CHAPTER 4

Sageliness Within, Kingliness Without

The challenges Wang Yangming confronted in Jiangxi were hardly to end with his rapid suppression of the prince’s rebellion, and by some accounts what he had just overcome paled in comparison with what he would face over the course of the next year. During this time, the emperor and his circle of favorites traveled to the region for the purpose of reenacting and stealing the credit for a rebellion now dead in the water. Censor Li Long’s judgments capture well the predicament he faced:

What was difficult about suppressing the prince’s rebellion wasn’t succeeding at it but rather rallying the righteous. This is because the traitorous prince’s rebellion had indeed found collaboration from within [the Ming court], and people wished only to look on from the sidelines. And yet at this time those officials who came to the aid of the emperor were all willing to risk their lives and destruction of their families in order to save their country. Thereafter, the jealous tried to bring them down by spreading rumors and wished to steal the credit for their achievement. On what basis will people in their hearts remain loyally obedient? Should in the future there be some unforeseen turn of events, who will be willing to rise to the occasion?

The jealous to whom Li refers were at first two of the emperor’s closest companions—Eunuch Director Zhang Zhong 張忠 and the Earl of Anbian Xu Tai 許泰. The threat they posed to Wang Yangming became so serious that death was a constant prospect for many months, and it is for this reason that Wang’s principal biographer Qian Dehong took issue with the censor’s assessment: “As for the events surrounding the suppression of the rebellion, it was not hard to rally the righteous but rather extremely difficult to handle the turn of events initiated by Zhang Zhong and Xu Tai.”

The period of time covered here begins when Wang Yangming returned from Hukou to Jiangxi’s provincial capital (Nanchang) on August 21, 1519, and ends with his departure for Beijing on July 23, 1521, when he was summoned by the emperor for the purpose of conferring honors and possibly high office. For

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1 NP, 34:1275.
2 Ibid.
those two years between capturing the prince and being called to Beijing, Wang Yangming was largely residing in Jiangxi as grand coordinator. It was during this same period of time that the Zhengde emperor, abetted by the border commander Jiang Bin 江彬 and other close companions, departed with a large expeditionary force and several generals in order to lead his own campaign against the prince and rewrite the history of the rebellion. These imperial favorites plotted against Wang Yangming and accused him of crimes. In many moments Wang feared for his life, and that of his entire lineage.

As explained in Chapter Two, scholarship on Wang Yangming has stressed how important these trials and tribulations were to his unveiling of the doctrine of the extension of the innate knowledge of the good (zhi liangzhi 致良知). Okada Takehiko, for instance, believes that while suppressing banditry in southern Jiangxi and then the prince’s rebellion, Wang became more fully aware and convinced that what he was witnessing and acting upon was “the mysterious operation of the unobstructed mind (mushin no myōyō 無心の妙用)” or, in other words, the natural functioning of innate knowledge.³

There is ample evidence to support this interpretation of Wang’s philosophical development. In the middle of 1520, while residing in southern Jiangxi’s Ganzhou Prefecture, he informed his close disciples that his guiding light during this time, when he had very much to stand on his own and weather the constant threat of death, was innate knowledge of the good. He also explained that these experiences caused this knowing to become more lucid.⁴ According to his disciple Qian Dehong, “After the campaign against the Ning Princely Establishment, he suffered hardship caused by Zhang and Xu, his life hanging by a thread. He was tempered one hundred times and polished a thousand, and yet the radiance shined through, and he came only further to trust in the goodness of this knowledge. [Following its] spiritual transformations and wondrous responses, without ever flowing towards excess, transparent and still to the depths, silent without falling into emptiness, [this knowledge] could be verified with a thousand sages and be shown to be without error.”⁵

But in addition to correlating his philosophical development with his life experiences, there is another side to Wang Yangming’s claims that should also be explored. His assertion that innate knowledge of the good was sufficient to handle all of the difficulties he confronted also implies that his actions throughout this time were in some sense the result of his having moved a step forward

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³ Okada, Ō Yōmei taiden, 3:277–78.
⁴ Cf. Wang, Instructions for Practical Living, 193.