

Book Review: *Renxue Bentilun* (The Ontology of Benevolence)

Renxue Bentilun (The Ontology of Benevolence) by Chen Lai 陳來. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing, 2014, 503 pages. ¥52.00. Hardcover. ISBN 9787108049971.

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Among the significant concerns of today's philosophers is the search for universal values in a pluralistic world. Chen Lai 陳來 (1952–), a modern Chinese philosopher of Confucianism, published *Renxue Bentilun* 仁學本體論 (The Ontology of Benevolence) in June of 2014, as a way to address this issue. The editorial department of *Zhongguo zhexueshi* 中國哲學史 (The History of Chinese Philosophy) introduced his work with the following words, “Professor Chen Lai’s new work, *The Ontology of Benevolence* is a creative synthesis of the 2000-year history of thought on benevolence (*renxue sixiang* 仁學思想) that applies Confucianism and Chinese philosophical approaches to address problems facing Confucianism and Chinese philosophy in contemporary times. This work lays the foundation for the revival of Confucianism in contemporary times (Institute of Philosophy of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 2014, 129). Dai Zhao-guo 戴兆國 (2016, 8) points out that, “*The Ontology of Benevolence* reflects a theoretical awareness that emerged in the process of Chinese and Western philosophy interacting and blending with one another and is a magnum opus providing an excellent contribution to the ongoing Chinese tradition.” So how does Professor Chen try to solve the problem of universal values in a pluralistic world? What concrete arguments does he make and what are the grounds of the book’s central claims? The primary purpose of this review is to offer a survey of the philosophical structure of Chen Lai’s work.

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I. Reconstruction of Universal Moral Value

Before we embark upon an analysis of Chen Lai's work, we will briefly discuss the core problem he seeks to address. Chen Lai claims that after the Second World War, the international order has become blurred, local cultures have lost their equilibrium, and relations and exchanges between the various regions of the world have become and remain stagnated. Moreover, nations and countries have lost their distinctiveness, and individuals are losing the ability to think rationally because of the effects of a global culture of consumption. He asserts that all of these problems have arisen because of the pervasive influence of the liberal morality centered on personal rights that emerged during this period and the decline of universal values brought about by the "Faustian spirit" of the West. He further insists in the need to restore universal values and that the only way to build a sound world order and culture in a pluralistic world where universal values appear to have collapsed is to establish a single universal moral value (Chen Lai 2014, 496-497).

What universal moral value does Chen Lai advocate? First of all, he claims that it must observe a principle of what he calls "pluralistic universality" that both Eastern and Western civilization can espouse (Chen Lai 2014, 497; 2006, 138). What is pluralistic universality? It seems to consist of two distinct aspects or "layers." He claims the values of Eastern and Western civilization both have two layers of representation: The first layer is "inherent universality" (內在的普遍性) and the second layer is "realized universality" (實現的普遍性). By "inherent universality" he means that there is potential universality in the values of both Eastern and Western civilization. And by "realized universality" he means that if external and historical conditions are satisfied, the values of Eastern and Western civilizations can actually be realized universally. This implies that while the extent to which the values of Eastern and Western civilizations are realized as universal values in a given age and set of circumstances may be different, the values themselves are inherently universal (Chen Lai 2014, 491). He says:

In our opinion, the West realized its own value as universal in the early days, while the East is still at the beginning stage of realizing its locality as universal. However, the inherent universality of spiritual value is not determined by the degree of external realization. There is an inherent universality in the spiritual civilizations and values of East and West, which can be called “inherent universality.” However, many external and historical conditions are necessary for the inherent universality to be realized outside. And if it is realized and appears outside, it can be called “realized universality.” More precisely, on the level of spirit and value, it must be recognized that Eastern and Western civilizations have universality and are expressions of the universal, but there are differences between them, and the degrees of realization are different in different historical period; this is pluralistic universality. (Chen Lai 2014, 491–492)

According to Chen Lai, the values of Eastern civilization are different from those of Western civilization. However, there is inherent universality in the values of Eastern and Western civilizations. And while Western civilization has realized its values universally early on, due to enabling external and historical conditions, Eastern civilization is still at the beginning stage of realizing its values universally. If that is the case, what is the universal value realized by Western civilization, and what is the universal value that Eastern civilization is realizing? Chen Lai (2014, 492) claims that justice, freedom, rights, and rational personality are the universal values realized by Western civilization, while benevolence (*ren'ai* 仁愛), manners (*lijiao* 禮教), responsibility (*zeren* 責任), community (*shequn* 社群), and peace of mind (*neixin anning* 內心安寧) are the universal values that Eastern civilization is realizing at this point in time. He goes on to condense the values of Eastern and Western civilization into the Five New Virtues (*xin wu de* 新五德) of benevolence, freedom, equality, justice, and harmony (*hexie* 和諧) (2014, 498).

Chen Lai points out that the values of Eastern and Western civilization are different, but also insists that both can be realized as universal. This is because there is a common and unchanging inherent universality in both. He goes a step further to condense the Five New

Virtues into a single universal value of benevolence. He says “Freedom is the activity of benevolence without any obstacles; equality is the treatment of benevolence without any discrimination, justice is the distribution of benevolence without any deviation, harmony is the flow of benevolence body (*renti liuxing* 仁體流行)” (Chen Lai 2014, 429). This means that the single universal value of modern society is benevolence.

II. Benevolence and Its Foundation: *Yuzhou bentì* 宇宙本體

One might ask for a more clear and precise definition of the meaning of benevolence that Chen Lai intends. He defines benevolence as loving, helping, and encouraging other people (Chen Lai 2014, 82/93). He insists that helping each other and loving life are the ways and norms by which individuals should lead their lives in a community (Chen Lai 2014, 84). Furthermore, he maintains that this is a universal value that every person in this world should “surely” or “definitively” perform. In reference to Chen Lai’s argument, we may ask why every person should be required to love, help, and encourage others? What is the normative and obligatory nature of benevolence based upon? Chen Lai presents *yuzhou bentì*, which I shall for now leave untranslated, as its foundation. What then is *yuzhou bentì*? Consider the term of *bentì* 本體 to which he appeals.

The *bentì* of Chinese philosophy means real existence, but it isn’t externalized, objectified, and stationary reality, it is an holistic (*zhengti* 整體) and dynamic existence, an entire process, and it is the reality that people have established in their experience of life. . . . In Chinese philosophy, *bentì* is the ceaseless production (*shengsheng buyi* 生生不已) of life. Therefore, Chinese *bentì* is not an ontology of eternal being. Chinese *bentì* refers to the most fundamental, real existence, and final existence. (Chen Lai 2014, 13)

Bentì is the internal root of the universe that is always present and never depleted. This *bentì* is neither one nor two with the world; it is no more than body (*tì* 體) and no more than function (*yong* 用).

Benti itself does not stop creating, and the great function of phenomena is also ceaseless production. (Chen Lai 2014, 12)

Based on these and related passages from his work, it can be seen that there are two meanings in the concept of *yuzhou benti* as used by Chen Lai. First, *yuzhou benti* means function (*yong* 用), which refers to the current state of the universe that is being produced (*shengcheng* 生成) and transformed (*bianhua* 變化). Second, *yuzhou benti* means body (*ti* 體), which refers to the deepest and most primary root that comprises the universe and life. However, the problem is how can *yuzhou benti* become the ultimate foundation for benevolence, which purportedly is a universal value in a pluralistic world? In other words, how can benevolence be derived from *yuzhou benti*? There seems to be a hard-to-fill gap between these two. How does Chen Lai attempt to bridge this gap? We find the answer in his book.

The ontology of benevolence must be established on the basis of its connection with the *wanwu yiti* 萬物一體. The universe or world, as understood from such a world view, is one in which events and things are intimately interconnected and form one body (*yiti* 一體).¹ Just as the character *Ren* itself already entails the interconnection between the individual and others, [such a view] recognizes others, forms relationships with others, mutually loves others, and lives harmoniously with others. (Chen Lai 2014, 31)

When I say that benevolence is *benti*, it is to emphasize the meaning of *yiti* and the meaning of the *benti* of *yiti* in particular. *Yiti* is the entire body, the *yiti* of all beings in the world (*shijie wanwu* 世界萬物) is benevolence, and the *yiti* of all beings in the universe (*yuzhou wanyou* 宇宙萬有) is benevolence. Therefore, *wanwu yiti* is *renti* and *benti*. (Chen Lai 2014, 30)

His solution, as described above, is to invoke the idea of *wanwu yiti* (the myriad things are one body) as a bridge to connect *yuzhou benti* and benevolence. Then he argues that *yuzhou benti* is *wanwu yiti* and *wanwu yiti* is benevolence itself to demonstrate *yuzhou benti* is equal

¹ In the body of my review, I use the Romanization *yiti* instead of the translation “a single body.”

to or somehow entails benevolence. He calls this *ren-benti* (the ontology of benevolence) for short. This is the underlying philosophical structure of Chen Lai's work, *The Ontology of Benevolence*.

III. *Wanwu yiti* as a Bridge

What is the *wanwu yiti* that Chen Lai invokes to connect *yuzhou benti* with benevolence? The term *wanwu yiti* that he puts forward has two meanings. First, it means that all beings that are created and transformed are organically connected. Namely there is a single universe in which all beings exist, are created, and transformed in close relationship with one another. Chen Lai considers this to be a whole, a continuum, and a single unity that is being created and transformed. Figuratively, the universe that Chen Lai describes is like a tree. Just as the whole tree comprises a trunk, branches, leaves, flowers, and fruit, all beings exist as a unity in which all things get along with one another and grow.

It is not only the synchronic symbiosis among individuals in the sense of time and space, but it also reveals that all individuals are *yiti* which is linked by a kind of unity, and they are closely related to one another. (Chen Lai 2014, 18)

Yiti refers to a whole body, but what is more important is to emphasize its organic connotation. In other words, no being can exist while it is separate from *yiti*, and a being can only exist if it exists with other beings. (Chen Lai 2014, 3)

Western and Eastern civilizations could accept this argument in the sense that *wanwu yiti* represents the organic connection of all things; the term would simply refer to the organic connection of the outer appearance of the world of phenomena, something that cannot be denied. Mark L. Johnson, a modern naturalist, has made a similar assertion, saying "It is a mistake to think of an organism and its environment as two entirely independent and unrelated entities; the organism does not exist as an organism apart from its environment"

(Johnson 1990, 207). However, if *wanwu yiti* is discussed only in the context of the organic connection among all things, it cannot support the normative universality that Chen Lai desires to establish. This is because *wanwu yiti* in this sense is just a claim about the current state of the phenomenal world, it does not imply anything universal, enduring, or normative. Natural selection makes clear that the different parts of the living world for the most part do not care for or about one another and that the changing ecology of the planet has driven most of the life that has arisen on the planet to extinction. One might here invoke the thought, found in the *Daodejing*, “Heaven and earth are not benevolent” (*tiandi buren* 天地不仁). In order to make his view plausible, Chen Lai imparts *wanwu yiti* with a special and distinctive metaphysical sense. In this sense, it means that all beings are *yiti* not only on the surface but also on a fundamental and essential level.

From the perspective of how things are in themselves [the claim that all things are] one body is essential and fundamental; and so, the relationship of being one body that exists between human beings and the myriad things is how things are in themselves (Chen Lai 2014, 30).

In recent years Mr. Zhang Shi-ying (張世英) also has recognized that *wanwu yiti* can replace God and Heaven as the authoritative, sacred, and absolute foundation of morality. *Wanwu yiti* is the source of the myriad things; it is the ultimate and original source of each and every person and thing. (Chen Lai 2014, 33)

Chen Lai argues that all beings are one body (*yiti*) not only on the surface, but also fundamentally, or internally, or absolutely. And he also emphasizes that this underlying metaphysical unity can be the foundation of moral norms in the same way that God and heaven provide a normative foundation for other value claims. So, we can call this feature of his view the claim of Fundamental *wanwu yiti*. Following this line of reasoning, *wanwu yiti* becomes identical to *yuzhou bentu*, the universe’s ultimate source, and an extension of the idea that all beings that are created and transformed are also organically connected to form a structured, normative whole. After he demonstrates that *yuzhou bentu* is *wanwu yiti*, Chen Lai goes on to argue that *wanwu*

yiti is benevolence per se.

What is the meaning of benevolence for Chen Lai? He argues that the term benevolence has two meanings. The first meaning of benevolence is to love others. It means that people have an experience of oneness with the environments in which they live (Chen Lai 2014, 102/104/106). According to Chen Lai, this is the primary sense of benevolence before the Han Dynasty (漢朝). For example, benevolence in the *Guoyu* 國語 means to love family (102), in the *Lunyü* 論語 it means to love people (104), in the *Mengzi* 孟子 it means to love all things (106). The second meaning of benevolence is a sense of vitality or a mind to give life. Chen Lai says the term “benevolence,” in this sense, was mainly used after the Han Dynasty. Based on the words of the *Shangcai yulu* 上蔡語錄, *Ercheng ji* 二程集, and *Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全書, the living are benevolent (Chen Lai 2014, 271), the loss of feeling (i.e. being numb) is non-benevolence (260), the seeds of trees, grass, and the five cereals are benevolence because they give life (Zhu Xi 1990, 13; Chen Lai 2014, 273), and the mind of heaven and earth that creates all things is called benevolence (Chen Lai 2014, 311).

From the above, we can see that the benevolence which Chen Lai presents is the name of a vibrant state or source of vitality; he calls it *renti* 仁體 (the body of benevolence) or *wanwu yiti*. He maintains that benevolence can become the comprehensive appearance (*zhongxiang* 總相), that is, the whole body (*zhongti* 總體) of all beings and the movement of the one *qi* 氣. The whole body is that of relations, and the whole body of the relations is no more than the right understanding of *wanwu yiti* (Chen Lai 2014, 39). He also argues that the great entirety is no more than benevolence, and benevolence is no more than the whole entire body or great entirety (39).

IV. Conclusion

To review and sum up, Chen Lai makes the assertion that we must build a universal single moral value in the post-Cold War era (2014, 496). But it must observe a principle of pluralistic universality that both Eastern and Western civilization can accept. He argues that the

universal single moral value needed today is benevolence. To prove his case, Chen Lai tries to demonstrate that the underlying nature of the universe itself is benevolence. In the process of his demonstration, he invokes and relies upon the thought that *wanwu yiti* means the myriad things are one body.

Chen Lai requires every person in the world to perform benevolence. Namely, to love and help other people. Because the current state of the universe fundamentally is benevolence, the most primary root of universe is benevolence. Chen Lai claims there is “one universe” in which all things exist, are created, and are transformed in close relation with one another, and the things in it are connected not only on the surface but also in some deep and fundamental metaphysically distinctive respect. He calls the underlying true character of the universe *wanwu yiti* or the body of benevolence (*renti*), because it is a sense of vitality or a mind to give life. This is the underlying philosophical structure of Chen Lai’s work, *The Ontology of Benevolence*.

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