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# Confucian ethics and the environment

## **Abstract**

Extract:

Confucianism is distinguished by its concern for the cultivation of human relations towards a harmonious society rather than one's relations with the supernatural or natural. However, it would be a mistake to regard the civilisational legacy of Confucius as purely humanistic. Confucianism is a philosophy which also contains profound environmental ethics through its inclusiveness of Heaven, Earth and the Human order. These form the traditional Chinese trinity which configure the ultimate harmony. Relations between people and the natural world are therefore of intrinsic interest to those who profess Confucian ethics.

## **Keywords**

Confucianism, environment, human will, Heaven

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## Confucian Ethics and the Environment

*by Li Tianchen\**

Confucianism is distinguished by its concern for the cultivation of human relations towards a harmonious society rather than one's relations with the supernatural or natural. However, it would be a mistake to regard the civilisational legacy of Confucius as purely humanistic. Confucianism is a philosophy which also contains profound environmental ethics through its inclusiveness of Heaven, Earth and the Human order. These form the traditional Chinese trinity which configure the ultimate harmony. Relations between people and the natural world are therefore of intrinsic interest to those who profess Confucian ethics.

This unaccustomed extension of Confucianism to ecological considerations is timely in the present age. With the planet's widespread industrial development and the rapid growth of population, ecosystems are in urgent need of *ethical* consideration. 'Saving' the environment requires that we understand it, our place within it, and our responsibilities toward it. The environment's unprecedented exploitation, in the absence of practices of protection and renewal, now threatens future economic and social development. In other words, an impoverished natural environment impedes both the material standard of living and socio-cultural quality of life. To the Confucian mind, this problem originates in the misconstruing of relations between humankind and nature. The solution may therefore begin with people understanding how to conduct such relations.

Confucian thinkers characteristically regard nature itself as holistic, all things in nature depending on each other and forming an organic whole. They also consider human beings as part of nature, an existence within it, emphasising that people and nature are closely bound in a harmonious, not conflictual, primary relationship. The pre-Qin (i.e. pre-221 B.V.) Confucian thinkers developed these ideas into the theory of the unity of man and Heaven or nature. Though Confucius did not put forward the theory, it was embodied in his thought. Confucius said: "Great was Yao as a prince! How exalted! There is no greatness like that of Heaven, yet only Yao could take it as a model."(1) Confucius affirmed that the example of Heaven - or nature - could be followed. The affirmation showed the unity of the human being and nature.

The theory of the oneness of Heaven and man was developed by later Confucians. In the *Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong)*,(2) it is said: "All things exist together, and they do not do harm to each other; all ways exist together, and they do not come into conflict."(3) Mencius (circa 385-312 B.C.) also expressed this idea of unity and its manifestations: "In all places by which the sage passes, misguided people are helped to change; in places where the sage stays, a mysterious role is played by him; the sage lives on up with Heaven, down with the earth."(4) Lu Jia (died 170 B.C.) expressed the linkage thus: "Tradition has it that Heaven gives birth to the myriad things to be nurtured by Earth and brought to completion by sages."(5) These expositions take the change and development of humans and nature as a related, harmonious and balanced movement. Heaven, Earth and human are not considered in isolation. On the contrary, the three are placed within a larger system and are taken as a whole.

To understand the meaning of Heaven, rendered from the Chinese *tian*, it is worth noting that: ". . . neither 'Heaven' nor 'Nature' fully expresses the meaning of *tian*, which has a variety of senses, including sky, weather, the natural order, and also a moral order."(6) Hence, as aptly observed in the *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Confucius' disciple, Xunzi (circa 310-219 B.C.) "represents *tian* as a natural order, operating according to unchanging principles, not intervening in extraordinary ways in human affairs but, rather, providing the context within which all living things exist".(7) Fung Yu-lan,

in his *History of Chinese Philosophy*, identifies five different meanings for *tian*: (8)

0. sky in the physical universe;
1. an anthropomorphic emperor of Heaven;
2. destiny or fate, for example, Mencius' statement: "As to the accomplishment of a great deed, that is with *tian* "; (9)
3. nature, as employed by Xunzi (see above); and
4. the universe's moral order, as expressed in the *Doctrine of the Mean* when it opens with the observation that *tian* confers on us our nature.

Types four and five are especially pertinent for Confucian environmental ethics. One may go further, as has been said of Xunzi's thought, and integrate "psychological, ethical, spiritual, and political"(10) considerations. In understanding the spectrum of meaning attached to *tian*, of Chinese philosophy imbuing it with morality and not only physicality, it is possible to appreciate why nature is equated with Heaven (*tian*) - rather than Earth, as is often the case in today's environmental discourse. Therefore, 'saving' the environment requires more than physical preservation; it calls for reverence and duty to the environment's greater self, nature. This extension of humanity carries ethical concerns for the environment.

The Confucian revival in the Song dynasty (960-1279), known as Neo-Confucianism, further entrenched the doctrine of the unity of Heaven and the human being, and hence ethical responsibility beyond the human environment. The Neo-Confucian philosopher, Zhang Zai (1020-1077), made this clear in his celebrated essay, 'Western Inscription' ('*Ximing*', from having been inscribed on the western wall of his room):

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. (11)

The body metaphor for the unity principle, which is indicative of the holistic approach to human relations in the wider dimensions of existence, also appears in the writings of Cheng Hao (1032-1085). In his essay, 'On Understanding the Nature of Humanity', Cheng Hao states: "The student must understand the nature of humanity (*ren*). The humane man forms one body with all things comprehensively."(12) In another essay, 'On Humaneness', he reflects: "The Master said, The humane person regards Heaven-and-Earth and all things as one body. There is nothing that is not part of oneself. Knowing that, where is the limit [of one's humanity]?"(13) Humanity may therefore be argued to extend beyond the human world and into the whole ecological domain. Indeed, the opening paragraph of *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* sets the tone for its coverage of Chinese philosophical traditions by announcing:

If one word could characterize the entire history of Chinese philosophy, that word would be humanism - not the humanism that denies or slights a Supreme Power, but one that professes the unity of man and Heaven. In this sense, humanism has dominated Chinese thought from the dawn of its history.(14)

In advocating the concept of oneness of Heaven and man, of a holistic body, Confucian thinkers do not mean there is no difference between the two. Rather, they consider that Heaven is the same as nature which runs its own course. Confucius said, "Heaven does not speak, yet the four seasons run their course and all things come into being."(15) 'Heaven' in Confucius' saying refers to living nature which is independent of human will. Xunzi expressed this idea well when he said, "Heaven goes with regularity. It does not exist for Emperor Yao, nor does it die for Emperor Jie."(16) Therefore, human acts of transforming nature need to be based on the understanding and observation of the laws of nature. Otherwise, the human habitat will be damaged and endangered.

This leads to the consideration of uninformed, and hence unethical, human will. While being no match to the greater scheme of things, human will certainly can and does interfere with the course of

nature. In doing so, as shown below, it can bring down nature's wrath - for example, flooding which results from deforestation. But human beings cannot tell nature how to do its job. This is a lesson yet to be properly understood. Through their technological proficiency, humans regard themselves as masters of nature. They have placed themselves hierarchically above nature and have embarked on a 'punitive expedition' against this erstwhile ally. Since the Industrial Revolution, there had appeared such problems as pollution of water, air and soil, as well as sound (noise pollution). Nowadays, ecological problems are clearly identified even if they are not convincingly contained or reversed. They include soil erosion, damage to the ozone layer, shortage of fresh water, and rapid decrease of forests and species.

To take one example, China's Water Resources Ministry estimates that severe drinking water shortages will occur within the first decade of this new century; a shortfall of 331.8 billion cubic metres by 2010, compared with a shortfall of 40 billion cubic metres in 2000.(17) It is estimated that: "100 cities on the north China plain - home to 45 per cent of China's population but only 10 per cent of its water resources - are 'desperately short' of water, while a further 300 cities across China suffer seasonal shortages."(18) To their credit, the Chinese authorities are introducing schemes to redress these problems, and hopefully not add to them, as potentially may happen with the scheme to "pump water thousands of kilometres along huge man-made channels from the flood-prone Yangtze River in the south to the drought-stricken Yellow River in the north".(19) Besides proper policy and planning for the environment via the governing authorities, there is a deeper need among communities in the developed and developing worlds to change attitudes towards the relationship they hold with nature. In other words, policies need to be embedded in an ethical tradition which recognises the value of nature as intrinsic to being human. Confucians oppose the idea which takes human beings as the centre of the universe, nor do they approve of the view which takes nature as the centre.

This is the distinguishing feature of Confucian ecological ethics: it does not give humans dominion over nature, nor does it sacrifice human development at the altar of pristine nature. Confucians maintain the oneness of humankind and nature, the harmony and unity between the two. The *Doctrine of the Mean* says: "Attaining equilibrium, heaven and earth will be in their right places and all things will come into being."(20) In handling relations between the human and natural worlds, people need to observe the principle of 'equilibrium', so that the vitality and harmony of nature, the ecological balance of the natural environment, can be maintained properly.

To act according to the requirements of nature in preserving and perpetuating itself, and to economise in the use of natural resources, are essential commitments in Confucian ecological ethics. Humankind's knowledge of protecting and making rational use of natural resources originated from the agricultural policy of ancient China. According to historical records, Emperor Yu (21) had a clear awareness of the need for ecological protection. He gave the order that: "In Spring, wood choppers could not be used in mountain forests so that bushes and trees can grow; in summer dense fishing nets could not be used in rivers and pools so that fish and tortoises can grow."(22) King Wen of the Zhou dynasty gave King Wu the deathbed injunction that: "Choppers be not used in mountain forests at the improper time so that bushes and trees can grow; dense fishing nets be not used in rivers and pools at the improper time so that fish and tortoises can grow. [Otherwise], fish and tortoises go and live in deep pools, birds and beasts go and live in bushes and forests, lonely and with difficulty."(23) That King Wen said this to his successor indicated that he took ecological and environmental protection as a matter concerning the national economy and the people's livelihood; indeed, a matter concerning the rise and fall of a nation. Xunzi also emphasised human responsibility towards nature:

Respond to it with peace and order, and good fortune will result. Respond to it with disorder, and disaster will follow. If the foundations of living (*i.e.*, agriculture and sericulture) are strengthened and are economically used, then Nature cannot bring impoverishment. . . . But if the foundations of living are neglected and used extravagantly, then Nature cannot make the country rich.(24)

Hence Confucians maintain that human beings should control and restrict their desires, so that natural resources can be rationally exploited and utilised, and their production and consumption kept in balance. Confucius himself resolutely opposed the misuse of resources. He advocated that the ruler

should "economise in expenditure, show affection towards his subjects, and use the labour of the peasantry only in the slack season of the year".(25) Mencius developed Confucius' thinking on this. He asked the rulers to control and restrict their material desires, make rational use of resources and pay attention to the development of production. He said: "Good cultivation and less tax will make the common people rich."(26) He also said: "If lands are cultivated at proper times, grains will not be eaten up; if dense fishing nets are not used in pools, fish and tortoises will not be eaten up; if bushes and trees are chopped at proper times, wood will not be used up."(27) Xunzi, too, spoke of this: "When rivers and pools are deep," he said, "fish and tortoises return; when mountain forests are flourishing, birds and beasts return."(28) Both Mencius and Xunzi understood the importance of other species to human beings. Indeed, Mencius advocated the idea of being "benevolent to the people and love all things", which reflected the Confucian teaching of attaching importance to all living things. Confucian thinkers understood that, only in this way, can all things exist and multiply in accordance with the laws of nature, while human beings can have living resources sufficient to their needs as a society. The simple rule is that society's productive activities must benefit the development of the environment, for when the environment develops so does the productivity of humans.

Hence the Confucian view holds humans to be part of nature and that they should respect and act in accordance with the laws of nature. The reality in our times, of course, has proved otherwise; people's ruthless exploitation of natural resources has greatly damaged the natural environment, to the point where humankind is in dire need of environmental morality. The Confucian belief in the unity of Heaven and the human provides such a morality. Other Confucian principles contribute to such values. The core of Confucian ethics is *ren* or benevolence. Confucius took the realisation of benevolence as his lofty ideal and lifelong task. He considered that all things in nature were the material foundation upon which human beings lived; hence people should take a friendly attitude towards them. He also thought that we ought to establish a relationship of 'love' with nature and take it as our friend, regarding it as unfilial "to chop a tree or to kill an animal at improper times."(29) Hence, love and filiality towards humans should be extended to the protection of, and respect for, the natural environment. This represents the full force of Confucian filial duty: we should be filial not only to our human parents but to mother nature, too. This is because we, as humans, are deeply related to Heaven and Earth, forming a triad of existence.

Taking the Confucian view that the current ecological crisis stems from the spiritual crisis in human beings, the solution to the ecological crisis ultimately rests with the spiritual regeneration of human beings. It is people who must cultivate their moral sensibility, for only those who have done so will be prepared to observe the regulations of environmental protection, and bear the responsibility and obligation they owe nature. Confucius identified this type of person as *junzi*, the morally noble person.(30)

The theory of unity of Heaven and the human being offers contemporary society a 'new'(31) way of thinking about solving relations between the human world and the natural world - that is, that these relations should be unitary and harmonious. In the final analysis, to protect nature and the environment is to protect human beings themselves. The central idea of the unity between man and Heaven extends the scope of filial piety and love to nature, but also enhances filiality and love across human generations by ensuring nature is preserved on behalf of past generations' efforts to the benefit of generations still unborn.

Confucian ecological ethics can direct people in correctly understanding and handling relations between one person and another, one generation and another, an individual and society, people and nature, partial interests and overall interests, immediate interests and long-term interests. The crossroads of two centuries presents a fitting occasion to pause and reconsider the eternal theme of how to achieve harmony between human civilisation and nature. The time is opportune to realise ecological harmony through Confucian ethics in this 'greening' century.

## References

\* Li Tianchen recently retired as Deputy Director of the *Confucius Culture Institute* of Qufu Teachers University, Shandong, China.

1. *Analects* VIII:19 (following the translation by Li Tianchen, Kong Fanfu, Tong Guangwu, and Ren Guosheng, Shandong University Press, Qufu, PRC, 1991, to be used hereafter). Yao was a legendary emperor in ancient China (3rd millennium BC).
2. The *Doctrine of the Mean* is traditionally attributed to Confucius' grandson, Zisi (492-431 BC), though some scholars have dated it to 200 BC and others say it is likely to be a composite work over time in the 5th or 4th century BC. See Wing-tsit Chan (trans. and comp.), *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1963, p.97; and Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (comp.), *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol. 1, 2nd edn, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999, p.334.
3. *Doctrine of the Mean*, ch. 30.
4. *Mencius* VIIA:13.
5. 'Lu Jia: The Natural Order and the Human Order', in de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, p.285.
6. de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, p.170.
7. Ibid.
8. Fung Yu-lan, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 1, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1952, p.31.
9. *Mencius* IB:14.
10. de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, p.177.
11. Zhang Zai, 'Western Inscription', in de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, p.683.
12. de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, p.694.
13. Ibid., p.695.
14. Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p.3.
15. *Analects* XVII:19.
16. *Xunzi*, Tianlun (天論 ch. 17). Jie (2nd millennium BC) was a legendary tyrant of the Xia Dynasty in ancient China.
17. Lynne O'Donnell, 'China Grapples with Parched Future', *The Australian*, 18 October 2000, p.8. Citing a reported released in October 2000 by the US-based Milrepa Fund, O'Donnell states: "All of China's water bodies are polluted to varying degrees, including all seven major watersheds - the Huai, Hai, Liao, Songhua, Yangtze, Pearl and Yellow rivers . . ."
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. *Doctrine of the Mean*, ch. 1.
21. The first legendary emperor of the Xia Dynasty in ancient China.
22. *Yizhoushu*, Dajujie.
23. *Yizhoushu*, Wenjiezhu.

24. *Xunzi*, ch. 17, in Chan, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, pp.116-117.
25. *Analects* I:5.
26. *Mencius* IA:3.
27. *Mencius* IA:3.
28. *Xunzi*, Zhishi.
29. *The Rites*.
30. The *junzi* is widely discussed in the *Analects*.
31. Confucius himself spoke of the importance of investigating the old in order to find from it what is new. *Analects* II:11.

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