

On the Notion of “Unifying *Ren* 仁” in Wang Yangming’s Thoughts on *Ren*

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Abstract

Two or three years before his death, Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529) started to emphasize the “unity of all things” (*wanwu yiti* 萬物一體). In scholarly discussions of Wang’s notion of “*ren* which unifies all things in the universe” (*tiandi wanwu yiti zhi ren* 天地萬物一體之仁), the character *ren* 仁 (benevolence/humaneness) is often overlooked. In fact, unifying *ren* (*yiti zhi ren* 一體之仁) is the central notion that Wang deploys to formulate his doctrine of the unity of all things. This notion is different from other traditional Chinese ideas about *ren* and unity, including Cheng Hao’s 程顥 (1032-1085) teaching that emphasizes “knowing *ren*” (*shiren* 識仁) in the beginning and then progresses to “completely being as one with all things” (*hunran yuwu tongti* 渾然與物同體). In a word, Wang’s doctrine of the unity of all things is both ontological and practical and reveals the humanistic spirit of World-ism (*tianxia zhuyi* 天下主義). On the basis of a belief in unifying *ren*, a harmonious world where “all things in the universe are originally as one with me” (*tiandi wanwu benwu yiti zhe* 天地萬物本吾一體者) can be created.

Keywords: Wang Yangming, unifying *ren*, unity of all things, unity of *ren*, World-ism

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1. Introduction

The doctrine of the unity of all things (*wanwu yiti lun* 萬物一體論) is the quintessence of Wang Yangming's 王陽明 (1472-1529) philosophy of the heart/mind (*xinxue* 心學). This doctrine advocates "*ren* 仁 (benevolence/humaneness) which unifies all things in the universe" (*tiandi wanwu yiti zhi ren* 天地萬物一體之仁). However, in most scholarly discussions, only the unity of all things (*wanwu yiti* 萬物一體) is considered and explored while *ren* is rendered insignificant. This undue disregard can render Wang's doctrine indistinguishable from other assertions that argue for the unity of all things. For example, some scholars maintain that Wang's notion has some theoretical parallels with Zhuangzi's 莊子 (c. 369-286 BCE) Daoist teaching: "all things are as one with me" (*wanwu yu wo wei yi* 萬物與我爲一).¹ In order to clarify the theoretical basis and implications of Wang's doctrine of the unity of all things, I will discuss the intellectual background of the notion of "unifying *ren*."

First, it should be pointed out that unifying *ren* is the focal point in the notion of "*ren* which unifies all things in the universe." The term "unity" (*yiti* 一體) does not fully encapsulate the meaning of *ren*; it only reflects some of its basic characteristics.² To be more specific, unity connotes totality, and thus the term unifying *ren* indicates that *ren* not only encompasses moral character belonging to the human heart/mind (the substance of the heart/mind, i.e., *xinti* 心體) but an ontological being that is as one with all things (the substance of *ren*, i.e., *renti* 仁體). Once we perceive *ren* as an ontological being, the notion of unifying *ren* reveals the spiritual characteristics of the universe. Therefore, this article focuses on unifying *ren* instead of *ren* itself, for only through the notion of unifying *ren* specifically can Wang's doctrine of the unity of all things be properly explained. In addition, the notion of unifying *ren* positions his doctrine of the unity of all things as belonging

¹ Regarding opposing Confucian and Daoist stances on the issues of *ren* and unity, see Shimada, "Chūgoku kinsei no shukan yuishinron ni tsuite"; Wu Zhen, *Chuanxi lu jingdu*.

² Wang does not carefully define *ren*. In the *Chuanxi lu* 傳習錄 (Instructions for Practical Living), he uses this term in two main contexts in line with Song Confucian usages: "*ren* is the virtue of the heart/mind" (*renzhe xin zhi de* 仁者心之德) and "*ren* is the principle of living in ceaseless succession" (*renzhe sheng sheng buxi zhi li* 仁者生生不息之理). In contrast, Zhu Xi clarifies the precise meaning of *ren* apart from its descriptive usages. For more details, see Wu Zhen, "Lun Zhuzi renxue sixiang."

to an ontological discourse. It can be called the doctrine of the unity of *ren* (*renxue yiti lun* 仁學一體論), differentiating it from other Chinese philosophical hypotheses which regard the unity of all things.

2. The Issues to Be Discussed

Generally speaking, there are two categories of discussions on the unity of all things before Wang: the Pre-Qin (prior to 221 BCE) version and the Song (960-1279) Neo-Confucian version. Representative examples of the former include Mengzi's 孟子 (372-289 BCE) assertion that "all things are complete in me," Zhuangzi's "all things are as one with me," and Hui Shi's 惠施 (c. 370-310 BCE) "love all things and all things are as one."³ The exemplar of the latter is Cheng Hao's 程顥 (1032-1085) assertion that "*ren* is completely as one with all things" and "*ren* is as one with all things in the universe."⁴ Wang's doctrine of the unity of all things is distinct from all these assertions, in that it is a doctrine of the unity of *ren* which is firmly based on his philosophy of the heart/mind.

It is generally assumed that Wang's doctrine of the unity of all things is indebted to Cheng Hao. Cheng's doctrine of the unity of all things consists of two main progressions: *ren* as ever-evolving virtue (*sheng sheng zhi ren* 生生之仁) and the spiritual realm of *ren* (*renzhe jingjie* 仁者境界). Cheng emphasizes that one should first recognize one's *ren* and then reach the spiritual sphere of *ren* where one is as one with all things. This realm is composed of subjective feelings and thus Cheng's teaching is a practice-oriented theory. In line with Cheng, Wang also interprets *ren* as ever-evolving virtue. However, unlike Cheng, Wang adopts the ontological being of unifying *ren* as the core notion of his doctrine.

One may ask why unifying *ren* is an ontological being. According to Wang, the heart/mind of *ren* (*renxin* 仁心) is not only an individual's heart/mind (*geti zhi xin* 個體之心) or ever-evolving heart/mind (*sheng sheng zhi xin* 生生之心) or ever-flowing heart/mind (*liudong zhi xin* 流動之心): it is as one with all things. In this sense, the heart/mind in Wang's philosophy is the ontological being of *liangzhi* 良知 (moral knowledge/innate knowledge).

³ Mengzi, "Jinxin shang" 盡心上: "萬物皆備於我矣"; Zhuangzi, "Qiwulun" 齊物論: "萬物與我為一"; Zhuangzi, "Tianxia" 天下: "泛愛萬物, 天地一體."

⁴ Wang, *Er Cheng ji*, vol. 2, 16: "仁者渾然與物同體"; Wang, *Er Cheng ji*, vol. 2, 15: "仁者以天地萬物為一體."

In Wang's philosophy, *liangzhi* and the principle of Heaven (*tianli* 天理) are essentially the same concept. If the principle of Heaven is an ontological being in Neo-Confucianism, then *liangzhi* is an ontological being in Wang's philosophy. Therefore, unifying *ren* can also be called the substance of *ren* (*renti* 仁體).⁵ The substance of *ren* is the substance of the heart/mind; the substance of the heart/mind is *liangzhi*; *liangzhi* is the principle of Heaven. They all indicate the same ontological dimension.

Wang formulates the doctrine of the unity of *ren* on the basis of the notion of unifying *ren*. His doctrine emphasizes the ontological being of unifying *ren* as a constituent of the organic singular entity which consists of all things in the universe. The significance of Wang's doctrine lies in elucidating the ontological being of *ren*, which exists not only in our heart/mind but also in objective reality. Thereby Wang's notion of *ren* acquires its ontological significance.

In the *Renxue bentu lun* 仁學本體論 (Ontology of *Ren*), Chen Lai 陳來 (1952-) argues that although Cheng Hao placed the substance of *ren* in the spiritual realm and attached practical and even ontological implications to it, Cheng's main emphasis lies in the subjective realm (*zhuguan jingjie* 主觀境界). Under Cheng's influence, Wang discusses the unity of all things mainly in relation to the heart/mind and thus his doctrine also interprets *ren* as being subjective to some extent. However, Chen believes that the concept of subjectivity is inadequate to explain Wang's unifying *ren* as an ontological being.⁶

In addition, Chen argues that Wang's doctrine of the unity of all things emphasizes the notion of one circulating *qi* or ether/vital force (*yiqi liutong* 一氣流通) since, in Chen's view, it is a fundamental premise of unifying *ren*. The substance of *ren* can comprise the substance of the universe and thereby transcend the substance of the heart/mind.⁷ However, it is doubtful that unifying *ren* needs the circulating entity of *qi* as predicate for the unity of all things. In my view, unifying *ren* directly equates with the ontological being of the universe.

⁵ In Neo-Confucianism, Cheng Hao first proposes the notion of the substance of *ren* (*renti*). He also argues that *ren* is the whole entity (*renzhe quanti* 仁者全體). See Wang, *Er Cheng ji*, vol. 2, 14. The term *renti* rarely appears in Wang's work, esp. in *Chuanxi lu*, but his notion of "unifying *ren*" should be understood in close relation to the substance of *ren* and the whole entity.

⁶ Chen, *Renxue bentu lun*, 291.

⁷ Chen, *Renxue bentu lun*, 299.

Based on the above discussion, we can assume that Wang interprets *liangzhi* as the principle of Heaven, since he already perceives *liangzhi* as an ontological being;⁸ they can be equated on this ontological basis. Accordingly, unifying *ren* can be discussed in relation to the substance of the heart/mind; in Wang’s theory, the hearts/minds of all things are a spiritual substance (*jingshen shiti* 精神實體). Thus, Wang argues that “humans are the heart/mind of the universe” and “all things in the universe are originally as one with me.”⁹ The term “originally” (*ben* 本) suggests that the human heart/mind and the heart/mind of Heaven (*tianxin* 天心) are as one in their origin, which is the basic premise of the concept of unity between humans and all things. The heart/mind of Heaven represents the substance of the spiritual characteristics of the universe,¹⁰ which serves as the basis for the unity of all things.

3. The Tenets of Wang’s Later Philosophy

It is widely agreed that Wang’s philosophy of the heart/mind is composed of three main propositions: “the heart/mind is principle” (*xin ji li* 心即理), “unity of knowledge and action” (*zhi xing heyi* 知行合一), and “extending *liangzhi*” (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知). Since *liangzhi* forms the basis of Wang’s philosophy, his teaching is also referred to as the teaching of extending *liangzhi* (*zhi liangzhi jiao* 致良知教). In a letter one year before his death, Wang clearly showed his favor for *liangzhi*, stating that what he had taught throughout his life was how to extend the reach of one’s *liangzhi* to encompass everything in the universe.¹¹

Later in life, while teaching at Yue 越 during the years of 1522-1527, Wang made a significant breakthrough in his theories. A few years before Wang’s demise, he began to emphasize an old but ever-renewing idea in Confucianism: the doctrine of the unity of all things.¹² As will be discussed

⁸ Wu Zhen, *Chuanxi lu jingdu*, 219-233.

⁹ Wu Guang, *Wang Yangming quanji*, 79: “夫人者，天地之心，天地萬物本吾一體者。”

¹⁰ Regarding the heart/mind of Heaven (*tian di zhi xin* 天地之心 / *tianxin* 天心), see Chen, *Renxue benti lun*; Wu Zhen, *Luo Rufang pingzhuan*, esp. sec. 5 in chap. 3.

¹¹ Wu Guang, *Wang Yangming quanji*, 990.

¹² This does not mean that Wang paid little attention to the doctrine of unity in his early years. When he met Zhan Ruoshui 湛若水 (1466-1560) in Beijing in 1504, they appreciated the importance of recognizing *ren* as Cheng Hao emphasized. They shared the same goal of reviving the holy learning. In the writing “Asking for Advice from Wang Jiaxiu” written in 1514, he expressed the view that *ren* makes all things in the universe one. The first

below, Wang emphasizes unifying *ren* as an ontological being and concludes that all things are as one, establishing the doctrine of the unity of *ren*. Of course, Wang's doctrine also concerns the subjective spiritual realm, similar to Cheng Hao's philosophy. However, this does not mean that Wang changes his focus from extending *liangzhi* to the unity of *ren*. On the contrary, the two ideas are mutually inclusive: unifying *ren* can acquire its practical significance only when it is combined with the cultivation of *liangzhi*. In this sense, the doctrine of the unity of *ren* goes hand in hand with Wang's philosophy of the heart/mind, with an emphasis on *liangzhi*.

However, the act of extending one's *liangzhi* is a personal moral practice. In order to extend *liangzhi* to society and all over the world, we must first harbor a belief in unifying *ren*, and thus the need for the doctrine of the unity of *ren* arises. The unity of *ren* and extending one's *liangzhi* form the two theoretical cornerstones of Wang's later philosophy; it is a logical development of Wang's philosophy to move from extending *liangzhi* to the unity of *ren*.

According to the *Yangming nianpu* 陽明年譜 (Chronicle Book of Wang's Life), in 1524 Wang assembled approximately three hundred local literati at the Academy of Jishan 稽山 founded by Nan Daji 南大吉 (1487-1541). In this assembly, Wang elucidated the meaning of the unity of all things in the *Daxue* 大學 (Great Learning), in order to encourage the literati to return to their original nature and thus enhance their morality through an expansion of their *liangzhi*. This event highlights the conviction with which Wang began to emphasize the unity of all things in his later years. In his later teaching, he exhorted people to restore their original natures and reap feasible gains by enhancing their *liangzhi*.¹³

However, the meaning of "all things are one" is not clear. Moreover, we should note that, in line with Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130-1200) preference for the *Daxue*, Wang also chooses the *Daxue* over the *Zhouyi* 周易 (Book of Changes) and the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (Doctrine of the Mean) as the primary theoretical grounds for his assertions. In his book *Daxue wen* 大學問 (Problems Concerning the *Daxue*), Wang explicates his interpretations of the *Daxue*'s position on the unity of all things.

According to Wang, the doctrine of the unity of all things is not

volume of *Chuanxi lu* deals with this idea many times. However, the theoretical reconstruction of the doctrine of the unity of *ren* appears only after 1525.

¹³ Wu Guang, *Wang Yangming quanji*, 1290: "功夫有得."

theoretical but practical. Wang strongly criticizes all forms of defamation since they are inimical to his belief in the unified heart/mind of all things (*yiti tongwu zhi xin* 一體同物之心), which acts as a combined expression of unifying *ren* and the unity of all things. Wang's belief in the unified heart/mind demonstrates that unifying *ren* is not merely an abstract concept, but an experiential belief which stimulates Wang to perform specific academic activities and spiritual pursuits throughout his life.

4. The Substance of *Ren* Is *Liangzhi*

In 1525, a year after his lecture at the Academy of Jishan, Wang wrote the *Qinmintang ji* 親民堂記 (An Essay on the Hall of Being Close to the People). In this essay, he advances the notion of the unity between illustrious virtue (*mingde* 明德) and being close to the people (*qinmin* 親民) with the aim of promoting the learning of the great person (*daren zhi xue* 大人之學). Wang explains this notion from the perspective of the unity of all things: "the great person is as one with all things in the universe. After [becoming a great person], one can be unified with all things."¹⁴

These statements are evidently reminiscent of Cheng Hao's philosophy, but Wang introduces the concept of "the great person" in lieu of *ren* and argues that the unity of all things becomes a feasible task only once a person becomes great. In this way, the paradigm of the great person is equated with *ren* and in other contexts the great person is identical to the sage (*shengren* 聖人); Wang frequently and interchangeably refers to the heart/mind of the great person and, in other contexts, the heart/mind of the sage.

In 1525, Wang wrote two essays where he further elaborated the doctrine of the unity of all things: *Chongxiu shanyin xue ji* 重修山陰學記 (Reconstruction of Shanyin County School) and *Da Gu Dongqiao shu* 答顧東橋書 (A Reply to Gu Dongqiao). The coda of the *Da Gu Dongqiao shu* is separated in order to produce an independent piece of writing entitled *Baben sai yuan lun* 拔本塞源論 (On Pulling Up the Root and Stopping up the Source). Liu Zongzhou 劉宗周 (1578-1645) praises this piece as the best work on the unity of all things after Mengzi.

In his essay, Wang discusses the heart/mind of the sage: what the sage seeks is the original state of his heart/mind, which is as one with all things in the universe. He explains why the five relations (*wu lun* 五倫) of father

¹⁴ Wu Guang, *Wang Yangming quanji*, 252: "大人者，與天地萬物為一體也。夫然後，能以天地萬物為一體。"

and son, king and subject, husband and wife, old and young and friends have not been correctly established: we have not fully realized our original heart/mind. Only once we do this, can the world be governed. Thus the learning of the sage (*shengren zhi xue* 聖人之學) is nothing but an act of extending the heart/mind. Wang's conclusion is that the ultimate goal of the sage is to be one with all things in the universe.

In discussing the unity of all things, Wang assumes that the heart/mind of the sage inherently exists. The pursuit of realizing the original state of the heart/mind aims at the unity of all things. This practice is possible since the heart/mind of the sage already possesses *ren*, which thus enables him to be as one with all things. Hence, Wang deems the realization of the original state of the heart/mind as a representation of the substance of *ren* and thus equates the substance of *ren* with the substance of the heart/mind. In this sense, Wang emphasizes that the learning of the sage is none other than the pursuit of realizing the original heart/mind.

In the *Baben sai yuan lun*, Wang deciphers the heart/mind of the sage and then compares it with that of the ordinary person. In this comparison, he notes no intrinsic difference between the two forms of heart/mind. However, the heart/mind of the ordinary person is easily influenced by selfish concerns and desires which can split the heart/mind. For fear of these harmful ramifications, the sage educates the world on *ren* which unifies all things. Wang finally reaffirms that the hearts/minds of the people are the same:

The heart/mind of the sage perceives all things in the universe as one. He sees all people in the world as the same regardless of physical and emotional distances from them. All those who have blood and *qi* (*xueqi* 血氣) within them feel intimacy with each other, the same kind of intimacy they feel towards their brothers and babies. There is no one who does not want to be safe; therefore, the sage enlightened them all and promoted the notion of the unity of all things. The hearts/minds of all people in the world are not different from that of the sage at the outset but become distracted by private concerns and desires for material objects. For this reason, big becomes small and flow becomes blocked. Each person has their own heart/mind, but end up seeing their father, sons, and brothers as enemies. The sage worried about this and proposed the notion of *ren* that unifies all things in order to enlighten the world. As a result, people may overcome selfishness and eliminate evils, and thereby restore their shared original heart/mind.¹⁵

¹⁵ Wu Guang, *Wang Yangming quanji*, 54: “夫聖人之心，以天地萬物爲一體，其視天下之人，無外內遠近，凡有血氣，皆其昆弟赤子之親，莫不欲安全而教養之，以遂其萬物一體之念。天下之人心，其始

Wang defines unifying *ren* as the original state of the sage's heart/mind. He argues that the original state of the ordinary person's heart/mind is the same as that of the sage, since every human inherently possesses unifying *ren*: the substance of *ren* is innate for all.

Here we can see that Wang's philosophy of the heart/mind considers unifying *ren* as the substance of the heart/mind or the substance of human nature (*xingti* 性體). Unifying *ren* is not only the innate substance of the heart/mind but also an ontological being encompassing all things in the universe. Unifying *ren* is not merely the representation of subjective attributes such as "the heart/mind of the sage" or "the original state of the hearts/minds of ordinary people," but also an objective ontological being. Therefore, all things in the universe are constantly connected through unifying *ren*. That is, unifying *ren* is the substance of *ren*, which in turn comprises the organic whole of all things in the universe. In the *Daxue wen*, he also emphasizes the substantiality of unifying *ren*:

The great person can be one with all things in the universe not because he intends to do so but because it is part of the nature of his heart/mind's *ren*. Not only the great person but even petty people have such hearts/minds. Even petty people's hearts/minds retain unifying *ren* without exception, for it is rooted in their nature as mandated by Heaven. Being bright in itself, it cannot be obscured; therefore, we call it illustrious virtue.¹⁶

The above quotation suggests that unifying *ren* does not rely on conscious intent as it innately exists within the heart/mind. Unifying *ren* is an ontological being and human nature mandated by Heaven (*tianming zhi xing* 天命之性), and thus it is originally illustrious and cannot be obscured, much like *liangzhi*. It is the basic virtue of Confucian ethics and therefore unifying *ren* maintains universality and objectivity.

The universality of the substance of *ren* can be expressed as follows: "*ren* is as one with children," "*ren* is as one with animals," "*ren* is as one with plants," "*ren* is as one with stone." In short, unifying *ren* is the original feature of the unity of all things in the universe, and nothing can be added to it. The above expressions do not mean that the human heart/mind is as

亦非有異于聖人也，特其間于有我之私，隔于物欲之蔽，大者以小，通者以塞，人各有心，至有視其父子兄弟如仇仇者，聖人有憂之，是以推其天地萬物一體之仁以教天下，使之皆有以克其私，去其蔽，以復其心體之同然。”

¹⁶ Wu Guang, *Wang Yangming quanji*, 967: “大人之能以天地萬物為一體也，非意之也，其心之仁本若是，其與天地萬物而為一也。豈惟大人，雖小人之亦莫不然。是其一體之仁也，雖小人之亦必有之，是乃根于天命之性，而自然靈昭不昧者也，是故謂之明德。”

one with plants and stone: it means that the substance of *ren* is as one with them. In other words, *ren* and all things are unified, and therefore *ren* is a substance in itself. Substance is innate and omnipresent, and so is unifying *ren*. It is completely perfect in itself, which means we cannot cultivate it after birth. We cannot change substance; we can only change what is reliant on our experiences or practices. Since Wang discusses unifying *ren* from an ontological perspective, this notion serves as the foundation of the unity of all things, by positing the thesis that the human heart/mind equals the heart/mind of Heaven or of the universe (*tiandi zhi xin* 天地之心).

5. The Practical Dimension of Unifying *Ren*

It should be pointed out that unifying *ren* is not merely a philosophical concept but also a practice-oriented concept, since it is related to humans as social beings and their activities as living creatures. Thus, unifying *ren* should involve moral and political acts. These two tasks should be consolidated into one, which is in line with Wang's emphasis on the practice of *liangzhi*.

As mentioned above, in the *Qinmintang ji*, Wang argues that illustrious virtue and being close to the people are considered the same. For Wang, there is hardly any difference between moral acts based on illustrious virtue and political acts based on being close to the people. He also discusses this aspect in the *Daxue wen*. The first three chapters of the *Daxue wen* explicate three tenets of the *Daxue*: "illuminating illustrious virtue" (*ming mingde* 明明德), "being close to the people" (*qinmin* 親民), and "abiding in the highest good" (*zhi yu zhishan* 止於至善). Wang poses unique interpretations of these three tenets through a reliance on unifying *ren*:

Illuminating illustrious virtue is to achieve the unity of all things in the universe. To be close to the people is to adeptly apply the unity of all things in the universe. Therefore, illuminating illustrious virtue hinges on whether one can be close to the people. If one is close to the people, one can illuminate one's illustrious virtue.¹⁷

The above quotation demonstrates two aspects of unifying *ren*. From the perspective of substance (*ti* 體), it is illustrious virtue; from the perspective of its application (*yong* 用), it indicates being close to the people. According

¹⁷ Wu Guang, *Wang Yangming quanji*, 968-969: "明明德者，立其天地萬物一體之體也。親民者，達其天地萬物一體之用也。故明明德必在於親民，而親民乃所以明其明德也。"

to the relationship between substance and application (*ti yong guanxi* 體用關係) as propagated by Neo-Confucianism, the substance of illustrious virtue is manifested in its application, i.e., in being close to the people, and such an application reveals the substance of illustrious virtue. Although substance and application are not logically equivalent in Chinese thought, they in fact reflect each other: substance is manifested in its application and from its application we can see substance (*ji yong xian ti, you yong jian ti* 即用顯體, 由用見體). This mutually sustained relationship between substance and application is maintained on the basis of unifying *ren*.

In Wang's view, Zhu Xi lacks this basis. Zhu Xi also believes that illustrious virtue is the foundation and being close to the people is the application of this virtue. However, he regards illustrious virtue and being close to the people as embodying a relationship of the fundamental and the peripheral (*benmo guanxi* 本末關係). For this reason, Wang repudiates Zhu Xi's view: Zhu Xi severs the elements of illustrious virtue and being close to the people and places them instead into a relationship between the fundamental and the peripheral:

We can say that illustrious virtue is the fundamental and being close to the people is the peripheral. However, we should not divide them into two things. The trunk of a tree is the fundamental while branches are the peripheral but they are still one thing; therefore, it is called the fundamental and the peripheral [of one thing]. If we call them two things, they already are two things; how can we say the fundamental and the peripheral? Renewing the people (*xinmin* 新民) and being close to the people (*qinmin* 親民) are not the same. The application of illustrious virtue and renewing the people are two different things. If we know that one becomes close to the people by illuminating illustrious virtue and that one comes to illuminate one's illustrious virtue by being close to the people, how can we divide them into two?¹⁸

According to Wang, Zhu's explanation is devoid of the notion of unifying *ren*, and thus the relationship between the fundamental and the peripheral is difficult to establish. In the analogy of the trunk and the branches, unifying *ren* is a tree; illustrious virtue is the trunk; being close to the people comprises the branches. Illustrious virtue and being close to the people are segments of one tree, the tree of unifying *ren*.

¹⁸ Wu Guang, *Wang Yangming quanji*, 970: "曰 '明德為本,' 親民為末, 其說亦未為不可, 但不當分本末為兩物耳。夫木之幹謂之本, 木之梢謂之末, 惟其一物也, 是以謂之本末。若曰兩物, 則既為兩物矣, 又何可以言本末乎? 新民之意, 既與親民不同, 則明德之功自與新民為二。若知明明德以親其民, 而親民以明其明德, 則明德親民焉可析而為兩乎!"

Only on the basis of unifying *ren* can the desired illustrious virtue and intimacy with the people be realized:

Starting from being close to my father and then to other people's fathers and to all fathers in the world; by doing so, my *ren* unifies my father, other people's fathers, and all fathers in the world into one. Once they are as one, the illustrious virtue of filial piety is finally elucidated. Starting from being close to my brother and then to other people's brothers and to all brothers in the world; by doing so, my *ren* unifies my brother, other people's brother, and all brothers in the world into one. Once they are as one, the illustrious virtue of fraternal obedience is finally elucidated. King and subject, husband and wife, friends, and even all the hills, waters, ghosts, birds, animals, and plants: there is nothing we do not feel close to. We can extend our unifying *ren* to all of them. After we reach this state, our illustrious virtue is all illuminated and we can indeed be unified with all things in the universe. This is what is called illuminating illustrious virtue all over the world.¹⁹

The statement "to extend our unifying *ren*" (*yi da wu yiti zhi ren* 以達吾一體之仁) is the premise of the above argument; one first attempts to be close to the people and then one's illustrious virtue is illuminated. When one's illustrious virtue is thoroughly illuminated, one can become integrated with all things in the universe. All these practices require unifying *ren* as a premise and reach their conclusion as the ultimate realization of unifying *ren*.

More importantly, the political undertaking of bringing peace and harmony to the world is the same as becoming a sage internally (*neisheng* 內聖). This undertaking also signifies manifesting one's original nature. As examined above, unifying *ren* is the nature mandated by Heaven and the substance of *ren* is the substance of nature. Therefore, the act of developing one's nature to the utmost (*jinxing* 盡性) is based on unifying *ren* and is the final stage of the unity of all things.

6. The Humanistic Spirit of Unifying *Ren*

Wang's doctrine of the unity of all things, based on unifying *ren*, holds a negative view of reality. In the *Baben saiyuan lun*, Wang's most emphatic

¹⁹ Wu Guang, *Wang Yangming quanji*, 968-969: "是故親吾之父，以及人之父，以及天下人之父，而後吾之仁實與吾之父人之父與天下人之父而為一體矣。實與之為一體，而後孝之明德始明矣！親吾之兄，以及人之兄，以及天下人之兄，而後吾之仁實與吾之兄人之兄與天下人之兄而為一體矣。實與之為一體，而後弟之明德始明矣！君臣也，夫婦也，朋友也，以至于山川鬼神鳥獸草木也，莫不實有以親之，以達吾一體之仁，然後吾之明德始無不明，而真能以天地萬物為一體矣。夫是之謂明明德於天下。"

essay, he rebukes vulgarized forms of Confucian learning repugnant to Kongzi 孔子 (551-479 BCE) and Mengzi. He criticizes the pursuit of external knowledge and its techniques for causing various problems, including disorder of the heart/mind. In order to solve these problems, Wang proposes the notion of unifying *ren*: people's hearts/minds are all the same. On the basis of unifying *ren*, private concerns and selfish desires are dissipated, and an ideal society where all things in the universe are unified is created.

Wang argues that in the Three Ages (*sandai* 三代) when the learning of the heart/mind was flourishing, every person could achieve unity with all things by unifying *ren*. As a result, everyone was spiritually connected to each other and thus there was no distinction between oneself and others, between humans and other things. This meant that in the Three Ages there was neither conflict between humans, nor alienation between humans and the natural world, nor between humans and other things. All were connected through the substance of the heart/mind, namely the substance of *ren*.

Wang is blatantly issuing a retrospective judgment in expressing a negative view of the present and then extolling the ancient world as an ideal. After the Three Ages degenerated and Kongzi and Mengzi passed away, the way of the King (*wangdao* 王道) disappeared and the technique for acquiring power prevailed. The learning of the sage was obscured while evil words proliferated out to the whole world. Consequently, teachers no longer taught unifying *ren* and students no longer studied it. The heart/mind pursued honor and profit, entailing harmful effects on itself and on human nature. These chaotic conditions lasted for thousands of years; as a consequence, the relationships connecting humans with each other and with other things were destroyed, and the spirit of unifying *ren* disappeared.

At the end of the *Baben saiyuan lun*, Wang decries the current state of society where the literati continue to encounter difficulties, yet proclaims that the universal truth is still valid: the principle of Heaven persists in the heart/mind of the people and *liangzhi* remains the same through all ages. Thus, when someone is told of the teaching of unifying *ren*, he feels sorrow and pain towards tragic situations, and his will to be moral never drains like the mighty river. Wang expects this kind of outstanding literati to appear in his time and his sincere voice is reminiscent of Kongzi: "without such men, with whom shall I walk."²⁰ The belief in unifying *ren* and the unity of all things demonstrates the humanistic spirit of Confucianism. These two

²⁰ *Lunyu* 論語, "Weizi" 微子: "吾非斯人之徒而吾誰與."

ideas presuppose the organic connection shared by human society as well as the organic connection of all things in the universe.

7. Conclusion: The Ethics of World-ism

The theoretical forms of the unity of all things and the unity of Heaven and humans (*tianren heyi* 天人合一) bear a familial resemblance. Both notions did not appear until the 11th century. However, according to Yu Yingshi 余英時 (1930-), the notion of the unity of Heaven and humans is what Whitehead (1861-1947) calls the basic premise for mainstream thought in every era of Chinese history, from the Pre-Qin period to the Song and Ming dynasties. In other words, this notion constitutes “an important basic idea in Chinese intellectual history.”²¹ According to Yu’s teacher Qian Mu 錢穆 (1895-1990), the notion of the unity of Heaven and humans is where the entity of traditional Chinese culture converges; Qian believes that this notion is the main contribution of Chinese culture to the future survival of humankind.²²

Qian Mu himself does not deal with the unity of all things, yet when Yu Yingshi explores the notion of the unity of Heaven and humans as discussed in the pre-Qin period, he offers the unity of all things as support for his argument that the unity of Heaven and humans was being newly addressed after the philosophical breakthrough of the Axial Age. According to Yu, Mengzi, Zhuangzi, and Hui Shi are the three thinkers who supported the unity of Heaven and humans.²³ Mengzi’s claim that “all things are complete in me” expresses a belief in the unity of Heaven and humans. That being the case, the unity of all things can be regarded as an important basic idea in Chinese intellectual history.²⁴ However, where in this history can we find the genealogy of Wang Yangming’s notion of unifying *ren* which did not appear until the 16th century?

It is generally assumed that both Cheng Hao’s and Wang’s belief in the unity of all things stem from Mengzi. Although there are some differences among these three thinkers’ positions, their common emphasis on *ren* assumes

²¹ Yu, *Lun tianren zhi ji*, 172.

²² Yu, *Lun tianren zhi ji*, 72-73.

²³ Yu, *Lun tianren zhi ji*, 186-187.

²⁴ It is uncertain whether the unity of all things and the unity of Heaven and humans are compatible. However, Heaven in what Yu calls a new theory of the unity of Heaven and humans is defined as the world composed of one *qi* of *Dao* 道. Therefore, the issue of “*jue ditian tong*” 絕地天通 (the isolation of Heaven and Earth) is transformed into the issue of how one can be one with *Dao*. Yu, *Lun tianren zhi ji*, 186.

greater philosophical significance. Mengzi says "all things are complete in me. If one examines oneself and ascertains one's sincerity (*cheng* 誠), there is no greater delight than [this experience]. If one devotes a great deal of effort into practicing reciprocity (*shu* 恕), nothing can be closer to the pursuit of *ren* than this devotion."²⁵ *Cheng*, *shu*, and *ren* are core concepts in Confucianism; Mengzi promotes his view of the unity of all things based particularly on the concept of *ren*. From Cheng Hao's thesis of "completely being in one with all things" to Wang Yangming's notion of unifying *ren*, they both have theoretical similarities to Mengzi's idea expressed in "all things are complete in me," formulating their ideas on the firm basis of *ren*.

However, the statement that "all things are complete in me" is not easy to comprehend since humans are fundamentally different from other beings such as plants and mountains, and even from each other. Consequently, it seems impossible to be as one with all things outside of the realms of mysticism. The identity of a human being is intertwined with human consciousness and subjective judgment; it has nothing to do with objective reality. If a connection with the world cannot be fully established in the inner heart/mind, one must at least recognize one's place as part of a whole entity of beings.²⁶ Mengzi's testimony, "all things are complete in me," is related to the pursuit of *ren* (*qiuren* 求仁). This pursuit begins with extending the heart/mind, knowing one's nature and finally knowing Heaven; in this sense, Mengzi's idea paved the way for the theory of the way of Heaven (*tiandao* 天道) and the human heart/mind (*renxin* 人心).

Contrary to the above interpretation, Zhu Xi interprets Mengzi's statement from an ontological point of view. He opposes the claim that all things can fuse into an individual, a subjective being, and therefore adds the character *li* 理 (principle) to the statement in order to add precision: "the principle of all things (*wanwu zhi li* 萬物之理) are complete in me." According to Zhu Xi, only the principle is an ontological being that encompasses all things.²⁷ However, Zhu Xi's position erroneously regards the homogeneity of all things as the homogeneity of the principle. In fact, the statement "all things are complete in me" has more to do with *ren* than the principle; this is what we should bear in mind when interpreting the unity of Heaven and humans, or the unity of all things.²⁸

²⁵ Mengzi, "Jinxin shang": "孟子曰，'萬物皆備於我矣。反身而誠，樂莫大焉。強恕而行，求仁莫近焉。'"

²⁶ Yu, *Lun tianren zhi ji*, 41.

²⁷ Zhu, *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, 350.

²⁸ Ever since Cheng Hao claimed that Heaven and humans are not originally two things, and

Although Wang's doctrine of the unity of all things originates from Mengzi, it is his own concept of unifying *ren* which grounds his doctrine. Only on the basis of unifying *ren* do humans and all other species become one, as do the way of Heaven and human nature. In addition, since unifying *ren* is the same as *liangzhi* and the principle of Heaven, Wang's doctrine of the unity of all things gains universal significance as an ontological discourse. It is also noteworthy that unifying *ren* has significance only when it is accompanied by actual practice. Once it aims for the spiritual realm, it subsequently aims for fashioning a social community that values *ren*.

Fundamentally speaking, the doctrine of the unity of all things, which is based on unifying *ren*, is the same as the doctrine of the unity of *ren*. The substance of *ren*, in continuous relation to beings, enables humans to be one with other things. The spirit of unifying *ren* is inherently humanistic: "if one person is not saved, then I will feel as if I myself pushed him into a ditch";²⁹ "if one thing is out of place, I will feel that it is because my *ren* is not fully extended."³⁰ These statements can be viewed as Confucian ethics that concern the world (*tianxia* 天下). For Confucians, World-ism (*tianxia zhuyi* 天下主義), which emphasizes a unified concept of "one world," is not merely a political view or a cosmological view but an ethical one. From today's perspective, World-ism, which adopts *ren* as its basis, does not simply concern international relations in pursuit of balancing national interests: it pursues embracing others on the basis of unifying *ren*. Its ultimate aim lies in the harmonious co-existence of the human community.

Lastly, the significance of the doctrine of the unity of *ren* lies in the way of Heaven and human nature co-existing as one, and eliminating any barriers between humans and other things. Thus, we should reestablish the relationship between the human community and all other things. In other words, we should restore the integrity of the world, and lay the basis for the order of human society. At the same time, we should emphasize that moral life is inseparable from cosmic life. It is only by inclining towards

thus it is needless to say that they are one thing, only a few Neo-Confucians mention the term "*tianren heyi*" 天人合一 (unity of Heaven and humans). This term does not even appear in the *Wang Yangming quanji*. However, this does not mean that the notion of the unity of Heaven and humans started to dissipate. On the contrary, discussions concerning the ways of Heaven and of humans, the hearts/minds of Heaven and of humans, the principle of Heaven (*tianli*) and *liangzhi* were ceaselessly discussed in the school of heart/mind during the Ming dynasty.

²⁹ Wu Guang, *Wang Yangming quanji*, 79: "一夫不獲，若己推而納諸溝中。"

³⁰ Wu Guang, *Wang Yangming quanji*, 25: "使有一物失所，便是吾仁有未盡處。"

unifying *ren* that we can create an ideal world, where humans and their moral aims are in harmony with all things in the universe.

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論王陽明“一體之仁”的仁學思想

吳震

中文摘要

王陽明逝世前二三年開始竭力強調“萬物一體”論，然而人們却往往忽略該命題的全稱“天地萬物一體之仁”的“仁”字。其實，“一體之仁”是陽明學重構萬物一體論的核心觀念、本體依據。以一體之仁為根本旨趣的萬物一體論既不同于先秦以來傳統的萬物一體論，也有別于程顥的由“識仁”而進至“渾然與物同體”的仁者境界說，而是新形態的以仁為本的“仁學一體論”。陽明學萬物一體論既是一項本體論論述，也是工夫論命題，更反映了“天下主義”的人文精神。陽明認為由一體之仁的信念出發，有望實現“天地萬物本吾一體者”的和諧共存的理想世界。

關鍵詞：王陽明，一體之仁，萬物一體，仁學一體論，天下主義