ABSTRACT

Wang Yang-ming (1472 -- 1529) was an outstanding philosopher of the Ming Dynasty. His philosophy of mind can best be summarized by the Mind is Principle desire (心即理), Extension of Innate Knowledge (致良知) and the Unity of Knowledge and Action (知行合一). Although all these doctrines are closely related, this Academic Exercise examines mainly the doctrine of the Unity of Knowledge and Action, which is very much misinterpreted by both his contemporaries and scholars today. Problems arise largely due to the ambiguity of terms used by Wang Yang-ming. To him, Knowledge does not refer to Cognitive Knowledge, but Moral Knowledge or the Innate Knowledge (良知). Action, as opposed to actual performance, pertains to reflexive action of the Mind (意). Once the Innate Knowledge makes a judgment and sets a direction (i.e. decides what is good and what is bad), Action is involved. In other words, Action begins when a
thought assumes a directionality and becomes an intention. The only thing that can separate this Unity is selfish desires (私欲). Thus, it is only looking from this viewpoint that the doctrine shows its uniqueness and value.

This study is divided into seven chapters: Chapter One is a general discussion of the Ming intellectual trends. The following Chapter examines the theoretical background of the Unity of Knowledge and Action. Fundamental ideas behind this doctrine will be discussed in Chapter Three. Chapter Four and Five elucidate the meanings of "Knowledge" and "Action" as reflected in the writings of Wang Yang-ming. Chapter Six explores the link between "Knowledge" and "Action" and the significance of "Unity" in the doctrine. Chapter Seven, the concluding Chapter, gives an overall evaluation of this doctrine.