

The "Gongfu" Theory in The Great Learning: A Philosophical Inquiry

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Abstract: As one of the Confucian classics, "The Great Learning" holds significant value and a distinguished status. Its theory of moral cultivation ("gongfu" theory) is not only regarded as the core of Confucian learning but has also occupied a central position in philosophical inquiry—from the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty through the innovation of the School of Mind in the Ming Dynasty. The Cheng brothers (Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi) of the Song Dynasty elevated "The Great Learning", "The Doctrine of the Mean", "The Analects", and "Mencius" to equal standing. During the Southern Song period, Zhu Xi compiled his commentaries on these texts into the "Collected Commentaries on the Four Books". Zhu Xi's work later gained the confidence and high regard of Emperor Lizong of Song, and Zhu Xi himself was posthumously awarded the title of Grand Preceptor and granted the honor of being venerated in the Confucius Temple. In the Yuan Dynasty, "the Four Books" became the content and standard for the imperial civil service examinations; the Ming Dynasty continued this tradition, which persisted until the imperial examination system was abolished at the end of the Qing Dynasty. Throughout these several centuries, the ritual norms and ethical teachings of "the Four Books" continuously guided the intellectual foundations and conduct of the literati.

1. Introduction

Based on the thought of scholars such as Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, this paper analyzes the classical texts to clarify the philosophical characteristics and connotations of the "gongfu" theory in "The Great Learning". Taking the "Three Guiding Principles and Eight Steps" as the primary research framework, it conducts a detailed exposition across three dimensions—ontology, epistemology, and praxis—seeking to articulate the theoretical system of the "gongfu" theory in "The Great Learning" and to reveal its profound influence on the developmental course of Confucianism.

2. The Ideological Foundation of the Gongfu Theory in The Great Learning

2.1 The Connotation of the "Three Guiding Principles"

The Great Learning opens with a clear statement of purpose: "The way of the great learning lies in illuminating the illustrious virtue, in loving the people, and in resting in the highest excellence." [1] These three "guiding principles" constitute the theoretical foundation and core connotation of the gongfu theory in The Great Learning.

First, "illuminating the illustrious virtue" refers to bringing forth the luminous moral nature innately endowed in human beings. From an ontological perspective, Zhu Xi's commentary identifies this virtue as follows: "The illustrious virtue is what human beings receive from Heaven; it is spiritual, luminous, and never obscured, embodying all principles and responding to all affairs." [1] This virtue is not acquired through postnatal learning but serves as the fundamental basis of what makes human beings human. It is also the "innate good nature" that Mencius regarded as distinguishing humans from beasts. This understanding situates the illumination of virtue within the framework of "the unity of Heaven and humanity", reflecting the Confucian fundamental cognition of human nature.

Second, the connotation of "loving the people" has been subject to much historical controversy. For instance, Zhu Xi altered it to "renovating the people", interpreting "qin" as "xin" (to renovate): "To renovate means to reform what is old. That is to say, having illuminated one's own illustrious virtue, one should extend this to others, enabling them also to remove the defilement of old habits." [1] Wang Yangming, who held a different view from Zhu Xi, insisted on the original meaning of the classic, interpreting "qin" as "to love" or "to be intimate with." In his explanation to his disciple Xu Ai, he stated: "... 'Loving the people' is analogous to what Mencius meant by 'loving one's kin and being benevolent to the people'; to 'love them' is to 'treat them with benevolence.'" [2] Although the two interpretations differ to some extent, they share a common emphasis on the responsibility for moral cultivation and the virtuous character of extending oneself to others.

Third, "resting in the highest excellence" represents the supreme realm attainable through cultivation and "gongfu" theory. It also refers to the state of "ultimate goodness" achieved through moral cultivation and the fulfillment of responsibility. Zhu Xi annotates: "To rest means to arrive at this point and not to deviate. The highest excellence is the ultimate point of the natural propriety of things and principles." [1] This realm demands that human conduct continuously approximate the supreme goodness in the process of illuminating virtue and loving the people, thereby manifesting the Confucian ultimate pursuit and orientation toward the ideal personality.

2.2 The Sequential Order of Gongfu in the "Eight Steps"

The Great Learning proposes eight concrete steps for realizing the Three Guiding Principles: "The ancients who wished to illuminate their illustrious virtue throughout the world first governed their states well. Wishing to govern their states well, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first made their intentions sincere. Wishing to make their intentions sincere, they first extended their knowledge; the extension of knowledge lies in the investigation of things". [1] These "Eight Steps" constitute a logically rigorous and progressively ordered system of "gongfu" theory.

"The investigation of things and the extension of knowledge" constitute the starting point of "gongfu". The Great Learning emphasizes: "When things are investigated, knowledge is extended; when knowledge is extended, the intention becomes sincere; when the intention is sincere, the heart is rectified; when the heart is rectified, the person is cultivated; when the person is cultivated, the

family is regulated; when the family is regulated, the state is well governed; when the state is well governed, the world is brought to peace".[1] This formulation reveals a complete path extending from objective cognition to subjective cultivation, and finally to social practice.

Among these, "cultivating the person" occupies the central position. Hence, The Great Learning explicitly states: "From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all alike must take the cultivation of the person as the root." [1] So-called "cultivating the person" is precisely what The Doctrine of the Mean emphasizes as "self-perfection". Only by first achieving "self-perfection" can one attain the realm of "perfecting things". So-called "perfecting things" refers to the further steps of "regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world" that can only be undertaken after the person has been cultivated.

From the perspective of the sequential order of gongfu, the first five steps—investigating things, extending knowledge, making the intention sincere, rectifying the heart, and cultivating the person—belong to the gongfu of "inner sageliness", focusing on the elevation of individual moral cultivation, that is, "self-perfection"; the latter three steps—regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world—belong to the gongfu of "outer kingliness", emphasizing the extension of personal cultivation to social governance or the gongfu directed toward external things, namely, "perfecting things." This construction of "the unity of the inner and the outer" embodies the Confucian paradigm of the ideal personality: "inner sageliness through self-perfection" and "outer kingliness through perfecting things."

2.3 The Theme and Structure of the Gongfu Theory

The gongfu theory in The Great Learning presents an argumentative structure that is "complete in both form and spirit" and rich in "sequential gradation."

From the perspective of its essential purport, on the one hand, the way of The Great Learning is oriented toward the Confucian ideal of the "Way of Benevolence" realized through "bringing peace to the world." This requires a clearly articulated program of "cultivation, regulation, governance, and peace" as a guide for action. On the other hand, Confucianism upholds the principle of "rectifying oneself before rectifying others," emphasizing that the cultivation of the person is the foundation for regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world. It refuses to "bend the foot to straighten the yard"—that is, to compromise principle for the sake of expediency—thereby precluding the possibility of any rupture in this systematic sequence.

In terms of its structural features, the "gongfu" theory in The Great Learning exhibits the following characteristics:

First, it is a philosophical system without a cosmological origin serving as the supreme noumenon. Since there is no explicit cosmological origin as the highest ground, its ethical and political thought does not presuppose a priori legitimacy, nor can its theoretical design be based on a "supreme justice." It recognizes only concrete human beings and concrete things, each possessing its own reason for existence. Between human beings, there must be mutual understanding and respect—that is, "loving one's kin". Between human beings and things, each also fulfills its own nature—that is, "loving things".

Second, it embodies the characteristic thought that "substance and function share one source". The new schema of the gongfu theory in The Great Learning takes "virtue" as its inner core and ascends progressively toward the logic of "things", presenting a unified structure of "inner cultivation and outer governance" and "inner sageliness and outer kingliness." This structure not only manifests the hierarchical levels of "gongfu" but also emphasizes the intrinsic coherence among its various stages.

Finally, it underscores the paramount importance of a "practical character." As one of the

summits in the history of ancient Chinese thought, Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism possesses a vast and meticulous theoretical system. The theoretical developments of later thought mostly derived from summarizing how past sages applied gongfu and self-cultivation, and their ultimate aim was to bring these into the actual practice of cultivation. Therefore, a "practical character" also lies at its core.

3. Core Characteristics of the Gongfu Theory in The Great Learning

3.1 The Epistemological Significance of "Investigating Things and Extending Knowledge"

"Investigating things and extending knowledge" constitutes the starting point of the gongfu theory in The Great Learning and has provoked sustained and penetrating discussion throughout the history of Confucian thought. The original text of The Great Learning offers a relatively brief treatment of "investigating things and extending knowledge," stating only that "the extension of knowledge lies in the investigation of things"[1] and that "when things are investigated, knowledge is extended." [1] Yet its connotations are extraordinarily rich. From the perspective of literal meaning, "ge" (to investigate) carries multiple significations, including "to arrive," "to come," "to achieve sympathetic resonance," and "to exhaustively examine." Zheng Xuan annotates: "Ge means to come. Wu means affairs. When one's knowledge of the good is profound, good things come to him; when one's knowledge of evil is profound, evil things come to him. This means that affairs come according to what people love." [3] This interpretation emphasizes the existence of a relationship of sympathetic resonance between individual cognition and objective things, achieving a similar effect to the idea of "sympathetic resonance between Heaven and humanity" in the "Zhouyi" (Book of Changes).

From an epistemological perspective, "investigating things and extending knowledge" encompasses three dimensions: the object of cognition, the method, and the purpose. Zhu Xi held that the object of investigating things is "the principles of all things under Heaven," the method employed is "investigating principle by approaching things", and the ultimate purpose is to achieve cognition of the essence of things. He states: "Exhausting the principles of things to the utmost means reaching the furthest extreme so that nothing is left unexamined." [1]

From the perspective of gongfu theory, investigating things and extending knowledge possesses the characteristic of practice and actual implementation. It is not purely theoretical cognition but a practice of self-cultivation involving the embodied apprehension of "Heavenly Principle" in concrete things. As The Great Learning states, "the extension of knowledge lies in the investigation of things," emphasizing that cognition must be combined with practice. This is precisely the reason that later scholars such as Zhu Xi stressed "one principle with many manifestations"—"this single principle is distributed among the myriad things to constitute their substance"—and Wang Yangming stressed "extending innate knowing" and "the unity of knowledge and action".

3.2 The Theory of Moral Cultivation in "Sincerity of the Intention and Rectification of the Mind"

"Sincerity of the intention and rectification of the mind" constitutes a crucial link in the "gongfu" theory of The Great Learning, reflecting the profound understanding of the moral subject in Confucian thought.

First, regarding "sincerity of the intention", The Great Learning states: "What is meant by 'making the intention sincere' is allowing no self-deception. As one loathes a foul odor, as one loves a beautiful color: this is called satisfying oneself. Therefore, the superior person must be watchful over himself when he is alone." [1] This formulation reveals that the essence of "sincerity of the

intention" is truthfulness without deceit, and equally demands that one maintain moral self-awareness even in solitude. Zhu Xi annotates: "Sincerity of the intention is the first step in self-cultivation. 'Allow no' is a prohibitive expression. 'Self-deception' means that although one knows one should do good and remove evil, what arises in the mind is not yet genuine." [1] The core of the "gongfu" of "sincerity of the intention" is "vigilance in solitude". Through contrasting the conduct of the superior person and the petty person, The Great Learning illuminates the importance of "vigilance in solitude": "The petty person, when left alone, does all manner of evil, nothing being too wicked for him... This shows that when there is sincerity within, it manifests externally; therefore, the superior person must be watchful over himself when he is alone." [1] This method of cultivation emphasizes that one's inner virtue and external conduct must exhibit a high degree of consistency; neither can be neglected.

Second, regarding "rectification of the mind", The Great Learning points out: "The reason that cultivating the person depends on rectifying the mind is that when one is affected by anger, the mind cannot be rectified... This is what is meant by saying that cultivating the person depends on rectifying the mind." [1] The essential point of the "gongfu" of "rectifying the mind" lies in controlling the emotions and maintaining concentration. Emotions such as anger, fear, fondness, and anxiety interfere with the proper functioning of the mind, causing one to lose the state of centrality, equilibrium, clarity, and serenity. Therefore, "rectifying the mind" requires maintaining inner tranquility and perspicuity when facing various circumstances.

3.3 The Pivotal Position of Cultivating the Person

Cultivating the person occupies an extremely important and pivotal position in the "gongfu" theory of The Great Learning. The Great Learning explicitly states: "From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all alike must take the cultivation of the person as the root." [1] This formulation establishes the central importance of cultivating the person within the entire "gongfu" system. The following analysis proceeds from three aspects:

From a structural perspective, cultivating the person is the turning point between "inner sageliness" and "outer kingliness". The first four steps—"extending knowledge, investigating things, making the intention sincere, and rectifying the mind"—have as their ultimate purpose the continuous cultivation of "inner gongfu", while the latter three steps—"regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world"—can only be undertaken as outward extensions after the person has been cultivated. As The Great Learning states: "When the person is cultivated, the family is regulated; when the family is regulated, the state is well governed; when the state is well governed, the world is brought to peace." [1]

From the perspective of content, cultivating the person involves the requirement of "gongfu" cultivation that integrates body and mind. It refers not only to the elevation of moral goodness but also encompasses the regulation of physical conduct. Through its discussion that "cultivating the person depends on rectifying the mind," The Great Learning illuminates the intimate relationship between body and mind.

From the perspective of function, cultivating the person serves a connecting and mediating role. It is at once the completion of inward personal cultivation and the beginning of outward engagement with social affairs. This dual function embodies the pursuit, summarized by Confucian thinkers since antiquity, of the unity between "personal value" and "social value."

3.4 The Outer-Kingly Ideal of Regulating the Family, Governing the State, and Bringing Peace to the World

The ultimate goal of the "gongfu" theory in The Great Learning is to realize the outer-kingly

ideal of "regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world". This ideal reflects the Confucian construction of an ideal social order.

First, regarding "regulating the family", The Great Learning states: "The reason that regulating the family depends on cultivating the person is that when people are partial to those whom they love... Therefore, to love someone while knowing his faults, and to loathe someone while knowing his merits—this is rare indeed under Heaven." [1] This discussion reveals the intrinsic connection between cultivating the person and regulating the family: only by first cultivating oneself can one handle family relationships impartially.

Second, regarding "governing the state", The Great Learning emphasizes: "The reason that governing the state must begin with regulating the family is that if one cannot instruct one's own family, one cannot instruct others... Parental affection is the means by which the multitude is governed." [1] This idea that "when the family is regulated, the state is well governed" reflects the Confucian concept of the "isomorphic structure of family and state".

Third, regarding "bringing peace to the world", The Great Learning proposes the "way of the measuring square": "What you do not want done to yourself by those above, do not do to those below; what you do not want done to yourself by those below, do not do to those above... This is called the way of the measuring square." [1] This principle requires that rulers treat their subjects with empathy, reflecting the "people-oriented thought" in Confucian doctrine—just as Mencius later advocated "governing with benevolent policies through a benevolent heart."

4. The Interpretation and Development of the Gongfu Theory in The Great Learning by Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism

4.1 Zhu Xi's Path of Neo-Confucian Interpretation

Zhu Xi's interpretation of the gongfu theory in The Great Learning marks the maturation of the Neo-Confucian gongfu system. He carried out a distinctive transformation and reinterpretation of the ancient text of The Great Learning through the method of "rearranging the text and supplementing the commentary". He maintained that The Great Learning should be divided into two parts: the "classic", which constitutes the guiding principles of The Great Learning—namely, "illuminating the illustrious virtue, renovating the people, and resting in the highest excellence"; and the "commentary", which constitutes the concrete steps—namely, "investigating things, extending knowledge, making the intention sincere, rectifying the heart, cultivating the person, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world." Furthermore, he held that the ancient text of The Great Learning lacked the commentary on "investigating things and extending knowledge," and therefore composed a supplementary commentary, thereby endowing it with new significance.

With regard to "gongfu" theory, he constructed his theoretical system on the foundation of giving equal weight to "the way of inquiry and study" and "honoring virtuous nature". He regarded the "gongfu" of "the way of inquiry and study" as the concrete method—the diligent effort of "knowing and seeking to know"—while the "gongfu" of "honoring virtuous nature" referred to nourishing the mind and cultivating one's nature, seeking to apprehend the original substance of the mind, that moral practice which is "obtained without thought and understood without learning," "luminous and spiritually perceptive."

His "gongfu" theory exhibits the following characteristics: First, it emphasizes the cognitive path of "investigating principle by approaching things". He held that the purpose of investigating things is to exhaustively examine the principles of things, and to grasp the universal Heavenly Principle through the cognition of concrete things. Second, it attaches importance to the method of self-cultivation through "maintaining reverence and nourishing [the mind]". He described

"reverence" as possessing the characteristic of permeating the totality of thought, encompassing four refined dimensions: "concentrating on the one, vigilant awareness, collecting oneself, and dignified composure." Finally, it adheres to the practical principle that "knowledge and action" mutually depend upon and mutually advance each other. Zhu Xi maintained that "the way of inquiry and study" and "honoring virtuous nature" are not two concepts as incompatible as "a square peg and a round hole" or "ice and charcoal," but rather constitute one theory of "one principle with many manifestations."

4.2 Wang Yangming's Innovation of the School of Mind

Wang Yangming's interpretation of the "gongfu" theory in *The Great Learning* represents the supreme achievement of the Ming Dynasty School of Mind. Taking his critique of Zhu Xi's revised edition of *The Great Learning* and its theory of "investigating things" as his point of departure, he gradually established his system of the School of Mind, which takes "innate knowing" as the noumenon and "extending innate knowing" as the "gongfu" theory. His interpretation of *The Great Learning* underwent a developmental process from "sincerity of the intention" to "extending innate knowing." He used "sincerity of the intention" to govern the "gongfu", holding that "investigating things" is the effort of "sincerity of the intention," and that "resting in the highest excellence" is the ultimate point of "sincerity of the intention."

As his thought developed, Wang Yangming gradually recognized the limitations of the "theory of sincerity of the intention," and turned instead to proposing "extending innate knowing" as the fundamental gongfu of *The Great Learning*. Wang Yangming's innovations in the "gongfu" theory of *The Great Learning* are manifested primarily in the following aspects:

First, he proposed the ontological thought that "no principle exists outside the mind". He maintained: "The mind is principle. The absence of selfishness is the accordance with principle; failure to accord with principle is selfishness." [2] There is fundamentally nothing in the things of the world that can be "investigated" in the sense of an external object; failure to accord with Heavenly Principle lies in one's "selfishness" alone, and the "gongfu" of investigating things can only be practiced upon the "mind." This view fundamentally altered Zhu Xi's path of "investigating principle by approaching things."

Second, he emphasized the "gongfu" theory of "the unity of knowledge and action". Wang Yangming pointed out: "The place where knowledge is genuine, earnest, and solid is action; the place where action is clear, aware, and penetrating is knowledge. The "gongfu" of knowledge and action is fundamentally inseparable..." [2] This theory dissolves the opposition between knowledge and action, emphasizing the unity of moral cognition and moral practice.

Third, he established the "gongfu" cultivation system of "extending innate knowing." Wang Yangming held that innate knowing is the moral consciousness innately possessed by every human being, and that "extending innate knowing" means recovering and expanding this innate moral consciousness. He stated: "Innate knowing is 'the equilibrium before the feelings are aroused,' is the noumenon that is 'vast and impartial' and 'still and unmoved,' and is what all human beings share in common..." [2]

4.3 A Comparison of the Gongfu Theories of Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming

The divergence between Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming on the "gongfu" theory of *The Great Learning* reflects two different orientations within Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism: the orientation of the School of Principle and that of the School of Mind.

From the perspective of the starting point of "gongfu", Zhu Xi advocated "investigating things and extending knowledge," emphasizing the seeking of principle from objective things; Wang

Yangming advocated "extending innate knowing," emphasizing the starting point from the innate knowing within the mind. Zhu Xi, following the text of *The Great Learning*, maintained that "the extension of knowledge lies in the investigation of things"; Wang Yangming, basing himself on Mencius's thought regarding the original mind, reinterpreted *The Great Learning*, maintaining that the extension of knowledge is realized through the investigation of things (in the sense of rectifying the mind).

From the perspective of the goal of "gongfu", both pursued the ideal personality of becoming a sage or worthy, but their choice of paths differed profoundly. Zhu Xi emphasized a gradual approach of cultivation, progressively accumulating knowledge and virtue; Wang Yangming emphasized an approach analogous to "sudden enlightenment", directly apprehending the noumenon of innate knowing.

Despite the divergences in their directions of thought, both Zhu and Wang made enormous contributions to the development of the thought of *The Great Learning*. Zhu Xi's interpretation established the complete system of the Neo-Confucian "gongfu" theory, and his method of "investigating things and exhausting principle" exerted a far-reaching influence upon later generations. Wang Yangming's innovation opened a new path for the gongfu theory of the School of Mind, and his doctrine of "extending innate knowing" elevated the Confucian learning of human nature and mind to new heights.

5. Conclusions

Through an analysis of the "gongfu" theory in *The Great Learning*, this paper arrives at the following conclusions:

First, the "gongfu" theory of *The Great Learning* takes the "Three Guiding Principles and Eight Steps" as its core structure, constructing a gongfu cultivation system with clear levels and logical coherence. This system takes "illuminating the illustrious virtue, loving the people, and resting in the highest excellence" as its goals, and "investigating things, extending knowledge, making the intention sincere, rectifying the heart, cultivating the person, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world" as its methods, manifesting the Confucian vision of the ideal personality: "inner sageliness through self-perfection and outer kingliness through perfecting things."

Second, the "gongfu" theory of *The Great Learning* possesses the distinctive characteristics of ancient Chinese philosophical thought. It does not presuppose some origin as the supreme noumenon; rather, taking "benevolent love" as its core and human morality as its foundation, it forges a thought system that values both inner character and external cultivation, emphasizing "the unity of knowledge and action." This characteristic makes the "gongfu" theory of *The Great Learning* unique in the history of philosophy.

Third, the later in-depth study of the "gongfu" theory of *The Great Learning* diverged into two different orientations: "the School of Principle" and "the School of Mind." Zhu Xi established the "gongfu" theory of the School of Principle through "investigating principle by approaching things," while Wang Yangming opened the path of the gongfu theory of the School of Mind through "extending innate knowing." Although the two diverged, both deepened the understanding of the classic of *The Great Learning* and promoted the further development of Confucian philosophical thought.

In conclusion, the thought of the "gongfu" theory in *The Great Learning*, as a treasure of traditional Chinese culture, possesses the highest value in both its theoretical and practical significance. Under new historical conditions, we ought to approach this precious cultural heritage with an innovative attitude, developing it through inheritance and innovating through development,

so that the "gongfu" theory of The Great Learning may radiate new vitality and energy in the new era.

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