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Harmony: A confucian prescription to build a better world in the 21st century

Abstract

Extract:

Since the emergence of human society there have been moral concepts underpinning relations among people, as well as between people and the natural environment. If the two kinds of relations; human-to-human and human-to-nature, are well handled people will have cause to be happy and society will develop smoothly. If they are not, disturbances will overtake human and social development, with the potential for total breakdown, perhaps extinction. The 21st century is especially vulnerable to these bleak possibilities. So it is of primary importance to establish harmonious human relations and a harmonious relationship with nature.

Keywords

Confucius, harmony, 21st century, human relations, humanity

VIEWPOINT FROM CHINA

Harmony - A Confucian Prescription to Build a Better World in the 21st Century

*by Li Tianchen**

Since the emergence of human society there have been moral concepts underpinning relations among people, as well as between people and the natural environment. If the two kinds of relations - human-to-human and human-to-nature - are well handled, people will have cause to be happy and society will develop smoothly. If they are not, disturbances will overtake human and social development, with the potential for total breakdown - perhaps extinction. The 21st century is especially vulnerable to these bleak possibilities. So it is of primary importance to establish harmonious human relations and a harmonious relationship with nature.

In the past decades science and technology have developed rapidly. Their development has brought many benefits to humankind, but also many new problems. The main problems are:

- The aggressive exploitation of natural resources, their depletion (for example, forests), environmental pollution and the daily worsening of quality of life because of environmental degradation.
- An increasing indifference and hostility among members of society in circumstances of a widening gap between rich and poor, and the anxieties of those who struggle to survive, as well as those who fear for the safety of their wealth.
- The loss of ambition and life goals, together with the onset of loneliness and depression, may be found when people become materially better-off but spiritually vacant. This "illness of modern society" exists not only in the developed Western countries but also in the developing countries. While catching up with the modern developed countries, many developing countries are following the same disastrous road with the same consequences.

These problems of environmental degradation, social indifference and personal spiritual neglect, together with technology's continual march forward making the world smaller and smaller, will deeply affect life in the 21st century.

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Therefore people need to find ways to cure this globalised illness of modernity before they are overwhelmed by it.

In the quest for a cure, many have rediscovered the prescription of "harmony" in Chinese ethics. The harmony between people, between people and nature and the serenity of the heart, are already well articulated in Chinese ethics. Harmony is the most effective treatment for modern society's ills. Appreciating the value of harmony and making it the standard of conduct amongst ourselves and in our relations with nature would speed up the progress of social civilisation.

When a person lives in society, the best way to conduct relations with others is through *ren* (human-heartedness; benevolence), which is the nucleus of Confucius' ethical thought. Confucius regarded *ren* as the highest moral standard. He further put forward guiding principles for handling all kinds of relations. He advocated that the superior should employ his subordinates according to the rules of propriety, and the subordinates should serve their superior with loyalty; the parent should be kind and loving to the child, who should in turn be filial to the parent; the older sibling should show fraternal love to the younger, and the younger should show respect to the older; husband and wife should be gentle and polite to each other; and friends should be friendly to, and have faith in, each other. Confucius also specified the principle in the conduct of teacher-student relations and adults-children. These principles are of real relevance in day-to-day living and social, including global, well-being.

Harmony in the family is an important aspect of human relations. Each family is a cell of society. If each family is in harmony, the whole society will be in harmony. To achieve harmony in the family, filial piety and fraternal duty should be practised. In the 21st century, productivity will undoubtedly be developed even further, but social security may not be equally developed. An example concerns care for the aged. Since the problem of ageing populations will be a widespread social problem of the 21st century, it becomes especially pertinent to encourage families to provide for the aged and show respect to parents. This is a form of filial piety, as advocated by Confucius.

Confucius said that in our youth we should be filial at home and respectful to our elders abroad. If we are filial and respectful at home, in society we can surely respect our superiors and colleagues. Filial piety and fraternal duty are the basis of Confucius' moral principles. They can be extended to other aspects such as being generous in how we treat other people, doing favours for others, declining out of modesty, uprightness, gentleness, kindheartedness, and politeness. Once realised in our conduct, these principles and standards will become precious ideological wealth in the construction of sound human relations and a harmonious society.

The moral principle of *ren* (benevolence) can be applied not only to conducting relations between one person and another, but to relations between people and nature. Nature as our environment has always been generous to us with a wealth of living materials. Human beings should, in turn, take good and loving care of the environment. They should stop the ruthless and predatory exploitation of natural resources. On the contrary, they should take measures to protect these resources and promote their growth and re-growth. We must not think only of the present and neglect the future. A proper balance between economic development and unstressed environmental capacity should be maintained. In a word, a harmonious relation between people and nature must be established.

To achieve human-to-human and human-to-nature harmony, the value of harmony itself needs to be realised (literally, made real) and put into action by each individual. To do this, self-cultivation becomes imperative. Central to self-cultivation is the shedding of selfishness. Selfishness is harmful to harmony. Nowadays, many people have come to concentrate on personal interests only. This is contrary to Confucian ethics. Confucius opposed obtaining wealth in an unrighteous way. He said: "Wealth and rank unrighteously obtained seems to me as floating clouds." They lacked substance. He stressed the pursuit of morality and justice, not personal gain, saying: "Think of justice first when seeing interests or gains." If people follow Confucius' teachings, not only would there be a better order in people's personal lives, but a superior order as well in the family and in society, and harmony between Earth (upon which we enact our lives) and Heaven (the moral universe).

History will soon cross the threshold of the 21st century. As modern science and technology have shrunk the planet into a global village, the fundamental global ethic of the 21st century must bear the imprint of integration. It needs to be built on the basis of the East Asian unity of Heaven and humanity and of the Western scientific spirit, as approved by the people of the world in pursuit of their spiritual and material needs. This is essentially the pursuit of harmony, which entails the conscious rejection of selfishness and greed, as a cure to the ills of modern civilisation. Only then would the 21st century be invested not with the 20th century's destructive tendencies but genuine hope and confidence.