



## The Modern Significance of Confucianism

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### Abstract

Confucianism still has important value in the modern times; the purpose of the thesis is to expound the modern significance of Confucianism, that is, it is important to protect the natural environment; to keep harmony of the society; to improve the international relations and to cultivate the perfect personality. So the thesis concludes that Confucianism should be re-examined and developed in the equal communication, dialogues, and fusion between Chinese and western philosophical traditions in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, Anthropocentrism, The unity of nature and man

Confucianism has been predominant for 2000 years in the traditional Chinese culture, and it has had a great influence on the Chinese politics, economy, culture and the social psychology. In modern times, however, Marxism was established as the official ideology in China after the communist took over in 1949, and then Confucianism was totally eclipsed by Marxism. At the same time, with the industrial civilization developing quickly in the modern times, more and more ecological and social problems are emerging. While lots of the scholars pay more and more attention to Confucianism again, they argue that human can find much resourceful and valuable wisdom in Confucianism thoughts. The purpose of the thesis is to expound the significance of the Confucianism: it can provide an effective perspective to solve environmental problems; the social problems; the international relations problems and the personality cultivation problems.

### 1. Confucianism can benefit to the ecological civilization

#### 1.1 *The consequence and the cause of the environmental crisis*

Environmental pollution caused China to suffer 511.8 billion yuan (about 64 billion U.S. dollars) in economic losses in 2004, which amounted to 3.05 percent of GDP that year, according to a report, titled *China Green National Accounting Study Report 2004*(Gov.com, 2006), the environmental costs of water pollution, air pollution, and solid wastes and pollution accidents accounted for 55.9 percent, 42.9 percent, and 1.2 percent of the total costs, respectively. These figures demonstrate that the rapid economic growth that the Chinese government has been so proud of has been achieved in part at the expense of the environment and natural resources. And it warned people of realizing the seriousness of the pollution in China. We must change the existing developing pattern of economy. As Karyn Lai, a famous professor in the University of New South Wales, announces that “(a) major theme that cuts across many debates in environmental philosophy is that of anthropocentrism.” He also claimed that, “anthropocentrism, construed as the inability or unwillingness of human beings to accord moral standing or moral consideration to other species, has been held responsible for the degraded state of the natural environment and for species extinction.”(Karyn Lai, 2003, pp. 279) since the theory of the anthropocentrism is the cause of the present environmental problems, the serious situation cannot be changed unless we change the view of the anthropocentrism. Fortunately, Confucian’s vision has offered a kind of wisdom with great inspiration for us, that is, the principle of the unity of nature and man that can be used as correct ways of thinking for the solution of these problems.

#### 1.2 *The theory of ‘the unity of nature and man’ (Note 1) of Confucianism*

The theory of ‘the unity of nature and man’ stresses on harmonious development of man and nature. Although Confucianism interpreted the theory of ‘the unity of nature and man’ in many different ways including mysticism; its center value is indeed to expound a cosmology of unity of nature and man. Ancient Chinese philosophers had already recognized 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.”(Mencius, 1983, pp.203) there are a great many of the similar arguments in the ancient Chinese philosophy books.

Indeed, in ancient China, ‘the unity of nature and man’ is not merely a humanist thinking principle but also the actualization of such principle in the activities of treating nature kindly and preserving natural environment that manifested in positing the officials to preserve natural environment such as ‘yuren’ (Note 2) in antique China and

promulgating some decrees of preserving natural resources such as ‘tianlu’ (Note 3) and ‘Liji-Yueling’ (Note 4) in the Warring states period. Ancient ecological wisdom appears to be valuable and enlightening, especially in such times that human existential environment are increasingly decelerated. Naturally, these important theoretical resources concerned with human destiny and trends of civilization in Chinese philosophy are the very points for the scholars to pay attention to today.

## **2. Confucianism has the enlightening significance to solve the social problems**

Since 1978 China carried out the policy of the reform and opening, the development of economy makes people all over of the world surprised. At the same time, however, many social problems never seen before emerged continuously. Such as morality neglected, money worship, crime rate increase etc. what caused these problems is that the former value of morality is abandoned by Chinese gradually. Today, we should re-examine the value of the Confucianism to correct the present social problems.

### *2.1 Morality is first*

Confucians regard moral values as the basis of social and political order. The onus lies on each individual to assume the moral obligations inherent in his position; the cardinal virtues of benevolence or humanity embrace the moral qualities of the true man: loyalty, reciprocity, dutifulness, filial and fraternal affection, courtesy, good faith and friendship. Confucians maintain people should be guided by morals and regulated by ritual. So they assist that mediation rather than litigation is the preferred means of dispute resolution. Confucians value social harmony, and litigation is considered to be a negative social phenomenon because it exacerbates ruptures and poisons social relationships beyond the point of repair. Therefore, Confucius said, “In hearing litigations, I am like any other body. What is necessary is to cause the people to have no litigations.” (Doebelin, 1940, pp.46) Today, the society ruled by law is advocated, this view is obviously different from the times of Confucius. However, a society which depends on the law solely is not an ideal society. If the government can integrate the law with the morality, the consequence is obviously effective.

### *2.2 Family is the essential structure of the society*

The Confucian tradition is particularly known for its emphasis on human relatedness, particularly family relations. These relations are usually called Five Cardinal Virtues including parent and child; elder and younger sibling; husband and wife; person-in-charge and subordinates and friend to friend. These Five Cardinal Virtues are constituted as spheres of value as Mencius outlined, “closeness between father and son, duty between ruler and subject, distinction between husband and wife, precedence of the older over the younger, and trustworthiness between friends”. (Mencius, 1983, pp.238) These Five Cardinal Virtues should be understood dynamically rather than statically, in the context of the Confucian life-long process of learning to be human. Even though the relations themselves are described constancies, the value desiderate is not descriptions of an idealized static state, but culturally constructed remedies for difficulties particular to each of those relational spheres. The traditional Confucian Five Cardinal Virtues model recognizes the primacy of familial relations. These primordial ties provide the central orientation to the rights and responsibilities as a man.

In modern times, society accepts the individualism and emphasizes the value of the individual, so the value of the family is neglected gradually. Therefore more and more people around us are suffering from anxiety, depression, isolation, and helplessness in life. It is said that “in established world economies and countries, we are now confronting the fact that at least one out of five people suffers from mental health problems.” (G.C.Poon, 2003, pp.108) Historical and anthropological research shows that family relations persist through a variety of economic and political systems, and that thus far no society has permanently replaced or done away with them. It seems that the basic human family system, with at least one and at best two biological parents, is the simplest and most directly efficacious arrangement for human development, particularly though not exclusively for the nurture of young children. Confucian thought has a profound future significance in improving the role of the family in the society.

## **3. Confucianism can provide a way to deal with the international conflict of civilizations**

The conflict of civilization has been a continuous problem so far, so the world is not peaceful and the people are not secure in the heart. For example, since the US government waged the war to Iraq, the people of two countries even all over the world have suffered the torture of the war. It is reported that three and a half years after major combat ended in Iraq, nearly 2,900 U.S. service men and women have been killed and a relentless insurgency has complicated a political solution and caused the deaths of thousands of Iraqis in sectarian violence. Facing the damage of the conflict of civilization, which is puzzling human beings today, Confucianism has offered some wisdom with great inspiration for us, for example:

### *3.1 Harmony but no assimilation*

Confucianism attached importance to the theory of harmony. Confucius said “the use of ritual is the harmonious.” (Confucius, 1983, pp.51) That is, harmony is the most important. So Confucius told his students: “The superior man is

harmony but no assimilation; the mean man is assimilation but no harmony.” (Confucius, 1983, pp.147) the theory had great impact on solving the relations of persons and countries. For example, in ancient times China was once one of the strongest countries in the world, but it never waged a war to invade other weak nation, although it had the economy and military strength. On the contrary, it often provided economic and technological help to the small countries around it. This action reflected the theory of harmony fully. So how to realize the harmonious relation Confucius had a series of methods to instruct the governors, that is Loyalty and Reciprocity.

### 3.2 The morality of Loyalty and Reciprocity

The principle of Loyalty and Reciprocity is the nucleus idea of the Confucius. Loyalty means doing one's utmost; Reciprocity means putting one in the others' place whatever one does. That is, “fully realizing the self is Loyalty; extending the self is called Reciprocity.” (ZhuXi, 1983, pp.72) Today the doctrine of Reciprocity is called the golden law by the scholars all over the world. When people solve the controversial issues between countries, if they all put themselves in the other's place, and the world will be more peaceful than today. Certainly, the relations of countries is much more complicated than which of persons, but Mencius, another the most famous Confucian, presented the principle of communicating between the countries in detail. That is, people are the fundamental elements when solving the problem of the relations of the two countries.

### 3.3 People are fundamental for the government

There were many small states in the ancient China, Qi is the strongest state among of them. And the people of Qi attacked Yan, a small and weak country to the north of Qi, and conquered it. The King of Qi asked Mencius if he should take possession of it for himself, Mencius replied that, “If the people of the Yan will be pleased with your taking possession of it, then do so...If the people of the Yan will not be pleased with your taking possession of it, then do not do so...” (Doebelin, 1940, pp.124) according to Mencius, people are the decisive forces that solve the countries conflicts. This argument provided some reference for the United States to settle the dispute in the anti-terrorist. The peaceful world will never come if violence is retaliated by violence and injustice is revenged by injustice. People from all over the world can't forget the catastrophe caused by the conflict of civilizations and expect eagerly the arrival of the peace.

## 4. Confucianism can help us with the personality cultivation

As we are contemplating on some of the great issues that are facing our human civilization in the 21st century, we must collectively recognize that more and more people around us are suffering from extraordinary worry and unhappiness in life. In established world economies and countries, we are now confronting the fact that at least one out of five people suffers from mental health problems. (G.C.Poon, 2003, pp.108)

Confucianism is not only a theory of governing the country, but also a training way developed to be a way of controlling oneself. For example, Confucius educated his students to control their mind-heart and make it conform to the ritual. Confucian stressed on the training personal morality by learning and introspection continuously, so that one can keep his good nature inherited from the heaven. Moreover, Confucians assist there are many attractive things, but one can only take some he ought to rather than he wants. Mencius said: “Life is my favorite, and righteousness is also my favorite, however, if I can't get both, and I will give up the life and take righteousness.”(Mencius, 1983, pp.332) If we can understand the profound significant of these words, we will have a strong faith and belief in our heart. If we have a forceful faith or a highest value in our heart, we won't have such feelings as anxiety, depression, isolation, and helplessness. In one word, Confucianism can balance our behavior; it is possible to say that Confucianism is developed to be level of practical and living philosophy.

As we have seen, human civilization in the 21st century confronts many important problems, its prospect will not be the conflict of civilizations and the disaster caused by such conflicts as some western scholars have predicted, but rather a co-existence of various civilizations which is claimed by Confucianism as ‘harmony but no assimilation’ and will accord to the aspiration of the peoples from all over the world. Chinese philosophy should obtain much more esteem and therefore the equal communication, dialogues, and fusion between Chinese and western philosophical traditions may be expected to enter into a new great phase.

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**Notes**

Note 1. An important term in Chinese philosophy. It means that the relation of the nature and man is harmony.

Note 2. A kind of the official that administers the mountains and forests in the state

Note 3. An official given by the Heaven on the head

Note 4. A chapter in the book that instructs the king of the state to do something or not to do something in every month