ABSTRACT

Caigentan, a collection of aphorisms written by Hong Yingming (circa late sixteenth century to early seventeenth century?) in the late Ming period, is widely known for its integration of the philosophy of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism in the exposition of Hong’s philosophy and principles of life. Yet a close scrutiny of its contents will reveal that the apparently arbitrary and unsystematic coalescence of the three teachings is actually integrated by a very important philosophical concept, which is the concept of mind or xinli. It is worth noting that this concept has either been overlooked or has yet to receive adequate attention in virtually all the literature dealing with the philosophical contents of Caigentan. Obviously the emphasis on such a concept in the book is a good reflection of the profound and pervasive influence of the philosophical views of Zen and especially the ‘Mind School’ or xinxue (with particular reference to Wang Yangming’s teaching and his conception of the ‘Mind’ as a universal spiritual whole) on Hong in his day. Most importantly, the central concept of mind can provide us with a unique perspective from which to analyze the interrelationship of the philosophical ideas of the three teachings and their integration into an organic whole. The availability of such a focus is undoubtedly helpful in enabling us to go beyond our mere surface impressions of the unity of the three teachings in the Caigentan, and to carry out our research or study to gain a deeper understanding of this important aspect of its philosophical
contents. Such an objective is basically what this academic thesis has been designed to achieve.

Altogether, this thesis consists of five chapters:

Chapter One gives a general introduction on the importance of the concept of mind in the Caigentan, with a brief account of the philosophical background and conditions that give rise to its emphasis in the context of Hong’s philosophy. The main objective of the thesis is also highlighted here.

Chapter Two focuses on the philosophical nature and contents of the mind, which are basically covered in three areas, namely, its relation to another important Chinese philosophical concept of nature or xing, its inner state, and its association with ethics.

Chapter Three touches on the aspect of mind and external world. We will analyze the functional nature of the mind in respect of its interaction with the external concrete world, and also how the Neo-Confucian view of the universal mind influenced Hong’s outlook on the spiritual unity of both the mind and external world.

Chapter Four provides an overall picture of the kind of ideal and free spiritual realm or mental state which Hong hoped to attain, through recognizing the eternally real inner state of the mind, and extricating oneself from material pursuits and worldly entanglements. The discussion is largely based on our earlier discussion of the concept of mind, and also whatever clues and hints we can identify in his sayings.

Chapter Five concludes the thesis by acknowledging the positivity of the coalescence of the teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism and
Daoism in the Caigentan as embodied in Hong’s exposition of the concept of mind, despite certain related philosophical limitations which can be observed textually. In fact, the great significance of the unity of the three teachings becomes even more evident when we consider that the essential spirit of Chinese intellectual learning lies not in making distinctions, but rather in seeking for comprehensive understanding and unity.