

Article

Wang Yangming's Concept of Oneness from the Perspective of Mysticism

Linna Liu

Division of Philosophy, School of Politics and Public Administration, Soochow University,
Suzhou 215123, China; lnliu@suda.edu.cn

Abstract: Wang Yangming's emphasis on the concept of oneness establishes a significant connection between his philosophy and mysticism. This comparative study draws upon his mystical encounters and conceptual framework. Although "all things form one body" appears to be a typical formula of extrovertive mysticism, his doctrine is more inclined to be classified as a type of introvertive mysticism because of the special definition of "thing" and the deep involvement of heart-mind. The realm of oneness is based on the mode of a heart-mind pervading the entirety of the universe and all things, with the core concept of *liangzhi* as both pure consciousness and the base of the world. The adoption of a mystical philosophical perspective highlights Wang's theory of oneness as a spiritual philosophy, transcending general ethical claims, thus enriching our understanding of Wang's philosophy of mind.

Keywords: Wang Yangming; mysticism; oneness; introvertive; extrovertive

1. Mysticism within Chinese Contexts

The comparative study of mysticism and Chinese philosophy has been pioneered by several scholars, though the approach remains debatable. Feng Youlan interprets Mencius' statement "all things are complete in me" as a mystical expression within Chinese philosophy and argues that the mystical realm represents the pinnacle of self-cultivation (Feng 2001, p. 366). B.I. Schwartz posits that Daoist thoughts in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* can be classified as mysticism arising within a Chinese context, albeit distinct from those of Indian or Christian origins (Schwartz 1985, p. 188). Chen Lai also notes that the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism accommodates a mystical tradition (Chen 1991, p. 412). Other scholars have expressed different views. For instance, Mou Zongsan objected to using the term mysticism to explain Chinese thoughts, fearing it would obscure the rational spirit and moral values of Confucianism (Mou 2003b, p. 333). This concern largely arises from the simplification of mysticism as an unspeakable, vague tradition, pointing to a purely subjective and accidental psychological phenomenon. While acknowledging that the term "mysticism" carries intricate connotations in various contexts—encompassing witchcraft, mythology, hallucination, and religions—the core theme of mysticism can be defined as a philosophy that emphasizes comprehending ultimate reality through mystical intuition and enlightenment rather than logical reasoning. If we limit the concept of mysticism to a spiritual tradition that transcends rationality, it is possible to compare it with Chinese philosophy. As Julia Ching notes that "the Chinese mind has been characterized more by intuition than by analysis" (Ching 1997, preface), even Mou Zongsan agrees that Chinese philosophy emphasizes intuitive enlightenment over logical argumentation (Mou 2003b, p. 336), which is consistent with the theme of mysticism.

A key characteristic of mysticism is the experience of "oneness" with the ultimate reality. Building upon William James's observation that individuals from diverse backgrounds share a similar experience of becoming "one with the Absolute" (James 1936, p. 410), W.T.



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Stace further develops the idea, assuming that mystical experiences are fundamentally similar worldwide, transcending ages, cultures, and religious affiliations. It is a universal cultural phenomenon, while the interpretations may vary. The common thread in mystical experiences is identified as “culminating in the perception of, and union with, a Unity or One” (Stace 1961, p. 62). The shared characteristic of mysticism and Chinese philosophy can also be captured from the perspective of oneness, as Feng Youlan and Schwartz have pointed out. Feng defines mysticism as “a philosophy recognizing the realm of ‘all things form one body’, where the individual is united with the whole universe, erasing distinctions between self and others, inner and outer” (Feng 2001, p. 366). Schwartz similarly discusses the assumption in mysticism that “finite humans or some finite humans can achieve oneness or some kind of mystic union with the ultimate ground of reality” (Schwartz 1985, p. 193). These studies provide methodological guidance for further comparative analysis.

The mystical experience of oneness within traditional Chinese thought is encapsulated by the phrase “all things form one body” (*wan wu yi ti* 萬物一體), an expression that holds a longstanding tradition in Chinese philosophy, with roots dating back to the pre-Qin period. Mencius declared that “all things are complete in me” (the *Mencius*, 7A4), while Zhuangzi expressed that “heaven, earth, and I were produced together, and all things and I are one” (the *Zhuangzi*, 2:9). Similar ideas proliferated among Neo-Confucians. Zhang Zai (1020–1077) described a spiritual realm that “what fills up the heaven and earth is my body, what commands the heaven and earth is my nature”, positioning humans as parallel to the universe (Zhang 1978, p. 63). Cheng Hao (1032–1085) extended Confucius’ concept of benevolence (仁 *ren*), stating that “a person of full virtue is one who is totally united with things” (Cheng 1981, p. 16). While interpretations of these expressions may vary,¹ they all allude to a state of mind that encompasses all things, advocating for the dissolution of boundaries between self and the external world, and between the inner and outer realms.

This idea of oneness holds significant importance in the philosophy of Wang Yang-ming 王陽明 (1472–1529), a prominent Neo-Confucian scholar of the Ming dynasty. As a leading critic of the orthodox teachings of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), Wang based his metaphysics and moral philosophy on the concept of the heart-mind (*xin* 心), introducing several notable doctrines such as “the heart-mind itself is the pattern (*xin ji li* 心即理)”, the “unity of knowledge and action” (*zhi xing heyi* 知行合一), and the “extension of the innate knowledge” (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知). His idea of “all things form one body” is integral to his theoretical framework and, as noted by Kenji Shimada, forms one of the main pillars of his philosophy (Shimada 1986, p. 87). In his late work *Inquiry on the Great Learning* (大學問, completed in 1527), Wang elaborated on his concept of oneness in detail: “A great man is one who regards the heaven and earth and all things as one, who sees all under heaven as a family, and all within the country as a single person. Those who divide you and I according to the physical body are small men 大人者，以天地萬物為一體者也，其視天下猶一家，中國猶一人焉。若夫間形骸而分爾我者，小人矣” (Wang 2011, p. 1066).² In this passage, he illuminates the nuanced state of the heart-mind of a great man, emphasizing a unity that transcends dichotomies and divisions.

Wang’s proposition of “all things form one body” is not just a verbal statement reiterated by others; it stems from the profound personal experiences of the thinker. There is textual evidence of Wang’s encounter with several genuine moments of enlightenment. For instance, in 1502, while practicing Daoist cultivation in the Yangming Cave in his hometown, Wang purportedly achieved a prophetic ability (Wang 2011, p. 1351). According to the account of his disciple Wang Ji 王畿 (1498–1583), during this meditation, “the master observed within and perceived his body akin to a crystal palace, transcending worldly concerns and self-awareness, forgetting the boundaries of heaven and earth, and merging with emptiness” (Wang 2007, p. 33). Later, in 1508, amidst political persecution and banishment to the remote courier station of Longchang, Wang meditated incessantly in a stone coffin. One night, he experienced a breakthrough, sensing “as if someone spoke to him in the darkness; he cheered and involuntarily leaped, awakening his followers”.

He concluded that “My nature possesses all it needs for acquiring the way of sageliness” (Wang 2011, p. 1354), marking a pivotal enlightenment in his life that liberated him from the fear of mortality. Although this experience is deemed “beyond expressions”, the depictions of “cheering” and “leaping” suggest that he experienced ecstasy, leading to a strong confidence in becoming a sage and a focused commitment to the study of heart–mind, implying a deep apprehension of his inner subjectivity. He later emphasized that the oneness of heart–mind “is not through imagination, but the inherent reality of benevolence” (Wang 2011, p. 1066), indicating the objectivity of his experience. These traits—feelings of peace and ecstasy, a sense of objectivity or reality, and the apprehension of inner subjectivity—are common in mystical experiences (Stace 1961, p. 131). Thus, Wang’s enlightenment should not be seen as merely a theoretical breakthrough or intellectual speculation; rather, it is closely tied to his profound meditative experience. These experiences likely served as Wang’s internal motivation to propose the theory of oneness.

Wang Yangming’s encounters and discussions of “oneness” can be seen as part of a broader, global mystical experience, even though it evolved independently within the distinctive context of Chinese culture. Through a comparative study, we will highlight the significance of Wang Yangming’s theory as a spiritual philosophy rooted in his genuine life experience, transcending the purely ethical interpretation of “all things form one body”. Additionally, we will address the questions of “what to be one with” and “how to be one” in Wang’s theory by drawing on the framework of mystic theory, revealing the complexity of oneness that extends beyond its literal expression. Lastly, we will further explore the relationship between the notion of “all things form one body” and Wang’s core theory of *liangzhi* (良知, the innate knowledge), emphasizing the coherence of his overall philosophy.

2. The Problem of Classification: Extrovertive or Introvertive

Mystical experiences can be classified in several ways, with the distinction between extrovertive and introvertive experiences being of overriding importance (Stace 1961, p. 60). Rudolf Otto refers to these as the outward way and inward way (Otto 1932, p. 38). Chen Lai concludes that “extrovertive mysticism perceives the unity of the myriad things, while the introvertive perceives the consciousness beyond time and space, that is also the whole reality” (Chen 2018, p. 409). Both variants share common characteristics, such as a sense of objectivity, tranquility, joy, divine reverence, and an alleged indescribability. Paramount among these shared traits is the perception of an ultimate unity or the One. Extrovertive mystics perceive the unity of the plural world, whereas introvertive mystics ascend to the realization of pure consciousness (Stace 1961, p. 133). The latter is believed to be a more comprehensive unity and thus is regarded as more significant in religious and philosophical contexts. As Stace remarks, “Extrovertive experience is no more than a stepping stone to the higher introvertive state” (Stace 1961, p. 49). Ninian Smart even suggests reserving the term “mystical” solely for cases of introvertive mysticism, thereby depreciating the importance of extrovertive experiences (Smart 1968, p. 66). In Chinese academia, it can be challenging to draw a strict dividing line between introvertive and extrovertive mysticism. Chen Lai argued that expressions like “being one with heaven and earth” in Neo-Confucianism represent extrovertive mysticism, while expressions like “the universe is my heart-mind” and “the appearance of heart-mind” imply the realm of introvertive mysticism (Chen 1991, p. 411). These concepts may coexist within a single philosopher. When examining Wang Yangming’s concepts within the framework of mysticism, we encounter the complexity of his mystical expressions: while the phrase “all things form one body” appears to be a typical extrovertive expression, the deep involvement of the heart–mind in his overall philosophical system makes it an introvertive one.

In extrovertive mystical experiences, the unifying vision is perceived through the physical senses amidst the multiplicity of objects. The subject of experience acts more like an observer, seeing “all the objects manifested, or possessed, one life, while at the same time they did not cease to be individuals” (Stace 1961, p. 72). Consider the example of Meister Eckhart (1260–1327), who posited, “All that a man has here externally in multiplicit-

ity is intrinsically One. Here all blades of grass, wood, and stone, all things are One. This is the deepest depth” (Eckhart 2009, p. 409). The statement elucidates the oneness inherent in “external” things, where the diversity of grass, wood, and stones persists, yet they simultaneously coexist as a unified entity in the perception of the mystics.³ On the contrary, introvertive mysticism is devoid of sensuous and empirical content, leaving behind an absolute unity. Introvertive mystics claim that when excluding all physical sensations from one’s consciousness, what emerges is not unconsciousness, but a state of pure consciousness, an undifferentiated unity (Stace 1961, p. 86). A paragraph in the *Upanishad* captures this mental state aptly: “It is pure unitary consciousness wherein awareness of the world and of multiplicity is completely obliterated. It is ineffable peace, it is the Supreme Good, it is one without a second, it is the Self” (*The Upanishads* 1957, p. 51). In this experience, the mental state is characterized as “beyond the senses, beyond understanding, beyond all expression”. Deprived of empirical content, it lacks even a sense of time and space, leading to a dissolution of individuality.

From the above description, it can be deduced that there are two main criteria for classification: (1) whether physical senses play an important role in the mystic experience; and (2) whether the mystic subject reaches a pure consciousness void of multiplicity.

At first glance, Wang’s proposition of “all things form one body” appears to be a typical expression of extrovertive experience. As noted by Stace: “the formula of the extrovertive type of experience is ‘all things are One’” (Stace 1961, p. 67). Wang’s several statements provide detailed descriptions of the unity of various “things”, revealing some extrovertive characteristics of his mysticism:

“The *liangzhi* of man is also that of grasses, trees, tiles, and stones. Without the *liangzhi* in man, the grasses, trees, tiles, and stones cannot be themselves... That is because Heaven, Earth, the myriad things, and man are originally one.”

人的良知，就是草木瓦石的良知。若草木瓦石無人的良知，不可以為草木瓦石矣。……蓋天地萬物與人原是一體。 (Wang 2011, p. 167)

As articulated in this statement, the author acknowledges the existence of the multiplicity of things, evident in his differentiation of grasses, trees, tiles, and stones. He even extends this scope to include elements like wind, rain, dew, thunder, the sun, the moon, stars, birds, and beasts, asserting that they are all interconnected with humanity. This oneness is seemingly rooted in the differentiation of all things and is perceived among the multiple external objects, akin to Eckhart’s perspective where they both perceive the multiplicity of trees and rocks while recognizing their unity. When Wang argues that the grasses and trees should “be themselves”, he focuses on the subjectivity of things themselves, implying that things “don’t cease to be individuals”, the existence of multiplicity indicating the characteristic of extrovertive experiences in which differences among things persist.

The ethical orientation of Wang’s theory of oneness can also be regarded as extrovertive. When discussing oneness, Wang is not advocating for a state of absolute silence and emptiness. Instead, he emphasizes that with this vision of heaven and earth as one, we become more sensitive to the suffering of others, just as we are aware of our own bodies: “Heaven, earth, and the myriad things are originally one body with me; is there any suffering or bitterness of the people that is not disease and pain in my body?” (Wang 2011, p. 89). As a Confucian scholar, Wang never relinquishes his concern for others and the external world. In his advocacy for oneness, he aims to achieve the goal of “regarding others as ourselves, regarding the country as my own family”, thereby implying an extrovertive dimension.

However, it is important to note that in most contexts, the oneness of all things is understood as a state of reality within the heart–mind, particularly in relation to the concept of *liangzhi* (良知, the innate knowledge). The earlier discussion on “grasses, trees, tiles, and stones” was in response to a disciple’s question about whether these things also possess *liangzhi* like humans. From Wang’s answer, we see that the unity of all things is based on the idea that “the *liangzhi* of humans is the same as that of plants and stones”. Wang often uses expressions like “The heart–mind of a sage regards Heaven, Earth, and

all things as one body" (Wang 2011, p. 61). By emphasizing the involvement of the heart-mind, Wang suggests that he is not merely concerned with the question of whether things like grass, trees, tiles, and stones are one, but rather with how they are perceived within our state of mind. *Liangzhi*, often translated as "innate knowledge" or "pure knowing", refers to the inherent reality of the heart-mind. Wang Yangming developed this idea from Mencius, clearly stating, "*Liangzhi* is what Mencius meant when he said, 'the sense of right and wrong is common to all men' 良知者，孟子所謂‘是非之心，人皆有之’者也" (Wang 2011, p. 1066). *Liangzhi* is universal, shared by all people, and prior to experience, as it "requires no deliberation to know, nor does it depend on learning to function 不待慮而知，不待學而能" (the Mencius 7A15). Wang considers it a core concept in his philosophy of mind, describing it as "my nature endowed by Heaven, the original state of my heart-mind, naturally intelligent, shining, clear, and understanding 是乃天命之性，吾心之本體，自然靈昭明覺者也" (Wang 2011, p. 1066; Chan 1963a, p. 665). According to current research, *liangzhi* is both an emotional and cognitive judging state (Angle and Tiwald 2017, p. 105), and it is, after all, a consciousness (Chan 1963a, p. 655).

When oneness is described as a universal consciousness, it points to a deeper degree of unity. *Liangzhi* is a "pure" consciousness in the sense that it does not originate from sensations. As Wang highlights, *liangzhi* should be distinguished from vision and auditory perception (*jianwen* 見聞): "*Liangzhi* doesn't come from seeing and hearing, while seeing and hearing are functions of *liangzhi* 良知不由見聞而有，而見聞莫非良知之用" (Wang 2011, p. 80). This does not mean that *liangzhi* is completely separate from sensations; rather, sensations merely serve as functions. *Liangzhi* is the "original state" (*benti* 本體) of the heart-mind, making it distinct from sensory knowledge derived from external objects. Wang also links *liangzhi* to *weifa* (未發, not yet manifest), a state before the arising of emotions, indicating that our perception of *liangzhi* does not depend on sensory actions (Wang 2011, p. 1503). He situates *liangzhi* at the metaphysical level of ultimate reality, as *dao* (道), distinguishing it from the phenomenological level. In Wang's understanding, the ultimate reality (*dao*) cannot be seen (*jian* 見): "The *dao* is unspeakable, if you speak with an effort, it will be dim. The *dao* is not visible, if you mistakenly try to see it, it will get far away 道不可言也，強為之言而益晦；道無可見也，妄為之見而益遠" (Wang 2011, p. 292). Here, the *dao* (道) is separated from language and sensations, and it cannot be defined by "being" or "non-being". This transcendence of sensory experience indicates an introverted dimension of his philosophy.

From the above analysis, Wang's notion of oneness seems to encompass elements of both extroverted and introverted mystical experiences. How should we reconcile the contradictions? A further delve into the definition of "thing" may help clarify the concept.

3. Relationship between "Thing" and Heart-Mind: An Introverted Perspective

Wang Yangming offers a nuanced understanding of the relationship between the heart-mind and things, rendering his assertion of "all things form one body" more profound than it may initially appear.

In Wang's definition, "things" (*wu* 物) differ from what is conventionally referred to as external "objects". He introduces a distinctive definition of "thing":

A thing is an event. For every emanation of the will, there must be an event corresponding to it. The event to which the will is directed is a thing.

物者，事也，凡意之所發必有其事，意所在之事謂之物。(Wang 2011, p. 1071)

In Wang's perspective, a "thing" is intricately connected to our will and consciousness, rather than being synonymous with "external objects". Only within the intentionality of the will do things become themselves. Things are inseparable from intentional activity, when we assert that a thing "exists", it implies that it has already been perceived by our heart-mind.

An anecdote effectively underscores this point: during Wang's travels in a southern town, a friend pointed to flowering trees on a cliff, questioning the relevance of the flowers

to the mind. Wang responded, “Before you look at these flowers, they and your mind are in the state of silent vacancy. As you come to look at them, their colors at once show up clearly. From this, you can know that these flowers are not external to your mind” (Wang 2011, p. 122). Here, Wang does not debate the existence of external things; instead, he delves into how things manifest in our minds. Only through the participation of the mind can the properties of flowers, such as colors, distinctly emerge, imbuing them with meaning. That is what he means by “there are no things outside the heart-mind, there are no events outside the heart-mind 心外無物，心外無事” (Wang 2011, p. 174). As an intentional object, a “thing” can be talked about in two senses: one is as the objective reality that is involved and projected by consciousness, and the other is in a pure cognitive sense, as objects of consciousness. Wang Yangming does not explicitly state whether the “thing” is a real being or just a conceptual object, which is likely not the focus of his discussion. What he emphasizes is the intentional activity itself, that consciousness determines the value of things.

When we apply this definition of “thing” to the proposition of “all things form one body”, it can be inferred that a more accurate expression of it is “all things in the heart-mind form one body”, and thus it is transferred into a description of the inner state of heart-mind. The multiplicity of things does not necessarily exist any longer, leaving behind a pure consciousness. Relevantly, “all things form one body” is believed to be based in *liangzhi*, the inherent reality of heart-mind. Wang employs the term *liangzhi* to denote one’s pure consciousness and moral intuition. Oneness is not solely the amalgamation of all external things, but also the unity of the heart-mind with the external world. The profound engagement of consciousness suggests the introvertive dimension of his theory.

In the relationship between things and *liangzhi*, “the receptive and responsive trigger” (*ganying zhi ji* 感應之幾) serves as a crucial bridge of communication. When receiving the stimulation of things, the heart-mind is receptive (*gan* 感), when a reaction is made, the heart-mind is responsive to things (*ying* 應). The subtle state of the heart-mind’s activity is termed the “trigger” (*ji* 幾), a word derived from an ancient Chinese metaphor for machinery” (Zhou 2021, pp. 465–92). It represents the subtle incipient activity of one’s heart-mind, providing an originating power to the activity of things. It is an inward spring of activity, as the *Book of Changes* says: “*Ji* is the subtle activation, which is also the foreknowledge of good fortune”. In the state of *ji*, the activity of the heart-mind begins to emerge but remains invisible; it is believed to be a critical point in determining one’s direction toward good or evil (Chan 1963a, p. 467). The connection between heart-mind and things is captured by the trigger, indicating that the intrinsic activity of heart-mind is identical to that of things, just as they are from “one body”. Wang applies this mechanism of heart-mind to redefine “things”, as he articulates the following: “in terms of the receptivity and responsiveness of the clear intelligence, it is called a thing 以其明覺之感應而言，則謂之物” (Wang 2011, p. 86). This suggests that a “thing” is precisely an activity of consciousness, and the unity of things is actually a oneness realized by the responsive function of the heart-mind.

In conventional understanding, the constitution of “one body” is based on the perception of material entities. The circulation of blood and the flow of vital force, known as *qi*, make one individual’s body as one. However, everybody is apart from others, even far different from those of animals and plants. How can all individual things form one body? Wang responds to this question by pointing to the “trigger of the heart-mind”:

The Master said: “Just look from the point of view of the receptive and responsive trigger. Not only animals and plants, but heaven and earth also, along with Spiritual beings, form the same body with me.”

先生曰：“你只在感應之幾上看，豈但禽獸草木，雖天地也與我同體的，鬼神也與我同體的。” (Wang 2011, p. 141)

The “trigger” serves as the mechanism transitioning from non-existence to existence, from stillness to activity, and from darkness to brightness. Beginning with the trigger, the activity of the responsive heart-mind can involve a myriad of things, and differences

gain unity through it. As Zhang Zai points out, receptivity is an ability to merge differences (Zhang 1978, p. 63). The trigger permeates all things, interconnecting them without separation. Wang Yangming argues that the activity is prevailing without exception: “While here is receiving, there is responding, that’s because they share the same mechanism 此感彼應，自同一機” (Wang 2011, p. 948). All things are perceived through the responsive function of heart–mind. The function of mutual response extends beyond one’s body, encompassing the entire world. The consciousness of a human being, through mutual influence and response facilitated by the “trigger”, becomes the consciousness of the universe. We can perceive a myriad of things, just as perceiving our four limbs, which is why we say they form one body with me. One’s heart–mind encompasses all things in the universe, and all things in the universe are intricately connected within the heart–mind. This interconnectedness leads to the assertion that the universe is one body, and the heart–mind of human beings and all things cannot be separated. Mou Zongsan aptly noted that through the trigger of heart–mind, “the heart–mind covers the universe”, transcending a subjective formal principle but a spiritual reality one can reach (Mou 2003a, pp. 95–96).

When Wang’s overall philosophy is concerned, the comprehensive unity between things and the heart–mind is a significant point. “All things form one body” in this sense transcends its literal meaning, embodying more characteristics of introvertive rather than extrovertive, highlighting the depth of his mystical encounters.

4. *Liangzhi*: The Pure and Universal Consciousness

In introvertive mystical experience, individuals who have transcended all empirical mental content reach a state of pure unity or pure consciousness. The individual self merges with an infinite and universal self, leading to a dissolution of the boundaries between the separate selves. This merging results in a boundless and universal consciousness (Stace 1961, p. 147), referred to as “the One” by Plotinus, the “Divine Unity” by Eckhart, or the “Brahman” in the *Upanishads* (Stace 1961, p. 67; Eckhart 2009, p. 462; *The Upanishads* 1957, p. 121). Wang Yangming designates this universal spirituality or infinite mind as *liangzhi*, asserting that *liangzhi* is “the heart–mind of heaven and earth” (Wang 2011, p. 141). While *liangzhi* aligns with the concept of a “universal self” in mysticism, the specific connotations of these terms—*liangzhi*, the Divine Unity, and Brahman—may differ due to their distinct cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, they share a similarity in transcending individuality and encompassing everything in the universe.

Liangzhi, as the core of Wang Yangming’s enlightenment experience, refers to the inherent reality of heart–mind as well as the ultimate reality of the world. Expanding upon Lu Jiuyuan’s proposition that “the universe is my heart–mind, and my heart–mind is also the universe” (Lu 1980, p. 273), Wang establishes his philosophical framework upon the homogeneity of the heart–mind and the universe. *Liangzhi* is posited as a universally pervasive consciousness that transcends individual differences. Wang asserts that “The fact that *liangzhi* is inherent in the human mind is the same throughout all generations and the entire universe 良知之在人心，亙萬古，塞宇宙，而無不同” (Wang 2011, p. 83). Although most people may not experience this unity, Wang believes that this consciousness exists within everyone, irrespective of cultural boundaries. Wang consistently emphasizes the ubiquity of *liangzhi*: “It is the same in a sage or a fool, from one’s heart to reach the four seas, from a thousand years ago to the era after ten thousand generations 自聖人以至於愚人，自一人之心，以達於四海之遠，自千古之前以至於萬代之後，無有不同” (Wang 2011, p. 311). From this perspective, *liangzhi* exhibits characteristics of spatial consistency and temporal continuity, being the same in all human beings across time and space.

More importantly, Wang Yangming proposes that the heart–mind is “the master of heaven and earth and spiritual beings 天地鬼神的主宰” (Wang 2011, p. 141), viewing *liangzhi* as fully integrated with the reality of the universe and as foundational to the existence of the world. In a discussion with his disciple about why “heaven and earth and

spiritual things form the same body with me”, Wang explains that “what fills heaven and earth is my clear intelligence (*ling-ming* 靈明)”:

“Separated from my clear intelligence, there will be no heaven, earth, spiritual beings, or myriad things, and separated from these, there will not be my clear intelligence”

天地鬼神萬物離去我的靈明，便沒有天地鬼神萬物了。我的靈明離卻天地鬼神萬物，亦沒有我的靈明。(Wang 2011, p. 141)

Clear intelligence is another expression of *liangzhi*, highlighting its qualities of brightness, intelligence, and understanding (Wang 2011, p. 1066). Wang establishes a relationship between the world and one’s *liangzhi*, arguing that without one’s consciousness, the world of him would not exist: “If heaven is deprived of my clear intelligence, who is going to look into its height? If earth is deprived of my clear intelligence, who is going to look into its depth 天沒有我的靈明，誰去仰他高？地沒有我的靈明，誰去俯他深？” (Wang 2011, p. 141). In this view, Wang is creating a world that exists within one’s own consciousness, where heaven, earth, and everything are encompassed by it. For Wang, the master of the world is not a self-generated creator or an isolated spirit, but consciousness itself, which both substantiates and is inseparable from the existence of the world. Though the idea of consciousness becoming “the heart-mind of heaven and earth 天地之心” may seem unconventional in everyday language, it aligns with mystical discourses. The notion of a “universe self” governing all things highlights the original unified spirit of the universe. Wang Yangming equates the state of oneness in the heart-mind with the perfect virtue of *ren* (仁), the ultimate ideal of Confucian self-cultivation: “The benevolent man takes the heaven, earth, and all things as one body; nothing is not myself 仁者以天地萬物為一體，莫非己也” (Wang 2011, p. 302). *Ren* represents the ultimate reality of the self. In the realm of perfect virtue, the individual experiences a oneness with the world, becoming a vast and universal self that encompasses everything and transcends individuality. The individual is not merely a participant in the world but also its master and ultimate being. *Liangzhi* embodies this universal self, a unified consciousness that is “neither before nor after any state and is neither internal nor external but is one body without differentiation 無前後內外而渾然一體者也” (Wang 2011, p. 72).

Liangzhi is a pure consciousness that emerges after all empirical contents have been removed, yet it is not absolute nothingness; rather, it embodies the reality of both heart-mind and the world. In introvertive mysticism, the subject of experience feels the dissolution of the inward self and experiences the disappearance of the “I”, fully immersing into an infinite being. Wang similarly describes *liangzhi* as having characteristics of emptiness and formlessness, likening it to the Great Void (*tai xu* 太虛), which transcends all differentiations: “Only those who has achieved the *dao* can realize *liangzhi*’s brightness, clearness, and intelligence. It is perfect and penetrating, vast, and akin to the Great Void. Everything exists within the Great Void, and nothing can be an obstacle of the Great Void 夫惟有道之士，真有以見其良知之昭明靈覺，圓融洞澈，廓然與太虛而同體。太虛之中，何物不有？而無一物能為太虛之障礙” (Wang 2011, p. 234). In realizing *liangzhi*, one feels a complete sense of identity with the Great Void, with individuality dissolving into the universal self. As Stace notes, the walls that separate the individual self from the infinite being are broken through (Stace 1961, p. 119). However, the dissolution of individuality does not entail the annihilation of self-consciousness, mystics often claim to feel the “true self”, with the individual self of the experiencer being transformed into the universal self. The subject of experience is not merely a component but is the agent of unity. Everything derives its meaning of existence from “me”. As Wang states, “*Liangzhi* is the spirit of creation. This spirit produces heaven and earth, spiritual beings, and the Lord. They all come from it. Truly, nothing can be equal to this 良知是造化的精靈。這些精靈，生天生地，成鬼成帝，皆從此出，真是與物無對” (Wang 2011, p. 119).

A line from his poem (*yong liangzhi sishou* 咏良知四首) best reveals what *liangzhi* is in both ways: “What a person perceives alone when there is no sound or smell is the foun-

dation of the heaven and earth and all beings 無聲無臭獨知時，此是乾坤萬有基” (Wang 2011, p. 870). “No sound or smell” signifies *liangzhi* as a pure consciousness void of empirical contents, and, at the same time, it is the base of the universe. Hence, a connection between the subjectivity of oneself and the universal self is established through the concept of *liangzhi*. Wang emphasizes that “the sage merely follows the functioning of his *liangzhi*, and heaven, earth, and all things are contained in its functioning and operation 聖人只是順其良知之發用，天地萬物，俱在我良知的發用流行中” (Wang 2011, p. 121). By asserting that “there are no things outside *liangzhi*”, Wang unifies the realm of subjectivity and the existence of the world, reflecting the fundamental logic of his concept of oneness.

5. Conclusions

The concept of oneness in Wang Yangming’s philosophy encompasses two levels of meaning: an ethical concern for the outer world and an inner spiritual realm. According to Chen Lai, the former emphasizes social practice, and the latter focuses on personal cultivation (Chen 2019, pp. 45–49). Kwong-Loi Shun identifies five dimensions of the state of oneness: (1) sensitivity to harm to all things; (2) love to and nourish all things; (3) viewing the human community in terms of family relationships; (4) a sense of mission and responsibility; and (5) the idea of no self (Shun 2020, pp. 389–444). Although Shun’s research centers on Zhu Xi, these five dimensions are broadly applicable within Chinese philosophy, where the first four points are ethical, and the last pertains to individual spirituality. This spiritual dimension in Confucianism, closely linked to transcendental experience, has yet to become a central focus of Confucian studies, as Xinzhong Yao notes (Yao 2008, pp. 393–406). Most contemporary research on Wang Yangming’s thinking of oneness tends to focus on its ethical implications, exploring it as a topic of moral psychology and interpreting it as empathy towards others’ suffering.⁴ While ethics plays a crucial role in Wang’s thought, his notion of oneness extends beyond the ethical framework of empathy. It reflects his understanding of the ultimate reality of the world and constitutes a significant aspect of his metaphysics.

Incorporating a mystical perspective clarifies the genesis and ultimate aspirations of Wang Yangming’s doctrine. The role of mystical experience in the development of his theory highlights its engagement with the existential state of life, elevating it beyond the mere repetition of preexisting discourses. Wang’s theory of oneness advocates not only ethical love for others but also a profound understanding of the ultimate reality of the world and our heart–mind. Mysticism enriches the interpretation of oneness as a spiritual concept, prompting a reevaluation of Wang’s oneness within the broader context of mysticism. By distinguishing between introvertive and extrovertive mysticism, the questions of “what to be one with” and “how to be one” in Wang’s theory of oneness are examined. Redefining “things” as “events in my heart–mind” allows the expression “all things form one body” to transcend a mere unity of external objects. This unity does not stem from an implicit presupposition of the dichotomy between object (“things”) and subject (“I”), but rather emerges as an inherent state of the heart–mind. Based on the receptive and responsive functions of the heart–mind, all things are encompassed within its scope, forming a unity between things and heart–mind. The profundity and thoroughness of this oneness reveal the introvertive dimension of Wang’s mystical experience. Wang’s theory of *liangzhi* can also be analyzed through the lens of mysticism. As the infinite and universal mind, *liangzhi* “becoming the master of the universe” is not merely a poetic rhetorical expression but a conclusion drawn from his genuine life experience. This analysis reveals the close relationship between *liangzhi* and “all things form one body”, highlighting the consistency of Wang’s theory. However, it is important to note that this comparative study aims to enrich the understanding of Wang’s theory through mysticism without suggesting that his theory is exclusively mystical. Mysticism serves as a means to comprehend Wang’s life experiences and intellectual domain, reflecting certain facets of his philosophy. Undoubtedly, some aspects of Wang’s philosophical framework transcend mysticism, and these two systems are not inherently mutually inclusive.

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Notes

- ¹ Zheng (2015) labels Zhang Zai's mode as "contemplative oneness" and Cheng Hao's as "perceptual oneness".
- ² Most of the English translations in the article are by the author, with some terms adapted from Chan (1963a, 1963b) and Ching (1972).
- ³ The discussion is limited to the passage quoted, and we are not asserting that all of Eckhart's experiences are extroverted.
- ⁴ For example, David Tien (2012) examines Wang's concept of oneness from the perspective of moral psychology, arguing that this state can be achieved by overcoming self-centered desires rather than selfishness. Philip Ivanhoe (2015) compares Wang's oneness with the empathy–altruism hypothesis in psychology. Huang (2015) distinguishes between the psychological terms "sympathy" and "empathy" and provides a detailed analysis of "empathy" in Wang's philosophy. Yu (2017) compares Wang's notion that "all things are one" with the Stoic concept of oikeiosis, arguing that Wang promotes a decentralized self through the mode of oneness. While these studies are valuable, this paper does not focus on the psychological mode and ethical claims, thereby offering a distinct perspective.

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