

Nature and Justice in Early Confucianism: a Perspective on the Ecological Catastrophes of Modern China

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Introduction: modernization and ecological catastrophes

One characteristic of modern Western political philosophy, for example liberalism, is that it believes that the construction of human society should be a rational process essentially independent of the natural world. In the works of major political thinkers, like Hobbes and Locke, almost nothing is said concerning the importance of the natural environment of human society. The relationship between humankind and nature is that between subject and object, and one of conquest and utilization. To a large extent, present days ecological problems such as global warming are byproducts, through world economic progress, of this modern political ideology. It seems clear that the rapid economic growth of China, which adopted this aspect of Western political ideology, has largely contributed to this global ecological problem.

Ecological problems in present day China have become catastrophic. Desertification in northwestern part of China has been progressing rapidly due to decades of deforestation and overexploitation of natural resources. The severe PM 2.5 problem is only a new expression of the old problem of air pollution. Ground water pollution, soil pollution, so on and so on, are all signs of the destruction of the natural environment due to China's modern economic progress. However, the severity of environmental and ecological problems in modern China is also related to specific problems of its political structure. From the starting point of its modernization, China abandoned its traditional political ideology and turned to Western political thinking. Modern China succeeded its nation building and early modernization in the revolution and pre-reform period by turning to Marxism which is not essentially different from liberalism as far as the nature-human relationship is concerned. The market oriented economic reform since 1980s has almost brought to term China's modernization process, but at the same time it deeply damaged the ecological health of the country. It has also become evident that China's political system has not really been modernized as it is still suffering from the ancient problem of the systematic corruption of bureaucrats and even of generalized corruption within society. The environmental problems of present day China are in fact the result of the combination of both the problem of modern society and that of its ancient political legacy. Corruption is the underlying reason why modern legislations on environmental protection have failed to prevent the worsening of the environmental situation.

Thus, environmental and ecological problems are fundamentally related to the problems of the modern Chinese political structure as a whole. An essential change of 'ideological' thinking is needed. Modern ecological ethics is trying to add such concepts as animal rights etc. to mainstream Western political thinking. It also seeks to find inspirations in Eastern Cultures such as Buddhism and Taoism. Compared to Buddhism and Taoism, Confucianism is less referred to due to its 'anthropocentric' characteristic. However, as the dominating ideology of ancient China for two thousand years, Confucianism contributed a lot to the prosperity of Chinese civilization which was largely environmental friendly. Though it is anthropocentric in a certain sense, nature nonetheless constitutes a primary and essential concern in Confucianism, something which is essentially different from modern Western political thinking. Furthermore, we might say that according to Confucianism, to some extent, the political structure is only one part of the cosmic structure of the world as a whole. The de facto ideological vacancy during the reform period of modern China gave rise to a revival of Confucianism especially in the recent two decades. A reinterpretation of Confucianism, especially concerning its attitude toward nature, might provide a new perspective to see the problem of modern China as well as of the modern world as a whole.

Confucianism is a tradition of political thinking which has many schools and interpretations. Given the purpose of this study, this paper will mainly focus on the most read classics, such as *The Analects* / 『論語』, *Mencius* / 『孟子』, etc. The first section will describe the understanding of the relationship between nature and humankind in Confucianism. The second section will relate the specific Confucian attitude toward nature to its discussion on human nature and humanity which is the most fundamental part of Confucianism. The third section will further discuss how the moral and political philosophy of Confucianism is essentially non-anthropocentric. The conclusion will turn to the historical reality of China, both when Confucianism was adopted as the ideological rhetoric by the state and when, in modern China, Confucianism was abandoned.

1. Conquering nature and the establishment of human society and state

According to Confucianism, civilization started when the sage kings in antiquity succeeded in utilizing nature through developed technologies and thus ended the primitive living conditions of humankind. In the chapter Li Yun or The Conveyance of Rites (礼運) of *Liji* or *Book of Rites* (『礼記』), there is a passage saying:

Formerly the ancient kings had no houses. In winter they lived in caves which they had excavated, and in summer in nests which they had framed. They knew not yet the transforming power of fire, but ate the fruits of plants and trees, and the flesh of birds and beasts, drinking their blood, and swallowing (also) the hair and feathers. They knew not yet the use of flax and silk, but clothed themselves with feathers and skins. The later sages then arose, and men (learned) to take advantage of the benefits of fire. They molded the metals and fashioned clay, so as to rear towers with structures on them, and

houses with windows and doors. They toasted, grilled, boiled, and roasted. They produced must and sauces. They dealt with the flax and silk so as to form linen and silken fabrics. They were thus able to nourish the living, and to make offerings to the dead; to serve the spirits of the departed and God. In all these things we follow the example of that early time.¹⁾

The primitive living conditions in the early days of humankind described in the first part of the above paragraph may be viewed as a Confucian version of 'the state of nature'. However, the difference between this Confucian version and the state of nature described in the writings of modern political thinkers like Hobbes and Locke lies in that the former emphasizes the primitive living situation due to the lack of development of technologies while the later focuses primarily on the absence of political order. Correspondingly, Confucianism regards getting out of the primitive state through developing various forms of technology as a precondition to the establishment of a civilized social life. And Confucianism emphasizes that it is sage rulers who played a crucial role in this process.

Further, in Confucianism, one of the major roles of the state is to deal with and to prevent natural disasters. According to a Chinese legend, at the beginning of Chinese history, the Great Yu (大禹), one of the several well-known legendary sage kings, succeeded in flood control and established the first hereditary dynasty Xia (夏). To some extent, the legitimacy of rulers in the remote antiquity of China came from their success in dealing with natural disasters, which had been threatening the people's life. This legend of the Great Yu was interpreted by Confucianism as part of Chinese history and in *Mencius*, we find a passage discussing the performances of the early sage rulers.

'In the time of Yao, when the world had not yet been perfectly reduced to order, the vast waters, flowing out of their channels, made a universal inundation. Vegetation was luxuriant, and birds and beasts swarmed. The various kinds of grain could not be grown. The birds and beasts pressed upon men. The paths marked by the feet of beasts and prints of birds crossed one another throughout the Middle Kingdom. To Yao alone this caused anxious sorrow. He raised Shun to office, and measures to regulate the disorder were set forth. Shun committed to Yi the direction of the fire to be employed, and Yi set fire to, and consumed, the forests and vegetation on the mountains and in the marshes, so that the birds and beasts fled away to hide themselves. Yu [the Great Yu] separated the nine streams, cleared the courses of the Ji and Ta, and led them all to the sea. He opened a vent also for the Ru and Han, and regulated the course of the Huai and Si, so that they all flowed into the Jiang. When this was done, it became possible for the people of the Middle Kingdom to cultivate the ground and to obtain sufficient food. During that time, Yu was eight years away from his home, and though he thrice passed its door, he never entered... The Minister of Agriculture taught the people to sow and reap, cultivating the five kinds of grain. When the five kinds of grain were brought to maturity, the people all

obtained subsistence.²⁾

According to this passage the first thing sage kings and ministers did was to deal with the difficulties that nature imposes on human beings, including natural disasters, in particular floods. Only after first conquering nature, can human beings then make use of it through cultivation and other productive activities. Thus, according to Confucianism, nature constitutes on the one hand a threat to human life and on the other hand resources for human living. To deal with nature in the way of disaster control and utilizing natural resources with developed technology was regarded as both an important function of the rulers and a major source of legitimacy of their state rule. To the opposite, the importance of nature in the establishment and legitimacy of the state is clearly lacking in modern political thinking.

2. The respect and protection of nature

Confucianism emphasizes that human society should respect the order of nature and protect nature while making a living from natural resources. We can find this attitude of respecting and protecting nature in both the discussions of individual cultivation and those concerning state policies and regulations. In *the Analects* (『論語』), it is reported that ‘The master [that is, Confucius] angled, but did not use a net, he shot, but not at birds perching.’³⁾ For Confucius, not to fish with a net and not to shot at birds perching, which avoids killing a large number of fish and birds is a human way of dealing with animals, and thus a gentleman (君子)’s a proper way of behaving. This is in accordance with the Confucian virtues of individuals, those of humanity/ 仁 and propriety/ 礼 .

Mencius for his part argued that the state should have a policy to protect nature.

‘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, this enables the people to nourish their living and mourn for their dead, without any feeling against any. This condition in which the people nourish their living and bury their dead without any feeling against any, is the first step of royal government.’⁴⁾

In this passage Mencius gave a rational explanation of why the state should have a policy respecting natural order and preserving natural resources. Only by doing so, he argues, can people have enough harvest to live a decent life. Mencius regards this policy as the first step towards a royal government.

Furthermore, in Confucianism, this attitude toward nature should been incorporated into the ritual traditions of society. In the chapter of ‘Royal regulations’ (王制) of the *Book of Rites* (『礼記』), there is a more detailed discussions as for how to utilize natural resources,

‘When the otter sacrificed its fish, the foresters entered the meres and dams. When the

wolf sacrificed its prey, the hunting commenced. When the dove changed into a hawk, they set their nets, large and small. When the plants and trees began to drop their leaves, they entered the hills and forests (with the axe). Until the insects had all withdrawn into their burrows, they did not fire the fields. They did not take fawns nor eggs. They did not kill pregnant animals, nor those which had not attained to their full growth. They did not throw down nests.’⁵⁾

Confucius in the quoted passage writes mainly in relation to the cultivation of individuals, while Mencius’ arguments constitute a kind of a rationalization of state regulations; hence his discussion rather belongs to the category of social rites. Activities such as fishing, hunting, foresting, firing the field, etc., were in principle entrusted to the care of specific government officials, and would be performed at determined times according to the change of seasons and done following certain ritual like regulations.

Thus, unlike what is the case in mainstream modern Western political thinking which regards human society as a rational construction completely separate from and even opposite to nature, nature constitutes a major concern in Confucianism. According to Confucianism, civilization started with success in fighting against natural disasters and in developing technology to utilize natural resources, a development in which the sage rulers played an important role. And the need to respect natural order and to preserve natural resources has always been a major concern in Confucianism. In the following two sections we will discuss how this distinctive Confucian attitude toward nature is related to its interpretation of human nature and its state theory.

3. Nature and human nature

In both ancient and modern times, many arguments concerning human evil tend to interpret evil as natural, as coming from nature. In contrast, Confucianism holds a positive view of human nature and urges individuals to cultivate humanity or to perfect human nature. According to Confucianism, on the one hand, human beings should cultivate humanity which will differentiate them from the beasts, on the other hand, human society is still part, though a very special part, of nature. Thus Mencius while discussing of human nature, gives the example of the Niu Mountain (牛山).

The trees of Niu mountain were once beautiful. Being situated, however, in the borders of a large State, they were hewn down with axes and bills - and could they retain their beauty? Still through the activity of the vegetative life day and night, and the nourishing influence of the rain and dew, they were not without buds and sprouts springing forth, but then came the cattle and goats that browsed upon them. To these things is owed the bare and stripped appearance of the mountain, and when people now see it, they think that it was never finely wooded. But is this the nature of the mountain? And so is it also of what properly belongs to man; shall it be said that the mind of any man was without benevolence and righteousness? The way in which a man loses his proper goodness of

mind is like the way in which the mountain is denuded of trees by axes and bills.⁶⁾ Mencius' argument is that the Niu Mountain was originally beautiful; it was human action, deforestation and overgrazing, which destroyed the ecological environment of the mountain and made it look ugly. Similarly, human nature is originally good, but if people do not make effort to maintain and cultivate it, they will lose its goodness. Mencius tries to justify his argument concerning the goodness of human nature with the analogy between human nature and the natural beauty of Niu Mountain. Actually, references to the goodness of human nature or the natural beauty of Niu Mountain are essentially normative. Mencius provides a rational justification for these arguments by relating the opposite appearance, that is, the ugliness of the mountain and the evil of human nature in reality, to destructive human actions. Thus, we might explore something more than a pure analogy in this discussion. For Mencius, it seems that, the nature of human beings is not to be separated from nature or more precisely from 'the nature of nature.' The two also have one fundamental aspect in common in that human actions can have similar effects on both. That human beings can understand this relationship between actions and nature is the fundamental reason why they should have normative beliefs concerning human nature and the natural world generally.

Furthermore, what is involved in the relation between nature and human nature is more than only reason. Confucianism argues that human virtue or humanity has its origin in the natural feeling of sympathy among human beings/ 惻隱之心. Only by consciously developing this natural feeling can a person cultivate his human virtues, the most important of which is humanity/ 仁, and become a gentleman. Confucianism argues that human beings have a natural feeling of love toward their parents or children, but they also have a natural feeling of sympathy toward other people. There is a famous paragraph in *Mencius* concerning a stranger's natural sympathy toward a baby about to fall into a well.

When I say that all men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others, my meaning may be illustrated thus: even now-a-days, if men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. They will feel so, not as a ground on which they may gain the favour of the child's parents, nor as a ground on which they may seek the praise of their neighbours and friends, nor from a dislike to the reputation of having been unmoved by such a thing. From this case we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration is essential to man...⁷⁾

For Confucianism, this natural feeling of sympathy is not exclusively confined to human kind. It can also be expanded toward animals. When Mencius tried to persuade the King of Liang to pursue the benevolent politics, he tells the following story.

'I heard the following incident from Hu He: "The king," said he, "was sitting aloft in the hall, when a man appeared, leading an ox past the lower part of it. The king saw him, and asked, "Where is the ox going?" The man replied, "We are going to consecrate a bell with its blood." The king said, Let it go. I cannot bear its frightened appearance, as if it were an

innocent person going to the place of death...⁸⁾

Mencius interprets this behavior as a manifestation of the king's benevolent heart. He says, 'So is the superior man affected towards animals, that, having seen them alive, he cannot bear to see them die; having heard their dying cries, he cannot bear to eat their flesh...'⁹⁾ He then urges that king to expand his kindness toward animals to all the people of his kingdom.¹⁰⁾

In Confucianism this natural feeling of love and sympathy can also be extended toward the whole natural world. There is a famous paragraph in *The Analects*: 'The Master standing by a river, said, "It passes on just like this, not ceasing day or night!"'¹¹⁾ It has generally been interpreted as indicating that Confucius was moved by the beauty, strength, or even the 'virtue' of the natural world. This sentence is well known and deeply loved by those educated in Confucian cultures, and typically reflects the Confucian sentiment or aesthetics toward nature. For Confucianism, Human beings do not only have a natural feeling of sympathy toward each other, which is the foundation of humanity, but also have a natural feeling of sympathy and love toward nature. In consequence to behave in a friendly and human manner towards nature is an essential part of (the virtue of) humanity. Thus, the pursuit of humanity, which might be interpreted as to love other beings, and to love nature, is not a belief which comes only from reason, but an attitude that is based both on reason and on a natural sentiment or feeling of human beings.¹²⁾ In Confucianism, to respect and love nature is not only rational behavior done for utilitarian considerations, but more essentially it is an action in accordance with the pursuit of humanity, a virtue that is based on the natural sympathy and feeling of love toward others beings and the natural world.

Correspondingly, in Confucianism, nature is not only the natural world as it is understood in our modern era. That is, an object to be conquered and utilized, and for that very purpose preserved and understood with natural sciences. In Confucianism, nature is also an object to be felt, sympathized, respected and loved. In their relationship with nature and with each other, human beings realize their humanity. At a different level of philosophical thinking, nature was regarded as a metaphysical object, described mainly in reference to the concept Heaven/ 天 . It is from this metaphysical Heaven, that human beings gain their nature, and that the state obtains its legitimacy.

4. The Mandate of the Heaven

According to Confucianism, humanity, and the human virtues, have to be cultivated in social relationships and should be exemplified by the proper behavior (礼) of individuals. For Confucianism, on the one hand, the individual person should consciously cultivate his or her virtues and behave properly; on the other hand, the state should promote the welfare of the people, which constitutes a precondition for the cultivation of virtue. The state should also promote the cultivation of humanity through, among other things, teaching the people to conform to a moralized social order. Following the discussion on the rulers' function to deal with nature and agricultural

production, quoted earlier, Mencius continues,

'But men possess a moral nature; and if they are well fed, warmly clad, and comfortably lodged, without being taught at the same time, they become almost like the beasts. This was a subject of anxious solicitude to the sage Shun, and he appointed Xie to be the Minister of Instruction, to teach the relations of humanity: how, between father and son, there should be affection; between sovereign and minister, righteousness; between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions; between old and young, a proper order; and between friends, fidelity.'¹³⁾

Thus, in Confucianism, besides or beyond the relationship between nature and human society, rulers have to further maintain a good social order through teaching and promoting moralized social relationships among people. However the separation between nature and human society is by no means definitive. On the one hand, managing the relationship with nature constitutes not only the precondition of a well-ordered society, but also part of humanity and of the corresponding social norms, as we argued earlier; on the other hand, a well-ordered society contributes to the order of the cosmic whole. According to Confucianism, the ruler of the state gains his legitimacy from the Heaven (tian/天, the literal meaning of which is the sky), this is known as the Mandate of the Heaven (天命). In pre-Qin Confucianism, this concept of Heaven was already different from that of the physical sky, but at the same time it was also different from the theistic understanding of the concept. The concept of the Mandate of the Heaven is essentially metaphysical and represents something like the ethical sovereign of the whole natural and human world.¹⁴⁾

Concerning the natural world, Confucius once commented in the following way on how the Heaven works:

The Master said, "I would prefer not speaking." Zi Gong said, "If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record?" The Master said, "Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?"¹⁵⁾

Thus, in Confucianism, nature is not simply an objective entity as understood in mainstream modern political thinking, but a living existence with an ontological Heaven as its sovereign. The same applies to human world. According to Confucianism, the ruler gains his legitimacy from the Mandate of the Heaven (天命). Confucianism argues that the ruler must try to establish order in human society and to promote the welfare of the people. Since 'Heaven sees according as my people see; Heaven hears according as my people hear',¹⁶⁾ if the ruler cannot gain the heart of the people, he will lose the Mandate of the Heaven. It seems at first sight that this line of argument is not in opposition to a certain understanding of democracy in modern political thinking. However, the Mandate of the Heaven is essentially different from the general will of the people, and the sovereignty of the ruler should not be understood as the sovereignty of the people as usually claimed in modern states. The essential difference is that in Confucianism, the legitimacy of the ruler, or more generally, the principle of human society, is not a problem exclusively related to

humankind, but a problem that relates to both the human world and the whole cosmic world, the former constituting a part of the latter.

Though in Confucianism, only the sovereign ruler gains the Mandate of the Heaven to rule the state, individual beings also have, but in a different way, their own mandates (命), which are also from the Heaven. The mandate of a sage, for example Confucius or Mencius, could be something close or related to the Mandate of the Heaven of the ruler, such as exemplified by the following passage of *The Analects*,

The Master was put in fear in Kuang. He said, "After the death of King Wen, was not the cause of truth lodged here in me? If Heaven had wished to let this cause of truth perish, then I, a future mortal, should not have got such a relation to that cause. While Heaven does not let the cause of truth perish, what can the people of Kuang do to me?"¹⁷⁾

Here, Confucius believes that he has himself received the mandate from the Heaven to transmit the civilization as the King Wen did, though in his life time, he clearly had no chance to become a ruler, and furthermore few rulers really liked to listen to his teaching. Actually, throughout Chinese history, as Theodore de Bary points out, most Confucian scholars believed that, though only the ruler of the state had the sovereign power which comes from the Mandate of the Heaven, it is the Confucian scholars who inherit civilization and understand what the government should do with the Mandate of the Heaven.¹⁸⁾ In this sense, Confucianism argues that a Confucian gentleman should either pursue state officialdom to help the ruler realize the Mandate of the Heaven, or as a scholar advise or criticize the ruler so as to persuade him to follow the right way of governance.

Likewise Mencius, when arguing for the goodness of human nature, directly relates human nature with the Heaven, and accordingly a person's cultivation of human virtues with the establishment of one's Heaven-ordained being.

'He who has exhausted all his mental constitution knows his nature. Knowing his nature, he knows Heaven. To preserve one's mental constitution, and nourish one's nature, is the way to serve Heaven. When neither a premature death nor long life causes a man any double-mindedness, but he waits in the cultivation of his personal character for whatever issue; this is the way in which he establishes his Heaven-ordained being.'¹⁹⁾

Though in Confucianism, individuals' self-cultivation of human virtues is essentially in accordance with their pursuit of government officialdom or scholarship, Mencius emphasizes that consciously concentrating on one's cultivation of virtues is the way to establish or realize one's mandate from the Heaven. Even if a person does not have the chance to become an official or to advice the ruler, and no matter whether he lives a long or a short life, he still can establish his own Heaven-ordained being with his belief and through great effort on self-cultivation.

Thus, for Confucianism, both the cultivation of human virtues at the level of the individual and the pursuit of benevolent government at the level of the state are not regarded as actions that are only related to human society, as is the case in modern Western political thinking. Both the legitimacy of the sovereign power of the state and the justification of the cultivation of individual

virtues are regarded as ultimately originating from the Heaven, the ethic sovereign of the whole natural and human world. In other words, in Confucianism, the state theory that the sovereignty of the ruler comes from the Mandate of the Heaven should be interpreted in a normative way, that is, the ruler should follow or represent the Mandate of the Heaven in pursuing benevolent governance (仁政) and establishing the system of rites (礼制). This role of the state is not in contrast to, but rather in accordance with individual beings' efforts to realized their own Heavenly-ordained being through cultivating humanity and behaving humanly at the local level, in family, in community, etc.

Confucianism argues that by cultivating humanity and by establishing a well-ordered society, human beings contribute to the well-being of the whole cosmic world. Xunzi (荀子) in his writing developed the concept of triad (参) between the Heaven, the Earth, and human being. The Chinese character can/参 also means to participate, to assist, to facilitate, etc. In the chapter 'Man's Nature Is Evil,' Xunzi argues that:

If the man in the street applies himself to training and study, concentrates his mind and will, and considers and examines things carefully, continuing his efforts over a long period of time and accumulating good acts without stop, then he can achieve a godlike understanding and form a triad with Heaven and earth. The sage is a man who has arrived where he has through the accumulation of good acts.'²⁰⁾

In the chapter of Zhong Yong, or The Doctrine of the Mean, of *Liji*, there is a paragraph saying something similar to what Xunzi says in the above paragraph:

When we have intelligence resulting from sincerity, this condition is to be ascribed to nature; when we have sincerity resulting from intelligence, this condition is to be ascribed to instruction. But given the sincerity, and there shall be the intelligence; given the intelligence, and there shall be the sincerity. It is only he who is possessed of the most complete sincerity that can exist under heaven, who can give its full development to his nature. Able to give its full development to his own nature, he can do the same to the nature of other men. Able to give its full development to the nature of other men, he can give their full development to the natures of animals and things. Able to give their full development to the natures of creatures and things, he can assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth. Able to assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth, he may with Heaven and Earth form a ternion.²¹⁾

The fundamental idea of Confucianism is that human nature is essentially in accordance with the metaphysical and ontological existence of the Heaven, and that to develop one's human nature and to cultivate humanity with great sincerity is the way to participate the creative process of the whole world, both natural and human.

In short, in the political philosophy of Confucianism, on the one hand, individuals are urged to differentiate themselves from beasts through cultivating humanity, and rulers are urged to conquer nature and to promote a moralized social order. On the other hand, to feel, respect, or even to love the natural world is regarded as an essential part of one's humanity, in consequence to protect

nature and to respect natural order constitute one major concern of the government and an important part of social rituals. This relationship with nature is actually the manifestation of a specific metaphysical interpretation of the cosmic whole. The normative arguments on human nature and human society, both the cultivation of humanity on the part of the individual and the pursuit of benevolent governance on the part of the state, are regarded as originating from the mandate of the Heaven, author of the truth and order of the whole world. Thus, the idea of respect for and protection of natural world is essentially in accordance with the underlying philosophical belief of Confucianism.

Conclusion: Confucianism and the ecological problem in modern China

Even though Confucianism was regarded as the dominating ideology in ancient China throughout two thousand years of its history, to a large extent it only served as ideological rhetoric to justify the status quo, and it was by no means the only form of political thinking which had an influence over ancient China. To mention but one example: Legalism (法家). The First Emperor of Qin (秦始皇) interpreted the Mandate of the Heaven as justification of his absolute power, in a more Legalist way. Other emperors essentially followed his example, though they turned to Confucianism as a rhetoric. 'Confucianism on the outside and Legalism on the inside' (儒表法里) is a well-known saying which describes the complicated situation of ancient China.

Notwithstanding the ideologically dominant role of Confucianism, and notwithstanding that the government officials were mostly recruited from Confucian scholars, the Confucian ideal never became true in ancient China. To a large extent because of the absoluteness of state power and the fact that bureaucrats became the ruling class, ancient China never solved the problem of corruption. One important characteristic of the political structure of ancient China is the dynastic cycle. When a dynasty was first established, it could largely guarantee the order of society and provide basic social welfare to the people. But during its period of decadence, the bureaucratic system generally became corrupted and the government could no longer function well.

A similar process took place as far as the human-nature relationship was concerned. At the beginning of a dynasty, the state usually made efforts on flood control and other ways of dealing with natural disasters and could provide reliefs when disasters struck. However, towards the end of a dynasty's reign the state often lost its ability to manage the natural environment and the budget necessary in order to provide relief. Natural disasters happened and famines broke out more often during those periods. Then, when social order could no longer be generally guaranteed and a large portion of the population lived in dire conditions, the state would lose its legitimacy and rebellion, with the aim of overturning the old dynasty, broke out and gained legitimacy. In many cases, the refugees displaced by the famine would join the rebellious army in the time of political turmoil.²²⁾

An example of this is provided by the last dynasty Qing (清). The Manchu Qing had actually established the most complicated system of famine relief in ancient China. A large storage of grain

was maintained to stabilize the prices of the grains in normal years and to provide famine relief when natural disasters happened.²³⁾ However, the same thing happened to the Qing dynasty as to other dynasties during its declining period. A large famine broke up during the fourth and fifth years of Guangxu reign (the so called 丁戊奇荒 in 1878 and 1879). At that period, the last dynasty was in its ending period. The state had largely lost the revenue necessary to rescue the victims; the large storage of grains had almost disappeared by then; and corruption which prevailed throughout the whole bureaucratic system further prevented efficient disaster relief. As a result, about one tenth of the population died of the famine.²⁴⁾

Thus, though Confucianism was adopted by most dynasties as state ideology, its core principles had never really been applied in real politics throughout two thousand years of Chinese history. It seems clear that in ancient China, where victims of natural disasters were supposed to be relieved by the government, famine happened due more to the dysfunction of the state than to natural disaster itself. When China entered its modern period, Confucianism was criticized as backward political thinking and essentially abandoned. Western thinking such as Marxism and liberalism was adopted as the political ideology on the part of the state and by individuals as well. Unlike what is the case in Confucianism, one fundamental idea of modern political thinking is the blatant split between the human world and the nature world. Both individual cultivation and the pursuit of justice at the state level are regarded as something relative to subjective will of human beings only and essentially having nothing to do with the natural world. The traditional idea of the Mandate of the Heaven is criticized as a superstitious idea. And nature is simply regarded as an object to be conquered and utilized. Many people brainwashed by the ideology of materialism have almost lost the sense of natural beauty and the feeling of sympathy toward the natural world. Against this background, deforestation and other forms of destruction of the natural environment as a result of industrialization were viewed as justified to a large extent.

Further, one effect of all kinds of mass movements is that many people have lost confidence in the goodness of human nature. Especially in the post-Mao reform period when the government relaxed its strict ideological control to further its modernization process, people began competing and pursued their self-interest, even at the cost of social justice and natural environment. During that period, a continuing high rate of GDP growth appeared together with rampancy of corruption among officials as well as in society as a whole and with great destruction of natural environment.

While enjoying the benefit from high economic growth, in Communist China people have also suffered from all sorts of catastrophes, ultimately related to this materialist ideology, as well as to moral collapse both of the state officials and individuals.

In the great famine that took place during the Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1960, around 30 to 40 million people died. Droughts, floods, and other natural disasters certainly contributed to the famine, which was referred to by the state and the people as 'the three years of natural disasters'. But it is apparent that the main cause of the famine was not natural disasters but rather the failures of the policies in the Great Leap Forward movement.²⁵⁾

A recent catastrophic event was the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake. One politically sensitive topic concerning this catastrophe was the school casualties. Thousands of students died due to the poor quality of schoolroom construction. Angry parents who lost their single child asked the government to investigate local officials and construction firms involved in building the collapsed schools; and some political activists such as Ai Weiwei voluntarily investigated the details of school casualty. Yet, unlike the quick response to rescue the victims of the earthquake, the government in this case was reluctant to make a deep inquiry into the school construction scandal; related reports were censored and some activists were even silenced or imprisoned.²⁶⁾ The inferior quality of school buildings revealed the extent of corruption of local officials and the general problem of the construction industry. These various incidents all indicate some deep-seated problems with the present regime, which is why the government lacked confidence in dealing with the school construction scandal.

Finally, the 'chronic' industrial, social, political and ecological catastrophes Chinese people are suffering in their everyday life such as severe air pollution, food safety problem, social turmoil, etc. are all related to the collapse of social morality and justice, and to the pursuit of selfish benefit on the part of individual actors, both officials and non-officials, ready to sacrifice all rules and laws. What is clear is that these catastrophes are both human and natural. In China, both human beings and nature are suffering from the problematic modern political developments. However, this problem of corruption is by no means a new one; something similar to the old dynastic cycle has reappeared. This is a problem which can no longer be solved in the 'old way', that is, by the change of dynasty through revolution or rebellion. China is no longer an ancient agricultural society, but a modern society. A fundamental change in the political thinking and the political structure is needed in China. Given its important role in Chinese history, and given the possibility for new interpretation of its political philosophy, Confucianism might provide a new perspective to look at the problems modern China is facing.

Notes

- 1) <http://ctext.org/liji/li-yun> Liji, Liyun, 6. 昔者先王，未有宮室，冬則居營窟，夏則居橧巢。未有火化，食草木之實，鳥獸之肉，飲其血，茹其毛。未有麻絲，衣其羽皮。後聖有作，然後修火之利，范金合土，以為臺榭，宮室，牖戶，以炮以燔，以亨以炙，以為醴酪；治其麻絲，以為布帛，以養生送死，以事鬼神上帝，皆從其朔。*Li chi : Book of rites : an encyclopedia of ancient ceremonial usages, religious creeds, and social institutions*, translated by James Legge, pp. 369-370. Most quotations of the Confucian classics, except when mentioned otherwise, can be found at the website: <http://ctext.org>. For the convenience of the reader, I will give the reference to the quotation as well as the original Chinese text. Actually, in Confucianism studies, there can be many interpretations for the same text. Since this paper focuses more on the general ideas of Confucianism, I will not discuss here the more complicated problem of interpretation. However, my own understanding of the Confucianism classic texts came mainly from those books such as 『十三經注疏』, 『論語正義』, 『孟子正義』.
- 2) <http://ctext.org/mengzi/teng-wen-gong-i> Mengzi, Teng Wen Gong I, 4. 「當堯之時，天下猶未平，洪水橫流，氾濫於天下。草木暢茂，禽獸繁殖，五穀不登，禽獸傷人。獸蹄鳥跡之道，交於中國。堯獨憂之，

- 舉舜而敷治焉。舜使益掌火，益烈山澤而焚之，禽獸逃匿。禹疏九河，淪濟漯，而注諸海；決汝漢，排淮泗，而注之江，然後中國可得而食也。當是時也，禹八年於外，三過其門而不入... 后稷教民稼穡。樹藝五穀，五穀熟而民人育。James Legge, *The Life And Works of Mencius: With Essays and Notes*, Reprint. Originally published: London : Trübner, 1875. And Ji, Ta, Ru, Han, Huai, Si, and Jiang are names of different rivers.
- 3) <http://ctext.org/analects/shu-er> The Analects, 7/27. 子鈞而不綱，弋不射宿。《The Analects》, 15/9. *The four books: Confucian Analects, The great learning, The doctrine of the mean, and The works of Mencius*. With English notes and translation by James Legge, the Chinese Book Co., 1930.
- 4) <http://ctext.org/mengzi/liang-hui-wang-i> Mencius, Liang Hui Wang I/3. 不違農時，穀不可勝食也；數罟不入洿池，魚鼈不可勝食也；斧斤以時入山林，材木不可勝用也。穀與魚鼈不可勝食，材木不可勝用，是使民養生喪死無憾也。養生喪死無憾，王道之始也。
- 5) <http://ctext.org/liji/wang-zhi> Liji, Wang Zhi, 22. 獮祭魚，然後虞人入澤梁。豺祭獸，然後田獵。鳩化為鷹，然後設罝羅。草木零落，然後入山林。昆蟲未蟄，不以火田，不麇，不卵，不殺胎，不斃夭，不覆巢。 Otters usually arrange the fish they caught in a neat line on the bank of the river, which was thought as a kind of sacrifice in ancient China.
- 6) <http://ctext.org/mengzi/gaozi-i> Mencius, Zaozi I, 8. 孟子曰：「牛山之木嘗美矣，以其郊於大國也，斧斤伐之，可以為美乎？是其日夜之所息，雨露之所潤，非無萌蘖之生焉，牛羊又從而牧之，是以若彼濯濯也。人見其濯濯也，以為未嘗有材焉，此豈山之性也哉？雖存乎人者，豈無仁義之心哉？其所以放其良心者，亦猶斧斤之於木也 ...」
- 7) <http://ctext.org/mengzi/gong-sun-chou-i> Mencius, Gong Sun Chou I, 6. 所以謂人皆有不忍人之心者，今人乍見孺子將入於井，皆有怵惕惻隱之心。非所以內交於孺子之父母也，非所以要譽於鄉黨朋友也，非惡其聲而然也。由是觀之，無惻隱之心，非人也 ...
- 8) <http://ctext.org/mengzi/liang-hui-wang-i> Mencius, Liang Hui Wang I, 7. 「臣聞之胡齋曰，王坐於堂上，有牽牛而過堂下者，王見之，曰：『牛何之？』對曰：『將以擊鐘。』王曰：『舍之！吾不忍其觶觶，若無罪而就死地。』...」
- 9) Ibid. 君子之於禽獸也，見其生，不忍見其死；聞其聲，不忍食其肉。
- 10) Confucianism recognizes the difference in the levels of a person's love toward those near and far, and urges people to expand their love and kindness toward their close family members to those far away. As far as non-human world is concerned, Confucianism did not say that a person's natural feeling of sympathy toward animals and other natural existence are secondary to his feeling for other humans. Actually this can be said for human world also, as the story of a child about to fall into a well indicated. In short, the natural feeling of sympathy, no matter to what, is there, it is through reason that people should expand this love to others which a person could not naturally have.
- 11) <http://ctext.org/analects/zi-han> The Analects, Zi Han, 17. 子在川上，曰：「逝者如斯夫！不舍晝夜。」
- 12) Actually, the sentiments or aesthetics toward nature in Confucian culture are also and perhaps more exemplified in Taoist writings. In the chapter Qi Wu Lun (齊物論) of *Zhuangzi* (『莊子』), there is a famous paragraph saying, 'Formerly, I, Zhuang Zhou, dreamt that I was a butterfly, a butterfly flying about, feeling that it was enjoying itself. I did not know that it was Zhou. Suddenly I awoke, and was myself again, the veritable Zhou. I did not know whether it had formerly been Zhou dreaming that he was a butterfly, or it was now a butterfly dreaming that it was Zhou. But between Zhou and a butterfly there must be a difference. This is a case of what is called the Transformation of Things.' (昔者莊周夢為胡蝶，栩栩然胡蝶也，自喻適志與！不知周也。俄然覺，則蘧蘧然周也。不知周之夢為胡蝶與，胡蝶之夢為周與？周與胡蝶，則必有分矣。此之謂物化。)
- For the English translation, see <http://ctext.org/zhuangzi/adjustment-of-controversies/> For the

interpretation of the original text, I referred to 『庄子今注今译』 陈鼓应注译, 台湾商务印书馆, 1994, pp. 101-102

Though Confucianism did not go as far as Taoism, sympathy with nature is commonly shared by both schools. On the difference between Confucianism and Taoism on human-nature relationship, see 「儒, 道生态观之比较」, 刘学智, The International Conference in Commemorating 2565th Anniversary of Confucius & the 5th Congress of the International Confucian Association, Sep. 2014, Beijing, pp. 827-834.

- 13) <http://ctext.org/mengzi/teng-wen-gong-i> Mengzi, Teng Wen Gong I, 4. 人之有道也, 饱食, 煖衣, 逸居而无教, 则近于禽兽。圣人有忧之, 使契为司徒, 教以人伦: 父子有亲, 君臣有义, 夫妇有别, 长幼有序, 朋友有信。
- 14) For a detailed discussion of the Confucian concept Heaven, see Chenyang Li/ 李晨阳 「从“天人合一” 回到易经“天地人三材哲学”——兼论儒家环境哲学的基本构架」 The International Conference in Commemorating 2565th Anniversary of Confucius & the 5th Congress of the International Confucian Association, Sep. 2014, Beijing, pp. 820-826.
- 15) <http://ctext.org/analects/yang-huo> 子曰:「予欲无言。」子贡曰:「子如不言, 则小子何述焉?」子曰:「天何言哉? 四时行焉, 百物生焉, 天何言哉?」
- 16) <http://ctext.org/mengzi/wan-zhang-i> Mencius, Wan Zhang I, 5. 『天视自我民视, 天听自我民听』
- 17) <http://ctext.org/analects/zi-han> 子畏于匡。曰:「文王既没, 文不在兹乎? 天之将丧斯文也, 后死者不得与於斯文也; 天之未丧斯文也, 匡人其如予何?」
- 18) Bary, Wm. de. Theodore. *The Trouble with Confucianism*. Harvard University Press. 1996.
- 19) <http://ctext.org/mengzi/jin-xin-i> 孟子曰:「尽其心者, 知其性也。知其性, 则知天矣。存其心, 养其性, 所以事天也。夭寿不贰, 修身以俟之, 所以立命也。」
- 20) Xunzi: Basic Writings, translated by Burton Watson, Columbia University Press, 2003. The quote can be also found in <https://manyulim.wordpress.com/category/xunzi/> 今使塗之人者, 以其可以知之質, 可以能之具, 本夫仁義法正之可知可能之理, 可能之具, 然則其可以為禹明矣。今使塗之人伏術為學, 專心一志, 思索孰察, 加日縣久, 積善而不息, 則通於神明, 參於天地矣。故聖人者, 人之所積而致矣。 <http://ctext.org/xunzi/xing-e>
- 21) <http://ctext.org/liji/zhong-yong> Liji, Zhong Yong, 23. 自誠明, 謂之性; 自明誠, 謂之教。誠則明矣, 明則誠矣。唯天下至誠, 為能盡其性; 能盡其性, 則能盡人之性; 能盡人之性, 則能盡物之性; 能盡物之性, 則可以贊天地之化育; 可以贊天地之化育, 則可以與天地參矣。
- 22) John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China a New History*, second enlarged edition, the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006.
- 23) Huang, Xianghui/ 黃向輝, 「浅析晚清灾荒救助的措施」 『传承』 2009 年第 10 期
- 24) Yang, Jianli/ 楊劍利, 「晚清社会灾荒救治功能的演变——以‘丁戊奇荒’的两种赈济方式为例」 『财政经济』 第 4 期 2000 年 11 月。
- 25) Frank Dikotter, *Mao's Great Famine: the history of China's most devastating catastrophe, 1958-62*, Bloomsbury, 2011.
- 26) Ai Weiwei, Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009, the MIT Press, 2011.

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