

The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism: Implications for China and the World

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Today virtually all axial-age civilizations are going through their own distinctive forms of transformation in response to the multiple challenges of modernity. ¹ One of the most crucial questions they face is what wisdom they can offer to reorient the human developmental trajectory of the modern world in light of the growing environmental crisis.

China and the Confucian tradition face an especially significant challenge given the size of China's population and the scale of her current efforts at modernization. A radical rethinking of Confucian humanism began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when China was engulfed in an unprecedented radical social disintegration as the result of foreign invasion and domestic dissension. In the late twentieth century, this reformulation continued in the "New Confucian movement" led by concerned intellectuals, some of whom left mainland China for Taiwan and Hong Kong when communism was established as the ruling ideology in the People's Republic in 1949.

In the last twenty-five years, three leading New Confucian thinkers in Taiwan, mainland China, and Hong Kong independently concluded that the most significant contribution the Confucian tradition can offer the global community is the idea of the "unity of Heaven and Humanity" (*tianrenheyi*), a unity that Confucians believe also embraces Earth. I have described this vision as an anthropocosmic worldview, in which the human is embedded in the cosmic order, rather than an anthropocentric worldview, in which the human is alienated, either by choice or by default, from the natural world. ² By identifying the comprehensive unity of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity as a critical contribution to the modern world, these three key figures in New Confucian thought signaled the movement toward both retrieval and reappropriation of Confucian ideas. Speaking as public intellectuals concerned about the direction of the modern world, each of the three key thinkers articulated this idea of unity in a distinctive way.

Qian Mu (1895–1990) of Taiwan characterized the unity as a mutuality between the human heart-mind and the Way of Heaven. ³ Tang Junyi (1909–1978) of Hong Kong emphasized “immanent transcendence”: we can apprehend the Mandate of Heaven by understanding our heart-and-mind; thus, the transcendence of Heaven is immanent in the communal and critical self-consciousness of human beings as a whole. ⁴

Similarly, Feng Youlan (1895–1990) of Beijing rejected his previous commitment to the Marxist notion of struggle and stressed the value of harmony not only in the human world, but also in the relationship between humans and nature.

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Since all three thinkers articulated their final positions toward the end of their lives, the unity of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity sums up the wisdom of these elders in the Sinic world. I would like to suggest that this New Confucian idea of cosmic unity marks an ecological turn of profound importance for China and the world.

AN ECOLOGICAL TURN

Qian Mu called this new realization a major breakthrough in his thinking. When his wife and students raised doubts about the novelty of his insight—the idea of unity between Heaven and Humanity is centuries old—Qian, already in his nineties, emphatically responded that his understanding was not a reiteration of conventional wisdom, but a personal enlightenment, thoroughly original and totally novel. ⁶ His fascination with the idea of mutuality between the human heart-and-mind and the Way of Heaven, and his assertion that this idea is a unique Chinese contribution to the world, attracted the attention of several leading intellectuals in cultural China. ⁷

Tang Junyi, on the other hand, presented his view from a comparative civilizational perspective. He contrasted Confucian self-cultivation with Greek, Christian, and Buddhist spiritual exercises, and concluded that Confucianism’s commitment to the world combined with its profound reverence for Heaven offered a unique contribution to human flourishing in the modern world. The Confucian worldview, rooted in earth, body, family, and community, is not “adjustment to the world,” ⁸ submission to the status quo, or passive acceptance of the physical, biological, social, and political constraints of the human condition. Rather, it is dictated by an ethic of responsibility informed by a transcendent vision. We do not become “spiritual” by departing from or transcending above our earth, body, family, and community, but by working through them. Indeed, our daily life is not merely secular but a response to a cosmological decree. Since the Mandate of Heaven that enjoins us to take part in the great enterprise of cosmic transformation is implicit in our nature, we are Heaven’s partners. In Tang’s graphic description, the ultimate goal of being human is to enable the “Heavenly virtue” (*tiande*) to flow through us. His project of

reconstructing the secular humanist spirit is, therefore, predicated on an anthropocosmic vision. [9](#)

Feng Youlan's radical reversal of his earlier position is an implicit critique of Mao Zedong's thoughts on struggle and the human capacity to conquer nature. His return to the philosophy of harmony of Zhang Zai (1020–1077) signaled a departure from his Marxist phase and a re-presentation of Confucian ideas he had first developed in the 1940s, prior to the founding of the People's Republic of China. The opening lines in Zhang Zai's "Western Inscription" state:

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 fills 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. [10](#)

The "Western Inscription" can be regarded as a core Neo-Confucian text in articulating the anthropocosmic vision of the unity of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity. Accordingly, Feng characterizes the highest stage of human self-realization as the embodiment of the "spirit of Heaven and Earth." [11](#)

A significant aspect of Qian, Tang, and Feng's ecological turn was their effort to retrieve the spiritual resources of the classical and Neo-Confucian heritages. In the sixteenth century, for example, Wang Yangming (1472–1529) offered in his "Inquiry on the Great Learning" an elegant interpretation of Confucian thought, one with rich implications for modern ecological thinking:

The great man regards Heaven and Earth and the myriad things as one body. He regards the world as one family and the country as one person. As to those who make a cleavage between objects and distinguish between self and others, they are small men. That the great

man can regard Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things as one body is not because he deliberately wants to do so, but because it is natural to the humane nature of his mind that he do so. [12](#)

By emphasizing the “humane nature of the mind” as the reason that the great person can embody the universe in his sensitivity, Wang made the ontological assertion that the ability to strike a sympathetic resonance with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things is a defining characteristic of being human.

To demonstrate that this is indeed the case, he offered a series of concrete examples:

When we see a child about to fall into the well, we cannot help a feeling of alarm and commiseration. This shows that our humanity (*ren*) forms one body with the child. It may be objected that the child belongs to the same species. Again, when we observe the pitiful cries and frightened appearances of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, we cannot help feeling an “inability to bear” their suffering. This shows that our humanity forms one body with birds and animals. It may be objected that birds and animals are sentient beings as we are. But when we see plants broken and destroyed, we cannot help a feeling of pity. This shows that our humanity forms one body with plants. It may be said that plants are living things as we are. Yet even when we see tiles and stones shattered and crushed, we cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows that our humanity forms one body with tiles and stones. [13](#)

These examples clearly indicate that “forming one body” entails not the romantic ideal of unity, but rather a highly differentiated understanding of interconnectedness.

Neo-Confucian thinkers like Wang deeply influenced Qian, Tang, and Feng. The efforts of the latter group to employ Confucian ideas to enunciate their final positions may seem to be a matter of personal style. Yet all three were obviously convinced that their cherished tradition had a message for the emerging global village; they delivered it in the most appropriate way they knew. Their use of a prophetic voice suggests that their Confucian message was addressed not only to a Chinese audience but also to the human community as a whole. They did not wish merely to honor their ancestors but also to show that they cared for the well-being of future generations.

Were they even conscious of the ecological implications of their final positions? In the last decades of the twentieth century, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and even mainland China were all marching toward Western-style forms of social organization. Modernization was the most powerful ideology in China. By challenging China's traditional agriculture-based economy, family-centered social structure, and paternalist government, industrialization seemed to seal the fate of Confucianism as no longer relevant to the vital concerns of the contemporary world. ¹⁴ Perhaps Qian, Tang, and Feng were nostalgic for the kind of "universal brotherhood" or "unity of all things" that Max Weber and others have supposed must disappear in a disenchanting modern world. However, while traces of romantic longing can be seen in their writings, all three discovered a new vitality in the Confucian tradition. In order to appreciate properly what these men accomplished, it will be useful to recall the broad historical context in which they worked.

HOLISTIC CONFUCIAN HUMANISM

Prior to the impact of the modern West, Confucian humanism largely defined political ideology, social ethics, and family values in East Asia. Since the East Asian educated elite were all well versed in the Confucian classics, what the three contemporary thinkers advocated as a unique Confucian contribution to the human community was, in fact, a spiritual orientation once widely shared in China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. The famous "eight steps" in the first chapter of the *Great Learning* provide a glimpse of what Confucian humanism purported to be:

The ancients who wished to illuminate their "illuminating virtue" to all under Heaven first governed their states. Wishing to govern their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their personal lives. Wishing to cultivate their personal lives, they first rectified their hearts and minds. Wishing to rectify their hearts and minds, they first authenticated their intentions. Wishing to authenticate their intentions, they first refined their knowledge. The refinement of knowledge lay in the study of things. For only when things are studied is knowledge refined; only when knowledge is refined are intentions authentic; only when intentions are authentic are hearts and minds rectified; only when hearts and minds are rectified are personal lives cultivated; only when personal lives are cultivated are families regulated; only when families are regulated are states governed; only when states are governed is there peace all under Heaven. Therefore, from the Son of Heaven to the common people, all, without exception, must take self-cultivation as the root. ¹⁵

This holistic vision of a peaceful world rests on a carefully integrated program of personal self-cultivation, harmonized family life, and well-ordered states. At the heart of this vision is a sense that “home” implies not only the human community, but also the natural world and the larger cosmos. Speaking directly to the above passage, Wm. Theodore de Bary has observed, “Chinese and Confucian culture, traditionally, was about settled communities living on the land, nourishing themselves and the land. It is this natural, organic process that Confucian self-cultivation draws upon for all its analogies and metaphors.”¹⁶ He noted that the farmer poet Wendell Berry made the Confucian point: “[H]ome and family are central, and we cannot hope to do anything about the environment that does not first establish the home—not just the self and family—as the home base for our efforts.” De Bary concluded that:

If we have to live in a much larger world, because ecological problems can only be managed on a global scale, the infrastructure between home locality and state (national or international) is also vital. But without home, we have nothing for the infrastructure, much less the superstructure, to rest on. This is the message of Wendell Berry; and also the lesson of Confucian and Chinese history.¹⁷

The human in this worldview is an active participant in the cosmic process with the responsibility of care for the environment. Thus in the classical period of Confucianism we see a holistic humanism expressed in the *Great Learning*. Furthermore, environmental concerns implicit in the *Great Learning* are explicitly articulated in other core Confucian texts. A statement in the *Doctrine of the Mean* succinctly captures the essence of this cosmological thinking:

Only those who are the most sincere [authentic, true, and real] can fully realize their own nature. If they can fully realize their own nature, they can fully realize human nature. If they can fully realize human nature, they can fully realize the nature of things. If they can fully realize the nature of things, they can take part in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can take part in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can form a trinity with Heaven and Earth.¹⁸

Obviously, this idea of the interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and humans was precisely what the three thinkers had in mind in stressing the centrality of the precept of “the unity of Heaven and Humanity,” although for more than a century this idea had been regarded as an archaic irrelevance in cultural China. The excitement of rediscovering this central Confucian precept was a poignant reminder of how much had been lost and how difficult it was to retrieve the

elements of the tradition that remained significant.

CRITICAL VOICES FOR AN ECOLOGICAL TURN: NEW CONFUCIANS AND THE EARTH CHARTER

Both from within the Confucian tradition and from without, critical voices have emerged to criticize the Enlightenment vision of secularization, rationalization, and development at any cost. Even at the height of the May Fourth Movement's obsession with Westernization as modernization, some of the most original New Confucians had begun to question the individualistic worldview and utilitarian ethics implicit in the Enlightenment project. Two key examples are Xiong Shili (1883–1968), who elaborated a naturalistic philosophy of vitalism, and Liang Shuming (1893–1988), who called for restraint and moderation in using natural resources.

Xiong Shili reconfigured Confucian metaphysics through a critical analysis of the basic motifs of the Consciousness-Only school of Buddhism. He insisted that the Confucian idea of the "great transformation" (*dahua*) is predicated on the participation of the human in cosmic processes, rather than the imposition of human will on nature. He further observed that as a continuously evolving species, human beings are not created apart from nature, but emerge as an integral part of the primordial forces of production and reproduction. The vitality that engenders human creativity is the same energy that gives rise to mountains, rivers, and the whole of the planet. There is consanguinity between humans, Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things of nature. Since his naturalistic vitalism is based on the *Book of Change* and some Neo-Confucian writings, the ethic of forming one body with nature looms large in his moral idealism.

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Liang Shuming characterized the Confucian ethos as a balance between detachment from and aggression toward nature. Although he conceded that China had to learn from the West to enhance her competitive fitness for the sake of national survival, he prophesied that in the long run the Indian spirit of renunciation would prevail. [20](#) While Liang merely hinted at the possibility of alternative visions of human development, his inquiry generated a strong current in reevaluating and revitalizing Confucianism at a time when Westernization dominated the Chinese intellectual scene.

The distinctive contributions of these two thinkers are critical to the ecological turn of later Confucianism. Xiong highlights the naturalistic vitalism of the tradition from its classical expression in the *Book of Change* to its Neo-Confucian articulation in the notion of the fecundity of life (*sheng-sheng*). Liang maintains that long-term human survival depends on the practice of moderation, a hallmark of Confucian cultivation in attaining balance, harmony, and equilibrium. Thus Xiong and Liang observe that the vitality of natural processes must be respected and preserved through restraint.

However, neither Xiong nor Liang was able to sustain an argument in favor of a nonanthropocentric, not to mention eco-friendly, ethic. The modernist trajectory was so powerful that Confucian humanism was profoundly reconfigured toward a secular humanism. The rules of the game determining the relevance of Confucianism to China's modern transformation were changed so remarkably that most attempts to present a Confucian idea for its own sake were ignored outside a small coterie of ivory-tower academicians. Thus the goals of modernization and economic development overrode broader humanistic and communitarian concerns.

As Amartya Sen and others have argued, however, it is now clear that the modernization process, used simply for utilitarian ends of development, is insufficient for the full range of human flourishing.²¹ Instead, there is a broader understanding emerging that development must include not only economic indicators but consider human well-being, environmental protection, and spiritual growth as well. To this end, there is a growing awareness in the world community of the need to develop a more comprehensive global ethic for sustainable development.²² This coalesced in the "Earth Charter" that was developed over the last decade since the United Nations Earth Summit was held in Rio in 1992.

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An international committee spent three years drafting the charter before its formal release by the Earth Charter Commission at a meeting in Paris in 2000. Hundreds of consultations were held with organizations and individuals throughout the world to ensure that it would be an inclusive people's charter. The charter sets forth principles of ecological integrity, social justice, democracy, nonviolence, and peace.

The Earth Charter enjoins us to "respect Earth and life in all its diversity," "care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love," and "secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations."²⁴ As the charter puts it, "humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life." For Confucians, the "community of life" is expressed as consanguinity between the earth and ourselves, because we have evolved from the same vital energy that makes stones, plants,

and animals integral parts of the cosmos. We live with reverence and a sense of awe for the fecundity and creativity of nature as we open our eyes to what is near at hand.

When measured against these principles of a global ethic for sustainability, a narrowly conceived modernization process such as China's is inadequate. This critique is an important external counterpoint to modernization within an Enlightenment framework.

If China's modernist project had followed the democratic ideal of building a society that is "just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful," ²⁵ as formulated in the Earth Charter, it could have had a salutary effect on China's overall conception of development. A counterfactual exercise is in order. Surely the global issues mentioned in the Earth Charter are far from being resolved in the modern West, but had they been put on the national agenda for discussion in China, the Chinese intellectual ethos could have been much more congenial to the culture of peace and environmental ethics. After all, "eradicating poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative" ²⁶ and promoting human flourishing as well as material progress are both socialist and Confucian ideals. Although "upholding the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being" ²⁷

may appear to be a lofty goal, it is compatible with the Chinese notion of realizing the whole person. Furthermore, "affirming gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development" and "ensuring universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity" ²⁸

are clearly recognized modern Chinese aspirations. The traditional Confucian sense of economic equality, social conscience, and political responsibility could have been relevant to and significant for debate and conversation on these vitally important matters. The cost of the secularization of Confucian humanism was high. The single-minded commitment to progress defined in materialist terms has substantially confined the scope of the national agenda to wealth and power. As China completely turned her back on her indigenous resources for self-realization, she embarked on a course of action detrimental to her soul and her long-term self-interest.

CONFUCIAN HUMANISM AS AN ANTHROPOCOSMIC VISION

Qian, Tang, and Feng saw the potential for Confucian humanism to occupy a new niche in comparative civilizational studies. As a partner in the dialogue among civilizations, what

message can Confucians deliver to other religious communities and to the global village as a whole? To put it simply, can Confucian humanism informed by the anthropocosmic vision deepen the conversation on religion and ecology? Specifically, can the Confucian self-cultivation philosophy inspire a new constellation of family values, social ethics, political principles, and ecological consciousness that will help cultural China develop a sense of responsibility for the global community, both for its own benefit and for the improvement of the state of the world? Can Confucian thinkers enrich the spiritual resources and broaden the Enlightenment project's scope to embrace religion and ecology?

The idea of the unity of Heaven and humanity implies four inseparable dimensions of the human condition: self, community, nature, and Heaven. The full distinctiveness of each enhances, rather than impedes, a harmonious integration of the others. Self as a center of relationships establishes its identity by interacting with community variously understood, from the family to the global village and beyond. A sustainable harmonious relationship between the human species and nature is not merely an abstract ideal, but a concrete guide for practical living. Mutual responsiveness between the human heart-and-mind and the Way of Heaven is the ultimate path for human flourishing. The following four salient features constitute the substance of the New Confucian ecological vision.

Fruitful Interaction between Self and Community

Since the community as home must extend to the "global village" and beyond, the self in fruitful interaction with community must transcend not only egoism and parochialism, but also nationalism and anthropocentrism. In practical ethical terms, self-cultivation is crucial to the viability of this holistic humanist vision. Specifically, it involves a process of continuous self-transcendence, always keeping sight of one's solid ground in earth, body, family, and community. Through self-cultivation, the human heart-and-mind "expands in concentric circles that begin with oneself and spread from there to include successively one's family, one's face-to-face community, one's nation, and finally all humanity." ²⁹

In shifting the center of one's empathic concern from oneself to one's family, one rises above selfishness. The move from family to community prevents nepotism. The move from community to nation overcomes parochialism, and the move to all humanity counters chauvinistic nationalism. ³⁰ While "[t]he project of becoming fully human involves transcending, sequentially, egoism, nepotism, parochialism, ethnocentrism, and chauvinist nationalism," it cannot stop at "isolating, self-sufficient humanism." ³¹ If we stop at secular humanism, our arrogant self-sufficiency will undermine our cosmic connectivity and constrain us in an anthropocentric predicament.

A Sustainable Harmonious Relationship between the Human Species and Nature

The problem with secular humanism is its self-imposed limitation. Under its influence, our obsession with power and mastery over the environment—to the exclusion of the spiritual and the natural realms—has made us blind to ecological concerns. [32](#)

An ecological focus is a necessary corrective to the modernist discourse that has reduced the Confucian worldview to a limited and limiting secular humanism. Confucianism, appropriated by the modernist mindset, has been misused as a justification for authoritarian polity. Only by fully incorporating the religious and naturalist dimensions into New Confucianism can the Confucian worldview avoid the danger of legitimating social engineering, instrumental rationality, linear progression, economic development, and technocratic management at the expense of a holistic, anthropocosmic vision. Indeed, the best way for the Confucians to attain the new is to reanimate the old, so that the digression to secular humanism, under the influence of the modern West, is not a permanent diversion.

Mutual Responsiveness between the Human Heart-and-Mind and the Way of Heaven

In the appeal of scientists at the Global Forum Conference in Moscow in 1990, religious and spiritual leaders were challenged to envision the human-Earth relationship in a new light:

As scientists, many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred. [33](#)

Obviously, the ecological question compels all religious traditions to reexamine their presuppositions in regard to the earth. It is not enough that one's spiritual tradition makes limited adjustments to accommodate the ecological dimension. The need is for none other than the sacralization of nature. This may require a fundamental restructuring of basic theology by requiring the sanctity of the earth as a given. Implicit in the scientists' appeal is the necessity of a new theology, adding nature as a factor that must enter into, and

transform, the traditional understandings of the relationship between God and human beings.

For the New Confucians, the critical issue is to underscore the spiritual dimension of the harmony with nature. As Wing-tsit Chan notes in his celebrated *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*,

“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.”

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The “humanism that professes the unity of man and Heaven” is neither secular nor anthropocentric. While it fully acknowledges that we are embedded in earth, body, family, and community, it never denies that we are in tune with the cosmic order. To infuse our earthly, bodily, familial, and communal existence with a transcendent significance is not only a lofty Confucian ideal but also a basic Confucian practice. In traditional China, under the influence of Confucian thought, Daoist ritual, and folk belief, the imperial court, the capital city, literary temples, ancestral halls, official residences, schools, and private houses were designed according to the “wind and water” (*fengshui*) principles. While these principles, based on geomancy, can supposedly be manipulated to enhance one’s fortune, they align human designs with the environment by enhancing intimacy with nature. Similarly, Chinese medicine as healing rather than curing and the mental and physical exercises such as the ritual dance of the great ultimate (*taijinqun*) and various forms of breathing disciplines (*qigong*) are also based on the mutual responsiveness between nature and humanity.

Self-Knowledge and Cultivation to Complete the Triad

Confucians believe that Heaven confers our human nature and that the Way of Heaven is accessible through self-knowledge. They also believe that to understand the Mandate of Heaven we must continuously cultivate ourselves. This is completing the triad of Heaven, Earth, and humans. Nature, as an unending process of transformation rather than a static presence, is a source of inspiration for us to understand Heaven’s dynamism. As the first hexagram in the *Book of Change* symbolizes, Heaven’s vitality and creativity is incessant: Heaven always proceeds vigorously. The lesson for humans is obvious: we emulate the constancy and sustainability of Heaven’s vitality and creativity by participating in human flourishing through “ceaseless effort of self-strengthening.”

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The sense of “awe and reverence before the universe” is prompted by our aspiration to respond to the ultimate reality that makes our lives purposeful and meaningful. From either a creationist or an evolutionist perspective, we are indebted to “Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things” for our existence. To repay this debt we cultivate ourselves so as to attain our full humaneness amidst the wonder of existence.

Mencius succinctly articulated this human attitude toward Heaven as self-knowledge, service, and steadfastness of purpose:

When a man has given full realization to his heart, he will understand his own nature. A man who knows his own nature will know Heaven. By retaining his heart and nurturing his nature he is serving Heaven. Whether he is going to die young or to live to a ripe old age makes no difference to his steadfastness of purpose. It is through awaiting whatever is to befall him with a perfected character that he stands firm on his proper destiny. [36](#)

Self-realization, in an ultimate sense, depends on knowing and serving Heaven. The mutuality of the human heart-and-mind and the Way of Heaven is mediated by cultivating a harmonious relationship with nature. Through such cultivation, humans form a triad with Heaven and Earth and thus fully realize their potential as cosmological as well as anthropological beings. This sense of mutuality, achieved through completion of the triad, precludes the imposition of the human will on Heaven and transforms the human desire to conquer nature.

SUSTAINING THE ECOLOGICAL TURN: THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

The Copenhagen Social Summit in 1995 identified poverty, unemployment, and social disintegration as three serious threats to the solidarity of the human community. Globalization intensifies and enhances the felt need for rootedness in primordial ties. Our community, compressed into a “village,” far from being integrated, blatantly exhibits differentiation and outright discrimination. [37](#) For developing societies such as China to appreciate the environmental movements of the developed world, the contradiction between ecological and developmental imperatives will have to be resolved. The ecological advocacy of elegant

simplicity is not persuasive if one considers development, in the basic material sense, a necessary condition for survival. Only if China comes to feel a responsibility not just for nation-building but for nature itself can China become a constructive partner on global environmental issues. She could be encouraged to do so if the developed world, especially the United States, demonstrates moral leadership. Without encouragement and reciprocal respect from developed countries, it is unlikely that she will independently embark on such a path. Fortunately, mutually beneficial dialogues on religion and ecology between China and the United States have already begun.

The ecological turn, as an alternative vision, is particularly significant in this regard. To make it sustainable and, eventually, consequential in formulating policies, the need for public-spiritedness among intellectuals is urgent. The emergence of a public space in cultural China provides a glimmer of hope. Although full-fledged civil societies in the Chinese cultural universe are found only in Taiwan and Hong Kong, the horizontal communication among public intellectuals in several sectors of society in the People's Republic has generated a new dynamism unprecedented in modern Chinese history. If we define public intellectuals as those who are politically concerned, socially engaged, culturally sensitive, religiously sensitive, and ecologically conscientious, they are readily visible and audible on the political scene.³⁸ Indeed, public intellectuals in academia, government, mass media, business, and society are articulating a variety of ecological and spiritual messages relevant to China's quest to join the modern world. The New Confucians may never "find the unifying thread, the balancing mean, the underlying value, or the all-embracing conception"³⁹ that can serve as a standard of inspiration for all concerned citizens of the nation. However,

they are strategically positioned to generate new discussions on the ecological way "as macrocosm, overarching unity, and ultimate process"; indeed, as a necessary reference for "the human enterprise in its fullest dimensions, deepest reflections, and most dynamic activity."

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Given the current political climate in China, religion is a particularly delicate matter. Whether religion will play an active role in shaping China's development strategy is not yet clear. The possibility of a sound environmental ethic depends heavily on the ability of Chinese intellectuals to transcend a narrow nationalism informed by secular humanism and their willingness to take religion seriously in considering human integrity and self-fulfillment. The government's appeal to science and national security as a way of outlawing superstition, as in the case of the Falungong, has not been effective in dealing with the outpouring of religious sentiments throughout the country. Its technocratic approach to religious issues merely reflects an increasingly unworkable instrumental rationality. Religion as a vibrant social force is widely recognized by public intellectuals in government, academia, business, and the mass media. Although it is difficult to predict precisely how religious and ecological discourses will converge in China, tolerance of religion often entails sensitivity to ecology.

When public intellectuals in China begin to appreciate the profound religious implications of the ecological turn and the importance of retrieving and reappropriating indigenous spiritual resources to develop an environmental ethic, they will be ready to take part in a dialogue among civilizations concerning religion and ecology.

In a broader context, for religious and spiritual leaders to play a significant global role in articulating a shared approach to environmental degradation, they must assume the responsibility of public intellectuals themselves. As the Millennium Conference at the United Nations in September of 2000 clearly showed, unless religious and spiritual leaders can rise above their communities of faith to address global issues as public intellectuals, their messages will be misread, distorted, or ignored. China is particularly suspicious of the intentions of religious and spiritual leaders if they are exclusively concerned about the well-being of their own communities. Yet the time is ripe for spiritual and religious leaders outside China to engage Chinese public intellectuals in mutually informative and inspirational conversations on religion and ecology.

The New Confucian ecological turn clearly shows that a sustainable human-Earth relationship will depend on the creation of harmonious societies and benevolent governments through the self-cultivation of all members of the human community. At the same time, Confucians insist that being attuned to the changing patterns in nature is essential for harmonizing human relationships, formulating family ethics, and establishing a responsive and responsible government. As Mary Evelyn Tucker notes: “The whole Confucian triad of heaven, earth, and humans rests on a seamless yet dynamic intersection between each of these realms. Without harmony with nature and its myriad changes, human society and government is threatened.”

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Since each person’s self-cultivation is essential for social and political order, the public intellectual is not an elitist, but an active participant in the daily affairs of his or her society. The Confucian idea of the concerned scholar may benefit from the wisdom of a philosopher, the insight of a prophet, the faith of a priest, the compassion of a monk, or the understanding of a guru, but it is the responsibility of the public intellectual that is the most appropriate to the embodiment of this idea. The Confucians remind us that, in order to foster a wholesome worldview and a healthy ecological ethic, we need to combine our aspiration for a harmonious relationship with nature with our concerted effort to build a just society.

Public intellectuals in China should impress upon the political leadership that it is in an advantageous position to “promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace,” [42](#) as recommended by the Earth Charter. They should recognize that since the Chinese people are well disposed to Mahayana Buddhism and religious Daoism as well as inclusive Confucian humanism, they can appreciate the value of the coexistence of Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things and can “treat all living beings with respect and consideration”

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as an expression of their humanity. Furthermore, as an increasing number of public intellectuals in the academic community have already forcefully articulated their ecological concerns, they should be encouraged to “integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life.”

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Many liberal-minded public intellectuals have openly suggested that the major challenge in Chinese political culture is democratization at all levels, which must begin with greater transparency and accountability in governance at the top. As the rule of law, rather than the rule by law, is widely accepted as the legitimate way to provide access to justice for all, the ideal of “inclusive participation in decision making”

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is no longer unimaginable.

New Confucians fully acknowledge that in their march toward modernization in the cause of nation-building, their primary language has been so fundamentally reconstructed that it is no longer a language of faith, but a language of instrumental rationality, economic efficiency, political expediency, and social engineering. They are now recovering from that mistake. Their reanimated anthropocosmic vision may inspire a new worldview and a new ethic. This ecological turn has great significance for China’s spiritual self-definition, for it urges the nation to rediscover its soul. It also has profound implications for the sustainable future of the global community.

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ENDNOTES

¹ For a contemporary discussion on the axial-age civilizations, see Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1986).

² See Tu Wei-ming, “Embodying the Universe: A Note on Confucian Self-realization,” *World & I* (August 1989): 475–485.

³ Qian Mu’s last essay, “Zhongguo wenhua dui rennei weilai keyou di kongxian” (The Possible Contribution of Chinese Culture to the Future of Humankind), first appeared as a newspaper article in *United News* in Taiwan (26 September 1990). It was reprinted, with a lengthy commentary by his widow, Hu Meiqi, in *Zhongguo Wenhua* (Chinese Culture) 4 (August 1991): 93–96.

⁴ For an elaborate discussion on this, see Tang Junyi, *Shengming cunzai yu xinling jingjie* (Life Existence and the Spiritual Realms) (Taipei: Xuesheng Book Co., 1977), 872–888.

⁵ Feng Youlan, *Zhongguo xiandai zhhexueshi* (History of Modern Chinese Philosophy) (Guangzhou: Guangdong People’s Publishers, 1999), 251–254.

⁶ See Hu Meiqi’s commentary in *Zhongguo Wenhua*.

⁷ For example, Ji Xianlin of Peking University, Li Shengzi of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Cai Shangsi of Fudan University, and a number of other senior scholars all enthusiastically responded to Qian’s article. My short reflection appeared in *Zhonghua Wenhua* (Chinese Culture) 10 (August 1994): 218–219.

⁸ Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, trans. Hans H. Gerth (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1951), 235.

⁹ Tang Junyi, *Shengming cuizai yu xinling jingjie*, 833–930.

¹⁰ Chang Tsai (Zhang Zai), “The Western Inscription,” in Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), 497.

¹¹ Feng Youlan, “Xin yuanyuan” (New Origins of Humanity) in *Zhenyuan liushu* (Six Books of Feng Youlan in the 1930s and 1940s) (Shanghai: Eastern Chinese Normal University Press, 1996), vol. II, 626–649.

¹² Wang Yangming (Wang Yang-ming), “Inquiry on the Great Learning,” in Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 659.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 659–660. Since Wang Yangming wished to demonstrate that the mind of the small man can form one body with all things as well, he used “he” rather than “we” in the text.

¹⁴ Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

¹⁵ The “Text” of *The Great Learning*. Although I have made a few changes in my translation, it basically follows Wing-tsit Chan’s version. See Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 86.

¹⁶ Wm. Theodore de Bary, “‘Think Globally, Act Locally,’ and the Contested Ground Between,” in *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Bertrhong (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 1998), 32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

¹⁸ *Zhongyong* (Doctrine of the Mean), XXII. See Tu Wei-ming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989), 77. This translation is slightly different from Wing-tsit Chan's version, cited in the book.

¹⁹ Xiong Shili, *Xin Weishilun* (New Theory on Consciousness-Only) (reprint, Taipei: Guangwen Publishers, 1962), vol. I, chap. 4, 49–92.

²⁰ Liang Shuming, *Dongxi wenhua jiqi zhexue* (Eastern and Western Cultures and their Philosophies) (reprint, Taipei: Wenxue Publishers, 1979), 200–201.

²¹ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999).

²² See Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, eds., *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

²³ The Earth Charter .

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

[27](#) Ibid.

[28](#) Ibid.

[29](#) Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 182.

[30](#) Ibid.

[31](#) Ibid., 186–187.

[32](#) See Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990) and Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

[33](#) Quoted in Mary Evelyn Tucker, “The Emerging Alliance of Religion and Ecology,” in Steven L. Chase, ed., *Doors of Understanding: Conversations on Global Spirituality in Honor of Ewert Cousins* (Quincy, Ill.: Franciscan Press, 1997), 111.

[34](#) Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 3.

[35](#) *The Book of Change*, “image” of the first hexagram, *qian* (heaven).

[36](#) *Mencius*, VIIA:1. See D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1970), 182. My translation of the first line is different.

³⁷ Tu Weiming, “Global Community as Lived Reality: Exploring Social Resources for Development,” in *Social Policy & Social Progress*, Special Issue on the Social Summit, Copenhagen, 6–12 March 1995 (New York: United Nations, 1996), 47–48.

³⁸ The case of Qu Geping merits special attention. Since the Stockholm Conference on the Environment in 1972, he has been instrumental in developing an infrastructure within the governmental system for dealing with environmental protection in China. As chairman of the Environmental Protection and Resource Conservation Committee of the National People’s Congress, he plays a pivotal role in formulating national policies and encourages nongovernmental agencies in raising environmental concerns. For a retrospective look at his own career, see Qu Geping, *mengxian yu qidai: Zhongguo huanjing baofu di guoqu yu weilai* (Dreams and Anticipations: The Past and Future of China’s Environmental Protection) (Beijing: Zhongguo huanbao kexue chubanshe, 2000).

³⁹ Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 216.

⁴⁰ Ibid. It should be noted that although de Bary’s main concern here is the Way in the “learning of the mind-and-heart,” the ecological implications are self-evident.

⁴¹ Mary Evelyn Tucker, “The Emerging Alliance of Religion and Ecology,” in Chase, ed., *Doors of Understanding*, 120.

⁴² The Earth Charter.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Currently more than a hundred programs (including departments and research centers) focusing on the environment have been developed in China’s institutes of higher

learning. While the majority of these programs are primarily concerned with technical engineering issues, quite a few of them have integrated subjects in the social sciences and the humanities in their multidisciplinary approaches to environmental protection.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

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