
Understanding Ecological Civilization:

The Confucian Way

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I have argued that we are entering a new Axial-Age. The main reason for this assertion is the rise of an ecological consciousness in the latter half of the twentieth century. Indeed, since the 1960s when, with the help of the vision of the astronauts, the naked eye has been able to see our earth (The Blue Planet) in its entirety, a phenomenon unprecedented in human history with profound implications for human self-understanding. The advances in science and technology during the last half a century have so empowered the human capacity to know ourselves (body, heart, mind, soul, and spirit) and our environment that we are currently in possession of a comprehensive and integrated knowledge of our earth. We have a quantifiable appreciation of the earth's minerals, plants, biology, animals, soil, water, and air. Even a primary-school student has access to information about us and our environment both in breadth and depth that was utterly unimaginable even a decade ago. It is vitally important to note that knowledge as both power and cognition has enhanced in manifold ways such that even a single minicomputer which

is available to millions all over the world possesses the calculating capacity comparable to that available to the entire Pentagon in 1976. In short, our ability to effect, if not to control, the world around us is millions of times greater than that of our ancestors at the advent of the Axial-Age. Simply put, an innocent teenager anywhere on the globe now has the destructive power to damage the world, including human lives, that is greater than that of any tyrant in human history.

One of the most tragic scenarios in our human condition today is that as our rational observation of the vulnerability of the environment is refined as a result of the enhancement of our cognitive capacities, our awareness of the inability of the human species to deal with its viability increases proportionately. This trajectory, leading in the direction of an irreversible path of self-destruction, seems inevitable. The case of China is relevant here. The current leadership has wisely announced a broadening of the Chinese developmental strategy to include both cultural and ecological dimensions. It is encouraging that the single-minded approach to economic growth based on market mechanisms and calculated exclusively in terms of GDP since Deng Xiaoping's era of reform and opening has been significantly revised. However, the harsh reality of maintaining a growth rate of over 7 percent, mainly based on an orientation toward exports and domestic consumption, compels central, provincial, and local governments to rely heavily on pollution-producing

industries and private ownership of automobiles to increase performance. As a result, the desperate need for environmental protection has been relegated to the background to allow the so-called “hard reason of development” to take center stage. With more than 10 million private cars pouring into the Chinese life world on an annual basis, for urban dwellers in Hangzhou, Kunming, and Chengdu, as well as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, the real everyday experience of being Chinese will continue to suffer from air pollution, traffic jams, and a deeply engrained mean-spiritedness.

Against this background, Confucian humanism as the most influential habit of the heart in Cultural China, consisting of the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and Singapore, and the Chinese diasporic communities throughout the world, offers a vision of learning to be human that is worth considering as a rich resource for human survival and flourishing in the 21st century. Confucian humanism is a form of spiritual humanism that is substantially different from the secular humanism of the modern West that has been instrumental in shaping the Chinese cultural identity that is profoundly meaningful for Cultural China, Confucian East Asia, the Asia Pacific Region, and the global community. I will simply identify five salient features of Confucian humanism as a basis for further exploration:

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1. There are four inseparable dimensions of the human experience that must be taken into consideration in any conceptualization of humanity in the 21st century: (1) Cultivation of the self as a holistic process of spiritual exercise for human self-realization, which involves the wholeness of the body, the sensitivity of the mind, the purity of the soul, and the expansiveness of the spirit. (2) Harmonization of the community which entails regulation of the family, governance of the state, and maintenance of world order. (3) A sustainable and harmonious relationship between the human species and nature, and (4) Mutual responsiveness between Heaven and Humanity.
 2. Humanity forms one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things. Nature is always part of a human communion. It is never conceived of, let alone treated as, a collection of senseless matters to be manipulated or to be abused.
 3. “Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother. Even such a seemingly insignificant creature as I finds a niche in their midst. All that fills the universe is my body and all that directs the universe is my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters and all things are my companions.”

4. I am related to all people in a differentiated way, but as I extend my feeling of intimacy outward from my family to neighborhood, local community, nation, and the world, I find myself connected by a common bond. Likewise, I am related in a differentiated way to all members of the animal kingdom, the life world, and the inanimate universe, but I am connected with all modalities of being by a sense of consanguinity.

5. I am a human being not by choice. Even though I choose to be a Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu, I am critically aware that I am a human being among other human beings. As a concrete and living human being here and now, care for the earth as my proper home is dictated by my common sense as well as by my faith in the survivability of the human species.

In the Axial-Age civilization, great spiritual leaders such as Confucius, Socrates, Buddha, Christ, and Mohammed taught humanity to be informed, knowledgeable, wise, and spiritual. There are different paths toward human flourishing. Cultural diversity, religious pluralism, and multiple forms of modernity will continue to characterize the ideological landscape of the human community. But care for the earth, our true home, underlies all diverse, pluralistic, and multiple modes of human development. In the new Axial-Age, all religious traditions must cultivate a humanist (anthropocosmic) vision. Guided by this vision, the

emerging Chinese cultural identity must be open, pluralistic, and self-reflexive. This will require ecumenicalism, cosmopolitanism, a sense of reverence for the transcendent, sensitivity to the concrete, and patient watchfulness.