



Undergraduate assignment feedback form
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<i>Module title:</i> Sinological English I: A History of Chinese Classical Scholarship	
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Two Different Interpretations of *Gewu* 格物 and *Zhizhi* 致知 by Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming

Gewu and *zhizhi* are two important concepts found in *The Great Learning*. However, there have been significantly different interpretations of these concepts throughout history. This essay will explore two interpretations—those by Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, the two most influential philosophical figures in East Asia over the past thousand years.

1. Zhu Xi's interpretation of *gewu* and *zhizhi*

Zhu Xi's definition was the most widespread interpretation. It was given in *the Collected Commentaries of the Four Books in Chapters and Sentences* (*Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集註):

‘*Zhi* 致 is equivalent to *tui ji* 推極 (extend to the limit). *Zhi* 知 is like *shi* 識 (to know, be acquainted with). Extending to the limit what I know is to wish what I know to be without limit (absolutely exhaustive). *Ge* 格 is equivalent to *zhi* 至 (to reach, arrive at, extend). *Wu* 物 is like *shi* 事 (matters, affairs). To investigate thoroughly the principles of matters and things is to wish to reach this extreme point definitively.’¹

According to Zhu Xi, everything has its own underlying principle, and *gewu* refers to careful investigation of things to uncover that principle. He believed there is essentially one universal principle—the law of the world—endowed by Heaven and nature. When this principle is manifested in individual things, it appears in various forms, giving rise to different principles in each object or matter in appearance. The aim of *gewu* is to uncover the underlying principles within everything—whether interacting with others, managing human relationships, handling affairs, studying the classics, or even observing the broader natural world, such as Heaven and earth, the sun and moon, stars, animals and plants.

Since Zhu Xi believed this principle is endowed by Heaven, it is inherently known by our innate nature. Through persistent effort in investigating things and gradually extending this process to encompass all aspects of the world, one can accumulate and develop their understanding of the principles. Over time, this continuous effort may lead to a moment of profound realisation—what Zhu Xi called a ‘breakthrough to integral comprehension.’² This

¹ Ian Johnston and Wang Ping, *Daxue and Zhongyong Bilingual Edition* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong 2012), p. 139.

² Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition Vol I* (New York: Colombia University

is known as *zhizhi*.

At that point, the principle will be fully understood, and the original mind-heart (*benxin* 本心) will be clearly revealed. Zhu Xi also asserted that once this level is achieved, one's intentions will naturally become sincere and focused, and the mind will be rectified.³ This reflects his theory of self-cultivation, which follows a strict and sequential process where no step can be skipped. It also shows his emphasis on the investigation of things and principles.

2. Wang Yangming's interpretation of *gewu* and *zhizhi*

Learning from Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming's theory is primarily based on Zhu Xi's teaching. However, he eventually found Zhu Xi's approach unconvincing and difficult to put into practice, particularly after failing to discover the principle of bamboo, despite spending seven days investigating it. He's comprehension of *zhizhi*, then, is simply 'extending one's innate knowledge of the good to the utmost.'⁴ He explained the second character *zhi* 知 as 'the innate knowledge of the good', which, according to him, aligns with what Mencius described as the inherent human sense of right and wrong. He explained that this innate knowledge 'requires no deliberation to know, nor does it depend on learning to function. This is why it is called innate knowledge. It is my nature endowed by Heaven, the original substance of my mind, naturally intelligent, shining, clear, and understanding.'⁵

Wang believed that because this innate knowledge exists within everyone, whenever a thought or intention arises, this innate knowledge already makes a judgement about right and wrong. Even when committing a wrongful act, one's mind-heart is aware that it is wrong. Therefore, in Wang Yangming's view, *zhizhi* means allowing this innate knowledge to function as it originally should, guiding one's actions and movements.

As for *gewu*, he said,

'*Wu* is an event. For every emanation of the will there must be an event corresponding to it. The event to which the will is directed is the *wu*. *Ge* is to rectify. It is to rectify that which is incorrect so it can return to its original correctness. To rectify that which is not correct is to get rid of evil, and to return to correctness is to do good.'⁶

He regarded *gewu* as the practical implementation of *zhizhi*. Once the innate knowledge

Press, 1999), p. 729.

³ Original text is '蓋物格則理明，理明則誠一而心自正矣' from *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類. Translation is by myself. Chinese Text Project <<https://ctext.org/>> [accessed 24 June 2025].

⁴ Wing-tsit Chen, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 665.

⁵ Chen, *A Source Book*, p. 665.

⁶ Chen, *A Source Book*, pp. 665-666. (with modification)

discerns right from wrong, one can correct wrong actions and promote what is good through actual practices. In doing so, the innate knowledge will gradually be recovered. Therefore, *gewu* and *zhizhi* are complementary and form an inseparable, unified process.

There is a famous saying by Wang Yangming:

‘In the original mind-heart there is no distinction of good and evil.

When the intentions become active, however, such a distinction exists.

The function of innate knowing is to know good and evil.

The rectification of things is to do good and remove evil.’⁷

From his perspective, rectifying things (*gewu*) and extending innate knowledge (*zhizhi*), along with making intentions sincere, rectifying the mind and cultivating the self are essentially one unified process viewed from different aspects. He asserts that the mind is the master of the body, the intention is what arises from the mind, the original substance of the intention is the innate knowledge, and wherever the intention is directed is a thing.⁸ This illustrates Wang Yangming’s holistic view of self-cultivation, centred on the mind and intentions. All efforts of self-cultivation, therefore, aim to return to and restore the original mind-heart.

As there is a constant debate on the meaning of *gewu* and *zhizhi*, these terms are difficult to translate accurately. The common translations—‘investigation of things’ for *gewu* and ‘extension of knowledge’ for *zhizhi*—reflect the influential interpretation of Zhu Xi. However, these translations may overlook certain nuances. For example, the character *ge* 格 can also mean ‘to reach’ or ‘to attain’, a sense acknowledged even in Zhu Xi’s interpretation only. Additionally, the term ‘knowledge’ in English is often associated with learning information and skills. Yet in both Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming’s view, *zhizhi* is about the knowledge inherent in human nature.

3. Comparison of the two interpretations

The two explanations of *gewu* and *zhizhi* reveal fundamental differences between Zhu Xi’s and Wang Yangming’s ontology, epistemology and methodology.

Zhu Xi asserted that the principle is the nature of all beings, but it is obscured by material

⁷ De Bary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, p. 850. (with modification)

⁸ Wang Yangming 王陽明, *Instructions For Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-ming*, translated, with notes, by Wing-tsit Chan (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 14.

force (*qi* 氣). The purpose of *gewu zhizhi* is to recover this principle by working through the material force or human desire. This shows Zhu Xi's dualism. However, from Wang Yangming's belief that the mind-heart is the principle, and every phenomenon is a reflection of the mind-heart, it is clear that he held a monistic theory.

On the acquisition of knowledge, Zhu Xi argued that it requires effort from outside, although he believed that knowledge is inherent in human nature. It is an outside-in process—from investigating the principle of things to uncovering the Heavenly principle and luminous virtue originally possessed by every human being. Wang Yangming, however, disagreed with Zhu Xi's outward-looking view. He insisted that there is no truth or principles outside of the mind-heart, and that all knowledge is innate. This formed his idealism, in which he regarded all knowledge as moral and de-emphasised empirical knowledge.

In terms of methodology, Zhu Xi followed a strict sequence aligned with *the Great Learning*, involving a process of gradual accumulation. This may be due to his theory of principle and desire, which holds that eliminating desire requires constant efforts. In contrast, Wang Yangming advocated the unity of knowing, viewing them as an inseparable whole. This reflects his idealist stance and his belief that knowledge must be acquired through practice—it cannot be divorced from lived experience.

Overall, in the explanation of *gewu* and *zhizhi*, there are significant differences in theory, methodology, and practice. However, there is one similarity: their ultimate goal is the same—to recover the original luminous virtue.

4. Historical influence of the two interpretations

Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming's philosophies had a profound impact both during their lifetimes and long after their deaths. Zhu Xi's method of explaining classics with principles drove a significant trend from exegesis towards philosophical annotation, and it later developed into three major branches of classical studies: philosophical, evidential and philological scholarship. Furthermore, his compilation of the Four Books, later officially endorsed, elevated its position even higher than the Five Classics. As a result, Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism ideology became one of the most significant philosophical systems in Chinese history.

Three hundred years later, Wang Yangming offered a striking departure from the Zhu Xi's ideology. His promotion of looking inward to the mind-heart was initially intended to remedy the problem of Zhu's learning appearing at that time. This ultimately gave rise to the School of the Mind. His teaching on 'rectifying the mind', 'innate knowledge' and 'unity of knowing and

action' further emphasised the moral and ethical practices of classical learning. Wang Yangming's monistic ontology opened new horizons for later scholars and stimulated further philosophical reflection and discussion.

5. Conclusion

Through his interpretation of *gewu* and *zhizhi*, Zhu Xi promoted his theory of the principle and formed Neo-Confucianism. Wang Yangming's interpretation, however, was rooted more in personal experience. He moved beyond a purely textual framework and offered a more holistic perspective. Overall, both figures made profound contributions to Chinese philosophy.

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