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Wang Yangming

The Philosopher of the Mind — The Unity of Knowledge and Action

by Robert Miller

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PART ONE

The Seeker

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Chapter One

The Boy Who Would Be a Sage

立志成聖

The family said he had been carried for fourteen months.

That is the first thing the disciples wrote down about him, and it tells us immediately what kind of story they believed they were telling. In Chinese tradition the legendary sage-emperor Yao was said to have been carried for fourteen months. A long gestation was the mark of an extraordinary child. Whether or not Madame Zheng, wife of the young scholar Wang Hua, actually carried her first son beyond the ordinary term, the family remembered it that way, and by the time the Nianpu was compiled, the remembering had become part of the man.

He was born on the thirtieth day of the ninth lunar month in the eighth year of the Chenghua reign, which is to say 31 October 1472, in the household of the Wang family in Yuyao, a prosperous county town in the hills of eastern Zhejiang, not far from the port of Ningbo and the old cultural capital of Shaoxing.

On the night of his birth, the story goes, his grandmother, Madame Cen, dreamed that a divine being robed in crimson and jade descended from the sky on five-colored clouds, playing music, and placed an infant in her arms. She woke to hear the newborn crying in the next room. Her husband, the boy's grandfather Wang Lun, named the child Yun, which means "cloud." The neighbors began to call the

building where he was born the Ruiyun Lou, the Tower of Auspicious Clouds. The tower still stands in Yuyao, rebuilt and restored, and visitors still climb its stairs.

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The family into which the cloud-child was born had a long memory and modest means. The Wangs traced their line back to Wang Xizhi, the fourth-century calligrapher whom Chinese tradition reveres as the greatest master of the brush who ever lived. Whether that descent was real or a pious invention, it gave the family a certain bearing. They thought of themselves as people of culture, not people of power.

Wang Lun, the grandfather, embodied that ideal. He had never held office. He was a scholar who taught village children, read the classics for pleasure, played the zither, and planted bamboo all around his house. He took the name Zhuxuan, "Bamboo Pavilion," and he liked to say that bamboo was his teacher: hollow at the center, upright, green through the winter, bending in storms but never breaking. A man should be like that. The boy grew up among those stalks, and bamboo would return to haunt him.

His father, Wang Hua, was cut from different cloth. He was brilliant, disciplined, and ambitious in the way that the Ming examination system rewarded. Every three years, the empire held a vast series of examinations: county, provincial, metropolitan, and finally the palace examination, presided over in theory by the emperor himself. Hundreds of thousands of men sat for the lowest level. A few hundred, in each cycle, reached the top and were awarded the degree of jinshi, "presented scholar," which opened the doors to the highest offices in the land. The single candidate ranked first in the palace examination was the zhuangyuan, and for the rest of his life he would be among the most celebrated men in the empire.

In 1481, when his son was eight, Wang Hua became zhuangyuan.

It is hard to overstate what this meant. A family that had produced quiet village scholars for generations had, in a single stroke, produced the most honored graduate in the realm. Wang Hua was appointed to the Hanlin Academy, the elite institution that drafted imperial documents and trained future grand secretaries. The following year he sent for his father and his son to join him in Beijing.

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Here the stories begin to cluster around the boy, and they all have the same shape.

The Nianpu says that he did not speak until he was five. His family worried. One day, the story goes, a passing Buddhist monk saw the child playing and stroked his head and said, "A fine child. A pity his name gives the secret away." The grandfather understood: the name Yun, cloud, referred to the dream, and in revealing a heavenly origin it had somehow bound the child's tongue. He renamed him Shouren, "one who preserves humaneness," taking the words from a line in the Analects of Confucius: what knowledge has attained, humaneness must preserve. The boy began to speak immediately. Not only that: he began reciting passages from the classics that he had heard his grandfather read aloud, as though he had been memorizing them silently all along.

A modern reader will recognize the type. Saints' lives in every tradition contain such stories. But the story of the silent child who speaks only when he is given the right name, and who turns out to have been listening the whole time, is worth noticing, because it is a story about inner knowledge waiting to be released. The disciples who told it believed that their teacher's later doctrine was, in a sense, the truth of his own childhood.

On the journey north to Beijing in 1482, the party stopped at Jinshan Temple, on an island in the Yangtze near Zhenjiang. Wang Lun's friends gathered for wine and poetry and, as men of letters did, began

composing verses on the view. Before they finished, the ten-year-old asked if he might try. He produced a poem on the spot:

Jinshan is a fist-sized stone,

pressing down on the sky-reflecting water of Yangzhou.

Drunk, I lean against the moon on the Pavilion of Wondrous Height;

a jade flute's music startles the dragon awake in its cave.

The adults were astonished. Someone gave him a second subject, the Moon-Shading Mountain Pavilion, and he produced another, ending with the thought that if a man had eyes as large as heaven, he would see that the mountain was small and the moon was vast. The poem is clever: a child's game of perspective. But it also contains the beginning of a lifelong idea, that what we see depends on the size of the eye that sees it.

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In Beijing the boy was enrolled with a private tutor, as befitted the son of a Hanlin academician. He was not, by every account, a docile student. He played war games with other children, dividing them into armies and commanding them with flags. His father scolded him. He did not stop.

Then came the conversation that the disciples remembered above all others.

It was 1483, and the boy was eleven. One day he asked his teacher a question that seems simple but is not.

"What is the most important thing in the world?"

The teacher gave the answer that every teacher in the empire would have given. "To study, pass the examinations, and become an official. Like your father."

The boy thought about it. Then he said: "I am not sure that passing the examinations is the most important thing. I think the most important thing is to study to become a sage."

The teacher did not know what to say. When Wang Hua heard about it, he laughed. "So you want to be a sage, do you?"

It is easy to read this as a precocious child's boast. But in the world of the fifteenth century, it was something closer to a provocation. The Neo-Confucian tradition that governed Ming education held, in theory, that sagehood was the goal of learning. The great Song-dynasty philosopher Zhou Dunyi had written that sagehood could be learned. Zhu Xi, whose commentaries were now the official curriculum of the examination system, had spent his life explaining how. But in practice, almost no one took the goal seriously. Sagehood was something attributed to Yao and Shun, to the Duke of Zhou, to Confucius and Mencius, figures who lived in a golden age two thousand years in the past. Ordinary men studied the sages in order to pass examinations. They did not study in order to become them.

The eleven-year-old had noticed the gap between what the system claimed to be for and what it actually did. He would spend the rest of his life trying to close it.

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The household in Beijing was the household of a busy official, and the education the boy received there was the education every son of such a household received.

It began with memorization. Children of scholar families started on primers like the Three Character Classic, rhymed lines of three characters each that taught basic history, ethics, and the names of things, and then moved on to the Four Books: the Analects of

Confucius, the Mencius, the Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean. They learned to recite each text aloud, over and over, until they could reproduce it perfectly, and only afterward, sometimes years afterward, did the teacher explain what the words meant. By his early teens a promising boy might have memorized several hundred thousand characters of classical text. He would carry them in his head for the rest of his life. Wang Yangming would one day test the greatest insight of his life against those memorized words, alone in a cave, with no books to consult.

Alongside memorization came calligraphy, the daily practice of writing characters with brush and ink, and the beginnings of composition: couplets, short poems, and then the formal essays that the examinations required. It was a demanding education, and it produced, at its best, men of extraordinary learning and literary refinement. It also produced boys who could recite the Analects flawlessly without ever having asked themselves whether they believed a word of it.

Wang Shouren learned quickly and easily. What he did not do was sit still. The Nianpu and later anecdotes agree that as a boy he was restless, mischievous, and constantly distracted by games.

One story, repeated in many later accounts, concerns Chinese chess, xiangqi, a game of generals, chariots, horses, and cannon fought across a river on a board of lines. The boy loved it. He played it so obsessively that he neglected his studies, and his father, losing patience, took the chess set and threw it into the river. The boy, the story goes, responded by writing a poem: a mock lament for the lost pieces, in which the general drowns, the chariots and horses are swept away by the current, the cannon sink with a sound like thunder, and the soldiers vanish into the waves, carried off to the Dragon King's palace beneath the water.

Whether or not the poem is genuinely his, the story is revealing. The game he loved was a war game. Even his grief for it took the form of a

battle scene. The father saw a distraction to be removed; the son saw armies. The two of them would go on seeing the world differently for many years.

There is a further detail in the stories of this period that is easy to pass over. His grandfather, the bamboo-loving Wang Lun, often lived with the family in the capital, and the boy spent much of his time with him. It was from his grandfather, not his father, that he seems to have absorbed his first ideas about what learning was for. Wang Lun had never held office and had never wanted to. He read the classics because he loved them and because he believed they taught a man how to live. He played the zither and wrote poems and tended his bamboo. To a boy surrounded by the anxious ambition of the capital, where every conversation seemed to turn on rank and promotion, the old man must have been a living reminder that there was another way to be a scholar.

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The next year his mother died.

Madame Zheng's death in 1484, when her son was twelve, left almost no trace in the documents. The Nianpu records that he mourned with great sorrow. We know nothing else about her: not her personality, not her voice, not what she said to the child who would become one of the most important thinkers in Chinese history. It is one of the silences that the historian of premodern China learns to live with.

Wang Hua remarried. Folk stories later told how the boy, resentful of a harsh stepmother, bought an owl, hid it in her bedding, and then bribed a shamaness to tell her that his dead mother's spirit was angry at her treatment of the boy. The stepmother, terrified, became kind. No serious historian believes this tale; it belongs to the popular legends that gathered around Wang Yangming after his death, when storytellers turned the sage into a trickster hero. But it is revealing nonetheless. The people who told it remembered him as clever,

unconventional, and willing to bend the rules in pursuit of a just result, and they were not entirely wrong.

The loss of a mother, whatever form his grief took, would come back to him twenty years later in a Buddhist temple in Hangzhou, at the moment when he decided that no philosophy which asked a man to cut the bonds of family could be true. But that is a later chapter.

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By his early teens, the boy who wanted to be a sage had found a second ambition that sat beside the first and would never leave it. He wanted to be a soldier.

This was not a fashionable thing for a scholar's son to want. The Ming dynasty had been founded by a peasant general, the Hongwu Emperor, and in its early decades military men had been honored. But by the late fifteenth century, the dynasty's civilian bureaucracy had come to look down on soldiers as rough, ignorant, and dangerous. The empire's military affairs were increasingly managed by civil officials who had never drawn a bow, and by palace eunuchs who had never seen a battlefield. A man of good family studied the classics. He did not study war.

Wang Shouren studied war. He read the Six Secret Teachings, attributed to the ancient strategist Jiang Taigong. He read the Three Strategies of Huang Shigong and the Art of War of Sunzi. He practiced archery and horsemanship. And at fourteen, in 1486, he went to see the frontier for himself.

That is the subject of the next chapter. But it is worth pausing here, at the end of his childhood, to notice the two ambitions side by side. The boy wanted to be a sage. The boy wanted to be a general. His father's world told him that these were two different things, and that neither was what a sensible young man should actually pursue. His father's world told him to pass the examinations.

He would do all three. It would take him most of his life to discover that the first two had never been separate, and that the third had very little to do with either.

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