

Tang Yijie

CONFUCIANISM'S CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE

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During most of the 20th century Confucius was held in disrepute by progressive folk in China. His doctrines were taken to be inherently reactionary, supporting a system that kept China weak and backward. The vituperation against the Sage reached a climax in the early 1970s, in the waning days of the Cultural Revolution. Confucius's reputation has improved since the death of Mao and especially, it would seem, since the turn of the 21st century, and once again he is celebrated by China's ruling elites. Much of the new approval is perhaps superficial, praising Confucius more for being a world-famous Chinese than for any particular contribution he made and accepting his teachings insofar as they are compatible with current conventions and banalities. Tang Yijie, a professor of philosophy at Peking University, has a somewhat deeper appreciation of the contemporary meaning of Confucius, showing how the Confucian approach to life might contribute to current problems relevant to the relationship of the individual to nature, to society, and to his own personality.

*There is an interesting puzzle about the author. Tang has been an outspoken defender of Confucius since the 1980s, but in the 1970s he was apparently a member of the "Liang Xiao" writing group (the term could in itself be a person's name, but it is also homophonous with the Chinese for "two schools," referring to Peking and Tsinghua universities in the country's capital). (See Yue Daiyun and Carolyn Wakeman, *To the Storm: The Odyssey of a Revolutionary Chinese Woman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).) This group was affiliated with the radical Gang of Four and its main purpose was to attack enemies of the Gang under the guise of vicious attacks on Confucius. Perhaps at times in his life Tang has been something of an opportunist. But this may also reinforce the suspicion some have had from time to time that the 1970s' anti-Confucius campaign was more complicated than it seemed. For while the campaign was certainly sponsored by the radicals, the notions it condemned Confucius for seem eerily close to the ideas one would attribute to the radicals themselves.*

1. Two Reasons for Confucianism's Contemporary Significance

I have discussed the theme of Confucianism's contemporary significance many times: During the 1980s, the 1990s, and into the 21st century. And it's not just me. More and more scholars are discussing this theme. Why?

I believe there are two reasons. Number one, our Chinese nation (民族) is on the eve of a great national revival. At this juncture we must review our historical cultural tradition.

As we are preparing to stride into a new millennium, the thinkers of the world are responding to the call of a new

“axial age.” This demands that we give greater weight to a reviewing and developing the thought and wisdom of ancient times, looking back on the source of our cultural development, responding to the new diversification in world culture.

Number two, the new century has brought out the demand that our country establish a “harmonious society. Mr. Fei Xiaotong once brought up the question of “cultural self-consciousness.” In building a harmonious society we also need that kind of cultural self-awareness.

This situation requires that in studying the history and development of our national culture, it is necessary to respond to the new forces of world cultural development, that is, the force of the new axial age. In responding to our country’s goal of a “harmonious society,” there is a demand for cultural self-awareness. In a new historical period of this sort, what questions confront all of human society as well as our own society? What kind of powers do we need to solve the problems that will promote the early advent of this new axial age and the harmonious society.

I believe that in order to analyze “Confucianism” we must approach it from different perspectives. Let’s approach Confucianism from three different corners: namely, the traditional governmental (正統) Confucianism, philosophical (道統) Confucianism, and academic (學統) Confucianism. For a long time Confucianism was joined together with China’s historical political system. There is no doubt it had an important function in feudal totalitarian despotic rule. The idea of philosophic Confucianism points to something common in any systematic historical tradition or school of scholarship or culture. There is bound to be a tradition in any scholarly culture, whether in the west or in China. In China there are the three schools of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism; and each has its traditions. Academic Confucianism points to the scholarly tradition, to its scholarly concepts. Here, perhaps, the face value of Confucianism is rather great; it is able to provide relatively significant intellectual resources to human society.

2. The contradictions between Man and Nature

What are the great questions facing human society today? I believe they all go back to three great questions: the contradictions between man and nature; the contradictions between man and man (or man and society); and man’s internal contradictions. How can these contradictions be resolved? These three questions are of great relevance to the current building of a “harmonious society” and the achievement of “peaceful coexistence” among human societies. I believe that the concepts of our country’s Confucianism—the “unity of Heaven man”; the “unity of others with myself”; and the “unity of body and mind,” those three great philosophical themes—may provide us with precious guidance in resolving the above three great contradictions and constitute intellectual resources deserving of special attention. Naturally I am not saying that in answering these questions we can rely solely on Confucian thinking and nothing else.

On the question of the contradictions between man and nature, in 1992, 1,575 prominent scientists published a “Warning to the Human Race.” It opened with the assertion that humanity and nature were on a collision course. I

believe that this showed a profound awareness that if human society continues along the way it is going there will be a severe crisis. The high degree of development of science and technology have brought people much happiness; but man, who is a part of nature, has in his conquest of nature obtained not only a great number of tools that destroy nature but also weapons that will destroy him himself. The limitless development and destruction of nature and the waste of resources not only destroys the natural harmony but also the harmony between man and nature. This has brought about conditions posing a serious threat to human existence. This situation is related to the western style of thought that poses a distinction between the subjective and the objective. Western thinking from the axial age of Plato onward has assumed a dualism between the subjective and the objective (for example, mind-matter; Heaven-man). The Chinese style of thinking is fundamentally different, and has taken a position of the “unity of Heaven and man” (or the inseparability of the subjective and the objective).

One of the sources of Chinese philosophy may be said to be the Zhou Book of Changes (周易). The “Bamboo Writings of Chu” unearthed in Jingmen in Hebei province in 1993 record a very important concept: “Changes are the way to comprehend the Way of Heaven, the Way of Man.” That is to say, Changes is the unifying thread joining the study of the Way of Heaven (natural laws) and the Way of Man (the ordering of human society). In other words, from ancient times China has realized that the study of “Heaven” cannot but involve “man,” and likewise the study of “man” cannot but involve “Heaven.” This is the idea of the “Unity of Heaven and Man.” From the perspective of the development of human society, the first problem people ran into was the relationship between “man” and “nature” (Heaven), since human survival is bound up with the natural world. Therefore China from ancient times there has always been the question of the relationship of Heaven and Man. Naturally from ancient times onward there have been many different ways proposed to treat this issue: some scholars advocate following the flow of nature; some believe that we must make use of Heaven to serve man: “control the decrees of Heaven and put them to use”; some assert that “in the exchange of Heaven and man, each overcomes the other”; so forth and so on. But the mainstream of Confucianism proposes the “unity of Heaven and man.” This means that Heaven cannot be separated from man and man cannot be separated from Heaven.”

From the notion of this unity which is expressed first in the *Book of Changes*, we have a kind of model for thinking about the current contradiction between man nature, and from this we can learn three things.

1. The “unity of Heaven and man” is a model for thinking. It demands that we do not put man and Heaven in opposition to each other. Man is a part of Heaven. “Man obtains his life first from Heaven.” If we destroy Heaven we are also destroying ourselves and we will suffer the consequences. Therefore, man should not only “know Heaven” (understand nature in order to make better use of it) but should also “fear Heaven” (hold the natural world in respect,

taking the “protection of Heaven” as a sacred responsibility). Nowadays people stress only “knowing Heaven,” meaning making use of Heaven, conquering Heaven, even needlessly destroying Heaven; but they don’t know to hold Heaven in respect. This, no doubt, is an extreme manifestation of “scientism,” the notion that science is omniscient. The unity of “knowing Heaven” and “fearing Heaven” is a manifestation of the unity of Heaven and Man; it shows that man has an internal responsibility toward Heaven. The philosophical concept of the unity of Heaven and man shows the complex relationship between heaven and man. It not only implies that man should know Heaven but also that man should respect Heaven, since Heaven has its sacred nature. Perhaps this is because Chinese Confucianism was not a religion in the ordinary sense, but it did have a certain religious nature to it. Perhaps because of this in China Confucianism can play something of the role of religion. It holds that the dependence of man on Heaven has an “internal” moral character that, through cultivation, can lead to a “transcendence,” a “going beyond the mundane to achieve sagehood.”

2. We cannot consider the relationship between Heaven and man to be an externally-imposed relationship. This is because “Heaven is man” and “man is Heaven.” Heaven and man cannot be separated from each other. Man cannot be separate from Heaven, nor Heaven from man. Apart from Heaven man cannot exist. Apart from man, there is no way for the reason of Heaven to be expressed, for who would take up the responsibilities implied by the Way of Heaven? A recognition of this kind of internal relationship between Heaven and man is a special trait of Chinese philosophy.

3. Why do we say there is an internal necessary connection between Heaven and man in Confucian philosophy? It is perhaps that from ancient times onward, at least from the western Zhou, there has been the tradition in Chinese thought that “Heaven hears as my people hear, Heaven sees as my people see.” This has been the conception from Confucius and Mencius down through the Cheng brothers, Zhu Xi, Lu Xiangshan, and Wang Yangming. Zhu Xi has a theory that may reflect a consistency in Confucius’s “study of Goodness” (仁學). He says: Goodness (仁) is the mind of Heaven to produce things in abundance. In humans it is the mind tenderly to love others and do well by things; it embraces the four virtues and holds together the four beginnings.” The Way of Heaven is to produce without ceasing. With its mind informed by love Heaven successfully brings all things into existence and nurtures them. So man must model himself on Heaven and be loving toward others and do well by all things that are. This is because “Heaven and man are one body.” Man is man because he receives the essence of Heaven, so while man lives in the world he must accord with the mind of Heaven to produce things in abundance and have the mind tenderly to love others and do well by things. The mind of Heaven and the mind of man are the same mind. Man has the responsibility of bringing about the Way of Heaven. The meaning of human life is in the embodiment of the Way of Heaven; the value of human life is in accomplishing the will of Heaven, all of this because Heaven and man are internally related.

In the above discussions I have approached the unity of Heaven and man from a philosophical perspective. That is the only way to get to its real heart and value. It is a world view and a style of thought. Its significance is that man has been given a responsibility he cannot evade. Man must become one with Heaven (be raised to the height of Heaven) and so bring about man's own self-transcendence to arrive at the ideal of the unity of Heaven and man.

Of course, the Confucian "unity of Heaven and man" cannot directly resolve one by one all contemporary issues having to do with the "contradictions between man and nature." But as a philosophic concept and a mode of thought that does not dichotomize man and Heaven but treats them as part of the same frame and with an internal relationship between them can without a doubt give some positive direction toward the resolution of the relationship between Heaven and man.

3. Contradictions Between Man and Man

Today the contradictions in human society between man and man are even more complex than those between man and nature. They involve contradictions between the self and others; between the person and society; between states; between nations; between regions. For example, the pursuit of goods and power, the fight over natural resources, the growth of possessions and ambition lead to opposition and war between states, nations, and regions, and also to imperial hegemony, terrorism, so forth and so on. Too much attention to the pursuit of money and material enjoyment, particularly the greed and corruption of rulers and the oppression of the common people lead to tension in the relations among individuals, social demoralization, the growth of gangs and factions, the proliferation of black societies—so forth, so on. Is Confucianism able to provide meaningful ways of thinking about the many and varied ills of contemporary society?

I believe that perhaps the Confucian theories concerning Goodness (or humanity) may establish a harmonious relationship between individuals, and that this may be extended to relations among states, nations, and regions. This could have major significance in building a "harmonious society."

Ever since [Samuel P.] Huntington presented his thesis on the conflict of civilizations in 1993 there has been much discussion of this among scholars from all countries. In trying to figure out how to eliminate the conflicts and even wars that arise because of cultural conflicts, perhaps Confucius's notion of "harmony without sameness" might be an extremely important principle. The highest ideal in traditional Chinese culture is that the "ten thousand things grow together without harming each other; their ways move in parallel without mutual interference" (from the Mean, 中庸). The ten thousand things growing together with their ways moving in parallel expresses lack of sameness; they do not damage or interfere with each other—this is harmony. This can be a rich source of ideas for coexistence within plurality.

Different nations and states can go through cultural exchanges and dialogues. If there is exchange or conversation

that leads to a certain kind of common understanding, in a certain sense that is a kind of process of moving from difference to some sort of commonality. This kind of mutual commonality does not mean that one side exterminates the other nor does it mean that one side becomes assimilated into the other. It means the search for points where different cultures come together and from this base are able to develop together. This is the working of harmony. Different nations and different states, because of geographic, historical, and various random factors develop different cultural traditions. It is because there are these different traditions that human culture is so rich and colored; moreover, these different traditions supplement and move among each other in the long river of human history. Differences of culture may lead to conflict, even to war. But we should not think that difference necessarily leads to conflict and war. Especially under today's conditions of advanced science and technology there is the danger that large-scale warfare would lead to humanity's self-annihilation. Therefore, we must diligently seek through dialogue among different cultures to bring about points of harmony. There are now many scholars in China and the west who recognize the importance of seeking mutual understanding among different cultures through the channels of dialogue. Whether it is Habermas's principles of justice and solidarity or Gadamer's thesis of broad dialogue, there is a recognition of the need for harmony without sameness as a premise. It is only if we recognize that nations and states with different cultural traditions can find points of harmony will it be possible for them to obtain equality of rights and duties; it is only under such conditions that "broad dialogue" can "truly and smoothly accomplish its ends." Thus, Confucius's principle of "harmony without sameness," based on the notion that "harmony is the most valuable, should become a basic principle for handling relations among different cultures.

4. Contradictions within Our Selves

If we can use the Confucian concept of the unity of Heaven and man to supply material relevant to the contradictions between man and nature and the unity of self and others to resolve the contradictions among men, then we may use the "integration of the inner and the outer" to moderate the contradictions within our own persons.

There are all sorts of pressures in modern society. Particularly the unlimited pursuit of sensual enjoyment brings about a loss of psychological balance and a division in the human personality. The psychological imbalance induces spiritual disturbances, alcoholism, murder, suicide, so forth. This distortion of the human heart and mind has become a sort of social disease with a serious effect on social peace. The reason is a withering away of morality, so that people no longer have a sense of harmony of body and mind. Many perceptive scholars have proposed theories and policies about how to cure this kind of condition. From the perspective of Chinese traditional culture there is a great deal of attention given this in the Confucian practice of the cultivation of the person and the nurture of the mind.

Proper governance of society must depend upon proper governance of the person. How well someone is able to

govern himself depends upon his self-cultivation of morality. The standard of whether a morality is appropriate or not depends upon whether or not it accords with the Tao, the Way. The “Way” here refers to the “Way prevailing under Heaven,” namely, harmony. And in order to achieve harmony in society one must have a “humane and loving heart.”

Here we must link individual moral self-cultivation with the concept of Goodness or humanity (仁), a thread running throughout all of Confucian teaching. The Confucian notion of self cultivation is not without its purpose: it is for the sake of “putting in order the family,” “governing the country,” bring peace to all under Heaven”: in other words, it is to build a “harmonious society.” The Book of Rites records the ideal of the society of Great Harmony; it involves building a pluralistic society with harmony in politics, economy, and culture. The Confucians base the building of a harmonious society on the moral cultivation of the person. Thus, Confucians give great attention to personal cultivation in both its internal and external aspects.

Confucian self-cultivation has its goal. The *Book of Changes* says, “Make use of personal calming in order to honor virtue.” An individual undergoes self-cultivation in order to elevate his spirit and to “set his mind on Heaven and earth, establish his life’s destiny, and continue to study to achieve sagehood, so that all things in the world are at peace.” It is in order to “establish the great root and so carry out the Way.” As far as the individual is concerned, he will be at peace with himself both in his interior thoughts and emotions and in his external relations. The Confucians believe that in order to achieve harmony between the interior and the exterior it is necessary to “bring peace and calm to the person and establish destiny.” Therefore, Zhu Xi says, “If a person can be centered within himself, even though the world at large is in chaos, the inner world, its Heaven and earth and ten thousand things, remains peaceful and unharmed. If someone is unable to attain this, even though there is order in the world at large, within oneself one will be perturbed, even if no harm comes to him from without. It’s the same for a country or a family.”

If we in our internal and external states can be centered and in harmony, the chaos of a disordered world cannot disturb our inner peace. If we are not centered and harmonious in our internal and external states, even if there is a very well-ordered world outside, we will still be troubled, worried, perturbed. We must work hard at cultivating our own virtue whether the world at large is in chaos or is in order. In this way we can fulfill our life’s duty and when it is time to leave the world we can go with a sense of peace and fulfillment.

Confucians consistently give great attention to peace and calmness of the person and the establishment of destiny. This is a demand of self-cultivation. In this way we can bring harmony to our own hearts and minds and to our internal state and its external manifestations. Our words and actions will accord with the “morality of being human.” And in this way our persons will be at peace and our destiny established. We must eliminate all the obstacles in the way of our personal harmony. It is not easy to carry out the Confucians’ “morality of being human,” but this is something people

should ardently strive for. But the purpose of achieving this personal peace is to bring about social harmony.

Sima Qian says: “For one today to make a record of the Way of the Ancients is to make for ourselves a mirror; it is not that the two ages are necessarily identical in all things.” We have been reviewing the thought of Confucius and his school in order to find out whether it contains resources significant for human society of the present time. This is without a doubt something important. But the thought and ideas of the sages and worthies of ancient times are not able fully to resolve all the problems of the present time; nor do they all accord with the demands of contemporary society. They can only show us a path for thinking, hints on how to make use of these resources, giving us a new base for addressing the concerns of the present time. It is in this way that they can make a contribution toward the building of a harmonious human society. “Though Zhou is an ancient state, its Mandate is ever-new” (*Book of Songs*). Our Chinese nation is an ancient nation with 5000 years of history and culture. Our mission is to assure that our society constantly renews itself and to make contributions to the whole of mankind.

Guangming Ribao. 14 December 2006.