

A Study on Wang Gen's Theory on Honoring the Body

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Abstract. Wang Gen's theory of honoring the body shows a profound significance and is worthwhile for us to explore. Its theoretical source is his view of investigating things in the south of Huai, which is quite different from Zhu Xi's and Wang Yangming's views and lays a foundation for the theory of honoring the body. And the theory of honoring the body has meaningful connotations. This paper analyzes the connotation of honoring the body from Wang Gen's own interpretations and reveals the lives' value through Wang Gen's philosophy idea. Wang Gen thinks that the body and the Tao originally is the same thing. He thinks highly of the value of honoring the body. At last, this paper discusses the influence of Wang Gen's theory of honoring the body. Wang Gen's theory makes Confucian more civilian and more close to the common people's life, which has a great influence to the promotion of the Confucian's philosophy and humanity thoughts.

Introduction

Wang Gen (1483-1541), whose original name was silver, courtesy name was Ruzhi and self-titled Xinzhai. He was born in Anfengchang, Taizhou City (now Dongtai City, Jiangsu Province). He was a disciple of the great mind-philosophy master Wang Yangming. And he founded the Taizhou School. Wang Gen put forward many philosophy ideas and had an important position in the Chinese philosophy history. Among these ideas, his theory of honoring the body showed a profound significance and was worthwhile for us to explore.

The Theoretical Source of Honoring the Body

Wang Gen's theoretical source of honoring the body was his view of investigating things in the south of Huai. Zhao Zhenji wrote in *the Taizhou Wang Xinzhai Epitaph*, "The conscience of Yuezhong and the gewu of Huainan are like the two wheels in the carriage, which are using the same one axle." "Yuezhong" referred to Wang Yangming and "Huainan" referred to Wang Gen. This sentence actually bracketed these two things together, which revealed that Wang Gen's view of investigating things in the south of Huai was the most core theory in his philosophy idea and its meaning could compare with the Wang Yangming's Conscience Theory in one side.

The characteristics of Wang Gen's view of investigating things in the south of Huai didn't have a performance on the theory of epistemology and the doctrines that approved the values of humanity, but had a performance on the aspect of axiology. It had clarified that the individual should be in a position of leading rather than bow and everyone should have self-consciousness and personality dignity in the relationship of the body, the family, the country and the world, which also mean the relationship of individual and the feudal society.

Wang Gen was born as a salt worker, but his academic prestige was gradually recognized and he also had a close relationship with the literary intelligentsia. He thought the social state was that not only ordinary people could not realize their life values but also many officials could not realize their

own values through his own observation and experience. So he regarded the book *The Great Learning* as a textbook. He illustrated his life value through interpreting the connotation of investigating things. Because he was living in the south of the Huaihe River, his view of investigating things was called investigating things in the south of Huai.

“Investigate things” was one of the “eight terms” of *The Great Learning*, which was regarded as the theoretical basis of “cultivate one’s morality”. *The Great Learning* said, “Things investigated, genuine knowledge acquired; genuine knowledge acquired, thoughts purified; thoughts purified, hearts rectified; hearts rectified, personalities cultivated; personalities cultivated, family regulated; family regulated, the states well governed; the states well governed, the whole world will be in peace and tranquil.” The book had demonstrated the great meaning of “cultivate one’s morality”, but had not made specific explanations. So the scholars put forward their different interpretations of Investigate things.

The earliest explanation of investigating things was Zheng Xuan, a scholar in the Eastern Han Dynasty. He said, “Investing is the meaning of coming, things is the meaning of matters. One person who gets education of goodness will do good things; one person who gets education of evilness will do bad things. A person’s deed of good or evil depends on his education degree.” He interpreted “investigate” as “come” and interpreted “things” as “matters”. This account had been used to the Tang Dynasty. And with the development of the Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty, a variety of new explanation had come up. Among them the representative explanations were Zhu Xi’s and Wang Yangming’s explanations. Zhu Xi interpreted “investigate” as “to” and interpreted “things” as “cases”. He thought “investigate things” was “exploring rules from things”. And differently, Wang Yangming interpreted “investigate” as “rectify”, which meant rectify the incorrect things and interpreted “things” as “sincerity”. He interpreted “investigate things” as “rectify one’s heart” and his interpretation had become an ideological motivation to correct people’s behaviors.

Wang Gen also put forward his own ideas of “investigate things”. And his interpretation advocated realizing man’s value, which was of great significance. Wang Gen said, “The body is one thing with the family, the country and the world.” It could be seen that Wang Gen interpreted “things” as “the body, the family, the country and the world”, which referred to the whole relationship of the feudal society. And what’s more, Wang Gen made a specific explanation of “investigate”. Firstly, he thought “investigate” had the meaning of distinction. *The Great Learning* came up an idea “things have their root and braches”. Wang Gen assumed the body as the root and assumed the country as the braches on basis of it. He emphasized the body’s important position in the social relationship. Secondly, he thought “investigate” had the meaning of standard. He said, “My body is a rule and the country is a rectangle. The country’s angle is not right because my body is not rect.” That was to say, whether the country could be governed well or not, it all depended on individual’s subjective efforts. Therefore, the problems in the country should be found reasons from individual. Finally, he thought “investigate” had the meaning of reflecting on oneself, which also meant know yourself again. For one thing, you should recognize that you shoulder the historical responsibility of your country, be strict with yourself, not abandon yourself. For another thing, you could acknowledge the normal physiological need, for example, you disguised when you smelt bad odors; you delighted when you smelt the good odors. Wang Gen encouraged people to realize their values through the thoughts and the actions.

The Connotation of Honoring the Body

Wang Gen said, “The body and the Tao originally is the same thing. The most honorable thing is this Tao and the most honorable thing is this body. It can’t be called honor the body if you don’t honor the Tao. It can’t be called honor the Tao if you don’t honor the body. You must know the best goodness is to honor the body and the Tao both.”

Wang Gen proposed the idea of “the body and the Tao originally is the same thing”. He affirmed the body in the ontological sense. In Confucian culture, the body had three meanings, the first was as

a kind of physiology, the second was as a kind of social and cultural thing and the third was as an existence of the noumenon. As was known to us all, the body as an existence of the noumenon was the highest concept in the Confucian.

The body's noumenon could be traced back to Mencius. Mencius put forward the "application form", which said that the body was nature and only the saint can improve the body to the perfect state. Mencius's view of application form presupposed a body of the ontology. Under the care of the body of the ontology, no one's body was perfect, only the saint can achieve the goal of making the body perfect through cultivating his morality. That was to say, the body's perfection must depend on self-cultivation, only saint could achieve this training.

Despite Mencius presupposed a body of the ontology, he didn't make a clear affirmation on the noumenon of the body. Neo-Confucian thought the heart could reach the way of ontology through approaching the reason, but the body was the nature of temperament, which was a mixture of goodness and evilness. It was difficult for the body to achieve the goodness, so it didn't have the noumenon. It was Wang Gen who gave noumenon to the body clearly in the Confucianism.

Wang Gen gave the body noumenon through making the body and the Tao becoming the one. Wang Gen's explanation of the body on the ontology revealed that the body had a cultivation process. This idea fundamentally set up the dignity of the body and laid a theoretical foundation for Confucian's cultivating the morality through the body.

But when seeking the Tao and honoring the body had conflicts, Wang Gen advocated learning Weizi's behaviors, who was good at saving himself and was prepared to comeback. This was a person in the Confucian's analects "Three benevolent person in the Yin Dynasty". Three benevolent people referred to Weizi, Jizi and Bigan. They felt very worried when they saw the King Zhou of Shang inhumanity. Weizi persuaded the King Zhou many times, but the King Zhou didn't listen, so Weizi ran away angrily. Jizi also persuaded the King Zhou many times, the King Zhou put him off a slave and poisoned him in jail. Then Jizi had to pretend crazy to conceal his wisdom. Only Bigan persuaded the King Zhou despite anything and he was killed by the King Zhou by cutting the heart. Confucian thought that these three people although behaved differently, they were all loyal to their king and patriotic to their country. However, Wang Gen held a different view with Confucian. Wang Gen said, "Weizi's running away, honoring his body, is the best; Jizi's being a slave, preventing from death, is better; Bigan killed himself by persuading, is the worst. Confucian thought they are all selfless and call them the benevolence, but the advantages and disadvantages in order are obvious." Wang Gen divided these three people into three levels according to their attitudes to the body and the Tao. Weizi both insisted on the Tao and saved himself, which means "save the body and have a clear conscience, which is in the high state". Jizi insisted on the Tao but hurt his body, was "have a clear conscience but not save his body, which is in the middle state". Bigan didn't save his body and didn't reach the Tao, was "lose the body and lose the Tao both, which is the in the lowest state".

However, Huang Zongxi put forward some questions to Wang Gen's theory of honoring the body. He thought Wang Gen put "honor the body" before "honor the Tao", which showed scares of death. These words were too harsh and lacked of proper understanding of Wang Gen's thought.

Actually, Wang Gen was much despised of those who only saved his body but not sought the Tao. He advocated repeatedly that the value of lives was reaching the Tao. To realize the ideal of reaching the Tao, you must cherish the lives and don't make unnecessary meaningless sacrifices. As a result, he thought Weizi's running away was not contradictory with Confucian's die to achieve virtue and Mencius's lay down one's life for a just cause. They were the same deeds in the different situations. He proposed that people should pay the lives for justice in the certain circumstances, making the death having the value and meaningful, but it couldn't turn into discipline rules and regulations of acquiring people to seek the Tao by giving up one's life blindly.

Wang Gen's insight was in consistent with the enlightenment thought in the transformation of the Western Europe. One important feature of enlightenment thought was thinking highly of the emotional life. It opposed the church's limiting people's pursuit of sensibility. Similarly, Wang Gen's

theory of honoring the body also was against the moral supremacy to pursue the meaning of individual life. As a result of the limitation of the Chinese and foreign cultural exchanges, Wang Gen's thought of respecting the life could only with the aid of the Taoist spirit, and not directly with the help of the achievements of western culture. In that historical condition, however, it was of great significance and played a guiding role for Wang Gen to put forward such an idea.

Be Worldly Wise and Make Oneself Safe

The thought of being wise and making oneself safe was the application of the theory of honoring the body in the real life, which was a theory about relationships. Wang Gen was attempted to building harmonious and loving relationships in order to promote the realization of self-worth. So we could say that if we wanted to reach the state of honoring the body, we should be worldly wise and make oneself safe as the external conditions.

The thought of being worldly wise and making oneself safe had existed since ancient times. And Wang Gen developed it in his own understanding. The thought of being worldly wise and making oneself safe first came up in *The Book of Song*. It said, "Both Ming and Zhe in order to protect the body." The original meaning of being worldly wise and making oneself safe was that the people who knew the difference between right and wrong and understood things profoundly wouldn't take part in the dangerous activities which would injured himself. Wang Gen once said that the people who knew honor the body must love his body as treasure. However, some people would take his words too literally and misunderstood his meaning. They thought his meaning was that save his body by giving up his responsibilities. However, the fact was in the contrary. Wang Gen advocated that people should not only love his own life but also love other people's life to make other people also love him, which was the unity of loving himself and loving others. This was the right interpretation of Wang Gen's theory, and his theory was a further development of the theory of the benevolent love others advocated by Confucian.

Wang Gen said, "if I love my own body, I will love others. If I love others, others will love me. If others love me, my body can be honored. If I love others, I will not hurt others. If I don't hurt others, others will not hurt me. Others don't hurt me; my body will be honored. If I can honor the body, I will respect my body as treasure. If I respect my body, I will respect others. If I can respect others, others will respect me. Others respect me, my body can be honored. If I can respect others, I will not neglect others. If I don't neglect others, others will not neglect me. If others don't neglect me, my body will be honored. This benevolence is the Tao that everything was one way."

Wang gen here emphasized love oneself and love others interacted as both cause and effect. He advocated to save himself by loving people, respecting people, not hurting people, not neglecting people. In this way he could fulfill himself and fulfill others and get mutual reciprocity and mutual benefit. His idea was filled with the thought of people were equal, which was advanced in the ancient times and made contributions to modern social fairness construction.

As a result, Wang Gen was also against two kinds of tendencies. One kind was that people only love himself but not love others. He saved his life in the foundation of hurting others to benefit himself. The emperor in that time only loved himself and didn't love others and common people lived in a poor life. A cheetah raised in the palace needed to use more than 200 people. And the cheetah was fed on by thousands of tones of food every year. But in the contrary, common people had little food to eat. In the poor regions, common people sold their sons and daughters to exchange food. The poverty of common people and the luxury of the emperor formed a huge contrast, which made Wang Gen felt so angry. He strongly criticized this deed which was honoring his body by harming others to benefit himself and extortion. He said, "Who knows love his own body but doesn't know love others, he must do these for the purpose of convenient himself and harm others to benefit himself and thus people must will revenge him. As a result, his body can't be honored. His body can't be honored, then how to honor the country and the world! The selfish people don't know the roots and the branched are in

consistence.” He said these words to condemn the behaviors which only loved himself but not loved others and allured emperors to take good care of the people and love the subjects as if they were his own children.

Wang Gen’s thought of being worldly wise and making oneself safe mainly embodied in two aspects. The one aspect was that “I don’t want to be stressed by others”. That was to say, we should have independent personality, thought and will and we should not be stressed by others. The other aspect was that “I also don’t want to force others”. That was to say, we should respect other people’s independent personality, thought and will and not force other people. He thought himself was the root and in the leading position. And he should look up reasons from his own if questions raised up. If people don’t love him, the mistakes were on him not on others.

Therefore, Wang Gen hoped emperor to find reasons from his own problem. He didn’t get people’s love because he didn’t do well in his governess. He hoped the emperor could follow the edification of benevolent loves others which was proposed by Confucian. As well he wanted the emperor to follow the example of old ancient judicious emperors’ governance and carry out the benevolent governance to get common people’s love and trust.

Of course, Wang Gen also knew that it was not so easy to establish kind and harmonious interpersonal relationship by just emperor’s “benevolence” and “goodness” and people’s own reflection. The most important was to inspire people’s “innate knowledge and innate ability”.

So Wang Gen said, “Ming Zhe is the conscience and being worldly wise and making oneself safe is the innate knowledge and innate ability. That is so called knowing without thinking and having ability without learning. Everyone has it and the saint is the same with me.” In his opinion, “being worldly wise and making oneself safe” told us the truth of loving our body and loving others. Loving our body and loving others was the inspiration of the “sense of compassion”, which referred to innate knowledge and innate ability people all had. “Sense of compassion” was first proposed by Mencius. It said that when people saw a child falling into the well they would save him without thinking, which was people’s natural instinct. Wang Gen regarded “being worldly wise and making oneself safe” as innate knowledge and innate ability. Because it was people’s natural instinct, people could know without thinking and have ability without learning. For the innate knowledge and innate ability, the saint was the same with me. Therefore, we should play active roles and make all kinds of conditions of realizing our values. Wang Gen proposed that the theory basis of “being worldly wise and making oneself safe” was the unity of human nature and social nature, the basic content of it was the unity of loving his own body and loving others and the main object was to realize people’s values. Therefore, he formed a complete and systematic theory. Wang Gen’s thought of being worldly wise and making oneself safe was the interpretation and application in practice of the theory of honoring the body.

The Influence of Honoring the Body

Wang Gen’s theory of honoring the body changed the Confucian’s attitude to the body to some extent and made the Confucian more civilian and more close to the common people’s life, which had a great influence to the promotion of the Confucian.

The Religious Rites. In the Neo-Confucianism, “justice” or “conscience” could provide the ultimate survival basis to people. To literary intelligentsias, they could not only find the ultimate settling for lives but also got the Confucian and Yan Hui’s cheerfulness. But for ordinary people, they could get the Tao closely by some religious ceremony, like listening, mediation and fasting. They cultivated themselves in the eyes, ears, mouth, nose, tongue and as such physiological practices.

Due to Wang Gen’s highlighted the body, the Confucian paid more attention to the needs of the body. They absorbed the related resources of Buddhism and Taoism and created many kinds of ritual activities to meet the needs of practicing the body, which made the general people also could seek the Tao.

Respect the Life and the Survival Rights. Wang Gen's body had two meanings, one was individual and the other one was flesh. For the meaning of individual, highlighting the body meant the acknowledgement of the private. Therefore, people acquired the private rights in the process of adjusting the relationship between the public and privacy. For the meaning of flesh, the outstanding of the body represented the respect for people's physical life and perpetual life. And at the same time it also represented the recognition of the human desires and placed common people's life and survival rights in a high position.

Simple and Easy Way of Self-Cultivation. Wang Gen regarded general people as his teaching objects; naturally, he pursued the simple and easy method to guide them. Wang Gen made the way of cultivating the Confucian morality more simply through emphasizing the importance of the body. For one thing, he sought support from the Taoist classic *Zhouyi*, such as "The Tao is that the foolish men and foolish women can go with the knowledge." It was the application of the method of simple thinking. For another thing, his theory of honoring the body displayed the Confucian modes of body practice. Body practice was just in stand of using the body practice to seek the Tao, which paid attention to the cultivating method of the body. Because it sought the knowledge and cultivated the morality through the body, general people also could practice it.

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