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# Confucianism and Ecological Civilization: A Comparative Study

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between the concept of an 'ecological civilization', as adopted in modern PRC, and Confucian values. Global warming, desertification, heavy metal contamination, smog, and water pollution represent some of the environmental issues that restrict the development of China, as well as other countries in the world economy, threatening people's health and livelihood. The gravity of the situation was reflected in the Report of the 17th Chinese Communist Party (CPC) National Congress held in 2007, which called for the development of an "ecological civilization," a policy further formalized at the 18th National Congress of the CPC in 2012. However, societal and cultural support is needed to ensure a deep and lasting evolution towards a sustainable eco-civilization. Confucianism provides considerable material for the establishment of such an ecological civilization. Confucius and Mencius stressed the importance the protecting natural resources and emphasized thriftiness. An analysis of Confucian relational theory and filial piety suggests that human beings should be concerned with nature and sustainable development, which in turn requires people to protect and conserve natural resources, maintaining their sustainable use. Recent Chinese commitments to sustainable development, combat desertification, reverse forest losses and slow soil degradation show a desire to positively transform human-environmental interactions.

## **Keywords**

ecological civilization; Confucianism; eco-civilization; environmental protection, relationships, heaven, earth, nature, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), Confucian, ethics

## Confucianism and Ecological Civilization: A Comparative Study<sup>1</sup>

By Yuan Shuai<sup>2</sup>

### *Abstract*

The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between the concept of an ‘ecological civilization’, as adopted in modern PRC, and Confucian values. Global warming, desertification, heavy metal contamination, smog, and water pollution represent some of the environmental issues that restrict the development of China, as well as other countries in the world economy, threatening people’s health and livelihood. The gravity of the situation was reflected in the Report of the 17th Chinese Communist Party (CPC) National Congress held in 2007, which called for the development of an “ecological civilization,” a policy further formalized at the 18th National Congress of the CPC in 2012. However, societal and cultural support is needed to ensure a deep and lasting evolution towards a sustainable eco-civilization. Confucianism provides considerable material for the establishment of such an ecological civilization. Confucius and Mencius stressed the importance the protecting natural resources and emphasized thriftiness. An analysis of Confucian relational theory and filial piety suggests that human beings should be concerned with nature and sustainable development, which in turn requires people to protect and conserve natural resources, maintaining their sustainable use. Recent Chinese commitments to sustainable development, combat desertification, reverse forest losses and slow soil degradation show a desire to positively transform human-environmental interactions.

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Ecological Civilization; Confucianism; Eco-civilization; PRC – Environmental Protection; Confucian relationships; Heaven-and-Earth; Nature – Attitudes Towards; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD); Confucian Ethics.

The environment has become a central concern to national wellbeing and quality of life in the current era. Global warming, desertification, heavy metal contamination, smog, and water pollution represent some of the environmental issues that restrict the development of China, as well as other countries in the world economy, and threaten people’s health and livelihood. The gravity of the situation was reflected in the Report

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<sup>1</sup> The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views, position or policies of the *Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*. Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors publish diverse, critical and dissenting views so long as these meet ethical and academic criteria.

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of the 17th Chinese Communist Party (CPC) National Congress held in 2007. It called for an “ecological civilization,” a concept also translated as “conservation culture” and “ecological progress” (*Xinhua*, 2012). When the 18th National Congress of the CPC was held in November 2012, it also declared an “ecological civilization” that will result in a “beautiful China” (Report, 2012, section VIII). In February 2013, the 27th Council of the United Nations Environment Program adopted the draft decision to promote the concept of ecological civilization in China, marking the Chinese ecological civilization theory and practice in the international community as worthy of support. Ecological civilization is regarded as a more advanced form of civilization after the three phases of primitive civilization, agricultural civilization and industrial civilization. It is a necessary stage for China to enter in view of the severe environmental situation.

But it will not do this without cultural support to ensure a deep and lasting evolution of ecological civilization. The cultural support base comes from the philosophy of Confucianism. It represents the most influential ideological system which China produced, dating back more than 2000 years and continues to affect all aspects of the civilizational development of the Chinese people, as well as the nations of the Confucian Culture area – namely, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam – and is still alive among the Chinese diaspora throughout the world. Moreover, with the rise of China's economy, China's cultural influence is also growing. Therefore, the ancient Chinese Confucian ethics of the relationship between humans and nature has attracted more and more attention. Confucianism provides considerable material for the establishment of an ecological civilization. The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between ecological civilization and Confucianism.

Confucianism elaborates the relationship between people, as well as their relationships within society, with an emphasis on *ren* (benevolence; human-heartedness) and *shu* (reciprocity; forbearance). According to the *Analects of Confucius*: “The *ren* person is one who, wishing himself to be settled in position, sets up others; wishing himself to have access to the powerful, achieves access for others” (VI:30). The second, *shu*, is explained by the *Analects* thus: “When directing the actions of subordinates, do so as though officiating at a great ritual sacrifice. Do not do to others what you would not wish done to you” (XII:2). What is the common thought between the two? It entails a “human-heartedness” of showing consideration to others and treating them as if they were oneself. This may be viewed as generating a positive exchange of energy between people, creating harmony.

Although to a lesser extent, Confucianism does offer insights into the relationship between humans and nature, and it is worth elaborating. As Li Tianchen (2003, p. 1) points out in his essay on ‘Confucian Ethics and the Environment’:

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.

To this end, it is worth listening to the great Confucian philosopher Mencius (372-289 BCE). He said the morally superior person (*junzi*, also translated as “gentleman”) is “lovingly disposed to people generally, and kind to creatures” (VIIA:45). He also said the attitude of the *junzi* towards animals is this: “once having seen them alive, he cannot bear to see them die, and once having heard their cry, he cannot bear to eat their flesh. That is why the gentleman keeps his distance from the kitchen” (*Mencius*, IA:7, D. C. Lau translation).

Human relations with nature are also about being part of a greater existence in the reverence towards *tian* (Heaven) and one’s ancestors. The 11th century Neo-Confucian philosopher, Zhang Zai, expressed this idea evocatively in his essay ‘Western Inscription’:

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. (Translated in Bary and Bloom, 1999, p. 683.)

Another Neo-Confucian thinker of that era, Cheng Hao, reflects that: “The humane person regards Heaven-and-Earth and all things as one body. There is nothing that is not part of one’s self. Knowing that, where is the limit [of one’s humanity]?” (de Bary and Bloom, 1999, p. 695).

Since the Industrial Revolution, people have taken an unbridled attitude towards nature. But nature is striking back, through desertification, floods, air pollution, global warming and the emergence of extreme weather events. Thus the teaching to love people and the creatures of this planet, and to revere Heaven and our ancestors who represent the continuity of life, is a serious life-affirming proposition. Borrowing from the earlier Confucian saying (*Analects*, VI:30), we might say that morally superior persons wishing to be establish themselves, seek also to establish nature; wishing to empower themselves, seek to empower nature. *Junzi* people would also implement *ren* (or of the principle of benevolence and loyalty) by considering nature as they would consider themselves. To form a positive interaction and induce harmony, human beings need to take the initiative to give nature protection and respect.

The philosophy of Confucianism, as described above, is consistent with the interpretation of ecological civilization in the 18th Party Congress Report. The Report points out that “We must treasure nature more consciously, protect the ecosystem more actively” (Report, 2012, section VIII), which emphasizes that respecting and protecting nature are serious undertakings into the future. “We should launch major projects for restoring the ecosystem, increase our capacity for producing ecological products, take integrated steps to control desertification, stony deserts and soil erosion, enlarge forests, lakes and wetlands, and protect biodiversity” (*ibid.*). When the Report speaks of being “Faced with increasing resource constraints, severe environmental pollution and a deteriorating ecosystem,” and that “we must raise our ecological

awareness of the need to respect, accommodate to and protect nature” (ibid.), it becomes clear that the above noted Confucian ideas are related to the same argument.

The *Analects of Confucius* speaks of preservation of resources in both natural and human affairs: “When the Master fished he did not use a net; when he hunted, he did not shoot at nesting birds” (VII:27). “The Master said: To guide a state great enough to possess a thousand war chariots: be attentive to affairs and trustworthy; regulate expenditures and treat persons as valuable; employ the people according to the proper season. (I:5). Thus in his time, Confucius stressed the importance the protecting natural resources and emphasized thriftiness. Mencius pointed out in the strategy of benevolence that:

If the seasons of husbandry be not interfered with, the grain will be more than can be eaten; if close nets are not allowed to enter the pools and ponds, the fishes and turtles will be more than can be consumed; if the axes and bills enter the hills and forests only at the proper time, the wood will be more than can be used; when the grain and fish and turtles are more than can be eaten, and there is more wood than can be used. (*Mencius*, IA:3)

The 18th Party Congress Report also states, “We should remain committed to the basic state policy of conserving resources and protecting the environment as well as the principle of giving high priority to conserving resources, protecting the environment and promoting its natural restoration” (Report, 2012, section VIII). Confucianism has been confirmed again in the Report. However, there is another aspect of Confucianism that is relevant to relations with nature, even if at first glance it may appear to be a strange connection: it is the idea of “filial piety”.

The connotations of filial piety are varied in Confucianism. Philosophers have expended many words on how to attend to one’s parents. Among the best known is to be found in the *Analects of Confucius*:

Ziyou asked about filiality. The Master said, “What is meant by filiality today is nothing but being able to take care of your parents. But even hounds and horses can require care. Without respectful vigilance, what is the difference?” (II:7)

Zixia asked about filiality. The Master said, “It is the expression on the face that is difficult. That the young should shoulder the hardest chores or that the eldest are served food and wine first at meals – whenever was that what filiality meant?” (II:8)

The meaning of filial piety could extend to the nature. The *Book of Rites (Li Ji)*, one of the five classics of the Confucian canon, states that “to chop down a tree or kill an animal at the improper time is unfilial” (cited in Li, 2003, p. 4). The Confucian philosopher Xunzi (end of the 4th century BCE) said:

Heaven and Earth are the root of life, the ancestors are the root of the human species, and rulers and teachers are the root of order. If there were no Heaven and Earth, how could there be life? (*Xunxi*, IX, trans. de Bary and Bloom, p. 175)

Thus, the meaning of filial piety is not only for people, but also extends to the relationship between humans and nature; and the scope of nature will also include the object of human filial piety, cherishing nature like cherishing our loved family. This can also be understood as follows: we should express filial piety to the ancestors who

led to our birth; we also ought to be filial to nature which gave birth to our ancestors. In addition, filial piety requires people to maintain the continuity of the human race, as having no offspring is deemed to be most unfilial (see *Mencius*, VIIA:26). This suggests that human beings should be concerned with sustainable development, which in turn requires people to protect and conserve natural resources and maintain the sustainable use of natural resources. The 18th Party Congress Report also has similar content:

. . . we should leave more space for nature to achieve self-renewal. We should keep more farmland for farmers, and leave to our future generations a beautiful homeland with green fields, clean water and a blue sky . . .

Promoting ecological progress is a long-term task of vital importance to the people's wellbeing and China's future . . . We must give high priority to making ecological progress and incorporate it into all aspects and the whole process of advancing economic, political, cultural, and social progress, work hard to build a beautiful country, and achieve lasting and sustainable development of the Chinese nation. (Report, 2012, VIII)

Since the onset of industrial civilization, people's attitude towards nature developed from unbridled exploitation to acceptance of a mode of endless use, which essentially comes from arrogance and ignorance. In order to live in harmony with nature, reduce natural disasters, and achieve sustainable development of humankind, people's mindsets need to change, and from there comes the establishment of specific systems and institutions. The Confucian classic, *Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong)*, proposed that:

Only that one in the world who is most perfectly sincere is able to give full development to his nature. Being able to give full development to his nature, he is able to give full development to the nature of other human beings and, being able to give full development to the nature of other human beings, he is able to give full development to the natures of other living things. Being able to give full development to the natures of other living things, he can assist in transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth; being able to assist in transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth, he can form a triad with Heaven and Earth. (*Zhongyong*, 22, trans. de Bary and Bloom, p. 338)

Having established an ecological civilization, "along with economic, political, cultural and social progress as one of the five goals in the country's overall development plan" (Xinhua, 2017) at the 18th National Congress of the CPC, the Chinese leadership has since addressed both the mentality and the practicality of this view of development. China's President Xi Jinping has noted that "we should protect the environment like we protect our eyes and treat the environment like it is our lives" (*Xinhua*, cited in Sun Li and Hu Meidong, 2015). Moreover:

In 2013, when answering questions from students of Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University, Xi said China will never pursue temporary economic growth at the expense of environmental degradation.

"The pursuit of harmony between human and nature is about having both gold mountains and green mountains," Xi said, referring to rapid economic growth and a good environment.

"Green mountains are equal to gold mountains," Xi said. (Sun Li and Hu Meidong, 2015)

The unity of Heaven and humans is one of the most important thoughts of Confucianism. Mencius said that sincerity is the way of Heaven, to think how to be sincere is the way of the human (*Mencius*, IVA:12). This suggests that humans are like nature in that they are unified by the same principles of life, and that they should understand and follow these principles to realize their own development. Besides this interpretation, there is also the notion that the rules of human relations are also applicable to nature. Just as loyalty, forbearance and filial piety are applicable to people, so too we should treat nature like a human friend, respect and love it. But Confucius advised that to go beyond this is as wrong as to fall short; nature is not supreme over human beings. We cannot sacrifice the human being for nature. To protect and love nature and benefit from the nature, this is a doctrine of the Mean between humankind and nature. They are like the Yin and Yang of Tai Chi: they reinforce and awaken each other; an over-emphasis of one will lead to imbalance of power, and bring terrible consequences. Although the background contexts are different, the proposed ecological civilization expressed in the 18th Party Congress Report has creatively transformed a lot of Chinese traditional culture. Confucianism once again provides valuable spiritual wealth for people to deal with the relationship between humans and nature.

The above points about loyalty, filial piety and sincerity are similar: they can be regarded as ethical norms between people, and between people and nature. The Report also considers the construction of an ecological civilization system. The system emphasizes the importance of regulating people's behavior and guiding their awareness through publicity and education, which coincides with the system of rites and music in the pre-Qin period. Rites served to educate and constrain the members of all social classes in the ideological and behavioral aspects. Rites not only regulate the behavior of people and their families, but also extend to the relationship with nature. Likewise, "music" is from the heart, to induce people to abide by the "rites" (that is, a variety of social norms and systems), sincerely and consciously. Indeed the *Book of Rites* considers music as inducing conviviality, an essential emotion. Therefore, both ancient and modern systems deal with external constraints and internal guidance to promote their message.

Ecological civilization is inseparable from the ecology science. Ecology is the study of the interactions of living things with each other and their physical environment. A human being is also a living thing in this world, and a human's environments are other people, societies and nature; this seems to have a lot to do with Confucianism. Some ecological theories are closely related to Confucianism, e.g. "being able to assist in transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth" (*Zhongyong*, 22). We should not impose our will on nature but respect the changes brought about by nature itself, and guide nature in accordance with the natural laws and inherent characteristics of things, to avoid disaster and benefit from nature. This corresponds to some ecological theories and their practices. Among the numerous examples are: *close-to-nature forestry management*, which entails cultivating the forest into its

natural state in order to achieve the best results; *low coverage planting in arid areas* – a lack of rainfall in arid areas means plants are sparse and so artificial high-density planting is not consistent with the laws of nature; and *planting trees on suitable sites*, a significant rule in Silviculture.

Confucianism was born in agricultural civilization, so its teaching does not conflict with nature, and it has become more mature after more than 2000 years of development. China is the only one country among the four ancient civilizations that has not been interrupted. The dominant ideology of Confucianism has played an important role in maintaining Chinese civilizational history, such as the unity of Heaven and humans. Nowadays, the proposed ecological civilization, assimilating much of the wisdom of Confucianism, is bound to contribute to the future development of Confucianism and the relationship between humans and nature.

The current strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” – represents a huge development project for China and participating countries. The BRI is not only a trade road and a friendship road, but it should be an ecological and green road. In the implementation of BRI, we should carry out the concept of ecological civilization in all aspects, so that ecological civilization can travel abroad and not only find relevance in China. We can no longer take the path of development at the expense of environmental destruction, as there will be no road of development after the destruction. It is necessary to treat the natural ecology of each country along the way as we would the people.

By respecting and protecting the local ecological environment sincerely, practicing ecological civilization and Confucianism, we can in turn obtain the respect of the local people. The Belt and Road strategy will then be aligned to sustainable development with local people and nature. This would truly make it the “project of the century”, as President Xi Jinping described it at the 2017 Belt and Road Forum (Bosu, 2017). Certainly it would demonstrate the vital relationship between ecological civilization and Confucianism. This shows that China has it within its cultural heritage and scientific innovation to “assist in transforming and nourishing” the wider world of environmental and human interaction.

More recently, the ‘Belt and Road Cooperative Mechanism to Combat Desertification’ was launched at UN’s 13th Session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 13) to the Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). This was held in Ordos, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China, in September 2017. By the end of the Conference: “113 countries had agreed to specify concrete targets with clear indicators, to rehabilitate more land and reverse degradation, which currently affects over a third of the world’s land resources” (UNCCD 2017). Moreover:

The new UNCCD 2018-2030 Strategic Framework is the most comprehensive global commitment to achieve Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) in order to restore the

productivity of vast swathes of degraded land, improve the livelihoods of more than 1.3 billion people, and to reduce the impacts of drought on vulnerable populations.

The Conference also witnessed the birth of the first global private sector fund dedicated to implementing the SDGs. Known as the Land Degradation Neutrality Fund, it will be a source of transformative capital bringing together public and private investors to fund projects to restore degraded lands, which come with environment, economic and social benefits. (UNCCD 2017)

This inclusive, cross-sector and multi-level approach would certainly fit in well with Confucian theory and further demonstrates the vital relationship between ecological civilization and core Confucian values.

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