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<i>Module Code: SICH4007</i> <i>Module title: Sinological English I: A History of Chinese Classical Scholarship</i>	<i>Student number: 2015604</i>
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The two Interpretations of 明明德 Ming mingde and 親民 Qinmin from 朱熹 Zhu Xi and 王陽明 Wang Yangming

1. Introduction

明明德 (Ming mingde) and 親民 (Qinmin) are two important concepts in The Great Learning. This report will compare the interpretations of these two terms by two famous philosophers in ancient China: 朱熹 Zhu Xi and 王陽明 Wang Yangming, and analyse how they understand the two terms, and the reasons behind the differences in their interpretations.

2. Comparison of the Two Interpretations

2.1 Interpretations of 明明德 Ming mingde by 朱熹 Zhu Xi and 王陽明 Wang Yangming

Zhu Xi's interpretation

According to Sishu Zhangju Jizhu 四書章句集注, Zhu Xi believes that the luminous virtue (Mingde) is gets from Heaven. It includes the principles of everything, and within it we can find the way to respond to all things. However, it is obscured by selfish desires, so the brightness of the luminous virtue cannot be manifested. ¹

In Zhuzi Yulei 朱子語類, Zhu Xi's opinion is that people originally possess Mingde. It is like no child does not know to love his parents and brother, this analogy comes from the Mencius. Ming mingde is the act of restoring the conscience that has been obstructed by selfish desires.²

¹ Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of chinese tradition*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). p725.

² Shidian guji 識典古籍, *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 <<https://www.shidianguji.com/>> [accessed 15 June 2025]

Zhu Xi used an example: he likens our virtue to a mirror. The mirror, when covered with dust, is like our virtue being obscured. The dust refers to our selfish desires. Once we remove the dust—just like removing selfish desires—the mirror will be able to reflect everything clearly, just as our luminous virtue will be restored.³

From the perspective of the history of classical learning in the Song dynasty, in Zhu Xi's interpretation, Ming mingde includes the principles of everything. This kind of interpretation is related to his research on Neo-Confucianism. Zhu Xi's thinking was influenced by Cheng Yi 程頤 of the Northern Song dynasty. In Zhu Xi's Zhongyong Zhangju 中庸章句, it is recorded that "nature is principle" 性即理也. Zhu Xi believes that everything has principles, and it is important to understand them. These principles are included in Mingde. When we manifest our luminous virtue, we can discover the principles contained within it, and through them, respond to everything appropriately.

Zhu Xi's interpretive method approaches Ming mingde from the angle of principle, explaining the reasoning behind it and why Ming mingde becomes obscured. Ming mingde is something we receive from Heaven—it is not far from us, because we originally possess it. This can increase the reader's confidence in restoring their own Mingde, and encourage them to reflect on the wonders of virtue, such as being "replete with all the principles by which one responds to the myriad things and affairs 具眾理而應萬事"⁴ It can also inspire curiosity about the state of manifested Mingde. This interpretation is accessible to general readers who may not yet understand the concept of Ming mingde.

Wang Yangming' s Interpretation

According to Chuanxilu 傳習錄, Wang Yangming' s view is that whether it is the "extension of knowledge," the "bringing of peace to the world," or even "loving the

³ Shidian guji, *Zhuzi yulei*.

⁴ Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of chinese tradition*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). p725.

people”⁵, all of these are related to Ming mingde. Mingde is the virtue of our mind—it is humanity. He believed that “The man of humanity regards Heaven and Earth and all things as one body. If a single thing is deprived of its place, it means that my humanity is not yet demonstrated to the fullest extent.”⁶

In Daxuewen 大學問, Wang Yangming mentioned that “To manifest the clear character is to bring about the substance of the state of forming one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things.”⁷

In Wang Yangming’s opinion, manifesting luminous virtue is to extend this virtue. He used filial piety as an example to illustrate how to manifest the virtue of filial piety—not only by loving our own parents, but also by loving others and all people’s parents in the world. In this way, our humanity truly becomes one body with our parents, others, and all people’s parents.⁸

Mr. Chen translated “一體” as “one body.” We could find another way to understand this word: all things in Heaven and Earth form a unified whole with our mind. Since luminous virtue is humanity—it is the virtue of the mind—to fulfill this virtue is to realize this kind of humanity: treating all things as one body, one unity. If even one thing loses its place, it means that humanity has not been fully realized, and luminous virtue has not been fully manifested. Unlike Zhu Xi’s search for principle, Wang Yangming emphasized the unity of mind and principle. Therefore, he interpreted Mingde as the virtue of the mind.

⁵ WING-TSIT CHAN, *Instructions For Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-Ming* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1963), p.55.

⁶ WING-TSIT CHAN, *Instructions For Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-Ming*, p.55.

⁷ WING-TSIT CHAN, *A Source Book In Chinese Philosophy* (USA: Princeton University Press, 1963), p.660.

⁸ WING-TSIT CHAN, *A Source Book In Chinese Philosophy*, p.660.

Wang Yangming' s interpretation explained Mingde from a deeper perspective and from more angles. For instance, he believed that Mingde is humanity, and humanity is the virtue of our mind. He no longer interpreted Mingde as an individual or isolated concept, but saw that everything has its own way of manifesting Mingde, and that it can be applied to anything. When readers encounter Wang Yangming' s interpretation, they may be able to find ways to fulfill and manifest Mingde, this makes the interpretation of Mingde more meaningful and practical.

The main differences between Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming' s interpretations of Ming mingde are as follows:

Zhu Xi interpreted it from the angle of reasoning, while Wang Yangming interpreted it from the angle of the mind. Zhu Xi used examples to illustrate what Ming mingde is, how to restore it, and why it becomes obscured. Wang Yangming, on the other hand, emphasized that Ming mingde is humanity, and explained how to extend this humanity to all relationships and all things in Heaven and Earth, making them become one body.

2.2 Interpretations of 親民 (Qinmin) by 朱熹 (Zhu Xi) and 王陽明 (Wang Yangming)

Zhu Xi's interpretation

According to Sishu Zhangju Jizhu (四書章句集注), Zhu Xi follows 程頤 Cheng Yi's view that the character “親” (qin), meaning “to be kind,” should actually be “新” (xin), meaning “to renew.” He explained that “to renew” means to reform the old. It means that once one has clearly manifested his own clear and bright virtue, he should extend it to others so that they too can do away with the stain of earlier soiling.’⁹

⁹ Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of chinese tradition*, p725-726.

Zhu Xi's interpretation of Ming mingde emphasizes manifesting our own luminous virtue, while Qinmin is about extending this to others—to reform the old. The significance of this interpretation is that it reminds leaders, or anyone, to first achieve virtue themselves before leading others to do the same. The priority is logical: first Ming mingde, then Qinmin.

Zhu Xi mentioned how to identify the authenticity of ancient texts in *Huianji* 晦庵集. One of the methods is to think, “Whether their meaning conforms to reason”¹⁰ According to the concept of “principle over text,” this explains why Master Cheng and Zhu Xi changed the text from “Qinmin” to “Xinmin.”

Wang Yangming's Interpretation

Wang Yangming disagreed with Zhu Xi. He said, “The word ‘新’ (xin) in the phrase ‘arouse the people to become new (xin) means the people become new themselves.”¹¹ He used several sentences from *The Great Learning* as evidence to argue that “親” (qin) in these sentences means “love” rather than “to renew.” He believed that Qinmin has two meanings: educating the people and feeding the people. Using “Xinmin” to mean renovating the people is one-sided. Wang Yangming believed that loving the people is included in Ming mingde, saying, “Loving the people is to put into universal operation the function of the state of forming one body.”¹²

In Wang Yangming's conception, Ming mingde and Qinmin are inseparable: Ming mingde is the substance, and Qinmin is the practice. He mentioned the two meanings of Qinmin: educating people and feeding people. This is a limitation in Zhu Xi's interpretation, and it reminds leaders that while they focus on reforming the people, it is equally important to pay attention to people's real lives.

¹⁰ Original text is “義理之所當否” , from Zhu Xi, translation from Prof. William Yau-nang NG's Class.

¹¹ WING-TSIT CHAN, *Instructions For Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-Ming*, p.6.

¹² WING-TSIT CHAN, *A Source Book In Chinese Philosophy*, p.660.

The main differences between Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming's interpretations of Qinmin are as follows:

Zhu Xi changed the original text, Wang Yangming explain that Qinmin means loving the people and should not be changed to "Xinmin." Because Zhu Xi focused on the reasoning of the text, he chose to interpret Qinmin differently from the original text, while Wang Yangming preferred to interpret it according to the original text. This difference reflects the distinctive features of their interpretations.

3. Conclusion

The two interpretations show two different interpretive methods, which relate to their different historical backgrounds. Zhu Xi's method seeks principles, while Wang Yangming's method interprets the connection between the mind and the substance of the concept, and finds ways to practice it. Although Zhu Xi's interpretation is clear, it is somewhat one-sided. Wang Yangming's interpretation is more comprehensive; it helps me understand the concept more deeply and apply it in practice, such as fulfilling humanity in our relationships. This reflects the thinking of Mencius, "A gentleman is affectionate to his parents and relatives, so he is benevolent to the people." 親親而仁民¹³. Overall, I prefer Wang Yangming's interpretations.

From the perspective of the history of classical learning, Zhu Xi's ideology of Neo-Confucianism and Wang Yangming's philosophy of mindfulness (心學) can be clearly seen in their interpretations of the text. For example, Zhu Xi believed in "principle over text," while Wang Yangming advocated the unity of mind and action. Both of them place emphasis on different aspects, and their interpretations can offer enlightenment to future generations from different angles. Reasoning and the mind should be given equal importance—this is the inspiration we gain from comparing their interpretations.

¹³ Translated into English by Zhao Zhen Tao 趙甄陶, Zhang Wenting 張文庭 Zhou Dingzhi 周定之, *Mencius*, (Hunan: Hunan People's Publishing House, 1999), p.314.

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