

Civilization-Level Madness:

The Catastrophic Destruction of Thought Structures

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Abstract

This paper systematically analyzes the thought structures underlying civilization-level madness and their historical catastrophic consequences. Focusing on Zhang Zai’s concept of “Establishing a Heart for Heaven and Earth” and Wang Yangming’s principle of “the Mind is Principle,” it reveals how this philosophical chain grants individual consciousness potential authority over social systems, institutions, and natural laws, forming the foundation of unconstrained subjectivism. The study further examines how Mao Zedong politicized this chain, leading to absolute power, institutional failure, and civilization-level systemic destruction, exemplified by the Great Leap Forward famine and the Cultural Revolution.

By comparing the totalitarian regimes of Hitler and Stalin, the paper demonstrates that the destructive potential of the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming–Mao Zedong chain is more systemic and structural, reflecting the interaction between thought structures and institutional environments that produces “civilization-level madness.” The paper proposes

modern societal preventive strategies, including clearly defining the boundaries of rational civilization, critically addressing the expansionist logic of philosophical chains, strengthening institutional checks and balances, and establishing multi-layered protections in education, technology, and ecological systems.

The study aims to reveal the fundamental role of thought structures in civilization self-destruction and provides theoretical guidance and practical warnings for preventing systemic disasters in contemporary society.

Keywords

Civilization-level madness; thought structure; unconstrained subjectivism; Zhang Zai; Wang Yangming; Mao Zedong; institutional checks and balances; systemic destruction

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The relationship between the philosophy of mind (xinxue) and Confucianism has long been a core debate in Chinese intellectual history. From Zhang Zai’s “Establishing a Heart for Heaven and Earth” to Wang Yangming’s “The Mind is Principle,” this thought chain shaped Chinese conceptions of human consciousness and cosmic moral order. Zhang Zai’s idea emphasizes that humans are not merely observers of the natural order but bearers of cosmic moral responsibility. Wang Yangming further proposed that moral laws reside within the human mind, establishing individual conscience as supreme.

While philosophically innovative, this chain reveals significant risks when politicized. Granting individuals the status of “cosmic moral agents” can produce subjectivist inflation. Applied to politics, it may result in extreme authority, where personal will overrides institutional rules and natural laws. Historical evidence shows that the combination of ideology and political practice can create immeasurable social and civilizational disasters. Mao Zedong’s slogan “fight against heaven, earth, and man” exemplifies not only political mobilization but also the extreme manifestation of a personal savior mentality. The thought chain, extended from philosophy into politics, constitutes civilization-level madness—not a sporadic psychological aberration, but a structural, systemic risk.

This issue remains relevant today. With the amplification effects of technology and collective action, personal will combined with absolute ideology can overwhelm civilizational self-regulatory mechanisms. Similar patterns are evident in global history: Hitler’s racialist totalitarianism, Stalin’s political purges and famine, and the theocratic violence of religious wars. Compared to these, the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming–Mao Zedong chain is uniquely destructive because it threatens the rational, ecological, and social order of civilization itself.

1.2 Problem Statement

The central question of this study is: when “the mind is principle” is politicized and personal will overrides natural and social systems, what systemic risks does civilization face? Such risks manifest not only as mortality or social disorder but as structural destruction at a civilizational level: thought structures, power systems, and institutional constraints mutually reinforce each other, forming a self-perpetuating cycle of damage.

History shows that when individuals or thought chains perceive themselves as “representing Heaven” or “enacting the mandate of history,” they often nullify checks and balances, plunging society into prolonged crises. The Great Leap Forward famine, the Cultural Revolution, Hitler’s World War II and Holocaust, and Stalin’s purges and famine are all tragic outcomes of extreme ideology coupled with

absolute power. Labeling these phenomena simply as “madness” or “dictatorship” is insufficient to convey the civilization-level risk embedded in their thought structures.

1.3 Research Objectives and Significance

The objectives of this paper are threefold:

1. Construct a philosophical–historical–civilizational critique chain

- **Analyze Zhang Zai and Wang Yangming’s thought logic**

- **Trace its extension and amplification in Mao Zedong’s political practice**

- **Reveal how thought structures transform into systemic persecution**

2. Reveal the causal relationship between thought structures and civilizational risk

- **Show how centralization of thought and subject inflation triggers absolute power**

- **Analyze pathways by which institutional and natural feedback mechanisms are undermined**

3. Provide warnings and reflections for contemporary society

- **Emphasize the importance of rational constraints, institutional checks, and ecological civilization**

- **Alert to the irreversible destruction that occurs when individuals or ideologies presume to “act on behalf of Heaven”**

This chapter lays the theoretical foundation for the study: civilization-level madness is not merely historical actors' behavioral deviations but a catastrophic interplay of thought structures and institutional design. Understanding this structural risk is essential to preventing civilizational self-destruction and is a core concern for modern governance, ideology, and ecological management.

Chapter 2: Zhang Zai, Wang Yangming, and the Analysis of the Thought Chain

2.1 Zhang Zai's "Establishing a Heart for Heaven and Earth"

Zhang Zai (1020–1077) was a prominent representative of Neo-Confucianism during the Northern Song dynasty. His philosophy, known as the "Hengqu School of Mind" (Hengqu xinxue), centers on the proposition: "Establish a Heart for Heaven and Earth, Establish Humanity and Life." Superficially, this emphasizes moral responsibility and human spiritual commitment. A closer analysis, however, reveals a profound risk of subject expansion inherent in its philosophical logic.

When Zhang Zai proposed "establishing a heart for Heaven and Earth," he implied that humans are not merely observers of the natural order but bearers of the moral order of the cosmos. Here, "heart" (xin) is not just individual

psychological experience but is endowed with a cosmic function that can stand in for Heaven and Earth in fulfilling moral duties. This concept elevates individual moral consciousness to the level of cosmic ontology, suggesting that the human heart can “represent Heaven” and supervise or even shape the order of all things. Philosophically, this idea breaks the boundaries between humans and nature, and between humans and the universe, positioning subjective will at a cosmic scale.

The inherent danger lies in subject expansion. When individuals or groups believe they can shoulder “Heaven and Earth’s moral responsibility,” their will becomes unconstrained by natural laws or social limits. This logic of subject expansion provides the theoretical foundation for Wang Yangming’s philosophy of mind and, later, Mao Zedong’s extreme political practices: if the human heart can substitute for Heaven’s principle, then personal will possesses the potential to override history, society, and nature. While Zhang Zai’s philosophy originates in moral cultivation, its ontological tendencies and the cosmic empowerment of the heart embed risks of politicization and power expansion.

From a modern civilizational perspective, this thought can lead to structural disasters. The chain of thought grants individuals a “supernatural” sense of duty and mission. If the political system permits, it directly transforms into unchecked power. This is not hypothetical; history repeatedly demonstrates that the philosophical logic of

subject expansion, once politicized, can lead to systemic social collapse and civilizational catastrophe.

2.2 Wang Yangming's "The Mind is Principle (Heavenly Principle)"

Wang Yangming (1472–1529), a Ming dynasty thinker, proposed that "the mind is principle," internalizing moral laws within the human heart and forming a complete system of mind philosophy. Wang emphasized that every individual can comprehend and enact "Heavenly Principle" (tianli) through innate moral intuition (liangzhi), providing the supreme authority for personal moral action.

Philosophically, "the mind is principle" identifies objective moral law with subjective consciousness, meaning that tianli is no longer external but fully resides within the human mind. In other words, the human heart is not only a cognitive tool but also an agent of cosmic order. This logic further reinforces subject centralization: individuals are no longer passive followers of universal order but active agents capable of directly understanding and realizing cosmic ontology. If politicized or empowered, this idea allows individuals or elites to assume absolute correctness, overriding institutions, laws, and natural laws.

The internal logic of Wang Yangming's philosophy also contains potential ontological tendencies. By fully internalizing principle within the heart, personal will acquires near-absolute moral legitimacy. This diminishes the

necessity of external constraints and provides philosophical justification for extreme actions. Historically, this philosophy has had profound consequences in political practice. For instance, during the Ming and Qing periods, some local officials and scholars, guided by self-perceived moral intuition, implemented policies that disregarded social and ecological constraints. During Mao Zedong's era, this philosophy was fully politicized, evolving into the extreme practice of "fighting against Heaven, Earth, and Man," causing large-scale social disasters.

From a modern philosophical and systems theory perspective, the danger of "the mind is principle" lies not only in potential deviation of individual moral judgment but in the self-reinforcing structure of thought. Once individuals or groups identify their moral intuition as tianli, any external constraint may be perceived as a challenge to "Heavenly Principle," creating irreconcilable conflicts. This structural subject expansion is a theoretical prerequisite for civilization-level disaster.

2.3 Summary of the Thought Chain

Combining Zhang Zai and Wang Yangming forms a clear philosophical chain:

- 1. Zhang Zai: Human hearts bear cosmic moral responsibility; establish a heart for Heaven and Earth.**
- 2. Wang Yangming: Human hearts are Heavenly Principle; realize cosmic laws through innate moral intuition.**

This chain has two key features:

- **Subject expansion: Individual consciousness is granted authority over cosmic morality.**
- **Philosophical ontologization: Moral law is internalized in the heart, making the individual an agent of cosmic order.**

This thought chain provides a theoretical foundation for subsequent political practice. When absorbed and amplified by political actors like Mao Zedong, it forms unconstrained subjectivism: individuals or political elites believe they possess the authority to act on behalf of Heaven, unbound by history, society, law, or natural order. This structural danger is far greater than mere psychological madness or extreme individualism because it can be magnified in institutionalized political practice, producing civilization-level disasters.

Historical evidence confirms that once politicized, this chain leads directly to systemic social destruction. Events such as the Great Leap Forward famine and the Cultural Revolution are extreme manifestations of this philosophical chain in power practice. The thought chain grants individuals the will to override nature and society while dissolving institutional and social constraints, profoundly damaging the civilizational order.

In sum, while the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming chain is philosophically innovative and morally aspirational, its

inherent logic of subject expansion and ontologization provides fertile theoretical soil for extreme political practice, serving as a modern warning of civilization-level ideological risks.

Chapter 3: Mao Zedong and the Practice of Unconstrained Subjectivism

3.1 Revolutionary Will and the “Personal Savior” Fantasy

Mao Zedong is one of the most controversial figures in modern Chinese history, and his political practice exemplifies extreme subjectivism. His famous slogan, “fight against Heaven, Earth, and Man,” is more than revolutionary rhetoric; it reflects a self-perception as a historical savior. This ideology directly inherits the philosophical chain of Wang Yangming’s “the mind is principle” and Zhang Zai’s “establishing a heart for Heaven and Earth,” but it is fully politicized, transforming into the practical logic of absolute power.

“Fighting against Heaven” implies that personal will can override natural law; “fighting against Earth” suggests that political action can reshape social order or even historical processes; “fighting against Man” reflects absolute control over individuals, classes, and opposition forces. In Mao’s view, the individual not only has the right to comprehend tianli but also possesses absolute power to transform society

and nature. This ideology equates political practice entirely with personal will, subordinating social order and natural laws to the individual's intentions.

Philosophically, this “personal savior” fantasy is an extreme interpretation and amplification of Wang Yangming’s mind philosophy. Originally, Wang emphasized moral self-awareness and cultivation, but Mao politicized it, making personal will the ultimate force in history. History shows that when this structure interacts with power practice, it produces unpredictable social destruction and civilization-level disasters.

3.2 Politicization of Mind Philosophy

The core of Mao’s political practice is the full politicization of the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming chain. Zhang Zai’s logic of subject expansion leads individuals to believe their hearts can bear cosmic moral responsibility; Wang Yangming’s ontologization of principle grants absolute legitimacy to individual will. When combined and empowered, personal will dominates history, society, and institutions.

In practice, this chain manifests as:

- 1. Politicization of will: Personal will is transformed into the guiding principle of institutions; societal actions follow the leader’s will rather than laws, regulations, or objective reality.**
- 2. Self-assigned historical legitimacy: Mao perceived his actions as representing historical trends and the people’s**

will, exempt from external supervision or checks. This self-assigned legitimacy prioritizes policy execution absolutely, even rationalizing severe errors.

The danger of politicized mind philosophy is that it dissolves institutional constraints and social feedback. When personal will is deified as “agent of tianli,” any opposition is perceived as a challenge to cosmic order, creating a self-reinforcing loop between thought and institution. Within this loop, absolute power becomes inevitable, and social institutions, natural laws, and rational logic are marginalized or destroyed.

3.3 The Ideological Source of Systemic Disaster

The ultimate result of Mao’s thought-practice is the full eruption of systemic disaster. This outcome is not accidental but determined by the underlying thought structure. Its core sources include:

- 1. Thought structure leading to absolute power**
 - The Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming chain reinforces individual subject consciousness.**
 - Personal will is granted legitimacy beyond institutions and nature.**
 - In political practice, power concentrates, and any opposition is treated as a challenge to tianli.**
- 2. Collapse of institutional and societal checks**
 - Institutional constraints, legal norms, and social feedback mechanisms are ignored or destroyed.**

- **Policy execution lacks objective evaluation, errors are amplified.**
- **Social, economic, cultural, and ecological systems suffer structural damage under absolute power.**

Historical evidence highlights these dangers:

- **The Great Leap Forward famine (1958–1961):** Policy guided by personal will, lacking institutional oversight and societal feedback, resulted in misallocation of grain, falsified data, and ultimately 30–45 million deaths.
- **The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976):** Ideological movements were politicized, and any dissent was labeled “historical rebellion,” leading to prolonged destruction of social order, education, culture, and economy, and millions of lives and freedoms were persecuted.

These cases demonstrate that Mao’s practice is the extreme amplification of the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming thought chain in power. Subject expansion and the philosophy of “the mind is principle,” when politicized, produce civilization-level madness—not individual psychological craziness, but systemic disasters arising from the interaction of thought structures, power, and social institutions.

3.4 Modern Societal Implications

Mao’s practice illustrates that when philosophy is politicized and personal will overrides institutions and nature, civilization faces irreversible damage. Lessons for modern society include:

- 1. Thought must be constrained by institutions**
 - **Individuals or groups should not assume absolute power over history and nature.**
 - **Institutional and social feedback are key mechanisms to prevent civilization-level disasters.**
- 2. Beware the “personal savior” mentality**
 - **In politics, technology, or culture, any entity assuming it can “represent justice” or “act on behalf of Heaven” poses extreme risk.**
- 3. Civilization-level risk is structural, not incidental**
 - **It is not mere psychological breakdown but systemic destruction arising from thought structures interacting with power.**
 - **History’s painful lessons demand vigilance in political, educational, and institutional design.**

Chapter 3 demonstrates how Mao’s political practice embodies the extreme consequences of politicizing the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming thought chain. His “fighting against Heaven, Earth, and Man” is not merely a slogan but a concrete manifestation of subject expansion and mind-as-principle philosophy in political power, producing civilization-level disaster. The thought structure drove absolute power, institutional collapse, and systemic social destruction, providing profound philosophical and historical warnings for understanding modern civilizational risks.

Chapter 4: Civilization-Level Disasters: Historical Analysis

4.1 The Mao Zedong Era

Mao Zedong, as one of the most influential political figures in modern Chinese history, exemplifies the extreme consequences of unconstrained subjectivism. The thought chain of Zhang Zai’s “establishing a heart for Heaven and Earth” and Wang Yangming’s “the mind is principle” was fully politicized in Mao, producing personal will that overrides history and natural law. This thought structure directly resulted in two civilization-level disasters: the Great Leap Forward famine and the Cultural Revolution.

4.1.1 The Great Leap Forward Famine (1958–1961)

The Great Leap Forward aimed to achieve rapid industrialization and agricultural modernization through political will and mass mobilization. However, policy design severely neglected natural and economic laws. Grain requisition policies, the collectivization of communes, and falsified production reports made widespread famine inevitable. Scholarly estimates suggest that this man-made famine caused approximately 30–45 million deaths, around one-fifth of the national population at the time. This figure not only reflects the massive loss of individual lives but also reveals the structural danger of the thought chain: when leaders equate their will with “Heavenly Principle,” social institutions and feedback mechanisms fail, resulting in civilization-level systemic disaster.

4.1.2 The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)

The Cultural Revolution represents another extreme manifestation of Mao’s politicized thought. By mobilizing Red Guards, persecuting officials, attacking the “Four Olds,” confiscating property, and censoring ideas, the social order, education system, cultural heritage, and scientific institutions suffered severe destruction. Millions, possibly tens of millions, were persecuted, imprisoned, or killed. Economic activity stagnated, education and culture regressed by a decade, and social trust and knowledge systems were devastated. This period illustrates that the structural risk of a politicized thought chain can destroy not only individuals but the entire social and civilizational system.

4.2 Hitler and World War II

Compared with Mao, Hitler’s extreme ideology also caused civilization-level disaster, though its logic was primarily concentrated in racial and nationalist political practice. Hitler treated personal and state power as forces above law and morality, believing that the interests of the German nation took precedence and that racial purification and expansion constituted a historical mission.

4.2.1 World War II Death Toll

World War II was one of the most widespread and brutal conflicts in human history, with an estimated 70–85 million deaths, including both military and civilian casualties and indirect deaths from famine, disease, and forced labor. The

war destroyed European—and global—economic systems, urban infrastructure, and social order.

4.2.2 The Holocaust

During Hitler’s rule, the Nazi regime systematically killed approximately six million Jews through concentration camps and mass executions. This atrocity was not only an extreme violation of individual rights but also a deep disruption of social ethics and civilizational order. While brutally destructive, the political logic was still targeted toward specific ethnic groups. Its “civilization-level” impact was concentrated on social ethics and demographic structure rather than the systemic destruction of an entire state apparatus.

4.3 Stalin’s Rule

Stalin’s rule in the Soviet Union exemplified extreme centralization and ideological absolutism. Structurally, his thought process shares similarities with Mao: personal will overrides institutions, and political legitimacy is self-assigned through ideology.

4.3.1 Political Persecution and Purges

During Stalin’s era, millions of party officials, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens were imprisoned or executed through purges and political persecution. The state apparatus was dominated by fear and obedience, with administrative and social functions severely distorted.

4.3.2 Famine and Man-Made Disasters

Stalin's collectivization and planned economy policies caused famines and mass deaths. Estimates suggest that political purges, repression, and famine together caused 20–25 million deaths. While Stalin's ideology emphasized collectivism, it similarly exhibits the structural risk of absolute personal will, ultimately producing civilization-level disasters.

4.4 Comparative Analysis

Comparing the historical disasters under Mao, Hitler, and Stalin reveals significant differences in the destructive outcomes of various thought chains:

- 1. Systemic Destruction**
 - Hitler's racial purges and war caused massive death, but the political logic was relatively constrained to race and national interests.**
 - Stalin's collectivism and ideological control damaged institutions, the economy, and social order, but the state machinery continued to operate to some extent.**
 - Mao's thought practice fully politicized the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming chain, placing personal will above history, institutions, and natural law. His destruction encompassed not only human life but also the social, economic, cultural, educational, and civilizational operational logic.**
- 2. Civilization-Level Logic**
 - The extreme form of Mao's thought chain shows how philosophical structure can systematically generate**

disaster. Subject expansion and politicized mind philosophy created a closed loop, rendering institutions ineffective, natural laws ignored, and social feedback mechanisms paralyzed.

- **Logically, the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming–Mao chain is more “civilization-level” destructive, as it threatens fundamental structures of civilization—power, institutions, and ideology—beyond population and social order.**

3. Systemic vs. Individual Focus

- **Hitler’s and Stalin’s disasters had centralized personal will elements but targeted specific groups or strategic goals.**

- **The Mao era illustrates civilization-level systemic risk driven by thought structure: entire society, economy, and culture were directly impacted, with deaths and destruction tightly synchronized with political will.**

Chapter 4 demonstrates, through historical evidence, how politicized thought chains can produce systemic destruction. Compared with Hitler and Stalin, the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming–Mao thought chain is logically more dangerous, granting individual minds power over institutions, society, and nature, exposing civilization to comprehensive, structural, and long-term disaster. This provides a clear case for understanding modern civilizational risk, warning of extreme consequences arising from concentrated thought, absolute power, and absent institutional checks.

Chapter 5: The Philosophy and Civilizational Critique of Unconstrained Subjectivism

5.1 Critique of the Thought Structure

The root of unconstrained subjectivism can be traced to the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming thought chain in Chinese philosophical history. Its core logic is the identification of the individual mind with the universe and heavenly principle, granting humans a position of absolute authority beyond institutions, society, and nature.

5.1.1 Ontological Expansion of “Mind as Principle” and “Establishing a Heart for Heaven and Earth”

Zhang Zai’s “establish a heart for Heaven and Earth” originally emphasized moral responsibility and maintenance of cosmic order. Logically, however, it implies that individuals can act on behalf of Heaven, placing personal will above universal laws. Wang Yangming’s “mind as principle” further internalizes objective moral law into the individual heart, endowing personal will with near-absolute legitimacy.

The philosophical risk of this chain is ontological expansion: the individual mind is granted cosmic-level authority, blurring or overturning boundaries between subject and object, individual and nature, will and institution. The individual ceases to be a follower of natural order and perceives themselves as a “cosmic agent.” Historically, this

logic is easily politicized, giving rise to civilization-level risks of unconstrained subjectivism.

5.1.2 Misalignment of Human Role with the Universe and Natural Order

From systems theory and modern cosmological perspectives, humans occupy a limited and constrained position. Natural laws—gravity, thermodynamics, ecological balance—do not bend to personal will. The Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming chain, however, places human consciousness above natural and cosmic order, creating role misalignment: the individual is no longer a participant but attempts to act as a system designer. Historically, this misalignment has been infinitely amplified in political practice, directly producing civilization-level disaster.

5.2 Critique of Historical Practice

Once philosophical logic is adopted in political practice, latent structural risk becomes systemic disaster. The Mao era is a prime example.

5.2.1 Politicalization of Thought Leading to Absolute Power

Mao fully politicized the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming chain, making personal will the absolute driver of state institutions and historical processes. Policy-making and governance no longer relied on law, institutions, or empirical data but completely followed the leader’s will and self-assigned “historical justice.” Core features of this absolute power include:

- **Personal will above all: Society, economy, culture, and ecological systems must obey the leader's will.**
- **Institutional checks fail: Legal, administrative, and supervisory systems were ignored or abolished, paralyzing feedback and regulatory mechanisms.**

5.2.2 Elimination of Checks and Neglect of Natural Law

Another danger of unconstrained subjectivism is the systematic neglect of checks and natural law. During the Great Leap Forward, falsified grain reports and policy errors caused tens of millions of deaths. During the Cultural Revolution, education, culture, and science were destroyed. These historical facts show that politicized personal will can bypass institutional constraints and forcibly restructure social, economic, and cultural systems, generating civilization-level disasters.

5.3 The Concept of Civilization-Level Madness

To scientifically understand this phenomenon, this study introduces the concept of civilization-level madness, distinguishing it from personal psychological deviation, religious theocracy, or mere dictatorship.

5.3.1 Definition

Civilization-level madness refers to a structural phenomenon in which personal will or a thought chain overrides systemic constraints, causing catastrophic destruction of social, institutional, cultural, and civilizational operations. This differs from psychological insanity, as it emerges from the

interaction between thought logic and institutional environment.

5.3.2 Distinction from Other Forms of Madness

- **Individual psychological madness: Unlike sporadic individual disorder, it is the amplification of structural thought within an institutional context.**
- **Religious theocracy: Does not rely on supernatural authority but on the self or a thought chain, replacing institutions and natural laws.**
- **Extreme dictatorship: Not merely concentration of power, but absolute power driven by underlying thought logic that systematically destroys institutions, society, and civilization.**

5.3.3 Characteristics of Civilization-Level Madness

- 1. Politicization of thought chains: Philosophical logic is adopted by political power, granting individuals legitimacy over history and nature.**
- 2. Institutional failure: Checks and social feedback systems are ignored or destroyed.**
- 3. Systemic destruction: Social order, economy, culture, education, and ecology are simultaneously disrupted.**
- 4. Long-term civilizational impact: Immediate death and destruction are compounded by damage to social trust, knowledge transmission, and continuity of civilization.**

Chapter 5, through analysis of the philosophy of unconstrained subjectivism, historical practice, and the

concept of civilization-level madness, reveals the intrinsic link between thought structure and civilizational disaster. Once the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming chain is politicized and empowered, it not only produces absolute personal will but undermines social institutions, natural law, and civilizational operation. Civilization-level madness is thus the theoretical root of the catastrophic disasters during the Mao era and a critical warning for modern society in institutional design, power limitation, and ideological education.

Chapter 6: Insights and Preventive Measures

6.1 The Boundaries of Rational Civilization

The development of civilization must be grounded in reason, institutional frameworks, and natural constraints. Historical civilization-level disasters—particularly under Mao Zedong, Hitler, and Stalin—demonstrate the fatal consequences of ignoring systemic limits and the expansion of the subject. The primary boundary of rational civilization lies in recognizing the inviolability of natural, social, and systemic constraints.

6.1.1 Natural Constraints

Natural laws are objective and irreversible. Gravity, thermodynamics, ecological balance, and other fundamental principles do not change according to human will. Thought

chains such as Zhang Zai’s “establishing a heart for Heaven and Earth” and Wang Yangming’s “the mind is principle”, if implemented politically without regard for natural law, can result in catastrophic outcomes. Rational civilization must acknowledge that humans cannot replace natural law, nor can personal will reshape the cosmic order. The agricultural policy failures of the Great Leap Forward exemplify this: disregard for natural laws led to unavoidable famine, tens of millions of deaths, and severe disruption of civilizational order.

6.1.2 Social and Institutional Constraints

Social institutions and legal systems form the foundation of civilization. Unconstrained subjectivism shows that when personal will overrides institutions, absolute power and societal collapse inevitably follow. Rational civilization must operate within the framework of power separation, checks and balances, and social feedback mechanisms to prevent individuals or political elites from rewriting systemic rules under the pretext of “Heavenly Principle” or “historical mission.”

6.1.3 Systemic Constraints

Modern civilization depends heavily on complex, interconnected systems: economic networks, energy grids, information technology, ecosystems, and global supply chains. Politicized thought chains or subject expansion can trigger systemic risks, allowing local errors to rapidly propagate globally. For example, if “personal savior–style” thinking infiltrates technology, energy, or artificial

intelligence, it could produce cross-system, civilization-level disasters. Rational civilization must therefore emphasize systemic constraints, data feedback, and multi-layered checks to prevent individuals or thought chains from generating catastrophic impacts on entire systems.

6.2 Philosophical Warnings

History shows that philosophical ideas, once politicized, can serve as instruments of power legitimacy, producing civilization-level madness. Modern civilization must draw deep lessons from philosophy.

6.2.1 Critiquing the Expansion Logic of Thought Chains

The Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming thought chain essentially embodies subject expansion, granting individual minds authority above institutions and nature. Modern society should critically evaluate its risks and establish clear intellectual boundaries:

1. The individual mind cannot replace the social system: Personal moral sense and political ideals must operate within institutional frameworks.

2. Philosophical ideals cannot override natural law: Conscience and moral intuition should serve verifiable system rules rather than self-deification.

3. Intellectual authority requires institutional oversight: Any individual or group claiming “Heavenly Principle agency” must be constrained by societal, legal, and technological checks.

6.2.2 Educational, Institutional, and Cultural Safeguards

Preventing civilization-level madness requires multi-layered societal protections:

- **Education:** Philosophy, history, and science education should instill an understanding of natural, social, and systemic constraints.
- **Institutions:** Separation of powers, transparent decision-making, social oversight, legal checks, and data-driven policy evaluation systems.
- **Culture:** Promote rational thinking, scientific spirit, and critical consciousness to prevent self-deification of individuals or groups.

These mechanisms not only guard against individual power expansion but also prevent systemic risks in technology, politics, economy, and ecology.

6.3 Modern Societal Warnings

The politicization of thought chains and unconstrained subjectivism are not only historical phenomena but could re-emerge in modern society. In a globalized, information-driven, and technologically advanced context, these risks are increasingly complex and widespread.

6.3.1 Modern Risks of “Personal Savior” Thinking

In political, technological, or social movements, when individuals or elites claim the authority to “decide for history, society, or nature,” modern civilization-level madness can emerge:

- **Technology:** AI or biotech developers assuming control over “future social order” while ignoring ethics, law, and systemic constraints may cause cross-system disasters.
- **Politics:** Political leaders substituting personal will for institutions and law may recreate historical tragedies.
- **Ecology:** Environmental policies driven by individual or thought-chain priorities, ignoring natural feedback mechanisms, may trigger global ecological collapse.

6.3.2 Recommendations for Systemic Constraints

Modern society can mitigate civilization-level risks through:

- 1. Technological constraints:** Establish global standards and multi-layer oversight to prevent absolute control of critical technologies (e.g., AI, gene editing, energy systems) by a single actor.
- 2. Political constraints:** Strengthen institutional power checks, transparent decision-making, and citizen oversight to prevent individuals or thought chains from overriding history and institutional rules.
- 3. Ecological constraints:** Develop environmental policies and resource management strategies grounded in scientific data to ensure effective natural system feedback and prevent systemic harm from individual will.

6.3.3 Long-Term Civilizational Safeguards

Preventing civilization-level madness is not only a matter of institutions and technology but also civilizational awareness. Societies must cultivate historical consciousness, philosophical critique, and systemic thinking to recognize potential risks of subject expansion. This awareness serves as

a soft civilizational constraint, preventing politicization of thought chains and absolute power, ensuring the long-term stability of social, cultural, and ecological systems.

Chapter 6 clarifies preventive pathways against unconstrained subjectivism and civilization-level madness through analysis of rational civilizational boundaries, philosophical warnings, and lessons for modern society. Recognizing natural, social, and systemic constraints, critiquing expansionist thought chains, and establishing multi-layered educational, institutional, and cultural safeguards are key strategies. Attempts by individuals or groups to override institutions or natural law risk triggering civilization-level consequences, and history and philosophy provide clear warnings and guidance.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 The Nature of Civilization-Level Madness

A systematic analysis of the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming–Mao thought chain and historical practice leads to a clear conclusion: civilization-level madness arises from the interaction of thought structure, absolute power, and the absence of checks.

- 1. Thought Structure: Zhang Zai’s “establish a heart for Heaven and Earth” and Wang Yangming’s “mind is principle” logically grant individual minds cosmic-level**

authority, endowing personal will with potential legitimacy above institutions, society, and natural law.

2. Absolute Power: When political practice politicizes the thought chain, individual will becomes the operational core of institutions, concentrating absolute power over social, economic, cultural, and ecological systems.

3. Absence of Checks: Lack of legal, institutional, social, and natural constraints prevents policy correction, disables feedback mechanisms, and places the entire civilizational structure at high risk.

The convergence of these three factors makes civilization-level madness a structural, systemic risk—beyond individual psychological deviation or mere dictatorship—capable of producing catastrophic social, institutional, and cultural damage in both the short and long term.

7.2 Historical Lessons

History offers the most direct warning: the combination of politicized thought chains and absolute power inevitably leads to civilization-level disaster. Specifically:

1. The Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming–Mao chain: The philosophical logic of subject expansion was politicized under Mao, enabling personal will to override institutions and natural law, resulting in the Great Leap Forward famine ($\approx 30\text{--}45$ million deaths) and the Cultural Revolution (destruction of social, cultural, and educational systems).

2. Comparison with other totalitarian regimes: While Hitler and Stalin also caused tens of millions of deaths, their

political logic largely focused on racial or national interests. The Mao chain's destruction was more systematic, affecting social institutions, cultural transmission, and the operational foundations of civilization.

3. The dangers of politicized thought: History demonstrates that once philosophical structures gain political authority, any feedback or institutional check can fail, making personal will a direct trigger for civilizational collapse.

These lessons show that civilizational self-destruction is not accidental but a predictable outcome of the interaction between thought structure and institutional failure.

7.3 Critical Implications

Critiquing the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming–Mao chain is not merely a historical evaluation but carries relevance for modern civilization reflection and risk management:

1. Understanding structural risk is key to preventing civilizational self-destruction:

- Focusing solely on individual or event-level errors cannot explain civilization-level disasters.**
- Recognizing the structural interaction among thought chains, absolute power, and institutional failure is essential for designing educational, institutional, and cultural safeguards.**

2. Emphasizing rational constraints, institutional checks, and ecological civilization:

- **Rational constraints: Acknowledge natural laws and systemic limits, preventing thought chains from overriding systems.**
 - **Institutional checks: Separation of powers, social oversight, legal and technological feedback mechanisms to prevent absolute personal or group control.**
 - **Ecological civilization: Ensure long-term coordination of human behavior with natural and social systems, preventing cross-system disasters.**
- 3. Practical value of philosophical critique:**
- **Critiquing thought chains helps modern society recognize potential civilizational risks.**
 - **Education, culture, institutions, and technology can create multi-layered safeguards to prevent historical tragedies from repeating.**

Chapter 7 summarizes the essence, historical lessons, and critical implications of civilization-level madness. The logical and practical dangers of the Zhang Zai–Wang Yangming–Mao chain remind us that the continuation of civilization relies on multiple constraints—rational, institutional, and ecological. Only by understanding structural risks and establishing corresponding safeguards can society avoid self-destruction driven by thought expansion and absolute power, drawing lessons from history to secure the foundations of modern civilization.