Confucianism and Ecology

How do Confucian cosmology and its emphasis on intergenerational continuity contribute to environmental wellbeing

By Mary Evelyn Tucker

The Confucian tradition has a long historical legacy in East Asia extending from China across Korea and Japan and into Vietnam. The influence of Confucianism has been significant in political thought and institutions, social relationships and ritual exchange, educational philosophy and moral teaching, cultural attitudes, and historical interpretation. Indeed, Confucian values still play an important part in East Asian life despite the striking inroads of modernization and westernization.

Although we are concerned here with the potential positive contribution of Confucianism to environmental thought, acknowledgment is made of the inevitable gaps between theories and practices as well as the limitations of Confucianism. Nonetheless, the potential of the Confucian tradition is significant for continuing to shape East Asian societies in their quest for sustainable development and environmental integrity.

While this tradition has enormous historical variations, cultural particularities, and national differences in the region, nonetheless, there are certain central ideas and values that have spread across the area. These values constitute key elements of the tradition that have endured despite historical changes and political upheavals.

These include: a dynamic cosmological context or worldview for promoting harmony amidst change; the embeddedness of each person in concentric circles of relationships and ethical responsibilities, the importance of the family including past, present, and future generations; the function of a hierarchical social system where loyalties to elders and to teachers are critical; the significance of education in cultivating the individual, enriching the society, and contributing to the political order; the role of government in establishing a political bureaucracy for ruling large numbers of people; and the value of history as an element of civilizational continuity and moral rectification.

These values will be discussed in relation to their potential contribution to environmental thought. Of singular importance in these discussions is the rich cosmological worldview of Confucianism, which promotes harmony amidst change. This is an invaluable perspective for seeing nature as intrinsically valuable and for understanding the role of the human in relation to natural processes as critical. This worldview is characterized by four key elements: an anthropocosmic rather than an anthropocentric perspective, an organic holism of the continuity of being, a dynamic vitalism of material force (ch'i, qi), and a comprehensive ethics embracing both humans and nature.

By "anthropocosmic" we refer to the great triad of heaven (a guiding force), earth (nature), and humans. This idea is central to Confucian thought from its earliest expressions in the classical texts to its later developments in Neo-Confucianism, which arose in the 11th century. This seamless interaction of these three forces contrasts markedly with the more human-centered orientation of western traditions where personal salvation in relation to a divine figure is central.

By "organic holism" the universe is seen as unified, interconnected, and interpenetrating. Everything interacts and affects everything else, which is why the notion of microcosm and macrocosm is so essential to Chinese cosmology. The elaboration of the interconnectedness of reality can be seen in the correspondence of the five elements with seasons, directions, colors, and even virtues.

This type of classification began in the third millennium B.C.E. and resulted in texts such as the *I Ching* (Book of Changes). This sense of holism is characterized by the view that there is no Creator God behind the universe. Chinese thought is less concerned with theories of origin or with concepts of a personal God than with the perception of an ongoing reality of a self-generating, interconnected universe described by Tu Weiming as a "continuity of being."

"Dynamic vitalism" refers to the basis of the underlying unity of reality, which is constituted of *ch'i*, the material force of the universe. This is the unifying element of the cosmos and creates the basis for a profound reciprocity between humans and the natural world. Material force (*ch'i*) as the substance of life is the basis for the continuing process of change and transformation in the universe. The term *sheng-sheng*, namely, "production and reproduction" is repeatedly used in Confucian texts to illustrate the creativity of nature.

This recognition of the ceaseless movement of the cosmos arises from a profound meditation on the fecundity of nature in continually giving birth to new life. Furthermore, it constitutes a sophisticated awareness that change is the basis of the interaction and continuation of the web of life systems -- mineral, vegetable, animal, and human. Finally, it celebrates transformation as the clearest expression of the creative processes of life with which humans should harmonize their own actions. In essence, human beings are urged to "model themselves on the ceaseless vitality of the cosmic process."

**Comprehensive Ethics.** Confucian ethics in its most comprehensive form relies on a cosmological context of the entire triad of heaven, earth, and humans. Human actions complete this triad and are undertaken in relation to the natural world and its seasonal patterns and cosmic changes.

In this context humans are biological-historical-ethical beings who live in a universe of complex correspondences and relationships. Cultivation of the land and of oneself are seen as analogous processes requiring attention, care, and constant vigilance. Virtues are described as seeds that sprout through moral practice and flower over time.

The ethical vitality of the individual is situated against the backdrop of the dynamic pattern of *ch'i* in nature. The Chinese martial arts and medical practices reflect this attempt to balance and cultivate one's *ch'i* as part of maintaining one's physical and moral health.

For many Confucians this meant not only reciprocity with the patterns of nature but also responsibility for the health of nature as well. It was thus critical for the government to support agriculture through irrigation systems as creating the basis for a sustainable society. Human livelihood and culture was seen as continuous with nature, as the following passage by a leading Han Confucian, Tung Ch’ung-shu (c. 179-c.104 B.C.E.), indicates: "Heaven, earth, and humans are the basis of all creatures. Heaven gives them birth, earth nourishes them, and humans bring them to completion. Heaven provides them at birth with a sense of filial and brotherly love, earth nourishes them with clothing and food, and humans complete them with rites and music. The three act together as hands and feet join to complete the body and none can be dispensed with."

Within this broad cosmological pattern of Confucian thought the person is seen in relationship to others and not as an isolated individual. Thus there are more grounds in Confucianism for emphasizing the common good, which is critical for developing environmental ethics. Western traditions tend to underscore the importance of the individual, highlighting her/his rights and freedoms. The Confucian tradition stresses the importance of cooperative group effort so that individual concerns are sublimated to a larger sense of the common good. In this view, self-interest and altruism
for a common cause are not mutually exclusive, and responsibilities rather than rights are stressed. Such a communitarian value system may be indispensable for fostering sustainable communities.

With the Confucian emphasis on the continuity of the family there is a strong ethic of indebtedness to past generations and obligations to descendants. Within this moral framework there is the potential for evoking a sense of self-restraint and communal responsibility toward the environmental well being of future generations. In other words, the Confucian emphasis on lineage (ensuring continuity from the ancestors to the heirs) may be raised to another ethical perspective, namely, intergenerational obligations toward maintaining a healthy environment. On this basis it could be argued that unlimited development or unrestrained consumption should be curtailed.

The hierarchical social system of Confucianism can also be expanded to place humans in relation to the biological lineage of life in the natural world. In this sense, loyalty to elders, teachers, and those who have gone before may be broadened to include respect for the complex ecosystems and forms of life that have preceded humans. Thus biodiversity can be valued. The total dependence of humans on other life forms for survival and sustenance may be underscored in this scenario. "Loyalty" is thus enlarged from the human world to include the natural world itself.

Confucian education as essentially a form of moral cultivation has been viewed as a means of contributing to the betterment of the sociopolitical order. By extension, ethical restraint toward the unlimited use of the environment can be seen as adding to the social and political stability of the region as a whole. From a Confucian perspective moral suasion and education are a viable means of evoking communal changes that would promote such stability through personal choice and voluntary measures rather than simply through legislation from above.

Confucian forms of government are generally highly centralized and interventionist. Thus, they can afford to engage in long range planning with other key sectors, especially the business community. Because this long-term policymaking is not unfamiliar in East Asian societies, it is possible to include environmental issues in these kinds of centralized strategic planning. Rather than only being concerned about immediate goals or quarterly profits, such planning can assist processes of environmental preservation.

History is valued in Confucian societies as a means of maintaining civilizational continuity and collective memory. Thus, there is a greater sense of the importance of the transmission of ritualized behavior as a means for deriving lessons from the past for the present. In other words, history is often narrated through a moral framework as a means of guiding present decision making. This may be helpful in raising issues of what is currently at stake in the precarious rush to global consumerism by contemporary civilizations, especially in light of resource limits and the current ecological crisis. The long-range civilizational perspectives that East Asia holds may be invaluable in reorienting societies toward long-term sustainable policies and practices.

**Conclusion.** It is this worldview that has enormous potential for renewed appreciation of nature as intrinsically valuable but also as the source of personal vitality and moral integrity for sustaining the community of life. Moreover, this perspective values nature as the origin of all that sustains life itself from the basics of food, clothing, and shelter to innumerable sources of employment. This is not to deny the negative dimensions of the Confucian tradition nor to claim that historically China was a model of ecological fitness. It is, however, to suggest ways in which a rethinking of Confucianism may be helpful in our contemporary context.

Such a reinterpretation from within the Confucian tradition is already taking place through the efforts of Tu Weiming and other New Confucians, whose insights are reflected in this article. The extent of this revival has still to be fully expressed in East Asia and beyond. Yet its potential for affecting the formation of a global environmental ethic remains significant.
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