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# The Educational Implications of Wang Yangming's Ecological View of 'Benevolence as the Unity of Heaven and Earth'—Based upon 'Inquiry on the Great Learning'

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**Abstract:** The relationship between heaven and humanity is one of the fundamental philosophical foundations of ecological ethics in ancient Chinese Confucian thought. As a master of Confucian philosophy of mind, Wang Yangming integrated the traditional Confucian discourse on the relationship between heaven and humanity into the principles of the philosophy of mind. Building on the traditional doctrine of benevolence centered on moral concern, he further developed an ecological view of 'benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth'. In his work *Inquiry on the Great Learning*, Wang Yangming systematically elaborated on this notion, emphasizing the philosophical expression of the relationship between humans and nature within an ethical framework and outlining the new implications of traditional Confucian ecological thought. This paper aims to analyze Wang Yangming's ecological view of 'benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth' by examining the ecological ideas in his *Inquiry on the Great Learning*. On this basis, it seeks to refine the valuable achievements of traditional Chinese ecological civilization thought and strengthen the theoretical foundation of contemporary ecological ideas with Chinese characteristics.

**Keywords:** Wang Yangming; benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth; ecological view; educational implications; *Inquiry on the Great Learning*

## 1. Introduction

'Inquiry on the Great Learning', as the culminating work of Wang Yangming's later years, provides a systematic elucidation of the central framework and major accomplishments of his philosophy of mind. Within this text, Wang's discourse on the relationship between heaven and humanity can be principally summarized by the notion of 'benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth'. In this formulation, he creatively integrates the natural order of the cosmos with the moral and ethical order of human society, thereby incorporating the cultivation of a harmonious relationship between humans and nature into the very domain of benevolence and righteousness.

From the perspectives of mind-nature theory, cosmology, and ontology, Wang Yangming accomplishes a philosophical articulation of traditional Confucian benevolence in conjunction with ecological thought. Since the mind is understood as the origin of all things, the 'mind of heaven and earth' as the ultimate source of existence and the 'mind of benevolence and righteousness' as the source of morality are fundamentally homologous. On this basis arises the philosophy-of-mind principle of 'benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth', which naturally extends into an ecological vision of the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature. The 'mind of heaven and earth' is that upon which all beings depend for their existence, while the 'mind of benevolence and righteousness' is that upon which human beings rely for moral life. Accordingly, the realization of an ideal ecology of harmony



between humans and nature becomes both the fundamental motivation and the essential content of the sage's and noble person's cultivation of benevolence and righteousness.

'Inquiry on the Great Learning' takes the 'Three Guiding Principles and Eight Steps' from the 'Great Learning' as its argumentative point of departure and theoretical foundation. Within this framework, graded love is posited as a necessary principle of the ecological vision, the unity of knowledge and action as a guiding norm for natural practice, and education as the proper path for transmitting natural wisdom. From Wang Yangming's perspective on benevolence, moral concern extends to all things between heaven and earth, thereby rendering the connotation of 'benevolence' infinitely expansive and giving rise to the educational significance of an ecological conception of benevolence.

The development of Wang Yangming's ecological thought during the mid-Ming Dynasty responded to a context of growing political centralization, commercial expansion, and scholarly debate over Zhu Xi's rationalist Neo-Confucianism. Within this milieu, Wang's Philosophy of Mind shifted the focus of Confucian learning inward, toward moral intuition (*liangzhi*) and practical engagement. His concept of 'benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth' can therefore be understood as both a philosophical innovation and a constructive engagement with contemporary pressures, including resource constraints and a perceived disconnect between bureaucratic life and the natural world.

This analysis is grounded in a hermeneutic-philosophical reading of Wang Yangming's *Inquiry on the Great Learning*. By closely examining the text within its intellectual context, the study reconstructs the ecological dimensions of the concept of "benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth." This reconstruction is further brought into dialogue with contemporary scholarship in ecological philosophy and Confucian studies to evaluate the relevance and limitations of Wang's ideas for modern educational theory.

## 2. Harmony Between Things and Benevolence: Traditional Ecological Views as a Theoretical Foundation

Traditional Confucian discourses on ecological civilization were often rooted in questions of social production and daily life, emphasizing the fundamental role of natural resources in sustaining political order and ensuring societal stability. Among the Confucian thinkers, Mencius distinguished himself by transcending the narrow confines of economic and social concerns to address the moral relationship between humans—and human society more broadly—and natural beings, particularly animals, as well as the ecosystem as a whole.

The well-known dictum, 'The gentleman keeps distant from the kitchen', rich in moral and ecological connotations, originates from the chapter "King Xuan of Qi Asks about the Deeds of Duke Huan of Qi and Duke Wen of Jin" in the *Mencius*:

*"There is no harm in this; it is a technique of benevolence. You saw the ox but not the sheep. The gentleman's attitude toward birds and beasts is this: having seen them alive, he cannot bear to see them die; having heard their cries, he cannot bear to eat their flesh. Therefore, the gentleman keeps distant from the kitchen."*

This passage highlights two fundamental positions. First, it regards the cultivation of a benevolent heart as inseparable from the construction of a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. The reason "keeping distant from the kitchen" is deemed a "technique of benevolence" lies in the fact that kitchens, as sites of daily meals and sacrificial rituals, are ubiquitous and unavoidable. Yet turning a blind eye to the life and death of animals inevitably dulls the heart of compassion. Thus, the gentleman stays away from the kitchen in order to preserve his benevolence. The underlying motivation is 'natural'—that is, "it arises from the heart-mind itself, not for any ulterior purpose" (Wang Yangming, "Reply to Shu Guoyong·Kui Wei", cited through Wang, 2020).

Second, the relationship between humans and nature is articulated through the principle of gradation. Mencius emphasized that love is graded, arguing that benevolence toward people takes precedence over affection for things: "The gentleman's attitude toward all things is to love them but not with benevolence. Toward the people, he is benevolent but not affectionate" (Mencius·Jinxin I). He further remarked: "That whereby humans differ from birds and beasts is slight. Most people discard it; the gentleman preserves it" (Mencius·Lilou II). By identifying benevolence and righteousness as the fundamental distinction between humans and animals, Mencius essentially grounded human superiority in the possession of moral attributes (Deng & Guo, 2015). As such, the ecological view of pre-Qin Confucianism rests on a differentiated foundation marked by anthropocentrism—an orientation that carries within it the risk of disharmony.

In contrast, the Daoist moral-ecological vision diverges significantly, grounding itself in a cosmology of nature rather than human-centered morality. The Daoist 'Way' models itself on 'nature': "There are four greats in the universe, and humanity is one of them" (Laozi·Chapter 25). In this framework, humans hold no privileged centrality

but stand on equal footing with all beings, compelled to conform to natural laws in order to survive and flourish. Laozi's vision of the harmonious unity between humans and nature denies any natural 'center' and thus fundamentally deconstructs the anthropocentric perspective. This ecological wisdom, expressed in notions such as "Dao models itself on nature" and "the unity of heaven and humanity," is impartial, holistic, and moderate, supplementing and correcting the virtue-centered anthropocentrism of Confucian ecological thought (Qi, Zhang & Xie, 2010).

Building upon both Confucian and Daoist foundations, Zhang Zai advanced the discourse by addressing the relationship between heaven and humanity at the philosophical level, achieving a synthesis of ethical morality and natural ecology under the rubric of 'the unity of heaven and humanity'. Zhang Zai's reflections unfolded along two axes: 'heaven' and 'humanity'. Regarding 'heaven' as a symbol of nature, he interpreted the 'Way of Heaven' and the 'Great Harmony' as the ultimate sources that generate and sustain all things. In this sense, 'heaven' becomes not only the origin of natural existence but also the ground of human morality. Regarding 'humanity' as a derivative of nature, Zhang Zai's theory of 'Heaven as Father and Earth as Mother' portrays humans as products of the cosmic order, acknowledging their dependency upon the generative powers of heaven and earth. He further recognized the finitude of individuals, declaring: "Therefore, what fills heaven and earth is my body; what commands heaven and earth is my nature." Here, both human form and human nature are understood as originating from heaven and earth, thereby transcending the anthropocentric limitations of earlier Confucian ecological views.

In this respect, Zhang Zai's conception of the status of humans and all things resonates with Daoist thought, treating humans as co-equals with other beings, or more precisely, as organic components within the totality of things. Yet he advanced beyond pre-Qin Daoism by elevating nature above both humans and things, thereby according it ultimate priority (Lin, 2013). For Zhang, nature is a vast cosmos woven from vertical and horizontal interrelations, within which humans and all beings are encompassed. At this level, nature assumes the character of an extended state or clan, endowed with both moral and ecological significance. Within this 'cosmic family,' humans and all things emerge as moral subjects, mutually implicated in shared fortunes and misfortunes. Thus, the ideals of 'universal love for all things' and 'people as siblings and things as companions' constitute a shared ecological morality. The realization of harmony in human relations, human–nature relations, and cosmic relations thereby becomes the inevitable condition for sustaining the order of the universe and attaining the highest state of harmony, the 'Great Harmony' (Xu & Zhu, 2010).

By incorporating all beings within the purview of benevolence and righteousness and by treating nature itself as a vehicle for moral cultivation, Zhang Zai's ecological vision of 'the unity of heaven and humanity' accomplished an integration of cosmological naturalism and ethical humanism. Consequently, taking 'harmony between things and benevolence' as its foundational orientation, the traditional moral–ecological framework offers two principal insights: first, the use of a compassionate heart to construct harmonious ecological relations; and second, the adherence to the principle of conforming to nature and obeying its laws as the means to achieve sustainable symbiotic development between humans and nature. These perspectives already embody the embryonic forms of ontology, gradation theory, substance–function theory, and heart–mind fulfillment theory, which would later be deepened in the formulation of 'benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth'.

While building upon this Confucian and Daoist legacy, Wang Yangming's Philosophy of Mind introduced a distinctive shift by locating the foundation for ecological unity not merely in external cosmic principles or graded social ethics, but within the innate moral consciousness (*liangzhi*) of the individual. For all its philosophical depth, Wang Yangming's ecological vision remains framed by the anthropocentric concerns characteristic of the Confucian tradition. Locating the foundation for ecological unity primarily within the 'great man's mind' risks neglecting the material conditions and institutional mechanisms essential for effective environmental governance. Similarly, the principle of 'love with distinctions,' while expansive, sustains a hierarchical worldview that may inadvertently reinforce human dominion over non-human entities. Such limitations are historically situated, reflecting the intellectual horizons of a mid-Ming society that, understandably, operated without the insights of modern ecological science or a planetary sense of environmental crisis.

### 3. 'Benevolence as the Unity of Heaven and Earth': Philosophical Foundation of the Mind School's Ecological Perspective

#### 3.1. *The Unity of All Things: The Metaphysical Foundation of the Mind School's Ecological Perspective*

Wang Yangming adopted the "Three Guiding Principles and Eight Steps" of the Great Learning as the point of departure for his inquiry into the relationship between heaven and humanity and into the principles of natural ethics. Building upon the Neo-Confucian explorations of Song–Ming scholars concerning the idea of 'benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth,' he creatively integrated the philosophy of mind, cosmology, and ontology to demonstrate the inherent unity between Confucian moral cultivation and ecological ethics.

Zhang Zai, recognizing the finitude of human individuality, famously declared: “Therefore, what fills heaven and earth constitutes my body; what commands heaven and earth constitutes my nature.” Since heaven, earth, and the human mind share the same origin, ‘universal love for all things’ and ‘people as siblings and things as companions’ emerge as both the shared morality of humanity and the ontological basis of the gentleman’s benevolence. Cheng Hao further advanced the doctrine of ‘benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth,’ asserting: “Scholars must first understand benevolence. The benevolent person is seamlessly united with all things. Righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness are all aspects of benevolence.” He continued: “The benevolent person regards heaven, earth, and all things as one body, with nothing excluded from the self” (Cheng, 1981).

Building on these foundations, Wang Yangming articulated in *Inquiry on the Great Learning* that the unity of heaven, earth, and all things constitutes the essence of the great man’s benevolent mind:

“The great man regards heaven, earth, and all things as one body. He sees the world as one family and the central kingdom as one person. Those who distinguish between physical forms and separate themselves from others are small-minded. The great man’s ability to unite heaven, earth, and all things as one body is not a forced intention; it is inherent in the benevolence of his mind” (Wang, 1992).

Here, the meaning of the Great Learning is precisely the ‘learning of the great man.’ The essence of attaining the state of the ‘great man’ lies in transcending the barriers of physical form and ecological separation. Thus, taking all things as one body and the world as one family becomes both the fundamental study of cultivating a benevolent heart and the necessary path for Confucian scholars to become sages (Bai, 2017).

### 3.2. *Love with Distinctions: The Educational Implications of Ecological Ethical Principles*

Rooted in benevolent morality, the mind of the great man is identical with the ‘mind of heaven and earth.’ In this sense, the emotions of all beings resonate with the benevolent heart:

*“Hence, upon seeing a child about to fall into a well, one must feel a sense of alarm and compassion—this is because one’s benevolence forms one body with the child. The child belongs to the same category of being as oneself. Upon hearing the pitiful cries and seeing the trembling fear of birds and animals, one must feel an inability to bear their suffering—this is because one’s benevolence forms one body with birds and animals. Birds and animals are sentient beings. Upon seeing broken or crushed grass and trees, one must feel pity and concern—this is because one’s benevolence forms one body with grass and trees. Grass and trees possess vitality. Upon seeing tiles or stones that are broken or damaged, one must feel regret and care—this is because one’s benevolence forms one body with tiles and stones.”*

According to Wang Yangming, this benevolence manifests in four affective modalities: compassion (ceyin zhi xin), the heart of unbearable suffering (buren zhi xin), pity (minxu zhi xin), and protective care (guxi zhi xin). Such moral concern arises spontaneously from the heart of benevolence; it is not externally imposed. Extending from self to others, then to animals, plants, and even inanimate things, benevolent love unfolds progressively ‘with distinctions.’ While acknowledging the natural hierarchy of moral sentiments, it extends ethical concern universally, thereby constructing an inseparable moral interconnection between humans and all beings.

Through this differentiated extension, Wang Yangming conceptualized a ‘community of shared destiny’ characterized by mutual flourishing and interdependence. Its realization rests on the moral intentionality of the great man’s benevolent heart and on the holistic dynamism of the unity of all things. In this way, Wang Yangming elevated human benevolence to the cosmological level of ‘benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth,’ thereby enabling resonance and interconnection between the human mind and the myriad things (Du, 2023). Wang’s model of ‘love with distinctions’ successfully expands the ethical community, but its graded structure inevitably raises questions from modern ecocentric perspectives. The hierarchy it sustains, however benevolently intended, may sit uneasily with contemporary ideals of ecological equality, revealing the anthropocentric constraints within even the most expansive Confucian frameworks.

### 3.3. *The Unity of Knowledge and Action: The Substance-Function Practice of Ecological Moral Cultivation*

Wang Yangming concretized the idea of ‘benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth’ through the non-duality of substance (ti) and function (yong) expressed in the unity of knowledge and action. He read the Great Learning as follows: “The Way of the Great Learning consists in illuminating the luminous virtue, in loving the people, and in abiding in the highest good.”

‘Illuminating the luminous virtue’ constitutes substance—the fundamental orientation of benevolence, righteousness, and the mind of heaven and earth—while ‘loving the people’ constitutes function—the concrete

practice of cultivating a benevolent heart and extending it to all things. The essence of ‘illuminating the luminous virtue’ lies in dispelling the obscurations of selfish desire and thereby restoring the innate unity between humans and the myriad beings:

*“This benevolence that forms one body with all things is inherent even in the heart of the petty person. It is rooted in the nature endowed by the Mandate of Heaven, naturally luminous and unclouded; hence, it is called the luminous virtue.”*

As the natural extension of the great man’s mind and the nature endowed by Heaven, innate knowledge (liangzhi) constitutes the ultimate basis of the unity of all things. Thus, ‘illuminating the luminous virtue’ is not the external imposition of moral norms but the intrinsic unfolding of innate knowledge. In turn, ‘loving the people’ represents the necessary extension of this intrinsic realization, actualizing the function of benevolence. As Wang argued, “Illuminating the luminous virtue establishes the substance of forming one body with heaven, earth, and all things; loving the people actualizes the function of forming one body with heaven, earth, and all things (Qin, 2018). Therefore, illuminating the luminous virtue must be realized through loving the people, and loving the people is precisely how one illuminates one’s luminous virtue.”

By articulating the indivisibility of substance and function, Wang integrated graded benevolent love into the framework of the unity of all things, extending ethical concern ‘from self to others’ and ‘from humans to things’ (Zhang, 2004). The process of extending moral practice outward”, namely loving my own father, then extending to the fathers of others, and further to the fathers of all under heaven”—ultimately reaches a state where “spirits of the mountains and rivers, ghosts and gods, birds and animals, grasses and trees—none are not truly embraced with intimacy.” Through the unity of knowledge and action, the philosophical conception of ‘benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth’ is concretized in ecological praxis (Zhang, 2020).

### 3.4. Fulfilling the Mind and Achieving Resonance: The Core Wisdom of Ecological Cultivation and Education

For Wang Yangming, the learning of the sage consists fundamentally in ‘fulfilling the mind’ (jinxin). To “take heaven, earth, and all things as one body in benevolence” is the indispensable guarantee of this fulfillment. As he stated: “The sage’s pursuit of fulfilling his mind is based on forming one body with heaven, earth, and all things.... When the mind is fully realized, the family is regulated, the state is well governed, and peace is brought to the world. Therefore, the learning of the sage does not go beyond fulfilling the mind.”

‘Fulfilling the mind’ thus transcends closed self-cultivation, pointing toward a cosmic broad-mindedness and universal moral concern. When the moral agent restores the original substance of innate knowledge, love naturally extends from people to things, constituting a ‘community of shared destiny.’ In this consummate state, benevolence embraces mountains, rivers, plants, animals, and even stones, ultimately realizing a ‘great harmony’ (datong) wherein humans and all beings coexist and flourish together. Ecological harmony, in this framework, is not an optional extension but an integral component of ‘bringing peace under heaven’ (ping tianxia).

Hence, conforming to natural laws and constructing harmonious ecological relations are not extrinsic duties but inherent implications of fulfilling the mind and extending the benevolent heart to all things. The ecological vision of the Mind School therefore culminates in the wisdom of ‘fulfilling the mind and achieving resonance’ (jinxin gantong), complemented by the transformative power of cultivation and education (hanyang jiaohua). By awakening the innate substance of ‘benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth,’ individuals generate a sustainable and self-renewing moral intentionality, thereby grounding ecological harmony in the deepest foundations of Confucian moral cultivation.

Despite its inspirational value, Wang’s ecological vision faces practical challenges in contemporary educational settings. His reliance on moral self-cultivation may underestimate the role of structural and policy-driven approaches to ecological crisis. Furthermore, the Confucian ideal of ‘harmony’ sometimes risks obscuring conflicts of interest between human development and ecological preservation. Therefore, while Wang’s thought provides a moral foundation, its integration into modern education requires complementary frameworks from environmental ethics, policy science, and critical ecology.

## 4. Conclusions

In *Inquiry on the Great Learning*, Wang Yangming’s systematic exposition of the ecological perspective encapsulated in the principle of ‘benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth’ constitutes both a creative transformation and an innovative development of the traditional Confucian doctrine concerning the relationship between heaven and humanity. Metaphysically grounded in the theory of mind–nature and ontology, Wang

articulated the ethical principle of ‘love with distinctions’ as a foundation for ecological thought, integrated moral cognition with ecological praxis through the doctrine of the ‘unity of knowledge and action,’ and realized the educational wisdom of ‘heart–matter communion’ through the cultivation of ‘fulfilling the mind and achieving resonance.’ Progressing in a layered fashion from metaphysical foundations and ethical principles to practical pathways and pedagogical methods, Wang Yangming’s ecological vision of ‘benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth’ offers enduring insights for contemporary ecological education. It calls for the cultivation of the personality of the ‘great man’ (daren), who embodies a cosmological outlook of the unity of all things and assumes responsibility for extending benevolence to human beings and care to the myriad entities of the natural world. It emphasizes the substitution of empty rhetoric with gradated affective concern that expands from the near to the distant, coupled with concrete practice rooted in the unity of knowledge and action, thereby awakening the innate clarity of conscience (liangzhi) and transforming ecological ideals into conscious action.

In the context of escalating global ecological crises, the resources embedded in Wang Yangming’s ecological thought remain highly pertinent. His vision of a cosmos transcending physical boundaries, his empathetic compassion extending to grasses, trees, tiles, and stones, and his practical wisdom articulated in the injunctions to ‘illuminate virtue, love the people, and care for things’ together constitute a valuable reservoir of traditional cultural resources for the construction of ecological education with Chinese characteristics. The principle of ‘benevolence as the unity of heaven and earth’ thus represents not only a crystallization of traditional Chinese ecological wisdom but also a civilizational gene enabling contemporary ecological education to rearticulate the intrinsic connection between human benevolence and the natural world.

Admittedly, the findings of this study, being primarily derived from textual and philosophical analysis, would benefit from future empirical investigation. Natural extensions of this work include qualitative or case-study research exploring the application of Wang’s ideas in contemporary ecological education practices in China. Placing this Confucian perspective in dialogue with Western ecological pedagogies through comparative study also presents a promising avenue for developing a more robust cross-cultural discourse on environmental education. In addition, further comparative work with Western ecological pedagogies could also foster a more robust, cross-cultural dialogue. Despite its historical constraints, Wang Yangming’s thought remains a vital cultural resource for reimagining the bond between humanity and nature in an age of ecological uncertainty.

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Not applicable. This study does not involve any human participant.

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### Data Availability Statement

The data of the study is the classical texts of Wang Yangming, which can be found online easily. Authors agree to provide the raw data of their study together with the manuscript for editorial review if needed.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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