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Learning to be Human: *Ren* 仁, Modernity, and the Philosophers of China's Hundred Days' Reform

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Learning to be Human: *Ren* 仁, Modernity,

and the Philosophers of China's Hundred Days' Reform

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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It is difficult to adequately acknowledge all the people that participated in the making of this dissertation. The contributions are as unique to each person as they are numerous, and they each in their own way constitute a condition for its possibility. I cannot, therefore, thank all those who deserve it, and I wish to express my gratitude to those whom in my failings as a human will have failed to mention here.

If I were to start by returning to the beginning, I would have to thank my mother and my father, who through their persistent support have both allowed and encouraged me to continue on a career which many people would have seen as self-indulgent folly. Their support, importantly, lead me to tutelage of Clive Thirkill. It was he who taught me as a struggling middle school student the history of ideas. He inspired me with Homer's classics, fascinated me with the quiet, almost rhythmic equanimity with which Aristotle seemed to untangle life's most perplexing questions, shocked me with the biting logic of Hume's skepticism, and seduced me with the beguiling dance of Nietzsche's rhetoric. Because of him I decided at an early age that I wanted to become a philosopher. Most importantly, it was he who taught me how to write at a time when I thought such a thing was beyond my abilities.

More recent contributions are, of course, nonetheless equally important. I thank the Philosophy Department of the University of South Florida, and its remarkable array of creative thinkers equally dedicated to their students as they are to breaking the boundaries of philosophical inquiry. It is respectable enough that they include non-western thought among their courses, and that they were open to a student unsure of where to place himself in the various

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Abstract

In a period of deep political division, insurrection, opium addiction, foreign conflicts, and economic distress, three intellectuals, Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865-1898), Kang Youwei 康有爲 (1858-1927), and Liang Qichao 梁啓超 (1873-1929), developed philosophical systems to identify the source of China's problems and to devise solutions. With these philosophical theories, they enacted a political movement to reform Chinese government and society known as the "Hundred Days' Reform" (*wuxubianfa* 戊戌變法) of 1898. While scholars like Chang Hao, Wing Sit-chan, and Joseph R. Levenson have all written on all or some of these reformers, they have done so largely from the perspective of Chinese intellectual history. Yet, very few philosophers have rigorously analyzed the theories of this period and tried to bring them into conversation with Western thought. Virtually none have examined the various ways these philosophers discussed the core Confucian concept of *ren* 仁 (humanity/humaneness) while developing their theories.

This dissertation addresses this gap in research by examining the role this traditional concept played in the modernizing discourses of the three major philosophers of China's pivotal Hundred Days' Reform. The concept is indispensable to understanding Confucian philosophy of the self along with the concomitant projects of self-cultivation, ethical governance, and learning. Tracing the history of this important concept allows us to study how philosophical discourse about selfhood and humanity changed during this formative period. This understanding, in turn,

provides us with a more global picture of modern philosophy and problematizes essentializing oppositions such as East/West, traditional/modern, and religious/secular.

Chapter One begins with a general note on the methodology of this project. I argue that we ought to avoid assuming that the important features of modernity and modern selfhood in the West are essential to modernity itself and therefore must be found in the works of the Hundred Days Reformers. Chapter Two discusses the important features of *ren* in Classical Confucianism and explains that the Confucian *dao* 道 ("way" or "guiding discourse") was seen as an authoritative *dao* for cultivating this quality. Chapter Three examines how Tan Sitong engages with the issue of how to cultivate *ren* in a world of multiple cultural *dao* in his groundbreaking text *Renxue* 仁學, or *An Exposition of Ren*. Chapter Four explores the concept of *ren* in the major works of the other two reformers. I contrast Kang Youwei's cosmopolitan vision of modernity with that of Tan Sitong and explain Liang Qichao's criticism of *ren* in his text the *Xinmin Shuo* 新民說 (*On the New Citizen*). Chapter Five continues with the analysis of these three thinkers' views on the modern self-cultivation of *ren* by looking at how they treat the topic of women's liberation. After having explored the differences between the emergence of modern philosophy of the self in China and the West, the final chapter explores what makes them both "modern" by utilizing Foucault's influential reflections on the nature of modernity.

I conclude by saying that the West must resituate its own history of philosophy within a global context by exploring the way modernity has manifested in other philosophical traditions. I demonstrate how the philosophies of these three important thinkers can help us toward a broader understanding of the nature of modern philosophy in a global context. By philosophizing across cultures, the Hundred Days' Reformers sought to move us toward, however imperfectly, a more global discourse on the task of learning to be human.

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Introduction:
Philosophical Modernity in China and the Hundred Days' Reform

In a period of deep political division, insurrection, opium addiction, foreign conflicts, and economic distress, three intellectuals, Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865-1898), Kang Youwei 康有爲 (1858-1927), and Liang Qichao 梁啓超 (1873-1929), developed philosophical systems to identify the source of China's problems and to devise solutions. With these philosophical theories, they enacted a political movement to reform Chinese government and society known as the "Hundred Days' Reform" (*wuxubianfa* 戊戌變法) of 1898. Although the reform movement was cut short by a coup, resulting in the execution of Tan and the exile of Kang and Liang, it marked a turning point in Chinese history. For the first time, these philosophers ventured to develop new philosophical perspectives with ideas from the West. They took the first steps toward transforming China from an empire into a modern nation-state and set the paradigm of modern philosophical discourse in China in the 20th century. Their ideas continued to inspire generations of revolutionary-minded thinkers including Mao Zedong.

While there has been a steady increase in high-quality, English-language scholarship illuminating the value of traditional Chinese philosophy, very few philosophers have rigorously analyzed the theories that emerged during this initial period of modernization and reform in China. Virtually none have examined the striking way these philosophers utilized the core Confucian concept of *ren* 仁 (humanity/humaneness) while developing their theories. Just as European modernity can hardly be appreciated without understanding the philosophical issues of

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the 17th and 18th centuries, so Chinese modernity cannot be fully understood without examining these early, seminal conversations.

This dissertation addresses this gap in research by examining the crucial role this traditional concept *ren* played in the modernizing discourses of the three major philosophers of China's pivotal Hundred Days' Reform. *Ren* is central to Confucian thought and arguably the core concern of the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) and the rest of the *Four Books* (*Sishu* 四書) of Confucian classics. It is indispensable to understanding Confucian philosophy of the self along with the concomitant projects of self-cultivation, ethical governance, and learning. As is often noted, the word is a homophone with the word for "human" and the character is formed by combining the characters for "human" (*ren* 人) and "two" (*er* 二). The concept emphasizes human social relations as a defining feature of selfhood and posits human selfhood as an *activity*, a moral project of self-cultivation.[1] Tracing the history of this important concept allows us to study how philosophical discourse about selfhood and humanity changed during this formative period.[2] This study aims to show that by focusing on their discussions of *ren*, we are better able to grasp their unique philosophical contributions to the concept of modernity. This understanding, in turn, provides us with a more global picture of modern philosophy and problematizes essentializing oppositions such as East/West, traditional/modern, and religious/secular.

Chapter One begins with a general note on the methodology of this project. It draws upon recent comparative research on classical Chinese thought and describes how the subsequent

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[1] Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*: *A Vocabulary* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2012), 87. This understanding of *ren* will be developed further in the coming chapters.

[2] The question of what makes a discourse "philosophical" is of course an important question that itself involves a level of comparative reflection on the basic assumptions about philosophy and knowledge in the West. This issue, therefore, comprises a major concern of Chapter One.

chapters will apply these insights to the thought of the Hundred Days' Reformers. I argue that these thinkers have been undervalued in West because of certain biases and difficulties in interpreting their work. These difficulties can be overcome if we avoid assuming that the important features of modernity and modern selfhood in the West are essential to modernity itself and therefore must be found in the works of the Hundred Days Reformers. Instead, when we understand the Confucian philosophy of *ren*, we can make better sense of their philosophical concerns. I argue that we must also refrain from assuming simple equivalences when translating philosophical terminology between Chinese and English, and instead be sensitive to how the use of certain modern Western terms changed when they were taken up by Chinese thinkers.

Chapter Two begins by explaining the important features of *ren* and the related concepts of self-cultivation and embodiment in Confucian philosophy of the self. I outline the history of the term *ren*, from its pre-Confucian usage to its appropriation by Confucian thinkers in the classical period, while contrasting it with certain thematic tendencies in Western philosophy of the self. I propose that the classical concept of *ren* shares many affinities to the classical Greek concept of *kalokagathia* (beauty and goodness). Whereas Socrates comes to understand self-cultivation in terms of the soul's quest for knowledge *of* the good and the beautiful, Confucius understands self-cultivation in terms of the cultivation of beautiful and good embodied performances according to the standards of a shared cultural tradition. I thus emphasize the relational understanding of the self within Confucian philosophy and the importance of social roles and rituals for its articulation and development. I also explain the concept of a *dao* ("way," "method," or "guiding discourse") and how the Chinese textual and historical tradition was perceived as providing an authoritative *dao* for the cultivation of *ren*. The problem that faced

Confucian thinkers was how this *dao* could be consistently followed and put into practice in a cultural system.

After laying out some distinctive features of the Confucian philosophy of *ren*, I will show how the crisis that unfolded at the end of the 19th century in China was distinct from the crisis that early modern thinkers faced in the West. I describe this crisis in terms of a disruptive transformation from the discursive environment of the *tianxiaguan* 天下觀 (the metaphysical view of the world with China as its political and cultural center), to that of the *shijieguan* 世界觀 (the view of the globe as a distribution of sovereign territories across geographical space). I argue that the problem that these thinkers faced was how to reconceive the project of self-cultivation in a new globalized space that included a multiplicity of cultural *dao* aside from the one transmitted from Chinese antiquity.

Chapter Three examines how Tan Sitong engages with this issue in his groundbreaking text *Renxue* 仁學, or *An Exposition of Ren*. He presents three different cultural systems – the Christian/scientific, the Buddhist, and the Confucian – all of which, he proposes, are viable candidates for cultivating *ren*. Tan looks for the principle that underlies all cultural systems and determines whether a system becomes enduring and influential. He concludes that this principle is *tong* 通 ("continuity"). All cultural systems are aimed at facilitating *tong*. More enduring and influential cultural systems are those that do so more effectively. However, Tan believes no *dao* is constant and that facilitating *tong* requires constant change within the cultural system. The success of the West, he contends, is due to the Westerners' love of what is new, their openness to trade and exchange with other cultures, and their willingness to change. For Tan, modern self-cultivation involves cosmopolitan interconnection, a constant critique of conventional identities, and an openness to other cultures.

Chapter Four explores the concept of *ren* in the major works of the other two reformers. Here, I claim that Kang Youwei's philosophy of *ren* shares many affinities to Tan's. Both philosophers call for greater interconnection between cultures and a more cosmopolitan world order. However, Kang Youwei follows Mencius' understanding of *ren* as "the heart that cannot bear the suffering of others," and this leads him to a different diagnosis of the world's problems. His philosophy introduces a strong notion of linear progressive time where he links the progress of *ren* to the history of *tong* 同 ("unity," "cooperation"). He asserts that growing cooperation amongst humanity will eventually help us establish a global consensus on principles for a constant *dao*. Following this *dao* will eventually give rise to a global cultural system that can reliably and consistently cultivate *ren* and relieve the suffering caused by divisions and inequality. In his *Datong Shu* 大同書, or the *Book of the Great Unity*, he lays out a detailed program for bringing about the future *ren* utopia, which will be based on these principles. However, I argue that by attempting to articulate, once and for all, a final human *dao* that can consistently cultivate *ren*, he occasionally creates new versions of the same rigid divisions and inequalities he seeks to overcome.

Liang Qichao, by contrast, departs from both Kang and Tan by rejecting global unity as the goal of modernity. In his work, *Xinmin Shuo* 新民說 (*On the New Citizen*), he instead asserts that the principle that has made the West successful is its focus on another traditional concept, *yi* 義 ("moral duty"), which is connected to the concept of the "individual" (*wo* 我). However, I argue that he should not be read as rejecting the traditional program of self-cultivation altogether in favor of Western individualism. First, his understanding of *yi* is much closer to a more traditional understanding of *ren*, which entails "differentiated love" rather than a "universal love." Liang reasons that in order to survive, China must put the nation and its citizens first

before a concern for world unity. Second, I argue that what Liang finds inspiring about Western culture is not its commitment to individualism but what he sees as its communitarian spirit expressed in its concept of the citizen.

Chapter Five continues with the analysis of these three thinkers' views on the modern self-cultivation of *ren* by looking at how they treat the topic of women's liberation. This aspect of their thought is often overlooked even though all three are consistent in their belief that gender inequality was one of the central reasons for China's problems. I further explore the relationship between *ren*, embodiment, and gender in the Confucian tradition and show why this tradition required these three thinkers to address the topic of women in their modernization of self-cultivation. The unique understanding of gender, I contend, led these thinkers to emphasize the problem of structural and systemic sexism and helped motivate their broader criticisms of the traditional family and hierarchical social roles.

After having explored the differences between the emergence of modern philosophy of the self in China and the West, the final chapter explores what they have in common that makes them modern. I accomplish this by utilizing Foucault's influential reflections on the nature of modernity in "What is Enlightenment?" and *The Order of Things*. I argue that the philosophers of the Hundred Days' also conceived of modernity as an exploration of human selfhood, but not primarily in terms of a science of man (as Foucault describes in *The Order of Things*). Rather, Tan Sitong describes modernity as a love of what is new combined with a process of constant "daily renewal." I compare this to Foucault's later characterization of modernity in "What is Enlightenment" as a "heroization of the present" in which modern humans reflect on the history of their present in an effort to transgress its limits. Chinese intellectuals, however, contribute a comparative dimension to Foucault's account since they insist that this process requires the

exploration of other cultures, not just a reflection on one's own tradition. Meanwhile, Kang Youwei's attempt to describe a final, ideal cultural system for self-cultivation represents some of the dangers of modernity that Foucault warns us about, while Liang Qichao's observations on the character of the West prompt us to reflect anew on the West's own understanding of its philosophical history.

I conclude that since Foucault's characterization of modernity focuses exclusively on the West, it is incomplete. Instead, the West must resituate its own history of philosophy within a global context by exploring the way modernity has manifested in other philosophical traditions. In the end, I aim to demonstrate how the philosophies of these three important thinkers can help us toward a broader understanding of the nature of modern philosophy in a global context. By philosophizing across cultures, the Hundred Days' Reformers sought to move us toward, however imperfectly, a more global discourse on the task of learning to be human. In our own age of global crises like global warming, Sino-American tension, and a global pandemic, I hope that the value of building a more global understanding of our modern condition will be evident, and that the present work, in however small a way, will be conducive toward that end.

Chapter One:
Philosophizing in Translation – A Preparatory Note on Methodology

"One of my most important methods is to imagine a historical development for our ideas different from what actually occurred. If we do that the problem shows us a quite new side."[3]

- Ludwig Wittgenstein

The Chinese word for "philosophy," *zhexue* 哲學 (literally "wisdom studies"), is a modern term developed to translate the Western concept. The presence of this neologism signals a change in how the Chinese came to perceive their own intellectual history. Its emergence coincided with broader structural changes in pedagogy and knowledge production such as the formation of universities and academic journals. The very term "*zhexue,*" therefore, makes its own kind of philosophical claim about the ordering of knowledge. It understands certain theoretical works in the Western and Chinese traditions as engaging in a similar enterprise despite potentially vast separations in time, space, and subject matter. Therefore, in any comparative study it is important to keep in mind that by translating we are engaging in a kind of philosophical practice. Translating philosophical ideas involves a kind of philosophizing in translation, that is, the making of philosophical claims while asserting equivalences between words in different languages. Comparative philosophy has the double challenge of interpreting the philosophical discourses of other traditions while simultaneously critically reflecting on the assumptions of one's native tradition.

Luckily, there is a good deal of precedent from which we can draw guidance. For much of history, non-Western philosophy was marginalized, if not completely ignored in the Western

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[3] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 45.

academy as insufficiently rigorous, if it was considered philosophical at all. Chinese philosophy has sometimes been characterized as either impenetrable mysticism or empty traditionalism. Even as late as 1989, the influential philosopher and art critic, Arthur Danto, proclaimed that "philosophy arose only twice in human civilization, once in Greece and once in India."[4] This implies that, strictly speaking, philosophy exists in China only as a foreign import, first in the form of Buddhism from India in the 1st century C.E. and later from Europe in the form of philosophical modernity. Danto's justification is that only these two traditions noticed and took seriously the difference between reality and appearance. They sought to identify what was universal and constant behind the illusory world of change. Similar perspectives led many thinkers in the West to consider the formal rules of logic, universal and necessary ideas, the existence of things called "minds" that can access these ideas, and other familiar features of Indo-European philosophy as the origins of anything discernible as philosophical inquiry.

Chad Hansen, in his *Language and Logic in Ancient China* and later in *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, offers an insightful approach for challenging this view. He claims that cultures within the Indo-European language family understandably tended to adopt similar theoretical assumptions about things like meaning, language, and the minds that understand them.[5] In particular, Western theories tended to view language as primarily descriptive in its function. Words refer to states of affairs in the external world. We learn language by a process more or less similar to the one St. Augustine famously describes in his *Confessions*.[6] It is a process in which verbalized sounds are associated with objects in the world through acts of

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[4] Arthur C. Danto, *Connections to the World*: *The Basic Concepts of Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 14.
[5] Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*: *A Philosophical Interpretation*, 1. iss. as pbk., [Nachdr.] (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 16.
[6] Augustine, *Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.8.13.

ostension. Over time, through various mechanism like Plato's Form of the Good[7] or Augustine's

"divine illumination,"[8] the mind can pick out those features that are essential to all members of a

set of objects and arrive at an adequate idea of the set.

More recently, this picture of language learning has been criticized as an overly simplistic

and somewhat mystical one, most famously by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*.[9]

Hansen draws upon Wittgenstein's skepticism toward this picture of language learning to

problematize dominant Western theories of meaning. He writes that,

> Popular Western accounts of language mythologize the process of language
> learning. We hide the process in the obscure and inaccessible realm of the private,
> inner mind. We postulate that a prelinguistic rational process creates invisible,
> intangible, inaccessible, obscure, and somewhat mysterious mental objects. We call
> these ideas or concepts. And then, with a logic that would delight Nietzsche, we
> insist that these mysterious, unseen things are the most immediate, obvious, and
> basic objects of knowledge.[10]

Hansen asserts that these Western accounts arose out of various assumption about language tied

up with common features of Indo-European languages, such as assumptions about the primacy of

spoken language over written language. However, these assumptions should not be taken as

necessary and universal and were not shared by Classical Chinese thinkers. Differences in the

nature of the Chinese language, such as the ideographic nature of its writing system, gave rise to

different background assumptions about how language works and is learned. For instance, he

writes that, "Chinese philosophers would not have thought that postulating mental pictures could

explain the meaning of language. Their language was pictures. These pictures were conventional

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[7] See especially, Plato, "Republic," in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson
(Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 517b.
[8] "But as for all those things which we "understand," it is not the outward sound of the speaker's words that we
consult, but the truth which presides over the mind itself from within, though we may have been led to consult it
because of the words. Now He who is consulted and who is said to "dwell in the inner man," He it is who teaches us,
namely, Christ." Augustine, "The Teacher," in *The Teacher, the Free Choice of the Will, and Grace and Free Will*
(Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 51.
[9] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §1.
[10] Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, 75.

and public, conveyed and learned as civilization's adornment. The language of thought was public, shared and acquired through history."[11] By characterizing the written Chinese language as "pictures," Hanson does not mean to suggest that the characters are pictographs. Most of them are not. He only means to say that the Chinese written language was not (and is in many ways still is not) understood as a system for visually representing sounds. The characters more often represent sets of concepts to which a name (*ming* 名) is attached. Thus verbal language is often conceived of as referring to these public "pictures." This would have discouraged thinkers from explaining the meaning of words by claiming they refer to mental pictures that somehow inhere in objects or structure them from a distance. It also led early Chinese thinkers to think of language as a socially acquired behavior rather than something learned privately "in the mind."

Hansen contends that these and many other differences in background assumptions gave rise to distinct tendencies in the two philosophical traditions. He argues that one of these tendencies in the Indo-European tradition was an understanding of human selfhood that emphasized the individual mind and its cognitive faculties. He summarizes this tendency in the following way,

> The common Indo-European theory of mind centered on the cognitive faculty. The model of knowing was representing accurately through mental contents – true beliefs. The mental items arrange themselves into beliefs – mental compositions or sentences of *mentalese*… these inner pictures of a world generate, in Buddhism as in England, a radical phenomenological skepticism about the external world. The lever of philosophical discourse pries against the fulcrum of a contrast between an inner, private subjectivity and an outer, abstract, objective, transcendental reality. Thus Indian thought and Greek and Western thought share a focus on metaphysics and epistemology.[12]

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[11] Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, Ibid.
[12] Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, 17.

Hansen believes the skeptical problems generated by the private mind and its relationship to the external world form some of the most persistent questions of Indo-European philosophy. From this perspective arose familiar dualistic structures like the divisions between appearance and reality, reason and emotion, subject and object, and belief and desire. We can argue then that some philosophers simply took these tendencies prevalent in the West to be definitive of philosophy itself. Yet, this conclusion is unwarranted. There is no reason to assume that the background assumptions of speakers of Indo-European languages are a more correct or rigorous way of understanding the nature of meaning. It is possible for philosophical inquiry to have evolved along different lines given a different set of assumptions.

Hansen suggests that traditional Chinese philosophy began instead with a concern with rules for social behavior and how to follow them consistently. Philosophical debates targeted the question of which guide for action, which *dao* 道 ("way" or "guiding discourse"), can provide a consistently reliable guide for all our behaviors including language. *Dao* can be attributed to a great variety of things. One can talk about nature's *dao* or the *dao* of Confucius (i.e. his teachings). Individuals or groups of individuals can have a *dao*, or there may be *dao* associated with a certain activity. In any case, a *dao* is always prescriptive, not descriptive. It conveys an instruction set for going about one's activities. This includes the way to divide up the world in language (often referred to as "naming," *ming* 名). For instance, classical Confucian thinkers were concerned with making sure that the *dao* of the ancients transmitted by Confucius was properly interpreted and put into practice in society. Once put into practice, this *dao* effectively organized an entire cultural system for society.[13]

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[13] By "cultural system," I mean the system of ritual customs of a community including its language, identities, and prescribed behaviors, particularly with regard to the social, political, and economic organizations to which they give

All this contributes to some of the main differences between philosophy of the self in what I refer to as the Confucian and Socratic paradigms. The Chinese and Western traditions were not defined by these paradigms nor do these paradigms determined the way all and every member of these traditions thought. Rather, I mean to describe here a dominant set of assumptions, positions, and problems within these traditions which philosophers often either took up or responded to in their critiques. As Hansen writes, "Western philosophy absorbed Socrates' and Plato's distrust of conventional wisdom, that is, hearsay. That sent Western thought on an endless quest for perfectly universal principles."[14] This skepticism toward convention and hearsay gave rise to a need to ground customs and beliefs upon rational foundations. In particular, it was assumed that our terms need rational justification to determine their correct usage (definitions). This eventually leads to a tendency within Western thought to understand the self in terms of a knowing mind/soul, which tries through various means to form true sentential beliefs about the world. Although this characterization does not capture all philosophical theories of selfhood in the tradition(s) designated as "Western." The major canonical figures of European thought tend to take up some version of this model, and those that do not, often do so in reaction to this model's dominance. Few philosophers in this tradition develop theories of selfhood in complete independence from this paradigm. Since the philosophical process toward these general features of selfhood begins with Socrates, I refer to the paradigm as Socratic. This then allows us to contrast this tradition with the Chinese philosophical tradition, which according to Hansen, "seems to have started instead embroiled in the Wittgensteinian challenge: Even given my acceptance of [a] traditional way of acting, how

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rise. This concept will be explained further in coming chapters, where I will argue that modern thinkers were interested in what *dao* had contributed to the perceived strength of the Western cultural system.

[14] Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, 93.

shall I know if I have followed it correctly?"[15] Therefore, whereas epistemic skepticism tended to dominate philosophical discourse in the West, "Chinese skeptics draw on cultural relativism for their doubts instead of inner, private subjectivity."[16]

The Socratic Paradigm of selfhood, which posits the self as a knowing mind/soul searching for the universal foundations of knowledge, finds little purchase in early Chinese thought. If we try to read these Western approaches into our translations of Chinese texts, we have trouble making sense of the philosophical debates in which they are engaging. This insight is shared by many important comparative philosophers seeking to understand Confucian philosophy. Herbert Fingarette's seminal 1972 work *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* was one of the first attempts to employ this approach. Fingarette draws on contemporary developments in Western philosophy in his interpretation of Confucian thought. He argues that Confucius puts forth a concept of human selfhood that is distinct from those traditionally found in either the Buddhist or Western traditions. He observes that Western and Buddhist traditions tended to emphasize the "individual mind, the inner life and reality of the individual,"[17] and argues that just as missionaries read Judeo-Christian religious concepts into Chinese philosophy in previous generations, translators and commenters have read this "individualistic and subjectivistic view"[18] into Confucian texts. The result in both cases was that Chinese philosophy was construed as a kind of proto-Christianity or proto-philosophy respectively – a respectable early attempt at the basic features of philosophy, but one that ultimately failed to achieve the qualities required to be considered philosophical.

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[15] Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, Ibid.
[16] Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, 40.
[17] Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius*: *The Secular as Sacred* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Association, Pleasant Hills Community Church, 2004), ix.
[18] Fingarette, *Confucius*, viii.

As Roger Ames describes throughout his many works on Chinese thought, the self we find in the Confucian tradition is not typically an individual, private consciousness that ontologically precedes the roles and relations it takes up in society.[19] He argues that Confucian philosophy begins to make sense when we understand the human self as a deeply social, ritual being in which social conventions are considered constitutive of true selfhood, not barriers to it. He writes that, "in considering personal identity from a Confucian perspective, we must appreciate fully the way in which both our somaticity and our complex manifold of relations with others enable us to achieve and sustain our coherence as a person."[20] He reads the concept of *ren,* the central virtue of Confucian ethics, as meaning "being consummate in one's conduct," and it is achieved by perfecting our roles and relations through the mastering of their associated ritualistic performances. In other words, to *behave* humanely is to be human (*ren zhe ren ye* 仁者 人也).[21] As will be argued later, the emphasis on somaticity, or embodiment, is crucial for our understanding of some of the basic features of the Confucian paradigm of selfhood. Most of all, it helps explain the Confucian ethical preoccupation with ritual (*li* 禮) rather than abstract ethical principles. Ames writes that, "we might correlate "body" (*ti* 體) and its cognate character "achieved propriety in one's roles and relations" (*li* 禮) by arguing that they express two ways of looking at the same phenomenon: That is, they reference "a living body" and "embodied living" respectively."[22] The body and its socially conditioned activities constitute selfhood, rather than the private, immaterial mind. Both Fingarette and Ames argue that once we understand these things, we can begin to understand Confucian thought not as a kind of primitive Western

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[19] Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 96.
[20] Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 105.
[21] Confucius, *Zhongyong* 中庸, 20.
[22] Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 109.

philosophy but as a sophisticated philosophical approach that has something to contribute to philosophical considerations in the West.

Of course, only if we have an expanded view of what makes a discourse philosophical can we then recognize these different traditions as both being worthy of the name "philosophy." For this, developments in what Ames refers to as the "self-critical phase of the Western philosophical narrative"[23] in the 20th century have been crucial. For example, Foucault's genealogical analyses of Western intellectual history have helped philosophers understand how certain proposition can be accepted as truth in one period only to suddenly be rejected for reasons that are not always obvious. Wittgenstein's insights on language make us realize the variety of ways words get their meaning, the relationship of meaning to different forms of life, and the limitations of the philosophical quest for certainty as traditionally understood. These challenges to traditional ways of thinking have encouraged philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists to take greater care in understanding and evaluating foreign cultural practices. They have shed light on the ways language, history, and culture can influence the practice of philosophy. As a result, they have helped expand our notion of philosophical discourse and open us up to contributions from previously overlooked sources. The "Arthur Dantos" of the world notwithstanding, Western scholars have increasingly argued for treating Chinese thought as a serious philosophical tradition. The result is that it is increasingly clear that Western perspectives can no longer lay exclusive claim to philosophical debates.

However, much of the research done on Chinese perspectives on selfhood has focused on the classical period. Far less has been done on modern developments and transformations. The reason, I argue, is in part a lingering echo of the prejudice Danto articulated with a minor

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[23] Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 14.

modification: *modern* philosophy, strictly speaking, has its origins in the West. It only exists in China as a Western import. When Chinese intellectuals did begin to adopt the modern philosophical paradigm, their attempts were either clumsy approximations or naïve misunderstandings. Chinese thought became truly modern only when it sufficiently rejected traditional discourse and adopted certain essential features of Western modernity. It failed to modernize insofar as these traditional discourses persisted or failed to adequately articulate themselves within the rules of Western discourse.

I argue that just as with philosophy in general, the problems that characterize modern philosophy in the West naturally reflect the dominant concerns of the Western tradition. Given the differences in background assumptions between the Western and Chinese traditions, it would be unreasonable to assume without further evidence that the topics and strategies adopted by modern Chinese thinkers would be identical to those adopted in the West. A more fruitful interpretive approach would be to try to identify the concerns that likely informed the positions of these philosophers, given the context of their own philosophical tradition and the problems they faced at that time. To remedy this problem, the following section will introduce the period of the Hundred Days' Reform and outline some of the difficulties inherent in interpreting its thinkers. I will then propose solutions to these difficulties based on the strategies of these contemporary comparative thinkers described here. The final section will outline some of the culturally and historically contingent elements of Western modernity. This will then open up the possibility that the features of Western modernity do not represent the necessary features of modernity itself and clear the space for a discussion of modern philosophy in China.

1. The Hundred Days' Reform and the Problem of Translating Modern Philosophy

Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Tan Sitong were the first generation of philosophical reformers during an important transitional period in Chinese history. China's defeat at the hands of its "barbarian" neighbors in the Sino-Japanese war of 1895 was a national shock. The resulting Treaty of Shimonoseki forced the Qing Empire to cede large portions of its territory. The combined effect of these and other traumatic events was a crisis of identity that inspired these intellectuals to fundamentally rethink the traditional worldview and revisit old ideas in novel ways. Their philosophical views and social activism eventually culminated in the ill-fated Hundred Days' Reform of 1898, which sought to enlist the Guanxu Emperor (reigned 1875 - 1908) to enact sweeping reforms to governmental and societal structure. Yet, as the intellectual historian of modern China, Peter Zarrow, writes, "the 'hundred days' shook China's political institutions to the core, but less because of the proposed reforms themselves than the new philosophy that lay behind them."[24] These thinkers articulated new theories of politics and history while drawing from a wide range of textual traditions. Despite the reform's failure, Liang and Kang's subsequent exile, and Tan's execution, their philosophical thought has been highly influential for future generations of intellectuals and political activist.

While there is growing interest in modern Chinese philosophy, research tends to focus on the later New Confucians of the 20th century who are often presented as offering alternatives to the universalizing program of Western liberal modernity.[25] The intellectuals of the Hundred

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[24] Peter Gue Zarrow, *After Empire*: *The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885-1924* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012), 24.

[25] For instance, see Jana S. Rošker, *The Rebirth of the Moral Self: The Second Generation of Modern Confucians and the Modernization Discourses*. Hong Kong: CUHK Press, 2016. Here, Rošker mentions the Hundred Days only briefly. The reformers (of whom only Kang and Liang are mentioned) are portrayed as engaging in the first failed attempt at modernization. She focuses instead on later figures like Tang Junyi 唐君毅 and Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 who receive much more attention in philosophical scholarship.

Days' Reform are often the subjects of studies by historians and sinologist, but the philosophical value of their works is generally overlooked by philosophers in the West. Translations of their works into English are few and often fragmentary. Studies on Tan's philosophy are rare even though his treatise on the concept of *ren* is widely regarded as the first work in China to attempt a systematic synthesis of Western and Chinese philosophy. In truth, these thinkers are a great object study for comparative philosophical research. They were the first generation to have received a traditional Confucian education within the imperial examination system while at the same time taking Western learning as a serious challenge to that tradition.

A major barrier to the study of their work is that there seems to be a tacit assumption that the thinkers of the Hundred Days' Reform are philosophically unremarkable even if they are historically important for China. Indeed, the influential sinologist and intellectual historian, Joseph R. Levenson, explicitly characterizes the intellectuals of the late Qing Dynasty in this way in his widely read *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*. He describes these thinkers as lacking agency, merely responding to the impact of Western ideas rather than engaging with or developing them in novel ways. In his opinion, their reactions to these ideas certainly produced works that are of great historical significance for the development of modern China, but they ultimately lacked the power to produce works that had universal significance.[26] To paraphrase his words, anyone interested in modern Chinese history can profit from a study of these philosophers; anyone interested in philosophy in general need not give them another glance.[27]

This unspoken consensus emerges as a result of a variety of interpretive difficulties in reading the thought of this period. First, the complicated and sometime idiosyncratic process of

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[26] Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate,* 3 vols. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), xvi.
[27] Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, ibid.

translation between multiple languages at this time often produced awkward neologisms or unfamiliar uses of Western terms. This problem is then compounded by the fact that, having been trained in the traditional Chinese canon and working with a limited supply of often fragmentary and randomly selected Western sources, their work seems to fit nicely in neither tradition. Cultural expectations about what makes a discourse modern or sufficiently philosophical are confounded by this ambiguity. As a result, questions of the continuity or discontinuity of their thought within Chinese intellectual history often supersede questions about what contributions, if any, these philosophers make to modern thought more generally.

We can challenge this position by showing that there is at least one plausible interpretation of their theories that renders their insights to be of significance to philosophy in the West. To do this, we must remember that Tan, Kang, and Liang all were either working with translations or translating works themselves, often for the very first time. In this way, they were all engaged in philosophizing in translation. They make use of concepts from both the West and China as they adapted to changes in the world around them. The process of translating new technical terminology from foreign languages produced subtle yet important mutations in meaning as they shifted from one cultural-linguistic environment to another. English speaking scholars must then face the challenge of rendering their works back into Western languages while at the same time capturing these minute shifts in meaning. Therefore, understanding their philosophizing in translation requires a philosophy *of* translation.

Lydia Liu's influential work, *Translingual Practice*, explores many of the philosophical issues concerning language and translation in this period. She writes, "strictly speaking, comparative scholarship that aims to *cross* cultures can do nothing but translate. As a trope of epistemological crossing, translation always says one thing in terms of another, although it must

pretend to speak the truth for the sake of fidelity (or sanity, to be more exact)."[28] As a result,

when we read the thinkers of the Hundred Days we must be careful not to rush to conclusions

about apparent equivalences asserted in translations. We must keep in mind that these thinkers

were in a constant process of recasting ideas in terms of others for the purpose of dealing with

some specific problem or crisis they perceived. To further complicate things, Liu details the

baroque processes some terms underwent as they were exported from China to Japan only to be

reimported into Chinese with new influences from Western thought.[29] Additionally, translating

highly technical terms from Western discourse into Chinese involved transliterating terms into

the Chinese writing system. This required many different, sometimes simultaneous, attempts

over several generations.

All this naturally causes great difficulty when attempting to discuss these texts in English.

Words like *zizhu* 自主, *quanli* 權利, and *gongli* 公理, which can be translated as "autonomy,"

"rights," and "universal principles," respectively, certainly strike the English reader as familiar

topics of philosophical discourse. Yet, the way these thinkers use these concepts often runs

counter to our normal intuitions about their meanings. The result is a chimera of the familiar and

foreign that seems to fit our expectations about neither "Chinese" nor "Western" philosophy. We

do not, for instance, see the strategy of radical doubt employed as a method to establish universal

principles in Kang Youwei. Nor do we see autonomy defined as the ability to transcend

inclinations and formulate moral principles independently of practical ends in Tan Sitong. Rights

are not endowed by a creator and preserved without regard to an envisioned social good in Liang

Qichao. Instead, Kang Youwei sees *gongli* as established by a consensus, one that will allow us

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[28] Lydia He Liu, *Translingual Practice*: *Literature, National Culture and Translated Modernity - China, 1900-1937* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 1.
[29] Liu, *Translingual practice,* 32-40.

to formulate principles for just global governance. Tan Sitong contends that freedom is achieved mutually through friendship and mutual critique. This mutual critique pushes us to always go beyond our current limitations and achieve freedom through constant change. Liang Qichao sees rights as established by individuals fighting for recognition by the state and are the means by which citizens collectively establish strong societies. These points are missed if we forget the real differences between the background assumptions of these two traditions.

To deal with these difficulties, I take theories of selfhood and the different categories that are used to articulate the self (such as gender, citizenship, etc.) as situated within the historical and cultural context of a discursive environment, such as a language or a philosophical tradition. These discursive environments include sets of background assumptions and rules for how various terms are used. Therefore, when talking about how these thinkers engage with Western ideas to formulate new understandings of humanity, I avoid assuming that when certain Western ideas are adopted by these thinkers, it is because they realized the inherent truth of their conceptual content. I likewise avoid assuming that they always understand these imported ideas in the same way as Western thinkers. Rather, I will look for what philosophical problems these thinkers face within the terms of their discursive environment and what strategies and conceptual tools they employ to overcome those problems. As Wittgenstein observed, "when language-games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of words change."[30] When concepts are adapted to certain discursive environments they will adapt again when those environments change. The very act of transporting a term like "autonomy" into the discursive environment of Confucian self-cultivation changes the way this word gets used (and therefore changes its meaning). To forget this leads us to the Levensonian impression that these

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[30] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, translated by Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), §65.

thinkers were merely reacting to the impact of new concepts from the West but ultimately failing to understand their full meaning. In short, they end up looking as though they are trying to play a game of chess but don't quite grasp the rules. By focusing on the local crisis that was facing Chinese intellectuals at this time we can gain a better understanding of why these thinkers selected certain Western concepts to understand the problem and how they used them to formulate a solution.

2. Reconstituting the Temporal and Contingent Elements of Western Modernity

To study modern Chinese philosophy, the idea of modernity itself must first be problematized. When extended across cultures the term "modernity" appears to assert a set of features that are shared amongst "modern" cultures in contrast to "traditional" ones. What then do we mean when we use the term "modern" to describe the thought of the philosophers of the Hundred Day's Reform?

In his essay, "Multiple Modernities," S. N. Eisenstadt describes what he calls the classical theory of modernity. This theory views modernity as a societal phenomenon exported from the West to other parts of the world.[31] In this view, modernity is broadly understood as a process of substituting tradition, feudalism, and religion with rationality, global capitalism, and science. Within the context of philosophy, a similar view suggests that Chinese thinkers began to modernize as they adopted the kind of philosophical commitments that we in the West recognize as being associated with such a transition. This theory encourages research on the thinkers of the Hundred Days' Reform to take the form of what I call "influence studies." These studies aim to identify and itemize sources within the Chinese or non-Chinese traditions that influenced their

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[31] S. N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000), 2.

thought. The goal of this technique is to situate these philosophies within the transition to modernity by highlighting their apparent continuity or discontinuity with the Chinese tradition.

However, this contrast of the modern and the traditional appears increasingly arbitrary as the classical theory comes under critique and new theories that offer accounts of a diversity of modernities with complex relationships to their individual traditions are put forward.[32] Foucault, for instance, in his influential writings on modernity historicizes some of the "essential" features of Western thought in a way that reveals their historical and contingent elements. In this way, he challenges the notion that the history of Western thought conveys universal truths about human selfhood and historical development. Therefore, I use his reflections on the history of Western philosophy to engage with these thinkers of another tradition and see what their philosophies of *ren* contribute the understanding of philosophical modernity. Following Liu and other theorists of comparative modernity, my approach in this dissertation will be to view modernity not in terms of these simple substitutions but in terms of a confrontation between competing cultural systems. As I outline above, the problems that preoccupied philosophers working within the dominant paradigms of selfhood in the Chinese and Western philosophical traditions were as different as the strategies that they devised for dealing with them. These paradigms emerged and evolved within cultural-linguistic (discursive) environments to which these concepts and strategies were adapted. As we will see, these paradigms started from very similar positions in terms of their concerns about goodness, nobility, authority, and self-cultivation. However, slight differences in the way Socrates/Plato and Confucius respond to similar problems within their traditions lead those that followed them down divergent paths. Centuries later, the dramatic events of the late 19th century in China caused significant disruptions to the discursive

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[32] Bjorn Wittrock, "One, None, or Many? European Origins and Modernity as Global Condition," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000), 31-32.

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environment within which the Confucian paradigm of selfhood had emerged and gained dominance. However, in this period of modernization we do not see the complete abandonment of the Confucian paradigm for the Socratic nor the replacement of an older paradigm with a newer, unrelated modern one. Nor are traditional concepts simply either replaced or retained. Traditional ideas also often evolve to cope with the changes in their environment.

The standard understanding of philosophical modernity in the West focuses on transformations within the development of the Socratic paradigm of human selfhood. As will be explored in later chapters, the paradigm began with Socrates' emphasis on the human being as a knower who tries to form true beliefs about independent, universal forms, particularly the form of the good. His allegory of the cave envisions this pursuit of knowledge as a quest for emancipation of the mind from the enslavement of ignorance. Later thinkers, particularly in the Christian tradition, come to place greater and greater emphasis on this private mind or soul and its relationship to knowledge of universal and eternal things. The standard, undergraduate text-book narrative of philosophical modernity then typically begins with Descartes and the so-called "discovery" of the subject. This private subject, the *cogito*, has rational thought as its defining feature. Through reason, this private mind can transcend its cultural, temporal, spatial, social, linguistic, and embodied situatedness. These features guarantee the subject's freedom of will through independence from the causal world. They also make it possible to critique each of these temporal and embodied aspects to discover the universal foundations of knowledge that can command the assent of all other rational subjects. This includes knowledge of the good-in-itself (God) and his creation. Thus, the two desired outcomes of Descartes' strategy for finding the

universal foundations of knowledge were to objectively prove the universal validity of the

Christian faith and to establish truth in the sciences.[33]

Later, Kant continues working in this paradigm by resolving some of the epistemic

problems that emerged from Descartes' theories for arriving at universal knowledge

(specifically, the controversy between the rationalists and the empiricists). Again, these

controversies brought about skeptical questions about whether we could arrive at truth in the

sciences. Kant's strategy is to look at universal structures of reasoning and experience within the

rational subject itself. He concludes that we cannot know that our experiences reflect the world

as it truly is in itself, that it, as it would be perceived by God. However, we can arrive at some

kind of knowledge which is universal and can ground our beliefs since there are certain things

that are necessary conditions for the possibility of knowledge. In this way, by drawing the limits

of human knowledge, Kant also shows how it can be possible. As Foucault observes, this heralds

a period of thought in which thinkers try to discover universal truths by examining the subject in

its finitude.[34]

The political expression of this brand of rational subjectivity found its prominent

expression in the tradition of liberal individualism, broadly construed. The individuality of the

rational subject is emphasized in its participation in a society conceived of as a collection of

individuals. The free exercise of individual reason becomes the political foundation of a rational

and enlightened (i.e. good and free) society.[35] Thus, we have secular government separated from

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[33] See for instance Descartes' Letter of Dedication in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*; Rene Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," in *Rene Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondences*, ed. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc, 2000), 97 -102.

[34] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*: *An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Londres: Routledge, 2002), 342.

[35] See for instance, Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective," in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld, Rethinking the Western tradition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 8:19. For a discussion of the relationship between selfhood, liberalism, feminism, and modernity in a comparative context, see Xiao Wei, "The Feminist Concept of the Self and Modernity," *Diogenes* 221 (2009), 118.

any one particular religious or cultural understanding of the good. Rather, the highest good is the

exercise of reason itself. [36] Government's primary function is to protect the autonomy of the

rational individual (called a "citizen") and to promote the free exercise of reason. [37] Liberalism in

its classical formulation appeals to the formal equality of all rational subjects as the basis for

their political equality. Whatever the differences of culture, religion, race, gender, or ability one

can argue for the formal equality of all individuals as rational agents.[38]

The view that modernity replaced traditional thought with a more rational view of the

world ignores the high degree of continuity that exists within this apparent transition between

pre-modern and modern philosophy in Europe. As we can see, Descartes' rational subject

contains many of the basic features of the traditional paradigm of selfhood. Versions of his

cogito argument can be found as far back as St. Augustine,[39] and the idea that rational thought

constitutes the defining feature of human selfhood is almost as old as Western philosophy itself.

The self-as-knower model is retained and even distilled to a finer point than ever seen in

Socrates. Skepticism regarding the possibility of true knowledge continues to motivate

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[36] "For since reason is not sufficiently effective in guiding the will safely in regard to its objects and the satisfaction of all our needs (which it in part itself multiplies), and an implanted natural instinct would have guided us much more certainly to this end… its true vocation must therefore be not to produce volition as a means to some other aim, but rather to produce a *will good in itself*, for which reason was absolutely necessary, since everywhere else nature goes to work purposively in distributing its predispositions. This will may therefore not be the single and entire good, but it must be the highest good, and the condition for all the rest, even for every demand for happiness… for reason, which recognizes its highest practical vocation in the grounding of a good will, is capable in attaining this aim only of a contentment after its own kind, namely from the fulfillment of an end that again only reason determines." Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals,* Rethinking the Western tradition (Yale University Press, 2008), Ak 4:396.

[37] This is one of the major thrusts of Kant's theory of enlightenment. See, Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?," in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld, Rethinking the Western tradition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 8:36-7.

[38] I am by no means suggesting that this is a comprehensive overview of Modern subjectivity in Western philosophy. I only mean to take this up as the most traditional understanding of modernity as it is understood within the Socratic paradigm of selfhood. Throughout the present work, I will attempt to show that this understanding of modernity leads us into confusion about the kind of philosophical projects that arose in China at the end of the 19th century. In the final chapter, I will address a more nuanced approach to the character of modernity offered by Foucault to further answer the question "what is global modernity within the context of philosophy?"

[39] Augustine, *The City of God* (New York, NY.: Penguin Books, 1972), XI.26.

Descartes' philosophical project, and the discovery of the rational foundations of knowledge maintains its close relationship to the acquisition of freedom. Thus, Descartes was not attempting an overthrow of the fundamental, "traditional" commitments of the Socratic paradigm. If anything, he intensifies them. He uses Augustine's version of the *cogito* argument specifically to set up epistemological principles based on a universal experience of subjectivity that could mediate between the warring factions in philosophy and religion of his time. Placing scientific inquiry on the firm foundations of his new algebraic geometry was, in many ways, a return to the principle inscribed above the doors of Plato's Academy in Athens, albeit in a more systematic and radical way.[40]

Moreover, Kant's critical philosophy, his attempt to place knowledge within the boundaries of human finitude and religion within the scope of mere reason, should be seen as a continuation of Descartes mission to establish truth in religion and the sciences. As Foucault states, the modern age in the West is not characterized by "the attempt to apply objective methods to the study of man,"[41] but rather is characterized by the project "of revealing the conditions of knowledge on the basis of the empirical contents given in it."[42] He believes that modernity in the West becomes a kind of anthropology, and the modern self appears as "a being such that knowledge will be attained in him of what renders all knowledge possible."[43] In other words, the study of the world becomes the study of the human subject as a knower. Kant's move to assert the exercise of reason itself as the unqualified good simultaneously establishes the possibility of autonomy in an otherwise determined world. Thus, Kant's critique is formulated

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[40] According to tradition an inscription above the door of Plato's Academy read, Μηδείς αγεωμέτρητος εισίτω μοι τη θύρα, "Let none but geometers enter through this door."
[41] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 347.
[42] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, *Ibid.*
[43] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, *Ibid.*

well within the Socratic paradigm of selfhood. Even though Socrates still has an understanding of the self that is distinct from that of later modern thinkers, the themes of knowledge of the good, freedom, and the authority of reason get continually reproduced in various ways within this line of thinkers.

Therefore, it is an unwarranted assumption to regard Western modernity as generic rather than specific to the historical tradition in which it emerged. It follows from a specific philosophical tradition and emerges as a response to a culturally specific crisis. Stephen Toulmin, for instance, argues that both the emergence of what we consider rational modernity and the *kind* of rationality that emerged in modernity were both tailored to the crisis that Europe faced in the 17th century. The Thirty Years' War and the discoveries of Galileo had thrown society, from philosopher to farmer, into a relativistic vertigo. From this Toulmin observes that, "the simultaneous collapse of cosmology and epistemology coupled with the growing violence of dogmatic partisans encouraged the creation of a foundationalist system that underwrote both cosmology and epistemology."[44] Descartes' method of radical doubt sought to confer an indisputable foundation on which to build commensurability between warring factions within science and religion that were tearing society apart. Kant's strategy to add "what is man?" to the questions of philosophy, was an attempt to find in human selfhood something which could establish common ground between warring factions in Western science and religion. Both thinkers, in effect, return to the origins of Western thought, retrieve past theories of epistemology and selfhood, and repurpose them as tools for a contemporary crisis. The view that portrays Western modernity as a rejection of tradition in favor of a radically new and generic cultural

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[44] Stephen Edelston Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*: *The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013), 81.

paradigm ignores these traditional elements and the culturally specific crisis they were used to navigate.

Yet, this generic view of Western modernity often persists even among some of its postmodern critics. One popular strategy for overcoming the hegemony of the Western model of modernity is the trend in recent years to offer up traditional Chinese notions of selfhood as alternative models to Western liberalism. This strategy is clearly summed up in David Hall's essay "Modern China and the Postmodern West." As he puts it, "the internal contradictions of the modern phenomenon have led to a cultural crisis," where modernity is understood as "liberal democracy, capitalist free enterprise, and the spread of rational technologies."[45] The solution he and others suggest is to look to other traditions such as China's for alternatives. Hall argues that classical Chinese thought offers a concept of selfhood that avoids many of the problematic issues of the liberal individualist model of selfhood. After comparing classical theories to philosophies of leading 20th century continental thinkers, he suggests that classical Chinese philosophy is "in a very real sense postmodern,"[46] in that it embraces change rather than permanence, lacks reliance on transcendence, and avoids the theoretical and practical problems of liberal individualism.

While I am sympathetic to Hall's view and believe that it may enhance the appeal of studying Chinese thought in the 21st century, this portrayal of China as a "postmodern" solution to modernity's ailments is a double-edged sword. Hall's strategy suggests the value of Chinese thought lies in its allegedly postmodern past and risks further encouraging Western philosophers to ignore Chinese philosophy after its modernization. Modern Chinese thinkers are then evaluated in terms of how well they maintained continuity with the traditional past or were able

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[45] David L. Hall, "Modern China and the Postmodern West," in *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Elliot Deutch (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 50.
[46] Hall, "Modern China and the Postmodern West", 59.

to use traditional ideas to resist the encroachment of a modernity understood as intrinsically "Western." We are then faced with a problem that Liu eloquently describes in her work: "in the very act of criticizing Western domination, one often ends up reifying the power of the dominator to a degree that the agency of non-western cultures is reduced to a single possibility: resistance."[47] Restoring the agency of the intellectuals of the Hundred Days' Reform and asserting the universal significance of their work, therefore, requires placing the contingent elements back into Western modernity so we can see Western modernity as specific to a philosophical tradition and not as generic. In this way we can open up a space for these thinkers to reveal the important features of Chinese modernity on their own terms.

In the following Chapter, I will examine some of the basic features of the Confucian paradigm of selfhood as it was first formulated in Classical Confucianism by analyzing the concept of *ren*. I will use this analysis to show the relationship between Confucius and Socrates and how slight differences in their thought started philosophical paradigms that become increasingly divergent until they were forced into rapid and ineluctable confrontation at the end of the 19th century. Thus, beginning with the analysis of classical Confucian thought will highlight the important features necessary for appreciating the perspective of the Hundred Days' Reformers and the philosophical questions they tried to answer. As we will see, these thinkers likewise returned to their cultural origins to retrieve and repurpose ideas to solve a specific intellectual crisis that they faced. When the intellectual commitments of the Confucian paradigm are clarified, we will then be in a better position to examine how Western ideas were ultimately being understood by these thinkers as they translated them into their philosophical discourse.

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[47] Liu, *Translingual practice*, xv.

Chapter Two:
The Appropriation of the Concept of *Ren* in Classical Confucianism

"I am wiser than this man; for neither of us really knows anything beautiful and good, but this man thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas I, as I do not know anything, do not think I do either."[48]
– Socrates

"The Master said, "To live in the neighborhood of the good [*ren*] *is beautiful. If one does not choose to dwell among those who are good, how will one obtain wisdom?"*[49]
– Confucius

The argument thus far has been that understanding the philosophical and historical context of the concept of *ren* will provide a clearer understanding of the problem that the Hundred Days' Reformers faced and of the philosophical strategies they developed for dealing with that problem. In turn, this will help clarify why their sometimes unusual appropriation of Western concepts would have seemed reasonable to them and their contemporaries. Yet, giving *ren* a succinct and precise definition proves to be difficult for several reasons. The term has a long, complex history that predates even Confucius (551-479 BCE). Confucius then takes up the term and uses it in a way that appears to have been unfamiliar to his contemporaries and even his students.[50] It also doesn't help matters that Confucius consciously declines to give one clear definition of the term. Instead, he gives differing definitions based on how the question is

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[48] Plato, "Apology," in *Plato in Twelve Volumes* 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0170%3Atext%3DApol.%3Asection%3D21d.

[49] *Analects* 4.1: 子曰：「里仁為美。擇不處仁，焉得知？」 Quotations from the classics can be found at https://ctext.org/confucianism. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. Here, I have slightly altered Edward Slingerland's translation for comparison. As I will discuss below, the term *ren* has no exact equivalent in English. In the present chapter I will show that, in Confucius' usage of the term has strong affinities to *kalos kagathos* and is even often translated into English as "Good/ness." For instance see, Edward Gilman Slingerland, *Analects*: *With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003).

[50] This impression comes from the fact that Confucius' students routinely and repeatedly ask him to clarify what he means by this term, whether so and so could be considered *ren*, and what attributes are associated with this quality.

formulated, in what context it is being asked, and by which student. In one passage of the

Analects (*Lunyu* 論語), the classic collection of Confucius' statements and conversations, his

students even appear to complain that Confucius seldom spoke of *ren*.[51]

It is not surprising, then, that scholars somewhat differ on how to translate *ren*. Often, the

character is rendered into English as "benevolence," and indeed this is how Chan Sin-Wai

translates it in his translation of Tan Sitong's *Renxue* (translated as *An Exposition of*

Benevolence). While appropriate in certain contexts, scholars often raise some common concerns

about this translation. For example, Henry Rosemont and Larson Di Fiori understand the term

"benevolence" to suggest an attitudinal or psychological disposition toward wanting to bring

about the good, particularly in the sense of good will toward others. However, they assert that

ren as it is used in the *Analects* is a quality of embodied action rather than a psychological

disposition or good intent. They argue after an extensive survey of the use of the term in the

Analects that it cannot be understood merely "in terms of an inner virtue/feeling/attitude/

emotion,"[52] and so rule out any such terms including "benevolence" as providing a consistently

reliable translation. Certainly, qualities such as kindness and altruism that are implied by the

term "benevolence" are not unrelated to the concept of *ren*. Confucius associates *ren* with

empathy, reciprocity, and "putting oneself in someone else's place" (*shu* 恕).[53] However,

"benevolence" does not encompass the various other meanings we encounter, particularly as it is

used in the pre-Confucian period. The use of *ren* to mean something like "benevolence" is partly

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[51] *Analects* 9.1 子罕言利，與命，與仁。I take this passage to mean Confucius was reluctant to give a robust description of precisely what *ren* entailed.

[52] Henry Rosemont and Larson Di Fiori, "Seeking *Ren* in the *Analects*," *Philosophy East & West* 67, no. 1 (2017), 99.

[53] This is how Roger Ames translates this term. He notes that *shu* was often associated with achieving *ren* even in the classical dictionary, the *Shuowen Jiezi* 説文解字. See, Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 195.

an interpretive innovation of another important Confucian philosopher, Mencius (*Mengzi* 孟子, 372-289 BCE).[54] Mencius' use differs slightly from Confucius' earlier use of the term, and as a result, scholars have increasingly reserved the translation of *ren* as "benevolence" for the *Mencius*, (though even this translation has been contested).[55]

"Benevolence" is a particularly poor translation of Tan Sitong's modern use of the term, since in some instances his concept even runs counter to the typical understanding of benevolence. Other translations vary over a wide range depending on the preferences of the translator or the stated aims of the scholar. "Humaneness," "Goodness," "relational virtuosity," "consummate conduct," "perfect virtue," and "authoritativeness" have all been offered by different translators and commentators.[56] Clearly, insofar as each of these touch upon an important aspect of the concept, no one English word suffices to cover all its uses and connotations. Moreover, since the meaning of the term changes over time, and since this dissertation is concerned with such transformations, I mostly choose to leave *ren* untranslated. Wherever a translation is given out of necessity or convenience, it will be indicated in parenthesis.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will outline the historical significance of this concept within Confucian self-cultivation as it was formulated within the *Four Books* of classical Confucianism (roughly before the 3rd century BCE). These texts set the foundations for how *ren*

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[54] Mencius likely drew his interpretation from the rival Mohists school of philosophy founded by the philosopher Mozi 墨子 (470-391 BCE), who advocated for a principle of "universal love" (jianai 兼愛) and a kind of utilitarian theory of societal organization. There are, however, some important differences between the Mohists and the British Utilitarians. See Hansen's discussion where he distinguishes Mohism from both Act and Rule Utilitarianism in Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, 115. As we will see, the philosophy of Mozi is one of the schools of thought that is revived by the Reformers in their modern appropriation of traditional thought, particularly by Kang Youwei and Tan Sitong.

[55] Jiyuan Yu, "Translation of *Ren* in Van Norden's *Mengzi*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 37, no. 4 (2010), 666.

[56] For a brief survey of these translations, see Yu, "Translation of Ren in Van Norden's Mengzi", 661.

and selfhood were discussed within the Confucian paradigm up until the end of the 19th century. This is by no means a comprehensive overview of Classical Confucianism. Rather, I focus on some persistent themes that emerged in these texts that will be crucial for understanding the thought of the later Reformers. I will first survey the various uses of the term in pre-Confucian writing and explain how the term was taken up and modified by Confucius in the *Analects*. I then continue with its use in two other foundational texts, the *Mencius* and the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學). Together, these form three of the *Four Books* of Classical Confucianism and provide an ample introduction to the basic features of *ren* relevant to this study. Specifically, I will argue that the pre-Confucian term *ren* originally signified a gentlemanly ideal of goodness and beauty for (typically male) aristocrats and is analogous to the concept of *kalos kagathos* or *kalokagathia* (beautiful and good) in ancient Greece. This *ren* quality was seen to make men authoritative and "fit to preside over others." Later, Confucius takes up this term and attempts to divorce it from its more superficial associations. Cultivating *ren* meant cultivating good embodied performances according to culturally established norms and moral exemplars. Later, Mencius takes the concept of *ren* as a distinctively human quality that disposes human beings towards socialization and ethical conduct, which can be cultivated (or lost) through a cultural system. Lastly, I show that the process of self-cultivation as laid out in the *Great Learning* portrayed the Chinese cultural system as an authoritative (*ren*) model for the rest of the world. This worldview then set the stage for the philosophical crisis of the late 19th century.

1. ***Ren* in the Pre-Confucian Context: The Ideal of the Male Aristocrat**

Crucial to understanding the cultural and intellectual landscape within which the discussion of *ren* took place is understanding the cosmological perspective laid out in the pre-Confucian text the *Book of Changes*, *Yijing* 易經. Ostensibly an ancient guidebook for

divination, Roger Ames stresses the fundamental importance of the text to the Chinese tradition saying, "the *Yijing* has been and still remains, in every sense, the first among the Chinese classics."[57] The work describes the universe as in a constant state of flux (*bian* 變). It then identifies patterns of continuity (*tong* 通) within this constant change. These patterns are signified by hexagrams – groups of six horizontal lines that guide the diviner's assessment of the results of oracular rituals. Each of the 64 hexagrams bears a name (e.g. *qian* 乾 or *kun* 坤) with which the pattern can be easily referred, and the accompanying description elaborates on the kind of transformation the hexagram represents and suggests an appropriate course of action.

Beyond its use as a guide for diviners looking for ways to make predictions within a sea of constant change, the text had a fundamental influence on Chinese cosmology. Change, flux, and transformation are largely taken as fundamental features of the world. While the patterns of transformation provide some continuity, distinguishing it from utter chaos, this continuity is not described as being *more real* than the change. It does not exist as a superstructure that imposes sense on an otherwise senseless chaos. Instead, it is written in the *Book of Changes* that, "transformations, having run their course, result in further changes [*bian* 變], changes result in continuity [*tong* 通], a continuity that lasts indefinitely." [58] This passage signifies not that transformations always give rise to something stable and permanent. Rather, it is saying that there is a necessary interplay between flux and continuity such that changes give rise to other changes in a continuous stream of transformations. The interplay of this oppositional pair (i.e. change and continuity) is matched by the interplay of other oppositional pairs such as hard and

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[57] Roger T. Ames, "The Great Commentary (Dazhuan 大傳) And Natural Chinese Cosmology," *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 2, no. 1 (2015), https://doi.org/10.1007/s40636-015-0013-2, 1.
[58] *Dazhuan*, B2: 易窮則變，變則通，通則久。

soft, active and still, male and female, hot and cold, *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽, etc. Each of these pairs

interacts not as mutually exclusive opposites but as codetermining aspects of a self-differentiated

unity, or "two sides of the same coin" so-to-speak. It is through the continuous interaction of

these pairs that change and flux become possible.[59]

Stability is therefore not metaphysically prioritized over change in the *Book of Changes*.

Change is not associated with mere appearance, which the diviner must get beyond or behind in

order to find what is stable, permanent, transcendent, or really real. Change is necessary and

even affirmed as good and as what ultimately makes life possible.[60] The task for humans is to

understand and work within these transformations. Ames summarizes the important

philosophical thrust of the text in the following way,

> The coordination of the relationship between the changing world and the human experience is the main axis of the *Yijing*. The purpose of this text is fundamentally normative and prescriptive. It purports to address life's most pressing question: What kind of participation in these natural processes can optimize the possibilities of a world in which natural and human events are two inseparable, mutually shaping aspects?[61]

In other words, how can human beings meaningfully interact and create within these constant

productive transformations of which we form a part. Here, humanity is not portrayed as pitted

against the natural world. Rather humanity takes part in these transformations (e.g. birth, death,

decay, growth, the transition of the seasons, etc.), and by understanding these transformations,

we can creatively participate in them.

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[59] *Dazhuan*, A12: 乾坤毀，則无以見易，易不可見，則乾坤或幾乎息矣。 "If the *Qian* and *Kun* transformations were taken away, there would be no means of seeing the system of transformation; and if that system were not seen, *Qian* and *Kun* would almost cease to act."
[60] *Dazhuan*, Ibid.
[61] Ames, "The Great Commentary (Dazhuan 大傳) and Natural Chinese Cosmology", 4.

This cosmological perspective tended to give rise to different strategies for dealing with the problem of change in Classical Chinese thought. Ancient Greek philosophers[62] tended to deal with the endless waves of change by searching beneath the surface for a foundation, some hidden ground, some form of permanence, to which they could anchor themselves. By contrast, the various schools of thought in China tended to search for some reliable method, some guiding discourse (*dao* 道), that would allow society to reliably *ride* them. These methods try to articulate patterns within the change and achieve a state of *gantong* 感通, a kind of effortless, sensitivity and mutual resonance with the world (literally a "feeling of continuity"). This ideal state of embodied living entails a skillful way of existing within one's changing environment that appears to others as alluring, authoritative, and sagacious. For the Confucian tradition, this quality was *ren*.[63]

The oldest uses of the character *ren* 仁 in the classic textual cannon appear in the classic collection of poetry known as the *Shijing* 詩經, or the *Book of Songs*, where it appears only twice.[64] How to translate the term in this text is again a matter of scholarly debate. For instance, Lin Yu-Sheng argues that any of the more familiar translations of *ren*, such as "benevolent" or "good," in this pre-Confucian context are "far-fetched."[65] In the *Book of Songs* the character is used in two poems in order to praise a man. The poems read,

<div align="center">"Shu Yu Tian"</div>

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[62] This is not to say all Ancient Greek philosophers, Heraclitus being an obvious exception. However, this characterization does seem to hold for many of the most influential figures such as Pythagoras, Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle, to name a few.

[63] Huaiyu Wang, "*Ren* and *Gantong*: Openness of Heart and the Root of Confucianism," *Philosophy East & West* 62, no. 4 (2012), 464.

[64] Yu-sheng Lin, "The Evolution of the Pre-Confucian Meaning of *Jen* 仁 and the Confucian Concept of Moral Autonomy," *Monumenta Serica* 31 (1974-1975), 175.

[65] Lin, "The Evolution of the Pre-Confucian Meaning of Jen 仁 and the Confucian Concept of Moral Autonomy", 180.

Shu is in the fields.
No one is dwelling in the streets.
Could it truly be no one is dwelling in the streets?
No one like Shu,
so beautiful and *ren*.

Shu is hunting.
In the streets no one is drinking wine.
Could it truly be no one is drinking wine?
No one like Shu,
so beautifully and well.

Shu is in the wilderness.
In the streets no one is harnessing horses.
Could it truly be no one is harnessing horses?
No one like Shu,
so beautifully and warlike.[66]

And,

"Lu Ling"

It's Ole Lu! *Ling-a-ling*!
And his master, beautiful and *ren.*

It's Ole Lu with a great collar!
And his master, beautiful and well-coiffed.

It's Ole Lu with a great ringing chain!
And his master, beautiful and skilled.[67]

In both poems the character for *ren* appears coupled with the character *mei* 美, "beautiful." The

men in both poems are described as skilled, athletic, warlike, handsome, good at drinking, and

presumably, popular. Lin Yu-Sheng rightly argues that the use of "good," "benevolent," "kind,"

or other moralistic terms to translate *ren* clearly appear out of place.[68] These poems are not about

his ethical treatment of other people or his inner virtues, but the attractiveness of the man's

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[66] *Book of Songs,* "Songs of Zheng": 叔于田、巷無居人。豈無居人、不如叔也、洵美且仁。叔于狩、巷無飲酒。豈無飲酒、不如叔也、洵美且好。叔適野、巷無服馬。豈無服馬、不如叔也、洵美且武。
[67] *Book of Songs*, "Songs of Qi": 盧令令、其人美且仁。盧重環、其人美且鬈。盧重鋂、其人美且偲。
[68] Lin, "The Evolution of the Pre-Confucian Meaning of Jen 仁 and the Confucian Concept of Moral Autonomy", 179.

physical appearance and abilities. Given the context of the poem and perhaps the other adjectives being used to describe these men, Lin instead chooses to translate the word as "manly" reading the word as a way of referring to "man's distinctive qualities."[69] Since the publication of Lin's influential study, several scholars including Edward Slingerland have accepted this translation.[70]

However, Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee in her recent work, *Confucianism and Woman*, points out that the character for "man" (男) has no graphic relationship to *ren*. *Ren* is rather formed out of the character for "person/human" (*ren* 人), which is gender neutral in Chinese. Moreover, the term for "man" (*nan* 男) is never used as a synecdoche for "humanity" as it is in English. Therefore, she is skeptical of any association of *ren* with maleness or masculinity, insisting that the quality is likewise gender neutral. She instead reads *ren* in this period as describing a "desirable, pleasing interpersonal quality or talent,"[71] which can be attributed to any person regardless of gender.

Rosenlee's point is well-taken. However, we must not set aside the important historical reality that during the classical period it appears *ren* is normally used to describe men. Confucius does not teach women and never uses the term to refer to women. He even on one occasion associates women with its opposing qualities.[72] In fact, I am not aware of any instance before the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (*Lienüzhuan* 烈女傳) in the 1st century BCE in which *ren* is

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[69] Lin, "The Evolution of the Pre-Confucian Meaning of Jen 仁 and the Confucian Concept of Moral Autonomy", 179.

[70] Slingerland, *Analects*, 238.

[71] Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women*: *A Philosophical Interpretation,* SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany: SUNY, 2007), 37. It should be noted that Rosenlee also refers to a passage in the *Shujing* 書經, *The Book of Documents*, which she regards as the earliest use of *ren*. However, this claim is contested by Lin. See Lin, "The Evolution of the Pre-Confucian Meaning of Jen 仁 and the Confucian Concept of Moral Autonomy", 174 n4.

[72] *Analects* 17.25: 子曰：「唯女子與小人為難養也，近之則不孫，遠之則怨。」 "The Master said, 'Of all people, daughters and petty people are the most difficult to deal with. If you are familiar with them, they lose their humility. If you set boundaries with them, they are discontented."

explicitly used to describe a woman. The convention of using the term to describe males is clearly established from this early appearance in the *Book of Songs*. This gendered interpretation of the early use of *ren* is further supported by the fact that two of the three mentions of *ren* in the main text (as opposed to the later commentaries) of the *Book of Changes* occur in the explanation of the *qian* 乾 hexagram, whose "*dao* establishes the male."[73] Here, *ren* is associated with nobility and is usually attributed to a *junzi* 君子, a gentleman or a prince. The passage states that "the gentleman [*junzi*] who embodies [*ti* 體] *ren* is fit to preside over others."[74] It goes on to say that the gentleman focuses on learning and puts what he has learned into practice in a way that is *ren*.[75] Given the patriarchal structure of Chinese society during this period, it is not surprising that *ren* was more often used to describe men rather than women. Although Rosenlee is right that the character itself was not etymologically or graphically associated with men, the actual gender biases related to its use in early discourse should not be overlooked. Later, I will argue that this early bias led to a tendency to emphasize men's roles over women's in the cultivating of a *ren* society. Understanding this will prove important for understanding the kind of sexism that existed in Chinese culture and why the status of women became such an important topic for the thinkers of the Hundred Days' Reform.

To summarize, this survey of *ren* in the available early texts suggests that it denoted the qualities of an aristocratic man who is alluring, beautiful, talented, desirable, martial, and popular. Through his learning he appears as adept and effortlessly charismatic in the way he

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[73] *Dazhuan*, A1: 乾道成男，坤道成女。 "The *qian* transformation's *dao* establishes the male. The *kun* transformation establishes the female."

[74] *Yijing*, *Qian* 乾 9: 君子體仁足以長人。

[75] *Yijing*, *Qian* 乾 20: 君子學以聚之，問以辯之，寬以居之，仁以行之。 "The gentleman learns and accumulates the results of his learning; poses questions, and discriminates among those results; dwells magnanimously and unambitiously in what he has attained to; and puts it into practice in a way that is *ren*."

hunts, rides, and drinks. Those who embody *ren* are natural leaders fit to preside over others. In short, *ren* was in the first place an aristocratic ideal of human selfhood not unlike the concept of *kalos kagathos* or "beautiful and good" in ancient Greece.[76] This Greek term also denoted the desirable qualities of an alluring aristocratic male, and later became a major topic of philosophical discourse, most notably with Socrates' famous declaration before the jury that neither he nor anyone else knew what was truly "beautiful and good."[77] In the following section, I will argue that like Socrates, Confucius takes this term and reinterprets it in some important ways that prove influential for the Confucian paradigm of selfhood.

2. Confucius' Appropriation of *Ren* in the *Analects*

The claim that the concept *ren* is central to Confucian thought is hardly controversial. As we have seen, the term *ren* appears rarely in pre-Confucian texts.[78] It occurs only a few times in the *Book of Changes* and most of those instances appear to be from sections of commentary that are likely of a later date. Yet, by the time of the compilation of the *Analects* during the next few centuries after Confucius' death,[79] it had become the preeminent moral concept of Confucian discourse. In contrast to the pre-Confucian texts, the twenty books that comprise the *Analects* mention *ren* 110 times.

In the *Analects*, the term becomes closely associated with an ideal of human selfhood. Modern scholars like Ames go so far as to equate the concept *ren* with the Confucian concept of

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[76] See the entry for this term in Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, "A Greek-English Lexicon, Κα^λοκἄγα^θ-Oς," accessed October 1, 2020, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=kaloka)/gaqos. While the concept of the Good in Plato and *ren* are sometimes loosely compared, scholars seem to have overlooked this key similarity in the pre-Confucian and pre-Socratic uses of these terms. They focus instead on comparing these concepts as they were understood after Plato and Confucius rather than how these thinkers appropriated and altered the traditional uses of these terms. Exploring this similarity will reveal some key parallels in the philosophical problem they faced and key differences in their strategies for dealing with that problem.

[77] Plato, "Apology" in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, 21d.

[78] Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 176.

[79] Slingerland, *Analects*, xiii.

selfhood insofar as it is an integral part of the project of becoming fully human.[80] At certain

places in the classical Confucian cannon, perhaps most famously in the *Mencius*[81] and the

Doctrine of the Mean (*Zhongyong* 中庸),[82] this association is explicitly made. As Rosenlee

summarizes, in the classical Confucian texts "the category of "person" is an achieved, ethical

category, instead of an a priori ontological category."[83] Therefore, one's status as human is

understood as an ethical project of cultivating *ren*. Being human is a continuous action as

opposed to a static state of being. Ames contrasts this to a more common understanding of the

human being in the Western tradition. He writes,

> *What* is a human being? This was the perennial Greek question asked in Plato's
> *Phaedo* and in Aristotle's *De Anima*. And perhaps the most persistent answer from
> the time of Pythagoras was an ontological one: The "being" or essence of a human
> being is a permanent, ready-made, and self-sufficient soul. And "know thyself" –
> the signature exhortation of Socrates – is to know this soul. Each of us *is* a person,
> and from conception, has the integrity of *being* a person.[84]

For these reasons, Ames chooses to use the term "human *becoming*" rather than a "human

being," to describe human selfhood in the Confucian tradition.[85] In other words, *ren* and selfhood

must be understood as a process of self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身) in which an individual follows

a certain way or method (a *dao*) that will help them toward achieving consummate personhood.

The term *xiushen* literally means to "embellish," "decorate," or "repair" the body (*shen*)

and brings into view the complicated understanding of embodiment in the Chinese tradition.

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[80] David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han*: *Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 27.
[81] Mencius, *Mencius,* Translations from the Asian classics (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2011), 7B16.
[82] *Zhongyong* 20: 仁者人也。
[83] *Rosenlee, Confucianism and women*, 35.
[84] Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 87.
[85] Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, Ibid. Interestingly, Classical Chinese has no word that can easily translate the English word "being." This is partly indicated by the fact that the modern Chinese term for "being," *cunzai* 存在, is a modern invention meaning literally "preserving presence."

Shen is merely one of several words that might be translated as "body." It is closely related to another character for "body," *ti* 體, mentioned in the section from the *Book of Changes* cited above (in which the gentlemen is said to embody *ren* and thus achieve his authoritative status). It was also referenced in the previous chapter where Ames translates it as "a living body." Both *shen* and *ti* denote aspects of human beings (or becomings) as embodied creatures, though to understand *shen* and its cultivation, it is necessary to understand *ti*.[86]

In her article, "Boundaries of the *Ti* Body," Deborah Sommer outlines the interrelated meanings of *ti* and *shen* through an extensive textual survey of their uses in the classical period. According to Sommer, *ti* indicates "a polysemous corpus of indeterminate extent that can be partitioned into subtler units, each of which is often analogous to the whole and shares a fundamental consubstantiality and common identity with that whole."[87] Thus, what she refers to as the "*ti* body" of the human being includes, but is not necessarily coextensive with, the physical body of an individual. It can also extend to include all other humans and even all material existence. This *ti* body can be divided along the levels of society, the family, the individual, or even body parts. The relationship between an individual human and the category of "human" is understood in terms of a part-whole relationship.[88]

Sommer goes on to say that the *shen* body is "the socially constructed self that is marked by signs of status and personal identity, and it is the accumulated corpus of a person's moral

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[86] Interestingly, in modern Chinese the word for "body" combines the two characters to form the word *shenti* 身體.
[87] Deborah Sommer, "Boundaries of the Ti Body," *Asia Major* 21, no. 1 (2008), 294.
[88] Chad Hansen argues such a view might have seemed natural to many early Chinese thinkers in part because the term for "human," like most nouns in Chinese, functions like a mass noun in English (e.g. "grass" or "water"). Such nouns are distinguished from countable English nouns like "beds" or "computers." Thus, in English I can have two computers, but I have two *drops* of water or four *blades* of grass. In Chinese, almost all individual objects are counted out from a whole by way of a measure word. In modern Chinese, for instance, one says "there are three *ge* 個 of person", not "there are three people." See, Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, 77.

values, character, experience, and learning."[89] The *shen* body, therefore, is slightly more coextensive with what speakers of English might more commonly associate with the "body," but it also includes the character, qualities, and learning that we put into practice with those bodies. It can absorb shame or praise and includes both the physical and social aspects of embodiment. Thus, one cultivates the *shen* body through cultivating one's social roles and putting into practice the kinds of activities and ritual performances that are traditionally associated with those roles. Through "embodied living" (*li* 禮, typically translated as "ritual"), we can cultivate and beautify (*xiu*) our individuated *shen* bodies. Confucius compares this process to the grinding and polishing of jade. The ritual system can thus take raw material and refine it to bring out its immanent worth and aesthetic value. As Hansen summarizes, "to understand Confucius, it is best to think of *ren* [human] as a single scattered object. Humanity directs its parts (states, cities, families, individuals) by a system of conventions… The parts are functional pieces of the whole. Individuals emerge as interstices in the framework delineated by social *li* [ritual]."[90] Through socialization, individuals can engage in this process of beautifying the *shen* body and together create a society that is beautiful and good (*ren* 仁).

The rituals that Confucius is concerned with include religious rituals but also extend far beyond them into the basic rituals of daily life. Fingarette, for instance, provides a famous example of the simple Western ritual of shaking hands. Here we have a ritualistic action that by itself has no particular practical function. Nothing concrete is accomplished by placing my hand into another person's hand that could not have been equally served by another action (e.g. bowing, waving). However, within the context of a cultural system this ritualistic action conveys

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[89] Sommer, "Boundaries of the Ti Body", 301.
[90] Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, 77.

a message between the participants of mutual respect. The performance of this ritualistic game

also sends a message about the nature of the relationship (the handshake is more formal than a

high-five). The ritual sets the tone of the encounter, communicates a greeting, and establishes an

expectation of the kind of relationship the participants have. Texts like the *Book of Ritual* (*Liji* 禮

記) give precise instructions on how various social activities ought to be carried out. The type of

animal used in a sacrifice, the direction one faces outside the door of a friend in mourning, the

kind of cap one wears at certain ceremonies, the speed of one's steps when passing one's

superior, etc. all contribute to distinguishing between different identities and their roles in

society. Therefore, book ten of the *Analects* is largely dedicated to describing the way Confucius

acted, the rituals he observed, and how he executed them.

In this way, Confucius is training young men to embody *ren* and become gentlemen and

respected leaders. Confucius continues to contrast *ren* with the vulgar or common qualities of a

xiao ren 小人, or "petty person."[91] However, at the same time, Confucius starts to disassociate

ren from mere noble birth. He teaches the way for cultivating this noble quality of *ren* to students

regardless of their background.[92] For him, *ren* is not a quality reserved to a certain class of

people. All men are born with the ability to cultivate this quality. They differ only in what *dao*

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[91] Confucius repeatedly contrasts the noble *junzi* with the common *xiao ren*. However, for him, these are qualities of character rather than hereditary. Therefore, it is perfectly possible for a ruler to behave like a *xiao ren*. Interestingly, one of the only mentions of women in the analects is in association with the *xiao ren*. See, *Analects*, 17.25: 子曰：「唯女子與小人為難養也，近之則不孫，遠之則怨。」

[92] *Analects*, 7.7: 子曰：「自行束脩以上，吾未嘗無誨焉。」 "The Master said, 'From the man bringing his bundle of dried meat for my teaching on upwards, I have never refused instruction to anyone'." Confucius' student Yan Hui for instance is considered to have been from a humble background. However, even though Confucius expands the term beyond hereditary nobility, the claims that he single-handedly transforms the term from a class distinction to a moral one are perhaps sometimes exaggerated. See, Erica Brindley, ""Why Use an Ox-Cleaver to Carve a Chicken?": The Sociology of the Junzi Ideal in the *Lunyu*," *Philosophy East & West* 59, no. 1 (2009).

they put into practice.[93] A young man can become a gentleman by learning the relevant

performances of a gentleman and how to apply them in a timely, conscientious manner.

He also distances *ren* from associations with superficial beauty and rhetorical ability. For

instance, he states in 1.3 that, "a clever tongue and commanding appearance [*ling se* 令色] are

rarely signs of *ren*."[94] Here, he sets up a distinction between the appealing quality of *ren* and

mere commanding or attractive appearance (*se*). Meanwhile, Edward Slingerland gives a helpful

explanation of Confucius' concern about "a clever tongue" (*ning* 佞) in Slingerland's

commentary on this passage. He writes, "in archaic Chinese, *ning* was pronounced *nieng* and is

actually a graphic modification of its cognate *ren* 仁 [in archaic Chinese, *nien*]. The original

meaning of *ren* was something like 'noble in form,' and it would appear that *ning* was its

counterpart in the verbal realm: 'attractive or noble in speech'."[95] Therefore, attractive or noble

speech is not sufficient for becoming a true gentleman either. It is not as good as being true to

one's word (*xin* 信) and practicing what one preaches, which are qualities more likely to

command people's respect. For this reason, Confucius repeatedly insists the superficially

appealing man is rhetorically skilled, but the *ren* man is careful (*ren* 訒) with his speech.[96]

This concern bears striking resemblance to Socrates' own quarrel with superficial beauty

and sophistry in ancient Greece. Socrates is especially concerned with people like Alcibiades

who appear good and beautiful but are in fact perhaps not truly so. He seeks to separate the *kalos*

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[93] *Analects*, 17.2: 子曰：「性相近也，習相遠也。」 "[people] are alike in nature, they differ in what they practice"
[94] Slingerland, *Analects*, 1.3.
[95] Slingerland, *Analects*, 2.
[96] *Analects* 12.3: 司馬牛問仁。子曰：「仁者其言也訒。」曰：「其言也訒，斯謂之仁已乎？」子曰：「為之難，言之得無訒乎？」 "Si Ma Niu asked about *ren*. The Master said, 'The *ren* man is cautious and slow in his speech.' Niu replied, 'Cautious and slow in his speech! Is this what is meant by *ren*?" The Master said, 'When putting things into action is so hard, how can one not be cautious and slow in speaking?'"

kagathos ideal from the attractive bodies of young aristocrats. Instead, he says that young men should be cultivating beautiful and good souls. We can achieve this through knowledge of the Good and the Beautiful themselves, rather than simply a desire for individual beautiful and good bodies/things.[97] Thus, in the *Charmides*, for example, Plato aims to show that although Charmides has an attractive body and comes from an aristocratic family, he cannot define the important noble virtue of *sophrosyne* (due perhaps to a previous night of excessive drinking).[98] Therefore, the goodness of his soul is called into question. Socrates has his own method of self-cultivation: *elenchus*. However, this method involves the quest for knowledge of the true self, the soul, by way of testing definitions of concepts. Thus, Joanne Waugh states that Socrates demonstrates his virtue by "knowing the true nature of the self, that is, what is good and bad for the self *as a knower*."[99] In short, the true self is understood as a knower, specifically, a knowing soul that seeks knowledge of the good.

For Confucius, however, the contrast between superficially appealing individuals and *ren* individuals hinges on the quality of an embodied performance, not that of an immaterial soul. The next several passages of the *Analects* proceed to discuss the way of cultivating a

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[97] Plato, "Symposium," in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 211-212b. One of the biggest differences between *ren* and *kalos kagathos* hinges on its relationship to the concept of *eros*. For Socrates, the erotic desire for beautiful and good young men partly motivates his push to distance true beauty and goodness from the body and to instead encourage his listeners to develop a love of beauty and goodness itself as well. Conversely, Confucius seldom speaks of such a desire for *ren* (see 7.30) and never of a desire for *ren* individuals. Instead, others are influenced by the *ren* individual like blades of grass in the wind (see 12.19). Strangely, Hyun Höchsmann sees *eros* and *ren* as analogous concepts. *Ren*, he reasons, can be translated into English as "love." *Eros* can also be rendered into English as "love." Therefore, *ren* and *eros* must be related. This is a great example of a bad philosophy of translation. *Ren* should not be understood as a desire, much less one analogous to *eros*. See, Hyun Höchsmann, "Love and the State in Plato and Confucius," in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 2, No. 1 (2002), pp. 97-116.

[98] *Sophrosyne* was another important noble virtue meaning something close to "temperance." Plato, "Charmides," in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 154d.

[99] Joanne B Waugh, "Questioning the Self: A Reaction to Carvalho, Press, and Schmid." In *Does Socrates Have a Method: Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato's Dialogues and Beyond*, edited by Gary Alan Scott. (University Park PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 296.

commanding *shen* body instead of merely a superficially attractive appearance. For instance, in the following passage (1.4), we see that Zengzi, a successful student of Confucius, instead focuses on cultivating his *shen* body through daily reflection on his behavior. Zengzi states that, "every day I examine myself [*shen*] on three counts: in my dealings with others, have I in any way failed to be dutiful? In my interactions with friends and associates, have I in any way failed to be trustworthy? Finally, have I in any way failed to repeatedly put into practice what I teach?"[100] Zengzi's process of self-examination is not offered as a definition of a specific virtue, but as a method (a *dao*) for cultivating certain embodied habits of social behavior. Confucius believes that through this kind of careful reflection, our behavior can become more authoritative and effortlessly command the respect of others.[101] Thus, the very next passage (1.5) deals with the effective management of the state through this method.[102] Then, a couple of passages later in 1.7, another student, Zixia, claims that genuine learning has to do with *xianxian yise* 賢賢易色, or "admiring the admirable while thinking lightly of attractive appearance."[103] Together, these passages teach us that an authoritative gentleman embodies *ren* through critical reflection on his activities and thus distinguishes himself from a merely superficially attractive person.

Therefore, the goal of the *Analects* is to provide a *dao* for embodying this quality of authoritative competence through realizing its ethical dimension. Luckily, for Confucius, the *dao* for achieving *ren* was already present in the received textual and historical tradition. Confucius

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[100] Slingerland, *Analects*, 1.4.
[101] See for instance, Slingerland, *Analects* 13.6: "When the ruler is correct [*zheng* 正], his will is put into effect without the need for official orders."
[102] *Analects* 1.5: 子曰：「道千乘之國：敬事而信，節用而愛人，使民以時。」" The Master said, 'The *dao* for ruling a country of a thousand chariots is this: be trustworthy while attending to business, be economical in expenditure and love people, and make use of the people at an appropriate time'."
[103] *Analects* 1.7: 子夏曰：「賢賢易色，事父母能竭其力，事君能致其身，與朋友交言而有信。雖曰未學，吾必謂之學矣。」 "Zi Xia said, "admiring the admirable and thinking lightly of attractive appearance; serving one's parents with one's utmost strength; devoting one's life to serving one's prince; being truthful in one's interactions with friends – even if others say that he is unlearned, I will certainly say that he is learned."

continually encourages his students to study classical texts like the *Book of Songs*. He insists

that, "it is by the Songs that the mind is aroused. It is by the rituals that the character is

established. It is through music that the finish is received."[104] This inherited cultural and textual

tradition serves as the guide for self-cultivation. All that is needed is authoritative teachers to

transmit the appropriate way to interpret it.[105]

For this reason, the *Analects* frequently uses the method of modeling and imitation for

teaching *ren*. Both books five and six of the *Analects* are dedicated to discussions about ancient

and contemporary exemplary men in order to illustrate *ren*. Confucius sees modeling as the

primary mode of education**.** Learning, for Confucius, is not a purely intellectual task. It is a

process of imitation and then knowing how to go on in a way that cultural authorities would

recognize as correct. Thus, Confucius characterizes learning by saying that if he provides one

corner of an issue, he expects the student to provide the other three.[106] However, he refuses to

equate *ren* with any single model. He wants to avoid tempting the students into unthinking

memorization or empty mimicry. Both modeling and reflection are needed. Thus, he states that,

"to study without reflection is a waste of time, reflection without study is dangerous."[107]

Studying exemplary people without reflection yields only empty, mechanical mimicry of their

behaviors. Reflecting without first studying examples of *ren* individuals could lead one to model

the wrong individuals.

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[104] *Analects*, 8.8: 子曰：「興於詩，立於禮。成於樂。」
[105] Confucius claimed not to have innovated any ideas, only to have transmitted the way of the ancients. See, *Analects*, 7.1: 子曰：「述而不作，信而好古，竊比於我老彭。」 "Transmitting and not innovating, trusting and loving the ancients, thus I compare myself with our old Peng."
[106] *Analects*, 7.8: 子曰：「不憤不啟，不悱不發，舉一隅不以三隅反，則不復也。」 "The Master said, "I do not open up to someone who is not eager to learn, nor express my thoughts to someone who is loquacious. When I have presented one corner of a subject to someone, and he cannot from it learn the other three, I do not repeat my lesson'."
[107] *Analects*, 2.15: 子曰：「學而不思則罔，思而不學則殆。」

Confucius instead provides individualized advice on how to achieve *ren* for each of his

students in a way that reflects the needs, strengths, and deficiencies of that student. For his

student Fan Chi, *ren* is focusing on the work at hand and only after thinking of the reward.[108] For

Zhong Gong, it is about not doing to others what you wouldn't want done to you.[109] For Sima

Niu being *ren* means being hesitant to speak (*ren* 訒).[110] Perfecting a performance is not the

same as perfectly mimicking a universal template. Sommer summarizes this point by saying,

"noble people completely somatize their learning in their *ti* bodies and let it beautify their social

shen bodies, but petty people quickly regurgitate it unabsorbed."[111] Petty people merely imitate

in a superficial way, but as it says in the *Book of Changes*, the *junzi* fully embodies his cultural

learning and puts it into practice in a way that is *ren*.

To illustrate this quality of *ren*, we can draw on a helpful analogy with a more familiar

kind of performance. One might compare *ren* to the charismatic skill of expert jazz musicians

who can improvise with the other musicians on stage with a seemingly effortless and unthinking

skill. People often are instinctively drawn to such talent and admire it, rendering these skilled

musicians authoritative in the field of music. I may not be able to strictly define why Thelonious

Monk ought to be considered a great musician, but the fact that people feel instinctively drawn to

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[108] *Analects*, 6.22: 樊遲問知。子曰：「務民之義，敬鬼神而遠之，可謂知矣。」問仁。曰：「仁者先難而後獲，可謂仁矣。」 "Fan Chi asked what constituted wisdom. The Master said, 'To give oneself earnestly to one's duties to the people, and, while respecting spiritual beings, to keep them at a distance, may be called wisdom.' He asked about *ren*. The Master said, "The *ren* man makes the difficulty at hand his first business, and reward only a subsequent consideration - this may be called *ren*."

[109] *Analects*, 12.2: 仲弓問仁。子曰：「出門如見大賓，使民如承大祭。己所不欲，勿施於人。在邦無怨，在家無怨。」仲弓曰：「雍雖不敏，請事斯語矣。」 "Zhong Gong asked about *ren*. The Master said, "When you go out, treat everyone as if you were receiving a great guest; when making use of the people, act as though you were assisting at a great sacrifice; do not do to others what you would not wish done to yourself. It is to have no complaints against you in the country, and none in the family." Zhong Gong said, "Though I am deficient in intelligence and vigor, I will make it my business to practice this lesson."

[110] *Analects*, 12.3: 司馬牛問仁。子曰：「仁者其言也訒。」曰：「其言也訒，斯謂之仁已乎？」子曰：「為之難，言之得無訒乎？」

[111] Sommer, "Boundaries of the Ti Body", 300.

his style makes him authoritative. Such an individual can appear to possess an almost clairvoyant anticipation of what their performance partners are going to do and be able to spontaneously match them with an innovative contribution. Moreover, when learning how to perform a piece of music, knowledge of technical terminology, theory, and principle only gets one so far. Initially, a student must seek out a teacher (an acknowledged authority) who will teach the student to play the instrument through instructive modeling. As the student improves, she may study these more famous culturally recognized authoritative models. Of course, she does not simply mimic these examples. After some time, the student ideally develops her own intuitive ability to innovate on the received musical tradition and the performances of others. She develops her own sense of *gantong*, which in turn may establish her as an authoritative model for others. [112]

3. The Elaboration of *Ren* in the *Mencius* and the *Great Learning*

One of Mencius' major contributions to the philosophy of *ren* is to explicitly posit the quality of *ren* as a kind of inborn human disposition toward modeling and socialization. A child has a behavioral inclination to want to communicate, imitate, and integrate with her family and social surroundings. This inclination is a necessary precondition for her ability to do things like learn language, acquire social skills, form relationships, and many of the things that make us

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[112] Compare this Confucian model of learning to Plato's, who regards mimetics as removed from true knowledge of the Good and the Beautiful. Plato would agree with Confucius that there is a difference between empty mimicry and true understanding and he also gives a theory for distinguishing between the two. However, Plato cannot offer Confucius' theory of knowing how to go on according to the standards of recognized cultural authorities. This would place the criteria for knowledge back in the hands of those masters of mimicry, the poets, whom he says know nothing of the Beautiful and the Good. He instead claims that understanding is in the mind. I know how to apply a term correctly in a new circumstance when I have achieved insight into the form of the thing itself. Thus, Plato in the *Republic* seeks to undermine the authority of the poets and transfer that authority instead to the philosopher who tests definitions through *elenchus*. Confucius, by contrast, stresses the authority of the poetry in the *Book of Songs* as well as other cultural classics. They are as central and indispensable to learning as dialectical reasoning is for Plato. For more on the relationship between Plato and Poetry, see Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, 2nd ed. Trans. Allan Bloom. (New York: Basic, 1991), 426-27.
It should be noted that Plato does not completely reject poetry as a source for learning any more than he rejects physically attractive bodies. However, he does place them on a lower rank in the pursuit of knowledge. For a comparison of Plato and Confucius' views on poetry see, Zong-qi Cai, "In Quest of Harmony: Plato and Confucius on Poetry," in *Philosophy East and West* 49, No. 3 (1999), pp. 317-345.

recognizable as human. Hansen compares this to Wittgenstein's own observations on humanity

and what Wittgenstein calls "forms of life,"

> Wittgenstein reminded us that the appeal to humanity is not merely bound up with the coherence of beliefs and doctrines. His famous aphorism, "If a lion could speak, we could not understand him," suggests that we share with those we interpret not merely logical abilities but basic motivational and attitudinal outlooks. We could not communicate effectively with a being who views us as either an irrelevant annoyance or a meal. The Confucian version of humanity [*ren* 仁] reminds us of this Wittgensteinian model… Confucians do not characterize *ren* as a reasoning structure, but as a set of specifically human social inclinations.[113]

Wittgenstein believes that the kind of creature we are, our environment, and the kind of life we

lead gives rise to certain practices. These practices form the basis for some of our most basic

beliefs, not the other way around.[114] For Mencius, our humanity (*ren*) is precisely this tendency

to learn and internalize social structures, to integrate ourselves into a society of shared norms,

and to care about what other people think and feel.

For Mencius, the most important of these attitudinal outlooks is what he calls "the

heart/mind that cannot bear to see the suffering of others" or *burenxin* 不忍心.[115] He illustrates

this with a story,

> Now, if anyone were suddenly to see a child about to fall into a well, his heart-mind [*xin* 心] would be filled with alarm, distress, pity, and compassion. That he would react accordingly is not because he would hope to use the opportunity to ingratiate himself with the child's parents, nor because he would seek commendation from neighbors and friends, nor because he would hate the adverse reputation [that could come from not reacting accordingly].[116]

The response to rescue the child is unthinking. It does not come after an intellectualized process

in which we calculate utility, apply a moral maxim, or weigh values. He is not claiming that all

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[113] Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, 89.
[114] See for instance, Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, §241 and §242.
[115] The word *xin* 心 in Chinese can mean either "heart" or "mind." Classical Chinese thinkers did not distinguish between a faculty of reason and a faculty of emotion or appetites. Therefore, some translators choose to translate *xin* as "heart-mind."
[116] Mencius, *Mencius* 2A6.

human beings share certain beliefs about children in dangerous situations. He is pointing to a disposition that humans have to empathize with other human beings. It is this disposition that we recognize as making us human. Thus, he continues, "one who lacks a mind that feels pity and compassion would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels shame and aversion would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels modesty and compliance would not be human; and one who lacks a mind that knows right and wrong would not be human."[117] In this way, self-cultivation involves cultivating this inborn *ren* disposition towards socialization, empathizing, and being concerned about what others think of us. By cultivating this disposition, the person becomes better at being human.

Mencius concludes that because of this shared *ren* disposition a morally just society is pleasing to the human being in the same way that meat is pleasing to the mouth.[118] However, this is only a disposition, not an immutable essence. It can be lost or destroyed through bad modeling or a corrupt social environment, which is why the cultural system must always be geared toward cultivating this heart. He echoes Confucius' observation that human beings are alike but become different through practice. Thus, he compares this human heart to a forest. If a forest is continually cut down, it will slowly come to resemble a forest less and less. At some point, it may even be pushed past its ecological threshold and no longer be able to recover naturally. Similarly, a human whose heart of *ren* is whittled away by bad modeling or a toxic cultural system may over time become more and more inhuman in his or her behavior and resemble little more than an animal.[119]

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[117] Mencius, *Mencius*, Ibid.
[118] Mencius, *Mencius*, 6A7.
[119] Mencius, *Mencius*, 6A8.

The cultivation of *ren*, therefore, lies at the intersection of a reliable cultural system and the reflective self-critique of one's *shen* body. One must continually strive toward cultivating this *ren* disposition and expanding on it, just like developing our musical taste and performative instincts is a constant task. Even master musicians must practice. In fact, Mencius elaborates on the task of cultivating *ren* with an analogy to another embodied activity. He compares it to archery saying, "one who would be humane [*ren*] is like the archer. The archer corrects his position and then shoots. If he shoots and misses he does not blame those who are more adept than he; rather, he turns within and seeks within himself."[120] Like an archer, the gentleman constantly corrects his own mistakes as he tries to aim toward cultivating that quality of *ren* that makes us what we are. If one abandons this task in some way, one risks becoming inhuman. Thus, Confucius states that if faced with the choice between sacrificing his humanity (*ren*) or staying alive, the *ren* person will give his life for *ren*.[121] Our humanity, he believes, is worth dying for.

The method of self-cultivation within the cultural system is laid out most clearly in the classic text the *Daxue* 大學 or the *Great Learning*, whose main function, as Ames aptly summarizes, is to describe "the process of becoming human."[122] The image of a tree-like structure extending outward is used here to illustrate the interconnection of the *ti* body and to describe self-cultivation in terms of organic growth and nourishment. The importance of the primary passage detailing this process makes it worth citing at length,

> Things have their roots and their branches. Affairs have their end and their beginning. To know what is first and what is last will lead near to what is taught in the *Great Learning*…

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[120] Mencius, *Mencius*, 2A7.
[121] *Analects*, 15.9: 子曰：「志士仁人，無求生以害仁，有殺身以成仁。」
[122] Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 92.

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue [*de* 德] to all under heaven [*tianxia* 天下], first governed well their own states. Wishing to govern well their states, they first organized the family. Wishing to organize their family, they first cultivated their persons [*xiu shen* 修身]. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first pursued knowledge. Such pursuit of knowledge lay in establishing the order of things and affairs [*gewu* 格物]. Things and affairs being ordered, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were organized. Their families being organized, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, all under heaven were made tranquil and happy.[123]

The path for self-cultivation is deliberately portrayed here in a way that evokes the image of roots and branches. The roots nourish the branches as the branches nourish the roots, and thus the whole tree can grow. Similarly, the individual cultivates the *shen* body through sincere introspection and learning. He avoids self-deception like a bad smell,[124] and this gives him clarity of mind. This individual self-cultivation then cultivates the other levels of the *ti* body and vice-versa. The way of learning to become human is enacted simultaneously along four dimensions: the individual's self-cultivation (*xiushen*), the organizing of the family (*qi jia*), the ruling of the state (*zhi guo*), and the bringing of peace to "all under heaven" (*ping tianxia*).

Several important points can be drawn from this passage. First, knowledge, or more precisely the "pursuit of knowledge" (*zhizhi*), constitutes an important part of an individual's self-cultivation. It does not, however, constitute a method for knowing the truth of *ren*, that is, of arriving at a definition that gets at the form of *ren* itself. It is not conceived of as the matching of private mental contents to external, pre-discursive facts. Rather, Ames points out that we find in

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[123] *Daxue*, 2: 古之欲明明德於天下者，先治其國；欲治其國者，先齊其家；欲齊其家者，先修其身；欲修其身者，先正其心；欲正其心者，先誠其意；欲誠其意者，先致其知，致知在格物。物格而後知至，知至而後意誠，意誠而後心正，心正而後身修，身修而後家齊，家齊而後國治，國治而後天下平。
[124] *Daxue* 3: 所謂誠其意者，毋自欺也，如惡惡臭，如好好色 "What is meant by 'making one's thought's sincere' is avoiding self-deception like one hates a bad smell, like one loves an attractive appearance."

both the character for "knowledge/wisdom" (*zhi* 智) and the character for "to know" (*zhi* 知) the presence of components associated with speaking: *yue* 曰, "say" and *kou* 口, "mouth." Ames contends that this reflects a concept of knowing that emphasizes communication and community. He writes, "this association with speaking reflects the importance of the social, communicative aspect of knowing… *zhi* entails a sociology of knowledge rather than any solitary knower. Given the irreducibly social character of the Confucian person, the locus of knowing is not the individual knower, but a knowing community."[125] In other words, it is closer to the kind of knowledge entailed in knowing how to speak a language. In order to speak a language, one cannot simply memorize vocabulary and grammatical rules but must learn a kind of performative skill in the creative application of these things in novel situations. Learning a language, furthermore, presupposes a linguistic community into which one is being initiated such that the community decides who is a competent user of the language. In this sense, Ames writes, "the assumption is that "knowledge" must be authenticated in a communal action for it to qualify as knowledge."[126] Knowing and the attainment of wisdom, as with all other aspects of individual self-cultivation, is at the same time an enterprise that must be undertaken within a cultural system. The authoritative *dao* transmitted from the ancients orders things and affairs (which is how I gloss *gewu*) in a way that elicits *gantong* in the community. In this view, the performative rather than descriptive function of language is emphasized. Language does not just describe affairs and things, it actively orders them, and I learn from authorities how to use words and apply them according to the inherited *dao*.

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[125] Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 191.
[126] Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, ibid.

Second, this understanding of knowledge leads to the strong importance of family relations in the Confucian *dao*. It is within the family that one first begins to learn and be socialized into this community of learners. It is necessary for society to encourage a sense of responsibility among parents who serve as models for their children, and to instill in children a sense of respect for the authority of their elders. This method ensures the proper modeling of behaviors and the cultivation of good members of society. The way one comports oneself towards one's parents when one is at home, for instance, sets the stage for how one will come to comport oneself toward authority figures more generally outside the home.[127] Parents who are neglectful of their children risk instilling in them maladaptive or antisocial tendencies. Therefore, the proper ordering of the family not only affects the individual but also the society. The Confucian tradition emphasized the importance of organizing social roles to cultivate *ren*. As one becomes a better son, younger brother, father, husband etc. one increasingly becomes better suited at participating in society, and society is thus enriched.

The political implications of this are clear. Preserving the integrity of rituals, regulating their performances, establishing an official textual canon, encouraging personal discipline and study of the classics, and the strict ordering of social roles is of paramount importance in creating a *ren* society. To lose the ritual ordering of society would be to lose our humanity. Therefore, the number of rows of dancers at a local dukes ceremony, the place where one bows before entering a temple, the length of time required for mourning one's parents, etc. all have both political and moral importance. Moreover, roles and identities are not understood in terms of natural kinds set

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[127] *Analects* 1.2: 有子曰：「其為人也孝弟，而好犯上者，鮮矣；不好犯上，而好作亂者，未之有也。君子務本，本立而道生。孝弟也者，其為仁之本與！」 "The philosopher You said, "They are few who, being filial and fraternal, are fond of offending against their superiors. There have been none, who, not liking to offend against their superiors, have been fond of stirring up confusion. The gentleman puts his attention on the roots. If the roots are firmly planted the *dao* will thrive. Filial piety and fraternal respect! - are they not the root of *ren*?"

down by a divine order. Rather, they are organized such that their ritualistic performances can be carried out to maintain a morally and aesthetically harmonious society. When asked about good governance, Confucius merely replies, "let rulers rule, ministers minister, fathers father, and sons be sons."[128] Good government and a stable society require the proper ordering and conduct of social roles, particularly family roles, according to ritual tradition.

In the end, Confucian thought organized these roles in a series of five ordered pairs of relations where the familial structure mirrors that of governmental authority: ruler-minister, father-son, husband-wife, older brother-younger brother, friend-friend. These relations are mostly hierarchical (except friend-friend), but also reciprocal. The minister corrects and councils the ruler even as he rules, just as the wife corrects and councils the husband. The *Great Learning* claims that once these complementary spaces of the country, the family, and the individual have all been properly ordered, it will bring peace and happiness to all under heaven (*tianxia*).

This notion of *tianxia* eventually became a kind of worldview within which self-cultivation was theorized and discussed. This *tianxiaguan* 天下觀, or "under-heaven view/perspective," was essentially the notion of authoritative model emulation writ large. Just as the individual who cultivates *ren* can influence others in their conduct, so does the cultivation of a *ren* society result in its influence over other civilization. The world in the *tianxiaguan* was thus seen as a series of concentric circles of cultural influence with the Chinese cultural system at the center. From this perspective, the surrounding cultures in East and South-East Asia followed the authoritative influence of China. This gave many Chinese confidence in the inherent power, or

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[128] *Analects*, 12.11: 齊景公問政於孔子。孔子對曰：「君君，臣臣，父父，子子。」公曰：「善哉！信如君不君，臣不臣，父不父，子不子，雖有粟，吾得而食諸？」

de 德, of this cultural system. Those who did not or would not adopt this cultural system were dismissed as incorrigible barbarians.

As we will see in the following chapters, the events of the 19th century lead to the gradual breakdown of this worldview culminating in a crisis that would have dramatic consequences on philosophical thought. The Confucian paradigm was built around the idea that the inherited *dao*, combined with critical introspection, could cultivate the human quality of *ren*. Whereas Socrates set off a philosophical paradigm that tended to be skeptical of the received cultural tradition and favored the authority of the principle of reason to arrive at universal knowledge, the Confucian paradigm was concerned with interpreting this received *dao* and putting it into practice in a way that was *ren*. However, we will see that the Hundred Days' Reformers did not replace traditional theories of knowledge or embodiment with Western ones. Rather they began to reevaluate *ren* and the method of its cultivation within a new understanding of the world. The next chapter will look at the nature of this change in worldview and how it upset traditional ideas about self-cultivation. This in turn, will help us make sense of one of the most influential thinkers of the period, Tan Sitong, and his modern theory of *ren*.

Chapter Three:
Tan Sitong, *Ren*, and the Critique of Cultural Systems

"What fills heaven [tian 天] and earth is my body [ti 體], and what rules heaven and earth is my nature…
The sage harmonizes with their power [de 德]; the worthy receive what is most excellent from them."[129]
- Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-1077)

In 1896, Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865-1898), the son of a Chinese government official, was

traveling China in search of knowledge to help with the cultural and political crisis he found his

country in. Tan had up to this point struggled in vain to achieve success in the imperial

examination system. For centuries, this grueling system was the means by which young men

established themselves in government careers and in society. It consisted of a series of tiered

examinations designed to test students' understanding of the *Four Books* and classical learning in

general according to traditional standards. Yet, by the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), problems

such as overpopulation had significantly reduced the passing rates of students in this highly

competitive, orthodox system. This left many bright young men, like Tan, with meager

prospects. He was then forced to pursue avenues outside the traditional system to find solutions

for the problems that China faced. These problems included, among other things, a rigidly

conservative social system struggling to deal with foreign aggression, social upheaval,

factionalism, and economic turmoil.

Disappointed by his own failures as well as what he saw as the political corruption,

hypocrisy, and ineptitude of the ruling Manchurian government, Tan turned to different sources

of learning including new texts from the West to make sense of his situation. While in Tianjin,

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[129] *The Western Inscription*: 天地之塞，吾其体；天地之帅，吾其性… 圣，其合德；贤，其秀也。

he met his friend, John Fryer, a Christian missionary working on translations of Western

Scientific texts in the Jiangnan Arsenal in Shanghai. There, Fryer presented Tan with scientific

marvels such as fossils, adding machines, an X-ray, a device for measuring brainwaves, as well

as a copy of a book titled, *Zhi Xin Mian Bing Fa* 治心免病法 (*Method of Avoiding Illness by*

Controlling the Mind).[130] The book was Fryer's own translation of a book published in 1893 by

an American writer named Henry Wood called *Ideal Suggestion Through Mental Photography:*

A Restorative System for Home and Private Use. [131] As a member of the so-called "New Thought

Movement," Wood saw the potential for a harmonious relationship between religious belief and

scientific knowledge. Wood draws upon science, religion, and idealist metaphysics to describe

the ability of the mind to affect the body and explains how one can even cultivate this ability to

cure physical ailments. Thus, through a series of coincidences, an obscure and marginal text

became one of the main representatives of Western science and religion to an important Chinese

thinker. Wood's treatise is among the works most often noted by scholars as having influenced

Tan's thought.

Connections like these help us better understand Tan's unique, if at times puzzling, use of

Western thought in his book, *An Exposition of Ren* (*Renxue* 仁學). In this text, Tan seeks to

ground *ren* in the structure of reality. *Ren*, he claims, is not just a human quality, but a

fundamental feature of the universe. He associates *ren* with the then important scientific concept

of ether, which he describes as the material body (*ti* 體) that constitutes all phenomena. He

contends that what Confucius called "*ren*" is simply a name that designates the function (*yong*

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[130] Benjamin A. Elman, *On Their Own Terms*: *Science in China, 1550-1900* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005), 400.

[131] Henry Wood, *Ideal Suggestion Through Mental Photography*: *A Restorative System for Home and Private Use*, 6th ed. (Boston MA: Lee and Shepherd, 1893).

用) of ether. All phenomena interact, communicate, and mutually penetrate one another by means of this ether.

He uses other natural phenomena such as electricity and gravity as both examples and metaphors to illustrate this *ren* function. He notes the way that atoms coalesce through forces to form larger bodies, which in turn interact with other bodies through gravitational forces, demonstrating the constant interaction and communication that constitutes reality. Thoughts in the brain are communicated through electrical impulses to the rest of the body, which then connect us to the external world through sensation. Ultimately, he concludes, nothing exists in isolation, but rather everything exists in a fundamental state of interconnection and continuity with everything else. When something becomes disconnected, it is subject to decay and subsequent reintegration with the whole. Severing of the nerves in the spine, for instance, disrupts this communication and results in paralysis or even death.[132] Therefore, the most fundamental meaning of *ren* is *tong* 通 ("continuity").[133] Drawing on Chinese Buddhist philosophy, Tan argues that dualities such as "self" and "Other" have only conventional reality. These dualities are created in the heart-mind (*xin* 心) through our attachment to permanence and the self. While not necessarily false, these conventional distinctions can create blockages that hinder *tong*. He concludes that the self-cultivation of *ren* involves overcoming these mental blockages and realizing this fundamental continuity with the rest of the universe.

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[132] Paralysis was referred to in traditional Chinese medicine as *buren* 不仁, or "not ren".

[133] Recall this term was one of the terms used in the *Book of Changes*. There I translated it as "continuity." As with many Chinese terms, there is no exact English equivalent. Simply put, *tong* suggests a lack of obstruction, an openness to flow and communication, and the presence of knowledge and understanding. It is used in many modern Chinese terms to indicate these things such as in *tongguo* 通過 "to pass through," *tongzhi* 通知 "to notify/inform," or *tongfeng* 通風 "to ventilate." It can also be used to suggest that someone is an expert or an authority on something as in *ta shi ge riben tong* 他是個日本通 "He is an expert on Japan."

Tan believes these conceptual blockages have hindered the cultivation of *ren* and caused a kind of sickness among individuals and Chinese society. Angry resentments between clans and ethnic groups threatened once again to tear China's multicultural empire asunder. Meanwhile, forces from outside the establishment pushing for reform found themselves running up against an entrenched conservative elite deeply invested in the status quo and suspicious of foreign people and ideas. It is from this vantage point that he critiques the situation in China. In a moment that resonates with our own time, he observes the dangers that these blockages present to a society,

> Nowadays everyone excels in cunning, all because of suspicion and jealousy… People delight in talking about the evils of others, but feel displeased and angry when hearing about the goodness of others… Parties emerge within parties, whose partisans attack each other. A man may contradict himself from one moment to another, or denigrate something one day and honor it the next… By observing this phenomenon, we know that a great disaster is at hand."[134]

The more we cling to the distinction between self and other, "us" and "them", the more we are willing to abandon our principles to maintain it. He believes cruelty, factionalism, and isolationism have karmically given rise to China's calamities. Yet, through the proper cultivation of what he calls our "mental power" (*xinli* 心力), we can overcome these conceptual obstacles.

For Tan, only through opening ourselves to other cultures, including Western ideas of science, democracy, and equality, can China be saved from its predicament. It is Tan's philosophical appropriation of *ren* in this foundational text that we shall turn to in this chapter to see how he uses this concept to formulate a philosophy of modern selfhood.

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[134] Sitong Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*: *The Jen-hsüeh of T'an Ssu-t'ung,* Institute of Chinese studies, the Chinese University of Hong Kong Monograph series 6 (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1984), Translated by Chan Sin-wai, 194. This text is a dual language version. Where I have provided my own translation of the original text, I provide pages for the Chinese text. Otherwise, I cite Chan's.

1. Research on the *Exposition of Ren* and the Study of Influences

The anecdote of exchange between Wood and Tan is also important for another reason. It illustrates some of the difficulties of understanding Tan's passionate and complicated work. As thinkers from this period began to seriously engage with Western learning, one necessarily finds oneself asking what "Western learning" precisely meant to them, how it was constructed within Chinese discourse, and what its sources were. Faithful exegesis quickly becomes complicated. Texts which may be peripheral to one culture can become representational as they cross borders. Debates and controversies that dominate the discourse of one tradition withdraw to the background in another. Technical vocabularies can become involved in controversies that their original authors perhaps never envisioned. Thus, a simple picture of a clearly defined Western modernity being transplanted into Chinese soil becomes increasingly untenable.

This interpretive problem is reflected in Tan's conflicted status within scholarship. He is regarded as both immensely influential and as lacking philosophical depth.[135] On the one hand, scholars in both China and the West recognize his influence on early modern Chinese philosophy. For example, Chan Sin-wai, who produced the only English translation of Tan's work, insists that "the importance of [his text] cannot be overstated. It is a great piece of writing which not only bore enormous influence on [Tan's] fellow patriots, but also uplifted the revolutionary morality of many who followed in his footsteps."[136] After the Hundred Days' Reform ended in failure as a result of the Empress Dowager Cixi's 慈禧 (1835-1908) *coup d'état*, Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei fled to Japan to continue their research and advocate reform. Tan Sitong, however, chose to stay in China and die for his vision of a more open,

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[135] Wei Yixia 魏义霞, "Tan Sitong Zhexue San Ti 谭嗣同哲学三题: (Three Questions Concerning Tan Sitong's Philosophy)," *Journal of Yunnan Minzu University* 云南民族大学学报 33, no. 4 (July 2016).

[136] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 1.

cosmopolitan, and humane China expressed in his philosophy of *ren*. His contemporaries, including Liang Qichao, heaped praise upon him and mourned his death. His willingness to face execution for the sake of reform raised him to the level of a martyred hero and a symbol of the obstinacy of the Qing Dynasty, ultimately sealing its downfall in the revolution of 1911. To this day, he is referred to as one of the six gentleman (*junzi*) of the Hundred Days' Reform who gave their lives for a better China.

On the other hand, some regard his importance as little more than symbolic. His early death left his philosophical work limited and undeveloped. Besides his correspondences and some early essays, the *Exposition of Ren* is his only lengthy philosophical work. Additionally, the content of his philosophical system suffers from difficulties and unsettled questions. What exactly is the relationship between *ren*, ether, and *tong*? Is ether a material substance, or a spiritual one? Why should we accept *ren*, which is a Confucian moral concept, as a fundamental feature of reality? If everything is constituted by the heart-mind, what is science describing? The sheer scale of the task he sets out for himself perhaps makes such questions inevitable. In the text he sets out to synthesize Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity into a coherent whole structured around his innovative interpretation of the concept of *ren*. He argues that all these teachings, at heart, teach *ren*. Moreover, he insists Western science, logic, and mathematics will help us realize the truth of Buddhist ideas, and ultimately help us realize this *ren*. His work, therefore, has been described as "broad and superficial"[137], and perhaps less charitably as "a

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[137] Fu Haojie 付豪杰, "*Liang Qichao Yu Tan Sitong Weixin Bianfa Bijiao Yanjiu* 梁启超与谭嗣同维新变法比较研究: (Comparative Research on Liang Qichao and Tan Sitong's Modern Institutional Reforms)," *Long Dong Xueyuan Xuebao* 陇东学院学报 30, no. 3 (May 2019) 60.

confused dream."[138] Even those that argue for the importance of more research into his thought

concede his status as an "immature and unclear thinker."[139]

In order to address this conflicted legacy, scholars turn to the question of influences.

Texts like Richard H. Shek's "Some Western Influences on T'an Ssu-t'ung's Thought"[140] or

Talbott and Wrights discussions of Tan's use of the scientific concept of ether[141] debate Tan's

understanding and appropriation of Western science. They are primarily concerned with showing

how Tan's understanding of the science of his day was perhaps more sophisticated than it may

appear. As Benjamin Elman writes in his monumental work on the history of science in China,

"at first sight, [Tan's] pronouncements appear as airy, metaphysical claims out of touch with the

tenor of modern science,"[142] yet closer examination, he argues, reveals that his interpretation of

ether sits comfortably with many contemporary Western theories. Many people during the 19th

century saw ether as a ubiquitous substance that constituted all things, and other popular

thinkers, like Wood, often associated ether with elements of spiritual belief.

Likewise in mainland China, Tan's thought was the subject of some prolonged debates

during the 20th century involving prominent scholars such as Li Zehou about whether Tan is a

materialist or an idealist.[143] This issue was of special significance to intellectuals in a newly

communist country in the throes of a cultural revolution. Their questioning hinged on whether

this revered martyr ought to be embraced as a precursor to the communist overthrow of feudal

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[138] Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1973), 737.
[139] Hung-Yok Ip, "The Power of Interconnectivity: Tan Sitong's Invention of Historical Agency in Late Qing China," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 10 (2009), 357.
[140] Richard H. Shek, "Some Western Influences on T'an Ssu-T'ung's Thought," in *Reform in Nineteenth Century China*, ed. Paul A. Cohen and John E. Shrecker (Cambridge: East Asian Research Center, Harvard, 1976).
[141] See David Talbott, "T'an Ssu-T'ung and the Ether," in *Studies on Asia*, ed. Robert K. Sakai (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1960), and David Wright, "Tan Sitong and the Ether Reconsidered," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57, no. 3 (1994).
[142] Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 400.
[143] See Chan Sin-wai's discussion of this debate in Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence* , 27-29.

ideologies or rejected as an apologist. Ultimately, both trends in the secondary literature are engaged in a similar strategy. They attempt to make sense of and evaluate Tan's thought by positioning him in relation to an intellectual tradition and frame him in terms of continuity/discontinutity – is he traditional or modern? Western or Chinese? Scientific or spiritual?

The careful study of textual influences done by these scholars certainly aids in our understanding of how certain concepts came to be understood by Tan. Yet the study of influences is not without its limitations. It is sometimes difficult to prove that something or someone influenced another thinker. Correspondences or written records can be helpful but not always as straightforward or self-evident as they are sometimes treated. Nor is it easy to pin down precisely what we mean by an influence. The presence of a similarity between a thinker and something he or she read does not by itself help us distinguish true influence from mere agreement. When working in the context of comparative modernity, where studying and detailing lines of influence can take centrality, it is easy to speak of influences as simple unidirectional movements that render the thinker as a passive receptacle of ideas. In other words, the issue of agency, evoked by Levenson's characterization of late 19th century Chinese intellectuals, threatens to emerge again in the tendency in the secondary literature to explain Tan's thought purely in terms of his philosophical influences.

The most extensive exposition of Tan's treatise in English is in Chang Hao's *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*. Chang dedicates a chapter to Tan where he discusses Tan's influences primarily in the form of an intellectual biography. He describes in detail Tan's intellectual development and the sources of his political, metaphysical, and ethical thinking. These descriptions are inevitably drawn into the question of whether his ideas are continuous or

discontinuous with Chinese thought and what relation they have to the presence of Western cultural influences.[144] Other times, Chang ties Tan's thought to psychological motivations such as the trauma caused by the death of several members of his family within days of each other during an epidemic in 1876 (age 11), which nearly claimed his life as well. In Chang's view, the tragedy of losing his siblings, his beloved mother, and his own narrow escape from death motivated his subsequent search for life's meaning.[145] All this no doubt helps explain why Tan's text is so profoundly moving, and why the values of his philosophy were so clearly reflected in both his life and his death. However, what is sometimes missed in Chang's account is a serious evaluation of Tan's work as a solution to a proposed philosophical problem. The philosophical crisis that Tan finds himself in and the philosophical system he develops to overcome it get lost in a laundry list of "native" and "foreign" influences. As long as his philosophy remains understood as a more or less inchoate collection of disparate influences, it will be impossible to fully comprehend its importance and why he sacrificed his life for it.

Another strategy in the secondary literature attempts to emphasize the aspects of cultural resistance in his work. In one essay, Viren Murthy compares Tan Sitong with another major thinker from the same period, Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1869-1936). Drawing on the Frankfurt School of Western Marxism, Murthy interprets modernity largely in terms of a process of reification. As Murthy explains, "reification implies the emergence of a 'world of complete things and relations between things,' which stand against the subject. This idea of a world of things implies not only a new type of discretely divisible spatiality, but also a new view of time

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[144] Chang Hao, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*: *Search for Order and Meaning (1890-1911)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 89-93.
[145] Hao Chang Hao, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*, 89.

as a series of points."[146] Modernity entails a new understanding of the self as subject, which stands within a world understood as a set of discrete objects in linear, quantitative time. Murthy reads both Tan and Zhang as reacting in individual ways to this reified notion of reality that is encroaching on traditional ways of thought through the persistent thrust of market forces. He concludes that Tan's philosophy is an "attempt to revive classical Chinese schemes in a modern world."[147] In the end, Tan's central philosophical strategy is to resist the colonizing forces of capitalist modernity and its reifying worldview using traditional categories of thought.

The strength of Murthy's approach is that, in contrast to many other interpreters, it presents us with a philosophical problem that Tan's project seeks to resolve. As will be discussed in further detail below, we see that the changes in the conceptualization of space and time indeed sparked a crisis in China to which thinkers felt the need to respond, as Murthy suggests. However, Murthy's characterization sometimes strains against the spirit of Tan's work. Tan hardly seems concerned yet with the kind of reification that worried European intellectuals of the late 19th and 20th centuries. To the contrary, he adopts a very sympathetic attitude toward scientific, technological, and economic developments, and even toward Western imperialism. He clearly believes that industry, trade, technology, and science will enhance our ability to cultivate *ren*. The image of the Chinese modernizer resisting the encroachment of a modernity (labeled "Western" and viewed as inevitable) by means of reviving "traditional" modes of thought is a familiar trope that, as I will show, finds little resonance in Tan's work. In this way, Murthy's strategy itself runs the risk of reifying Tan Sitong into a "resister" who combats Western capitalist modernity by clinging to the categories of a pre-modern world before its

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[146] Viren Murthy, "Ontological Optimism, Cosmological Confusion, and Unstable Evolution: Tan Sitong's Renxue and Zhang Taiyan's Response," in *The Challenge of Linear Time: Nationhood and the Politics of History in East Asia*, ed. Viren Murthy and Axel Schneider (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 51.
[147] Murthy, "Ontological Optimism, Cosmological Confusion, and Unstable Evolution", 60.

rationalization. We then are left to wonder what, if anything, can Tan's thought offer us who live in a thoroughly modernized society? Romanticism? Atavism? Nostalgia?

While studies of influence and intellectual biographies are perfectly legitimate forms of research, they are not enough to rescue thinkers like Tan Sitong from their position of mere historical importance for China. To show that Tan Sitong's thought has broader significance for philosophers in the West, we must provide an interpretation of his work that shows him to be contributing insights into the nature of modernity that Western thinkers have overlooked. In what follows I will give my own interpretation of the text by placing it within the context of the crisis Tan and his contemporaries faced at the time with relation to the cultivation of *ren* – the breakdown of the *tianxiaguan*. This interpretation will show that he does not haphazardly pile together Chinese and Western influences. He instead tries to synthesize different cultural traditions to establish a more global and cosmopolitan program for cultivating *ren*.

Ultimately, in Tan's work we find that controversies about the transcendental foundations of objective knowledge, while crucial to many modern thinkers in Europe, withdraw into the background. Knowledge, whether scientific or philosophical, is always presented as a means for cultivating *ren*, and much of his epistemological views rest comfortably within the received Buddhist tradition. Instead, the question for Tan is "what does it mean to be human in a globalized world that contains a variety of cultural systems for cultivating *ren*?" He accomplishes this by way of a sophisticated philosophical critique of cultural systems in which *tong* is asserted as the fundamental meaning of *ren* and as the condition for the possibility of all cultural systems. Although this interpretation departs from much of the secondary literature, this exercise in philosophizing in translation helps us make sense of the primary text in a way that avoids attributing to Tan mystical positions or vague contradictions. It also gives us an

interpretation of the text that shows it to have relevance to conversations that are important to Western philosophy and that add to our understanding of modern thought.

2. The Philosophical Problem: The Breakdown of the *Tianxiaguan*

Many historians of Chinese intellectual history emphasize the transition of Chinese self-conceptualization from a cultural empire to a modern nation-state as a turning point in Chinese thought.[148] In fact, Zhang Rulun, in his monumental work *Research in Modern Chinese Thought* (*Xiandai Zhongguo Sixiang Yanjiu* 现代中国思想研究), claims that modern thought in China emerged, rather mundanely, out of modern geography.[149] To understand this point, it is important to remember that before the 20th century the modern term for "China," *zhongguo* 中国, (literally "the Middle Kingdom(s)") did not consistently refer to a clearly defined sovereign land with distinct borders encircling a group of people with a shared national/ethnic identity.[150] Such an understanding of sovereign nation-states emerged as part of political modernity. Zhang Rulun characterizes ancient "China" instead as "more of a cultural concept,"[151] rather than a distinct political entity. It signified a cultural space that centered around a received textual and cultural tradition. As noted in the previous chapter, this cultural space formed the epicenter from which all civilization flowed outward to the various barbarian tribes (including the Europeans). Despite the continual cycling through of different dynastic empires and even conquest by different ethnic

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[148] See for instance, Zarrow, *After Empire*.

[149] Zhang Rulun 张汝伦, *Xian Dai Zhong Guo Si Xiang Yan Jiu* 现代中国思想研究: *(Research in Modern Chinese Thought)*, 1st ed. (Shanghai: Shang hai ren min chu ban she 上海人民出版社, 2014), 187

[150] For an interesting article on the invention of "China" as a political and historical entity, as well as its fractious relationship to contemporary nationalist historiography in China, see Arif Dirlik, "Born in Translation: 'China' in the making of 'Zhongguo'", *Boundary 2* July 29, 2015. Here, Dirlik claims that "China" and "the West" owe their self-identification to one another, despite contemporary Chinese nationalist historiography's attempt to portray China as a self-contained and ahistorical entity.

[151] Zhang Rulun 张汝伦, *Xian dai zhong guo si xiang yan jiu* 现代中国思想研究 Ibid.

groups, the perceived continuity of this cultural space and its position at the center of a wild and uncivilized world formed the foundation of a loosely defined "Chinese" identity.

Zhang Rulun rightly observes that this concept of China, therefore, constituted not just an identity, but a "kind of Sino-centrism… a way of seeing the world."[152] It coincided with and reinforced the Confucian worldview that placed China at the center of an ongoing project of self-cultivation unfolding within a space designated as *tianxia* 天下, or "under heaven." This *tianxiaguan* was often characterized in the following way: "Above is heaven [*tian*], below is earth, between heaven and earth resides China. At the periphery of heaven and earth reside the four barbarian tribes. The four barbarian tribes are the outer, China is the inner."[153] This perspective, Zhang Rulun argues, constituted "the Chinese people's understanding of the metaphysical space of their empire."[154] The path of self-cultivation set out in the *Great Learning* had over time become more than a prescription for effective statecraft and ethical guidance for aspiring gentlemen. The Chinese cultural empire was the authoritative model of humanity for the rest of the known world.

Thus, Zhang Rulun believes that the introduction of modern geography, with its division of the world into mathematical distances and political territories, challenged this Sino-centric worldview. He argues that intellectuals like Tan Sitong, Kang Youwei, and Liang Qichao saw in modern geography a fundamentally different kind of world, one in which China was one nation among many others.[155] This upending of the traditional metaphysical space was felt by these thinkers as an existential problem. It initiated a search for both individual and national identity.

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[152] Zhang Rulun 张汝伦, *Xian dai zhong guo si xiang yan jiu* 现代中国思想研究, Ibid.
[153] Quoted in Zhang Rulun 张汝伦, *Xian dai zhong guo si xiang yan jiu* 现代中国思想研究, 181.
[154] Zhang Rulun 张汝伦, *Xian dai zhong guo si xiang yan jiu* 现代中国思想研究, Ibid.
[155] Zhang Rulun 张汝伦, *Xian dai zhong guo si xiang yan jiu* 现代中国思想研究, Ibid.

In other words, the shift from this *tianxiaguan* to the *shijieguan* 世界觀 ("global" or "*shijie*"

view) was a radical disruption with cultural and intellectual repercussions analogous to the

introduction of Copernicus' heliocentric theory in Europe.[156]

However, merely pointing out the "influence" of Western geographical texts on Chinese

thinkers does not entirely explain why they began to rethink the world and their position in it in a

different way. After all, the extensive maps produced by the famous explorations of the Ming

Dynasty navigator Zheng He 鄭和 (1371-1433) did not have the same effect on the intellectuals

of his time.[157] Sophisticated world maps had been available to Chinese literati since their

introduction by Matteo Ricci in the 16th century, and mathematical grid-based cartographical

methods had been present for even longer.[158] It is not enough to simply say that modern

geography from the West gave China a more "accurate" picture of the world, which overturned

the "obviously false" discursive environment of the *tianxiaguan*. The crucial question is *why* did

these maps suddenly become troubling to intellectuals like Tan Sitong? In other words, why did

these geographical texts suddenly *become* influential?

Many events and gradual changes contributed to the eventual breakdown of the

tianxiaguan. Global economic factors certainly were changing the way countries interacted with

China. The Opium Wars (1839-1842 & 1856-1860) and the concession of land to foreign powers

further challenged the viability of the Sino-centric worldview. Yet the event that sparked the

greatest reaction among these thinkers is also the one that is most often cited as the catalyst for

the Hundred Day's Reform. China's defeat at the hands of Japan in the Sino-Japanese war (1894-

1895) resulted in the loss of its influence over its traditional vassal state of Korea. It also

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[156] Zhang Rulun 张汝伦, *Xian dai zhong guo si xiang yan jiu* 现代中国思想研究, 185.

[157] Benjamin A. Elman, *On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550 – 1900*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005), 26.

[158] Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 122.

awakened many Chinese to the reality that civilizations once regarded as peripheral (e.g., Japan and Europe) were now occupying the international centerstage. It was at this juncture that some intellectuals found China displaced from its traditional authoritative position within the *tianxiaguan*. The weakness and ineptitude of the Qing Dynasty in the face of what were once considered to be its cultural and moral inferiors suggested that other cultural systems with different *dao* were navigating the world with greater efficacy, power, and authority. The world in which the received *dao* had its sense was starting to break down and a new vision of the world had to be constructed. In Tan's view, the traditional Confucian rituals were being carried out in a mechanistic way oblivious to the fact that the temple around them was burning. Tan and the other Reformers were sounding an alarm.

For Tan, the crisis was an existential one because Chinese culture had lost sight of *ren*. The problems of social divisions, selfishness, corruption, isolationism, and dogmatism were a kind of sickness causing paralysis in society. The creative implementation of ritual conduct and cultural heritage that had been the backbone of self-cultivation had given way to empty mimicry and dogmatic traditionalism. Those in power were no longer able to creatively participate in the changing world around them. In the *Exposition of Ren*, he repeatedly attacks the recalcitrance of Confucian literati and the Qing government to reform. He derides the false moral superiority of those in power who use doctrines of Confucian morality to oppress others. For Tan, the dogmatic ritual practices and rigid identities that grounded social and political life in Qing Dynasty China had become stagnant, oppressive, and artificial rather than edifying and facilitating of creativity. In short, society had lost sight of the very *ren* that these rituals were intended to nurture. For the Confucian cultural tradition to survive, its ritual forms needed to change and adapt. He reminds his readers that even Confucius in the *Analects* and elsewhere recognized that the ritual order of

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society had changed over time and was not immutable. Therefore, in the *Exposition* Tan asserts that, "when rituals do not work, they have to be changed for the people."[159]

Lastly, Tan sees the problems of dogmatic conservativism, selfishness, and isolationism as tied together by a common thread, which he characterizes as a lack of *tong*. He believes these problems can be addressed through greater interconnection and openness, specifically through an openness and understanding of other cultures and an overcoming of conceptual divisions between self and other. Thus, Tan contends that the loss of *tong* signals a loss of *ren*. The solution to China's problem requires the integration of China into this new global community by bringing different world cultures into communication with one another.

The following sections will explore how Tan uses his understanding of *ren* to synthesize different cultural systems, as well as how this informs his critique of Chinese society. Stated briefly, we can read Tan as conducting a kind of philosophical critique, one where he is describing not the conditions for the possibility of scientific knowledge (which is not his primary concern), but of the possibility of a cultural system for cultivating *ren*. *Tong*, he concludes, is what all cultural systems have in common. It is what makes any cultural system possible, and *tong* is ultimately what any cultural system is trying to facilitate. If a cultural system frustrates *tong* and creates blockage, it becomes inhuman, paralyzed, and sick. By interpreting *ren* as *tong* he demonstrates that our humanity doesn't just give rise to the Chinese cultural system (implying that all other systems are barbaric). Rather, exchange between cultural systems is necessary to help us understand and cultivate our humanity.

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[159] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 91.

3. *Ren*, *Tong*, and Ether

The problem of the breakdown of the *tianxiaguan* explains why Tan's primary

philosophical concerns in the *Exposition of Ren* are not epistemological. He does not employ the

principle of reason to identify the foundations of objective knowledge. Nor does he offer up the

Western scientific approach to knowledge as something that stands in opposition to a "religious,"

"traditional," or "spiritual" approach. Instead, the major focus of his text is on various aspects of

cultural systems like rituals, social identities, societal structures, economic systems, and

language. The confrontation with another authoritative cultural system with its own social

organization and ways of ordering things (*gewu*), pushed Tan to reexamine the very concept of

ren. With the emergence of the *shijieguan* came the relativizing not of truth in the sciences and

religion, as in the case of the early modern West, but of the authority of the Chinese cultural

system and its sages. The skeptical challenge Tan faces is not "in a world of myriad perspectives

and religions, how can I arrive at true knowledge?" but "In a world of myriad cultures, how do

we cultivate *ren*?" Tan's strategy for dealing with the problem is not to reject traditional culture

in favor of a Western one that he considers more "scientific." Instead, he seeks for a way to make

different cultural systems commensurable with one another so that they can reveal the meaning

of *ren*.

First, Tan reminds his readers that, according to Confucius, ritual activity finds the basis

of its justification in *ren*.[160] He writes, "rituals are dependent upon *ren* for their expression; when

there is *ren*, there naturally are rituals."[161] Rituals are important only insofar as they help

beautify the *shen* body and cultivate *ren*. If the rituals are performed in a way that is merely

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[160] Confucius, *Analects* 3.3: 人而不仁，如禮何？人而不仁，如樂何？ (If a person is not *ren*, what does he have to do with ritual? If a person is not *ren*, what does he have to do with music?)
[161] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 252.

mechanical or perfunctory, then the ritual performances are empty. Mere imitation cannot help us achieve *ren*. All this echoes the insights of the Confucian classics. The novelty of Tan's approach, I argue, is that he proposes that *any* cultural system, not just the one laid out by Confucius and the sage kings, is potentially an expression of our *ren* and aims to help us model *ren* behavior.

It is in light of this proposal that we ought to interpret his recommended bibliography for understanding *ren* in the preface of his book. What would have immediately struck any of Tan's conservative contemporaries as senseless is that the bibliography includes a wide variety of texts beyond the Confucian classics. He includes Buddhist sutras, Daoist and Mohist texts, books of Western science and mathematics, and even the New Testament. This list of works openly challenges the familiar boundaries of the textual tradition and its ordering of knowledge from the outset of his exposition. From a certain perspective, these texts not only preach different doctrines, they are even engaged in wildly divergent fields. Some seemingly contradict one another while others appear to talk past one another entirely. Tan presents this surprising bibliography in order to pose the question that motivates his exposition. In a world of multiple different cultural systems, multiple *dao* for self-cultivation, what does *ren* mean? Taking seriously the validity of other cultural perspectives requires us to revisit the very nature of our humanity.

However, Tan believes that not all cultural systems are equally capable of cultivating *ren*. If they were, *ren* would simply be whatever a cultural system cultivates. This would render *ren* an empty concept and not at all helpful for facilitating meaningful dialogue. Instead, Tan believes the survival and influence of a cultural system corresponds to the degree to which it fosters *ren* conduct. This aspect of Tan's thought is often overlooked in the secondary literature,

but it is crucial to understanding his strategy. He makes it clear from the outset in the preface where he writes,

> A handful of discriminating men often grieve about the loss of [Confucius'] teaching. I venture to disagree. Why? Because a teaching cannot die. When a teaching dies, this must be because its roots are not strong enough to survive. Why then should we grieve its death? The highest teaching is one which at most loses its name, but its core meaning can never perish. Names are not what sages contend about. The word "sage" is a name, as are the sage's family and personal names. Names have nothing to do with persistence or extinction… There is nothing wrong with saying that the *dao* can be found in excrement, and that the Buddhist Law is but toilet paper. Why? Because they are but names, their core meaning can never perish. Only when [a teaching] has a core meaning but is unable to restrict itself to it does it cause people to be confused by "name" and "core meaning."[162]

This crucial passage signals the approach that Tan employs throughout his exposition. All teachings, all cultural systems, have a core meaning (*shigu* 實固) which is expressed through words, or "names" (*ming* 名). The exact vocabularies, doctrines, and ritual customs vary from teaching to teaching, but the success of a teaching is determined by how well it is able to transmit this core meaning. People become confused between names and the core meaning of a teaching when people become overly focused on the terms, rituals, or doctrines of a teaching, and thus lose sight of the ultimate message behind them.

For Tan, the core meaning that all teachings transmit is *ren*. Any cultural system that proves enduring and influential does so because it resonates with our *ren* dispositions and thus is an effective *dao* for cultivating *ren*. If it appears to die out, it is only in its superficial forms. That is, cultural systems can evolve and change form over time, but the core meaning of *ren* does not die. Therefore, names are not what sages cared about. In Tan's view, there were three main sages who "were able to be the source of *ren*,"[163] that is, who truly embodied the quality of *ren* in their

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[162] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 236.
[163] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 55.

activities and were able to formulate a *dao* that proved enduring and influential. The three

individuals were Siddhartha Gautama (the first Buddha, 5th-4th century BCE), Confucius, and

Jesus. He regards them as the founding sages of the three major world cultural systems of India,

China, and the West, represented by Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity.[164] Yet at their

core, they all aim at providing a *dao* for cultivating *ren*.

Tan asserts that the fundamental meaning of *ren* is *tong* 通. The concept of *tong* was first

introduced as the immanent principle of continuity within ubiquitous change in *The Book of

Changes*. Yet the full meaning of the character suggests a kind of an unobstructed flow,

communication, intelligibility, and a lack of barriers. Tan is suggesting that this is essentially

what we mean by *ren*.[165] If a person is disconnected, isolated, or unable to communicate (a

contemporary biomedical example would be someone who is brain dead) their humanity strikes

us as diminished. Tan thus concludes that, "the difference between *ren* and not *ren* [*buren* 不仁],

therefore, lies in whether there is continuity [*tong*] or blockage."[166] Each sage developed

teachings to foster and nurture this *tong/ren* disposition in human beings. The doctrinal and

ritualistic differences of these teachings are accounted for by the fact that each were designed to

be suited to their specific historical, cultural, and environmental needs.[167] Even the word "*ren*,"

Tan concedes, is just a name. It is merely the term used within Confucianism to refer to this

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[164] Tan does not give a justification for his selection. Nor does he explain the exclusion of other major figures such as Mohammad, of whom he almost certainly was aware. It appears he takes it as self-evident that these three cultural discourses are the ones that contend for world dominance or have proven themselves the most effective in promulgating their influence and constructing major world civilizations. This narrow view of world culture limits the usefulness of his work as a treatise on world culture. However, his fundamental strategy, and how it helped to establish a discourse that might be described as "modern" are what is of interest here.
[165] Recall also that *ren* was associated sometimes with *gantong* or a feeling of *tong*. See Chapter one section two.
[166] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 241.
[167] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 144.

disposition of *tong*. None of the three cultural systems, therefore, were able to articulate a perfect cultural system for cultivating *ren* once and for all.

Thus, Tan asserts that the condition for the possibility of any cultural system is the presence of this *tong*. *Tong* is also the feature that all cultural systems worthy of the name seek to facilitate. However, *tong* is not just a feature of our humanity; it is a fundamental feature of existence. After all, one is not just connected with other humans, but in fact one shares a connection on some level with all things. Eating, breathing, and perceiving are just some of the ways in which we can see that we are existentially tied up with the world around us. Tan's claim that *ren* is a fundamental feature of existence is not entirely his own innovation. Throughout the middle ages, particularly among the Song (960-1279) and Ming (1368-1644) Confucians, the notion that the quality of *ren* entailed a realization of one's continuity or interconnection with the rest of the universe became a common understanding. Recall that the goal of philosophical reflection in the *Book of Changes* was to establish a "feeling of continuity," or *gantong*, with the world. This feeling constitutes a kind of learned wisdom and allows one to interact with one's physical, social, and natural environments in a way that is alluring, charismatic, effortless, and efficacious. It is the goal of all *dao*, and the standard by which various *dao* can be deemed effective or not. Therefore, it is not all that difficult to see why Tan would asserts that *ren*, at its core means *tong*. He is bringing this evaluative standard to the surface as the method for comparing various *dao* and the cultural systems they produce.

The second way we can understand Tan's move here, besides its connection to the *Book of Changes* and Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism, is by understanding *ren* as analogous to Wittgenstein's notion of a form of life. Recall that Mencius' claim was that all humans share a form of life, a certain set of behavioral dispositions to empathy and socialization. He calls this

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our heart of *ren*, or the heart that cannot bear the suffering of others. Rather than saying that everything is "benevolence," we can understand Tan's claim that everything is *ren* as the claim that everything shares a form of life at a basic level. For instance, I do not just form communities with other human beings. We often share a form of life with other non-human animals. For instance, in modern Western societies, it is not uncommon to have a dog that is considered a valued member of the family. I can communicate with a dog, understand its emotions, play games with it, etc. Moreover, dogs understand my behaviors and emotions, and they can learn rules. Tan appears to expand this observation to say that that, in the broadest sense, I share a form of life with anything that can be experienced. If I have knowledge of something, it means that it is connected in some way with me. I could not have knowledge of an object that did not interact with other things in the universe on any level.[168] For this reason, *tong* reveals itself as the condition for the possibility of a form of life and as the condition for knowledge. Without a level of *tong* between myself and something else, I could not have knowledge of it, much less form a relationship with it. Thus, *tong*, which is the condition for the possibility of a cultural system, is also ultimately the condition for the possibility of anything's existence at all. While things may sometimes appear to be independent, they in fact are fundamentally connected with everything else. If a truly independent entity did exist, we could not possibly have knowledge of it since it would not interact with us on any level.

Tan invokes the Western scientific concept of ether to explain this phenomenon. He writes that everything in existence is "permeated with something extremely vast and minute, the cohesive, penetrative, and connective power of which embraces all things… For want of a better

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[168] For instance, think of a substance like dark matter. This substance is mysterious to science precisely because it doesn't interact with other matter on any level other than through the force of gravity. Thus, one might say that this substance (if it exists) is one of the most remote from my form of life, and therefore, difficult to understand.

term, let it be called "ether" [*yitai* 以太]."[169] The term ether, which had been part of Western

scientific discourse since Aristotle, eventually became obsolete after Einstein. However, during

the 19th century, it was a standard concept in the leading scientific theories of European

science.[170] This theoretical substance was posited as a ubiquitous medium through which light

was transmitted. It was also regarded by some scientists of the day as being responsible for

communicating attractive and cohesive forces such as electromagnetism and gravity.[171] For Tan,

ether is simply a name that describes a fundamental, undifferentiated material body responsible

for the cohesion and existence of objects. It is in this sense the material condition for *ren*.

He describes this fundamental level of interconnection through the ether as "the origin

[*yuan* 元], the function of which reaches the extreme in nothingness [*wu* 无]."[172] He describes it

in terms of nothingness since it exists prior to all forms and distinctions. It is the primal ocean of

becoming out of which all individuated things emerge. Therefore, *tong* is the originating feature

of existence that is manifested in all things, including our cultural systems. Since *tong* is the

fundamental meaning of *ren*, *ren* is the origin of everything. Thus, he says, "in heaven and earth

there is only *ren*."[173]

It is at this point that many interpreters, like Chang Hao, begin to mistakenly regard Tan

as engaging in a kind of mysticism.[174] They interpret this ultimate origin as a mystical, noumenal

realm that stands beyond the phenomenal world, defying any kind of articulation.[175] However,

Tan explicitly rejects the idea that the ultimate origin is a metaphysical realm beyond, behind, or

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[169] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 67.
[170] This is the central thesis of Wright's article. See, Wright, "Tan Sitong and the Ether Reconsidered".
[171] Wright, "Tan Sitong and the Ether Reconsidered", 560.
[172] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 236.
[173] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 242.
[174] Chang Hao, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*, 88.
[175] To be fair, some aspects of Tan's work welcome this interpretation of mysticism. He, for instance, talks about one becoming capable of superhuman abilities once one can comprehend this nothingness.

beneath the phenomenal one. While, strictly speaking, *ren* by its very nature defies exhaustive

articulation, it is not a mystical concept beyond human comprehension. Clearly Tan believes

there is something we can and should say about *ren*. His claim about the nothingness of *ren* is

distinct from dichotomies such as noumena and phenomena or reality and appearance. Following

the theories of Yogacara and Huayan Buddhism,[176] Tan sees such pairs as not mutually exclusive

but mutually conditioning. Ether brings individuated objects into existence, but individuated

objects are the way that ether manifests itself. It cannot exist apart from the objects of our

experience. Similarly, *ren* is what makes a cultural system possible, but our cultural systems are

also necessary for articulating *ren*. The origin does not ontologically precede that which it

originates. That is why it is "nothingness" rather than an ontological being. Nothingness and

"existence" (*you* 有) are coemergent and mutually dependent.[177]

Thus, while *ren* can be articulated by many different cultural systems it is not reducible to

any specific one. Tan is echoing the Daoist claim that any *dao* is incomplete in Gödel's sense.

That is, no cultural system can ever prove itself to be a constant guide for cultivating *ren*.[178]

There may be situations in which the available *dao* no longer works, no longer helps us achieve

effortless skill in our activities, or a point at which a *dao* provides contradictory advice for how

to go on. Any *dao* must be interpreted, and we can't simply appeal to further *dao* to help tell us if

we have followed it correctly. Therefore, while *ren* presents a kind of continuity within change,

it is not a permanent structure that transcends change. Tan writes, "this is why *The Book of*

Changes begins with a discussion of the "ultimate origin" [*yuan*], then of "penetration" [*heng*

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[176] For a helpful discussion of how Chinese Buddhist philosophy deals with the topic of ultimate reality and the conventional world see, Graham Priest, *The Fifth Corner of Four*: *An Essay on Buddhist Metaphysics and the Catuṣkoṭi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) , 111.
[177] This is one of the basic precepts of the classic philosophical text the *Daodejing*, which Tan frequently cites.
[178] *Daodejing* Ch. 1, 道可道非常道

亨]. The ultimate origin is *ren* and penetration is *tong*."[179] He associates *ren* with *tong* because he regards *ren* as the continuity that emerges within constant transformation in the movement of ether.

Moreover, his adoption of the Western scientific vocabulary to describe this ultimate origin is not a strategy to draw upon the authority of Western science to lend legitimacy to a mystical Chinese cosmology. I argue, he is making a substantive claim that the Western scientific worldview *as a part of a cultural dao* is commensurable with Chinese thought. He writes,

> When [the ether] reveals itself in function, Confucius calls it "*ren*," the "origin" (*yuan*), and "nature" (*xing* 性); Mozi calls it "love without discrimination" (*jianai* 兼爱); the Buddha calls it "the sea of thusness" (*xinghai* 性海), and "compassion" (*cibei* 慈悲); Jesus calls it "soul," "love your neighbor as yourself," and "love your enemies like friends"; and natural scientists call it "centripetal force" and "gravitational force" – all refer to this thing.[180]

Modern science observes the principle of *ren* in natural phenomena such as electricity, the cohesion of heavenly bodies, and brain function.[181] It can also be observed in the paralysis that results from the severing of communication between the nerves in the body.[182] He brings these things up to demonstrate that science provides a legitimate way of discoursing about *ren*/*tong*. The texts of Western philosophy and science as well as those of Buddhism can help illuminate this ultimate continuity that the sages were attempting to nurture.

To conclude, remembering that Tan's concerns are organized around a problem of cultural skepticism, not epistemological skepticism, allows us to get a clearer picture of how his ideas hang together. He is asking what makes a cultural system influential, authoritative, and

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[179] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 241.
[180] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 67.
[181] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 73.
[182] Traditional Chinese medicine describes paralysis as "*buren* 不仁".

enduring. The Confucian position was that our inborn dispositions will naturally make certain ways of behaving more intuitively appealing than others. A culture that produced *ren* individuals would necessarily become more powerful and influential (have greater *de*). Traditionally, when China faced crisis, it was perceived to be caused by a departure or failure to correctly interpret the *dao* of the sages. Now Tan is calling the established cultural tradition itself into question and returning to the concept of *ren* for guidance. *Ren* cannot have been exhaustively articulated by any one of these three successful teachings but perhaps bringing them into dialogue may help us understand *ren* better. This is not a turn to mysticism as much as a logical insight into the nature of the skeptical problem he is facing, given the role *ren* played in Confucian thought.

In this way, Tan is able to use his new interpretation of *ren* to recast self-cultivation within a more cosmopolitan worldview. He writes,

> It is only through continuity [*tong*] that the attainment of *ren* is possible. Hence in benefitting the self and benefitting others, we are forever sticking to what is right. When those mean and foolish people get a piece of fine cloth or a good meal, their faces beam with delight, because they have personally acquired those things. At that moment, their immediate reaction is to think of the self and its power; they stop there and have no continuity with others so that troubles about selfish interests arise… it is slightly better when people are able to attain continuity within a family, though not within a village. Perhaps in time they can attain continuity within a village or district, but cannot do so throughout an entire country. If gradually they attain continuity within the entire country, but balk when the idea of achieving continuity with the entire world is mentioned – this can hardly be *ren*.[183]

Tan concludes that the cultural crisis facing China cannot be solved by clinging to the status quo or through economic and cultural isolationism. Instead, he returns to the origin (*yuan*) of *ren* and reinterprets the project of self-cultivation as a process of achieving greater interconnection and continuity between self and Other. Whether it be an individual or a nation, those who continually divide the world between the interests of the self and the interests of others cannot achieve *ren*.

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[183] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 241.

Like a severed limb, they will achieve only paralysis, numbness, and decay. Understanding that one's ultimate self-interests are intertwined with the interests of others is the true meaning of *ren* and what makes a culture fit to preside over others. Understood this way, his claim that at their core the teachings of Confucius, Buddha, and Jesus all taught *ren* appears more plausible.

4. *Ren* and the Cultural System

Only once we have interpreted the relationship of *ren*, *tong*, and ether in this way can we begin to make sense of the way he critiques the Chinese cultural system. To summarize, Tan is searching for what quality all cultural systems seek to cultivate. The Confucian system called this quality *ren* and posited it as an inborn human disposition that gave rise to the Confucian cultural system. The authority of the Confucian cultural system was demonstrated by its authoritative status in the world of the *tianxiaguan*. The collapse of the *tianxiaguan* revealed to Tan that multiple different cultural systems can cultivate *ren*. Therefore, he wants to find what understanding of this *ren* disposition lies at the heart of any cultural system whatsoever and makes them all possible. This will also show us the principle that makes certain cultural systems more enduring and influential. Tan puts forward the principle of *tong* as the condition for the possibility of a cultural system for self-cultivation. A cultural system is successful to the extent that it facilitates *tong*, but fails insofar as it frustrates it.

Since mastery of the cultural system is traditionally the path to achieving authoritative conduct (*ren*), it is necessary for Tan to clarify in what ways a cultural system can help or hinder *tong*. Recall that cultural systems include ritual conventions like the system of naming (language), the division of social roles (including familial and political ones), and the expected performances and obligations attached to those roles. Tan does not dispute the fundamental necessity of these for achieving *ren*. Ritualistic distinctions are helpful tools for teaching *ren* and

cultivating it in individuals. Each of the founding sages developed a kind of ritual discourse for cultivating *ren* fitted to their cultural-historical environment. Therefore, rituals remain for Tan a necessary part of any cultural system for cultivating *ren*.

Yet, at the same time, Tan believes that rituals can also become the greatest hindrance to *ren*. Language can give the impression that things are fixed and independent. The ritualistic division of people into different roles within society and their relegation to different spaces obscures the fundamental continuity between all things. He claims that, "to differentiate others from the self and thus treat others differently from the self is like tearing the body asunder by chariots."[184] Eventually, people may become more focused on the pedantic miming of ritual conventions than on the cultivation of *ren*. At this point, the very rituals that are meant to cultivate *ren* become a barrier to achieving it. If left unchecked, this petty preoccupation with ritual propriety can result in the death of a society, like a body being torn apart.

Of all the aspects of a cultural system, the system of naming receives the most sustained criticism from Tan. He believes language is the most ubiquitous and pernicious of all ritual conventions in a cultural system. It risks obscuring *ren* in several ways. The first is by creating relative categories of mutual opposites (e.g. self/other, near/far, good/evil).[185] These oppositions give the illusion of discrete independent objects when in fact they are complementary and mutually entailing. Tan spends much of Part One of the *Exposition* deconstructing these relative categories by showing how each category is logically dependent upon its opposite.[186] Ultimately, he claims, there is only *ren*. The second is that we can become overly attached to names and forget *ren*. Tan sees all linguistic distinctions as conventional distinctions since ultimately all

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[184] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 77.
[185] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 83.
[186] See especially sections 9 through 13, Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 80-94.

things are united through the constant transformations of ether.[187] These distinctions can be organized in different ways according to the needs of the community. They are born out of habitual action, but over time can come to be regarded as immutable and necessary.

At one point, he illustrates his view on the nature of language by quoting a famous passage from the classical philosopher Zhuangzi (莊子 4th century BCE), which states, "a path is made by walking, things are so through appellation."[188] Tan uses this passage to remind his readers that the rules of ritual propriety actually originated from forms of everyday practices; they did not precede them. Just as a path may look like it is guiding the way we walk, what caused that path to come into being in the first place is the repeated act of walking. Over time the path appears to be the one directing us as we walk along it, yet really the path and the walking along of this route are coemergent. In other words, the rules governing the cultural system are not based on transcendent principles that precede them as a ground. Nor can a perfect cultural system be built recursively from knowledge of a universal human nature (he rejects the existence of a universal human nature).[189] They are merely culturally specific programs for achieving *ren*/*tong*. The sages, "only made use of the names already established by custom to illustrate the application of *ren*, so that people can understand it more easily."[190] Examples of such names can include names of moral virtues such as courage, filial piety, and even *ren* itself. Other cultural systems with different names can also be effective ways for cultivating *ren*/*tong*, but they will always be provisional. When they no longer work, they ought to be changed.

Tan's persistent concern throughout Part One is that the names of virtues and other conventional distinctions become objects of pedantic obsession by petty moralizers and pharisaic

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[187] This is why he claims the sages were not concerned with names. See, Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 78.
[188] Zhuangzi 2.6: 道行之而成，物謂之而然
[189] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 88-89.
[190] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 77

authorities. While these names were originally used as vehicles for communicating the teaching of *ren*, "with the passage of time however, the situation deteriorates to the point where teaching is lost while the names remain hanging in the air."[191] Since no *dao* is ever constant, a cultural system can over time lose its relationship to *ren*, particularly if it loses sight of the ultimate origin – that fundamental interconnection that establishes all things. Certain people then cling to the names and doctrines, forgetting that these were conventions set up for the purpose of communicating something deeper about our humanity.

One need only think of the way practitioners of religious traditions can commit atrocities in the name of certain doctrines that would likely have appalled the founding prophets of those religions. These kinds of acts, Tan might say, emerge not out of an understanding of *ren* but from a narrow-minded desire to further one's selfish ends. Speaking on the five relations, for instance, he writes that names are "used by rulers to control their subjects, by officials to curb their people, by fathers to repress sons, and by husbands to oppress wives; brothers and friends each seize upon a name with which to resist each other."[192] Those who speak out against leaders or fathers are called "disloyal" or "unfilial" to silence them. The actual moral message that Confucius sought to transmit with these virtues gets manipulated and twisted to become a tool for oppression. After all, he claims, "such names as "loyalty" and "filial piety" apply only to subjects and sons, they can never be used against rulers and fathers."[193] Words that were once used to cultivate society, are weaponized to label and denounce opponents, driving society apart. He mournfully observes in his own society those of equal status using the platitudes of traditional values to fight and denigrate one another dividing the country into petty factionalism.

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[191] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 79.
[192] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 78.
[193] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, Ibid.

It is this that has led to "the loss of any standards of judgments in society" and for him to observe (with great prescience) that a disaster was at hand.

All of this shows how the system of naming can move from a system that enables communication to one that, over time, reifies identities and feeds divisions between self and Other. To resist this process, Tan believes we must remember that it is *ren*, not the specific rituals of a cultural system, that is fundamental. Therefore, he writes, "ritual propriety [*li* 禮] is a name given to what has been put into practice for a long time: propriety in itself is truly inessential. The difference between propriety and impropriety is solely a matter of whether there is *ren* or not. That is why I say: in heaven and earth, *ren* alone exists."[194] We should not take him to be advocating a mystic monism in which all things are, in truth, *ren* or ether. He is merely addressing himself to a culture that he believes has become overly concerned with ritual propriety and reminding them that without *ren*, rituals are meaningless.

The reciprocal relationship between cultural systems and *ren* runs throughout the entirety of his critique of Chinese society and serves as the basis for his reforms. Thus, the majority of the first part of the text is devoted to explaining this relationship, arguing for the conventional nature of language, and rejecting a universal human nature. However, this aspect of Tan's thought is often glossed over in accounts of his philosophy, if it is addressed at all. Without it, his later political critiques in part two appear as an unconnected transition to themes cobbled together from various disparate sources justified with attenuated references to traditional culture.

To understand how he uses this reciprocal relationship to advocate for democracy (*minzhu* 民主), autonomy (*zizhu* 自主), and equality (*pingdeng* 平等), it is helpful to take a specific ritual system like language as an analogy. First, consider the fact that speakers of a

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[194] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 76.

language are all members of a ritual community. They are united by the meaningful actions that produce sounds and visual symbols that facilitate communication and form the basis of a linguistic community. Through speaking the language, members collectively establish conventions for making certain ritual distinctions. They create words and establish the scope of their application, they may conjugate verbs, distinguish between number and cases, and so on. These systems can take a variety of forms (French, Chinese, Dutch). The basis of any of these ritual systems is simply a behavioral disposition among members of the community toward communication. The way in which that community achieves this will be different depending on where they are. As stated before, this predisposition toward communication does not take the form of a universal grammar (in Chomsky's sense). That is to say, it does not precede it or lie beneath it structuring it like the foundations of a house. It only becomes manifest through the act of speaking itself, like Zhuangzi's path. Tan would describe this disposition as empty and characterize it as nothingness as opposed to a positive structure. The disposition to communicate arises along with communication and is structured by it. Language cultivates that disposition – as we continue to use the language, it becomes more sophisticated, and we become better at discoursing on a wider range of topics. Thus, the relationship between the communicative disposition (*ren*/*tong*) and language (the cultural system) is reciprocal.

Now Tan would draw our attention to the fact that we normally think of the rules of a particular language (e.g., English grammar, syntax, definitions, etc.) as guiding and governing its use, but this is a mistake. The rules of the English language emerged implicitly from the practice of speaking English itself. Like Zhuangzi's road, speaking English and the rules for speaking English arose simultaneously. Only after repeated practice did certain rules begin to emerge that look as though they are governing the language, guiding us toward correct usages. As the

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language community grows, these rules are then formalized and articulated by cultural authorities for the sake of maintaining consistency and establishing standards for determining "proper" and "improper" uses. At first, establishing formalized rules for the use of English is helpful for standardizing language and ensuring uniformity and intelligibility (*tong*) within the community. Rules of spelling, conjugation, pronunciation, and word usage aid in the uniformity of the language and solidify the identity of the community as speakers of a clearly defined language.

Of course, some rules are chosen for their popularity, practicality, or convenience. Others are perhaps chosen at random among a set of simultaneous existing conventions, merely for the sake of uniformity (e.g. choosing the spelling "favor" over "favour). Which conventions become the rules for "proper" use are chosen by cultural authorities. These cultural authorities form a privileged or elite class who increasingly favor their own conventions as "proper" and declare others as informal or "improper." While these rules are originally intended to ensure effective communication, they can over time lose touch with the natural development of actual communicative practices within the community if they fail to adapt to the changing nature of living language. Eventually, there comes a point at which the formal, proper use of the language becomes distinct from the vulgar or common use of the language. There in effect emerges class division in the language community. Put differently, the formalization of the ritual conventions eventually causes divisions within the community it was designed to unify.

Thus, Tan believes political power is an integral part of how the cultural system becomes entrenched and how it maintains itself. He argues that names "mean first one thing and then another, depending on where power and authority lie."[195] The sages used names to develop a

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[195] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 77.

cultural system that enhances interconnection, but over time the ritual forms are enforced by those in positions of authority (through institutions like the imperial examination system) as though there could not have been any other way, as though they were derived from an unchanging human nature or were built from necessity. This is then exploited for the selfish ends of those who use ritual distinctions to maintain their authority and divide society. Dogmatic attachment to these rules ends up dividing society and compromising *tong*. As the cultural system becomes increasingly divorced from *ren*, the rituals become static, meaningless, and even toxic. They frustrate *tong* and paralyze society with petty pedanticism.

In particular, Tan believes that those in power (whether fathers, emperors, or husbands) have a selfish interest in maintaining hierarchical social relations. He blames China's diminished position in the world on this unwillingness to reform society among the Qing government elites. He writes,

> It is obvious that reform alone can save our country from falling; yet no reform is insisted on. Is this not because reform will enlighten the people who must be kept ignorant, enrich the people who must be kept poor, strengthen the people who must be kept weak, and give life to the people who must be killed? In short, instead of imposing ignorance, poverty, weakness, and death on the people, reform would make it necessary to vie with the people for knowledge, wealth, power, and survival, things that are at present monopolized by the Manchu ruler."[196]

Those in power are fighting to maintain their authoritative place in the cultural system and not to preserve the Confucian teaching of *ren*. In truth, *ren* can only be brought about through political and cultural reform. The reforms Tan calls for include democracy, autonomy, and equality. Yet, he does not argue for these things using familiar liberal arguments based on individualism or

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[196] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 163.

rights. Rather his justification for them is that they promote "daily renewal" (*rixin* 日新) and keep societies from becoming stagnant and rigid.[197]

The concept of daily renewal is a traditional Confucian concept that has its origins in the *Great Learning*. It originally signified the commitment to self-cultivation that the gentleman must consciously renew every day. However, Tan takes this traditional, well-known idea and employs it against his society's obsessive, reactionary veneration of that very same tradition. He claims that daily renewal is a property of the constant flux of ether, and therefore, constant change is necessary for maintaining *ren*. Any system that becomes rigid, inflexible, and unchanging will guarantee its own obsolescence.

While Tan uses the Chinese neologism *minzhu* (literally, "people rule"), to translate the Western concept of "democracy," we should be careful about assuming a simple equivalence. Democracy, for Tan, does not necessarily imply universal suffrage or elections. He never gives a precise outline of what a *ren* government ought to look like. Rather, by democracy, Tan appears to simply mean a government that promotes equality and reciprocity between those in positions of authority and those below. In this way, it emphasizes the needs and dignity of everyone in society. Since the cultural system originates with the everyday practices of society, the political organization of society must somehow reflect the movement of the general will of the people. Like the Western concept, Tan associates democracy with a greater degree of individual autonomy. However, "autonomy," which Tan refers to with the neologism *zizhu* (literally "self rule"), is not construed in terms of the self-legislating of universal laws of action. Nor does he ever present it as a process of transcending one's social or cultural situatedness through rational

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[197] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 110.

action. In fact, Tan sees autonomy as grounded in the relation of friendship.[198] Of all the five

relations (ruler-minister, husband-wife, father-son, older brother-younger brother, friend-friend),

friendship is the one that emphasizes the equality (*pingdeng* 平等) of its constituents, since

neither of the pair is placed above the other in terms of authority. Through friendship with other

individuals who are cultivating *ren*, we surround ourselves with possible teachers and role

models, as Confucius recommends.[199] These friends can correct our mistakes and help us on the

path toward *ren*. This reciprocal relationship between friends helping one another better

themselves is what Tan refers to with the term *zizhu*. Instead of a ruler or a father imposing rules

and restrictions on those who are deemed below them, friends realize their *ren* through a co-

creative process of mutual critique and encouragement.

Tan believes democracy is realized when we realize that all the other relationships have

this notion of friendship at their core. Roles like "father," "son," and "ruler" are only names that

obscure the fundamental equality that unites all through *ren*. Tan writes, "when the evils of a

ruler and subjects reach an extreme, father and son, husband and wife naturally follow suit and

each will use a name to control the other… the existence of names not only keeps people silent

and makes them refrain from speaking up, it also shackles their minds, and keeps them from

thinking. The best way to keep people ignorant is to proliferate names."[200] For instance, the label

"rebel" is just a name that is used to suppress people who seek reform. He notes the irony that

"no ruler has ever come to power without first staging a rebellion. He who fails is condemned as

a rebel; he who luckily succeeds is praised as heavenly king."[201]

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[198] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 177.
[199] *Analects* 7.22: 三人行，必有我師焉。擇其善者而從之，其不善者而改之。 "When I walk with two others, I always find a teacher among them. Their good qualities I will follow, their bad qualities I will change."
[200] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 173.
[201] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 143.

Ultimately, all of the three major sages distinguished themselves by arguing for equality and democracy (in Tan's understanding of the term). Each, he claims, fought against the idea that privilege was deserved by one person or group of people. The social structures that they helped establish were originally meant to be reciprocal and edifying, not hierarchical. He concludes then that autonomy is essential to a *ren* society and is realized through the dissolution of the hierarchical relations into the equal relation of friendship. Democracy is realized when ruler and subject mutually forget each other's position, and the ruler becomes one of the people.[202]

A final way in which societies ensure the process of daily renewal is by openness to other cultures through economic, technological, and cultural exchange. Tan empathizes with the West saying that their acts of imperialism are in fact a manifestation of *ren*. It is China, he argues, that has cut itself off from trade and interaction with the rest of the world. The resulting misfortune is the inevitable result of this. China should instead be developing its economy to integrate with the emerging world economy. Moreover, Tan believes that the emergence of new technologies will allow both individuals and society to further realize their interconnection. The spread of information and the flow of people will aid in the sharing and mixing of different cultural traditions bringing forth new ways of understanding and cultivating *ren*. Yet he does not frame his vision for the future of China in terms of an economic, political, and technological utopia. Every *dao*, every technology, every ritual organization of society that facilitates interconnection at the same time hides intrinsic dangers for disconnection and division. One can think of present observations on the dual potential of the Internet for both greater interconnection and great division, greater democracy as well as greater authoritarianism. The difference, for Tan, lies in

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[202] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 154. Think of, for instance, how in a presidential democracy a person can take on the role of a president, and then return to being a citizen after a period of time. While Tan does not give a specific form of government, he seeks to describe an ethos where the boundaries between the roles of "ruler" and "subject" are porous and mobile.

whether there is renewal or complacency. The dangers are always present, and the task of daily renewal is constant, but we fail only when we stop trying.

5. Conclusion: Tan's Philosophy of *Ren* and Modernity

The question that concerns us is what about Tan's appropriation of *ren* warrants its status as a work of modern philosophy and what relationship does it have to modern thought as it is traditionally understood in the West? The above analysis shows that if we understand the modern character of his work in terms of Western forms of thought grafted onto a Chinese discourse, his project comes out as clumsy and superficial. If we approach his text as a proposed solution to a philosophical dilemma, his work reveals itself to be one of far more sophistication. Identifying the sources of modern or Western influences in Tan's thought does not in itself help us understand his philosophical aims. The interesting question is what made these ideas influential and how did they come together to form a solution to the problem of the breakdown of the *tianxiaguan*? Answering "because they are influential" merely begs the question. We might be able to locate sources of the concept of democracy, autonomy, or science in the modern Western tradition, but if we regard Tan as a passive receptacle for these influences, like an imprint on wax, then his philosophy comes out a superficial chimera of various influences and sources that he has ultimately misunderstood. He seems to both value novelty and appeal to traditional sources of authority. He criticizes the undemocratic nature of imperial China, but he gives no familiar account of liberal individualism as the basis for democratic values. He writes about the need for "autonomy" but grounds the concept in friendship, not the individual subject. These Western ideas take on new meanings within the discursive environment he is writing in, making them difficult to translate back into English. However, his use of these terms should not be seen

as a failure of understanding or as signs of superficiality. These moments of translation are productive and provide us with new possible understandings of these ideas.

Moreover, by analyzing his interpretation of *ren* as *tong* as a solution to a crisis of conflicting culture systems we can return some agency to his work. Under this interpretation, he does not merely react to the challenge of the West through compromise or resistance. He contributes a unique understanding of the values of democracy, tradition, and humanity. Autonomy is understood as something only possible within a community, where mutual critique and modeling are possible. Selfhood and equality require a process of overcoming the distinction between self and other. Through this approach, we can begin to place the relationship between Western and Chinese modernity into a clearer context. Tan, like early modern Western thinkers before him, attempts to establish common ground between competing perspectives. However, as we have seen, his strategy is quite different. The question that Tan poses at the outset is not an epistemological one. He is not asking about the validity or epistemic accuracy of Western science, or whether Christianity is the "true" expression of divinity. Nor does one ever get the sense that there are two pictures of the world, the religious and the scientific, that are at odds with one another or stand in need of reconciliation. Tan clearly sees science as reinforcing the claims of Buddhism, for instance, and he claims that investigations through science are necessary for understanding the interconnection of all things.[203] The opposition to European techno-science in China, such as it existed, was that it was a form of learning secondary to the wisdom required for cultivating *ren* and would hardly constitute the proper occupation for a gentleman. In other words, Tan is trying to convince his readers of the *value* of Western science as a method for cultivating *ren*.

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[203] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, Ibid. See also, Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 106.

The solution that Tan proposes is that we must overcome the divisions between cultural traditions to engage in a global process of creative discovery of *ren.* No *dao* for cultivating *ren* is constant. It must always adapt and change with the world. This insight, he insists, is at the core of all great teachings. He writes,

> The highest virtue resides in daily renewal alone, while the greatest evil is in the absence of daily renewal. How can heaven create without renewing itself?... And how can there be any changes in climate if the four seasons do not renew? Grass and trees lose their richness and luster if they do not renew. All veins and arteries for the vital energies are blocked if blood and breath do not renew… Renewal is expressed by Confucius as, "to mend one's ways"[*gaiguo* 改過[204]], by the Buddha as, "to be penitent"; and by Jesus as, "to repent." Constant renewal, on the other hand, is expressed by Confucius as, "to keep on doing," by the Buddha as, "to progress with virility"; and by Jesus in the idea that, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand."[205]

Tan is not merely making superficial comparisons of religious authorities. He is characterizing modernity as the realization of our humanity, a humanity that had been intuited by exemplary people around the world, but that we are always in a process of discovering and creating. Only now that the world is coming into greater connection through trade and technological development can this be more clearly understood. Modernity, understood as a process of realizing *ren*, is a process of self-cultivation in which we constantly renew ourselves, motivated by the promise of a better future. The source of Japan's success, he claims, was that it adopted the Western love of all things new.[206] Thus, the essence of daily renewal is a fondness for what is new.

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[204] *Analects*, 1.8: 子曰：「君子不重則不威，學則不固。主忠信，無友不如己者，過則勿憚改。」 "The Master said, 'If the scholar be not grave, he will not call forth any veneration, and his learning will not be solid. Hold faithfulness and sincerity as first principles. Do not have friends that are not equal to you. When you have faults, do not fear to mend your ways.'"
[205] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 110 and 257.
[206] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, Ibid.

Notice, however, that this is not a blanket rejection of traditional ideas in favor of a more "rational" Western worldview. In fact, he does not develop a theory of rationality to serve as the foundation for a cosmopolitan organization of society. His call for change originates in the reciprocal nature of *ren* and ritual. Tan's similarity to figures like Descartes or Kant is restricted to a single but important aspect: to overcome the skeptical crisis he was facing, Tan returns to what his tradition took to be the most original form of the human good (*ren*) and uses it to find a common ground. He reinterprets it with the insight expressed in the *Book of Changes* and renews it for the modern crisis he is facing. There can be no continuity (*tong*) without change (*bian*).

"Yang Zhu's principle is "egoism," which does not acknowledge the sovereign. Mozi's principle is "universal love," which does not acknowledge one's father. To not acknowledge sovereign or father is to be like the beasts."[207]

- Mencius

We now turn to the other two major figures of the Hundred Days' Reform: Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao. Kang Youwei was Tan Sitong's older contemporary while Liang was younger than Tan by about eight years. Placing Kang's work after Tan's in the order of analysis may seem like an odd choice since according to the traditional narrative Kang Youwei was Tan and Liang's teacher. However, the historical relationship between these three figures is complicated. In Liang's biography of Tan, written after his execution, Liang claims Tan declared himself a disciple of Kang Youwei after hearing of his ideas.[208] It is true that Tan Sitong in several places refers to Kang Youwei's thought and sees himself as in line with its cosmopolitan vision. However, my reading of these thinkers reveals that Tan's ideas are not at all derivative of Kang's and that they, in fact, disagree on some key issues. Liang's account of their relationship has also been challenged by the historical investigations of Zhang Dejun, who reveals a more tangential and even lukewarm relationship between the two thinkers.[209] It is unclear whether Tan and Kang ever met, and it appears much of what Tan knew of Kang's philosophy he learned by way of discussions with Liang Qichao. Chan Sin-wai likewise concludes that, "at no time was [Tan

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[207] *Mencius* 3B14: 楊氏為我，是無君也；墨氏兼愛，是無父也。無父無君，是禽獸也。
[208] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 37.
[209] Zhang Dejun, "Liang Qichao Ji Tan Sitong Shi Shishi Bian 梁啓超記譚嗣同事失實辨: (Clearing up the Inaccuracies in Liang Qichao's Biography of Tan Sitong)," *Wenshi* 文史 1 (1962), 81-85.

Sitong] a slavish disciple of Kang,"[210] despite such a portrayal by some later commentators. Instead, it is likely that Kang had a greater familiarity with Tan's philosophy than the other way around. After the failure of the reform and Tan's execution, Liang and Kang continued to write philosophy, develop their ideas, and be involved in politics. Therefore, the organization chosen here aims to reflect that development. In this chapter, I will show that while Kang and Liang's ideas ultimately developed in different directions, they continued to be concerned with the initial problem that Tan tried to solve in his *Exposition of Ren*: what does the cultivation of *ren* look like within the *shijieguan*?

Like with Tan, we see both Liang and Kang struggle to adapt to the discursive shift from *tianxiaguan* to *shijieguan*. Xiaobing Tang, for instance, notes that a major turning point in Liang's thought comes in 1890 when he comes across Xu Jiyu's world map (published in 1849).[211] As described in the previous chapter, modern geographical texts like Xu's helped convince these thinkers to take seriously the skeptical challenge of foreign cultural systems to the *tianxiaguan* and pushed the Reformers to develop new theories of self-cultivation that could function within this global space. Importantly, Tang describes how new concepts of national identity and linear time began to emerge out of this transition,

> To have access to the modern world, therefore, one had both to accept a new global, universal time and to claim a stable and coherent self-identity by means of a territorial nation. We can take this moment of simultaneous differentiation and identification as the birth of a collective modern Chinese subjectivity, its constitutive imaginary now being a world space in which China as a nation-state has to inscribe itself. The same moment also figuratively signals the inception of modern Chinese historical consciousness, for the dialectics of national space and universal time now becomes indelible in the Chinese discourse of modernity and its historical representation.[212]

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[210] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence* 38 N.6
[211] Xiaobing Tang, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 2.
[212] Tang, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity*, Ibid.

The emergence of the *shijieguan* required Kang and Liang to rethink "China," its cultural

system, and the Confucian *dao* within this new discursive environment. At the same time, the

history of China had to be reconciled with a new global history. It is this intersection between

universal time and emergent identities (such as nationality and race) that shows up in

philosophical systems of Kang and Liang as they situate their concepts of selfhood and self-

cultivation within the *shijieguan*.

In his monumental text, the *Book of the Great Unity* (*Datong Shu* 大同書), [213] Kang

Youwei describes time in terms of the evolutionary progression of society toward greater *tong*

同, or "unity and cooperation." This term "*tong*" is a homophone with Tan's "*tong* 通" and

likewise carries implications of interconnection and international cooperation. However, when

we examine their respective theories of *ren* we find that differences in these two terms lead them

to very different and even incompatible philosophical positions. Both Tan and Kang are

committed to a similar vision of cosmopolitanism, international cooperation, openness, and

equality. However, Kang's "*tong*" is much less metaphysical in its connotations than Tan's sense

of "unobstruction" and "continuity." Tan believes cultural systems are successful insofar as they

facilitate *tong* and will fall apart insofar as they do not. They can achieve *tong* through a

"democratic" process of constant change and adaptation referred to as daily renewal. Facilitating

tong requires the overcoming of rigid cultural conventions and the opening up to other cultural

traditions. The result is an ever-changing, international cultural system for self-cultivation based

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[213] There are several possible translations for this title. The character *tong* 同 is often used analogously to the English prefix "co-" as in "coed" or "coworker." It suggests level of mutuality, equality, and cooperation. Here, I have chosen "*Book of the Great Unity*" instead of Lawrence G. Thompson's *The One-World Philosophy of Kang Youwei*. Translations will generally follow Thompson's translation unless otherwise indicated. Where I have provided my own translations, I have cited the original Chinese text. See, Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* 大同书 (Beijing: Zhong guo ren min da xue chu ban she, 2010).

on free trade, international cooperation, and comparative learning. However, Tan does not provide content on what a *ren* cultural system should look like beyond the fact that it maximally facilitates *tong*. The reason is continuity requires constant change and adaptation. No cultural system can provide a perfect environment for cultivating *ren* once and for all. Kang on the other hand, is not satisfied with this. He believes that the world is approaching a state of sufficient global unity and cooperation (*tong* 同) to intuit the end of historical progress in the *datong* (the "great" unity). Kang sees self-cultivation as a part of a world-historical process of realizing a future utopia where all are united under a global cultural system and world government. As we will see, he draws out every detail of the future *ren* utopia largely through the identification of certain transcultural principles he calls "public principles" (*gongli* 公理). Citing the same important passage of the *Book of Changes* that discusses the relationship between change (*bian*) and continuity (*tong* 通),[214] he says, "today is the age when affairs have run their course, the day when the heavenly principles, human heart-minds [*xin* 心], the affairs of state, and the era of the earth all transform (*biantong*)."[215] This new form of society that will emerge from this transformation, for Kang, will last indefinitely, and those who are *ren* will help bring it about.

In contrast to both Kang and Tan, Liang emphasizes the need for a Chinese nation-state composed of strong citizens in order to survive in a world defined by competition and natural selection. Liang Qichao became a student of Kang Youwei during the 1890's, but after the failure of the reform, disagreements quickly emerged regarding whether reform or revolution was needed to solve China's political disfunction. By 1902, with the publication of his work *On*

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[214] *Dazhuan*, B2: 易窮則變，變則通，通則久。See the discussion of this passage in Chapter 2, as well as Tan's treatment of it in Chapter 3.
[215] Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* 大同书, 125.

the New Citizen, (*Xinmin Shuo* 新民說) Liang breaks with both Tan and Kang to critique more

fundamentally the Chinese tradition. After studying Western thought in Japan, Liang comes to be

critical of the Kang's concept of *ren* as a conceptual vehicle for modernization. The standard

reading is that he rejects the Confucian model of self-cultivation for a far more liberal notion of

selfhood. He then articulates a vision for society based on the pursuit of individual rights and

nationalism rather than cosmopolitan cooperation. However, on closer examination we shall see

that he continues to understand selfhood as a moral project of self-cultivation. Liang does not

perceive in the West a strong culture of individualism at all. Rather, he sees a unique form of

communitarianism in its ethos of civic responsibility. In fact, I argue that of the three thinkers, it

is Liang who is committed to the more original understanding of *ren* as a kind of "differentiated

love" rather than a "universal love,"[216] despite his otherwise critical stance toward Chinese

culture. He insists that one's commitment to the other should end at the boarders of the nation-

state and that the nation achieves success through the cultivation of strong, self-assertive citizens.

In this chapter, I argue that the understanding of the self in terms of a project of self-

cultivation is not replaced with theories of rational subjectivity or liberal individualism even as

more and more concepts derived from Western philosophy begin to show up in their work. I will

describe how we instead see in their works a complex process in which Western ideas take new

forms within a Chinese environment while certain traditional ideas are interpreted in new ways.

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[216] While Mencius sees *ren* as the heart that cannot bear the suffering of others, he insists that one should
differentiate between what is owed to different people. My obligation to aid my parents, for instance, outweighs my
obligation to help a stranger's parents. Thus, our *ren* disposition differentiates between those relationships that are
close to us and those which are distant. While ideally one develops one's empathic concern for others outwards
toward all things, one must first start with one's immediate social surroundings. See *Mencius* 2B14 quoted above.

1. **Realizing the *Datong*: Kang Youwei on *Ren* and Historical Progress**

By the time of the 1898 reform, Kang had already made a name for himself as a controversial reformer and energetic scholar. He pioneered new and unconventional interpretations of Confucian thought utilizing some Western ideas. Like Tan Sitong, in the *Book of the Great Unity* Kang draws upon the natural sciences to posit *ren* as a fundamental feature of reality. Kang suggests a possible connection between the scientific theory of ether and the notion of *qi* 氣 in Chinese cosmology. Sometimes translated as "material force," *qi* is a ubiquitous and rarified energy that condenses to form physical objects. Constantly in a state flux and movement, this matter-energy substance forms everything and therefore forms the material basis for the interconnection of all things. For Kang, ether/*qi* is what binds all beings together, facilitates knowledge of the world, and enables feelings of empathy and concern. The fact that I can come to have knowledge of other things and feel empathy for them suggests for Kang that all things in fact share one material spirit (*hunqi* 魂氣).[217] He also compares it to electricity and insists that divisions within this *qi* are only provisional and are like trying to cut water with a knife.[218]

While this picture of the world is similar Tan's, there are important differences in the two philosophers' understandings of *ren*. The relationship between *ren* and *qi*/ether is less close for Kang. He does not identify *ren* with ether. Rather, it seems that *ren* refers specifically to the capacity for empathy and selfless concern that *qi* facilitates, rather than its general interconnective function. For instance, his initial discussion of *qi* regards both *ren* and *zhi* 知 (knowing) as facilitated by *qi*, suggesting that these are distinct, though deeply related functions

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[217] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu*: *The one-world philosophy of K'ang Yu-wei* (London, New York: Routledge, 1958), Translated by Laurence G. Thompson, 65.
[218] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu*, 64.

of *qi*.[219] Moreover, while Kang describes *qi* as the primordial origin (*yuan*) from which all things originate, he does not describe *ren* in terms of "nothingness." Following Mencius, he typically characterizes *ren* as "the heart that cannot bear the suffering of others" (*buren xin* 不忍心). He believes this heart is exemplified in the fact that human beings are capable of empathizing with, and intuitively moved to action by, the suffering of people and creatures all over the world. This is even true, he points out, of those we have never even met. He suggests that this is made possible because of the interconnective power of the primordial ether.

However, for Kang, this heart of *ren* is ultimately shared not just by humans but all living creatures. In fact, he insists that the natural origins of *ren* can be found in evolutionary biology.[220] It can be observed in the way that birds and other animals care for their young, protecting them and feeding them while they are vulnerable. He writes that, "whereby the ten thousand creatures multiply their kind and do not become annihilated depends upon this *ren* nature. Should the species of creatures lack this constitution of love then human beings would not continue to be born and the ten thousand species would become extinct forever."[221] Therefore, *ren* is necessary for life itself. Without feelings of compassion, empathy, and selfless concern, species would not be able to maintain themselves.[222]

The close relationship between wisdom/knowledge (*zhi* 智) and *ren* as two aspects of human existence made possible by the ether is important for Kang Youwei's philosophy. Recall that the extending of knowledge was one of the steps of self-cultivation laid out in the *Great Learning*. Kang is continuing in this strain. He says that while *ren* is first in importance, one

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[219] Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* 大同书, 4.
[220] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu*, 169.
[221] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu*, Ibd.
[222] One can contrast this understand of *ren* with Tan's assertion that Western powers forcing China to open up to foreign trade was an act of *ren*. See, Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 116.

must first extend one's knowledge to cultivate *ren*.[223] He claims for instance, "those whose

perceptiveness and awareness [*jue zhi* 觉知] is diminished, their loving-mind is also diminished;

those whose perceptiveness and awareness is great, their *ren*-mind is also great. Boundless love

goes with boundless perceptiveness."[224] We can only extend our *ren*-mind toward things through

extending our wisdom and perception. However, for him this includes understanding historical

progress and its relationship to cooperation and the overcoming of suffering. [225] As Kang

observes in the introduction of the text, suffering is one of the ubiquitous features of existence.

By extending our knowledge we can identify the kinds of suffering (Kang identifies six

categories) and their sources. The *ren*-mind then is empowered to resolve these problems moving

history forward toward the *datong*. Having (by his own estimation) fully extended his knowledge

and cultivated his heart of *ren*, Kang believes he has found the solutions for all suffering in the

world and lays them out in the *Datong Shu*.

Kang's name for his future global utopia, the *datong*, derives from a passage in the

classic *Book of Ritual*, *Liji* 禮記. A section titled, the *Development of Rituals,* (*liyun* 禮運) tells

an origin story for the ritual system and its development over time. It describes an idealized time

in antiquity called the *datong* in which society existed in a state of harmony, equality, and peace.

During this time, Confucius says, "men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only

their own sons,"[226] rather all were cared for equally and were provided for in old age. People

shared their wealth and products of their labor freely and lived in near perfect harmony.

Confucius laments society's fall from this state and describes how the various ritual distinctions

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[223] Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* 大同书, 4.
[224] Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* 大同书, 5.
[225] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu*, 68.
[226] James Legge, tran., "*Li Yun* 禮運," Chinese Text Project (Donald Sturgeon, 2006), https://ctext.org/liji/li-yun, 1.

between people emerged. "Now that the great way [*da dao* 大道] has fallen into disuse and obscurity," Confucius says, "the kingdom is a family inheritance. Everyone loves [above all others] his own parents and cherishes [as] children [only] his own sons."[227] The rules of ritual were then implemented to regulate the ordered pairs of relations between ruler and minister, father and son, elder and younger brother, and husband and wife. Divisions between different states were formed for protection. Strong leaders emerged to lead the people in the proper virtues and ensure tranquility and harmony by enforcing the ritual order. In brief, the fall from the *datong* is represented by the building of walls, creation of divisions, and the narrowing of empathetic concern.

Another important feature of this origin story is how the rituals are chosen. Note that this passage temporalizes the ritual system. It shows it as the result of a historical processes not a transcendent necessity. The *Book of Ritual* does not contain any normative axioms that guide us on how to construct a universally valid or objectively correct ritual system. The sage kings developed the rituals based on pragmatic insights into various features of the natural world or "heaven" (*tian*) such as natural cycles.[228] The observance of the ritual system is necessary for "securing the blessing of *tian*,"[229] Confucius claims, but not because it is commanded by a transcendent deity. Rather it is the method (*dao*) for achieving a morally and aesthetically exemplary society in the world of constant transformation. The sage kings in their great wisdom were able to intuit the best way to organize society to achieve *gantong* and ensure political and social stability.

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[227] *Li Yun*, 2.
[228] *Li Yun*, 21.
[229] *Li Yun*, 7.

In the 1890's, the scholar and translator Yan Fu 严复 was introducing new ways for understanding old ideas like *tian*. Yan believed that Western sages could provide insights into understanding the ancient classics such as the *Book of Changes* and began publishing important philosophical and scientific texts from the West. In 1898, he published a translation of Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* as *Tianyan Lun* 天演論, or *On the Development of Heaven*.[230] He used the term *tian* to translate the Western concept of nature, and in this way, introduced a notion of linear progress written in nature to intellectuals like Kang.[231] Thus, evolutionary theory, as transmitted through Yan's translations of Huxley and Herbert Spencer, presented Kang with a new way of understanding the "blessing" of *tian* that the ritual system was aimed at eliciting.[232]

Specifically, the notion of progress and development over time helped to explain why the Chinese cultural system was no longer maintaining its authority. China's growing political problems and its humiliation at the hands of foreign powers challenged the idea that the traditional ritual system could still achieve this kind of authoritative excellence. Like Tan, Kang noticed that other cultural systems seemed to be doing better at securing the blessing of *tian*. The challenge was to develop a new philosophical system that could make sense of and address this failure. Kang, however, believes that no individual culture has yet developed the ideal ritual organization of society. The fact that suffering still exists all over the world, and that human beings are still able to tolerate it, is a sign that humanity has not fully cultivated its heart of *ren*. Each of the various cultural systems are merely imperfect approximations for cultivating *ren*.

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[230] Benjamin I. Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power*: *Yen Fu and the West,* Harvard East Asian series 16 (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964) 96.

[231] Zhang Rulun 张汝伦, *Xian dai zhong guo si xiang yan jiu 现代中国思想研究*, 51.

[232] Yan's translations were highly adumbrated and intermixed with his own commentary. While ostensibly a translation of Huxley's work, he actually was far more interested in the ideas of Herbert Spencer and introduced Spencerian theories of evolutionary progress through his commentaries. Ultimately, Yan approached his translations of these texts through the question of what makes a cultural system successful. See Shwartz discussion of Yan and Huxley, Schwartz, *In search of wealth and power*, 99.

The separation of different civilizations meant that humanity has only been able to imperfectly realize our *ren* nature. However, as the world reaches ever greater levels of interconnection and cooperation, we can finally begin to develop an ideal cultural system for a *ren* society.

Kang, therefore, portrays the *datong* not as a past ideal but as a future utopia towards which human history is progressing through a series of stages from more chaotic to more ordered and peaceful.[233] While the original story clearly portrays the *datong* as existing in the past, it was sometimes regarded as depicting the cyclical development of the decline, fall, and rise of successive imperial dynasties. Kang's interpretation, therefore, is perhaps not as radical an inversion as it first appears. A culture of harmony and peace is clearly achievable in Confucius' mind, and the goal of self-cultivation implies that this age may be attainable again. In this way, Kang believes that one can extend one's compassion toward future generations by understanding history. Human history, he believes, has been a story of humankind starting from warring tribes to forming broader and broader communities through cooperation. In the present age, we can cultivate our hearts of compassion by reforming society in ways that further increase human cooperation and mitigate current forms of suffering. Thus, Kang links the progress of *ren* to the history of cooperation and unity. Developing a *ren* society can no longer just involve China narrowly but must involve human civilization on a global scale.

He lays out the solutions to the problem of suffering by observing general patterns in nature that he calls "public principles" (*gongli*). These public principles are "public" (*gong*) in the sense that they are common across cultures in the same way that the meter can provide a unified standard of measurement (in Chinese the word for meter is also pronounced "gongli", but with a different character for "li"). He offers these principles in contrast to the more narrow,

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[233] These stages are likewise developed from Dong Zhongshu's 董仲舒 (179 BCE-104 BCE) theory of the three phases of history. The role of Dong Zhongshu's thought will be discussed further below.

parochial (*si* 私) ritualistic standards of traditional culture. An important contemporary Chinese scholar, Wang Hui, views this transition as perhaps one of the most definitive of the modern turn in Chinese thought. He writes, "by restructuring his cosmology through modern scientific knowledge, Kang Youwei drew Confucian universalism into a set of world relations organized according to natural principles, thus laying the groundwork for a system of natural principles related to the universe, human beings and ethics."[234] Yet, as he adopts these scientific principles, Kang Youwei does not appear to be interested in the epistemological question connected with science. He never discusses the public principles in terms of mental representations of objective states of affairs. Nor does he seem particularly interested in science as an epistemic theory. Kang Youwei's concern continues to be developing a *dao* for the cultivation of *ren*. He retains much of the path of self-cultivation laid out in classical Confucianism including the need to extend one's knowledge (*zhizhi* 致知). However, he believes that the discourse of Western science can help us extend our knowledge beyond the narrow confines of our individual cultural traditions. These transcultural principles then provide the basis for a cultural system that unites all humanity under one global "public government" (*gongzhengfu* 公政府). This government is public not only in that it is based on transcultural principles. It is also public in the sense that it focuses on the people and the alleviation of their suffering, as opposed to a government that is owned by a single imperial family.

The most fundamental of these public principles is related to Kang's initial observation that suffering is a universal fact of existence. He argues from a biological perspective for a

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[234] Hui Wang, *China from Empire to Nation-State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 124.

utilitarian *dao* of human action that aims at avoiding suffering and pursuing happiness.[235] He

writes,

> The nerves of the brain contain the animus [ling 灵]. Encountering material and
> immaterial [objects], there are then those which suit it, and those which do not suit
> it… Therefore, in the human *dao* there is only suiting and not suiting. What does
> not suit is suffering [*ku* 苦]. What suits and suits again is joy [*le* 樂]. Therefore, the
> *dao* of the human being is determined by the *dao* that it follows; [what] determines
> its *dao* is simply suffering and joy. What is schemed for by men is simply to abolish
> suffering so as to find joy. There is no other *dao*.[236]

Therefore, a *ren* society, that is, a society that exemplifies and cultivates the heart that cannot

bear the suffering of others, will naturally seek to maximize happiness and reject suffering.

Moreover, he believes that all philosophers and sages of the world have directed their efforts

toward the relieving of pain and maximizing of happiness. For example, human beings get

pleasure from having social relationships. Therefore, past sages sought to maximize the

beneficial aspects of these relations according to the requirements of that particular time period

and culture.[237] This utilitarian principle forms the basis of his critique of the current cultural

system from the government down to family and gender relations. The time has come for all

cultural systems to transform to relieve human suffering on a global scale through the application

of public principles. Throughout the book, he devises in painstaking logistical detail a society in

which this human *dao* is put into action in the ideal cultural system. He accomplishes this by

systematically and consistently applying his utilitarian principle to every aspect of human life.

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[235] As some of his contemporaries pointed out, this utilitarian approach combined with a concept of *ren* understood
as a kind of universal compassion bears strong resemblance to the strategy for critiquing ritual practice proposed by
the Mohists during the classical period. Therefore, while I shall use the term utilitarian to describe his theory, I do
not mean to suggest it was inspired by or drawn from the British Utilitarians. It is possible that he was familiar with
Mill's ideas, but his strategy could just as easily be drawn from Mohism. As with Tan, the question of influences is
being set aside here to answer the question of why a 'utilitarian' strategy, whatever its source, would have presented
itself to him as useful, and how he used it to address the problem of cultivating *ren*.

[236] Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* 大同书, 6.

[237] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu*, 80.

As Thompson observes, "one of the most truly admirable things about [the *Book of the Great Unity*], to a contemporary mind, is the unflinchingly honest manner in which the author is faithful to his standard, lead him where it may."[238] Indeed, some of his ideas for the future utopia would be considered radical by people in today's time, let alone in 19th century China. National boundaries are dissolved, and a global government is put in their place. All individuals, regardless of class or gender, are allowed to participate in government and can take up any occupation to which they are well suited. Individuals are free to choose sexual partners of either sex. Men and women marry only if they both choose. Class distinctions and their ritualistic markings are abolished. Private inheritance and other private assets are transformed to public ones. All people are equally cared for, educated, and protected by society. Even animals and the natural world are afforded a great deal of protection in this ideal human society.

Ultimately, however, Kang's strategy cannot escape all identities and distinctions. In adopting certain scientific categories and a new understanding of global history, he simultaneously introduces new sets of transcultural identities into the concept of the person including those of biological race and sex. Before this time, an individual performatively occupied social roles in an effort to beautify his or her *shen* body. In Kang Youwei's thought, however, we begin to see a slightly different concept of embodiment emerge in which individuals possess sexed and racialized bodies that are part of their biological nature. [239] He claims that while complete equality is a "public principle… the inequality of creatures is a fact. Whenever we speak of equality, it is necessary that creatures have the capacity to be equal in abilities, knowledge, appearance and bodily characteristics before equality can be effected."[240]

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[238] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu*, 45.
[239] More on this distinction in the following chapter.
[240] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu*, 143.

Some distinctions, for Kang, are overcome conceptually such as through realizing that apparent differences are superficial or merely linguistic constructs. For instance, despite their outward appearance men and women are ultimately equal in abilities, according to Kang.[241] Their differences are largely a matter of social prejudice and injustice. Therefore, men and women have the same or similar roles to play in the achievement of the *datong*. Racial distinctions, however, must be eliminated through practical measures.[242] The racialized body presents a problem for Kang because the science of his day shows him that certain races, specifically the black and brown races, are morally, intellectual, and aesthetically inferior.[243] These differences between the natural dispositions of the races must be overcome to achieve the *datong*. To achieve this, Kang advocates a long term eugenics program that includes forced migration, genocide, changes in diet, and intermarriage.[244]

To be fair, Kang appears to see some of this as a historical reality of our imperfect age. He tends to encourage more "gentler" forms of eugenics such as intermarriage. For instance, those who participate in interracial marriage, particularly with the darker races, will be rewarded with the title of *ren*.[245] However, this unfortunate aspect of his thought is often ignored in the secondary literature. But its presence points to a dangerous tension within his thought and a crucial difference between his philosophy of *ren* and that of Tan Sitong. Tan emphasizes using our mental power to continually deconstruct identities that divide humanity. Kang Youwei advocates more practical measures. In the end, his strategy for bringing the project of self-

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[241] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu*, 150.
[242] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu*, 141.
[243] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu*, 142.
[244] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu*, 145-148.
[245] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu*, 147.

cultivation into a global context ironically leads him to divide the world once again into civilized (white and yellow) and uncivilized groups (black and brown).

Kang Youwei's text further integrates scientific naturalism into the program of self-cultivation in the *shijieguan*. For him, scientific knowledge provides the means for creating public, transcultural principles with which to organize a new cultural system and describe its development within a new global history. Just like Tan, Kang does not see science as a threat to Confucian values, only as a potential resource for creating a global cultural system capable of securing the blessing of *tian*. Like Tan, the focus of his text is not primarily epistemic, but cultural. Neither is he simply a Confucian apologist hanging onto traditional categories even as he embraces some Western ideas. His task is to show how the transcultural insights of scientific knowledge can aid in expanding the project of self-cultivation beyond China. In the end, he believed that his ideal was still many centuries off and that the ideas he presented for an equal society were to radical for his time. For this reason, he never published the *Book of the Great Unity* in his life. But its vision for creating an egalitarian utopia that breaks down boundaries of economic class, sex, and ethnicity was to have a lasting influence on later Chinese communism.[246]

2. Liang Qichao: *Yi* 義, Self-cultivation, and the "New Citizen"

Liang Qichao was a brief but close friend of Tan Sitong. Being a student of Kang Youwei, he was clearly familiar with both of their cosmopolitan visions for cultivating *ren* in the *shijieguan*. However, his thinking appears to have begun to change after fleeing to Japan where he was exposed to a greater variety of Western thought that was being translated into Japanese at

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[246] See for instance, Federico Brusadelli, "A Tale of Two Utopias: Kang Youwei's Communism, Mao Zedong's Classicism and the "Accommodating Look" of the Marxist Li Zehou," *Asian Studies* 5, no. 1 (2017).

the time. Among the works he mentions frequently in *On the New Citizen* are those of Rousseau and of a German philosopher of law, Rudolf von Jhering (1818-1892). As we will see, he also becomes more familiar with evolutionary theory and begins to emphasize the role of competition rather than cooperation as the principle that determines the success of a cultural system. He draws upon these various ideas to make sense of the failure of reform and ultimately challenge the cosmopolitan visions of Tan and Kang.

Liang was a persistent intellectual presence from the late Qing through the first half of the Republican Period (1911-1949), and his ideas changed significantly over different periods of his life. Levenson, in his book *Liang Qichao and the Mind of Modern China*, sees Liang as transitioning through three stages of development. These range from his early work as an apologist for traditional culture to an iconoclast in his later years. The question that ties all three phases of his career together, Levenson argues, is a central question that all thinkers of the period in one way or another struggled to answer: "how can a Chinese be reconciled to the observable dissipation of his cultural inheritance – or how can a China in full process of westernization feel itself equivalent to the West."[247] In other words, Levenson equates modernization with westernization and believes Liang's thought should be understood as a balancing act between acceptance and resistance. Liang's turn to nationalism in the *On the New Citizen* is thus interpreted as a new strategy for national salvation. Levenson contends that by reconceptualizing the individual as a citizen of a nation-state pitted in competition against other nation-states, Liang abandons the "cultural apologist" strategy and instead opts for acceptance by envisioning a new, fully modernized (i.e. westernized) nation-state called "China."

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[247] Joseph R. Levenson, *Liang Ch'i-Ch'ao and the Mind of Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 5.

Levenson's question was no doubt in the mind of some Chinese intellectuals. However, it once again assumes that modernity is defined by the Western model, and the transition from a distinctive "traditional" viewpoint to a modern one is cast as one of substitution. The crisis that faced Liang Qichao is merely one of a choice: China or the West? Tradition or modernity? This interpretive approach also engages in the familiar tactic of psychologizing Liang's philosophy instead of seriously engaging with it. Levenson's framing of the question fits nicely with his observation that Liang and his contemporaries are historically important but philosophically nugatory. The question of reconciling Chinese cultural pride with westernization is, after all, only immediately interesting to Chinese of the early 20th century. It can only be of historical interests to 21st century philosophers. Yet, when we look at the way Liang deals with the concept of *ren* as developed by Kang and Tan, we can see that he does indeed philosophize on the issue of self-cultivation. He also reflects on controversies that continues to be relevant in modern societies everywhere.[248] Liang's turn away from Kang and Tan's approach seems to be motivated by a conceptual concern about the universalizing forces of modernity verses a concern for local identity. If a society is maximally inclusive, how does it distinguish itself as a society? Or put more familiarly, what is the place of *difference* in a modern world which prioritizes *universality*?

Liang begins his work by situating the topic of selfhood and citizenship within this problematic of sameness and difference. Unlike Tan and Kang, he sees the principle of competition rather than cooperation as what underlies cultural systems. Societies are formed through competition, and strong cultural systems are those that cultivate strong citizens. He writes,

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[248] Theresa Man Ling Lee makes a similar case for Liang Qichao in her paper. See Theresa M. L. Lee, "Liang Qichao and the Meaning of Citizenship: Then and Now," *History of Political Thought* 28, no. 2 (2007).

From the existence of the first human beings in the world until today, millions and millions of countries [*guo* 国] have existed around the world. I ask, of those that exist today, how many could cover the five continents on the map in a single color? Only a hundred or so. Of those that stand strong, how many have the strength to control the world, and in the future achieve victory in the world of evolution? Only four or five. Men all have the same sun and moon, mountains and rivers, square feet and round heads,[249] but whether they prosper or perish, whether they are weak or strong, what is the reason? Is it perhaps the fortuitousness of their location? Yet take modern America, there was an ancient America, but its glory is now enjoyed by the Anglo-Saxon race… Is it perhaps their heroes? Macedonia, too, was not without its Alexander, but now it is only dust.[250]

What ultimately differentiates successful and unsuccessful countries, he concludes, is the quality of their citizens (*min* 民). In the same way that the quality of a body's organs determines the health of the organism, so a strong nation requires strong citizens. He writes, "if one wants the country to enjoy wealth and honor, one must speak of the *dao* of the *xinmin* [new citizen]."[251] The *Xinmin Shuo* should, therefore, be read as an extended exegesis on this new *dao* for cultivating strong citizens of a modern nation-state.

The term *xinmin* 新民 is taken from a section of the *Great Learning* and is related to the idea of *rixin* or "daily renewal" discussed by Tan. The *junzi* (gentleman/prince) renews his commitment every day to the cultivation of *ren*. Then, through his authoritative influence, he leads the people to renewal (*xinmin*) likewise pushing society forward on its path toward manifesting *ren*. Scholars like Levenson and Chang Hao typically see this allusion to classical thought as either a sign of vestigial Confucian concepts lingering in a mind that is incrementally taking on modern ideas from the West, or as a strategy for communicating Western values to a

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[249] This was a common phrase in China. Traditionally *tian* was seen as being circular, while earth was square. This was reflected in the shape of human heads and their feet.

[250] Liang Qichao 梁啓超, *Xinmin Shuo* 新民説 (On the New Citizen), Chinese Text Project (Donald Sturgeon, 2006), https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en. 1.1. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

[251] Liang Qichao, *Xinmin Shuo* 新民説, *ibid*.

Chinese audience.[252] Instead, we can make better sense of Liang's work if we read him as offering a new notion of renewing the people within the *shijieguan*. In the text, he describes China's need for what he calls "national consciousness" or a "concept of a nation-state" (*guojia sixiang* 国家思想). He believes what is needed is a new concept of *zhongguo* (the middle kingdom) not as a cultural empire, but as a modern nation-state with proactive citizens. Such a consciousness is lacking in China, he claims. Instead, the Chinese are concerned only with their family clans or local identities. They are what he calls "tribalists," *bumin* 部民. By contrast, a strong country has people who have a sense of collective belonging to their nation, i.e. nationalists *guomin* 国民. Since China lacks a national identity, its people are provincial, narrow-minded, and lack a civic-minded duty to strengthen themselves and the nation. This, he believes, is the cause of its political decline.[253]

It is in the section titled "National Consciousness" that Liang most explicitly attacks the ideal of a global society and the *datong*. Competition, he claims, is the basis of any society. He entertains the idea that perhaps one day, far in the future, the *datong* will exist. But this is perhaps only a gracious concession to his proud teacher, because in the next paragraph he explains that a society like the *datong* would necessarily turn to barbarism without competition. He writes,

> Competition is the mother of civilization [*wenming* 文明]. The day that competition stops, civilization will come to a halt. From the competition of an individual emerges a family, from the competition of a family emerges a clan, from the competition of a clan emerges a country. The nation is the greatest grouping of the collective and the climax of competition.[254]

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[252] Hao Chang, *Liang Ch'i Ch'ao and Intellectual Transition in China*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1971), 150.
[253] Liang Qichao, *Xinmin Shuo* 新民説, 6.1.
[254] Liang Qichao, *Xinmin Shuo* 新民説, 6.4.1.

Competition, not "continuity" or "unity and cooperation," is the basis of all cultural systems. Successful cultures are those that cultivate strong citizens of a nation, and they require competition for their survival. Without it, differentiations of some kind would inevitably reemerge within a world civilization and would tear it apart. If a civilization could abolish all its boarders, the citizens would necessarily resort once again to tribalism in order to form some kind of identity.

This discussion of national consciousness informs Liang's treatment of *ren*, and he approaches the topic by again indirectly referencing his teacher. He invokes a distinction between *ren* and another important concept, *yi* 義 (moral duty), first articulated by the important Han Dynasty philosopher, Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104 BCE), which Kang himself employed. Dong Zhongshu writes that "*ren* is to give others peace and security, and *yi* [義] is to rectify [*zheng* 正] oneself. Therefore, the word *ren* implies others… and the word *yi* implies oneself… the principle of *ren* consists in loving people and not loving oneself, and the principle of *yi* consists in rectifying oneself and not in rectifying others."[255] There is some debate over what role the virtue *yi* played in classical philosophy. For instance, Hall and Ames argue that *yi* refers to the individual's intuitive understanding of the ethical dimension of a situation and one's ability to act ethically in a way that is always unique and particular to that situation.[256] Meanwhile, Chad Hansen argues that the term *yi* is fairly coextensive in the classical period with the English term "morality." A person who is morally principled might be described as exhibiting *yi*. For both Kang and Liang, the difference between *ren* and *yi* is one of focus, and

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[255] "仁義法," accessed April 9, 2020, https://ctext.org/chun-qiu-fan-lu/ren-yi-fa.
[256] David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 83.

the two concepts are intimately related: *ren* is directed toward forming a morally and

aesthetically harmonious community; *yi* is about the individual fulfilling his or her moral duties

within that community. [257] Therefore, when trying to cultivate *ren*, one focuses on one's

relationships with others, while *yi* is concerned with the specific duties and obligations an

individual must interpret and fulfill in order to achieve *ren*.

Liang and Kang differ from both each other and Dong Zhongshu in their evaluation of

the importance of these virtues. Dong Zhongshu sees both *ren* and *yi* as equally important and

complimentary. Both are needed for self-cultivation. Kang however holds *ren* as higher than *yi*

and believes that Chinese society has mistakenly overemphasized *yi* (that is, overemphasized

strict adherence to ethical obligations) at the expense of cultivating *ren*, resulting in an

authoritarian culture.[258] State Confucianism has focused on stringent moral codes at the expense

of cultivating *ren* relations between people and the government. Liang, however, inverts Kang's

evaluation. He accepts Kang's understanding of *ren* as a kind of benevolent feeling towards

others. However, he believes that *ren* and not *yi* has been the focus of Chinese culture. He claims

that the over-veneration of *ren* has made Chinese people complacent, weak, and narrow-minded

in that they lack a sense of civic responsibility and a competitive spirit.[259] In his view, the

cultivation of *ren* as laid out in the *Great Learning* envisions a highly paternalistic style of

government where the emperor provides for the people like parents for children. This approach

to governance cultivates a population that passively waits for a benevolent elite to provide for

them and that shies away from competition and self-assertion. By contrast, he argues, the West

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[257] The character *yi* 義 contains the character for "I" *wo* 我.

[258] Kang Youwei, Yihua Jiang and Ronghua Zhang, *Kang You Wei Quan Ji* 康有爲全集 (Collected Works of Kang Youwei), Di 1 ban, Guo jia qing shi bian zuan wei yuan huiWen xian cong kan (Beijing: Zhong guo ren min da xue chu ban she, 2007), 107.

[259] Liang Qichao, *Xinmin Shuo* 新民說, 8.10.

has emphasized *yi*. In other words, the West has emphasized the citizen and her civic duties, particularly her duty to strengthen the people by fighting for her rights (*quanli* 權利).[260]

This term *quanli* is a neologism used to translate the Western term "rights." However, translating *quanli* back into English is not a simple task. The term is comprised of two characters the first meaning "power" or "authority" and the second meaning "advantage" or "profit." Liang's understanding of the concept, he admits, is drawn from Jhering's work, *The Struggle for Law* (*Der Kampf ums Recht*), where Jhering describes rights as the result of the struggle of individuals for the recognition of their dignity in the law.[261] While Liang departs from Jehring's original philosophy in various ways, the idea of rights existing as the result of struggle and self-assertion forms the basis of Liang's thought.[262] In the section "On Rights Consciousness" (*quanli sixiang* 權利思想), Liang describes rights as originating in the assertion of one's strength and power,

> From where are rights born? They are born from strength. Lions and tigers always have first-class, absolute rights with respect to the myriad animals, as do chieftains and kings with respect to the common people, aristocrats with respect to commoners, men with respect to women, large groups with respect to small, and aggressive states with respect to weak ones. This is not due to the violent evil of the lions, tigers, chieftains, and so on! It is natural that all humans desire to extend their own rights and are never satisfied with what they have attained.[263]

At first, this looks like he is championing the perspective that "might is right" and is advocating a kind of self-centered war of all against all. Yet this is not at all the case. Instead, he says, "rights consciousness does not concern only the duties (*yiwu* 義務) that one ought to exercise

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[260] Liang Qichao, *Xinmin Shuo* 新民説, *Ibid.*
[261] Stephen C. Angle, "Should We All Be More English? Liang Qichao, Rudolf Von Jhering, and Rights," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no. 2 (2000), 245.
[262] Angle, "Should We All Be More English?", 242.
[263] Liang Qichao, *Xinmin Shuo* 新民説, 8.3. Here I have followed Stephen C. Angle's translation. See Liang Qichao, "On Rights Consciousness," *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 31, no. 1 (1999), 15.

toward oneself; in fact, it is also concerned with the duties that an individual ought to exercise toward a general group."[264] Humans don't just fight for their own immediate interests, but for a kind of principle of respect, which is extended to other members of their society. Rights are won when a group of people become strong enough to assert themselves within a society and win recognition in the laws of the state. Moreover, by fighting for my rights, I ensure that those rights are respected for all and strengthen the society. The state, after all, is only as strong as its citizens, and citizens who won't fight for themselves create a weak state vulnerable to states with citizens who will. For this reason, he believes merely talking about *ren* cannot help China establish a nation, the people must develop a sense of duty toward themselves and their nation.

Although he is often read as embracing a liberal notion of the self, Liang is not rejecting the entire paradigm of Confucian self-cultivation. In fact, his theory of the struggle for rights retains many classical features. As Stephen C. Angle observes, "Liang's understanding of the abilities and interests that one should legitimately be able to enjoy, which is how I will suggest we gloss "*quanli*," [rights] has a deep basis in the Confucian idea of an ethical and not merely legal ordering of the world."[265] This can be seen in Liang's linking of the struggle for rights with the concept of moral duty (*yi*). Liang insists our moral obligation to struggle for our rights is part of what makes us human. He writes,

> Animals have no responsibilities toward themselves other than preserving their lives, while in order for us who are called "human" to completely fulfill our self-responsibilities, we must preserve both our lives and our rights, which mutually rely on one another. If we do not do this, we will immediately lose our qualifications to be human and stand in the same position as the animals.[266]

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[264] Liang Qichao, "On Rights Consciousness", *Ibid*.
[265] Angle, "Should We All Be More English?", 244.
[266] Liang Qichao, "On Rights Consciousness", 15.

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Humanity here is once again cast not as an ontological category, but as a task. If we do not fight for our *quanli* then we become animalistic. The individual's moral struggle for rights is in fact simultaneously the moral struggle to cultivate a more human(e) society.

Therefore, Liang's criticism of *ren* is not a total rejection of the paradigm of self-cultivation. Nor is his use of Confucian concepts a sign of lingering vestiges of traditional thought or a rhetorical concessions to a Chinese audience. What Liang is in fact rejecting is the idea that cooperation and interconnection are what make a cultural system authoritative and influential. For Kang Youwei and Tan Sitong, there is no privileging of individuals to whom I ought to extend my empathy and concern. Liang rejects this in favor of making distinctions. This controversy in fact echoes the older debate between Mencius' notion of differentiated love as opposed to "universal love." Here we find a modernized version of the old debate on how far one ought to extend one's empathic concern in the process of self-cultivation. What would it mean to make no distinction between my own child and a stranger's child in my moral considerations? Would I not be cheating my child out of the special kind of affection she might expect and deserve from her parent? Just as a civilization requires boarders to maintain itself, our sense of empathetic concern must draw distinctions, Liang would argue. Otherwise, it is not recognizable as love at all. He writes, "speaking of fraternity [*boai* 博爱], its acceptable to kill a person, a family, or a clan for the love of your country. The country is the basic focus of self-love and the furthest extent of fraternity. Those who do not reach this extent are barbarians, as are those who exceed it."[267] Both those that are selfishly concerned with their local family clans and radical globalists are barbaric in that they do not place their moral obligations where they ought to be. Only the nationalist is the truly cultivated person. While he no longer uses the term *ren*, he is in a

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[267] Liang Qichao, *Xinmin Shuo* 新民説, 6.4.1.

real sense embracing a more traditional view of *ren* than the one Kang had proposed. Just like

ren, the struggle for rights is a defining moral feature of the human being and is one which can

be fostered or stamped out by the cultural system in which the individual lives. In Liang's *On the*

New Citizen, the *junzi* ideal gets transformed into the ideal of the self-empowered citizen of a

modern nation-state.

3. Conclusion: Two Theories for Modern Self-cultivation

Kang and Liang develop strikingly different programs for modern self-cultivation in the

shijieguan. Kang's strategy is to ground a global cultural system on scientific principles aimed at

the relief of suffering. Progress is revealed in the history of *tong*, which will culminate in a

society that fully realizes humanity's heart that cannot bear the suffering of others. Liang

chooses instead to reconceive of the cultural system within a new idea of the nation-state.

Nations become more influential and enduring when they cultivate strong, self-assertive citizens

invested in the good of the nation. The project of self-cultivation can continue among civic-

minded citizens who continually work on strengthening the nation and renewing the people. For

him, self-cultivation requires distinction and competition. Yet far from being a drawn-out

negotiation between apologetics and concessions to Western modernity, we see in this debate

between Liang, Kang, and Tan the rapid emergence of a familiar problem of modernity that

persists into the 21st century. Our modern paradigm often prioritizes universal (or public) values,

standardization, and uniformity at the same time that it paradoxically creates fixed identities of

race, sex, and nationality. The question then emerges of how we negotiate the tension between

this universalism and diversity. Kang seeks to establish a maximally inclusive society that prizes

equality among its members. Tan sees continuity and fluidity in all identities. Liang appears to

formulate the first pushback on both these positions by pointing out that a society that is

maximally inclusive and lacks distinctions is no society at all. A society requires exclusion to distinguish members from non-members and aggressive struggle to maintain this distinction.

This interesting debate gets missed if our interpretive strategy is to divine the psychological motives of these thinkers behind their philosophical programs. It launches us into a fruitless project of cataloging elements that are continuous or discontinuous with traditional thought. Levenson's question gives us a theory of the mind of modern China to explain which elements of traditional thought are kept and which are replaced. However, the approach I propose here gives a philosophical rather than a psychological explanation for their choices. Even when Liang rejects Kang's formulation of *ren* as the goal, self-cultivation remains a primary feature of the theory of the human self. Despite his adoption of seemingly familiar liberal concepts such as rights and a concern for the individual he does not base these in a theory that views the self as an individual proprietor who achieves freedom through the discovery of transcendent truths. Both Kang and Liang are using new scientific knowledge from the West to formulate a new *dao* for self-cultivation within the *shijieguan*.

However, showing that this interpretation renders these debates more philosophically interesting to 21st century Western philosophy does not prove that it is better than those that do not. To do this, I will show that this interpretive strategy also helps us make sense of a phenomena that other strategies have failed to explain satisfactorily. In the next chapter we turn to a pressing question that the reformers bring to the foreground as new social identities begin to form in this period of modernization: the so-called "Women Question" (*funü wenti* 婦女問題).

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"[268]

- Simone de Beauvoir

Women's liberation was a major component of the thought of the Hundred Days'

Reformers. All three argued vehemently against the oppression of women often by way of

critically engaging with traditional models of female virtue to make their case. Typically,

however, this aspect of their thought is glossed over as inessential, and its relation to their

discoursing on modern humanity never gets fully unpacked. In this chapter, I will argue that this

approach follows an assumption typical of the standard narrative of modernity, which regards

feminist thought as a kind of special discipline rather than a mainstream concern. It holds the

position that although feminist thought is an interesting tradition that takes off in the West with

modernity, it is not one of modernity's essential features. This is because neither the describing

of the human self in terms of rational agency nor the search for the transcendent foundations of

universal knowledge are projects obviously related to gendered bodies.

Moreover, the explosion of feminist thought in China at precisely the moment of its

confrontation with the West reinforces the assumption that feminism, like philosophical

modernity, exists in China as a cultural import. Its presence sometimes gets explained in terms of

the "influence" of either liberal ideas or a desire among "colonized elites" to imitate the cultural

conventions of the West, including its allegedly superior treatment of women.[269] However,

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[268] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 273.
[269] Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, and Dorothy Ko classify Liang Qichao as a liberal feminist thinker. See, Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl and Dorothy Ko, eds., *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*: *Essential Texts in Transnational Theory,*

liberal ideas were often significantly modified by these thinkers when they were appropriated, and the reformers were just as likely to criticize the status of women in the West as to uphold it as an example of justice. Tan Sitong, for instance, compares footbinding to the Western practice of corseting and condemns both as immoral. Kang Youwei is very clear that the oppression of women continues to be a global problem, not just one for China. Pointing to the treatment of women in the West or liberal theories as possible sources of influence does not fully explain *why* the treatment of women in the West would have struck these thinkers as something worthy of attention, let alone as one of the central issues of philosophical modernity.

When the topic of women's liberation is addressed, typically by historians, it is described as intricately connected to the critique of the Confucian cultural system. As feminist historian Wang Zheng states while writing on the later anti-Confucian iconoclasts of the early 20th century, "one of the three basic principles of Confucian social order is gender hierarchy (husband guides wife). Therefore, a wholesale offensive against Confucianism had to include an attack on gender hierarchy… Women, therefore, became a quintessential symbol of the Confucian *feiren* (inhuman) [非人] system… [Thus gender equality] was a sign of modernity."[270] Although these early intellectuals, especially Kang Youwei and Tan Sitong, were hardly engaging in a wholesale attack on Confucianism, their discussion of women's place in humanity set the tone for feminist discourse in the 20th century through to Mao's now frequently quoted assertion that "women hold up half the sky [*tian* 天]."

To understand the presence of feminist thought among these thinkers we should not look for explanations merely in terms of Western influence. Rather we must understand what

Weatherhead books on Asia (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 24. Wang Zheng does the same with Kang Youwei. See, Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*: *Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999), 36.
[270] Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese enlightenment*, 13.

problems internal to Chinese philosophy would have led these thinkers to emphasize gender

equality in their discussion of the modern human. The highly embodied understanding of *ren*

within the Chinese tradition gave rise to perspectives on the relationship between gender and

human selfhood that were distinct from those in the West. Far from simply imitating liberal

models of feminist discourse, these thinkers developed ideas that were suited to the distinct kind

of sexism that they found in Chinese society. After surveying some recent research into gender in

Chinese history and culture, this chapter will show how gender equality fit into the overall

philosophical projects of the Reformers. It will also use their arguments for gender equality as an

opportunity to further explicate their ideas about modern selfhood side by side in contrast to the

Western tradition.

1. ***Ren*, Gender, and Correlative Sexism**

From one perspective there seems to be no shortage of evidence of the systematic and

violent oppression of women in China's long history. By the Qing Dynasty, women were by

tradition and ethical injunction confined to the home, and even often referred to simply as *neiren*

内人 ('person/people of the inner chamber'). To say that one had never seen a neighbor's

daughter was meant as high praise for her. The physical structure of the Forbidden City remains

a powerful monument to the ancient custom of cloistering women behind walls for their purity

and chastity with the effect of imprisoning them to small, highly controlled and monitored spaces

for all their lives. The practice of footbinding is perhaps the most infamous example of this

confining and restricting of women and was singled out by the Hundred Days' Reformers as a

sign of the inhumanity of the ritual system. These social realities of late Qing society can easily

give rise to the assumption that the Reformers' feminist thought came from the West,

particularly in the form of liberal feminist theory, as they sought to reform a society that was obviously sexist.

However, we must be careful when translating feminist philosophy as we move between discursive environments. Specifically, we must recall that all liberation narratives must assume some idea of the subject or self that is to be liberated. As I have argued in the previous chapters, there are significant differences in the understandings of selfhood within the Confucian and Socratic paradigms. As the prominent scholar of gender in China, Tani Barlow, notes, "subjectivity, the province of feminism, is shaped in heterogeneous time,"[271] as well as space. She uses the term "catachresis" to designate the erroneous or anachronistic reading of English terms like "women," "gender," or "feminism" into Chinese discourse and argues that one must be mindful of assertions of equivalence when translating such terms across cultures and time periods. Therefore, an understanding of the sudden appearance of "feminist" ideas in the philosophies of the Hundred Days' Reformers is directly related to understanding their philosophies of selfhood and *ren*.

David Hall and Roger Ames share this view in their book *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* saying, "a failure to appreciate the real degrees of difference between prevailing western assumptions about the self and their Chinese counterparts has had important consequences for some issues in cross-cultural studies. Perhaps none of these issues is more significant than that associated with the understanding of sexual difference."[272] Generally speaking, traditional Western liberal feminism treats women as one of two natural sexual categories. The task of feminism, in this view, is to emphasize the formal equality women share with men as rational agents, and on this basis argue for the equal

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[271] Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 16.
[272] Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*.

rights and treatment that only men have traditionally enjoyed. This argument generally follows

the Socratic paradigm of selfhood. It contains a model that conceives of the true self as a

reasoning soul that transcends other merely physical and transitory aspects of the embodied self.

Socrates posits this model to draw attention away from the beautiful bodies of young aristocratic

men toward the acquisition of beautiful and good souls through dialectical reasoning. For Plato,

having knowledge of the Beautiful and the Good itself, not merely its physical embodiment, is

what qualifies someone as authoritative and (to put it in the words of the *Book of Changes*) fit to

preside over others.[273] Both women and men have the potential to become philosopher kings

since they are equally capable of reasoning and philosophical reflection (despite women

generally having weaker bodies).[274] Thus, debates about women's equality in Plato and

elsewhere in the Western tradition have frequently focused on whether and to what extent

women's bodies, being different from men's, preclude them from engaging in disinterested

reason.[275]

Western theories of the self include another prevalent dualism, namely, the opposition

between sex and gender. Sex signifies the biological fact about a body and follows a further

dualistic distinction: male or female. Gender signifies the cultural expression of sex through

masculine or feminine performances. Just as the rational soul is the foundational self that

ontologically precedes contingent aspects of selfhood such as the body and its performances,

similarly, sex is the real, material fact that grounds gender. Because of this parallel, many

debates in Western feminism have centered around the question of to what extent sex can or

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[273] Knowledge of the Good as a qualification for political leadership forms the major thrust of his critique of democracy. See, Plato, "Republic" in *Complete works*, 489a-490a.
[274] Plato, "Republic" in *Complete works*, 451e
[275] Plato, "Republic" in *Complete works*, 453a

ought to determine gender. That is, whether one's biological sex can or ought to determine one's roles in society.

Yet such dualistic understandings of "male" and "female" natures does not have an adequate equivalent in the mainstream of Chinese thought.[276] If we return to the classic *Book of Changes*, we note that mutually exclusive oppositions are expressly rejected. Specifically, there are two hexagrams that are typically associated with the principles of masculine and feminine, *qian* 乾 and *kun* 坤 respectively. However, they are also related to principles such as "above" and "below", "hot" and "cold", "summer" and "winter", *yang* and *yin*. These two patterns in the world of constant transformation are not permanent entities. They mutually entail and transform into one another. They also manifest differently in different phenomenon. For instance, they produce male (*mu* 牡 or *xiong* 雄) and female (*pin* 牝 or *ci* 雌) birds and animals. In human beings, however, they produce *nan* 男 and *nü* 女. *Nan* and *nü* also correspond roughly to "male" and "female", but these terms apply only to humans.[277] That is, they apply predominantly to *shen* bodies, which emerge when the more extensive *ti* body is ritualized through the cultural system.[278] Hall and Ames characterize the understanding of gender/sex difference in the following way,

> On the Confucian side, different players in the personalization of gendered roles
> can express their own uniqueness as persons in a way that can be compared with
> the way one "ritualizes" oneself to find a place in community. Neither human nature
> nor gender is a given. A person is not born a woman, but becomes one in practice.
> And gender identity is ultimately not one of kind, but resemblance… Males and

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[276] This point is made by many scholars. For a detailed discussion of the sex/gender relation and its relationship to traditional Chinese medicine and cosmology, see Robin Wang, "Yinyang Gender Dynamics: Lived Bodies, Rhythmical Changes, and Cultural Performances" in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Philosophy and Gender* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 207. Here she argues that the materiality of the body and the social manifestations of gender were not seen as separate realities, but mutually entailing and establishing.

[277] Rosenlee, *Confucianism and women*, 46.

[278] Deborah Sommer notes that while the term *ti* can be used to refer to the bodies of animals, the term *shen* typically cannot. Sommer, "Boundaries of the Ti Body", 317.

females are created as a function of *difference in emphasis* rather than *difference in kind*.[279]

Ultimately, both masculine and feminine principles are present in all humans and at all levels of the *ti* body. Sexual difference in a particular body signals the presence of an emphasis rather than an identity. According to some scholars, for instance, early Daoist medical texts sometimes recognized a multiplicity of possible sexes/genders within this framework.[280]

The goal of the Confucian *dao* was to guide individuals to coordinate these and other principles to cultivate their *shen* bodies. Meanwhile, the world described in the *Great Learning* constituted a great social theater in which roles must be appropriately choreographed and blocked to create an aesthetically and morally harmonious (*ren*) production. An individual becomes (rather than *is*) *nan* or *nü* by participating in the appropriate, expected performances of that particular identity (which may include certain physical signs). Thus, as Robin Wang points out in her study of gender dynamics in Chinese thought, "the "nature versus nurture" debate… has little relevance in classical Chinese texts (in terms of sex vs. gender). Sex and gender are not two separate realities or isolated entities."[281] The embodied (*ti*) performance of the appropriate ritual forms is how we come to embody things like male and female. If we remove these ritualized activities what remains is a depreciated version of man and woman, not the essential one. Instead, Robin Wang argues that the familiar categories of sex and gender would be understood much like other oppositional pairs like *yin* and *yang*, that is, as codetermining aspects of a self-differentiated unity.[282]

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[279] Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, 95-96.
[280] Susan Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History,* New approaches to Asian history (Cambridge [U.K.], New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 29.
[281] Robin Wang, "Yinyang Gender Dynamics", 207.
[282] Robin Wang, "Yinyang Gender Dynamics", 209.

With this understanding of the sex/gender dynamic in mind, we can understand the kind of catachresis that goes on when discussing feminist thought in late 19th century China. Barlow states that the contemporary term for "woman" in the sense of "female sex" in Chinese, *nüxing* 女性 (literally "female nature"), is a recent emergence that she and others date generally to the start of the 20th century. Preceding this term, she argues, exists rather a family of terms which might be translated varyingly as "daughter," "wife," or most generally "women of the patriline," [*funü* 夫女]."[283] In other words, "there is no term present before the 20th century that might indicate women as a group outside the family."[284] None of these terms can be extended to range over all women as such, that is, be read as denoting female sex apart from female-typed roles within the patriarchal family.[285] Barlow draws upon the writings of an influential philosopher and government official of the 18th century, Chen Hongmou 陳宏謀 (1696-1771), as an example. She observes that Chen sought to clarify sex and gender in a way that was "explicitly normative and definitional."[286] Yet the definitions he employs lack any attempt to ground themselves in pre-discursive facts. For instance, Chen's definitions "do not refer to women's bodies nor to their body parts."[287] Rather he organizes the category *funü*, "primarily within the *jia* [家，family], because what defines and anchors *funü* is the ritual life within the family."[288] Gender categories were not read off of a pre-discursive, given sex, but always understood relationally within the context of a network of gendered relationships within the home.[289]

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[283] Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 40.

[284] Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism,* (London: Duke UP, 2004), 40.

[285] To illustrate this, Lisa Rosenlee recalls an account of an anthropologist who was surprised to find that the women she interviewed struggled to define or describe the concept of "women" apart from female-type roles within society. See, Rosenlee, *Confucianism and women*, 47.

[286] Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 41.

[287] Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 43.

[288] Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, *Ibid.*

[289] Consider what Judith Butler says about the view that sex terms describe a body that is given prior to discourse. She writes, "the body posited as prior to the sign, is always posited or signified as prior. This signification produces

This cultural perspective has far reaching consequences for how gender manifested itself in practice. Exemplary female models from Chinese literature like Hua Mulan, a young girl who dresses in men's clothing and fights in a war for her family and country, are often portrayed as a skilled fighters with keen military intellects. Mulan is celebrated for her bravery, loyalty, and filial piety rather than condemned for her masculinity. Far from being seen as a subversive act of gender bending, her performance as a male integrated itself with, and contributed to, the cultivation of *ren* and was celebrated as an example of filial piety. Wang writes,

> Traditional Chinese heroines (*jinguo yingxiong*)[巾幗英雄] were women who fulfilled their obligations to the ruler or their kin with remarkable deeds in warfare. The stories of ancient heroic women warriors appeared in both heterodox literature and Confucian orthodox history books. To be a Confucian woman was to fulfill one's obligations as a daughter, wife, mother, and subject. A woman's marital spirit (*shangwu)* [尚武], demonstrated by fulfilling her obligations, qualified her as a remarkable woman rather than as a masculinized woman or an androgynous woman in the western sense… A man's lack of marital spirit…did not make him feminized.[290]

Thus, a pre-discursive sex did not necessarily determine a women's aptitude for certain activities. Sometimes cultivating *ren* requires innovative solutions tailored to the individual circumstances. Moreover, the hierarchical pairings of the five relations were in many texts seen as analogous to the more explicitly gendered husband-wife paring. For instance, the Confucian

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as an effect of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which precedes its own action. If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue performative, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification." Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 6. The position that the sexed body is prior to our discourse about that body is itself a product of discourse, namely, a discourse that emphasizes the descriptive function of language. Recall that the Socratic paradigm of selfhood theorized knowledge in terms of having insight into the thing itself. To know how to use a term correctly is to have adequate insight into what the term refers to. The Confucian paradigm saw the system of naming as prescribed by a particular *dao*. It construed understanding as knowing how to use a term according to that *dao*. Thus, the performative aspect of language was emphasized. The argument here is that while male/female and *nan/nü* appear to have a kind of equivalences, these terms nevertheless evolved within different discursive environments. Therefore, the understanding of these terms and their uses were not identical. This then helps us understand the nature of sexism within Chinese discourse as well as the reformers treatment of that sexism.

[290] Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese enlightenment*, 20-21.

philosopher Xunzi (310-235 BCE) posits the relationship of husband and wife as the root of the other relations.[291] The classic *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (*Linuzhuan* 烈女傳), a Han Dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE) text written as a guide for the self-cultivation of women (and the first place where the term *ren* is used to describe women), characterizes it as the "beginning" of the other relations.[292] The relationships of father and son, ruler and minister, etc., all in a sense follow the model of husband and wife. Within the father-son relationship, the father embodies the *yang* principle, and the son the *yin*, and so on. Both principles are needed to create a *ren* society.[293]

This is not to say that premodern China was a haven for sexual and gender fluidity. Hua Mulan, after all, must hide her female identity in order to join the army and fulfill her filial duties. The argument here is that this unique discursive environment gave rise to what Hall and Ames have called "correlative sexism." They point out that this brand of sexism was, in many ways, more brutal than the one found in the West, since the Chinese understanding of selfhood seemed to provide ample conceptual resources to include women as coequal partners in the cultivation of *ren*. The fact that they were excluded *in practice* makes their exclusion in a sense all the more egregious – an observation that is shared by the philosophers of the Hundred Days' Reform. Whereas Socrates begins the process of divorcing the concept of the Good and the Beautiful from the body, *ren* retains its association with the cultivation of *shen* bodies. Whereas Socrates sought to devise a "gender-neutral" ideal of selfhood in the form of the knowing soul, the Confucian paradigm tended toward an androgynous model of selfhood. Yet ironically, this also allowed it to subtly retain its original attachment to men and the patriarchal organization of

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[291] Xunzi, *Da Lue* 38: 夫婦之道，不可不正也，君臣父子之本也。
[292] Liu Xiang, *Exemplary Women of Early China*: *The Lienu Zhuan of Liu Xiang,* Translations from the Asian classics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 67.
[293] Rosenlee, *Confucianism and women*, 86.

society in general.[294] The Chinese cultural system for self-cultivation focused on the male. Female roles were supplementary and secondary for the cultivation of *ren*. Women only figure in one of the five relations (husband and wife) and were the subordinate of the pair. The others all describe relations among men. Rosenlee, in pointing this out, also notes that other relations such as between mother and son are not mentioned despite historically having great importance in Chinese society. The emergence of the *Biographies* and later the *Four Books for Women* (*Nüsishu* 女四書) clearly indicate an effort to compensate for the relative silence of the Confucian *dao* on how women cultivate *ren*. In the context of correlative sexism, women were not primarily defined as a "second sex" relative to "man," who by contrast gets defined as both "the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general."[295] Neither did *ren*, like Plato's *agathon*, ever merge with the form of a god that was considered *father*. Yet the very fact that this correlative sexism was perhaps conceptually less pernicious than its Western counterpart made it the more inexcusable. It was as though women, their relationships, and the unfortunate realities of their situation had simply been forgotten. The *dao* for women to cultivate *ren* emerged only later on as an afterthought.

Given the unique understandings of gender in China we ought to approach the topic of feminist discourse among the Hundred Days' reformers in a way that is appropriate to this discursive environment. Instead of assuming that these thinkers came to realize the truth of Western ideas about gender, which then saved Chinese women from their oppression, we should try to explain why the relationship between *nan* and *nü* suddenly became a major theoretical problem for philosophers at the end of the 19th century. Before this time, it was difficult to

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[294] For instance, Rosenlee contends that the patrilinear culture's focus on family inheritance, filial piety, and ancestor worship gave rise to sexist practices. See, Rosenlee, *Confucianism and women*, 122.
[295] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 15.

conceive of women as a social group outside of female-typed roles within the family as a sensible object of discourse. Therefore, with the exceptions of Chen Hongmou and Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602), philosophers that explicitly put forward arguments that openly criticized the treatment of women or their status in society were rare in Confucian discourse. However, with the collapse of the *tianxiaguan* exposing the inadequacies of the highly rigid and conservative social organization of Qing society, woman as a category started to emerge. It is in this context that we should understand these early intellectuals concern about gender and the beginning of what would later be referred to as "the women question" (*funü wenti* 婦女問題).

2. Gender Equality in the Philosophy of the Hundred Days' Reformers

The thinkers of the Hundred Days' Reform did not regard the liberation of women as a peripheral topic. It was regarded as an important part of modernization. While the confrontation with the West did introduce an interest in equality, rarely was this formulated in terms of the equal ability of men and women to use reason to arrive at objective knowledge. They argued for equality by describing the inhuman treatment of women and the unused potential of women in the task of self-cultivation. For example, Tan Sitong identifies the practice of footbinding as the source of China's failure in the face of invading powers for the past several dynasties.[296] For him, the treatment of women in China epitomizes China's cultural and moral failures. For China to strengthen itself in the face of imperialism, the status of women must be improved. Kang Youwei likewise views the plight of women throughout the world as one of the greatest injustices perpetrated in human history. He describes being born a woman as a form of suffering on par with sickness, disability, and poverty. In his utopian vision, the world cannot overcome suffering and establish the *datong* until the situation of women across the world is improved.

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[296] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 84.

Liang Qichao insists that a strong society requires the equal participation of all its people. The exclusion of women from full participation has resulted in China's weakness.

Once again, we find that Tan and Kang's different interpretations of *ren* lead them to slightly different strategies for dealing with the problem of gender inequality. Kang Youwei describes *ren* as a kind of universal love and empathy for suffering. The human *dao* is the behavioral disposition to discriminate between those interactions which produce happiness (*le*) and suffering (*ku*) and to pursue (*qiu*) the former and avoid (*qu*) the latter. Moreover, this *dao* is constant. There is no other *dao* (*wu ta dao yi*).[297] This allows him to foresee the development of history toward a future global utopia that has established a global consensus on certain public principles. By putting these public principles into effect, humanity can fully realize *ren* and end suffering. In the *Book of the Great Unity*, Kang argues that the current unequal division of the sexes, like the division between countries, is a sign of the trouble of the times and a major source of human suffering.

None of these three philosophers yet use the term *nüxing* to refer to women as a category, and this produces noticeable effects on the way they treat the topic of gender disparity. Kang Youwei writes in the chapter titled "On Women" (*lun nü* 論女) with shock and disgust about the treatment of women, detailing the way they have been restricted and oppressed. Yet a common misunderstanding of Kang's approach is made clear in Laurence G. Thompson's translation of the opening passage of this chapter. I cite his translation at length here,

> All men have had [particular] persons with whom they were most intimate, whom they loved the most: [their women]. Yet [men] have callously and unscrupulously repressed them, restrained them, deceived them, shut them up, imprisoned them, bound them, caused them to be unable to be independent, to be unable to hold public office, to be unable to be officials, to be unable to be citizens, to be unable to enjoy [participation in] public meetings; still worse [men have caused them] to be unable

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[297] Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* 大同书 6.

to study, to be unable to hold discussions, to be unable to advance their names, to be unable to have free social intercourse, to be unable to enjoy entertainments, to be unable to go out sightseeing, to be unable to leave the house; still worse, [men have] carved and bound their waists, veiled their faces, compressed their feet, tattooed their bodies, universally oppressing the guiltless, universally punishing the innocent. These are worse than the worst immoralities. And yet throughout the world, past and present, for thousands of years, those whom we call Good men, Righteous men, have been accustomed to the sight of [such things], have sat and looked and considered them to be matters of course, have not demanded justice for them, have not helped them. This is the most appalling, unjust and unequal thing, the most inexplicable theory under heaven.[298]

Thompson's 1958 abridged translation is the only translation of Kang Youwei's seminal text into English. In this, Thompson's contribution to understanding Chinese thought is immensely valuable. However, we see here revealing moments of catachrestic philosophizing in translation that shed light onto thought in the West as well as in China. First, Thompson translates the gender neutral character *ren* 人 ("person") as "man" following the sexist conventions of his own time. Other places where "man" occurs in the translation are rightly placed in brackets since the original Chinese text does not contain the corresponding character *nan* 男 or any of its variations. In fact, the terms for "men" or "males" or any masculine-typed roles appear *nowhere in the passage*.[299] Kang is talking explicitly about humanity or humans (*ren*) and their treatment of the category "*nü*," which as scholars have noted, is not coextensive with the category of "female sex". *Nan* and *nü* are correlative social categories, gender markers for various expressions of the human *dao*.[300] In other words, the target of the critique is not men but the cultural system. Kang is claiming that humans have created a set of social roles marked as *nü* for the cultivation of *shen* bodies, however, they have proved harmful to the people we love who fill them. The emphasis here is on how the world's sexist cultural systems harm the cultivation of *ren*.

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[298] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu* 149-150.
[299] Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* 大同书, 87.
[300] Rosenlee, *Confucianism and women*, 46.

Secondly, what Thompson translates as "Good men, Righteous men" corresponds to "*ren ren* 仁人" and "*yi shi* 義士". That is, "*ren* people" and "moral scholars." In other words, both men and women are guilty of ignoring the inhuman way society treats its wives and daughters. For example, a common target of criticism among all three thinkers is the abusive way that wives are sometimes treated by mothers-in-law. These matriarchs, who often held significant power within the family, were often infamous for their cruelty to younger women who entered the household. Kang appears genuinely shocked by this oversight among people who would otherwise have "hearts that cannot bear the suffering of others" and describes it as "inexplicable." It is as though society had simply ignored the suffering of the individuals who fill these thankless female-typed roles. The world of the *datong* could not possibly tolerate such inequality among half of humanity.

Therefore, Kang Youwei, as well as the other reformers, are far more sensitive to what modern feminists might consider "structural" and "systemic" sexism. They tend to focus on the role social institutions like the family, the division of gender roles, economic conditions, and linguistic conventions play in the formation of sexist oppression. They focus less on beliefs about "biological sex" and its relationship to "gender." They also tend to formulate arguments for equality by insisting on the necessity of women for the cultivation of society. Therefore, Kang insists that in the *datong*, people would follow the public principle that the categories of *nan* and *nü* "do not diverge," (*wei you yi* 未有異).[301] That is, both categories would have a co-equal (*tong* 同) role in cultivating *ren*.

Thus, the focus of much of his critique is on the family system, which comes in the chapter immediately following the one on women. Kang reiterates the claim that different

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[301] Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* 大同书 87.

historical periods require different *dao*. Sages like Confucius developed a *dao* to help cultivate *ren* within the limitations of the culture and time period in question. For instance, Kang writes, "anciently, in the Age of Disorder, the family system was formulated so as to put in order the social relations; hence there was no help for it but that there was pitiless and unjust repression."[302] Because of the inhumane and chaotic nature of the age, the system put in place by the early sages was a provisional *dao*. It, therefore, could not but be imperfect and to a degree inhumane. Now, however, the world is entering into an age of greater dialogue and cooperation, which will enable us to articulate principles that are more public and equal and less parochial and unequal. This requires each country to revise its cultural system until we reach the age of the *datong*.

The future that Kang Youwei describes for overcoming gender disparity is as radical as anything else he proposes. He argues that women have been regarded by the family as private (*si* 私, the opposite of *gong*) property. He claims that selfish concerns such as inheritance, wealth, and ownership helped create the family system.[303] Therefore, in a completely public government, economic equality and communal ownership will render these things unnecessary. People won't just be concerned with the welfare of their own children. Rather society will develop institutions and social policies that will focus on the welfare of children in general. [304] Eventually, the family as it is understood traditionally will be abolished as unnecessary. Men and women will freely associate and choose their sexual partners. Marriages will be decided by the partners themselves (rather than families or parents). They will be voluntary, temporary, and will last one year upon which they may be renewed if desired. Children will become wards of the state and the care for

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[302] Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* 大同书 125.
[303] Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* 大同书, 155.
[304] Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* 大同书, 165.

the young and the old alike will be a public responsibility. All ritualistic distinctions between

gender will be abolished to prevent conservative hierarchies redeveloping between people.

Instead, all people will be educated equally and eligible for political and professional positions.

Two things should be noted about his vision of the public government. The first is that

the intimate connection between economic equality and gender equality is taken as a given.

Recall that Xunzi places the husband-wife pairing as the basis for all hierarchical pairings. Thus,

the abolition of gender-role distinctions entails the abolition of hierarchical ordering in general

and vice versa. This helps explain why his discussion of women's equality simultaneously

focuses on economic, social, and political inequality. Critiquing the cultural system is impossible

without simultaneously critiquing one of its central ritual divisions: *nan*/*nü*.

The second is that he takes the cultivation of *ren* outside of the space of the traditional

family. Traditionally, this move would have been considered unthinkable since Confucius in the

Analects places the virtue of filial piety as the root of *ren*. The ritual organization of the family is

an integral part of Confucian self-cultivation. The abolition of the family ought to be the death of

ren. Kang realizes this problem and counters it by proposing that this previously private task will

be de-privatized (so to speak) and given to public institutions of prenatal and postnatal care. In

these institutions, trained professionals work to ensure the proper socialization of children.

However, these institutions also require the strict regulation of pregnant women. Since children

are the public wards of the state, women who become pregnant must report to these prenatal care

facilities where their actions will be monitored and restricted. Moreover, since women and men

will be equal, Kang worries that women will not want to go through the pain of bearing children.

Therefore, severe punishment (including a dishonorable name of "not-*ren*") will be given to

women who have abortions or avoid pregnancy, whereas women who bear children will be given high honors.[305]

As with his discussion of race, Kang's efforts to promote absolute equality through a detailed articulation of a future *ren* society inadvertently results in the unequal treatment of a group of people. Here, women are singled out and reified as *producers of children* for the state. Once again, their activities are subjected to strict monitoring and their movement is restricted. Although Kang provides us with an enviable vision of future social and economic equality, his belief in his ability to transcend his own historical and cultural situation and project himself into an ideal future occasionally blinds him to the biases of his own present. He inadvertently recreates some of the oppressive social divisions he is intent on overcoming.

This contrasts with Tan Sitong's more open-ended view of modernity. Tan makes far fewer claims about the social policies and institutions of the future. He agrees with Kang that cultural *dao* are tailored to the needs of different regions and historical periods. He also agrees that greater interconnection will lead to a more enlightened global society. However, as we saw, Tan's critique focuses on the inadequacy of any one cultural system to exhaustively cultivate *ren*. He agrees with Kang that the exposure to different cultures demands a reevaluation of the inherited cultural system in China, but he does not believe this will lead to a new and final cultural *dao*. For Tan, continuity requires daily renewal. Any *dao* must constantly adapt and change for it to be continuously transmitted.[306]

Tan's strategy for overcoming selfishness and rigid hierarchies is not to develop specific social policies and political institutions that will end them once and for all. Rather it will be achieved through the exercise of our mental power. Individuated objects are created by our

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[305] Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu*, 193.
[306] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 90.

language and desires and have only conventional reality.[307] Therefore, oppositional categories like good/evil, or male/female, desirable/undesirable are constructs of our guiding discourse.[308] Desire arises from our separation of things into discrete identities and our efforts to make them permanent. We crave to either hold on to things we want or to avoid things we don't want. Kang Youwei takes this as the constant human *dao*. Tan instead follows the Buddhist approach. Successfully attaining those things we desire and avoiding the things we don't is not a viable solution to the problem of suffering.[309] Instead, we must realize the fundamental impermanence of all things and the interdependent nature of oppositional categories. Only in this way can we get out of the endless cycle of desire and fulfillment.

Thus, we find the section in which Tan discusses the treatment of women is situated within his discussion about the conventional nature of language and our ethical evaluations of good, evil, and desire. He decries the treatment of women throughout history in China citing rape, the fetishization of virgins, female infanticide, the double-standard of the concubine system, and the sequestering of women within the home. Among the worst of these offenses, he claims, is the practice of footbinding. He asks, "what can we say in defense of China when it is

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[307] Again, it is helpful to note that Tan should not be understood as invoking an appearance/reality distinction. He is not saying that we need to rid ourselves of false appearances to get to what is really real. He is drawing from Chinese Huayan Buddhism, which sees the world as manifesting two realities – a conventional one and a ultimate one. Although distinct, these realities are mutually interdependent. The classic metaphor for this distinction comes from the Chinese Buddhist philosopher Fazang 法藏 (643-712). He compares these two aspects of reality to a statue of a golden lion. The gold represents ultimate reality. The lion represents conventional reality. Graham Priest gives a brief but helpful commentary: "On this model, there is, again, only one reality: there is only one thing – the golden lion. The gold and the lion are nonetheless distinct. (The gold could be melted down and refashioned into the statue of the Buddha. The lion would then cease to exist, but the gold would not.) But one cannot have the lion without the something of which it is made, the gold; conversely, the gold must manifest itself in some form or other, in this case, that of a lion." Priest, *The fifth corner of four*, 112.

[308] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 81.

[309] The Buddha argued that the problem of human suffering was the endless cycle of desire and fulfillment itself. We can never reliably and consistently satisfy our desires. Satisfying desires, if anything, simply produces stronger cravings. The solution, therefore, is to rid oneself of this attachment and aversion attitude itself. One can do this by realizing the impermanence of all things and their interconnection to all other things. Most importantly, this includes realizing the impermanence and interdependence of the self. See Priest's discussion in Priest, *The fifth corner of four*, 8-9.

guilty of a crime for which even the loss of its nationhood cannot atone?"[310] For Tan, these

actions are not just immoral, they are directly related to the political and cultural problems of

China. The restrictive culture of separating men and women, concubinage, and footbinding have

encouraged and facilitated lust (*yin* 淫) and violence (*sha* 殺, literally "killing") in Chinese

society. By hiding women and regarding sexual desire as evil, we inadvertently draw attention to

sexual desire and encourage lust. He writes that men and women are "isolated as if ghosts or

enemies, and this is to overemphasize these few inches of reproductive organs, to draw attention

to them and make them into something to be valued and coveted, and make people desirous of

sex."[311] Furthermore, by condoning acts of violence against women, we normalize and even

fetishize these acts of violence. This then further feeds these desires, making them stronger. The

cultural habits of footbinding and sequestering women encourage people to look at women as

sexual objects to be owned and gives rise to a culture of sexual violence against women. This can

only lead to a society that is deeply dysfunctional, divisive, and not at all *ren*. It is no wonder, he

insists, that since footbinding began to be practice, China has been repeatedly conquered by other

civilization that exhibited greater *ren* in their cultural systems.[312]

     To reform this dysfunctional cultural system, we must address it at the conceptual level

using our mental power. For instance, he claims that Chinese culture regards sexual desire as

"evil" insofar as it gives rise to actions like rape and adultery and names it with the term "lust."

Yet to overcome these problems, we cannot merely pursue the opposite to lust, "chastity." The

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[310] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 85.

[311] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, Ibid.

[312] The practice of footbinding was mostly restricted to the Han Chinese ethnic group. Tan claims that the practice started in the Song dynasty (960-1279). The Song fell after it was conquered by the Mongolian empire, which established the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). A new dynasty led by the Han Chinese was reestablished with the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), which in turn was again toppled by the invasion of the Manchurian Empire, or the Qing dynasty. Tan's claim is that the Yuan and the Qing can be explained by the fact that these people did not practice footbinding. He states that this fact alone made these civilizations worthy of the blessing of *tian*. See, Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 84.

solution is to instead be *less* strict with categorization and the separation of *nan* and *nü*. Thus he writes, "we can guide people so that men and women can have social intercourse; we can liberate them so that they can get used to each other, until they feel spontaneous in each other's company and mutually forget their differences, as in the mutual intercourse of friends; at that stage, they will not be conscious of the sex difference, let alone lust."[313] The problem, he contends, is one of our overemphasizing the ritual distinctions between men and women. The solution must come from detaching ourselves from the objects of conventional reality, not by avoiding some and pursuing others. "Excessive checking will bring about overflowing," he explains, "excessive channeling, blockage."[314] Unlike Kang Youwei, Tan refrains from describing what the ideal social organization would look like, because no ritual distinctions can ever provide a constant *dao* for forming society. The problem is the attachment to ritual distinctions themselves. *Nan* and *nü* must constantly reinvent themselves in relation to one another as friends – only then can they achieve autonomy in relation to one another.

Liang is no less vocal about the importance of gender equality for reforming China. One of his early works on modernization, "On Women's Education" (*Lun Nüxue* 論女學), written in 1897 soon after the Sino-Japanese war, is an extended argument for the education of women. In his view, wise people consider three things to be of the greatest importance: the protection of the nation, the protection of the species, and the protection of education.[315] The problem of gender equality is far from a distraction from the major concerns facing China, he claims. Instead,

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[313] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 85.
[314] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 87.
[315] Liang Qichao, "On Women's Education," in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, ed. Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl and Dorothy Ko, Weatherhead books on Asia (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 195.

"when I seek out the root causes of national weakness, I find that they inevitably lie in women's lack of education."[316]

He gives four proofs in support of this claim. The first is that "those who understand public principles" (*gonglijia* 公理家) understand that a country is only as strong as its people. When the people are able to support themselves materially, then the country is stronger as a whole. This foreshadows his later belief expressed in *On the New Citizen* that the paternalism of traditional Chinese government has infantilized the people and made them passive rather than self-reliant and self-assertive. This is particularly true of women, he argues, since they are kept at home idle while only men work and are educated. This practice is due in part to a false and condescending notion of female virtue – the rejection of which serves as his second proof. He specifically attacks the ancient saying that "for a woman, to lack talent is a virtue." He argues that leaving women at home idle and uneducated does not help bring the family together (referred to as *qi jia* in the *Great Learning*). Rather, it results in petty domestic squabbling between women in the home. The lack of education drives a social wedge between men and women in the home causing instability and frustration.

Moreover, since women are often the ones who raise children and are responsible for their education, women's lack of education negatively effects the future generation. Thus, his third proof is that one of the sources of Western strength is that their women are educated and are therefore better able to raise their children. He writes, "it has been said that there are two fundamental principles of governance: the first is to instill an upright heart, and the second is to recruit talented people from far and wide. Children's education establishes the foundation of both principles… Therefore, women's education fundamentally determines whether a nation will

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[316] Liang Qichao, "On Women's Education", 190.

survive or be destroyed and whether it will prosper or languish in weakness"[317] Following the insights of the *Great Learning*, Liang sees the health of the country as being intimately connected with the extending of knowledge and the proper organization of the family. Women's education not only helps the nation prosper but all of humanity as well. His fourth proof brings the model of self-cultivation given in the *Great Learning* to completion stating that since educating women helps them to be better mothers, the cultivating of women helps the cultivating of humanity as a species. He concludes that the treatment of women, particularly their being barred from education, is contrary to *ren*.[318]

As we saw in the previous chapter, later in *On the New Citizen* Liang comes to be critical of the emphasis on *ren* as understood by Kang. However, he maintains many of his same beliefs about the necessity of cultivating women in order to bring the people of China into renewal (*xinmin*) and pull them out of their complacency. Interestingly, the place where he discusses women (*nü*) most in the text is in the chapter titled "On the Martial Spirit" (*Lun Shangwu* 論尚武). This word "*shangwu*" is the same word that Wang Zheng discusses in her treatment of female hero-types in Chinese history. However, Liang looks to the ancient West for a new ideal of the female citizen. He speaks with glowing admiration of the spirit of the Spartans, its martial ethic, and the toughness of its women.[319] He mentions how they would participate in martial training, speak their minds, and develop healthy and sturdy constitutions through physical cultivation. He elsewhere contrasts this martial spirit of the Spartan citizen with that of contemporary China, which he laments for its lack of an "enterprising and adventurous spirit."[320]

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[317] Liang Qichao, "On Women's Education", 194.
[318] Liang Qichao, "On Women's Education", 200.
[319] Liang Qichao 梁啓超, "*Xinmin Shuo* 新民説" (On the New Citizen), Chinese Text Project (Donald Sturgeon, 2006), https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en., 17.1.2
[320] Liang, *Xinmin Shuo*, 7.4.2

In contrast to the Spartan women, the role models that were presented in the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* often emphasized women who were subservient and domestic. It organizes women according to virtues like compliance and chastity, and portrays them committing acts of suicide or self-mutilation to preserve their virtue.[321] While the *Biographies* are noteworthy for their emphasis on other virtues such as "skill in argumentation" and the attributing of the quality "*ren*" to exemplary women, Rosenlee points out that by the Ming and Qing Dynasties, virtues that emphasized women's domestic and subservient roles were given far more attention.[322] Liang, therefore, accuses this tradition of an obsession with the cloistering and chastity of women and of leaving China "with sickness but no vitality, with lethargy but no youthful spirit."[323] In this way, he concludes, China has followed the "*dao* of ghosts," not the *dao* of humans.[324]

Despite Liang's adoption of the language of individual rights, his argument is clearly not a liberal one. A liberal feminist would typically argue that men and women are equally rational and therefore have equal rights to things like education. Any practical benefit to society that such a policy might entail is simply a bonus. Yet Liang appears to be primarily focused on this practical benefit. His position is nationalistic, and its focus is on the cultivation of a strong and productive society. He does not conceive of women as a set of sexed individuals who need to be made equal to men on the basis of their rational faculties and ability for self-determination. Like Kang and Tan, the target of his critique is the Chinese cultural system for self-cultivation. He uses terms that refer to women's roles and writes about the necessity of having educated and cultivated people fill them. Liang's conception of rights is such that individuals strengthen the

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[321] Liu Xiang, *Exemplary Women of Early China*, 67-84.
[322] Rosenlee, *Confucianism and women*, 96.
[323] Liang, *Xinmin Shuo*, Ibid.
[324] Liang, *Xinmin Shuo*, Ibid.

nation through self-assertion in the political sphere. He is seeking to create strong citizens of a shared government. Cultivating women who are self-assertive and who fight for their rights strengthens the country. Attempting to read him as working with a liberal influence cannot but leave us with the impression that he has somehow missed the essential point of liberalism and has merely adopted its vocabulary in a superficial way. We also miss the repeated references to self-cultivation in the *Great Learning* and their role in his argument for women's education. If instead, we understand him as intentionally searching for a *dao* for self-cultivation that organizes an authoritative society, his position appears more consistent.

3. Conclusion: *Ren,* Reason, Gender, and Modernity

This analysis of gender in the thought of the Hundred Days' reformers is likewise not a detour into an inessential topic. It on the one hand reveals how the analysis of *ren* in the Confucian paradigm of selfhood helps us make sense of the philosophies of the Hundred Days' reformers and their particular concerns. *Ren* began as a virtue of the male aristocrat. It was a quality that designated him as alluring, charismatic, beautiful, and skilled. His ability to put his learning into practice in a way that appeared effortless and effective (i.e. in a way that elicited a state of *gantong*) made him fit to preside over others. Confucius notices that true authority requires not just superficial beauty or rhetorical ability; it also requires ethical elements such as trustworthiness and critical self-reflection on one's behavior. He describes the behavior of the true *junzi* as that which commands the assent and compliance of others without force of punishment or coercion.[325] The concern for patrilineal family and the patriarchal social structure led the philosophical focus to be on these male-typed authorities and their social roles. Women, in theory, if not always in practice, were given roles that were largely supplementary for the

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[325] See especially *Analects*: 2.3, 12.17, and 12.19.

purpose of the cultivation of a *ren* society. By taking seriously the idea that gender, as a category of selfhood, always evolves within a discursive environment, we can envision a modern discourse that likewise treats gender in a way that is distinct. When we understand the significance of *nan* and *nü* in the history of the cultivation of *ren*, it seems natural that these categories would form an important part of modern philosophical discourse in China.

On the other hand, this analysis also reveals some of the important differences between modern philosophy as it manifested in the China and the West. Both Socrates and Confucius were concerned with the problem of those who were merely appeared good because of their superficial beauty and rhetorical ability. However, Socrates frames this problematic within an appearance/reality distinction. This likewise is linked to another problematic that is lacking within Confucian discourse: the relationship between knowledge and desire. The erotic desire for boys forms a major concern within Greek culture that is tied up with male aristocratic authority (*kalos kagothos*) and self-cultivation (*paideia*). How do I know what I desire is truly beautiful and good? For Socrates, this question can only be solved by enquiry into the nature of desire itself. Thus, according to Foucault, the novelty of Plato's treatment of *eros* in the *Symposium* lies in his treatment of the question as an ontological one.[326] He asks not what makes a boy desirable, how one should love a boy, or how long that love should last before it transforms itself into a more "platonic" philia; he instead seeks true knowledge of love itself. Thus, it is of no small significance that he presents Diotima, a woman, as his teacher. He is placing authority in the possession of true knowledge. True knowledge would also lead to a kind of authority over the self (autonomy) by way of mastery over one's desires. This self-mastery in turn makes one fit to

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[326] Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality*, Trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage, 1985), 236.

preside over others. Both men and women are capable of becoming authorities provided that they are able to form true beliefs about the Good.

Modern philosophers working within the Socratic paradigm in the West continued to think of the self as primarily a knower albeit in a way that further increased the distance between what they considered to be the true self (the mind) from the body. They returned to the principle of reason developed early on in part by Socrates's search for universal knowledge of the good-in-itself. Descartes, for instance, navigated skeptical challenges to the authority of science and religion by appealing to what was traditionally seen as essential to our humanity – our rationality. Faced with intractable conflicts he used this principle to find the universal foundations of knowledge, securing truth and the freedom of the will. Meanwhile, one of Kant's many innovations was to explicitly identify the good will with the rational will and the free will. That is, he asserts that the rational will is the only thing that can be considered good without qualification. He thereby posits the exercise of reason *itself* as the Good and again links it to the struggle for freedom, this time on a historical scale.[327] Thus, in his *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective*, it is reason and its development that underwrites the progress of mankind. It is the essential good toward which human action, and therefore history, are aimed.[328] The use of our reason allows us to transcend the causal determination of our embodiment and to emerge out of our self-imposed minority into a mature autonomy.

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[327] "For since reason is not sufficiently effective in guiding the will safely in regard to its objects and the satisfaction of all our needs (which it in part itself multiplies), and an implanted natural instinct would have guided us much more certainly to this end… its true vocation must therefore be not to produce volition as a means to some other aim, but rather to produce a *will good in itself*, for which reason was absolutely necessary, since everywhere else nature goes to work purposively in distributing its predispositions. This will may therefore not be the single and entire good, but it must be the highest good, and the condition for all the rest, even for every demand for happiness… for reason, which recognizes its highest practical vocation in the grounding of a good will, is capable in attaining this aim only of a contentment after its own kind, namely from the fulfillment of an end that again only reason determines." Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:396.

[328] Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective" in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, 8:19.

Unfortunately, thinkers in the West, including Kant, often saw women as incapable of transcending their embodiment to achieve full status as rational free agents, if they spoke of women at all. Kant, for instance, categorizes women as "passive citizens" who cannot fully participate in society because of their lack of autonomy.[329] Like children, their irrationality renders them permanently immature, requiring the protection and guidance of men. Their identity is defined "vis-à-vis the *male* sex" and their status is attained through the graciousness of men.[330] Women are therefore barred from fully realizing their personhood and the promise of enlightenment.

This tendency in Western thought creates a strange tension noticed by later feminist critics like Simone de Beauvoir, who in a twist on Kant's own question "what is man?" poses the question: "what is woman?" She notices the tradition of dualisms throughout Western intellectual history, starting with Pythagoras, which associated men with transcendence, light, order, and the Good, and women with immanence, darkness, chaos, and evil.[331] On the one hand, reason, as the essential feature of our humanity, transcends the body, which in theory should make sex irrelevant to the exercise of reason, as it does for Plato. On the other hand, the supposedly "gender-neutral" qualities of the rational soul (which often merely concealed the association of "humanity" with "man") exclude woman because of her embodiment. In the words of de Beauvoir, the aspects of the body that mark a woman as female thus, "imprison her in her

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[329] "The journeyman of a merchant or artisan, the servant (who does not stand in service of the state), minors (*naturaliter vel civiliter*), all women, and anyone at all whose existence is preserved (through food and protection) not by their own means but through arrangements of others (except that of the state), do not possess civil personhood, and their existence is mere inherence, as it were." Immanuel Kant, "The Metaphysics of Morals," in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld, Rethinking the Western tradition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 6:315.

[330] Immanuel Kant, "On the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory, but It Does Not Hold in Practice," in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld, Rethinking the Western tradition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 8:295.

[331] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 104. Also see Hall and Ames' discussion of this association in comparison to Chinese notions of selfhood and gender in Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, 82-83.

subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature."[332] In other words, the formal

equality of human beings as rational, autonomous agents is simultaneously the means by which

women can be liberated and the means by which those like Kant can excluded them from full

personhood. Thus, the nurture-nature debate dominated much of the philosophical discussion of

gender in the West, and woman, De Beauvoir laments, is often forced to prove herself worthy of

equality by becoming man.[333]

By contrast, one of the most distinctive features of *ren* is that it maintained its embodied

significance within the Confucian paradigm of selfhood. It could not be discussed in a gender-

neutral fashion. *Ren* requires both male and female principles for realization. However, sexist

practices within ancient Chinese society made women an afterthought in the formulation of the

Confucian *dao* and left the suffering of women largely ignored. The roles they were given, like

the other roles that formed the subordinate end of the pairs of relations, put an undue burden on

them. As Liang Qichao points out, "although all belong to the same species of human beings,

those who are named "the people" [*min*] are made to obey the ruler like servants and concubines;

those who are named women [*nü*] are made to obey men like slaves."[334] The oppression of

women mirrored the oppression of the people, and the reciprocal nature of the five relations had

been forgotten. The *Biographies of Exemplary Women* had attempted to work women's roles

more explicitly into the cultivation of *ren* but in a way that often perpetuated the imbalance.

Among the examples that emerged over time from the *Biographies* was the architype of the

widow committing suicide out of loyalty to her husband. In other words, to kill oneself to

become *ren* (*sha shen cheng ren*) for women meant to sacrifice oneself, not as Tan had done for

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[332] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 15.
[333] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 14.
[334] Liang Qichao, "On Women's Education", 200.

the sake of reform, but for the sake of one's "compliance and chastity." Kang Youwei was the first to point out that this waste of human life reflected the oppression of sons, younger brothers, and the people, and was the most egregious example of it.

Like their Western counterparts, when faced with the skeptical crisis brought about by the breakdown of the *tianxiaguan*, these modernizers returned to the original theme of *ren*, which lay at the heart of their understand of human selfhood. Like rationality, *ren* served as the Good toward which we orient ourselves and supplied the principle of human progress, for Kang. Just as Kant asserts the exercise of reason itself as the unqualified good, Tan identifies the interconnecting function of cultural systems itself (*tong* 通) as the ultimate meaning of *ren*.

Yet by returning to the concept of *ren*, these thinkers necessarily had to reconceive of how bodies manifested this ideal. This caused them all to reflect on the themes of authority, governance, and gender. When themes of freedom or equality emerge in their works they are not related to a discourse of truth as it appears within the Socratic paradigm. Rather they all focus on engagement with foreign cultures to reappropriate their tradition in new ways and establish a morally and aesthetically harmonious society. For Kang, the ideal of *ren* meant the overcoming of suffering through the structuring of a global society that emphasized equality and cooperation (*tong* 同). The status of women was one of the most troubling forms of suffering that had been brought about by the unequal division of roles. Therefore, the discussion of gender was an indispensable part of structuring a modern society free of suffering. It was not a field of special interest that could be taken up or left alone when discussing humanity. Rather, it was inextricably linked to the transition from a "private" society owned by fathers and emperors to a "public" one that promotes the good of the people and achieves the traditional Confucian ideal of the *datong*.

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Tan sees *ren* as something that unites all cultures through the empty, originating ether. Its cultivation means realizing that all conceptual divisions are provisional and conventional. Clinging to these identities only exacerbates conflicts and cravings. Tan seeks to show the continuity between man/woman and chastity/lust in order to problematize the cultural practices that removed woman from view and placed her in the inner chamber to be forgotten in the patriarchal ordering of the cultural system. He places the relation of friendship as the root of the other relations, rather than the relation of husband and wife. In this way, he reminds us that in its healthiest form, what lies at the heart of the husband/wife pair ought to be a friendship. Only through the mutual forgetting and letting go of these differences do we realize this relationship of friendship and achieve "autonomy" (*zizhu*). This autonomy achieved through the cultivation of *ren* is distinct from any of the formulations in the Socratic paradigm. It is not achieved through self-mastery (as with Socrates), nor through transcending natural causality (as with Kant). It is an aesthetic process of beautifying the body (*xiushen*) through mutual critique and the creative appropriation of the ritual system. He therefore foreshadows de Beauvoir's own sentiments,[335] and says that to achieve equality women do not need to become men. Rather, both must become like friends.[336]

Finally, although Liang Qichao comes to be critical of *ren* as it was understood by Kang and Tan, his concept of *yi* merely signals an emphasis on cultivating self-assertive citizens and the necessity of first dealing with the problems close at hand. The people should no longer rely on patriarchal authorities to bring the renewal promised in the *Great Learning*. Rather, the renewal of the people is the moral responsibility (*yi*) of each individual citizen. Self-assertion

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[335] "To gain the supreme victory, it is necessary, for one thing, that by and through their natural differentiation men and women unequivocally affirm their brotherhood." Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 687

[336] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 85.

becomes the condition for freedom and this should be engaged in by both men and women. For all these thinkers, the hierarchical interpretation of the five relations had left the Chinese people stagnant, disconnected, and divided – the opposite of *ren*. The most neglected among them, left forgotten behind the walls of the inner chamber, were its wives and daughters.

Chapter Six:
Ways on Life's Stage – The Reformers and Foucault on the Condition of Modernity

"What a dangerous objection it would be against Christianity if paganism had a definition of sin that Christianity would have to acknowledge as correct."[337]

- Søren Kierkegaard

In the preceding chapters, I have applied the interpretive strategies of recent comparative thinkers like Roger Ames and Chad Hansen to the earliest stages of philosophical modernity in China. Just as these thinkers have shown that the background assumptions of Western philosophy do not represent those of philosophical thought in general, I have sought to describe the period of modernization in China and its reception of Western ideas without asserting the universality of the Western model of modernity as it is traditionally understood. In doing so, I have avoided the simple assumption that modernity was brought to China when Chinese philosophers came to see the truth and rationality of Western philosophy and the irrationality of their traditional philosophy.

One reason for avoiding this simplistic view is that it does not entirely explain why ideas that had been around for centuries suddenly came to influence thinkers in ways they previously had not. Why, for instance, did Xu Jiyu's world map and similar works of Western geography suddenly rattle the intellectual consciences of thinkers nearly 50 years after their original publications? Why didn't previous encounters with Western cartography or Zhao He's maritime explorations in the 15th century strike intellectuals in China as a fundamental challenge to the ritualized ordering of space in the *tianxiaguan*? What change allowed Tan Sitong to group

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[337] Søren Kierkegaard, "The Sickness Unto Death," in The Essential Kierkegaard, ed. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 367.

together Western treatises on mathematics and the *New Testament* with Buddhist and Mohist texts for understanding the Confucian concept of *ren*, something that would have seemed senseless only a few decades before? These questions cannot be answered simply by asserting the obvious truth of modern Western ideas and the irrationality of traditional Chinese thinking. Exchanges with Western science had been going on for centuries. Its tenants were not rejected as a heretical challenge to Confucian orthodoxy, only to emerge as influential when "reason" won out over "religion." Rather, many of these sources of knowledge had often simply been regarded as secondary to traditional learning required for the cultivation of *ren*. Therefore, we should not read into the reformers' thought a struggle to reconcile religious belief with secularism and science. Instead, the transition from the discursive environment of the *tianxiaguan* to that of the *shijieguan* lent all these sources the ability to speak with an authority that they previously lacked.

Moreover, the standard approach leaves open the question of why certain aspects of Western modernity became influential while other aspects, which seem inextricably related to them, did not. It cannot tell us why, for instance, Tan praised the value of autonomy while at the same time grounded it, not in the independence of the individual consciousness (which he rejects) but in the traditional Confucian relation of friendship. It leaves unexplained why Liang Qichao chose to talk about rights and the individual but condemned China not for its communitarianism but for its selfishness. It also fails to account for why all three thinkers came to see gender equality as one of the indispensable features of a modern society. We can only look at these anomalies as the result of a confusion on their part, or an effort to compromise between a foreign modernity and an intellectual attachment to their own tradition.

For early interpreters, assuming the universality of the Western model of philosophical modernity resulted in a bad philosophy of translation that lead them to search for equivalences in

Chinese thought. That is, they searched for recognizable moments that signaled China's transition to modernity in terms of substitutions – i.e., tradition with reason, religion with secularism. The result was that the philosophies of the Hundred Days' Reformers ended up looking like confused misunderstandings of what modernity, in *truth*, was all about. As Wei Zhang puts it, in the end, China's only option was "to translate its history of modernization into a discourse of philosophy by eliminating its temporal thus contingent elements from the discourse of modernity… [I]n the attempt to convert its discourse of modernity into a project of translation, China's history of modernity was reduced to a belated modernity in the derivative language of reason."[338] Chinese modernity could be understood as truly modern only by translating itself into the language of Western modernity. That is, it had to portray itself in terms of the emergence of rational subjects searching for the transcendental foundations of objective knowledge in order to build a rational, secular society.

This approach yielded the view espoused by Levenson that the thinkers of the late 19th century were only of historical importance to China and not of universal significance to the philosophy of modernity. I stated that this view could be disproven if we could produce a plausible interpretation of these thinkers that makes better sense of their philosophies and reads them as having something meaningful to contribute to the concept of modernity. To do this, I recontextualized Western philosophical modernity within a cultural and historical tradition, thus reconstituting its own temporal and contingent elements. I started by taking as our point of comparison the emergence of modern thought within the Socratic paradigm of selfhood. This included the emergence of a rational subject that can critically reflect on tradition through the representation of ideas to itself in pure thought, as well as the notion of liberal individualism in

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[338] Wei Zhang, *What Is Enlightenment: Can China Answer Kant's Question?* (State University of New York Press, 2010), 37.

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the sphere of politics. These features, I argued, emerged within a specific local and historical setting and were aimed at addressing certain epistemological issues brought about by the crisis in science and religion in 17th and 18th century Europe. Contextualizing the history of modern philosophy in this way opened up the possibility that a tradition with a different model of selfhood and faced with a different kind of crisis would produce a kind of modernity that was distinct in fundamental ways. But what then unites these two movements as distinctively "modern" in their character? We are now in a position to approach this question and reflect on how these early thinkers contribute to contemporary philosophy of modernity in the West.

To do this, however, will require a different theory of modernity, one that does not from the start exclude the possibility of a Chinese modernity different from the West's, as the standard narrative does. Among the many recent commentators on philosophical modernity, Foucault's reflections in *The Order of Things* and "What is Enlightenment?" are among the most influential. His skepticism toward universal or transcendent principles that underwrite our beliefs apart from any discursive environment makes him an attractive candidate for comparison. It is likely that he would be skeptical toward claims about the universality of the Western model of modernity, and this makes him helpful for articulating a more global understanding of philosophical modernity that considers the thought of the Hundred Days' Reformers. In the following sections, I will briefly sketch Foucault's relevant ideas about modernity and bring them into dialogue with their thought. I will then conclude by describing how all these thinkers contribute to the understanding of modernity as an existential condition in which humanity is engaged in a continual process of self-discovery and self-creation.

1. Foucault on Modernity

In his periodization, Foucault locates Descartes in what he calls the Classical Period, while taking modernity, strictly speaking, as emerging after critical shifts in the order of knowledge at the end of the 18th century in Europe. He writes in *The Order of Things*,

> When natural history becomes biology, when the analysis of wealth becomes economics, when, above all, reflection upon language becomes philology, and Classical discourse, in which being and representation found their common locus, is eclipsed, then, in the profound upheaval of such an archaeological mutation, man appears in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows: enslaved sovereign, observed spectator, he appears in the place belonging to the king, which was assigned to him in advance by *Las Meninas*, but from which his real presence has for so long been excluded.[339]

Foucault sees a fundamental shift from Descartes' *cogito* to the modern "man," which he sees as typified in the "Copernican Revolution" of Kant's first critique. Kant argues that we can never know whether our representations of the world to ourselves accurately reflect the way the world truly is in itself. To find universal truths, he instead turns toward the reasoning subject to find those judgments that necessarily lie in all our empirical experiences and structure knowledge. While we may never know the world objectively in the sense of how it appears to God, universal and certain knowledge is still possible since these judgements are *a priori* and thus necessary and common to all rational beings. By outlining the limits of the human being's powers to arrive at certain knowledge, that is, in outlining the human being in her finitude,[340] Kant's critical project sought to create a space within which knowledge would be possible, if always limited. Foucault sees this movement (as well as other transformations in knowledge at the end of the 18th century)

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[339] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 340.

[340] "Man's finitude is heralded – and imperiously so – in the positivity of knowledge; we know that man is finite, as we know the anatomy of the brain, the mechanics of production costs, or the system of IndoEuropean conjugation; or rather, like a watermark running through all these solid, positive, and full forms, we perceive the finitude and limits they impose, we sense, as though on their blank reverse sides, all that they make impossible." Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 342.

reflected in Diego Velázquez's painting, *Las Meninas*, where there exists an ambiguous relationship between the observer and what is observed. Here, "all the interior lines of the painting, and above all those that come from the central reflection, point towards the very thing that is represented, but absent."[341] Man, he claims, emerges as the key to representation, and both the subject and the object of all knowledge.

In other words, the study of the world becomes the study of the human subject as a knower. Therefore, Foucault sees the modern age not simply as "the attempt to apply objective methods to the study of man,"[342] but as a project "of revealing the conditions of knowledge on the basis of the empirical contents given in it."[343] In this way, modernity becomes a kind of anthropology, and the modern self appears as "a strange empirico-transcendental doublet, since he is a being such that knowledge will be attained in him of what renders all knowledge possible."[344] Foucault describes this doublet as strange partly because it tries to establish empirically what is transcendental. Through studying things like human biology, psychology, or history, modern thinkers believe that they can establish those necessary judgments that limit our knowledge and yet make knowledge possible. The transcendental foundations for all objective knowledge turn out to be the features of human selfhood itself. However, studying the human subject as an object like others once again calls into question the natural limits of our subjectivity. It is like the eye trying to see itself. This circular puzzle leads us to try to continually "think our own unthought," that is, to discover once and for all the hidden structures of our finitude that unconsciously determine what we say, think, or do.[345]

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[341] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 335.
[342] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 347.
[343] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, *Ibid.*
[344] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, *Ibid.*
[345] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 351.

Foucault criticizes this period of modernity as an "anthropological sleep," which endlessly seeks to find the universal, timeless structure of human nature that determines its possibilities. Yet, despite his characterization as a "post-modern" thinker, he situates himself, as do many of his commentators, within this post-Kantian tradition, even as he reflects critically on it.[346] Later in his career he begins to emphasize his connection to the original modern problematic set out in part by Kant's critical project. In "What is Enlightenment?" Foucault reflects on Kant's characterization of modernity in his essay of the same name. Here, Foucault comes to describe modernity as an attitude or an ethos toward the present. He sees in Kant's text a "distinct manner of philosophizing" one that "simultaneously problematizes man's relation to the present, man's historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject."[347] In other words, Kant is the first one to ask the question of his own present by seeking to place himself and his period in a historical moment. Foucault writes,

> It seems to me that it is the first time that a philosopher has connected in this way, closely and from the inside, the significance of his work with respect to knowledge, a reflection on history and a particular analysis of the specific moment at which he is writing and because of which he is writing. It is in the reflection on "today" as difference in history and as motive for a particular philosophical task that the novelty of this text appears to me to lie.[348]

It is this "heroization of the present," the situating of one's philosophical work in the present by historicizing it, that is the ethos of modernity. Foucault sees the project of enlightenment as a kind of "historical ontology of ourselves"[349] in which we take stock of our limitations through examining the historical situation we occupy.

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[346] Commentators often see a conflicted relationship with Kant, rather than one of simple rejection or critique. See Amy Allen, "Foucault and Enlightenment: A Critical Reapprasal," *Constellations* 10, no. 2 (2003), 191. As well as Lee Braver, *A Thing of This World*: *A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 343.

[347] Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage Books; Random House, 2010), 42.

[348] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, 38.

[349] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, 42.

Yet, whereas Kant is trying to set the ultimate limits of human knowledge, Foucault seeks

out those same limits to show their own historical contingency so that they may be transgressed.

This process of transgression is demonstrated in the second aspect of the attitude of modernity

Foucault observes in "What is Enlightenment?", namely, the modern self's concern for freedom.

This concern for freedom, in conjunction with the heroization of the present, characterizes

modern thought from Kant down to today. Foucault comes to see the modern human being as

"not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man

who tries to invent himself,"[350] and thereby frees himself from his historical limitations. What

makes Kant a modern thinker is not that he thought he found the transcendental features of the

human subject as a knower, but that he had reflected on his present and showed us a new idea of

the human being and what it could become. Foucault situates his own philosophy within this new

understanding of modernity. It is a modernity that is always changing and reformulating itself

not, as he says, to find the transcendental limits of our knowledge but to reveal those historical

conditions that have made us who we are, and envision "the possibility of no longer being,

doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think."[351]

Foucault's historical periodization of the emergence of modernity helps us place the

features of Western modernity within the context of a cultural-historical tradition. His

characterization of modernity within Western philosophy in terms of the relationship between

knowledge, truth, and freedom is helpful in that it points us toward answering the question of

what alternatives could it be compared to. Foucault even emphasizes the historical and local

specificity of Enlightenment. "We must never forget," Foucault writes, "that the Enlightenment

is an event, or a set of events and complex historical processes, that is located at a certain point

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[350] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, *Ibid.*
[351] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, 46.

in the development of European societies."[352] As a consequence of this, he insists that we "must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical,"[353] and instead "limit ourselves to this type of always partial and local inquiry."[354] Not only is his understanding of modernity historically and culturally specific, he warns against universalizing programs of modernity that attempt to create a new understanding of society and history grounded in features that purport to transcend our historical and cultural situation.

Perhaps for this reason, Foucault consciously places his analysis of modernity firmly within the Western tradition and makes few claims about the nature of modernity outside the West. Foucault does at one point brings up non-Western traditions in his reflections on the relationship between erotics and knowledge in *History of Sexuality Vol. I*. He notes a kind of *ars erotica*, which does not seek to find true knowledge of sexuality but transmits esoteric practices from a master to his chosen student where "truth is drawn from pleasure itself" and then deflects this knowledge back onto sexual practices themselves.[355] He locates this *ars erotica* in the traditions of India, China, Japan, the Arab-Islamic world, and Rome. There is something to this comparative moment, but this generalized gesture toward "the Orient" plus Rome does not adequately capture Confucian learning. While the classical Confucians do not focus on sexual desire as a topic of philosophical reflection, they do offer the ritual tradition as a means of both moderating desires and ensuring their satisfaction.[356] However, the ritual tradition is not esoteric. It is publicly shared and transmitted. At any rate, Foucault later comes to consider his discussion

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[352] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, 43.
[353] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, 46.
[354] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, 47.
[355] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 57.
[356] This is especially true of Xunzi. See his discussion of ritual in Xunzi, "A Discussion of Rites" in *Xunzi: Basic Writings*, Trans. Burton Watson, (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), 93-114.

of the *ars erotica* as a mistake, saying that he should have focused on examples within the Western tradition.[357]

Foucault's hesitation about going beyond the West as well as his admonition against global and radical projects is no doubt an acknowledgement of the violent atrocities committed in the early 20th century in the name of such projects, and his point is well-taken. However, we should not for this reason conclude, nor do I think Foucault means to suggest, that it is inadvisable to bring this understanding of modernity into dialogue with other modernities to build a more global model. Foucault merely objects to what he calls "universal intellectuals," the old-style intellectuals who claimed to single-handedly articulate such universalizing programs and understood themselves to be the "conscience of us all."[358] He speaks in favor of a new style of "specific" intellectuals, ones who speak with authority within a specific field but who also engage with one another in a global process of "exchange and support."[359] This process of exchange in turn, "makes it possible, if not to integrate, at least to rearticulate categories which were previously kept separate."[360] An exchange between the West and China, a tradition which Foucault admitted he knew little about,[361] might help us rearticulate these cultural categories, further contextualize the Western understanding of modernity, and expand on Foucault's original project. Was it not, after all, Borges' Chinese Encyclopedia that first shattered the familiar landmarks of his thought, thus providing the impetus for his insightful reappraisal of Western intellectual history?

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[357] Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage Books; Random House, 2010), 348.
[358] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage Books; Random House, 2010), 67.
[359] Foucault, "Truth and Power" in *The Foucault Reader*, 68.
[360] Foucault, "Truth and Power" in *The Foucault Reader*, ibid.
[361] Foucault, "Truth and Power" in *The Foucault Reader*, 74.

Borges' encyclopedia was, of course, fictional. Foucault understood that the "China" of the Western imagination often played the role of a heterotopia where one could find, "at the other extremity of the earth we inhabit, a culture entirely devoted to the ordering of space, but one that does not distribute the multiplicity of existing things into any of the categories that make it possible for us to name, speak, and think."[362] Thankfully, the work of "specific" intellectuals like Foucault and those working in the field of sinology and comparative philosophy have helped make the categories of "China" and "the West" a little less distant.

2. Knowledge and *Ren*

Given the distinctive historical and intellectual environment of China, the emergence of modern thought took a different form from the West in ways that were subtle yet significant. First, we should remember that *zhi* 智 or knowledge/wisdom was of course important within the Chinese tradition, but it was not understood as a set of true beliefs possessed by an individual consciousness whose primary function was cognition. Working within the Confucian paradigm of selfhood, the thinkers of the Hundred Days do not typically use *zhi* to indicate a project of representing accurately through private mental contents. The thinkers of this period typically refer to scientific knowledge as *gezhi* 格致, from the phrase *gewu zhizhi* 格物致知, or "the ordering of things for the extending of wisdom" as it appeared in the *Great Learning*. Thus, extending knowledge was not a theoretical, disinterested task that attempted to see the world from the disembodied perspective of God. As reflected in the *Great Learning*, knowledge emphasized the "ordering of affairs and things" (*gewu* 格物) in a way that allowed one to wisely navigate the world of transformations and achieve a state of *gantong*. For Kang Youwei this clearly meant using Western science to order things in a way that was public and transcultural

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[362] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xxi.

(*gong* 公) rather than parochial and narrow-minded (*si* 私). For Tan Sitong, the knowledge that could be brought about by science would help us see the fundamental interconnection of all things, and the mutual interdependence of apparent opposites. Therefore, although they adopted many aspects of western scientific discourse, it was not a partial embrace of a scientific positivism. They did not view science, to borrow from Foucault, as an effort to match discourse to a truth that is of the same order as the object. [363] They continued to treat it as a *dao* that could guide the construction of a cultural system for the cultivation of *ren*.

Thus, the picture of a long-benighted China being forced into Enlightenment by Western knowledge is misleading. Popular histories both in and out of China point to the Embassy of Lord Macartny in 1793 from King George III to the Qianlong Emperor 乾隆帝 (1711-1799) as the paradigmatic moment in which China turned away from scientific modernity. The embassy presented the emperor with some of the best scientific and technological instruments the British had in an effort to win diplomatic concessions from China. The emperor was not impressed and sent the embassy away. However, Benjamin Elman argues that the reason was not a lack of interests in scientific knowledge and technology. Rather, it was that China already had equally if not better scientific instruments and knowledge of its own, thanks in part to the earlier collaborations with the Jesuits. He further notes that China's military defeat by Japan a hundred years later was likewise not due to China's scientific or technological inferiority as is often suggested. He shows that by 1894 the Chinese navy was, in fact, superior to that of Japan, and contemporaries largely predicted a win for China.[364] What sealed Japan's victory, according to

[363] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 348.
[364] Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 379.

Elman, was its superior organization against China's internal factionalism, reactionary politics, corruption, and incompetent leadership.[365]

Elman's study shows that pre-modern China was not anti-scientific nor stubbornly "religious." It was not the triumph of Western scientific rationality over a so-called religious traditionalism that constituted the modern turn in Chinese thought. We do not see these thinkers latching on to the principle of reason as the new form of legitimate thought while rejecting the authority of cultural tradition and the communicative aspect of knowing. Instead, we ought to see that just like thinkers in the West, thinkers in this period responded to their crisis by posing the question "What is man?" in a new and radical way. However, it was not rationality but *ren* that constituted the important feature of the human self for these thinkers. Tan Sitong turns to the concept of *ren* not *zhi* in his efforts to develop a new understanding of humanity. Neither Kang nor Tan talk about a science of man as a means of attaining objective knowledge. *Ren* does not get posited as a positive foundation, which then can provide us with objective knowledge of the world. When knowledge/wisdom (*zhi*) is discussed, it is given a supplementary place next to *ren*. Kang in particular follows the Chinese tradition by explicitly placing *ren* above *zhi* in order of importance and value.[366] He lays out the relationship between *ren* and *zhi* in his early work, the *Neiwaipian*, by declaring, "the human *dao* takes *zhi* as its guide and takes *ren* as the origin to which it returns [*gui* 歸]."[367] He believes that *zhi* is integral to the activity of being human but *ren* is the goal where we come to rest in that which is our origin (*gui*).[368] In short, wisdom is

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[365] Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 382.
[366] Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* 大同书, 4: 仁智同用而仁為貴矣
[367] Neiwaipian 109: "人道以智為導，以仁為歸"
[368] The character *gui* 歸 has several meanings most of which connote the return to a place of origin, particularly in the sense of returning home.

instrumentally important for the sake of learning to embody *ren*, and *ren* serves as the constant reference point for our learning.

As we have seen, much of Confucian philosophical discourse was concerned with interpreting the wisdom of the received cultural *dao* for cultivating *ren* within oneself and society. With the violent breakdown of the *tianxiaguan* during the 19ᵗʰ century, Tan seeks to situate the human being, not just temporally in relation to the present age, but also geographically within a new multi-cultural global space. Consequently, we see that his strategy is to search for the conditions for the possibility, not of knowledge, but of a cultural system, that is, to outline the necessary features of a cosmopolitan system for realizing *ren*. But his concept *tong* does not represent a transcendental structure that stands outside of the phenomenal world of change. It is the continuity that is achieved through the process of constant change itself. Moreover, this change can only come through communication between different cultural traditions. Certainly, a restructuring of the received wisdom was necessary for this, and thus new scientific and mathematical knowledge from the West played an important role for him. But the "modern man" of his final articulation did not turn out to be "the rational subject" but the "the actor" who cultivates her *shen* body through study and discipline and constantly returns anew to the principle of *ren* as she reinvents herself and the roles she plays with others on a multicultural world stage.

Liang Qichao, as we have seen, comes to be critical of the concept of *ren*. Yet even in his criticism of *ren* as characterized by Kang Youwei, he does not turn to the concept of *zhi* as an alternative. He does not describe the new vision of selfhood in terms of a rational subject, much less a subject in whom knowledge will be found that will render all knowledge possible. What Liang takes as being most characteristic of the Western ethos is *yi* 義. Since *yi* is associated with

the individual (*wo* 我) this move is often taken to be indicative of his preference for Western-style liberal individualism over Confucian communitarianism. Yet the contrast between these two categories (that is, so-called Western individualism vs. Chinese communitarianism) is perhaps too neatly drawn. Liberal individualism doesn't adequately capture what Liang means when he characterizes the Western ethos as emphasizing *yi*. The model of selfhood that he sought to describe as exhibiting *yi* was not the individual proprietor, but the civic-minded citizen. In other words, the modern human being, for Liang, was not the site of universal and necessary conditions for the possibility of "ordering things to extend knowledge," nor was it the rational individual who held a set of self-evident natural rights. It was the self-assertive, principled citizen of a modern nation-state.

The concept of the citizen often has the character of the liberal individual, whose relationship to the state has, at least ideally, the character of a negative relation of non-interference. However, the concept of the citizen was not originally, and therefore not necessarily, founded on the idea of individual rationality. Liang often looks to the West's ancient past in his analysis of the concept of the citizen, and it is there that we perhaps find what was most interesting to him. For instance, when Aristotle asks, "what is a state?" in the *Politics*, he comes to define it as a composite structure made up of citizens, but what defines the citizen is the fact that, "he shares in the administration of justice."[369] It is the participating in and sharing in the just governance of the polis that makes a citizen a citizen. Aristotle goes on to observe that when Cleisthenes reformed the tribal system of Athens, he did something subtle and profound to the concept of citizenship. He distributed the tribes equally across Attica such that they were no

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[369] Aristotle, "Politics," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), 1275a20.

longer bound by a certain local homeland, nor strictly associated with a single family lineage. He

also enrolled foreign residents and even slaves as citizens.[370] Thus, these various persons became

attached, not to a private family lineage or place of origin, but to a shared political community in

whose governance they participated. It is this "public" spirit that so inspired Liang and caused

him to criticize the myopic and complacent spirit of Chinese society.

Ultimately, what impressed Liang so much about Western notions of "rights" and laws

appears to have been its deep communitarianism not individualism. In his understanding, the

individual citizen sets aside her private inclinations toward family and clan to devote herself to

the good of the people. In fighting for the recognition of her rights in the laws of the state, she

thereby codifies the rights of all citizens in its laws. Liang's criticism of China's culture of *ren*

government was its propensity towards a culture of paternalism, complacency, and

narrowminded concern for one's family clan and homeland. It was a culture in which the people

passively wait for the benevolent ruler of a "private" monarchy to dispense benefits to them from

above. Similar criticisms can be found in Tan's praise of the Western love of activity, and

accusation of Chinese lethargy, selfishness and lack of responsibility. [371] It can be found as well

in Kang's call for a public government that includes the equal participation of all its citizens. The

self as citizen is a highly relational concept, for Liang, and implies a relationship to a state of

laws and equal relations to other citizens. Thus, the traditional emphasis on cultivating a

relational virtuosity was preserved by Liang in many ways, despite his rejection of Kang's

understanding of *ren* as the primary goal of self-cultivation. His emphasis on *yi* was a call for the

active participation of individual citizens to bring China into an international community of

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[370] Aristotle, "Politics" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1275b35.
[371] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 111.

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nation-states, not an advocation of individualism couched in superficially traditionalist terminology.

The ambiguity of this relationship between a supposedly "individualistic" West and a "communitarian" China has been noticed by commentators. For instance, the scholar T.M.L. Lee writes, "contrary to the communitarian assumption that communal and civic identities are convergent, the problem as articulated by late Qing reformers suggests a qualitative gap between communal and civic identities."[372] Yet clearly the ambiguity rests in the understanding of individualism and communitarianism itself. Contrary to the West's typical understanding of its own history, the "Western modernity" that impressed itself on these thinkers was this communitarian aspect of the Western cultural spirit, which they took to be in direct contrast to China's. Simply put, on this interpretation of the Hundred Days' reformers, the defining concept of the human in Western thought is not the idea of the rational animal, but the idea of the human self as political animal, that is, a citizen of a *polis*. Liang Qichao's (mis)understanding of Western liberal theory reveals aspects of Western thought that are sometimes lost in our standard narratives about our own tradition. Rather than framing the relationship as a "clash" between Western individualism and Chinese communitarianism, we can perhaps recognize that both traditions sought to find a balance between the individual and society in ways that ultimately can aid one another.

Understood in this way, China and the West have much more they can say to one another. For instance, if we return to Kant's "What is Enlightenment?", we find Kant describing enlightenment as humanity's "emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity"[373] and it is

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[372] Lee, "Liang Qichao and the Meaning of Citizenship", 310.
[373] Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, 8:35.

through the exercise of reason that the human being achieves this emancipation. Thus the injunction, *sapere aude*, "dare to know." But as Wei Zhang points out, there is an unavoidable, yet sometimes underrecognized, social dimension to this injunction.[374] Kant believes that since it is "difficult for any individual to work himself out of immaturity… it is much more likely for an entire public to enlighten itself."[375] Enlightenment is also achieved through political and social change, not just the individual exercise of one's reason. For Liang and the others, the *shijieguan* provided a new environment within which individuals could articulate their humanity, not as sons, brothers, husbands, and wives, but as "male" and "female" citizens of a *res publica*, a public thing. Therefore, Enlightenment can be framed not only in terms of knowledge, as in the imperative "dare to know," but also as an imperative directed at the organization of the cultural system: "dare to take responsibility."

What we have to learn from the study of the Hundred Days' Reformers is not just about the history of modernity in China. We can reach a better understanding of our own intellectual history as well. We are able to place it within its global cultural context and evaluate it as part of a larger global conversation. We can come to see the West as a cultural tradition, rather than a center from which modern civilization radiates outward to other parts of the world. Ultimately, both traditions are full of stunning innovations as well as charming idiosyncrasies illuminating the human, all too human limitations that nonetheless make us who we are.

3. **Learning to be Human: History, Progress, and the Existential Condition of Modernity**

Foucault points out that the traditional periodization situates modernity as an epoch that is "preceded by a more or less naïve premodernity, and followed by an enigmatic and troubling

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[374] Zhang, *What Is Enlightenment: Can China Answer Kant's Question?*, 11.
[375] Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, 8:36.

postmodernity."[376] The picture of humanity moving out of a state of immaturity to maturity gives

the view of a universal history in which humanity is progressing from an unenlightened state to

an enlightened one. It is a picture that links "the progress of truth and the history of liberty in a

bond of direct relation."[377] Kant's universal history of the development of reason from a

cosmopolitan perspective, as well as its legacy, simultaneously gave rise to a spatial

discontinuity in global modernity. Europe emerged as the center of the modern world. China and

other countries were perceived as existing in a more primitive period of development, and thus

had to catch up to the West as they adopted those features which were deemed to be essential to

modernity. Meanwhile, as the West grows increasingly skeptical of master narratives,

particularly those that emphasize reason as the essential feature of our humanity, it nonetheless

maintains the notion of a further progression from a naïve modernity into a postmodernity. This

gives rise to either what Wei Zhang refers to as a perceived time-lag between a derivative

Chinese modernity and the West,[378] or the unfolding of multiple modernities across a

heterogenous space.[379]

However, Foucault believes that modernity should not be attached to some set of

doctrines that came out of the European Enlightenment, but rather should be thought of as "the

permanent reactivation of an attitude – that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as

a permanent critique of our historical era."[380] The constantly renewed critique of the human

being situated in its historical present is central to the modern philosophical ethos. Understood in

this way, what distinguishes modernity is not a rejection of the past but a new, critical reappraisal

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[376] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, 39.
[377] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, 43.
[378] Zhang, *What Is Enlightenment: Can China Answer Kant's Question?*, 37.
[379] Wittrock, "One, None, or Many? European Origins and Modernity as Global Condition", 32.
[380] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, 42.

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of the past as part of an ethos that is infinitely concerned with the present and its future possibilities.

Indeed, we find that the shift to the spatial environment of the *shijieguan* was simultaneous with a change in the way Chinese thinkers thought about their history. Scholars of modern China often point to the emergence of new methods in historiography as one of the hallmark features of this period of transformation. Wei Zhang, for instance, documents the way in which the political crises of the early 20th century were navigated by intellectuals who explored new historiographical theories that could reform China's understanding of its history and identity. This exercise provided the means by which Chinese intellectuals could understand the history of their own present, but always vis-à-vis its relationship to a cosmopolitan world in which China no longer occupied the center of culture and learning.

Q. Edward Wang, too, notes in his book, *Inventing China Through History*, how intellectuals in both China and Europe pursued an international discourse of history that would simultaneously establish a national identity, and we see this process unfolding in the thought of the Hundred Days' Reformers. [381] Tan Sitong and Kang Youwei emphasize the rehabilitation and acceptance of marginalized sources of learning from both within and outside of the Chinese tradition. They recontextualized and reinterpreted the received tradition as a way to make sense of the rapidly globalizing world around them. Meanwhile, in the same year that Liang published *On the New Citizen*, he also published an influential collection of works titled *The New Historiography* (*Xin Shixue* 新史學). Wang's description of the importance of this work within the national/transnational discourse of modernity is noteworthy,

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[381] Q. Edward Wang, *Inventing China Through History*: *The May Fourth Approach to Historiography,* SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 13.

Liang's *New Historiography* marked a new beginning in Chinese historical thinking and the rise of nationalist historiography. Liang initiated this nationalist discourse on history out of his concern for the problems in his country… however, this nationalist discourse is also transnational, at least in two aspects. First, the idea of writing national history was directly related to China's international experience in the nineteenth century, namely its defeats by the west and Japan, and to the spatial reconfiguration of the global world. Second, Liang's conceptualization of national history, as shown in *The New Historiography*, was inspired by his counterparts in Japan as well as the West.[382]

Liang's philosophical thought at this early stage is nationalistic, but it is not reactionary or isolationist. He differs from the enthusiastic globalism of his peers only in his desire to focus on the immediate problem of strengthening China and transforming it into a modern nation-state. His nationalist approach seeks to overcome selfish parochialism and factionalism by unifying China around a new understanding of its history and identity within the *shijieguan*. He does this, not by rejecting what is foreign, but by using his contact with foreign sources to redefine China. In general, the philosophers of the Hundred Days' Reform were engaging in a critical reflection on humanity by way of a confrontation with a cultural Other. This provoked a rethinking, not an abandonment, of their tradition. Neither could this critical reflection be achieved through a reactionary return to isolationism. Therefore, for the philosophers of the Hundred Days' Reform, modernity has both spatial and historical dimensions, and its method is comparative. What emerges from the careful study of these thinkers is that modernity is not understood simply as a moment in a series of successive stages of development of reason and freedom. Rather, when two cultural systems, two ways (*dao*) on the world stage, are forced to communicate with one another, we learn a bit about more about our humanity (*ren*).

Foucault provides the helpful suggestion that "rather than seeking to distinguish the 'modern era' from the 'premodern' or 'postmodern,' I think it would be more useful to try to find

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[382] Wang, *Inventing China through history*, 49-50.

out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with

attitudes of "countermodernity."[383] Using the perspective provided by the reformers, what was

decidedly antimodern about the Qianlong Emperor's response to Lord Macartney's Embassy in

1793 is not to be found in his dismissal of the scientific instruments as uninteresting, but in the

message he sent back with the embassy to King George III,

> Our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders… Ever since the beginning of history, sage Emperors and wise rulers have bestowed on China a moral system and inculcated a code, which from time immemorial has been religiously observed by the myriads of my subjects. There has been no hankering after heterodox doctrines… *The distinction between Chinese and barbarian is most strict*, and your Ambassador's request that barbarians shall be given full liberty to disseminate their religion is utterly unreasonable.[384]

Thus, the attitude of countermodernity that the thinkers of the Hundred Days' faced was a

shortsighted, inward looking attitude, one that saw its historical tradition as complete, already

decided, self-contained, independent from, and superior to the rest of the world.

Just as Foucault problematized the notion of modernity as a break from the past to a more

objective way of seeing the world, the comparative model of modernity offered by the thinkers

of the Hundred Days' Reform challenges the notion of an autochthonic modernity. That is, of a

modernity that emerges out of an isolated tradition relating itself to itself inside the clearly

delimited boundary of French and German men's skulls. It is not something which happens in

the pure isolation of Descartes in his armchair, or Kant in Königsberg. This exchange between

China and the West allows us to rearticulate these cultural categories and provides us with

possibilities for rethinking the canonical history of Western philosophy. For instance, we saw

that the Hundred Days Reformers saw the participation of women in society as one of the

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[383] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, 39.
[384] "Emperor Qianlong: Letter to George III, 1793 | US-China Institute," accessed December 22, 2020, https://china.usc.edu/emperor-qianlong-letter-george-iii-1793 (own emphasis).

important features of Western modernity. In what ways has the standard history of Western thought forgotten the participation of women in the development of modernity? Or: In what ways did modernity in Europe emerge through the participation and exchange with cultures outside of Western Europe? What effect did interactions with China either through the Jesuits in the 17th century help spur enlightenment thought in Germany?[385] In what way did encounters with non-European peoples inspire and make possible Kant's reflections on anthropology? Comparative study aids recent efforts to reframe the category of "Western" thought, its boundaries, its history, and its canonical figures. In the same way that this dissertation aimed to restore agency to these Chinese intellectuals, future researchers can shift these other philosophers and traditions out of the reified position of 'marginalized' thinkers and into a more central role within Western intellectual history.

Lastly, the Hundred Days' Reformer's reflections on the modern cultivation of *ren* provide us with some ways of reflecting on the notion of progress. Foucault notes that the discovery of the finitude of the human intellect (as with Kant), or the finitude of the limitations of our cultural tradition (as with Kang Youwei), simultaneously gives rise to certain eschatological visions of humanity's future possibilities. Foucault writes,

> But this primary discovery of finitude is really an unstable one; nothing allows it to contemplate itself; and would it not be possible to suppose that it also promises that very infinity it refuses, according to the system of actuality? The evolution of the species has perhaps not reached its culmination… Heralded in positivity, man's finitude is outlined in the paradoxical form of the endless; rather than the rigor of a limitation, it indicates the monotony of a journey which, though it probably has no end, is nevertheless perhaps not without hope.[386]

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[385] This particular question has been explored by the late Martin Schönfeld and deserves further exploration. See, Thomas Fuchs, "The European China – Receptions from Leibniz to Kant," translated by Martin Schönfeld in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (2006), 35-49.
[386] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 342.

Whereas Kant links the progress of Truth with the history of liberty, Kang links the progress of *ren* with the history of unity and cooperation. Progress then for Kang is not toward a truer or more rational view of the world, but rather is a process of humanity's self-realization achieved through comparative self-discovery. The limits placed on our cultural and geographical isolation have only allowed us to partially approximate *ren*. Yet this limitation contains within it the promise of a future in which humanity has overcome all barriers that isolate us from one another. At this state, humanity will have reached the *datong* and the greatest level of equality with both one another and with the natural world.

While Kang's utopian vision for the future of humankind eventually would influence the eschatological visions of the Maoists,[387] Foucault is skeptical of such eschatological visions and places utopias necessarily in the realm of nonexistence (as the word "utopia" itself suggests).[388] Kang takes the original *datong* utopia from the *Book of Ritual* that provided what Foucault would call a "fantasy of origin" for the development of the ritual system. He then transforms it into an end of history that will "cause man's anthropological truth to spring forth in its immobility."[389] While Kang does not claim to have found an immutable human essence, he does believe progress will give rise to a constant human *dao* for the cultivation of *ren*. Still, Foucault sees such utopias as being used to justify both programs for liberation and oppression. Indeed, both Kang and Mao appear willing to sacrifice much for the sake of reaching this *datong*.[390]

Instead, Foucault describes modernity as, "at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going

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[387] Brusadelli, "A Tale of Two Utopias", 104.
[388] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xix.
[389] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 286.
[390] This gives some credence to Liang's charge that any *datong* would likely inevitably give rise to barbarism.

beyond them,"[391] but not for the sake of reaching an end of history. Rather, he sees this project as a constant task, one that is, "a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty."[392] The eschewal of any set of doctrines that defines modernity leaves us with the understanding of humanity as an ongoing process of simultaneous self-discovery and self-creation.

It is on this issue of liberty that this study of the Hundred Days' reformers treatment of *ren* provides the greatest contrast to Western notions of modernity. Within the West's complex history of the interrelation of the concepts of goodness, true knowledge, and freedom, there remains a tendency in the West to focus on the individual's quest for enlightenment and freedom. Even among the strongest critics of the Socratic Paradigm in the West (Nietzsche for instance), individual freedom, especially from the constraints of convention, is held up as the highest goal of self-cultivation. The notion of *ren* can provide us with an alternative goal that does not threaten or reject freedom but rather frames it differently. Tan Sitong, too, talks about autonomy, and certainly desires it, but there are some critical differences that he can contribute to this ongoing task. First, he believes we achieve autonomy through the reciprocal relation of friendship. It is through a relation of mutual critique and guidance that one overcomes one's own limitations and achieves renewal. Tan is seeking to establish a path toward a world where cultural systems can speak to one another intelligibly. The cultivation of *ren* is an activity partly one of discovery part creativity, but like autonomy, it is not one that a single culture can do alone. It involves interaction and exchange with another.

Secondly, Tan's investigation into the concept of humanity is not one in which humanity seeks to free itself from itself. For him, it is a constant process of learning to become more fully what we are, but by a process of beautifying the body through *xiushen*. This process of

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[391] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, 50.
[392] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, *ibid.*

beautifying and cultivating oneself is how one achieves autonomy, that is authority over the self not just for individuals but for societies as well. By placing knowledge as secondary to the cultivation of *ren* individual and societies achieve autonomy through mutual critique with others and through the creative appropriation of the ritual system. This study reveals that these thinkers modernized through different appropriations of their traditions as they engaged with Western thought, rather than appropriating Western concepts. In this way, historical progress gets presented not by linking the history of liberty to the discovery of true knowledge, but by linking it to communication and continuity with other cultures. It is humanity's infinite promise to itself of its own self-realization through constant daily renewal by way of intercultural exchange and critique. In the final passage of the *Exposition of Ren* Tan writes, "the situation of the world can be compared to a flowing river. Once it has passed it is never the same again. This is why the *Book of Changes* begins with the hexagram *qian* 乾 (create) and ends with the hexagram *weiji* 未濟 (not yet complete)."[393] For Tan, the process of modernity remains open ended (*buhe* 不合). Science will deconstruct oppositional categories that tempt us into reifying reality into discrete objects, but it will also deconstruct the notion of the human itself, revealing humanity's fundamental continuity with the rest of the ever changing world.

In summary, Tan's notion of progress is not the idea of humanity progressing toward a positive goal that humanity sketches out in advance.[394] It is the process of humanity continually issuing itself promissory notes for something better than it is today. This can only be achieved through the freedom that is afforded by a critical friendship with other cultures, which can sometimes understand our own culture in ways that are different from how we understand it

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[393] Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence*, 296.
[394] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 349.

ourselves. As Wei Zhang concludes in her comparative analysis of Chinese and Western Enlightenment, "if humanity's growth or rational maturity is an ongoing process of self-understanding and self-interpretation; enlightenment is an ontological and existential condition rather than enterprise of epistemology."[395] Paraphrasing Kierkegaard's characterization of the individual's quest for self-realization, we can say that this existential condition of modernity, articulated by Tan, consists precisely in humanity being presently, infinitely concerned about itself and not about a positive goal, that is, in being infinitely concerned about itself and consequently never deeming itself finished.[396] Through extending our knowledge of each other and the world, we continually return anew to the origin (*yuan*) that established the myriad things. But for Tan, this *yuan* is not a being, much less a god. It is *ren*.

Thus, while Kang Youwei warns us that "if people sever themselves from the love that constitutes their heart that cannot bear the suffering of others, they extinguish the human *dao*,"[397] Tan's philosophy shows us how Kang's inspiring utopian ideal could simultaneously give rise to some of modernity's dangers. Programs such as Kang's, which emerge from time to time within a society, often argue that the realization of a positive goal for humanity's cultivation could be achieved, were it not for the limits imposed on it by this or that minority, foreigner, economic class, or the burden of recalcitrant cultural system. Then by means of the concentration camp, the gulag, or the indiscriminate self-harm of a cultural revolution, they attempt to rid humanity of its finitude. Yet in the end, they fail each time to achieve humanity's highest form and the final promise of modernity. Rather, humanity finds itself momentarily severed from *ren*, and experiences a kind of perdition.

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[395] Zhang, *What Is Enlightenment: Can China Answer Kant's Question?*, 97.
[396] Søren Kierkegaard, "Stages on Life's Way," in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 184.
[397] Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* 大同书, 3.

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