

The Origins and Developmental Trajectory of Pure Conversation in the Wei-Jin Period

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Abstract

As a scholarly and recreational activity widely favored by the literati during the Wei-Jin period (220 - 420 AD), pure conversation (清谈) gave rise to a distinctive cultural phenomenon. Its core content evolved in response to shifting historical contexts and social environments. During the turn of the Han and Wei dynasties, “pure criticism” (清议) prevailed, which later developed into Wei-Jin pure conversation. Practitioners of pure conversation employed debate and logical reasoning to elevate their social status, steering the discourse toward increasingly abstract and metaphysical themes rooted in Lao-Zhuang thought. Over time, this practice grew detached from practical concerns. By the Jin dynasties, pure conversation had become an indispensable part of aristocratic life, and its developmental trajectory exerted discernible influence on broader sociocultural transformations.

Keywords

Wei-Jin Period, Pure Conversation, Origins, Developmental Trajectory

1. Introduction

Since Emperor Wu of Han institutionalized Confucianism as the state orthodoxy, classical studies have emerged as the primary avenue for official recruitment. Bureaucrats delivering lectures on Confucian classics accumulated thousands of disciples, while their descendants perpetuated family scholarly traditions to pursue political careers. This process gradually formed hereditary aristocratic clans that dominated high-ranking positions across generations. Simultaneously, the establishment of the Imperial Academy and regional state schools filled the long-standing institutional void in authoritative education, cultivating Confucian-educated elites who upheld patriarchal norms. This systematic development effectively consolidated intellectual and cultural authority under centralized governance.

The term “Pure Conversation” has accumulated multiple interpretations through centuries. Within the distinctive sociopolitical and cultural context of the Wei-Jin period, it developed multifaceted political and philosophical dimensions that demand nuanced analysis in contemporary scholarship.

As an aspect of social history, contemporary scholarship on pure conversation remains primarily rooted in intellectual history. The activity is intrinsically linked to metaphysical studies (玄学), as its content largely overlapped with metaphysical discourse. Scholars frequently evaluate pure conversation through the framework of metaphysics, often conflating critiques of metaphysical philosophy with judgments of the conversational practice itself. Consequently, analyses addressing its role in social development remain scarce. This paper analyzes the origins and evolution of pure conversation through the prism of Wei-Jin sociopolitical dynamics, with particular emphasis on its constructive contributions to the era. The discussion herein is preliminary, and scholarly feedback is welcomed.

2. The Genesis of Wei-Jin “Pure Conversation”

During the Eastern Han period, the operational synergy between central and local cultural activities jointly propelled new trajectories in societal cultural transformation. As the political nucleus, the Imperial Academy demonstrated heightened responsiveness to political shifts across multiple fronts. This phenomenon manifested strikingly in the late Eastern Han, when literati like Runan’s Fan Pang emerged as leading critics of court politics. Numerous officials strategically aligned themselves with such figures through mentorship relationships—a practice that ultimately extended into the Imperial Academy itself. As an authoritative historical document recording the history of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the *Hou Han Shu* records:

“In the early years, itinerant scholars from Runan such as Fan Pang openly criticized court policies in the capital. Officials from the ducal ministers downward all humbled themselves to show respect to these virtuous scholars. The Imperial University students vied to emulate their exemplary conduct, believing that literary culture was about to be revitalized and that reclusive scholars would once again receive official appointments” (Fan, 1965).

Simultaneously, the lecture activities and disciple-gathering by local magnates could conversely influence the central authority. A case in point was Runan’s Zhang Pu, who studied the *Shang shu* (尚书) under his grandfather Zhang Chong in his youth and later became a disciple of the renowned Confucian scholar Huan Rong. The *Hou Han Shu* notes that he “*diligently pursued his studies without respite, ultimately enrolling several hundred disciples*” (Fan, 1965).

The confluence of political corruption, the Imperial Academy’s repressive academic climate, localized discursive practices, and proximity to centralized authority fostered hybrid social roles that emerged during the Han dynasty—figures who straddled Confucian scholarship and bureaucratic office while transcending both

categories (Yan, 2017). These elites adopted “clarifying the realm” as their ideological imperative. Their intellectual endeavors encompassed political critique, moral evaluation, and scholarly debate, synthesizing the gentry class’s cultural ethos with contemporary sociopolitical realities to articulate political aspirations. This fusion constituted the embryonic phase of “pure criticism”.

The initial focus of “Pure Criticism” lay in confronting the eunuch faction’s monopolization of power. A notable example occurred in the first year of Yongxing (153 AD), when Zhu Mu, Governor of Ji Province, was convicted and sentenced to penal servitude for his campaign against eunuch influence. The *Hou Han Shu* states: “*Liu Tao and several thousand scholars from the Imperial University proceeded to the palace gates to submit a petition to the throne*” (Fan, 1965). They argued that Zhu Mu exemplified patriotic devotion and zeal for eradicating corruption, whereas local malefactors exploited eunuch patronage to perpetrate unlawful acts. Significantly, these scholars offered to endure penal labor in Zhu Mu’s stead, thereby compelling Emperor Huan of Han to grant him clemency. The practice of Pure Criticism subsequently developed through three evolutionary stages: first, the cultivation of reputations via mutual patronage and collective advancement; second, the systematic evaluation of officials’ administrative performance; and finally, substantive critiques of contemporary governance policies.

The ideological roots of pure conversation lie in the evolution of classical studies of the Han dynasty. Criticizing the Development of Divination Theology (讖纬神学), the rise of Daoism, and the introduction of Buddhism created a cultural milieu contrasting with the rigid exegesis of ritual classics. As noted, “*Exegetical commentaries on a single classic sometimes reached over a million words*” (Ban, 1962), demonstrating diminishing practical value. The growing influence of pure criticism eventually provoked the movement of Political shock campaign (166-184 AD), dealing a severe blow to Confucianism and prompting scholars to seek reclusive lifestyles or new intellectual directions.

While most scholars trace pure conversation’s origins to pure criticism, Lu Xun maintained that “pure conversation fundamentally originated from Han pure criticism” (Lu, 2020). Although pure criticism initially constrained imperial authority and regulated gentry conduct, its effectiveness waned as the Zhongzheng Office’s authority declined, allowing political forces to nullify its verdicts (Zhou, 1997). However, divergent perspectives suggest pure conversation might have earlier roots in the habitual discursive practices of Eastern Han Imperial Academy students (Tang, 2018). Regardless of its precise genesis, pure conversation represents both a continuation and transformation of pure criticism under Wei-Jin’s unique historical conditions.

3. Debates on the “Three Mysteries” During the Wei-Jin Transition

The pure conversation of the Wei-Jin period diverged from earlier forms of pure criticism and casual discourse, transcending practical concerns to focus on meta-

physical inquiry. Regional gentry clans, who “Upon examining the prefectures and counties in the two capital regions, I found that most were dominated by powerful clans, which controlled local governance and shaped the intellectual discourse of the time.” (Wang, 2006), leveraged their privileges to curate topics centered on the “Three Mysteries”: the *Zhouyi* (周易), *Laozi* (老子), and *Zhuangzi* (庄子).

During the Taihe era (227 - 233 AD) under Emperor Ming of Wei, young intellectuals such as Xun Can, youngest son of Xun Yu of the Yingchuan Xun clan, gathered in the capital to explore abstract philosophies. Their debates revolved around “the supremacy of emptiness” and “the exaltation of metaphysical profundity”. Xun Can, emphasizing cosmic principles and the Way of Heaven, provocatively declared: “*Though the Six Classics exist, they are but the chaff of the sages*” (Chen, 1982). This assertion challenged Confucian orthodoxy, positing that the sages’ true essence lay beyond textual exegesis and required extratextual excavation. Such ideas catalyzed the “debate on words and meanings”, highlighting the limitations of language in conveying ultimate truths.

Emperor Ming of Wei, however, viewed the decline of classical studies as destabilizing. In 230 AD, he banned “frivolous rhetoric”, dismissing officials associated with such practices: “*Those indulging in superficiality, neglecting fundamental principles, shall be removed*” (Chen, 1982). Wang Chang condemned frivolous rhetoric as fostering hypocrisy and factionalism:

“If one does not dedicate oneself to cardinal virtues but abandons the roots for the branches, they will sink into ostentatious trends, which in turn foster the formation of cliques for personal gain. Such ostentation breeds the burden of hypocrisy, while cliques spark mutual strife” (Chen, 1982).

During the Zhengshi era (240 - 249 AD), leading figures in the pure conversation movement included He Yan, Wang Bi, Xiahou Xuan, Pei Hui, Deng Yang, Zhong Hui, and Sima Shi. Among them, He Yan and Wang Bi were of utmost significance. They made pioneering and fundamental contributions to pure conversation. Consequently, they were regarded as “the most outstanding scholars during the Wei and Jin dynasties” (Rong, 1996). He Yan, a key figure in Cao Shuang’s faction, organized debates, while Wang Bi, a prodigy under twenty, became its intellectual pillar. Their “School of Exalting Non-being” synthesized Daoist metaphysics with Confucian ethics, asserting: “Heaven, Earth, and all things take non-being as their root”. Finally, the theoretical system of “taking Non-being as the fundamental substance and essence, taking Being as the derivative manifestation and function” was summarized. This marked a significant achievement: the clever incorporation of Taoism into Confucianism solved the problem of similarities and differences between Confucianism and Taoism. This can also be said to be the first time that the distinction between existence and non existence was truly upheld in the pursuit of nothingness, leading to the prevalence of the theory of “Non-being”. Far from rejecting Confucian rites, they sought to refine them. Dur-

ing the Zhengshi Reforms, metaphysical principles were weaponized against aristocratic excesses:

“Carriages, robes, and insignia shall embrace simplicity. Ostentatious customs are prohibited, ensuring officials and nobles abandon embroidered silks and intricate adornments. Distinctions in plainness shall reflect rank, without exceeding modest gradations” (Chen, 1982).

Afterwards, the pure conversation scholars led by the “Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove” (竹林七贤) who had great significance for the development of pure conversation outside the capital city were a different scene. Gathering in bamboo forests to drink and discourse, they cultivated an ethos of transcendent and detachment that profoundly influenced Eastern Jin aristocratic culture. Unlike the Zhengshi debates centered on the *Zhouyi* and *Laozi*, their focus shifted to the *Zhuangzi*, critiquing the Sima clan’s manipulation of Confucian orthodoxy to justify political purges. Their slogan, “Transcend orthodoxy to embrace spontaneity”, which constituted neither wholesale rejection of Confucian ritual codes nor complete withdrawal from worldly affairs. While it engendered liberated philosophies pursuing individual emancipation and fashioning an ideal realm, these intellectual currents remained ensnared in the fundamental contradiction between “Spontaneity” and “Orthodoxy”. “Fundamentally, these intellectual currents articulated the suppressed resistance and ideological struggles of non-aristocratic landowning families against the hegemonic dominance of powerful aristocratic clans.”

The transformation of “Three Mysteries” as a core philosophical framework precipitated profound shifts in the social ethos of the period. This ideological re-orientation fundamentally altered the literati class’s epistemological approach. It reshaped their engagement with intellectual and cultural matters. Specifically, their focus evolved significantly. They shifted from emphasizing the didactic significance of theoretical and cultural traditions to prioritizing emotional articulation and spiritual introspection in intellectual pursuits.

4. Revival and Differentiation of Pure Conversation in the Western Jin Dynasty

During the Western Jin period, pure conversation discussions expanded beyond purely metaphysical topics to encompass historical studies and critiques of historical figures, with heightened emphasis on logical rigor, rhetorical expression, and tonal aesthetics. Concurrently, greater attention was paid to the cultural artifacts associated with pure conversation, such as the deer-tail chowrie (麈尾) which evolved from a practical tool for dusting and repelling insects into a symbol of eremitic refinement. As noted in historical records, “Pure conversation practitioners of the Six Dynasties invariably wielded the deer-tail chowrie” (Zhao, 2013). However, the Wei-Jin transition was marked by three key events: the Sima clan’s power monopoly, the founding of the Jin dynasty, and military campaigns to con-

quer Shu and Wu. During this period, large-scale pure conversation gatherings declined significantly, disappearing from the Bamboo Grove era until the early Taikang reign. It was only after national unification that figures such as Yue Guang, Wang Yan, and Pei Wei emerged as leading pure conversation scholars, revitalizing the tradition.

Historical accounts of Yue Guang's contributions to pure conversation are sparse, though he is described as a master of concise reasoning who "analyzed principles through succinct discourse" and spoke with "remarkable brevity." His contemporary Wei Guan once praised him as "*a mirror of clarity – encountering him was like parting clouds to behold azure skies*" (Fang, 1974), underscoring his pivotal role in pure conversation's revival.

The true expansion of pure conversation during the Western Jin was driven by Wang Yan of the Langya Wang clan and Pei Wei of the Hedong Pei clan. Wang Yan inherited and developed the metaphysical philosophy of He Yan and Wang Bi from the Zhengshi era, becoming a leader of the "Exalting Non-being" school. In contrast, Pei Wei challenged existing frameworks by proposing the "Exalting Being", establishing a rival intellectual faction. Wang Yan reinvigorated pure conversation discourse among the aristocracy through his mastery of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, as well as his emphasis on rhetorical elegance and persuasive debate. However, while the doctrine of "Exalting Non-Being" gained philosophical currency, its conceptual counterpart "Disparaging Being" also emerged. The practice of "Exalting Non-Being" transcended theoretical discourse. It manifested in three problematic behaviors:

"Elevating speech anchored in the realm of absolute non-being as profound metaphysics. Occupying official posts while neglecting administrative duties as a form of transcendent refinement. Indulging in self-abandonment and discarding moral integrity as unfettered liberation" (Fang, 1974).

Historian Lü Simian observed that the moral decline of Jin intellectuals became particularly evident due to such distortions: "Criticisms of pure conversation intensified during the Jin. This was precisely because its harms had become manifest" (Lü, 2016).

Pei Wei's "Exalting Being" theory emerged as a countermeasure to these excesses. Significantly, his critique targeted not the entire "Exalting Non-being" tradition but its nihilistic misinterpretations in mid-Western Jin Dynasty practice. By affirming the value of "being" without rejecting "non-being", "Exalting Being" served as a constructive supplement to pure conversation discourse. It challenged abstract metaphysics while reinforcing the pragmatic relevance of Confucian social norms. This philosophical adjustment failed to resolve the fundamental tension between "spontaneity" and "orthodoxy". However, it held progressive significance amid the increasing governance crises of the Western Jin Dynasty. The ideology of exalting non-being, when applied to governance, undermined societal responsibility. Pei Wei, through his distinctive theory of "Exalting Being", exem-

plified a rare practical orientation among the scholar-official class. He emphasized the inseparability between upholding Confucian ethical norms and cultivating individual moral character. By internalizing social obligations into ethical self-awareness, Pei Wei transcended the intellectual rigidity of his contemporaries and pioneering a new paradigm for reconstructing collective ethics. Although his philosophy could not avert the Western Jin dynasty's historical collapse, its pragmatic ethos endured and subtly permeated later intellectual discourse.

Unlike the aristocratic pure conversation elites, Guo Xiang, a scholar of humble origins, embodied intellectual contradictions. He strove to reconcile his philosophy with imperial ideology. Meanwhile, renowned for his dialectical skill, he held his own in debates with aristocratic thinkers like Pei Xia. He also developed the theory of "Independence Self-Generation", proposing that "all things arise independently yet interdependently." His methodology of "clarifying concepts through logical analysis" advanced scholarly discourse. Most crucially, Guo's doctrine of "coordinated independence" dissolved the perceived opposition between "spontaneity" and "orthodoxy". This resolved longstanding philosophical dilemmas. This earned him prominence as a pure conversation master during the Yuan Kang era (291 - 299 AD), transcending his modest social status.

However, the Western Jin regime soon faced existential crises. Emperor Wu of Jin's post-unification policies, including excessive enfeoffment of imperial clansmen and indulgence of aristocratic families, bred instability. Emperor Hui of Jin's incompetence and political chaos eroded central authority. Meanwhile, refugee unrest and rebellions crippled imperial governance. Concurrently, mass migrations of northern nomadic tribes encroached on the heartland, constricting the aristocracy's sphere of influence. In this climate of decline, the refined art of pure conversation, once practiced with the deer-tail chowrie in hand, became a fading luxury. Faced with pervasive corruption, many intellectuals retreated into affectations of purity. They indulged in hedonism and abandoned scholarly pursuits as the once-vibrant intellectual culture withered.

5. The Development and Decline of Pure Conversation in the Eastern Jin Dynasty

In the first year of the Yongjia era (307 AD), Sima Rui was appointed to oversee Jianye (modern Nanjing). He received the full support of scholar-officials led by Wang Dao. With this support, he began consolidating power in the Jiangnan region. During the Yongjia period (307 - 311 AD), there was a mass migration of northern aristocratic families to the south. This migration invigorated the development of the Jiangnan area. In 317 AD, the first year of the Jianwu era of the Eastern Jin, Sima Rui, who later became Emperor Yuan of Jin, re-established the Jin court. He established a southern regime. This regime utilized the Huainan region as a buffer and relied on the natural barrier of the Yangtze River. For Wang Dao and his fellow aristocrats, the fledgling regime faced urgent political and social contradictions. In such a situation, initiating scholarly or recreational pure

conversation activities lacked practical immediacy. Even though such gatherings would later become central to the cultural life of the elite.

Compared to earlier periods, pure conversation during the Eastern Jin underwent significant transformations. First, discussions on the *Zhuangzi* and Buddhist thought flourished. This led to the intellectual integration of Buddhism with metaphysics and the gradual convergence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Second, the academic rigor of pure conversation declined, giving way to an emphasis on aesthetic and stylistic enjoyment. This shift reflected the tension between the original dual purposes of pure conversation—intellectual exchange and leisure—and the increasingly complacent lifestyle of the elite. This tension was exacerbated by the fading prospect of northern military campaigns. Third, the practice became dominated by imperial clansmen and powerful aristocratic clans. These developments marginalized figures like Guo Xiang, who hailed from non-aristocratic landowning family backgrounds. Fourth, critical reflections emerged on the practical relevance of pure conversation.

Wang Dao played a pivotal role in bridging the tradition of pure conversation across dynasties. As a scion of the eminent Langye Wang clan and a paramount political leader, he naturally became the foremost organizer of pure conversation in the early Eastern Jin. Influenced by his kinsman Wang Yan, a renowned pure conversationalist of the Western Jin, Wang Dao had been immersed in the practice since youth. He nostalgically recalled the golden age of pure conversation during the Yuankang era (291 - 299 AD). This era echoed the intellectual fervor of the Zhengshi era (240 - 249 AD). Yet Wang Dao also recognized the persistent extravagance among aristocrats since the Taikang era (280 - 289 AD). The downfall of the Western Jin Dynasty affected aristocratic confidence to some extent. However, as Qian Mu noted: “Although the various aristocrats suffered from the turmoil in the Central Plains, they had not yet reached the stage of repentance and consciousness.” Moreover, since the Western Jin Dynasty, “the essence of pure conversation has been to indulge in ambition and remain unbounded by external constraints” (Qian, 2010). This indicates that the tradition of the Southern Ferry aristocrats remained unchanged.

Following the political stabilization after the Xiankang era (335 - 342 AD), Wang Dao, the paramount statesman of Eastern Jin, initiated a new wave of pure conversation debates. His principal interlocutor was Yin Hao from the Chen Commandery Yin clan. As a polymath pure conversation master, Yin Hao excelled not only in the “Three Mysteries” but also developed unique insights into Buddhist sutras in later years. After exhaustive debate, Wang Dao concluded their celebrated encounter by remarking: “Our discourse has yet to determine the ultimate source of principle. However, in terms of rhetorical mastery and metaphorical coherence, it truly resonates with the intellectual elegance of the Zhengshi era” (Yu, 2007). This evaluation established the encounter as paradigmatic for subsequent Eastern Jin pure conversation practitioners. Each of these practitioners profoundly influenced its later development.

Following Wang Dao's era, Yin Hao naturally ascended as the preeminent leader of pure conversation. His expertise spanned diverse philosophical schools, demonstrating profound understanding and analytical rigor. Particularly adept at tackling complex topics, he specialized in the "Four Fundamentals Debate"—exploring the relationship between "talent" (acquired ability) and "nature" (innate disposition): Identity of talent and nature. Independence between talent and nature. Talent as nature's external manifestation. Essential contradiction between talent and nature.

Unmatched in his time, Yin Hao crafted arguments marked by rhetorical splendor and logical imperviousness. His peer Sun Sheng achieved renown for refutational prowess tinged with sophistry, as records note: "*When Yin Hao dominated the intellectual arena, only Sheng could engage him in debate without yielding ground*" (Fang, 1974). The pure conversation alist further included Wang Meng, Liu Tan, Xie An, Huan Wen, and Emperor Jianwen of Jin (Sima Yu). Wang Meng and Liu Tan exemplified an antithetical style, characterized by lexical concision and logical clarity. Wang prioritized euphonic resonance, while Liu emphasized rhetorical ornamentation. Their debates, representing the epitome of literati elegance, became models for aristocratic emulation. Figures like Xie An, Huan Wen, and Sima Yu, though accomplished debaters, primarily served as activity organizers due to political obligations. Emperor Jianwen of Jin embodied this paradox: "In maturity, he cultivated mental vacuity and minimized desires, particularly excelling in metaphysical studies discourse" (Fang, 1974). Despite occupying the throne, his governance proved inept, overshadowed by an obsessive devotion to pure conversation.

The Eastern Jin witnessed Buddhist teachings merging with metaphysical studies to form "Buddho-metaphysics". An increasing number of eminent Buddhist monks joined the pure conversation circles of literati elites. They vigorously debated doctrines such as the "Mindlessness Thesis" and "Non-Absolute Emptiness Thesis". These discussions represented a subtle yet groundbreaking theoretical advance in metaphysical studies. They transcended the earlier frameworks established by: Wang Bi's *Commentary on the Laozi* (老子注), which expounded the "Exalting Non-being" doctrine; Xiang Xiu and Guo Xiang's *Commentary on the Zhuangzi* (庄子注), which championed the "Exalting Being" theory. The analytical rigor of Buddhist philosophy challenged pure conversation practitioners' epistemological frameworks, evidenced by Yin Hao's late-life Buddhist studies and Emperor Jianwen's concurrent engagement with metaphysical studies and sutras. Even as late as the later Eastern Jin Dynasty, new topics of pure conversation often originated from Buddhist scriptures, while Buddhist philosophy spread further to the imperial court. As noted in historical records, "Buddhist statues existed within the imperial palaces of the Jin Dynasty, and among the empresses and concubines, there were devotees who venerated these statues" (Tang, 2011).

This syncretism owed much to monastic elites like Zhi Dun (Zhi Daolin) and translation master Dao'an. Although not a conventional pure conversation par-

ticipant, Zhi Dun revolutionized metaphysical discourse (Tang, 2019). He did so through creative Buddhist reinterpretations of metaphysical studies concepts. Dao'an's translation enterprise systematized "matching meanings", correlating Buddhist ideas with Chinese classical references. His disciple Huiyuan institutionalized scripture exposition through "ascending the pulpit to expound doctrines", gradually transformed pure conversation formats from dialogic debates to hierarchical lectures.

These developments further challenged the dominance of Confucianism while simultaneously driving its evolution and transformation. Instead of adhering to a single ideological framework, rulers began to exploit the complementary nature of the three doctrines (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism) to balance intellectual pluralism, giving rise to unprecedented social mores, cultural identities, and aesthetic sensibilities.

During the Eastern Jin dynasty, pure conversation—a practice originally rooted in intellectual exchange—degenerated into a cultural phenomenon characterized by excessive performativity and entertainment, particularly among aristocratic clans. Although inherently non-productive economically and irrelevant to governance, this ritualized discourse posed no direct threat to political stability. Indeed, many participants lacked practical statecraft skills, functioning instead as rhetorical virtuosos who prioritized technical sophistication in argumentation over administrative obligations. By contrast, pragmatic statesmen such as Wang Dao, Huan Wen, and Xie An strategically engaged with pure conversation to refine their philosophical acumen and political epistemology. Through synthesizing abstract discourse with practical governance needs, these leaders catalyzed a period of relative prosperity. This dual historical role demonstrates that pure conversation as an intellectual pursuit did not inherently destabilize society, yet its transformation into a leisure-class pastime ultimately hindered national development.

6. Conclusion

The emergence of pure conversation was an inevitable product of historical trends, not a mere aggregation of ideas but the culmination of intertwined historical forces. During this period, aristocratic clans rose as the dominant social class, wielding absolute political and economic privileges. Rulers of successive dynasties prioritized political maneuvering, fostering complex power struggles. In response to these realities, cultural paradigms began to shift. Following the fragmentation of the unified Han Empire, the turbulent social environment and the rigid Confucian scholasticism of the Han era fueled skepticism among the intellectual elite. As the need for a new ideological framework intensified, the resurgence of Daoist philosophy and the introduction of Buddhism provided fertile ground for intellectual exploration. This period also witnessed the evolution of the "Pure Criticism" tradition from the Eastern Han Dynasty. To avoid political persecution, scholars gradually shifted from critiquing figures and policies to engaging in phil-

osophical debates and reforming Confucianism.

The Zhengshi pure conversation of the Wei-Jin transition marked the first peak of pure conversation's development. Emerging elites closely tied to the Cao family sought to transcend the constraints of orthodox Confucianism, clashing with traditional Han-era scholarly families rooted in classical studies. Notably, political turmoil did not stifle cultural growth, as evidenced by the flourishing of pure conversation figures within the Sima faction and the intellectual activities of the "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove" in regional contexts. To evade political entanglements, regional pure conversation scholars, led by the Seven Sages, steered discussions toward themes of transcendent and detachment, advocating "Transcend orthodoxy to embrace spontaneity".

After the Sima clan established the Western Jin Dynasty, they disbanded local military forces while enfeoffing imperial clansmen to safeguard the regime. These imperial appointees wielded absolute authority in regional governance. This accelerated their collaboration with powerful aristocratic clans and reviving pure conversation as an intellectual practice. At this juncture, pure conversation functioned as an academic activity that continuously advanced metaphysical studies.

By the Eastern Jin, as aristocratic clans monopolized political power, pure conversation increasingly emphasized aesthetic refinement. It prioritized rhetorical elegance, phonological harmony, and metaphysical inquiry. However, this intellectual pursuit gradually devolved into superficial extravagance among the elite. This exacerbated political corruption and destabilizing governance. Ultimately, pure conversation, once a vehicle for philosophical innovation, became a tool for aristocratic clans to feign moral superiority. They masked their decadent lifestyles beneath a veneer of cultural sophistication. The trajectory of pure conversation thus reflects both the intellectual vitality and the socio-political contradictions of its era.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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