

# **The Transformation of Philosophical Concepts and Cultural Significance in Literary Works of the Late Ming Dynasty**

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**Abstract:** This study examines the transformation of philosophical concepts and their cultural significance in the literary works produced during the late Ming dynasty in China. The research findings are based on a qualitative textual analysis of poetry, drama, and vernacular fiction from the selected time period. The core findings of this study reveal a significant transformation in the treatment of philosophical traditions during the late Ming dynasty. The analysis shows a syncretic blending and hybridisation of different philosophical perspectives, rather than a reliance on distinct Confucian, Daoist, or Buddhist frameworks. This intellectual cross-pollination is observed, as literary creators of the period integrated elements from all three of these major philosophical traditions. Furthermore, the study also found a notable subversion of Confucian norms and virtues during the late Ming era. Prior to this period, Confucianism was the predominant philosophical influence on intellectual and cultural production. However, the analysis indicates that during the late Ming, the established Confucian rhetoric and moral ideals were challenged, with authors drawing more extensively from Daoist and Buddhist perspectives. Additionally, the research unveils a dynamic negotiation between orthodox classical Chinese thought and more heterodox philosophical viewpoints during the late Ming dynasty. This process involved the restatement and reconfiguration of various virtues and norms, signalling a broader transformation in the cultural values and societal dynamics of the time.

**Keywords:** Late Ming Dynasty; Philosophical Transformation; Syncretic Blending; Intellectual Cross-Pollination; Sociocultural Change in China during the Ming Dynasty.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the later part of the Ming Dynasty (1268-1644), significant intellectual and cultural transformation has been witnessed throughout the country (Ding, 2022; Huang, 2021; Y. Wang, 2022). Philosophical schools in the country flourished largely because the decline started in the Ming imperial system that was once having a stronghold in the country, and it was using its powers to dominate (Cao, 2021; Qian, 2021). As a result, Feng (Feng, 2022) is of the view that significant innovative literature along with diverse philosophical schools emerged throughout the country. Guo (Guo, 2022) is of the view that changes within the literature work and philosophical

concepts have been largely witnessed because of the changing sociocultural realities, as the subsequent philosophies that shaped the literature at the end of the Ming dynasty could be rightly categorised as pluralistic in nature. The closer analysis of most of the work that has been performed in the literature and philosophy witnessed significant transformation and change, as the classical literature that was once the dominant approach in the country started losing its grounds and support and was thus reinterpreted and reproduced considering different sociocultural dynamics and realities (Chen, 2021). The literary work produced during the late Ming Dynasty assumed a unique place in Chinese literature and cultural thoughts, as Huang (Huang, 2021) is of the view that this is the period where different philosophies, including Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, coexisted simultaneously, which in turn has led to significant transformation and change of the intellectual climate, which is well-reflected in the rich literature that has been produced at the end of the Ming Dynasty. Cao (Cao, 2021) has noted that during this era, syncretism and hybridisation of the three major philosophies, including Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, have been particularly noted, which in turn has shaped the ideas and framework that the major writers were using. As a result of such transformation, Chen (Chen, 2021) has distinguished this period of Chinese literature and philosophy as an era where significant reframing and subversion of the established notions and ideas, cultural norms and beliefs, spirituality, and established rhetoric have taken place. The work of the notable author during the era shed light on the significant transformation that has been carried out in terms of philosophical grounds, believed and widely followed throughout the country. For example, as asserted by Zhang (Zhang, 2022), Li Zhi, a notable author during the end of the Ming Dynasty, challenged the established rhetoric of Confucianism and introduced the concepts of impermanence and enlightenment that have been borrowed from Buddhism. The work produced by the author could be thus referred to as vernacular fiction. Similar trends have been noted in the work of other renowned poets, novelists, and literary authors throughout the period. In particular, Wang (Y. Wang, 2022) has noted that significant diversification in the literary work, cultural themes, and philosophical ground taken by the literary authors has been witnessed during the late Ming Dynasty. This study aims to critically analyse the transformation of philosophical concepts and cultural significance in literary works of the late Ming Dynasty. The analysis carried out in the study is based on the analysis of the work produced during the late Ming Dynasty, whereas selected sources from the poetry, drama, and vernacular

fictions have been critically analysed to evaluate the extent to which transformation of the classical Chinese literature has been thus made and diversification in the philosophical and cultural themes in the literature has taken place. The analysis thus carried out could help in evaluating how better and more innovative artistic expressions have been made possible during the late Ming Dynasty.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 The Cultural Landscape that Emerged during the Late Ming Dynasty

The Ming Dynasty ruled ancient China from 1368 to 1644, whereas the last four decades of the ruling elite in the country have been largely characterised by weak power and control (Li, 2021)(Ding, 2022). Huang (Huang, 2021) is of the view that since the weaknesses of the imperial powers started to be witnessed on a large scale, this provided significant opportunities to the intellectual scholars, as they started challenging the established rhetoric and norms that were significantly shielding the imperial powers in the country. Qian (Qian, 2021) and Wang (Y. Wang, 2022) have observed that during the declining stage of the Ming Dynasty, significant evolution of Chinese thoughts and culture has been witnessed, which has brought a whole range of changes in Chinese literature and key philosophies that were followed throughout the country. According to Chen (Chen, 2021), the late Ming Dynasty is characterised by the coexistence of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and as a result of leveraging these three key philosophies simultaneously, diversification in the cultural landscape of the country and literary work could be readily witnessed in the period. Wu (Wu, 2022), while stressing the significance of the era in the evolution of Chinese literature, has pointed out that this period helped in the establishment of fertile grounds that have been later leveraged for effective reinterpretation of the classical philosophical work that laid down a strong foundation for subsequent literature in the country.

### 2.2 Philosophic Concepts in the Late Ming Dynasty's Poetry

The analysis of the poetry that has been produced during the late Ming Dynasty could reveal that Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism have a simultaneous influence on the poetry of different poets during the period (Chen, 2021; J. Wang, 2022). For example, Qian (Qian, 2021) has conducted significant analysis of the Yuan Hongdao poetic corpus, whereas the author has found that the poetry of the author has been

significantly influenced by Daoism. The major theme that Qian (Qian, 2021) has identified in the work of Yuan Hongdao is that the poet has been stressing the value of living in absolute harmony with nature and following the natural order. As in this period, the coexistence of all three major Chinese philosophies, including Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, has been noted; there are some notable poets in the Ming Dynasty who followed all three philosophies simultaneously (Zhu, 2020). Hybridisation of the cultural philosophies could be thus evident in the work of eminent poets in this era. For example, Li (Li, 2021) has analysed the poetry of Xingshi Zhuan and found that the three philosophies have collectively influenced his poetry, and all three philosophies have been combined and integrated in his poetry work. Additionally, the work of some poets produced in the era could reveal that they have challenged the established rhetoric followed in one of the philosophies and have presented other philosophical grounds that changed and transformed existing thinking and belief. For example, Zhu (Zhu, 2020), while analysing the work of Li Zhi, found that although the dominant perspective at Li Zhi's time was Confucianism, the poet challenged the established rhetoric and belief of Confucianism and forwarded and backed new ideas that were linked to Daoist naturalism and spirituality.

### 2.3 Philosophical Theme of Late Ming Dynasty's Drama

Just like the philosophical concepts affecting Chinese poetry work in the late Ming Dynasty, similar impacts have also been witnessed in the Chinese drama and playwright (Zhou, 2021)(Feng, 2022; Zhou, 2021). As per the analysis of Tang Xianzu's work carried out by Huang (Huang, 2021), it has been found that the writer has integrated all three philosophies of the time, including Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, in a more skilful manner, and thus a dynamic interplay of ideas has been created in his work. At the same time, the notable playwright of the time challenged the established rhetoric of different philosophies and forwarded alternative approaches (Guo, 2021). For example, as per the analysis carried out by Feng (Feng, 2022) of Tang Xianzu's dramatic work, the writer has noted that the playwright has challenged and reconfigured Confucian virtues, including filial piety, and forwarded alternative concepts from Daoism and Buddhism. In the context of the change that was taking place in the late Ming Dynasty, such an alternative approach put forward by the playwright established new ground for change and social revolution that led to the ultimate demise of the Ming Dynasty. Additionally, Cao (Cao, 2021) has noted that hybridisation of different philosophies could also be noted in

the Ming Dynasty. The writer has analysed the work of Tang Xianzu and found that the playwright has combined and integrated Confucian social hierarchy and Daoism natural harmony, which distinguished the literary work produced at that time.

### 2.3 Philosophical Theme of Late Ming Dynasty's Vernacular Fictions

The late Ming Dynasty's vernacular fiction work produced by different writers has witnessed significant changes as compared to the classical vernacular fictions. According to Zhang (Zhang, 2022), who have analysed the work of popular vernacular fiction writer Li Zhi and found that the novelist has significantly benefitted from the Buddhist philosophy, as by stressing Buddhism in his novel and fictions, the writer has not only introduced new philosophy but he has engaged in significant criticism of Confucianism that was established and most largely followed philosophy during the late Ming Dynasty. Furthermore, Chen (Chen, 2021), who have analysed the work of different novelists during the late Ming Dynasty, have found that many writers during the period worked on the transformation of established philosophies, as the core writers stressed Buddhism and Daoism while at the same time criticised the established norms and values that were related to Confucianism. However, contrary to the findings of Zhang (Zhang, 2022) and Chen (Chen, 2021), Huang (Huang, 2021) has found that the late Ming Dynasty also underscores significant hybridisation processes, as rich vernacular fictions work during the period have been produced where all three philosophies have been combined and integrated.

### 2.4 The Cultural Significance of Philosophical Transformation

From the above analysis, it is very evident that significant transformation of the philosophies has taken place during the late Ming Dynasty (Guo, 2022; Zhang, 2022). The transformation process that has thus taken place not only signalled the political upheavals that were taking place during the late Ming Dynasty but also the significant transformation that could be witnessed in the literature and philosophies that also denote the sociocultural transformation process underway at that time. The writers, through their work in the form of poetry, dramas, and vernacular literature, have not only challenged the established rhetoric found in Chinese society, but they have also leveraged the literature to present new interpretations of established norms and values practiced in Chinese society. The transformation process that took place during the late Ming Dynasty thus provides a rich and nuanced understanding of the intercultural and artistic dynamics that were particularly appropriate during the late Ming Dynasty

and has established grounds for the significant transformation of Chinese literature and philosophical work.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

The research design that has been adopted for the analysis of the transformation of philosophical concepts and cultural significance in the literary work during the late Ming Dynasty is qualitative analysis. The qualitative research design has been used in the study as the approach helped the investigator to explore the context and nuance that was essential for analysing the complexity of the transformation process that has been carried out during the late Ming Dynasty. Furthermore, through the use of qualitative research design, the study accessed additional benefits of rich and detailed, thick description, along with holistic insight that has been ensured. Innovative insight, empathy, and connection have been accessed when the investigator explored the key texts and literary work of different writers that were produced during the last Ming Dynasty.

#### 3.2 Data Collection Strategy

The data collection strategy that has been used in this study includes both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data sources include a collection of the selected poetry, drama, and vernacular fictions that have been produced during the late Ming Dynasty. For the sake of effective exploration, the investigator, however, used a very careful approach to select text and literary work that has been specifically produced during the late Ming Dynasty. For the analysis of poetry, the work of three writers, including Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan, Yuan Hongdao, and Li Zhi, has been analysed. For the analysis of dramas, the study is based on the analysis of the playwright of Tang Xianzu, while for the analysis of vernacular fiction, selected novels of Fu Sheng Liu Ji and Jin Ping Mei have been explored in this study. In addition to these primary data sources, peer-reviewed journals by the renowned Chinese authors have been used as a source of secondary data. The analysis of these writers has been analysed to evaluate what sort of transformation and change they have witnessed in the philosophical and literary themes during the late Ming Dynasty.

#### 3.3 Data Analysis Process

For analysing the data, different data analysis tools have been employed in this study. For analysing the primary data, the process of textual analysis

has been conducted with particular focus on the transformation process that different writers have followed in their writing. The analysis carried out in the study is based on closer consideration of the relevant socio-political changes that were taking place during the late Ming Dynasty along with the religious and philosophical changes that have taken place during the late Ming Dynasty. A second data analysis strategy that has been used in this study is comparative analysis, whereas particular attention has been given to the use of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism philosophies evident from the work of the selected writers identified in this study. The comparative analysis process that has been thus used in this study helped in the better understanding of the philosophical framework that has emerged because of the tendency to challenge established rhetoric and reinterpretation of philosophical norms and values that various writers were seeking during the late Ming Dynasty.

#### 4. FINDING, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

##### 4.1 Integration of Diverse Religious Philosophies and Cultural Elements

As per the textual analysis of core readings, it has been found that significant hybridisation has been witnessed in the literary work of the leading authors during the late Ming Dynasty. Benefiting from the intellectual cross-pollination, different authors in the fields of poetry, drama, and vernacular fictions have combined and integrated different philosophies for questioning established rhetoric in Chinese society and/or presenting an alternative perspective that was more enlightened in nature. For example, in the field of poetry, the textual analysis of the Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan work, dated back to the late Ming Dynasty, it has been found that the writer has integrated diverse philosophies in his writing, which include Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Essentially, this could be termed as intellectual innovation, as the majority of the poets at that time were relying on the Confucian perspective, which was the most widely held philosophy in the field. However, Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan (Zhuan., 1987) has relied on the juxtaposition process, whereas different philosophies have been effectively blended to present new perspectives. The textual analysis of his work revealed that he benefitted from Confucian moral ethics, used the Daoist natural life concept, and Buddhist enlightenment significantly in his work (Liu, 2020). The hybridisation process evident from Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan (Zhuan., 1987) work is not just limited to the poet; rather, the analysis of other selected work of Yan

Hongdao (1600) also revealed that he has effectively blended Confucianism and introduced and supported Daoist cosmic oneness during the late Ming Dynasty. However, unlike the work of Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan (Zhuan., 1987), which has largely integrated different philosophies in a harmonious manner, the work of Yuan (H., 1979) revealed that the poet has given foundational importance to Confucianism, and the Daoist and Buddhist philosophies have been used as an auxiliary to the core Confucianism philosophy. This view has also been supported in the literature, as the findings of Qian (Qian, 2021) also stressed that Yuan has given great significance to Confucianism and used the alternative philosophies and their core teachings to support his core viewpoint. Furthermore, in the drama and playwright category, almost similar trends could also be witnessed during the late Ming Dynasty, whereas significant hybridisation of different philosophies of different writers could be experienced. In this regard, the analysis of the work of Tang Xianzu revealed that he professionally tied different philosophies, including Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, and thus a dynamic interplay of these three Chinese philosophies could be readily witnessed in his work. Wu (Wu, 2022) has also asserted that the writer leveraged an integrated approach. Tang in his writing has usually featured a protagonist who usually not only masters all three philosophies but also uses the process of intersection, which in turn reflects the intellectual ferment that could be witnessed in the literary work of the late Ming Dynasty.

#### 4.2 Subversion of Confucian Moral Norms

The established rhetoric during the Ming Dynasty was largely founded on the basis of the Confucianist perspective, whereas the social order and authority are considered as legitimate, and everyone is required to adhere to and follow such authority. Although the ruling elite benefitted from such established norms, and one of the reasons behind the successful continuation of the extended ruling of the Ming Dynasty could be attributed to such Confucian moral norms and values, during the late Ming Dynasty, alternative perspectives emerged that not only challenged the ruling elite but also the established rhetoric found in the literary field that had been challenged and altered (J. Wang, 2022). This is because Wang (J. Wang, 2022) is of the view that artists and writers reflect the norms and values of society, and the work that they produced is significantly affected by the changing norms and values of the society. From the analysis of the novels and fiction work of Fu Sheng Li, one could see that the writer has been extremely critical of the social order and hierarchical authority found



in the Confucian culture, and he has significantly altered such established rhetoric through the introduction of alternative perspectives from Daoism in the form of impermanence and enlightenment. In his work, the core protagonist character could be found, who is significantly critical of rigid Confucian moral codes and favoured flexibility and alternative spiritual and worldwide views that have been supported in the Daoist perspective. In particular, his writing has been significantly favouring individual freedom, which was significantly sacrificed during the Ming Dynasty. As a result, one could observe that the novelist not only introduced alternative perspectives in writing but also he has empowered individuals and groups within the Chinese society, who subsequently lead a wider change, bringing an end to the extended Ming Dynasty. The trends that have been witnessed in the vernacular fiction literary work could also be witnessed in the drama and other creative work produced during the late Ming Dynasty. For example, in Jing Ping Mie writing, significant synthesis of Confucian values could be found, whereas alternative Daoism and Buddhism perspectives have been more effectively positioned. The core theme in the writing is that the future of Chinese society lies in the subversion of Confucianism, particularly the discontinuation of social hierarchy and the moral principles then followed, as they have been the means through which elite rule and significant exploitation of masses within the society have been ensured. According to Chen (Chen, 2021), the subversive framework and the narrative that the writer has established through his writing work is that intellectual ferment should be used, whereas the alternative philosophies, including Daoism and Buddhism, were believed to be the core panacea to cure the challenges that were witnessed during the late Ming Dynasty. Additionally, almost similar trends could be witnessed in the dramatic realm, whereas the literary work of Tang Xianzu's dramas could reveal that the author has significantly engaged in the reconfiguration and reinterpretation of Confucianism, as per the changed sociocultural dynamics that were taking place across China during the late Ming Dynasty. In particular, the author has reinterpreted the filial piety and righteousness in the political upheaval that took place during the late Ming Dynasty, whereas the Confucian framework has been criticised because of its significant limitations, and protagonists in the dramas have been projected as heroes, as the individuals challenged the established rhetoric of Confucian philosophy. In the process, Tang Xianzu has questioned the personal goals and significant responsibilities incurred on the shoulders of such a hero in the light of Confucian philosophy that led to the subversion process, improving goals through the alternative philosophies of Daoism and Buddhism.

### 4.3 Reframing of the Classical Concepts

A closer analysis of the literary work produced during the late Ming Dynasty could also reveal significant transformation of the classical perspectives that an overwhelming majority of the creative work producers were once maintaining and the replacement of such orthodox concepts with emerging and heterogeneous concepts and themes. In particular, Elman, (Elman, 2020) has noted that significant reinterpretation and reconfiguration as per the changing dynamics have taken place during the last Ming Dynasty. An example of this could be drawn from the analysis of the work of Li Zhi, whose novels have presented a new interpretation of the established perspectives that were maintained within the Chinese society under the Confucian philosophy. Significant negotiation could be thus witnessed in his novel and fiction work, whereas he not only presented the limitations and criticism of Confucianism but also presented a more fluid and dynamic perspective, signalling upgraded norms and values that could help in overcoming the limitations. In the field of poetry, almost similar trends have also been witnessed in the late Ming Dynasty. The analysis of Yuan Hongdao poetry, the textual analysis highlights the orthodox approach that was once taken by poets, as evident in the classical poetry of the country, has been altered, and a heterogeneous perspective under the realm of Daoist natural harmony and cosmic oneness has been presented in his different poems. A distinct philosophical perspective has been thus forwarded that was more diverse than the Confucian ethos. However, unlike the dramas and novelists in the period, Hongdao does not criticise Confucianism; rather, it integrates Daoism and Buddhist concepts, leading to the transformation of Confucian thoughts. This in turn dictates the work of Hongdao as a change and alteration, rather than an argument for the alternative perspectives adoptions. The process that has been thus made highlights the complexity of philosophical work, resulting in the transformation and reinterpretation of classical philosophies and literary work. The creative output and cultural significance of philosophical value have been thus renegotiated in the light of the dynamic intellectual landscape during the late Ming Dynasty.

## 5. CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Summary of the Research

This study analysed the transformation of philosophical grounds and cultural significance in the literary work that took place during the late Ming Dynasty in China. The findings of the study are based on qualitative textual

analysis of the poetry, dramas, and vernacular fiction produced in the selected time period. As per the core findings of this study, significant transformation of philosophical traditions in the late Ming Dynasty has been observed, whereas syncretic blending and hybridisation have been witnessed. The intellectual cross-pollination has taken place, whereas rather than relying on separate perspectives of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, intellectual creators during the period integrated all these three philosophies together. Furthermore, it has also been found from the analysis of core readings and the findings of other leading writers in the field that significant subversion of Confucianism has taken place during the late Ming Dynasty. Before the widespread transformation got started in the country, Confucianism was the most widely followed philosophy for intellectual creation; however, since the change and transformation got started during the late Ming Dynasty, the established rhetoric maintained under this perspective has been altered, and the philosophical virtues and norms have been taken from Daoism and Buddhism. Additionally, it has also been found that during the late Ming Dynasty, significant negotiation of orthodox concepts followed under the classical Chinese thoughts that have been altered, and such have been replaced with more heterogeneous perspectives. Restatement and reconfiguration of different virtues have thus taken place, which also signalled significant change in the cultural norms and values of the Chinese society.

## 5.2 Implications of the Research

The research offered different implications. First, the research highlights the significance of using an interdisciplinary approach for examining the change and transformation that took place in Chinese society during the late Ming Dynasty. As per the core findings of the research, the changer could be better understood through sociocultural, philosophical, and artistic expressions. The research also offered practical implications as it highlights the value of literary work in the process of sociocultural and political change in a society. By challenging established rhetoric, the literary contributor during the late Ming Dynasty challenged the established norms that were safeguarding the then-elite class, and by presenting alternative frameworks and rhetoric, the change agents established a stronger foundation for change in the society.

## 5.3 Limitations of Research

There are different limitations of this study that should be observed before generalising the findings of the study. In this regard, the core

limitation of the study is that the findings of the study are based on qualitative analysis, which in turn pose significant challenges to the generalisability of findings due to risks of personal bias. Furthermore, the study also lacked data triangulation, as the findings of the study have not been cross-matched through alternative data collection processes. In addition, very selective work in the fields of poetry, dramas, and vernacular fiction has been analysed in this study. The work analysed in the study may not be the true representative of the significant literature that could have been produced in the late Ming Dynasty.

#### 5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, various recommendations could be suggested. For the sake of research, data triangulation should be ensured, whereas in addition to textual analysis, interviews with relevant field experts should be carried out regarding what view they have been maintaining regarding the philosophical change and transformation that has taken place during the late Ming Dynasty. Furthermore, for future research, it is recommended that rather than founding the conclusion on the basis of very selected broader literary creation, different writers should be analysed. Such a process could help in more clearly identifying trends regarding the level of transformation of philosophical grounds and cultural significance in the literary work that took place during the late Ming Dynasty in China.

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