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How heaven and humanity are united as one: *Tong* as an alternative to *tianren heyi*

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Abstract

The relation between heaven and humanity is a central topic in Chinese philosophy. It is often examined through *tianren heyi*, a term considered the most significant to Chinese culture. In this article, I argue that *tianren heyi* is inappropriate and even misleading in our discussion of the relation between heaven and humanity. I investigate its absence from pre-Qin texts, the ambiguity of its meaning, and the exaggeration of its significance in Chinese philosophy. Hence, I advance *tong* as an alternative. My argument consists of two parts. First, I demonstrate that, in contrast to *tianren heyi*, *tong* is widely used as an important term by various early philosophical streams. Second, I focus on Mohist *shangtong*, Confucian *datong*, and Taoist *xuantong*, presenting how different philosophical streams take *tong* as a central term to develop distinct theories of the ideal relation between heaven and humanity. Instead of *tianren heyi*, *tong* can provide a solid step to a full understanding of how heaven and humanity are united.

KEYWORDS

harmony, heaven, oneness, *Tianren heyi*, *tong*

1 | INTRODUCTION

The relation between heaven and humanity is a central topic in Chinese philosophy, which is often examined through the term *tianren heyi* 天人合一 (heaven and humanity in oneness; hereafter, TRHY). TRHY is considered so significant to Chinese philosophy to the extent that some scholars believe it can provide unique insights into developing the contemporary world philosophy (Ji, 1993; Qian, 1991; Yao, 2017). Yet there are two main issues surrounding it. First, the term TRHY cannot be identified in any texts that belong to the pre-Qin 先秦 period.¹ If TRHY

were of such great significance, why is it absent in the golden age of Chinese philosophy? Second, because of the all-inclusivity of this term, there is no consensus on definition or understanding of it. Given these issues, to use TRHY to account for the oneness between heaven and humanity would be inappropriate and even misleading.

To better understand the oneness between heaven and humanity, I propose *tong* 同 as an alternative to TRHY. It should be noted that I do not suggest that the oneness between heaven and humanity can only be understood through *tong*. I do suggest that a better understanding of this ideal relation shall be reached through exhaustive surveys of a cluster of terms, such as *he* 和 (harmony), *yi* 一 (oneness), and *he* 合 (unity), which, however, are beyond the scope of this article.² Nevertheless, I believe the examination of *tong* can provide a first solid step to reach a comprehensive understanding of the oneness between heaven and humanity.

The discussion is divided into three sections. In Section 2, I sketch the development of TRHY in the history of Chinese philosophy. In Section 3, I dissect the term TRHY and examine issues related to it.³ In Section 4, to present *tong* as an alternative, I first demonstrate its wide presence across various philosophical texts, and then present different visions of *tong* from Mohists, Confucians, and Taoists.

2 | A SKETCH OF TRHY IN CHINESE HISTORY

The term TRHY does not appear in any texts that belong to the Warring States (475 BCE-221 BCE) or Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE). We can identify two phrases that have close meanings with TRHY in the *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露), a text traditionally attributed to Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179 BCE-104 BCE) of the western Han. In one place, the text says, “[as both heaven and humanity have the *qi* of joy and anger and the heart of sorrow and happiness], in terms of the category [of *qi* and heart-mind], heaven and humanity are one” (*tianren yiye* 天人一也) (Su, 1992, p. 341). According to this text, it is with respect to *qi* and the heart-mind that heaven and humanity are considered as one. In another place, the *Chunqiu fanlu* says, “[as things are consistent with names and names are consistent with heaven, in terms of names] heaven and humanity are united as one” (*tianren zhiji heer weiyi* 天人之際, 合而為一) (Su, 1992, p. 288). As the text suggests, it is with respect to names that heaven and humanity are in oneness. Thus, although both the expressions of *tianren yiye* and *tianren zhiji heer weiyi* can refer to the oneness between heaven and humanity, the respects for the two phrases that unite heaven and humanity as one are quite different: for the former, the respect is *qi* and heart-mind, while for the latter, the respect is names. Hence, to understand the oneness between heaven and humanity depends on context, which furthermore reveals that a common understanding of the oneness between heaven and humanity was not established in the period of the *Chunqiu fanlu*.

It was not until the Song 宋 (960-1279) dynasty that TRHY was articulated as a term by the philosopher Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-1077). Zhang says, “Confucians are to achieve sincerity by enlightenment, to achieve enlightenment by sincerity, so heaven and humanity are in oneness (TRHY 天人合一). To learn would be able to become sage, but to be in oneness with heaven is not to ignore humanity” (Z. Zhang, 1978, p. 65). Zhang’s TRHY is different from the two phrases in the *Chunqiu fanlu*: the *Chunqiu fanlu*’s involve *qi* and the heart-mind or the names, while Zhang’s emphasizes the moral principle, namely sincerity. It is sincerity that unites heaven and humanity as one. The emphasis on moral principles for Zhang’s TRHY is also echoed by other philosophers in that period such as Cheng brothers 二程兄弟, who were recorded to say that “there are the Way and the Principle,⁴ with respect to which heaven and humanity are one (*tianren yiye* 天人一也) without distinction”

(Cheng & Cheng, 1981, p. 20).⁵ Thus, we can observe a tendency among Song Confucians to understand the oneness between heaven and humanity in terms of moral principles. Nonetheless, the phrases that they adopted to describe the oneness, namely TRHY or *tianren yiye*, remain different. Therefore, TRHY is just one of the variant expressions of the oneness between heaven and humanity.

In the texts that belong to Yuan 元 (1271–1368), Ming 明 (1368–1644) and Qing 清 (1636–1912) dynasties, we can identify at least 330 places that mention TRHY. However, its meaning varies.⁶ According to these texts, TRHY is used to refer to the oneness of heaven and humanity with respect to natural laws, or to the oneness of heaven and humanity with respect to moral principles, and more. Thus, although we can observe an increasing trend to adopt this term, there is no consensus on what TRHY refers to. This fact suggests that TRHY cannot be considered as a formed term with a fixed set of meanings. Furthermore, as Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢 observes, there is no philosopher in this period who took TRHY as a central term to develop her philosophy (Liu, 2011, p. 80).

It is not until the twentieth century that TRHY has gained popularity among Chinese scholars. This period witnesses a process of modern Chinese scholarship being interwoven with global academia, in which Chinese culture is frequently criticized as backward. Since the May Fourth Movement in 1919, an increasing number of scholars have contended that Chinese tradition is an obstacle to China's modernization and therefore, loses its relevance in the modern world.⁷ Meanwhile, there is another group of scholars who aver that Chinese tradition could contribute to the modern world, and for them, a pressing concern is about how to advance its features, particularly its possible contributions, to the contemporary world. Jin Yuelin 金岳霖, Qian Mu 錢穆, and Ji Xianlin 季羨林 are three foremost scholars engaging in advancing Chinese tradition to the world. They all maintain that TRHY is one of the most distinctive terms in Chinese culture. Jin argues that TRHY represents the most distinct feature in Chinese culture: subjects and objects are in oneness, differences eliminated, and an individual and the universe become one (Jin, 1985, pp. 40–41). Qian's understanding of TRHY is different from Jin's. According to Qian, TRHY refers specifically to the oneness between *tianming* 天命 (the mandate of heaven) and *rensheng* 人生 (the life of humans), representing the harmony between heaven and humans; and Qian further argues that TRHY can avoid the separation of *rensheng* from *tianming*, a feature that is deeply rooted in the Western culture (Qian, 1991, pp. 93–94). Ji provides another understanding of TRHY. For Ji, TRHY refers to an ideal harmony between humans and nature, which possesses great significance to the contemporary nature conservation (Ji, 1993). Although these scholars' understandings of TRHY are different, owing to their promotion, TRHY becomes extremely prevalent not only in the academic circle but also in the general public.⁸

I have sketched out the development of TRHY in the history of Chinese philosophy, in which we cannot find any consensus on the use of the term TRHY and its meaning varies with contexts. It is in the late twentieth century that TRHY began to gain popularity and since then, has been widely discussed both in the academic circle and in the public sphere. Despite its huge popularity, doubts on the significance of TRHY in Chinese philosophy, however, never cease. In the next section, I first dissect the term TRHY and then analyze issues surrounding this term.

3 | DISSECTING TRHY AND ANALYZING ITS RELATED ISSUES

3.1 | Dissecting TRHY

The term TRHY can be divided into two parts: TR and HY. TR consists of two graphs, namely *tian* 天 and *ren* 人. *Ren* literally means humanity, while the meaning of *tian* varies with contexts.

In TRHY, there are three senses that *tian* is often used to denote: God (or the highest divine force), the natural organism without divinity but embodying the highest principles, and nature.⁹ Accordingly, TR literally means “God and humanity,” or “the natural organism with the highest principles and humanity,” or “nature and humanity.”

HY also comprises two graphs, namely *he* 合 and *yi* 一 (oneness). The meaning of *he* is closely associated with its graphic form. In the oracle bones, *he* is inscribed as 𠄎 (Li, 1999, p. 380), which consists of the upper part 宀—which represents a bronze cover—and the lower part 皿—which represents a bronze vessel. Thus, according to the graphic form 𠄎, *he* represents a state in which the bronze cover and the bronze vessel are unified as a whole. This reading of *he* can be supported by the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, an authoritative lexicon in the Eastern Han 東漢 (25–220), in which *he* is considered synonymous with *hui* 會, a graph also representing the unity between the upper and lower parts of a vessel (Duan, 1981, p. 223).¹⁰ Both the oracle bones and the lexicon *Shuowen jiezi* reveal that *he* describes a state in which different parts are united as a whole. Therefore, HY literally means different entities united as one.

It should be noted that although the graph *yi* appears simple, its meaning is quite complicated. A detailed discussion of *yi* is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, I intend to adopt an incisive account of oneness by P. J. Ivanhoe, which is instrumental to our understanding of TRHY:

Even a concept as apparently simple as “oneness” can be complex: it turns out there is more than one way to be one. The strongest sense in which two or more things can be one is by the relation of numerical identity: Clark Kent and Superman are one in this way. Some who defend environmental concern based on interpretations of the Gaia hypothesis rely on an only slightly less robust sense of oneness—something we might refer to as the “nature is a blended whole” hypothesis—when they insist that each and every part of the world is inextricably intertwined and passes in and out of one another. Two or more things can also be one by being parts of a single organic body, as my arm is one with the rest of me. This idea often is confused with the idea of being part of a single ecosystem. In the latter case, though, the relationship between part and whole is not as direct or crucial as in the former. Removing important members of an ecosystem may alter the system, but rarely will it lead to its collapse or directly and immediately affect all the other parts; cutting off a person’s arm or head will have more immediate and dire results. A fifth way to be one with others is as a member of some tradition, institution, team, club, or group. (Ivanhoe, 2018, p. 19)

Ivanhoe illustrates five senses of oneness. With regard to the relation between different entities becoming one, they are from the strongest to the weakest. The strongest sense of oneness is by the relation of numerical identity, such as two names—for example, Clark Kent and Superman—referring to the same person. The weakest sense of oneness is by the relation of different entities becoming one by sharing one or more features, or rules, or others. For example, different people belong to the same reading group by sharing the same interest in reading particular books. We can observe the difference between the two senses: for the strongest sense, different entities—such as different names—are identical, referring to the same person; for the broadest sense, different entities—such as different persons—are in oneness, with regard to some aspect, such as the same interest in reading, while different in other aspects, such as profession, or education background, or language. Hence, Ivanhoe gives us a nuanced account of oneness: although we can consider the relation between different entities as one, the ways these entities come as one are quite different and complicated.

Let me employ Ivanhoe's account to elaborate on TRHY. As the combination of TR and HY, TRHY means *tian* and humanity united as one. Since in the strongest sense of oneness, *tian*—be it God, or the natural organism, or nature—and humanity can never be identical, TRHY should be understood in the broadest sense: *tian* and humanity are united as one with respect to some aspect, while different in other aspects. Furthermore, as *tian* is often used to refer to God, or the natural organism, or nature, there are accordingly three types of TRHY, namely God and humanity united as one with some respect, the natural organism—without divinity—and humanity united as one with respect to some aspect, nature and humanity united as one with respect to some aspect.

We can find that most of the traditional and contemporary accounts of TRHY can be categorized into these three types (D. N. Zhang, 1985). Dong's *tianren heyi* belongs to the first type. For Dong, *tian* represents the highest divine force, and *tian* and humanity have the same *qi* and heart-mind.¹¹ Thus, TRHY means that the highest divine force and humanity become one with respect to *qi* and heart-mind (Su, 1992, p. 341).¹² In other words, it is because the highest divine force and humanity share the same element *qi* and the moral principles that the two become one.

In the second type, *tian* refers to the natural organism, which embodies moral principles but without divinity.¹³ Most philosophers since the Song dynasty take the graph *tian* of TRHY in this sense, and their understandings of TRHY fall into this type.¹⁴ For example, in Zhang Zai's understanding, *tian* represents the natural organism embodying the highest moral principles, and accordingly, TRHY means that the natural organism and humanity become one with respect to the highest moral principles (Z. Zhang, 1978, p. 65). That is, through self-cultivation, humanity can obtain the highest moral principles with respect to which humanity and the natural organism become one.

The third type is held among many modern scholars who witness the environmental deterioration and so advocate for nature conservation. For example, Ji Xianlin observes that the guided view in the industrial period that proposes humanity's dominion over nature leads the environment into deterioration, and the thought of TRHY is an antidote to the deterioration of nature. According to Ji, humanity, plants, and animals are interdependent in the same environment, in which each and every one will be inevitably influenced by its deterioration. Thus, Ji's TRHY means that plants, animals, and humanity become one, with respect to the same environment that they live in (Ji, 1993, pp. 14–15). Particularly, for the majority of modern Chinese scholars, this type of TRHY is relevant and can contribute to the contemporary environment philosophy.¹⁵

Hence, for the three types of TRHY that we can identify in traditional and modern discussions, the aspects that unite heaven and humanity as one are quite different: they could be *qi* and heart-mind, or the highest moral principles, or the same natural world. As most scholars fail to clarify the difference between these types, their uses of TRHY are ambiguous and often lead to confusion. Issues related to the uses of TRHY will be examined in the following section.

3.2 | Issues related to the term TRHY

The first issue concerns the significance of TRHY in the history of Chinese thought. We cannot identify the term TRHY in any early texts that belong to Pre-Qin or Han dynasty, a period that plays a crucial role in the development of Chinese philosophy. Its absence in early texts suggests that TRHY is not so significant to early Chinese thinkers as other terms such as Dao 道. We can

identify Dao from various philosophical texts. Confucians take Dao as a political ideal which can be reached through practicing ritual; Mohists also consider Dao as a political ideal which can be realized by following rulers' decrees; Taoists distinctively derive every principle, moral or political, from Dao, and a way to realize the political Dao is to adopt the principle of non-deliberate action (*wuwei* 無為). Although the conceptions of the ideal Dao are divergent for these philosophical streams, nevertheless, they all take Dao as a central term to develop their theories.¹⁶ In contrast, the term TRHY cannot be identified in any early texts, which shows that no thinkers in that period considered it essential to their philosophies.

Yu Yingshi 余英時 defends its significance, arguing that TRHY should not be taken as a theory with specific meanings, but rather as a “way of thinking” (*siwei fangshi* 思維方式) (Yu, 2007, p. 14). According to Yu, there are three types of TRHY. First, TRHY means the oneness between heavenly mandate and the heart-mind (*renxin* 人心), which can be shown in phrases such as “the intelligence of heaven is in line with the intelligence of people” of the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書). The second type of TRHY refers to a spiritual state of oneness between heaven and humanity, which can be presented in the phrase from the *Mengzi*, namely, “he who has exhausted all his mental constitution knows his nature. Knowing his nature, he knows Heaven.” The last type represents an organic whole that consists of heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things. This type can be observed from the *Chunqiu fanlu*, which says “heaven also has the *qi* of pleasure and anger, the heart-mind of sorrow and joy, (the *qi* and the heart-mind) are matched with those of humans.”¹⁷ In the phrases that Yu uses to illustrate his three types, we cannot identify the term TRHY. Thus, by the “way of thinking” Yu means that even if not expressed by the term TRHY, any thinking that implies a relation between heaven and humanity can be conceptually considered TRHY. As a way of thinking, Yu (2007) further suggests that TRHY is almost manifested in every aspect of Chinese culture, such as art, literature, philosophy, religion, and political thoughts. This broad understanding of TRHY is rejected by Liu (2011), who says “there is no thought in ancient China that can avoid discussing the cosmos or heaven and earth, and so almost every thought can be ultimately related to TRHY after analysis” (p. 73).¹⁸ Without an exact definition or content, TRHY is so inclusive that almost all philosophies can be encompassed.

Thus, we can observe ambiguities and confusion in adopting TRHY. For instance, Jin (1985) uses TRHY to represent the oneness between nature and humanity, the oneness between God and humanity, the oneness between an individual and society, and more. When reading TRHY in the same article, one may be confused about what particular type Jin intends to describe.¹⁹ Another example for the confusion existing in using TRHY concerns the relation between humans and nature. Ji (1993) takes TRHY in a broad sense and suggests that a prime type of TRHY is of the oneness between humans and nature. However, Li Sheng 李申 (2005) refutes Ji's view by focusing solely on the term TRHY and arguing that in the texts where this term appears, it is never used to refer to the oneness between humans and nature. Hence, without a clear definition of TRHY, any consensus on using this term to describe the oneness between humans and nature would be hardly reached.

The last issue concerns reasons why TRHY is widely adopted by modern scholars. A main argument for advancing TRHY is that it possesses two unique features that Chinese philosophy can contribute to the world. For one, TRHY depicts a unique way for self-cultivation whereby heaven and humanity become one. For the other, TRHY represents a typical Chinese understanding of the harmonious unity between humanity and nature.²⁰ Yet the significance of these two features can be accordingly weakened by the following two facts. First, the way of self-cultivation that TRHY reveals is also embraced by other civilizations. For example, a comparable method, namely askēsis or spiritual excises, can also be found in ancient Greek.²¹

Hence, rather than being regarded as unique, the Chinese conception of self-cultivation can be, at best, regarded as an example instrumental for cross-cultural studies. Second, abundant history records show that before the industrial age, the ecological system in the northern China had significantly deteriorated,²² and so the harmonious unity between nature and humanity that TRHY implies had little influence on the conservation of the environment in ancient China. That TRHY can play a significant role in the contemporary environmental conservation, therefore, is cast in doubt.²³

Given the absence of TRHY in early texts, the ambiguity and confusion in using it, and its significance in philosophical discussion and environmental conservation, TRHY should not be taken as a useful term in academic discussion. Nonetheless, I do not suggest that the oneness between heaven and humanity—which TRHY is often used to represent—deserves no investigation; I do suggest that in any discussion of this relation, TRHY is so ambiguous that often leads to confusion.

In addition, it is worth noting that I do not propose that an idea (for example, the oneness between heaven and humanity) can only exist if the term (namely TRHY) exists. I take a moderate position that doing Chinese philosophy should be first and foremost based on texts from which key terms can be identified and deciphered. TRHY should not be taken as an overarching term, but just as one of many ways to express the oneness of heaven and humanity. This will transform current discussion on oneness between heaven and humanity to focus on key terms that are peculiar to the text, allowing future discussions to be much more systematic and solid.²⁴ To investigate the oneness between heaven and humanity, in the next section, I will propose a new and more feasible approach.

4 | TONG AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO TRHY

In Section 2 and 3, I have presented various traditional and modern understandings of TRHY. However divergent these understandings are, there is a shared ground between them: regardless of references of *tian*, TRHY is used to represent an ideal relation—namely the oneness—between heaven and humanity. Yet, given the issues that I discussed in Section 3.2, it is inappropriate to adopt TRHY to investigate this relation. A new approach to investigate this relation, therefore, should avoid these issues: the absence of TRHY in early texts (issue one), and the ambiguity and confusion in using it (issue two).²⁵

To propose *tong* as a new approach, in Section 4.1, I explain how *tong* can avoid issue one. I first briefly discuss the presence of *tong* in early texts, demonstrating that *tong* is widely used as a central concept to describe an ideal relation between heaven and humanity. Section 4.2 analyses how issue two can be avoided. I present three visions of *tong*, namely *datong* 大同, *shangtong* 尚同, and *xuantong* 玄同, which are developed respectively by Confucians, Mohists, and Taoists, and represent three distinct understandings of how heaven and humanity are united.

4.1 | The presence of *tong* in early texts

Tong is usually understood as “sameness,” or “unity,” or “conformity.” Instead of these common understandings, I use a nuanced account that is proposed by Fan He. Based on the definition of *tong* in the Canon of the *Mozi*, He (2019) argues that *tong* should be more accurately

described as “when different X, where X can be properties, characteristics, entities, etc., share at least a Y, where Y can be property, characteristic, entity, etc., the different X become one with respect to Y” (p. 117)—call it *nuanced definition*. He (2019) further demonstrates that the *nuanced definition* is not just advanced by the Mohists; it is commonly accepted across philosophical streams in early China (pp. 117–121).²⁶ I take the *nuanced definition* for the following discussion.

In the *Mozi*, a chapter titled “Shang Tong” 尚同 proposes a theory of *tong* in society. According to the text, all people under heaven should be *tong* not only with the Son of Heaven (*tianzi* 天子) but fundamentally with heaven. Heaven is considered as an anthropomorphic divine force; it has emotions such as joy and anger, and principles which require absolute conformity from humans (Y. R. Sun, 2001, pp. 76, 81). Thus, *tong* describes an ideal state in which as a result of the humans’ absolute conformity, heaven and humans become one.

The Confucian text *Liji* 禮記 uses *datong* 大同 and *hetong* 和同 to portray two different ideal relations between heaven and humanity. The “Li Yun” 禮運 chapter depicts a *datong* society in which everyone’s conduct is spontaneous and consistent with *li* 禮 (ritual). *Li* is a central method proposed by the “Li Yun”; it is essentially related to heaven and used by sage kings to realize the heavenly way (X. D. Sun, 1989, pp. 581–582, 616). In other words, the *datong* society represents the oneness between heaven and humanity, which results from the humans’ spontaneously following *li*. *Hetong* characterizes another type of relation between heaven and humanity. According to the “Yue Ling” 月令 chapter, when the *qi* 氣 descending from heaven above and the *qi* rising from earth below harmoniously converge, all plants start to grow (X. D. Sun, 1989, p. 417). In this context, *hetong* refers to a state in which all things in the universe are in harmonious oneness.

In Taoist tradition, a central term is *xuantong* 玄同. In the *Laozi* 老子, *xuantong* refers to a state in which one is in harmonious unity with her surroundings (Gao, 1996, p. 98).²⁷ Yet it is in the *Wenzi* 文子 that this term is fully developed. According to the text, *xuantong* denotes an ideal spiritual state in which one, through self-cultivation, eventually detaches from desires and emotions and treats everything without distinction, namely, in oneness with the whole universe (Wang, 2000, pp. 18–19, 162–163, 338).²⁸

In addition, the *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經,²⁹ an excavated silk manuscript from Mawangdui 馬王堆, employs the term *shangtong* 上同 to describe an ideal relation between heaven and humanity. This text maintains that if a ruler consults everything in the cosmos—including heaven, earth, and people—to make sensible decisions in governance, a grand state of oneness between the ruler, the people, heaven, and earth would be reached (Chen, 2007, p. 103).

In short, these instances exhibit the conspicuous presence of *tong* in various early texts. They also reveal how different philosophical streams develop their unique understandings of the ideal relation between heaven and humanity by focusing on *tong*.

4.2 | Three visions of the ideal relation between heaven and humanity

To account for how heaven and humanity are united as one, in this section, I focus on three terms that are respectively coined by Mohists, Confucians, and Taoists, namely *shangtong*, *datong*, and *xuantong*.

Shangtong is a central term in the “Shangtong” chapter of the *Mozi*, which denotes a Mohist way to the oneness between heaven and humanity. *Shangtong* comprises two levels

of conformity. The first level is the down-top conformity to government leaders. According to the “Shangtong” chapter, there is a political system including the Son of Heaven who rules the whole world, then the Three Dukes who assist the Son of Heaven to solve daily affairs, the feudal lords ruling the states, the village heads ruling villages, the district heads ruling districts, and the common people in the lowest rank (Y. R. Sun, 2001, pp. 74–75). All people in this system are required to absolutely conform to their superiors, that is, “what the superior takes to be right, all must take to be right. What the superior takes to be wrong, all must take to be wrong” (Johnston, 2009, p. 93). The whole society can thus be governed by such down-top conformity: common people conform to district heads, district heads conform to village heads, village heads conform to feudal lords, feudal lords conform to the Three Dukes, and the Three Dukes conform to the Son of Heaven. Through the down-top conformity, every top-down decree is absolutely obeyed and executed. Consequently, all people in society are untied as an orderly whole.

The other level that *shangtong* comprises concerns the conformity to heaven, namely, to take heaven as the standard. The “Fayi” 法儀 chapter says:

If Heaven is taken as the standard, then all one’s actions must be measured against Heaven. [...]. [W]hat does Heaven desire, what does Heaven abhor? Undoubtedly what Heaven desires is that there be mutual care and mutual benefit among people. What it does not desire is that there be mutual hatred and mutual harm among people. How do we know that Heaven desires mutual care and mutual benefit among people and does not desire mutual hatred and mutual harm among people? Because it is inclusive in caring them and inclusive in benefiting them. (Johnston, 2009, p. 27)

Taking heaven as the standard means knowing what heaven desires, and what heaven desires is mutual care and mutual benefit among people. The practice of mutual care and mutual benefit is discussed in another chapter, “Jianai” 兼愛:

[W]hat are the methods of universal mutual care and exchange of mutual benefit? Master Mo Zi said: “People would view others’ states as they view their own states. People would view others’ houses as they view their own houses. People would view other people as they view themselves. So the feudal lords would care each other and then there would not be savage battles. Heads of houses would care each other and then there would not be mutual usurpation. Individual people would care each other and then they would not injure each other. Rulers and ministers would care each other and then there would be kindness and loyalty. Fathers and sons would care each other and then there would be compassion and filial conduct. If the people of the world all cared each other, the strong would not dominate the weak, the many would not plunder the few, the rich would not despise the poor, the noble would not scorn the lowly, and the cunning would not deceive the foolish ...” (Johnston, 2009, p. 139)

The practice of mutual care and mutual benefit first exists in compassion and filial conduct between family members, and then applies to immediate relatives, to friends, and eventually to all others of society. This practice is also required in political arena; government officials should provide kindness and loyalty to each other. Once the principles of mutual care and mutual benefit prevail in every rank of society, the conformity to heaven is realized.

Thus, the first level of conformity leads society to an orderly whole, and the second level leads to the unity of society and heaven. The combination of the two levels leads to an ideal state—namely, oneness—between individuals, society, and heaven. Therefore, the Mohist way to oneness between heaven and humanity exists not just in the down-top obedience, but more essentially, in the universal practice of mutual care and mutual benefit across every rank of society.³⁰

A Confucian vision of oneness between heaven and humanity can be captured by the term *datong*, which is discussed in the “Liyun” chapter of the *Liji*:

When the *great* Way was practiced, the world was shared by all alike. The worthy and the able were promoted to office and men practiced good faith and lived in affection. Therefore they did not regard as parents only their own parents, or as sons only their own sons. The aged found a fitting close to their lives, the robust their proper employment; the young were provided with an upbringing and the widow and widower, the orphaned and the sick, with proper care. Men had their tasks and women their hearths. They hated to see goods lying about in waste, yet they did not hoard them for themselves; they disliked the thought that their energies were not fully used, yet they used them not for private ends. Therefore all evil plotting was prevented and thieves and rebels did not arise, so that people could leave their outer gates unbolted. This is *what is called datong*. (de Bary et al., 1960, p. 175)³¹

Datong depicts an ideal state in which all virtuous acts are spontaneously enacted by each and every one in society. These acts include showing compassion and care to others, selfless contribution to society, and others. Moreover, this passage suggests that the crucial way to reach *datong* exists in practicing the great Way.

We can identify an intimate relation between the Way, heaven, and ritual. In other places of the “Liyun,” the Way is used with heaven in phrases such as *tianzhidao* 天之道 and *tiandao* 天道 (X. D. Sun, 1989, pp. 585, 617), which mean that the Way is ultimately derived from heaven. How can humans reach the Way? The crucial tool is ritual. As the “Liyun” suggests, ritual is employed by sages to regulate people; if people all under heaven were cultivated and behaving in accordance with ritual, the Way of heaven would prevail in society. Through ritual, humans are ultimately united with heaven: the whole society reaches an ideal state that we can call the oneness between heaven and humanity.³²

Thus, a way that relies on ritual to reach the ideal relation between heaven and humanity can be understood as this. Ritual is comprehensive and all-encompassing in every part of life. It is involved in both public and private conduct on occasions such as political audiences, diplomatic missions, marriage, drinking, and eating (X. D. Sun, 1989, p. 585). Only when an act follows ritual, can it be considered proper. And through a process of self-cultivation, people can eventually reach an ideal state in which every act is issued spontaneously and in accordance with ritual. In other words, people would not feel constrained, but rather natural to behave, such as showing respect, compassion, and care to each other, wherein a harmonious society is formed.³³ Furthermore, given that ritual is the central tool for humans to realize the Way of heaven, a state in which all people in society are united as a harmonious whole by following ritual can thus be considered as the oneness between heaven and humanity.³⁴

The Taoist vision of the oneness between heaven and humanity is distinct from the previous two. This state of oneness is described in the “Daoyuan” 道原 chapter of the *Wenzi*, which says, “in one heart-mind with heaven, in one body with Dao; there is neither joy nor anger; neither

happiness nor bitterness; the ten thousand things are in *xuantong*; neither wrong nor right” (Wang, 2000, p. 19).³⁵ The term *Xuantong* represents a physical and mental state of oneness with the universe, a state in which people have detached from differences, external influences, and internal fluctuations, reaching the spiritual tranquility. How can the ideal state be realized? The “Daoyuan” says:

[One should] value the self but devalue the world; appreciate the cultivation of the self but depreciate the cultivation of others; not let things disturb (the internal) harmony; not let desires disorder emotions; hide the name; if he has Dao, his name is hidden; if he does not have Dao, his name is revealed; act non-action, engage non-engagement, know non-knowledge; possess the Dao of heaven; embrace the heart-mind of heaven; exhale and inhale (the *qi*) of *yin* and *yang*; spit the old and take in the new; shut with *yin*; open with *yang*; unfold and fold with the hard and soft; move upwards and downward with *yin* and *yang*. (Wang, 2000, pp. 18–19)

The way to *xuantong* involves two aspects of cultivation: mental cultivation and physical cultivation. Rather than stressing the external world, the mental cultivation focuses on the internal self, which requires disengagement from external activities such as pursuing profits or engaging epistemic distinctions. As a result of this disengagement, the mind would not only remain tranquil and detach from external influences; it would also treat all things in the world without distinction and in this sense, the boundary between the self and the world ultimately vanishes. Such an ideal mental state is depicted as “in one heart-mind with heaven, in one body with Dao” (Wang, 2000, p. 19).³⁶ Through the mental cultivation, the mind is united with the whole universe as one. The physical cultivation focuses on controlling *qi*. By masterfully exhaling and inhaling the *qi* of *yin* and *yang*, a harmonious exchange of *qi* between the body and the external world can be sustained, whereby the body is united with the whole world as one. Thus, through the mental and physical cultivation comes an ideal state in which each and everything in the universe are treated without distinction and interconnected as a harmonious whole.

I have presented three visions of how heaven and humanity are united as one. The Mohist *shangtong* requires the down-top obedience from all people in society and their following the principles of mutual care and mutual benefit that are issued from heaven, through which all humans reach oneness with heaven. The Confucian *datong* involves practicing ritual in society. Only when each and every one practices ritual to the extent that it is never felt as the constraint from outside but spontaneously followed in every conduct, can the oneness between heaven and all humans be reached. The Taoist *xuantong* requires both physical and mental cultivation. Through masterfully controlling *qi* and mentally detaching from external influences, the boundary between the self and the external world vanishes: all things in the universe are interconnected as one.

5 | CONCLUSION

TRHY becomes increasingly prevalent in modern scholarship. However, the absence of its use in early Chinese philosophy, the vagueness of its meaning, and the exaggeration of its philosophical relevance to contemporary world cast deep doubts on the significance or uniqueness of TRHY to Chinese culture. Moreover, without a clear definition or concrete content, TRHY

often leads discussions of the relation between heaven and humanity into ambiguity and even confusion.

In contrast to TRHY, *tong* is widely adopted by various philosophical streams: *shangtong* in Mohism, *datong* in Confucianism, and *xuantong* in Daoism. To advance *tong* as an alternative to TRHY, I present three unique visions of the oneness between heaven and humanity that are epitomized by the three terms, *shangtong*, *datong*, and *xuantong*. To reach full understandings of the ideal relation heaven and humanity, I believe *tong* provides a first solid step to further investigation.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ I distinguish TRHY as a term from the subject, namely the oneness between heaven and humanity, that TRHY is used by a majority of scholars to refer to. In this article, I consistently use TRHY to refer to TRHY as a term. It should be noted that I do not deny that the subject that TRHY refers to is a central issue in the history of Chinese philosophy, but I do suggest that using TRHY to approach this subject is improper.
- ² A stimulating discussion of this approach to study Chinese philosophy, see Park (2021, pp. 12–13).
- ³ A similar approach can be found in Zongqi Cai's account of the phrase, *yiyi nizhi* 以意逆志, see Z. Q. Cai (2014).
- ⁴ The Principle (*li* 理) is generally understood in moral sense. Yet it deserves mention that *li* should also be understood in epistemological and metaphysical perspectives. For a detailed account of *li*, see Patt-Shamir (2020, pp. 243–263). Thanks to a reviewer for pointing out this.
- ⁵ It should be noted that in another place, Cheng brothers maintain that there is no division between heaven and humanity (*tianren wujian* 天人無間), and argue against the expression, “uniting heaven and humanity” (*he tianren* 合天人), because uniting implies the separateness of the two (Cheng & Cheng, 1981, p. 33). The witting avoidance of the use of “uniting heaven and humanity” clearly shows that the expression TRHY was not commonly accepted. I thank a reviewer for pointing out this saying from Cheng brothers.
- ⁶ Liu Xiaogan makes a thorough survey of the use of TRHY in this period, see Liu (2011, pp. 73–80). I adopt his discussion of TRHY in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties.
- ⁷ For a detailed account of the radical anti-traditionalism in the Modern China, see Lin (1979).
- ⁸ Many Chinese scholars advance Qian and Ji's discussions, see Cai (1994), C. S. Li (1994), Ren (1996), S. Y. Zhang (2007), Liu (2011), C. Y. Li (2014), and Yu (2014). TRHY also appears in English scholarship, see Ching (1997), C. Cheng (2011), Perkins (2014), and Yao (2017). For TRHY in media coverage, see Li (2014).
- ⁹ For the various senses of *tian*, see Perkins (2014, p. 29) and D. N. Zhang (1985, p. 1). It should be noted that there are other senses that *tian* can be used to refer to, such as the sky. Sarah Allan's insightful account of *tian* is particularly worth mentioning. Allan argues that *tian* primarily refers to the sky, where God or other ancestral spirits reside, and hence *tian* is used to serve as a euphemism for God. For Allan's detailed account, see Allan (2007). Nonetheless, in this article, I do not include the sense of the sky to discuss *tian*, because rather than the sky, those who adopt the term TRHY often refer to *tian* as God, or the natural organism, or nature.
- ¹⁰ For detailed accounts of “合” and “會,” see P. Li (1999, pp. 381–384, 402–406) and He (2019, p. 120).
- ¹¹ I do not mean that besides God, there is no other sense that Dong's *tian* can refer to. I just suggest that *tian* in Dong's mention of TRHY denotes God.
- ¹² In terms of wording, Dong's phrase *tianren yiye* is not identical with TRHY. Given that *tianren yiye* clearly refers to the oneness between heaven and man, therefore, I take Dong's phrase as one type of TRHY.
- ¹³ For a detailed account of the philosophy of organism, see Needham (1956, pp. 279–293).
- ¹⁴ Modern scholars, such as Qian Mu, also discuss TRHY in this sense. Qian emphasizes the mandate of heaven, which involves moral principles. See Qian (1991).
- ¹⁵ For another environmental account of TRHY, see Yao (2017).

- ¹⁶ For detailed accounts of how early philosophical streams took Dao as an ideal, see Graham (1989) and Yu (2002, pp. 38–56).
- ¹⁷ For discussion of different types of TRHY, see Yu (2007, p. 14; 2012, pp. 158–164; 2014, pp. 174–178, 187).
- ¹⁸ George Conger (1922) expresses a close view, saying “it may be urged that all philosophy is a discussion of the relations of man and the universe, and that every particular philosophy may be stated in terms of a comparison between the two” (p. xiii).
- ¹⁹ Similar examples can also be found in Qian (1991), Ji (1993), and S. Y. Zhang (2007).
- ²⁰ For discussions of the two features, see Jin (1985), Qian (1991), Ji (1993), and Yao (2017).
- ²¹ This point is made by Yu (2014, pp. 212–213). For the spiritual exercise in Greek philosophy, see Dodds (1951, pp. 150, 154).
- ²² For a detailed account of deforestation in traditional China, see Tuan (1968, pp. 184–188).
- ²³ It is worth mentioning He Zhaowu’s 何兆武 argument against the philosophical significance of TRHY. He (2005) contends that TRHY cannot be considered as a unique Chinese feature, since the goal for every philosophical tradition, western or eastern, is to pursue the ultimate oneness between heaven and humanity, namely TRHY (p. 67).
- ²⁴ I thank a reviewer for suggesting the clarification of my position.
- ²⁵ Although I discuss three issues in 3.2, the last issue, which concerns the significance of TRHY in contemporary discourse, is not included here; for this issue is not directly related to the examination of how heaven and humanity are related.
- ²⁶ For other accounts of *tong* in Confucian and Mohist traditions, see F. He (2020, 2021).
- ²⁷ This sense of *xuantong* can also be found in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. See Guo (1961, p. 353).
- ²⁸ It should be noted that the same passage also appears in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子. Paul van Els (2018) speculates that large portions of the received *Wenzi* are copied from the *Huainanzi* (pp. 107–108). However, given that this sense of *xuantong* appears in three different places in the *Wenzi* while just once in the *Huainanzi*, I focus on the *Wenzi* in my discussion.
- ²⁹ Most scholars speculate that this text may come into existence since the middle Warring States (Chen, 2007, pp. 37–41).
- ³⁰ For a comprehensive survey of Mohist *tong*, see F. He (2021, pp. 165–171).
- ³¹ The italics are my revision.
- ³² For example, in one place, the “Liyun” says, “ritual is used by previous kings to follow the Way of heaven and to regulate people’s emotions”; in another, “ritual must be derived from heaven” (X. D. Sun, 1989, pp. 585, 616).
- ³³ Chenyang Li provides an insightful account of the role that ritual plays in a harmonious society. Li (2007) argues that “*li* 禮 (ritual) is embedded in a culture as grammar is in a language. As the basic rules and norms of human behavior in a society, *li* is embedded in people’s everyday behavior as grammar is embedded in everyday expressions. We usually do not learn *li* in abstract forms, nor do we usually learn grammar in abstract forms. One becomes proficient in practicing *li* by following patterns of human activity in daily life, as one becomes grammatically proficient by using linguistic patterns. Although a person who has become skillful in performing *li* does not have to think about it all the time—one can act naturally in accordance with *li*—when someone does not behave appropriately, we will quickly notice that he or she violates some rules of *li*” (p. 318).
- ³⁴ For a detailed account of the ritual in the *datong* society, see F. He (2020, pp. 326–330).
- ³⁵ The same sense is also articulated in the “Jiushou” 九守 and “Weiming” 微明 chapters. See Wang (2000, pp. 163, 338).
- ³⁶ The same sense is also articulated in the “Jiushou” chapter, which maintains that focus on the self rather than the external world would eventually lead into a spiritual state in which all the ten thousand things are possessed in the self (Wang, 2000, p. 162).

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