

A Comprehensive Review Analyzing Half a Century of Wang Yangming's Contributions to Governance in Guangxi

Wenbin Li*

School of Public Administration, Hechi University, Hechi 546300, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China

*Corresponding author: Wenbin Li, jiguchuxin@163.com

Copyright: © 2023 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Wang Yangming was a prominent thinker and politician with significant national influence during the Ming Dynasty. He has been a key subject of study in the realms of China's ideological history, academic history, and political history. His travels to various regions have been the subject of valuable research. While the contribution of Wang Yangming in Guangxi has historically been less extensive compared to his contributions in places such as Zhejiang, Guizhou, and Jiangxi, it has shown gradual improvement over the past 50 years. Particularly, there has been an expanding and deepening exploration of the wisdom and impact he left during his governance of Guangxi.

Keywords: Wang Yangming; Guangxi; Social governance

Online publication: November 23, 2023

1. Introduction

From November of the sixth year of the Jiajing period in the Ming Dynasty (1527) to October of the seventh year of the Jiajing period in the Ming Dynasty (1528), Wang Yangming, despite his illness, assumed the position of Minister of War and served as the governor of Zuodu, overseeing military affairs in Guangdong and Guangxi. In the span of just one year, Wang Yangming successfully quelled the Sitian rebellion and put an end to the Dateng Gorge robberies in Guangxi, employing various measures including recruitment, education, and the deployment of troops. Guangxi was both the final official post held by Wang Yangming and his last residence. Over the past 50 years, scholars have increasingly recognized the wisdom and enduring impact of his governance in this region.

Since the 1970s, the academic community has undertaken a comprehensive study of Wang Yangming's administration in Guangxi, approaching it from various angles and yielding noteworthy research outcomes. Although recent master's and doctoral theses have made some mention of the research findings concerning Wang Yangming's governance in Guangxi, a full account of this topic remains incomplete. Hence, this manuscript seeks to address the gaps in our understanding.

2. The emergence of research (1974–2000)

The study of Wang Yangming's governance in Guangxi was instigated by scholars in Guangxi during a distinct period marked by their critical perspective. One of the earliest papers from this era is "Wang Yangming Reciting Confucianism with a Butcher's Knife in His Hand," authored by Gao Yanhong and Li Chunbang in the 1970s. This paper offered a critique of Wang Yangming as a staunch ally of the feudal landlord class and a proponent of subjective idealism. It unilaterally assessed Wang Yangming's governing measures in Guangxi, highlighting their perceived negative consequences ^[1].

Subsequently, Zhuang Ning's "Wang Yangming's Counterrevolutionary Actions and His 'Mind' Theory – Exposing Wang Yangming's Role in Suppressing the Uprising of the Yao and Zhuang People in Guangxi" and other articles followed a similar line of criticism and accusation ^[2], aimed at unveiling what they considered to be Wang Yangming's unflattering nature and his approach to governance in Guangxi.

From the 1980s to the 1990s, academic circles in Guangxi began to reevaluate the merits and drawbacks of Wang Yangming's governance in Guangxi, leading to a shift in their assessments. Yang Shilu, in "An Evaluation of Wang Shouren's Pacification of Ethnic Minorities in Guangxi," examined the strengths and weaknesses. He acknowledged Wang Yangming's policy of appeasement as a positive measure and recognized the legitimacy of his use of force to suppress civil unrest in Dateng Gorge and Bazhai. However, he also highlighted the inappropriateness of his military suppression as a blunder ^[3].

Following this, Mo Jiaren affirmed "On Wang Shouren's Pacification of Tianzhou," emphasizing that Wang Yangming's fundamental goal was to maintain the rule of feudal dynasties, but it also involved weakening the authority of local Tusi officials and, in some cases, discriminating against and oppressing frontier ethnic minorities in the process ^[4]. Mo Jiaren also delved into a comprehensive examination of how to evaluate Wang Yangming's activities and contributions in Guangxi, including the proposal to erect a statue of Wang Yangming in Nanning. While Mo Jiaren intended to criticize Wang Yangming for his actions and the idea of erecting a statue in his honor, he acknowledged that Wang Yangming objectively contributed to the advancement and development of Guangxi's frontier society.

Of course, this period also retained some entrenched and one-sided biases. For example, Gao Yanhong and Yao Shun'an maintained their longstanding negative perspective in their article "Ming Dynasty Bazhai Yao and Zhuang Farmers' Uprising." They criticized Wang Yangming's approach to governing Guangxi, describing him as "a Confucian general with numerous strategies, full of benevolence and morality," who was accustomed to using dual strategies of "eliminating mountain bandits" and "eliminating those who win favors" ^[5]. This negative criticism continued to influence research into the early 21st century, exemplified by Gong Ye's book "Why Did Wang Shouren Establish Fu Wen Academy in Nanning?" which characterized Wang Yangming as "one of the most loyal proponents of policies promoting ethnic discrimination and oppression" ^[6].

During this initial phase, research outcomes were limited, primarily led by local scholars in Guangxi who concentrated on evaluating Wang Yangming's governance without always relying on comprehensive historical data. These assessments often reflected nationalistic sentiments and were predominantly negative, influenced by prior research and ideological considerations.

3. Research in the early 21st century (2001–2013)

As the new century dawned, research on Wang Yangming's governance of Guangxi assumed a relatively objective stance. Mai Qunzhong and Du Chaoyou, in their article "Wang Yangming in Guangxi," summarized the evident historical impact of Wang Yangming. While they acknowledged his role as the enforcer of

suppressing uprisings among ethnic minorities in Guangxi, they also highlighted Wang Yangming's significant contributions to the development of education in the region ^[7].

Subsequently, Li Xiaowen, in the article "Governing by the Times – The Thought of National Border Governance Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties and the Evolution of Tangxi Tusi System," pointed out Wang Yangming's adaptable thinking, which allowed him to adjust to local conditions and changing times. This perspective challenged the conventional notion that the establishment of a sedentary and nomadic system was the fundamental difference between the systems of the Central Plains and the borderlands. Instead, it treated them as tools of social governance, thereby creating an effective political system. This insight reflected a more positive research and evaluation of Wang Yangming's governance activities in Guangxi in the early 21st century ^[8].

Following this, Sun Xianying and Qin Ming, in their work "The Dissemination and Influence of the Educational Ideas of Fu Wen Academy and Wang Shouren's Academy in Guangxi," explored the positive impact of Wang Yangming's establishment of Fu Wenyuan on the development of education in Guangxi, from the perspective of social education. They highlighted how Fu Wenyuan ushered in a peak period for the growth of academies in Guangxi and stimulated a trend of psychological learning in Guangxi academies after the mid-Ming Dynasty. This had a significant impact on the dominance of Cheng Zhu's philosophy in Guangxi ^[9].

In the same period, Ma Guojun and Li Hongxiang, in their work "On Wang Yangming's Governance of the Guizhou Guangxi Tusi Region and Border Stability," delved into the strategic dynamics of the Southwest Border Region, Wang Yangming's guidance on Guizhou Tusi An Guirong, and border stability. They also examined Wang Yangming's "land reform and return" policies in collaboration with Guangxi, thereby summarizing Wang Yangming's border management ideas. They fully recognized the importance of the Tusi system in maintaining the Southwest Border Region and guided by his psychological thinking, emphasized the necessity of managing chieftain rebellions to preserve the chieftain system ^[10].

In 2013, Ji Aimin summarized Wang Yangming's conquest of Si, Tian Tumu Lu Su, and Wang Shou during the Jiajing period in his article "Wang Yangming and the Governance of Si and Tian Tusi." He analyzed and summarized Wang Yangming's measures in these regions, though without discussing the actual effects and impacts of his actions ^[11].

While research outcomes during this second phase may not be abundant, they witnessed the participation of scholars from outside Guangxi. The primary focus was on sorting and discussing Wang Yangming's specific governance activities in Guangxi. These works not only relied on Wang Yangming's writings but also incorporated extensive historical literature, materials, and references to domestic and international research results. This comprehensive approach demonstrated a growing objectivity in the academic community's evaluation of Wang Yangming during this period.

4. Research over the past decade (2014–2023)

Over the past decade, research on Wang Yangming's governance of Guangxi has continually witnessed innovation and breakthroughs. Scholars from across the country have been reevaluating Wang Yangming's ideas, practices, and their impact on governing Guangxi from the perspectives of ethnic governance, educational practices, border defense, and ethnic relations.

4.1. Research on the thought of overall governance of Guangxi

In 2017, Zhao Shengmei, Xu Xiaoguang, and Zhang Ting's work titled "Wang Yangming's Thought and Practice on Governance of Southwest Ethnic Minorities" analyzed and summarized Wang Yangming's thoughts on ethnic governance. Unfortunately, it briefly discussed the practical application of Wang Yangming's

governance ideas in Guangxi without a comprehensive examination ^[12].

Ma Guojun and Xiong Zhen's "Inheritance and Innovation: A Study of Wang Yangming's Management and Its Influence on Southwest Ethnic Regions – Centered on Tusi in Shuixi, Sitian, and Yongshun" combined Wang Yangming's philosophical teachings with Tusi governance. While the perspective was relatively novel, their exploration of Wang Yangming's idea of governing Guangxi primarily focused on Wang Yangming's "Ten Virtues" and "Ten Disasters," which were supplemented with historical materials but lacked fresh and innovative insights ^[13].

In 2021, Pu Yanfang analyzed Wang Yangming's approach to quelling local civil unrest in Jiangxi, Guangxi, and other regions in her work, "Research on Wang Yangming's Thought on Governance in Ethnic Regions." She highlighted Wang Yangming's adaptability to local conditions and his flexible approach to conflict resolution, such as adopting "primary arrest and secondary arrest" in Jiangxi and Guangxi, which quickly quelled local unrest and stabilized social order. However, the article fell short in its exploration and utilization of historical materials from Guangxi, leading to some viewpoints that deviated from historical facts ^[14].

4.2. Research on the governance of Guangxi through ethnic education

In 2017, Hao Yong, in his book "Using Xia to Change Yi: Wang Yangming's Ethnic Education in Guizhou and Guangxi," approached the topic from the perspective of ethnic education. He argued that Wang Yangming implemented political measures in the rebellious areas of Guangxi combining martial arts and cultural and moral education to bring about positive changes ^[15].

In 2019, He Daxue systematically examined the reasons for Governor General Wang Yangming's visit to Guangxi and how he put his theory of conscience into practice in his work, "Exploration of Conscience Thought and Practice Shown by Wang Yangming during his Guangxi Tour." This work primarily focused on educational governance. However, there was a tendency to exaggerate Wang Yangming's role in the social development of the western border region of Guangdong ^[16].

In 2021, Fan Enna systematically cataloged Wang Yangming's educational activities in Guangxi in his article "Exploration of Wang Yangming's Educational Practice in Guangxi." This work clarified the social interaction between Wang Yangming and the Guangxi region, emphasizing his approach to social governance through education and complemented by military activities. However, due to limited collection and utilization of historical materials from Wang Yangming's time in Guangxi, the article did not delve deeply into the specific effects and impacts of this governance method ^[17].

4.3. Research on Guangxi governance from other perspectives

In 2015, Ma Guojun and Peng Bing's work, "Wang Yangming's Thought and Practice of 'Northern Defense and Southern Transformation' from the Perspective of Border Defense in the Ming Dynasty," delved into the situation and concept of southwestern border defense in the Ming Dynasty. They argued that Wang Yangming opposed hasty implementation of "land reform and return" in the south and actively promoted various educational strategies, contributing positively to the stability of border defense in the late Ming Dynasty ^[18].

In the same year, Deng Yun included a special section in his doctoral thesis, "Research on the Thought of Ethnic Relations in the Ming Dynasty, exploring Wang Yangming's approach to governing Guangxi from the perspective of ethnic relations. He outlined Wang Yangming's ethnic ideology, with "using Xia to turn barbarians" as its core ^[19].

In 2017, Zhou Meiqing's work, "Exploring the Study of Wang Shouren in Guangxi from the Inscription of the 'Meritorious Essay on Fuxing and Thinking of Tian,'" pointed out the relatively low academic attention

given to Wang Yangming in Guangxi. It urged contemporary readers to understand and appreciate Wang Yangming objectively, exploring and studying cultural resources associated with his legacy and fostering a deeper dialogue with his contributions ^[20].

Research outcomes in this third stage are relatively extensive, influenced by the growing impact of data mining and the cumulative knowledge from the first two stages. With the inclusion of master's and doctoral theses addressing Wang Yangming's governance of Guangxi, discussions on various issues have deepened, leading to new and more comprehensive conclusions. It is evident that interdisciplinary research results are mutually referenced and transformed, especially with philosophers drawing from historical research. Historians have shown increased interest in examining Wang Yangming's psychological thinking and governance concepts during his time in Guangxi. This heightened focus on research is also indicative of the growing attention from the domestic academic community. Compared to the peak of Wang Yangming's academic research in regions such as Zhejiang, Guizhou, and Jiangxi, Guangxi still offers ample opportunities for scholarly exploration. Thus, it is natural for researchers to expand their work in this field.

5. Conclusion

Over the past 50 years, research achievements on Wang Yangming's governance of Guangxi have gradually increased within the academic community. The research theme has evolved from irrationality to rationality, marking a transition from negative subjective criticism to a positive objective evaluation. This shift is not only attributed to the growing richness of historical citations but also the improved academic atmosphere, fostering a more comprehensive and objective understanding and evaluation. However, several shortcomings persist in current research:

- (1) Lack of awareness of issues: Previous research has primarily focused on simple statements of historical facts, lacking a systematic review of the process of Wang Yangming's governance of Guangxi. There is a particular absence of exploration into the actual effects and long-term impacts of various governance measures implemented during his tenure.
- (2) Insufficient excavation of historical materials: Some studies heavily rely on Wang Yangming's own memoirs and poems, neglecting materials from other relevant figures. Furthermore, there is a lack of attention to local historical materials, such as Guangxi local chronicles.
- (3) Simplistic research methods: Research arguments tend to be based on historical literature with minimal adoption of interdisciplinary research methods. The absence of field research results in a narrow research perspective and insufficient innovation in the works.
- (4) Weak connection between viewpoints: Existing research mostly elaborates and comments on Wang Yangming's governance process and reflected ideas, failing to delve into the organic harmony between his personal political tendencies and the border strategy of the dynasty and the state.

Addressing these problems and shortcomings in current studies necessitates the participation of scholars from various disciplines to explore and find solutions.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Gao Y, Li C, 1974, Wang Yangming Reciting Confucianism with a Butcher's Knife in His Hand. *Journal of Guangxi University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 1974(1): 51–57.
- [2] Zhuang N, 1975, Wang Yangming's Counterrevolutionary Hands and His 'Mind' Theory – Revealing Wang Yangming's Sinful Face in Suppressing the Uprising of the Yao and Zhuang People in Guangxi. *Historical Research*, 1975(4): 90–95.
- [3] Yang S, 1985, A Review of Wang Shouren's Suppression of Ethnic Minorities in Guangxi. *Guangxi Ethnic Studies*, 1985(2): 28–34.
- [4] Mo J, 1989, On Wang Shouren's Pacification of Tianzhou. *Journal of the Central Institute for Nationalities*, 1989(6): 57–62.
- [5] Gao Y, Yao S, 1985, Ming Dynasty Bazhai Yao and Zhuang Farmers' Uprising. *Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 1985(2): 59–65.
- [6] Gong Y, 2000, Why Did Wang Shouren Establish Fu Wen Academy in Nanning? *Guangxi Local Chronicles*, 2000(1): 53–55.
- [7] Mai Q, Du C, 2004, Wang Yangming in Guangxi. *Wenshi Chunqiu*, 2004(6): 38–40.
- [8] Li X, 2007, Governing by the Times – The Thought of National Border Governance Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties and the Evolution of Guangxi Tusi System. *Inheritance*, 2007(7): 83–84 + 92.
- [9] Sun X, Qin M, 2010, The Dissemination and Influence of the Educational Ideas of Fu Wen Academy and Wang Shouren's Academy in Guangxi. *Guangxi Social Sciences*, 2010(3): 25–28.
- [10] Ma G, Li H, 2012, On Wang Yangming's Governance of the Guizhou Guangxi Tusi Region and Border Stability. *Guangxi Ethnic Studies*, 2012(4): 116–125.
- [11] Ji A, 2013, Wang Yangming and the Governance of Si and Tian Tusi. *Guizhou Ethnic Studies*, 34(4): 143–146.
- [12] Zhao S, Xu X, Zhang T, 2017, Wang Yangming's Thought and Practice on Governance of Southwest Ethnic Minorities. *Guizhou Ethnic Studies*, 38(12): 200–204.
- [13] Ma G, Xiong Z, 2017, Inheritance and Innovation: A Study of Wang Yangming's Management and Its Influence on Southwest Ethnic Regions – Centered on Tusi in Shuixi, Sitian, and Yongshun. *Guizhou Literature and History Series*, 2017(2): 4–15.
- [14] Pu Y, 2021, Research on Wang Yangming's Thought on Governance in Ethnic Regions, thesis, Jishou University.
- [15] Hao Y, 2017, Using Xia to Change Yi: Wang Yangming's Ethnic Education in Guizhou and Guangxi. *Wang Xue Research*, 2017(1): 358–368.
- [16] He D, 2019, Exploration of Conscience Thought and Practice Shown by Wang Yangming during his Guangxi Tour, thesis, Guangxi University.
- [17] Fan E, 2021, Exploration of Wang Yangming's Educational Practice in Guangxi, thesis, Guangxi University.
- [18] Ma G, Peng B, 2015, Wang Yangming's Thought and Practice of 'Northern Defense and Southern Transformation' from the Perspective of the Border Defense Situation in the Ming Dynasty. *Journal of Guizhou University (Social Science Edition)*, 33(5): 145–153.
- [19] Deng Y, 2015, Research on the Thought of Ethnic Relations in the Ming Dynasty, thesis, Lanzhou University.
- [20] Zhou M, 2017, Exploring the Study of Wang Shouren in Guangxi from the Inscription of the 'Meritorious Essay on Fuxing and Thinking of Tian'. *Education and Culture Forum*, 9(6): 19–23.

Publisher's note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.