

## **Reconstructing Confucian Righteousness for Environmental Ethics**

Mei Yang and Maki Sato\*

### **Reconstructing Confucian Righteousness for Contemporary Environmental Consciousness**

#### **ABSTRACT**

The environmental crisis has become increasingly problematic, demanding the attention of not only of Chinese society but also the global society. To tackle the imbalance of morality and materiality, this paper argues that the virtue of Confucian righteousness should be the principle for measuring sustainability that will serve as the essence of economic growth. Restoring our faith in environmental ethics in the context of fast-paced economic development primarily calls for a spiritual solution, which requires the application of virtue as religious ethics.

The combination of economic growth and righteousness is ingrained to Confucian ethics, and is reinterpreted in this paper as a core concept evident in literature as early as the Zhouyi, the Analects, the works of Mengzi, and the traditional commentary of the Daxue. This paper thus stresses the urgency of bridging theory and practice in Confucian ethics as a way of reconstructing the discourse of “righteousness” for the sake of the ecology and the environment not only in China but throughout the world.

**Keywords:** economic growth; righteousness; morality; materiality; environment

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Since the application of the model of the ‘Chinese Economic Reform and Open up’ proposed in 1978, the concurrence of high levels of economic development and increase in GDP was celebrated, and these were taken to prove the success of the Chinese model. At the same time, however, the imbalance between morality and

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materiality has gradually arisen and recently has become even more evident. The maximisation of economic growth has led to the marginalisation of righteousness, and this is reflected in the serious environmental issues that have arisen. Ultimately, it is the environment that has paid the greatest cost in the gradual economic growth of the past 40 years, especially during the recent 20 years of the rapid economic boom. The considerable threat to the very basic needs of daily life and that of the living environment has to be faced. In 2020, China is advocating no economic growth for the first time since 1990, due to the novel corona virus pandemic.<sup>1</sup> However, with its latest draft of the 14<sup>th</sup> Five-year plan (2021-2025), it is apparent that China is shifting its development path into one that emphasises quality growth instead of blindly pursuing to catch-up with the developed countries.<sup>2</sup> Thus, providing a solution to the environmental crisis is essential and critical in order to sustain our quality of life, health, social well-being, prosperity, and productivity for the next five years, not only for the sake of China but for the world as a whole. While humanity seeks a path to justify and provide equal rights to the late-comers of economic development, such justification needs to abide by certain rules that aim to not harm the existing nature as such.

A fundamental way of solving this problem is the reconstruction of our faith in environmental ethics under the context of fast-paced economic development. Our nation is part of—not apart from—this cause-and-effect system: we produce to consume and consume what we produce. This is, after all, the ecological cycle that we human beings are maintaining and in which we are involved, both consciously and unconsciously. Nonetheless, given such fast-paced economic growth, our dependence on a ‘material life’ leaves us defenceless against the power of materiality, and we neglect the ‘living life’ of the Earth, which includes human life as well. In a highly-developed material society, awe in nature has been disregarded by the need for profit. Such marginalisation of virtue is dangerous. If righteousness counts for little or nothing in human minds, the whole is destroyed—we would have to struggle to survive in a world driven purposely by economic growth that will eventually turn a world with no profit made for all. In other words, we have to find a way (by means of morality or an ethical dimension) that enables us to justify longer-term and non-monetary profit—a type of profit that is not calculated following capitalistic accounts and the monetary system, and that profits all the ‘living life’ that have been marginalised or blocked out from the current system. Even though the authors are aware of the eco-system services being calculated into monetary accounts, we argue

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<sup>1</sup>Emily Feng and Amy Cheng. *China Abandons Economic Growth Targets amid Pandemic*. <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/22/860667352/china-abandons-growth-targets-for-1st-time-in-40-years>, accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2020.

<sup>2</sup>N Stern and C Xie (2020) *China's 14th Five-Year Plan in the context of COVID-19: Rescue, recovery and sustainable growth for China and the world*. London: Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science.

that such attempts often leaves out the welfare of the ‘living life’ as a whole and that such attempts only emphasises the anthropocentric view toward nature.

Under such ethical and spiritual pressure, which comes into conflict with the living environment, we intend to find a stimulus for moral cultivation. Thus, we argue that it is necessary to reconnect citizens (humans) and nature. The particular causes of and solutions to the environmental crisis in China and beyond have economic and social dimensions that require more detailed studies from different disciplines and perspectives. This essay sheds light from a Confucian perspective, which may seem apart from such economic and social dimensions but aims to provide a spiritual and ethical solution to the environmental problems that we are facing today. In this paper, we apply progressive Confucian ethics that consider the balance between economic growth and righteousness (*yiliguan*), which had been gradually abandoned not only in China but also among transforming Asian countries that once shared the value of Confucian ethics. It has been thought that Confucian ethics is incompatible with market economics.<sup>3</sup> However, in this paper, we argue that Confucian ethics is not ‘incompatible’ with market economics, rather Confucianism can be an excellent intellectual resource in solving the conflict between economic growth and the protection of the living environment. In so doing, we need to first re-examine the statements of ‘righteousness’ in classical Confucian discourse. By tracing the classical Chinese Confucian discourses on *Yi* (義) as ‘righteousness’ and *Li* (利) as ‘economic growth,’ we find that Confucian debates on these concepts emphasise the benefits in maintaining progressive market order and economic development. By opening up these essential texts and analysing how they should be studied, the ethical values re-examined in this paper may serve as a spiritual guidance not only applicable to China but for other countries that are facing the problem of imbalance between the morality and the materialism. The study first presents a review of the literature on the nature of virtue ethics in response to notions of economic growth without righteousness. Then, virtue ethics as a universal and practical metaphor is discussed. Finally, by reviewing Confucian virtue ethics, this essay attempts to reconstruct virtue ethics based on the aforementioned factors in combination with Confucian ethics to identify the universal applicability of Confucian ethics in responding to environmental crises.

### **PROBLEM: HUMANS AND ANIMALS ALL UNDER ‘BLUE SKY’ AS THE DREAM**

We are facing a critical moment in the Earth’s history. Our overextended human presence has affected every region of land and water. Rapid industrialisation, heightened consumerism, and unrestrained technologies are causing environmental

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<sup>3</sup>Such arguments are relevant especially in the Japanese Confucian context, such as the argument made by Eiichi Shibusawa.

degradation at an enormous scale.<sup>4</sup>The race toward economic growth and energy creation is ongoing, and it is admittedly much needed in order to overcome poverty and improve the standards of living. However, the costs of such growth, including environmental damage and human health problems, are rarely factored in. Such ‘progress’ has come at a price for both people and the ‘living’ planet.<sup>5</sup>

For instance, the recent global spread of COVID-19 has changed the world dramatically and has placed global society in trouble. People are struggling with the virus as they have with the disappearance of a clear blue sky; although, the constraints brought about by COVID-19, such as the decrease in economic activities, have ironically brought back the ‘temporal’ yet ‘clear blue sky.’ Although a blue sky is back, ‘staying healthy’ has virtually become a difficult dream for the majority of humans. Years ago, the continuous fight for a blue sky was one of the toughest challenges we were facing, especially in urban and industrial areas of the globe. Today, we wear the mask again to fight against the virus.

The blue sky, like fighting against the virus, comes and goes like a flash. Every time the virus arrives, the heavy cost is incurred due to lockdowns, the shutdown of industries, closing restaurants, cut off services, and so forth. Modern people are creating great ecological problems because of their attempts to encounter—and conquer—nature in a less moral way. We also have to take note that COVID-19 derives from zoonotic diseases that the once-clear boundary between the humans and the animals are easily being crossed. In considering the harmonious living environment, we have to rethink what kind of life the younger and future generations will have within the context of a counterbalance between the prosperous economy and the environmental issues.

In the pursuit of material wealth, some people have lost their humanity as well as their values related to responsibility. With the superficial improvement of the material life, spiritual life declines, and moral cultivation deteriorates. Today in Asian countries, people face a crisis of belief, moral decline, and loss of conscience, all of which collectively indicate a grievous loss in the spirit of humanity.<sup>6</sup>People seldom reflect upon their overly unethical and uncaring actions related to the abundance of material wealth, and the contrast between material desires and moral life collides in the form of masks. People living on this planet must not only attempt to transcend limitations by means of applied science and technology, but also find a path (way or *dao* 道) to regain the implementation of Confucian virtue ethics, which has long been

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<sup>4</sup>John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 2014), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. p.3.

<sup>6</sup>Fang Litian, “The Modern Significance of Some Basic Concepts in Chinese Buddhism,” *Confucianism and Spiritual Traditions in Modern China and Beyond*, eds. Fenggang Yang and Joseph B. Tamney, trans. Chi-ying Alice Wang (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 175.

a core ideology that united East Asian countries, China, Korea, and Japan. Space, or a room in several contexts such as mental space, personal space, both ontologically and virtually too, is needed for the reconstruction of moral ethics.

Human belief helps shape how we treat other humans, the world, and nature. It can also provide stories and narratives that aid us in interpreting who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going.<sup>7</sup> For Tucker and Grim, ‘Religions generate worldviews and ethics which underlie fundamental attitudes and values of different cultures and societies.’<sup>8</sup>In this sense, religions provide a foundation for worldly morality and a moral life shaped by faith. Similarly, Weber states, ‘The valuation of the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs is as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume. This was which inevitably gave every-day worldly activity a religious significance.’<sup>9</sup>

Confucianism, which had interacted with Daoism (its main competitor during ancient periods), Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam at different points in time, can be considered the original and most influential Chinese morality that also affected other Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Korea and Japan, for its way of thought. Therefore, Confucian ethics are undoubtedly the most profound values to study not only in the Chinese context but also for the Asian context. As the original moral code that had informed Chinese society for millennia, Confucianism provides models to guide the flourishing of the self, society, and nature. Thus, it is urgently important to retrieve, re-evaluate, and reconstruct Confucian ethics by drawing on key thinkers and texts from the classical tradition and by exploring their significant contributions. In doing so, we may be able to ascertain an applicable spiritual cultivation model for modern China and beyond.

C.S. Lewis writes, ‘The longest way round is the shortest way home.’<sup>10</sup>The shortest and hardest but only way home is (how) to live morally in an imperfect and materialistic world. Living a moral life is not doing something great. It requires us to develop the patience to slow down, to be concerned with the living environment that surrounds us. In this vein, one of the strengths of Confucian ethics is the humanistic concern of social responsibility, as indicated by the Confucian values of righteousness.

## **HARMONY BETWEEN MORALITY AND MATERIALITY IN CONFUCIANISM**

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<sup>7</sup>Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, “Foreword,” in *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape*, eds. Norman J. Girardot, James Miller and Xiaogan Liu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. xiv.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1930), p. 83.

<sup>10</sup>C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins, [1952] 2012), p. 5.

In this section, interpretations of traditional Confucian values of righteousness are offered to challenge extreme economic growth value judgments. The environmental problem in China and other Asian countries clearly includes many factors that require more in-depth study than we can provide here. Yet this study posits to address the environmental problem as a moral crisis: humans tend to pursue unlimited profit, and therefore righteousness is gradually marginalised. Following this perspective, Confucian ethics need to be re-examined in light of—rather than a barrier to—economic development, especially since beliefs regarding the relationship between economic growth and righteousness are profoundly influenced by orientation. Notwithstanding the seemingly distant relationship between economic growth and righteousness, righteousness actually measures effective economic growth.

Confucianism has been applied to philosophical and ethical teachings.<sup>11</sup> It is a tradition of scholarship, a religion, a social ethic, and a state ideology.<sup>12</sup> It evolved from the Shang-Zhou culture, which was founded by Confucius (tr. 551–479 BCE) during the Spring and Autumn period,<sup>13</sup> and was reshaped by Mencius (tr. 371–289 BCE) and Xunzi (tr. 298–230 BCE) during the Warring States period.<sup>14</sup> Confucianism gained its eminence during the Han Dynasty (206BCE–220CE). In the Song Dynasty (960–1279), impetus developed among scholars to re-examine the Confucian tradition, and this gave Confucianism a new direction, namely Neo-Confucianism. There are three traditions of thought that can be traced as the main sources of Neo-Confucianism: Confucianism; Buddhism, together with Daoism via the medium of Chan Buddhism; and Daoist religion. Neo-Confucianism came to be divided into two main schools. The first is *Lixue* 理学, or the School of Principle, which was pioneered by Cheng Yi (1033–1107) and completed by Zhu Xi(1130–1200). The other is *Xinxue* 心学, or the School of Mind, initiated by Cheng Hao(1032–1085), continued by Lu Jiuyuan(1139–1193), and completed by Wang Yangming (1472–1528).

Confucianism was taken as the founding ideology of the feudal (shogunate) and monarchical systems not only in mainland China but also in Korea and Japan.

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<sup>11</sup>Mei Yang, *Liberty in Harmony: An Integration of Confucian Harmony and Liberalism in Contemporary China*. In: *Vienna Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 7, Vienna: Praesens, 2015. pp. 227-245.

<sup>12</sup>John Makeham, *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup>It was one of the founders of the Italian Jesuit Chinese Mission, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), who was the first to use the Latin name “Confucius” in the West (Littlejohn 2011: xiii). “Confucius” is a Latinisation of the Chinese name *Kong Fuzi* 孔夫子, which means Master Kong and is in turn a reverent title for *KǒngQīū* 孔丘 or *KǒngZhòngní* 孔仲尼. Confucius lived during the later part of the Spring and Autumn period (722-481 BCE).

<sup>14</sup>The Spring and Autumn period (722–481 BCE) and the Warring States period (480–221 BCE) are two sub-periods within the *Eastern Zhou*.

However, the strong influence brought by Western countries has led to a decline in Confucian morality in the 20th century. In 1915, Chinese intellectuals inaugurated a “New Culture Movement” that sought fundamental changes to Chinese values, practices, and even the Chinese language.<sup>15</sup> Confucianism had lost its traditional strength in its homeland but survives in countries like Korea and Japan as a moral ground of the society.<sup>16</sup> Today, there is a trend to revive Confucianism in contemporary China. For example, there has been growing interest in Confucianism not limited to China’s intellectuals.<sup>17</sup>

### **Economic growth and Righteousness in Zhouyi**

*Yijing* 易经 (Book of Changes) is interpreted by Confucians as a treatise on metaphysics, but it was originally a book of divination.<sup>18</sup> The *Zhouyi Zhengyi* 周易正義 states, ‘Profit is the wholes of righteousness.’ Herein lie the distinction and congruence between *yi* and *li*. Economic growth is a holistic part of righteousness. If pre-existing economic growth were not able to attain the standard of righteousness, it would be abandoned because the purpose of pursuing profit is to bring profit to all, i.e. righteousness. Yet in modern marketing, the roles of the part and the whole are reversed: righteousness has become a marginalised part, and economic growth has become the sovereign whole. Through a re-examination of the debates related to economic growth and righteousness in *Zhouyi*, it becomes clear that to seek profit simply for its own sake is, in fact, to entirely abandon the whole: we would struggle to survive in a world purposely driven by economic growth world that does not profit all, but only enriches the partial members of the society. Therefore, the whole of righteousness is profit, which constitutes, determines, and controls profit.

#### *Economic growth and Righteousness in Analects*

*Analects* (*Lunyu*) is a collection of sayings, brief discussions, and observations made by and about Confucius, his disciples, and his contemporaries. *Analects* is an obscure English word, which is taken from the Greek *analekta* or selection<sup>19</sup>,

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<sup>15</sup>Stephen C. Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup>Fan Ruiping. *Confucian Bioethics* (Hingham, USA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup>At the start of the new millennium, the intellectual circle of Confucian studies has rapidly expanded, with Confucian intellectual discourses proliferating and increasingly influential in China’s symbolic environment. (cf. Pang, Qin. *State-Society Relations and Confucian Revivalism in Contemporary China*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 125.)

<sup>18</sup>Feng Youlan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Wenyi Publishers, [1947] 2012), p. 372.

<sup>19</sup>Barry C. Keenan, *Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011) p. 4.

conventionally used as a translation of the Chinese *Lunyu*, which means ‘selected sayings.’<sup>20</sup>

With regard to the virtues of the individual, Confucius emphasised that righteousness is the ethical principle of the noble man. A typical expression of the importance of righteousness is found in the following:

The Master said: ‘The noble man is aware of righteousness, the inferior man is aware of profit.’ (Analects 4.16) This distinction is of utmost importance as a moral teaching aimed to educate the noble man. The noble man should know how to control their eagerness to profit. But this saying is generally misunderstood, and is often read insofar as to prevent the noble man from acquiring profit, and to denote that people who seek profit are inferior. In the social context within which Confucius lived, hierarchical status was rigid. Here ‘noble man’ and ‘inferior man’ do refer to hierarchical status, and the noble man as a ruler must abandon unlimited profit for himself by following the virtue of righteousness so as to achieve a harmonious community that brings profit to all.<sup>21</sup> This is the part of righteousness that determines the whole of profit. The distinctive relation is that Confucius did advocate that the noble man should be above the goal of obtaining personal profit, but he did not reject acquiring profit for the sake of common people. The moral cultivation of righteousness necessary for the noble man is to naturalise the harmonious relation of hierarchy by moral power, and this political principle is still appropriate for modern East Asian society.

### **Economic growth and Righteousness in Mengzi**

For Mencius, righteousness is one of the most important virtues; it is the consummation of one’s moral self-cultivation.<sup>22</sup> The opening of *Mengzi* outlines the debate between ‘economic growth’ and ‘righteousness,’ stating that benevolence can maintain social order. Otherwise, officials would merely seek economic growth, leading to chaos. Therefore, Mencius saw ‘righteousness’ as having the highest importance as described below:

Mencius went to see King Hui of Liang. The King said: ‘My good man, since you haven’t thought one thousand *li* too far to come and see me, may I presume that you have something with which I can profit my kingdom?’

Mencius said: ‘Why must you speak of profit? What I have for you is Humaneness and Righteousness, and that’s all. If you always say how I can profit my kingdom?’ your top officers will ask, “how can we profit our clans?” The elites (*shi*) and the

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>21</sup>Such notion is well known among Japanese businessmen through Eiichi Shibusawa’s “An Interpretation of the life of Viscount Shibusawa” (1938).

<sup>22</sup>Wang Huaiyu. “The Way of Heart: Mencius’ Understanding of Righteousness,” *Philosophy East and West* 59, (2009): 322.

common people will ask: “How can we profit ourselves?” Superiors and inferiors will struggle against each other for profit, and the country will be in chaos.’

‘In a kingdom of ten thousand chariots, the murderer of the sovereign is usually from a clan of one thousand chariots. In a thousand-chariot kingdom, the murderer of the sovereign is usually from a clan of one hundred chariots. Now, to have a thousand in ten thousand, or one hundred in a thousand is not a small number. But if you put due-giving last and profit first, no one will be satisfied unless they can grab something.’

Political justifications for a humane government are explored at greater length in the *Mengzi*. Cultivated humaneness and rightness become the two virtues grounding all moral and political life, both of which are nurtured initially in familial relationships and extendable to other appropriate social ties. Both virtues are intended to be augmented by wise elaborations, ritual articulateness, and harmonious music (*Mengzi*1A:7; 4A:27).

From the statements above, we can see that Mencius is very much against a focus on profit and material gain. In such a context, the faith of righteousness provides a spiritual solution. Maintaining righteousness is very important; and in this principle, there are tendencies toward asserting a humanely inspired form of social righteousness based on a positive account of human nature. Educating people to think and follow this positive account of human nature is the righteousness that Mencius discusses.

### **Economic growth and Righteousness in the Daxue 大学**

Righteousness constitutes the foundation of human society as it lays down the manner through which appropriate distribution of duties and desired outcomes are determined in a political community.<sup>23</sup> In Neo-Confucianism, harmony between morality and materiality is of the highest importance for maintaining good social order in the nation. To make this point, we quote a passage from the traditional commentary of the *Daxue*:

‘One who rules a state or a clan, who sacrifices himself to wealth and its usage, must be under the influence of an inferior man. He may regard him as good, but if this man handles the affairs of the state or clan, calamities from Heaven and harm from men will be visited upon him. Even if a good man is finally found, what can he do? Thus the saying: ‘A state does not benefit from economic growth, it benefits from Righteousness.’<sup>24</sup>

The policymakers are akin to the ‘one who rules a state.’ If they are concerned with profit for the self, the state is endangered by corruption. Therefore, the essence of the rule is moral self-cultivation as a way of achieving harmony and peace among communities and nations. Cultivation ranges from investigating things in order to

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<sup>23</sup>Wang, “The Way of Heart,” p. 317.

<sup>24</sup>“The Great Learning 大學” in *Resources for East Asian Language and Thought*, ed. and trans., A. Charles Muller, (4 July 1992), <http://www.acmuller.net/con-dao/greatlearning.html>.

extend one's knowledge, and making one's intentions sincere in order to rectify one's mind, to cultivating oneself and harmonising one's family in order to govern the state and bring peace to the world. The cultivation of the person is linked directly to social identity and tied to the health of the family. The regulation of the family extends out to bring about tranquillity in the state, and finally, the world.<sup>25</sup>

### **Reactions to Economic Growth without Righteousness: From Theory to Practice in the Discourse of Virtue**

Earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Confucianism was often taken to be an obstacle to modernisation. More recently, Confucian work ethic and encouragement of learning have been credited with giving East Asian peoples the motivation, discipline, and skills necessary to engage in many essential processes of modernisation.<sup>26</sup> Today, the same elements, now politically well-established and inclined to emphasise stability as the key to sustainable economic progress, hope that the revival of traditional Confucian values will contribute to self-discipline and to the maintenance of social order.<sup>27</sup> Thus, efforts should be given to revive Confucian moral teachings in social practice. For instance, righteousness in Confucian thinking means the 'oughtness' of a situation. Everyone in society has certain things that must be done for their own sake because those are the morally right things to do.<sup>28</sup> One does what one ought to do, simply because it is morally right to do it, and not for any consideration external to this moral compulsion.<sup>29</sup>

Since 2015, the United Nations have adopted the Sustainable Development Goals – the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. The emergence of COVID-19 has underscored the relationship between people and nature.<sup>30</sup> Contemporary society has to solve the imbalance between economic development and ideological reconstruction. As discussed above, the concept of economic growth and righteousness must be re-examined, and the persistent part for the whole concept must be redefined. Consolidating and resolving these conflicts is an essential aspect of attaining progressive and continuous development.

<sup>25</sup>Keenan, *Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation*, p. 61.

<sup>26</sup>Wm. Theodore de Bary, "Confucian Education in Premodern East Asia," in *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons*, ed. Tu Weiming (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 21.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Feng, Youlan. *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Wenyi Publishers, [1947] 2012, p. 375.

<sup>29</sup>Feng, Youlan. *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Wenyi Publishers, [1947] 2012, p. 377.

<sup>30</sup> Sustainable Development Goals of the UN  
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-consumption-production/>

There is a gap between theory and practice in universalising Confucian ethics. As Bell notes, ‘progressive and humane Confucian values need to be translated into practice.’<sup>31</sup> The gap between the ideal and the social attention given to the realisation of such an ideal is evident. To reinterpret the ideology into the actual practices is a serious task for new Confucians and the re-modernisation of Confucian ethics. It may determine whether the present moral crisis will be finally resolved in a progressive direction.

The role and function of Confucian ethics amidst the modern transformation caused by rapid industrialisation and its associated environmental problems, especially in Asian countries, must be emphasised. In this study, Confucian ethics is identified as a positive factor. The underlying assumption that culture matters and that economic facts and political institutions are laden with cultural values is neither revitalised nor relegated to a residual category.<sup>32</sup> Progressive Confucian ethical traditions aimed at the well-being of the nation are formed to achieve both material and spiritual flourishing. Righteousness can enhance the public good. Thus, this section begins by presenting a review of the selected literature on the nature of virtue ethics from the perspective of the philosophy of religion.

### **Confucian Virtue Ethics**

Confucianism is best understood through ideas about virtue (*de*, 德), and those subjects that follow in their wake are most notably conceptions of the self.

Virtue has traditionally been conceptualised as the power to move others without exerting physical force. Confucius uses it to describe the charisma of *Zhou* rulers who won their universal allegiance. He moralises and widens the concept such that virtue becomes the capacity to recognise, understand, and perform the way (*dao*, 道). Since Confucian *de* (virtue) has been paired with *dao* (the way) and has had a moral meaning, the universal way and virtue are united in Confucian ethics. For Confucians, the self is endowed with a transcendental ‘spirit’ that, if fully developed, would enable one to be a coordinator of the world and a partner in the creative transformation of Heaven and Earth.<sup>33</sup>

Virtue refers to the inner integrity, charismatic influence, evocative attractiveness, or transformative quality of someone. The term also refers to that power itself, which

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<sup>31</sup>Daniel A. Bell, *China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. xxi.

<sup>32</sup>Tu Weiming, “Introduction,” in *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons*, ed. Tu Weiming (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 5.

<sup>33</sup>Liu Yuli, “Confucianism and Virtue Ethics,” in *Routledge Curzon Encyclopedia of Confucianism*, ed. Yao Xinzong (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp. 152.

is beyond any particularity of instantiation.<sup>34</sup>The manifestation of this inner power is marked by the ability to interact effectively with and to transform others. Inner power is invisible but strongly present. The ‘Book of Documents (*Shang Shu*, 尚書)’ describes a single or unified virtue known as Heaven that marks the ability not only to communicate with other human beings but also with spirits. Spirits are themselves possessed of virtue (*Zhongyong* 16: 1). Its absence within a ruler results in the loss of the mandate of Heaven, a dissociation of cosmic proportions.

Confucius believed that the source of his own virtue was Heaven, and that such virtue needed cultivation. Although cultivated within the context of human relationships, inner power lies outside overly conventional mores.<sup>35</sup>The cultivation of virtue is a key element in the *Great Learning*, which outlines eight steps (*batiaomu*) for making one’s inner power luminous (*ming*)—the luminous character of spirits and of humans who refine their spirit-like aspects. These steps involve a process of self-cultivation that begins with the ordering of one’s inner life and is then extended concentrically to one’s family, then their state, and eventually affecting the entire world.

In his ‘Treatise on Humaneness(仁書)’, Zhu Xi speaks of the moral qualities of the mind and of Heaven and Earth as fourfold, namely, origination, flourishing, advantage, and firmness. These correspond to the four moral qualities of humans (humanness, righteousness, rites, and wisdom). The cosmological are origination, as well as the human virtues, are seen as part of one dynamic process of transformation in the universe.<sup>36</sup>For Zhu Xi, as for Confucius, virtue was received from Heaven. Nevertheless, Zhu Xi further understood inner power in terms of principle and human desires. Whereas virtue is replete with principle, it could also potentially be obscured by human desires; in which case, it could be reinvigorated with self-cultivation. Similarly, for Wang Yangming (王阳明), the elimination of selfish human desires is imperative for the illumination of virtue, but his goal is to restore the condition of being one body with Heaven, Earth, and all things.

Following this, the cultural historian, Thomas Berry, speaks about environmental degradation as ultimately disastrous for the human community while indicating a path forward. The apocalyptic tone in his writing is prompted by his perception of humans as distancing themselves from the Earth community. He senses that humans have lost

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<sup>34</sup>Deborah Sommer, “De,” in *Routledge Curzon Encyclopedia of Confucianism*, ed. Yao Xinzong (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 185.

<sup>35</sup>Deborah Sommer, “De,” in *Routledge Curzon Encyclopedia of Confucianism*, ed. Yao Xinzong (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 185.

<sup>36</sup>Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong, “Introduction,” in *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. xxxvii.

their way from being integrated into a larger cosmology.<sup>37</sup> Berry believes that Confucian virtue makes the part and the whole interact as dimensions of each other. This tradition leads to an integrated social mode of being, never exalting the individual as having the ultimate value in themselves. What is developed is a remarkable sense not of individualism but of humanity having both a microphase and a macrophase. The microphase is the limited particularity of the individual in himself/herself; the macro-phase is the same individual as present within the entire order or reality. The ‘profound person’ of *the Doctrine of the Doctrine of the Doctrine of the Mean* is clearly the individual who, through the virtue of authenticity, has activated to his or her highest expression both the micro-phase and the macro-phase of one’s own humanity.<sup>38</sup> When all is said and done, living creatures, that is not only limited to human beings, grow without harming one another, and live in ways that run parallel without interfering with each other (*The Doctrine of the Doctrine of the Doctrine of the Doctrine of the Mean*).

For the Confucian tradition as a whole, the idea of self-cultivation implies a ‘creative transformation’ such that one (human) forms a triad with Heaven and Earth (天地人). Underlying this dynamic triad is the assumption that we are interconnected with all of reality, and this acts toward the overriding goal of self-cultivation. Thus, through the deepening of this creative linkage with all things, human beings may participate fully in the transformative aspects of the universe.<sup>39</sup>

Righteousness (*yi*, 義) is one of the most prominent master virtues. Mencius has two divergent views of cosmology: one that supports humaneness, and one that supports righteousness. We believe that Confucian virtue is progressive, and that humans are all going through the non-static and learning process of ‘human-becoming’ in order to acquire an inner-virtue within oneself.<sup>40</sup> In the context of ‘human-becoming’ in aligning with the ‘living world’ perhaps we might well say that humans are not only

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<sup>37</sup>John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, “Thomas Berry: Reflections on His Life and Thought,” *Teilhard Studies* (New York: Teilhard Association, Fall 2010), p. 12.

<sup>38</sup>Thomas Berry, “Individualism and Holism in Chinese Traditions: The Religious Cultural Context,” in *Confucian Spirituality*, eds. Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Crossroad, 2003), pp. 44.

<sup>39</sup>Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong, “Introduction,” in *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. xxxvii.

<sup>40</sup>According to the communication with Dr. Roger Ames (8th October 2020), he mentioned that “the interpretive context for Mencius is a shared *Yijing qi* cosmology in which *ren* and *yi* are complimentary pro-social inclinations.” In regard to “human-becoming” *ren* (仁) is the bases of everything. *Ren* is even the basis between *li* (利) and *yi* (義). When it is interpreted into human-becoming *ren* becomes the bases of relationships that makes possible the *yi* and *li*, therefore the triad relationship of *ren*, *yi*, and *li* are complimentary with each other.

‘human-becoming’ in an anthropocentric note, but ‘human-co-becoming’ in interconnectivity with the other living things and the living planet, the Earth.

### **Concluding Remarks**

East Asian countries have been making great achievements in countless fields. However, for the region as a whole, we believe there is still a long way to go before we can build a sustainable and prosperous region for the future. When we focus on each East Asian country, much space and room for development are revealed, not only in the economic field, but also in terms of the moral cultivation that has long been forgotten. This space for moral development and cultivation must be given first for righteousness, i.e., harmony between morality and materiality, as well as harmony between different cultures and nations, harmony between humans and nature.

We need to find a path that will lead to balance the conflict between ‘economic growth’ and ‘righteousness.’ The imbalance between morality and materiality is the presupposed contradiction of ‘economic growth’ and ‘righteousness.’ Profit has become the whole, full of tension and insecurity. ‘Righteousness’ has been marginalised, and this, in fact, has become the most significant barrier to the further progress of the so-called successful model of the rapid economic growth of East Asian countries, not only in China but also including countries such as Korea and Japan (Japan is famous for its several pollution-related diseases that shadow her rapid economic growth: e.g. from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Ashio copper mine to the 20<sup>th</sup> century Minamata disease).

For Confucians, the selfish desire for material self-interest powerfully corrodes social bonds and affections. The warnings of the Confucians may seem anachronistic in today’s East Asian countries, where Humanity and its Duty are swamped by conspicuous profit, but reconstructing righteousness by bridging theory and practice for Confucian ethics remains an urgent task. As Professor of World Religions and Anthropology, Lawrence E. Sullivan puts it:

A geology of the religious spirit of humankind can well serve our need to relate fruitfully to the Earth and its myriad life-forms. Changing our habits of consumption and patterns of distribution, reevaluating modes of production, and reestablishing a strong sense of solidarity with the matrix of material life—these achievements will arrive along with spiritual modulations that unveil attractive new images of well-being and prosperity, respecting the limits of life in a sustainable world while revering life at its sources.<sup>41</sup>

The ‘spiritual modulation’ in this paper is taken to be ‘righteousness’ as framed by Confucian ethics—an ethical part for a desirable whole. The reconstruction of Confucian ethical orientation is still under progress—at least after confronting the spiritual crisis over economic development. A more sustainable and practical form of

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<sup>41</sup>L. E. Sullivan, “Preface,” in *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape*, eds. N. J. Girardot, J. Miller, and Liu Xiaogan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. xi.

progress is needed in this rapidly evolving nation and in our shared world in order to attain structural evolution and transformation. In other words, there is a need to translate the Confucian ethical ideology into practical work, that is, to tie the ethics into the morality of our daily life.

In closing, the virtue of Confucian righteousness should be the principle for and essence of economic growth, especially in the Asian countries where the historical evidence proves Confucian ethics has once been dominant morality of the society. By reconstructing faith in virtue, people may place greater importance upon environmental ethics. This then becomes one of the spiritual solutions for today's environmental problems that counterbalance the created conflict between materiality and morality.

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### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We deeply thank for Prof. Mary Evelyn Tucker's invaluable suggestions to the manuscript. We (Maki Sato and Mei Yang) both cherish the time we spent together at Yale and enjoyed the inspirational discussion with Prof. Tucker so much.

We thank for Prof. Martin Schonfeld from the University of South Florida for his generous help. We actively communicated until the beginning of June 2020. It is so sad that he passed away later. We hope this work will reflect our deepest sympathies and eternal grateful memories towards Prof. Schonfeld.

### **DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### **FUNDING**

This work was supported by [the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Project funded by China's Ministry of Education] under grant [number 18YJAZH113]; and [Jilin Provincial Social Sciences Research Project] under Grant [2021J47]; and [Jilin University] under Grant [2019GJTD02].

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