root metaphors—water, plant, light, and mirror—that play a major role in Wang’s theories of the heart-mind. Of these, the root metaphors of plant and light are particularly crucial, working together and contributing to the construction of a coherent system of theory and practice. In this study, these two metaphors also help to unravel the various elements of the “three teachings” that are intermingled in Wang’s thought.

3.1 “Still Water and Flowing Water”: Various Aspects of Heart-Mind

The character 心 (xin) refers to an organ of cognition (zhī 知), thought (sī 思), will (zhì 志), emotion (qíng 情), and desire (yù 欲), and is variously translated as “heart” (the original, ancient form of the character is clearly a depiction of this physical organ), “heart-mind,” or “mind.” In Chinese philosophy xin is frequently associated with water when invoked in discussions of thinking and emotional states, but is generally associated with plants when the issue being discussed is goodness. This understanding is, however, in contrast to a dualistic one that relates the two metaphors to fundamentally different, separate, or even opposed faculties.

In Wang’s doctrine, xin itself is without a doubt also a key metaphor. He describes xin as “the master (zhuzai 主宰) of the body” (Chan 1963, 14) and explains it in the following terms:

Xin is not a piece of flesh with blood. It is wherever consciousness is. For
example, the ears and the eyes know to see and hear and the hands and feet know the feeling of itch and pain. All this consciousness is \textit{xin}. (Chan 1963, 252)

What then is this organ like? How was \textit{xin} conceived? Tracing its development back to its original meaning, we see that the metaphorical conceptual analysis of \textit{xin} ultimately provides the true starting-point of this study. As we shall see in the following pages, water, plant, light, and mirror together provide the metaphorical roots of early Chinese ideas about \textit{xin}. For instance, early Daoist descriptions of the sage’s heart-mind illustrate the value of purity and the duty of purification using the metaphors of still water (\textit{zhishui 止水}) and a clear mirror (\textit{mingjing 明镜}). With the image of still water serving as a mirror, Zhuangzi also emphasizes stillness and clarity when describing the character of the sage’s heart-mind, which is undisturbed by emotions or external influences.\footnote{2}

When water is still (\textit{jing 靜}), it gives back a clear image of the beard and the eyebrows; reposing in the water level, it offers a measure to the great craftsman. And if water in stillness possesses such clarity, how much more must quintessential spirit (\textit{jing shen 精神}? The sage’s heart-mind in stillness is the mirror (\textit{jian 鑒}) of Heaven and earth and the mirror (\textit{jing 鏡}) of the myriad things (\textit{tiandao 天道}).\footnote{3} (Watson 2013, 98)

When sympathetic emotion is stirred, the heart-mind as a calm pool of still water has a responding resonance. Later, the image of still water would also be used to explain the original mind (\textit{benxin 本心}) in both Chan (Zen) Buddhist and Neo-Confucian texts.

As Sarah Allan has stated, in Chinese philosophy the root metaphor of water, “with its multiplicity of forms and extraordinary capacity for generating imagery, provided always the primary model for conceptualizing general cosmic principles, which applied to the behavior of people, as well as to the forces of nature” (Allan 1997, 4). The metaphor of water is as important in Daoist and

\footnote{2} Harold Oshima (1983) makes a strong case that the concept of “mind” in the \textit{Zhuangzi} cannot be understood in isolation from the specific metaphors employed by the author, which serve conceptually as a “determinate model,” rather than merely as rhetorical window dressing.

\footnote{3} The character 鑒 or 鑢 (the early form of the character lacks the metal radical 金), originally depicted a person kneeling before a vessel filled with water, his head bowed to look at his reflection. From as early as the Shang Dynasty, vessels filled with water were used as mirrors in religious rituals. According to the \textit{Zhuangzi}, “No one takes flowing water as a mirror and yet he be finds his reflection in the standing water of a jian” (“De Chong Fu” 德充符).

\footnote{4} This translation is based on that in Watson (2013, 98), with some modification by the author.
Buddhist texts as in Confucian ones; however, whereas Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Chan masters are primarily interested in the “static” metaphor of still water as well as of the clear mirror, Mencius and other early Confucians favored such “process” metaphors as flowing water and plant growth, for instance the movement from the pure spring-source through silted channels to the sea, irrigation with water, and the washing away of dirt.

According to the *Zhuangzi*, “No one regards flowing water as a mirror and yet one finds his reflection in still water.” We will see that Zhuangzi deprecatingly contrasts running or flowing water (*liushui* 流水) with water that stands still, is perfectly flat, and calm. In Confucian literature, the stream of water is, on the contrary, a symbol of timelessness, eliciting feelings of awe at its ceaseless flow and admiration for its original clarity. “Water from an ample source,” said Mencius, “comes tumbling down, day and night without ceasing, going forward only after all the hollows are filled, and then draining into the sea. Anything that has a pristine source is like this” (“Lilou Xia” 離婁下; Lau 1970, 130–31). For its part, the stream of water links an original spring of pure and fresh water to an infinity of channels that constitute the water’s natural path and that always contain, in the form of sand and rock, the potential for pollution or obstruction of the natural flow.

Following Mencius, Wang used this metaphor to enlighten his students when he was sitting by a well next to a pond. “It is better to be a small body of water in a well which comes from a spring than a large body of water in a pond which comes from no source. The water in the well has the spirit of life that is inexhaustible” (Chan 1963, 48). The metaphor of the stream of water and way suggests the relatedness of all things—“the whole universe is lively and dynamic because of the same principle” (Chan 1963, 255), in the sense of coming from a single source (*Dao*) and of being penetrated by a single pure entity. Therefore, “The human mind is [as all-embracing and extensive as] heaven and it is [as deep and unceasingly-springing as an] abyss. The original substance of the mind contains everything. In reality it is the whole abyss” (Chan 1963, 199).

The concept of *xin* in Wang’s doctrine was modeled on water and on its subsidiary static or process metaphors. On the one hand, Wang, like Zhuangzi and the Chan masters, uses the image of still water to describe the original heart-mind of individuals (also see the Section 3.4 of this article “mirror polishing”: original heart-mind and spiritual cultivation”). On the other hand,

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5 Donald Munro explains that “static” means that movement or change, especially between poles, is not among the most significant aspects in descriptions of the image or in any account of the facts to which it applies; alternatively, in the case of a “process” metaphor, movement or change is an important feature (Munro 1988, 34–35).
using the process metaphor of the stream which flows from a pristine spring and passes through all living things, he harmonizes conflicting ideas and beliefs about *xin* and *liangzhi*. Moreover, compared with the Daoist likening of the passive and reflective mind to a mirror and to still water, the Confucian concept likens heart-mind to flowing water—alive, active, and moving freely, finding its own course. In Wang’s theoretical system, this process metaphor of flowing water communicates the potentially equal worth of all living things, as well as empathy and the persistent purity of the “source” as it exists within each thing. At the same time it also suggests an obligation to moral practice, namely, to “extend innate knowledge (*zhī liangzhì* 致良知)”:

One must exert the effort to extend innate knowledge at all times before one can be extremely lively and dynamic like that stream of water. If there is a moment of interruption, one will not be as extremely lively as Heaven and Earth. This is the height of learning. (Chan 1963, 213)

The juxtaposition of static and process water metaphors in Wang’s works also paradoxically places the function of knowing and feeling in the heart-mind. By observing these different subsidiary metaphors of water (source, pool, stream, channel, waterway, etc.), we also see aspects of the ancient Chinese concept of heart-mind, such as tranquility, quiescence (*jīng* 靜) and activity (*dōng* 動), substance (*tǐ* 體) and function (*yòng* 用), knowledge/cognition (*zhī* 知) and emotion/feeling (*qíng* 情), Dao-mind (*Dà xīn* 道心) and human-mind (*rén xīn* 人欲), and the tension between the Heavenly Principle (*tiān lǐ* 天理) and human desires (*rén yù* 人欲).

In ancient Chinese traditions, even when using these subsidiary metaphors of water, there are thus various, occasionally even oppositional, theories of the heart-mind. Wang Yangming’s systematic philosophy concerning the heart-mind is obviously a creative mix of various theories from the three teachings.

### 3.2 “Kernel in Its Husk” and “Sprouts”: *Xìng* (Human Nature) within the Heart-Mind

As has been discussed, the heart-mind is like a pond of still water or like a pristine spring, but—according to Mencius, at least—it also has “sprouts” within it. Mencius is well known for his doctrines of *liangzhi* and *siduān* (四端, the four sprouts of moral sense).

In characterizing *xin* as the seed of a tree or grain, Mencius described the “mind/heart-environment” relation as similar to that between barley seeds and various soils and rains. The natural moral sprouts of the heart-mind, namely
*liangzhi*, require cultivation to promote a course of development akin to that experienced by all cosmic life processes. There is a good example of such usage in *Wang’s* work:

Here is our innate knowledge (*liang zhi*) today. We should extend it to the utmost according to what we know today. As our innate knowledge is further developed tomorrow, we should extend it to the utmost according to what we know then ... When the tree has sprouted only a little, give it a little water. As the sprout grows, give it more water. From the time that the tree stem can be encircled by the fingers of one hand and then by those of two hands to the time when it can be encircled by both arms, the watering should be done according to its capacity to absorb. Suppose there is but a small sprout and here is a pail of water. If all the water is poured over it, it will be drenched to death. (Chan 1963, 200–1)

Since these four sprouts are only found in people and not in any other creatures, Confucians defined *human nature* (*xing* 性) as the possession of these sprouts, and described *ren* (仁, humaneness) as their natural tendency. Therefore, Confucian rulers must nurture their sprouts of virtue (*de duan* 德端) so that they might nourish the heart-minds of the people, as water nourishes plant life.

We can easily find many cases in Neo-Confucianism where the growth of a plant is used as a metaphor for human nature. For *Wang*, the metaphor of the cultivated plant became a central conceptual metaphor rather than an incidental illustration or an explanatory device. For instance:

Compared to the tree, the mind with sincere filial piety is the root, whereas the offshoots are the leaves and branches. One does not seek to find leaves and branches and then cultivate the root. *The Book of Rites* says, “A filial son who loves his parents deeply is sure to have a peaceful disposition. Having a peaceful disposition, he will surely have a happy expression. And having a happy expression, he will surely have a pleasant countenance.” There must be deep love as the root and then the rest will naturally follow like this. (Chan 1963, 8)

*Wang* employed the plant metaphor to link the development of the moral sense and human nature with cosmic processes of change. The plant suggests the value of growth and the duty of nurture, and reveals that change occurs in

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6 Ivanhoe (2000) has always emphasized the foundational role of metaphors in characterizing early Confucian conceptions of human nature and self-cultivation, and his analysis of these concepts is informed by careful attention to the details of the metaphors.
stages, as with a plant’s growth from seed to bud to blossom to fruit. Moreover, by speaking of the mind as being like a seed of grain that contains the principle (li) of life, namely ren (humaneness, though it literally means “kernel in its husk”), Wang was making the point that the growth process to completion is present in the heart-mind as potentiality, just as life lies hidden or dormant in the plant during winter, or hidden in the seed before branches and leaves blossom forth. The plant metaphor introduces the idea of stages of change and suggests the relation of nurture to endless growth, and provided Wang with a justification for the value of ceaseless self-realization. Nurture facilitates the transition from one stage to the next in the growth process, which is conceived as a cycle.

Wang speaks of “education” (jiaohua 教化), in the particular sense of the German “Bildung,” as being for everyone, implying the equal perfectibility of all human beings. Furthermore, “The task of the school was solely to perfect virtue” (Chan 1963, 119):

Like plants beginning to sprout, if they are allowed to grow freely, they will develop smoothly. If twisted and interfered with, they will wither and decline. In teaching young boys today, we must make them lean toward rousing themselves so that they will be happy and cheerful at heart, and then nothing can check their development. As in the case of plants, if nourished by timely rain and spring wind, they will all sprout, shoot up, and flourish, and will naturally grow by sunlight and develop under the moon. If ice and frost strip them of leaves, their spirit of life will be dissipated and they will gradually dry up. (Chan 1963, 183)

Human nature is, therefore, what human beings are, in accordance with their nature; it is “that which is needed” or “what ought to be” according to their nature, and thus it is also what they “ought to do” according to their nature. To Wang Yangming and other Confucians, human nature can no longer be understood as something ready-made: “Who has no roots? Innate knowledge is man’s root which is intelligent and is grown by nature. It naturally grows and grows without cease. It is only because some people are afflicted by the trouble of selfishness and injure and obstruct it that it cannot grow” (Chan 1963, 210).

Wang was convinced that “our nature is the substance of the mind and Heaven is the source of our nature,” and that “preserving the mind, nourishing one’s nature, and serving Heaven are the acts of those who learn them through study and practice them for their advantage” (Chan 1963, 13). It unfolds as a continuous process of becoming. As Liu Liangjian points out, human nature is in a state of growth, growing and maturing daily. Thus, human nature is neither ready-made nor determined at the moment of birth; it is neither fully formed at
the moment it is received nor unchanging up to the moment of death. On the contrary, it has not yet become something, but it is becoming and is pending completion (Liu 2013, 73). This is all to say that human nature is not complete, and must complete itself; the human being himself or herself must go out and complete it. In achieving one’s own nature, a human being is always completing itself, and incomplete.

3.3 “Always Shining”: Liangzhi (Innate Knowledge) within the Heart-Mind

Wang Yangming also describes the heart-mind as a place made bright by the Dao, and the principles (li) or the original nature within it: “Our original nature is purely good. What cannot be obscured in it is the manifestation of the highest good and of the nature of illustrious virtue (ming de 明德), and is also what I call liang zhi.” Furthermore, “The mind is the master of the body, and the pure intelligence and clear consciousness (xu ling ming jue 虛靈明覺) of the mind are liang zhi” (Liu 2013, 104).

To Wang, illustrious virtue or innate knowledge is simply the original nature of our mind; like a bright lamp or candle, it is able to illuminate things: “it is what I have just referred to as that which is always shining (heng zhao 恒照)” (Liu 2013, 132). Wang also uses the metaphor of light in his doctrinal statements, treating the heart-mind as similar to a light source in its capacity to clarify the principles of things; it is “always shining” and reflects things as they come without being stirred:

The shining mind is not active because it arises from the natural state of the original substance’s clear consciousness and there is no effort to be active [to stir it]. To stir it would make the mind erroneous. The erroneous mind also shines, because the natural state of the original substance’s clear consciousness is always present in it, but it is in fact stirred. If not stirred, it will shine. (Chan 1963, 140)

To Wang, innate knowledge is “the original substance of the heart-mind,” “the principle of nature,” and “the pure intelligence and clear consciousness of the Heavenly Principle” (Wang 2010, 67, 203). In this sense, he believes that even the small man has his heavenly nature, namely innate knowledge, the light of which cannot be obscured. Knowledge is the original substance of the heart-mind; the heart-mind is naturally able to know. All of us, whether good or bad, fundamentally have the same clear heart-mind, which can never be wholly obscured by our selfishness, and which always manifests itself in our immediate intuitive reaction to things.
Various pre-Song Confucian explanations of liangzhi as light include the belief that knowledge is of something non-empirical, that it is achieved through meditative practices as quiet-sitting (jingzuo 靜坐), and that its ultimate goal is comprehensive and total understanding. For example, a lamp placed in the middle of a room can project light onto a single object, or, in the case of complete and total knowledge, light up and illuminate everything in the whole room, leaving no place for bad things to hide. On occasion, Wang shifts to other related, subsidiary metaphors as explanations of xin and liang zhi—namely, the metaphors of the sun, a lamp, a candle, and even a bright mirror—but in every case the pictorial image invoked is that of a light source that “illuminates things (zhao wu 照物).” For instance, he says,

The knowledge of the sage is comparable to the sun in the clear sky, that of the worthy to the sun in the sky with floating clouds, and that of the stupid person to the sun on a dark, dismal day. Although the three kinds of knowledge differ in darkness or clearness, they are the same in the fact that they can distinguish between black and white. Even in a dark night one can tell black and white in a hazy way, which shows that sunlight has not entirely disappeared. The task of learning through study or hard work is nothing other than examining things carefully with this trace of light as the starting point. (Chan 1963, 228)

Western Zhou bronze inscriptions speak of “ming xin zhe de 明心哲德,” namely “clarifying the heart-mind and revealing the de”; thus, we know that the heart-mind had always been construed as the receptacle or container of various de, for example the dark virtue (xuan de 玄德) of the Daodejing or the illustrious virtue (ming de 明德) of the Daxue. However, according to Laozi’s teaching, all virtues come only from following the Dao. For him, the Dao is the only light source. In Wang Yangming’s philosophy, by the “Dao-mind is meant innate knowledge,” and he even suggests that the “Dao is innate knowledge”; therefore, “To follow your nature is called Dao. This refers to the Dao-mind. Because it involves some selfish ideas, it becomes the human-mind” (Chan 1963, 112, 218, 212). The ordinary man is not free from the obstruction of selfish ideas, though, and he therefore requires the effort involved in the extension of knowledge (zhizhi 致知) and the investigation of things (gewu 格物) if he is to overcome selfish ideas and restore principle. Only then will the heart-mind’s faculty of innate knowledge no longer be obstructed, but rather be able to penetrate and operate everywhere (Chan 1963, 15).

Moreover, Wang’s doctrine of xin and liangzhi is intended to reflect his belief in the desirability of the individual’s participatory engagement with the world.
“For at bottom Heaven, Earth, the myriad things, and man form one body. The point at which this unity is manifested in its most refined and excellent form is the clear intelligence (ling ming 灵明) of the human mind” (Chan 1963, 221–22). Wang introduces the metaphor of light projected from a source onto an object. This light makes “cognitive awareness (zhijue 知觉)” possible, which is a higher functioning of the heart-mind involving comprehension of li or Heavenly Principle (tianli 天理), something which children are not capable of because their minds are undeveloped:

The original substance [of the heart-mind] knows nothing and yet knows everything. From the beginning it is like this. For example, the sun does not purposely shine on anything and yet there is nothing it does not shine on. Not [purposely to] shine and yet shining on everything is characteristic of the original substance of the sun. Innate knowledge originally knows nothing and now we want it to know. Originally it knows everything and now we suspect that there is something is does not know. This is because we have not sufficient confidence in it. (Chan 1963, 225)

Wang treats the heart-mind of each person as a self-illuminating light source, not as a mere passive receptor. Like a bright lamp or candle, liangzhi is always able to illuminate things. This theory concerns the links between the subjective knower and what he knows. Wang inherited these associations from his early Daoist, Buddhist, and Neo-Confucian predecessors, and used them as tools to explain the heart-mind’s function of cognition. Using the metaphor of light, he subtly solves the separation problem in his philosophy of heart-mind. He shares with the early Daoists the idea that the sage’s mind is without prejudice, though in his case it is free of the selfish interests that distract his response from according with his moral standard. At the same time, like Zhu Xi and other earlier Neo-Confucians—not to mention many philosophers of the European Enlightenment—Wang has a theoretical and practical difficulty to resolve: the problem of self-discovery and a reliance on objective authority, which reveals a tension between self-enlightenment (juewu 觉悟) and enlightenment by good rulers or scholars.

To Wang, enlightenment is effected only by the heart-mind, which is its own enlightenment, shining forth by itself; tianli is light, standing in relation to the heart-mind as light does to its source. One can become an actual sage if one follows the dictates of one’s innate knowledge of the good and acts accordingly, or if—in Wang’s terminology—one extends one’s innate knowledge. The process of internal illumination, namely self-enlightenment, thus has both sudden and gradual aspects (Gregory 1987). Wang describes the result as the increasing of
light, as when one widens a hole through which light flows. Such light is crucial to the gradually maturing self.

3.4 “Mirror Polishing”: The Original Heart-Mind and Gongfu (Spiritual Cultivation)

Wang envisions the heart-mind as a light source, such as a candle or even a bright mirror resembling the sun. These meanings are manifest in the double meaning of the verb zhao (照), which simultaneously means “to illuminate” and “to reflect.” “It is like a bright mirror. It is entirely clear, without a speck of dust attached to it” (Wang 2010, 1, 25). Thus, the heart-mind, like a bright mirror, illuminates the principle in an external thing and also effects an equally bright “reflected” image of it in the heart-mind. The original mind is vacuous (i.e. devoid of selfish desires), intelligent, and not beclouded; at the same time, the Heavenly Principle within the heart-mind, i.e. humaneness, is like the brightness of the mirror. The Heaven Principle is eternally preserved, “and his original state of brilliant perceptiveness is never diminished or obscured, never led astray or confused” (Wang 2010, 25).

It is worth noting that, as mentioned above, the mirror-as-mind metaphor was first found not in Confucian texts, but in early Daoist and certain Buddhist texts. The earliest known uses of the metaphor of the heart-mind as a mirror are found in the Zhuangzi: “Perfect Persons use their heart-minds like mirrors, going after nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing” (Watson 2013, 59). The mirror metaphor later appears in Han dynasty Daoist sources to explain the clear heart-mind of the sage, which reflects all things without prejudice or desire. Early Chinese Buddhist literature often also invokes the mirror (along with dreams and the moon in water) to illustrate the illusory character of sensible things. During the Song and Ming dynasties, Neo-Confucian scholars began to adopt the mirror metaphor, using it to express the peace of the heart-mind, in particular the relation between reducing desires and heightening the heart-mind’s clarity. The ben xin, originally a Chan Buddhist term, also came to be used by the Neo-Confucians of the Lu-Wang School of Mind.

In Wang’s time mirrors were made of bronze, which took time to clear and polish. If a mirror is dark, how can it illuminate things? Wang said, “But after you polish it, then its brilliance can illuminate things again” (Wang, 1992, 1131). It is because it is covered by desire that its brightness is easily clouded over. By using the metaphor of the mirror to illuminate the relationship between ti (substance) and yong (function), and the metaphor of mirror-polishing (mojing

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7 Adapted from Watson (2013, section 7, 59).
磨鏡) to describe the practice of spiritual cultivation, Wang presented views that were already somewhat different from those of Zhu Xi, though he inherited many of the metaphors crucial to Zhu’s explanations within Neo-Confucianism. Wang’s disciple Xu Yueren (徐曰仁) summarizes below his master’s doctrine of the mind-as-mirror, subtly comparing it with Zhu’s:

The heart-mind is like a mirror. The sage’s heart-mind is like a clear mirror, whereas that of the ordinary person is like a dull mirror. The theory of the investigation of things in recent times says that it works like a mirror reflecting things and the effort is to be directed toward the [passive] role of reflecting. They don’t realize that the mirror is still dull. How can it reflect? The investigation of things in our Teacher’s theory is like polishing the mirror to make it clear. The effort is to be directed toward the [active] role of polishing. When the mirror is clear, it does not cease to reflect. (Wang 2010, 22)

Although “mind-as-mirror” and “mirror-polishing” are metaphorical expressions, they nonetheless have crucial bearing on the essential problematic of Wang’s philosophy of the heart-mind. Polishing, in the sense of removing prior prejudices and selfish interests, helps to clarify matters that are already known, especially intuitive moral rules or goals. In Wang’s usage, the metaphor of the mirror has two implications: that 体 (ti) and 神 (yong) derive from the same origin, and that 本体 (substance) and 功夫 (practice) are united in harmony. To Wang, the principle and the heart-mind are one. In his writings, then, the meaning of the metaphor of the mirror was extended to accommodate a new emphasis, i.e. that the heart-mind is in unity with the Heavenly Principle, and that it has a “norm-creating” function. In Wang’s words, “A bright mind is to acting without error as bright sunshine is to walking without stumbling” (Wang 1992, 103). Wang’s disciple Wang Longxi (王龍溪) described the transcendental state of his master’s later years as follows: “Whenever he broke silence, his original heart-mind was spontaneously manifested just as the shining of the sun in the sky in which all things are clear” (Huang 1985, 263).

In his early years, Wang Yangming mentioned that the 功夫 of self-cultivation refers to practices of meditation and of mental concentration (敬, seriousness, or reverential concentration), but he later argued that “training and polishing in the actual affairs of life (事上磨炼)” enable the heart-mind to move directly into its proper role upon encountering environmental stimuli. This is the “internal” aspect of becoming a sage, the method by which the mirror is “polished” so that its light can project forth. On a cosmic level, it is awareness that all knowledge is integrated and that gradual enlightenment about all principles is possible: “The light in the mind can penetrate everywhere.” The
The heart-mind as mirror is self-illuminating and passive, and only loses its brightness when obstructed. It is vulnerable to distortion by defilements, which in Chan Buddhist terminology are called “dust (chen 墜).”

In any case, the mirror metaphor always implicitly recognizes the existence of objects “out there.” Wang Yangming’s doctrine of the heart-mind also needs the support that the other root metaphors—among them light, lamp, and sun—can provide to convincingly illustrate what such abstractions as ending “the division between the internal and external” might involve. Moreover, the plant metaphor explains xin as something alive that exercises its vitality in regular emotional responses; the light of liangzhi guides the growth of those sentiments into correct expression. Later on, as Wang’s followers pondered the negative consequences of the popularization of their Master’s thought, they also developed new elucidations and critiques of the mind-as-mirror metaphor (see Chen 2009, Deng 2007, Bao 2012). This development constituted an important moment in the history of the Wang school of thought. Accordingly, a genealogical and comparative study of issues related to these root metaphors will give us a more comprehensive understanding of the features and development of Wang’s philosophy of heart-mind.

4 Conclusion

In contrast to Zhu Xi and the other Neo-Confucians, who never forgot that Buddhism was a foreign import, Wang Yangming has never been criticized for saying that the “three teachings” (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism) were essentially the same. He sincerely believed the general idea that different terms simply served to highlight different aspects of a single entity was correct, whether it ultimately came from Buddhism or Neo-Confucianism (which arose in

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8 Similarly, with the title of the book The Mirror and the Lamp, Meyer Howard Abrams identifies two common and antithetic metaphors of mind in romantic theory and the critical tradition, one comparing the mind to a reflector of external objects, the other to a radiant projector which makes a contribution to the objects it perceives. The first of these was characteristic of much thought from Plato through to the eighteenth century; the second typifies the prevailing romantic conception of the poetic mind. Abrams pointed out that the metaphorical transfer, namely the change from imitation to expression, and from the mirror to the fountain, the lamp, and related analogues, was not an isolated phenomenon. The changing metaphors of mind were an integral part of a corresponding change in popular epistemology — that is, in the concept of the role played by the mind in perception which was current among romantic poets and critics. And the movement from the eighteenth- to the early nineteenth-century schemes of the mind and its place in nature is indicated by a mutation of metaphors almost exactly parallel to that in contemporary discussions of the nature of art (Abrams 1971, 57).
response to the challenge from Neo-Daoism and Buddhism during the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties). Wang’s doctrine of the heart-mind had many similarities with Chan Buddhist ideas and has been attacked because of this for centuries, but his final goal of spiritual cultivation, namely “forming one body with all things (wanwu yiti 萬物一體)”, and his basic value of “ren” (humanity, humaneness) are typically Confucian.

By using this new methodology, Wang’s attempts to harmonize several ancient traditions concerning the heart-mind are revealed. While they may appear possibly contradictory to modern readers, they did not seem so to the Neo-Confucians. In Wang’s doctrine, the four root metaphors of water, plant, mirror, and light contribute to the peace of the heart-mind by providing all phenomena with a structure that explains their interrelation. Therefore, clarifying Wang’s ideas of xin and liangzhi by a study of his root metaphors is an important step toward explaining his further conceptions of the human world. This study of such root metaphors is thus neither self-defeating nor merely hairsplitting: it is rather an attempt to relive the historical changes and controversies of thought in pre-modern China.

Behind these changing metaphors is a progressively radical understanding of the heart-mind and its functions in Chinese philosophy. The surfacing of submerged metaphors puts certain old facts into a new and revealing perspective. As this inquiry indicates, a number of concepts that help clarify the nature of humanity and the world were not found simply in the examination of abstract facts, but rather emerged from the exploration of serviceable imageries whose properties were, by metaphorical transfer or through the changing metaphors of the heart-mind, predicated on the nature of various doctrines. Because each key metaphor is associated exclusively with a particular theory (or set of theories), the appearance of multiple metaphors within one systematic philosophy—e.g. Wang Yangming’s—can reveal much about the mix of theories it contains.

The root metaphors discussed here are especially significant because they reveal what is original in a philosopher’s works, if the philosopher is indeed creative and has new ideas requiring explanation. These qualifications notwithstanding, the metaphors can and do show differences in nuance which would otherwise be inexpressible through the concepts of the heart-mind.

At the same time, however, root metaphors can limit a philosopher’s ability to probe the creative characteristics of the human world that do not conform to the metaphors. This phenomenon recalls Thomas Kuhn’s insights into the way that some scientific paradigms can inhibit the acquisition of new knowledge (Kuhn 1996). The primary reason for the misuse of such metaphors is the philosopher’s lack of limitations on their use. This can be illustrated with several Neo-Confucian metaphors, and especially some borrowings from Buddhism and Daoism, e.g. the misuse of the metaphor of the mirror-as-mind and the resultant
failure of illustrious illusion or bright vision (guangjing 光景) in moral spiritual cultivation (see Ngoi 2000; Bao 2012). At best, some metaphors can explain certain specific aspects of given sets of facts concerning the example of the heart-mind, yet might lull one into thinking that they explain everything about these facts.

Mindful of the potential dangers of the influence of such root metaphors on thought, a systematic and meticulous study can at least be on guard when evaluating Wang Yangming’s arguments concerning xin and liangzhi, and his own use of such metaphors. This is one virtue of studying them. Awareness of their shortcomings does not cancel out their positive functions.

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