



Analysis of the relationship between heaven and man in Neo-Confucianism from an ecological perspective

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Neo-Confucianism's understanding of the relationship between heaven and man greatly reflects their view of nature and their aesthetic pursuits. Confucianism revolves around the perfection of human virtue, and the profundity of its theory of the relationship between heaven and humanity lies in the recognition of the value of all natural things. Therefore, the Confucian view of nature and humans emphasises the Unity of Heaven and Man by virtue. The concept of 'the Unity of Heaven and Man by virtue' unfolds the characteristic of symbiosis between humans and all things, which is manifested by the natural view of oneness of all things. The virtue of Sheng reflects the natural aesthetic consciousness of Confucianism. In Confucianism, virtue and beauty are unified, and this characteristic is mainly manifested as the beauty of ShengSheng. Sheng is not only a kind of great virtue but also a kind of great beauty, and the idea of the beauty of ShengSheng embodies the Confucian pursuit of the beauty of natural life.

Contribution: This article mainly examines the relationship between humans and heaven in Neo-Confucianism. In particular, it focusses on the thought of 'the Unity of Heaven and Man', and analyses the natural aesthetic influence of this thought.

Keywords: Neo-Confucianism; the unity of heaven and man; nature; aesthetic; ShengSheng; oneness of all things.

Introduction

Since ancient times, China has taken the relationship between *Tian* [天] and humans as the core clue throughout the problems of humans and nature, and Confucianism is even called the study of *Tian* and human. This article mainly focusses on three aspects. The first part analyses the concept of *Tian* in ancient China, so as to determine the understanding of nature in Confucianism. Traditional Chinese philosophy lacks the term 'nature' in the context of modern civilisation, but the relationship between *Tian* and humans served as the central clue throughout the problems of humans and nature. As a result, it was necessary to define the various meanings of *Tian* and the usage of *Tian* in Neo-Confucianism. In the second part, through discussing the relationship between heaven and humanity in Neo-Confucianism, it states that the overall attitude of Confucianism towards nature is the Unity of Heaven and Man by virtue ([天人合德] Tianren Hede). Chinese culture contains the idea of taking heaven and earth as the parents of all things, and taking humans as the spirit of all things. Humans can achieve unity with nature through virtue cultivation. The so-called Unity of Heaven and Man by virtue is the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature from ontology; thus, Confucianism shows a philanthropic attitude towards nature. The third part discusses the influence of Confucian 'the Unity of Heaven and Man by virtue' on people's natural aesthetic consciousness. In Confucianism, the unity of humans and nature is built on the basis of morality. The virtue of Sheng [生德] reflects the unity of beauty and virtue, and embodies the pursuit of the natural aesthetic consciousness of Confucianism. Nature and all things are full of vitality from the perspective of ShengSheng [生生], which has also become a major goal of Chinese aesthetics.

The multiple connotations of *Tian*

Tian is one of the most important categories in the Chinese philosophical system in the pre-Qin period, and many scholars have discussed the connotation of *Tian*. In *Shuowen Jiezi* [说文解字], *Tian* is interpreted as 'the supreme, referring to the one and the largest' ([至高无上, 从一大] zhigaowushang, cong'yida); thus, the basic characteristics of *Tian* can also be summarised as large and high. Different philosophers interpret the dimension of *Tian* in different ways. In general, this article adopts Zhang

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Dainian¹ and Song Zhiming's view of understanding *Tian* from three dimensions: the supreme ruler, heaven (the source of rationality) and the natural world.

The supreme ruler

The word supreme ruler ([主宰之天] zhuzai zhitian) means Huangtian [皇天] and regards *Tian* as an object of religious worship. The concept of the supreme ruler has a long and influential history. As a personality god in the religious sense, the supreme ruler has the characteristics of controlling all things, which are closely related to the worship of nature in primitive religion. As Chen Lai [陈来] pointed out, 'The first form of sacrificial worship in human history may be the worship of natural objects and natural forces' (Lai 2002:18). According to the existing oracle bone inscriptions, as early as the Shang Dynasty, people had distinguished the natural gods² from ancestral gods. Judging from the sacrificial categories of the Shang Dynasty, they believed in polytheism. Furthermore:

[T]he supreme gods of the divine kingdom are transformed from natural gods who play a larger role and are developed from the functional gods who are most closely connected with natural life. (Daji 1994:664)

The objects of sacrifice are primarily natural gods and ancestral gods. In the process of sacrifice, the status of natural gods is higher than that of ancestral gods. As a result, natural gods enjoyed a higher level of sacrifice and more offerings.

To some extent, this worship of the force of nature became a criterion for dealing with the relationship between heaven and humanity in the later slave society, and the human reverence for nature was expressed in the authority of *Tian*. The *Tian* that appeared in the literature of the Yin and Shang Dynasties was more of a religious concept in the sense of worshipping nature. Rulers often borrowed the concept of *Tian* to ensure the authority and legitimacy of their reign. During this period, the term *Tian* was largely used with the term Emperor ([帝] di) to express the concept of shangdi 上帝 [God], which is a kind of god with its own personality. At the time of the fall of the Yin Dynasty, the early Zhou politicians represented by the Duke of Zhou further supplemented the intention of *Tian* in order to meet the demands of people, just as Roške (2023) said:

In the Shang Dynasty, *Tian* became the supreme deity of the state religion, and this did not change significantly until the period marking the transition from the Western to the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (eighth century BC) (pp. 83–94)

In response to the original theory of religious destiny, the Duke of Zhou [周公] complemented it by proposing the

1. According to Zhang Dainian, the meaning of the so-called *Tian* in ancient China is rather complicated. In the Yin and Zhou dynasties, *Tian* referred to God, while *Tian* in *Xunzi* and *Zhuangzi* referred to the natural world. The *Tian* of Confucius and Mencius is a vague concept, and its meaning is not clear.

2. In ancient China, most of the gods originated from nature, and the earliest form of human worship was nature worship, which was closely related to the historical circumstances in which they lived at that time. Therefore, the scope of natural gods is actually very extensive. In addition to the general sense of the god of mountains and rivers, there are also wind and rain, stars, and the god of animals and plants in nature, such as in the *Book of Rites* [礼记] which has a saying: 'mountains, forests, rivers, valleys, and hills, can produce clouds, rain, and monsters, all can be called gods' [山林川谷丘陵, 能出云, 为风雨, 见怪物, 皆曰神。].

theory of matching *Tian* with virtue ([以德配天] yide peitian). In addition, the Duke of Zhou pointed out that if the emperor does not pay attention to virtue, he will lose his throne soon. If the king has no virtue, then 'Tian' will take over.

Heaven

Heaven (the source of rationality) is also called the Moral *Tian* ([道德之天] daode zhitian) or the Ethical *Tian* ([伦理之天] lunli zhitian), emphasising the significance of *Tian* as the source of morality, that is, the transcendent meaning in the philosophical sense. The Duke of Zhou proposed that rulers should match *Tian* with virtue, which created the ethical significance of *Tian* and its maturity was gradually perfected in the Confucian school represented by Confucius. The basic attitude of Confucius towards *Tian* is the fearing of the Mandate of Heaven ([畏天命] wei tianming). He emphasised that 'He who does not understand the will of Heaven cannot be regarded as a gentleman' (The Analects, Yao Yue. translated by Waley 2008:233). Under the premise of fearing of the Mandate of Heaven and knowing the Mandate of Heaven ([知天命] zhi tianming), Confucius affirmed *Tian* as the supreme ruler. Confucius said, 'Heaven does not speak; yet the four seasons run their course thereby, the hundred creatures, each after its kind, are born thereby. Heaven does no speaking!' (The Analects, Yang Huo. translated by Waley 2008:205). Although *Tian* is speechless, it dominates the change of the four seasons and the birth and destruction of all things. Thus, Confucius not only emphasised the Mandate of Heaven, but he also said: 'If we really wanted Goodness, we should find that it was at our very side' (The Analects, Shu Er. translated by Waley 2008:73). It can be seen that it is not necessary to rely on the Mandate of Heaven to become a benevolent person. As Fuguan (2004) said:

The Confucian thought established by Confucius, on the one hand, often talks about the problem of *Tian* from the objective position; but the Heaven or the Mandate of Heaven shown in moral practice is actually the expression of original heart/mind ([本心] benxin). (p. 29)

After Confucius, Mencius started the theory of good nature ([性善论] xingshanlun) and demonstrated the priority of morality from the perspective of the Mandate of Heaven. Mencius associated heaven with the human mind and believed that humans should begin with inner virtue and work their way up through cultivation to the lofty realm of the Unity of Heaven and Man ([天人合一] tianren heyi). He also stressed that people should take the initiative to settle the fate ([立命] liming) for themselves, saying: 'He, who has exhausted all his mental constitution knows his nature. knowing his nature, he knows Heaven' (The works of Mencius, Jin Xin. translated by Legge 2011:247). Thus, Mencius believes that, from a moral point of view, heaven and humanity are interlinked.

Natural world

During the spring and autumn periods, *Tian* becomes increasingly disconnected from its religious meaning and takes on the meaning of the natural world. During the Warring

States Period, Xunzi [荀子] proposed *the Theory of Tian* 天论 that the operation of *Tian* has its own *Chang* ([天行有常] *tianxing youchang*), where *Chang* 常 refers to laws and regulations. Obviously, the so-called *Tian* here is certainly not heaven, but can only be nature without will.³ Xunzi believed that there are rules to follow in nature. He claimed that:

The constellation follow their revolution; the sun and moon alternately shine; the four seasons present themselves in succession; the Yin and Yang enlarge and transform and the wind and rain spread out everywhere. (Xunzi II, *Tian Lun*, translated by Jhon 1999:535)

Xunzi believed that there are some rare physical phenomena, such as the eclipse of the sun and moon, unseasonable winds and rain, but there is no need to be scared of the mandate of heaven because of these phenomena. In short, in Xunzi's opinion, *Tian* is more like a physical world that can be recognised. The operation of nature itself has objective laws, and this operation law is independent of people. Xunzi called the laws of nature's operation *Chang*. He said, 'Heaven possesses a constant way; Earth has an invariable size' (XunziII, *Tian Lun*, translated by Jhon 1999:545). Therefore, Xunzi believed that *Tian* can be recognised and transformed.

Through the Confucian literature of the pre-Qin period, it can be found that the connotation of *Tian* in Confucianism mainly includes three dimensions: supreme ruler, heaven and natural world. However, the boundaries among the three dimensions of the conception of *Tian* is vague, and the use of *Tian* is intermingled even in the same literature. But the meaning of heaven had the greatest impact on later Confucianism, especially the views of humans and nature in Neo-Confucianism, which were largely based on heaven.

The natural view of the oneness of all things

Although *Tian* has multiple connotations, on the whole, the Confucian relationship between humans and nature is mainly based on the sense of heaven. As mentioned above, Confucius and Mencius' analysis of the relationship between nature and humans is based on the concept of comparing human morality with natural things⁴ ([比德] *bide*), and they regard *Tian* as the physical source of morality. That is why the Unity of Heaven and Man advocated by Confucianism can indeed be defined as the Unity of Heaven and Man by virtue. As Wang Yangming described:

For at bottom Heaven, Earth, the myriad things, and man form one body. The point at which this unity is manifested in its most refined and excellent form is the clear intelligence of the human

3. Of course, it should be made clear that the connotation of *Tian* in Xunzi's *the Theory of Tian* is not a single one; this *Tian* is not only the material nature, but also the moral Heaven.

4. It is a great tradition of Confucianism to compare mountains and rivers to virtue. Confucianism believes that mountains and rivers have virtue, as *the Analects* said: 'The wise man delights in water, the Good man delights in mountains. For the wise are move, but the Good stay still. The wise are happy, the Good, secure' (*The Analects*, Yong Ye, translated by Waley 2008:59–61).

mind. ([For Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yangming, translated by] Chan 1963:219–220)

The Confucian theory of the Unity of Heaven and Man by virtue is manifested in the natural view of oneness of all things ([万物一体] *wanwu yiti*). And the realm of oneness of all things is to admit that humans and all things share the same root, which is particularly prominent in Neo-Confucianism.

Zhang Zai [张载], one of the founders of Neo-Confucianism, proposed that 'Confucians understand the sincerity of natural law by observing human affairs, and the actions of humans are according to the natural law, so Heaven and man are integrated' (Zai 1978:65). Zai (1978) stated that heaven and humanity were originally one:

Qian 乾 should be called father and *Kun* 坤 should be called mother. Being so small, I was connected with them by blood and was in their midst. Therefore, the *qi* 气 of Heaven and earth formed my body, and the common sense of Heaven and earth formed my temperament. The people are my compatriots, and all things are my friends. (p. 62)

Heaven and earth are the parents of humans and all things, and I, like all things, was born between heaven and earth, with *qi* [气] constituting my body and the nature ([性] *xing*) of *qi* constitutes my nature. In this way, Zhang Zai explained, from the perspective of generativism, that humans and nature are born in heaven and earth. He therefore proposed, 'the people are my compatriots, and everything is my friend' ([民胞物与] *minbao wuyu*) and advocated universal love for nature. Zhang Zai believed that people and all things in nature have the same nature, so people should love everything. Zhang Zai's theory of 'the people are my compatriots, and everything is my friend' is based on the high unity of humans and nature. Thus, nature is an organic whole constantly evolving and created rather than the mechanical physical world.

When Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, the masters of Neo-Confucianism, developed Zhang Zai's idea of the Unity of Heaven and Man, it was expressed as the benevolence of all things as one ([万物一体之仁] *wanwu yiti zhiren*). Cheng Hao believed that Zhang Zai's *Heyi* 合一 still regarded heaven and humanity as different things; therefore, he proposed that 'inside and outside, up and down must be combined so as to form the idea of one Heaven-humanity ([一天人] *yitianren*)' (Hao & Yi 1981:59) and advocated abolishing the duality of heaven and humanity. The so-called *Heyi* in ancient times is synonymous with the so-called *Heyi* in modern languages. 'Heyi does not deny distinction, Heyi means that two opposing parties are closely connected and inseparable from each other' (Dainian 1985:22). Cheng Hao asked to cancel *Heyi*, and this seems to oppose the idea of the Unity of Heaven and Man, but actually Cheng Hao hoped to cancel the duality of heaven and humanity more completely. He proposed: 'There is no difference between Heaven and man, so there's no need to advocate *Heyi*' (Hao & Yi 1981:81). Therefore, from this point of view, he thought that once we talked about *Heyi*,

it was bound to cause the separation of heaven and humanity, which means heaven and humanity do not have the same root. Obviously, Cheng Hao thought that Zhang Zai's theory of heaven contained a crisis of duality between heaven and humanity, so he placed the external heaven in the human heart from an internal perspective. After establishing the principle of one heaven-humanity, Cheng Hao further put forward the benevolence of all things as one; he said: 'The benevolent man takes all things as part of his body, rather than isolating himself from them' (Hao & Yi 1981:16). He also said, 'For the benevolent man, the various beings between Heaven and earth are just like his body and limbs. There's no one who doesn't take care of their own body' (Hao & Yi 1981:74). In Cheng Hao's view, benevolence is being completely in the same body with thing. This means that the state of benevolence does not exist when the self is separated from other things and treats them as if they were their own body. He believed that the ego ([小我] xiaowo) should be abandoned in favour of accepting the oneness of all things as the greater self ([大我] dawo). This concept of the greater self expressed the meaning of universal love for all things in nature. His brother Cheng Yi continued Mencius' way of knowing the Mandate of Heaven, connecting human nature with heaven and the heart. He demonstrated the Unity of Heaven and Man through the Tao's holistic nature. He said, 'There is only one Tao. How can humanity and natural law be separated?' (Hao & Yi 1981:182). He believed that from the beginning to the end, there is only one Tao in the universe, and natural law and humanity are the different manifestations of the same Tao. 'Tao has no difference between Heaven and man, but in Heaven is natural law, in the earth is the way of the earth, and in man is humanity' (Hao & Yi 1981:282).

From the thoughts of Zhang Zai, Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, they all advocated the Unity of Heaven and Man by virtue. Zhang Zai used sincerity ([诚] cheng) to express the realm of 'the people are my compatriots, and everything is my friend', while Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi used benevolence ([仁] ren) to express the realm of the oneness of all things. Their thoughts contain the great love of nature, which is to transcend the limited ego to achieve the greater self. As Dainian (1985) said:

There is a popular view in the West that separating man from nature and affirming the differences between subject and object are human consciousness. However, Neo-Confucianism believed that the Unity of Heaven and Man was the consciousness of man. It should be admitted that this is a more profound view. If we agree that distinguishing the subject from the object and separating man from nature is the negation of the primitive and hazy consciousness. Then we can hardly disagree that affirming the unity of man and nature is the negation of negation, which is a higher level of understanding. (pp. 3–10)

Natural aesthetics from the perspective of being

From an ontological point of view, the Confucian natural view of oneness of all things shows the characteristics of the circulation between humans and nature. At the same time, it

highlights the beauty of the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Meng Peiyuan pointed that:

In Confucianism, man as the subject of value is the creative promotion and realization of the value of nature's intrinsic existence, rather than ascribing a certain value to nature from human interests. (Peiyuan 2004:65)

The fundamental feature of natural law is the law of ShengSheng ([生生之道] ShengSheng zhidao), that is the law of creation of all things in nature. This feature has become the key to the Unity of Heaven and Man by virtue and the fundamental attitude of Confucianism towards all things in nature.

What is the highest and truest morality between heaven and earth? In the *Zhou Book of Changes* [周易], it is proposed that the greatest virtue of heaven and earth is called Sheng, which means that nature is incessant and the fundamental virtue of heaven and earth is Sheng. From the point of view of the origin of life, the *Xici* [系辞] states that 'the result of the interplay of Heaven and earth and the union of Yin and Yang is the creation of all things' (Heng 2010:431). According to Confucianism, life is formed through the convergence of yinqi [阴气] and yangqi [阳气],⁵ both in human beings and in all things. So virtue is beauty, and beauty and virtue are unified. Therefore, the realm of oneness of all things is also a kind of beauty. All things in nature have the characteristic of Sheng, which is both a great virtue of heaven and earth and a great beauty, and this is the beauty of ShengSheng. Zeng Fanren [曾繁仁] once pointed out that one of the characteristics of the beauty of ShengSheng is the cultural tradition based on the Unity of Heaven and Man (Fanren 2019:8–12).

Fundamentally speaking, the source of Chinese culture begins with the study of Yi. Zongsan (2005:45) proposed that 'the beginning of Chinese culture focusses on life'; thus, the fundamental characteristic of the study of Yi is the concept of Sheng. It is written in the *Zhou Book of Changes* that the essence of Yi is Sheng, the process of creation is called Qian, and the process of imitation is called Kun. Therefore, the natural law summarised in the *Zhou Book of Changes* can be called Sheng. The original meaning of the word Sheng is to bear and nurture. In the Chinese oracle bone script, the word Sheng is depicted as a seedling just growing from the ground, and it can be seen that its meaning refers to the growth of plants. In *Shuowen Jiezi*, it is written that Sheng means that plants break through the soil and grow up. Therefore, the connotation of Sheng is the occurrence and growth of a natural innovation, and later it generally refers to the generation and growth of everything, such as birth, occurrence, and so on. In the Song and Ming dynasties, Sheng was regarded as the fundamental virtue of heaven and earth. Cheng Hao believed that heaven and earth obeyed the laws of nurturing life. He put forward that 'Endless changes are the content of Heaven. Heaven is just the principle of endless life; adhering to the principle of endless life is good' (Hao & Yi 1981:29). Therefore, Sheng is a

5. Some researchers have adopted the philosophical terminology of today's science, calling qi the unity of matter, energy and information, or the material energy field, which seems to accurately define the materiality, motion and continuity of the qi sphere, but inadvertently detracts from its vitality, spirituality and humanity (Jiazhu 2005:89–94).

kind of good; and in the Confucian view, good is also a kind of beauty. The beauty shown by the law of Sheng lies in the beauty of life. The *Zhou Book of Changes* elevates Sheng to a spirit, the spirit of innovation and change. This spirit of Sheng among heaven, earth and people has spread forever. It is precisely because of the existence of Sheng that everything in the universe can constantly grow and combine. Therefore, in the eyes of ancient Chinese people, all natural things are not only a simple material resource but also present the beauty of life. Just as Liu Yuxi said, no matter how high the mountain is, its name will spread far and wide if there is an immortal [山不在高, 有仙则名]. The meaning of Sheng is the same as that of full of life in nature, which is a spirit flowing in the universe of heaven and earth and the experience and fusion of emotional life.

Cheng Hao once said the following: Zhou Dunyi's [周敦颐] window was covered with grass, but he did not remove it. Someone asked him, and he said the grasses have life like himself. Weeds grow lushly, and ordinary people will pull them, but Zhou Dunyi allows them to grow. This shows Zhou Dunyi's respect and appreciation for natural life and reflects an aesthetic realm of the oneness of all things. Zhou Dunyi's practice also deeply influenced his disciples. It is recorded in the *Ideological Controversy of the Song-Yuan Period* [宋元学案]:

Although Cheng Hao's window is full of weeds, and he also did not clean them up. His family advised him to remove weeds, he said: No, I want to see nature in full bloom more often. (Zongxi 1982:578)

Not only that, he also prepared a basin to raise a few small fish, often watching the fish when he was free. When asked why he wanted to raise fish, Cheng Hao replied, 'What I watch is not fish, but the ease of all things' (Zongxi 1982:578). Grass and fish are common things in our daily lives, and people generally feel nothing when they see them. But when Cheng Hao saw the grass, he could think of the vitality of everything, and when he saw the fish, he could think of the ease of everything; this shows the aesthetic interest of Sheng. Confucianism believes that everything in nature has the virtue of the natural law, and therefore everything in nature also contains moral values.

Conclusion

Anthropocentric theory believes that humans regard themselves as the masters of all materials on the earth and all living animals, plants and inanimate minerals on the earth, and even the earth itself, are specially created for humans. In other words, in the sense of existence, it emphasises the central position of humans in nature, while at the value level, it believes in instrumental rationality and advocates science and technology. However, traditional Chinese Confucianism was contrary to this view.⁶ Confucianism's view of nature has

6. Along with the academic circle's reflection on the trend of anthropocentrism, some scholars believe that Confucianism is also a kind of anthropocentrism; but the Confucian anthropocentrism is different from the Western academic definition. Bai Xi said, 'The Confucian idea of ecological ethics is anthropocentrism in nature, but it is not interest-centered, but morality-centered, which constitutes an important difference from the Western traditional anthropocentrism'. And he argues that Confucian ecological ethics are humanism-centred or benevolent anthropocentrism (Xi 2004:22-28).

strong ecological and ethical characteristics. From Mencius to the Confucian scholars of the Song Dynasty, they all advocated the idea of the Unity of Heaven and Man by virtue, as they believed that human nature and natural law were connected, and therefore Confucianism had a general love for nature. They also highly recognised the virtuous value and aesthetic significance of nature.

As a moral philosophy, Confucianism traces the source of virtue in human society to *Tian*, so that the Confucian moral philosophy is a sort of moral metaphysics. Mou Zongsan believes that the characteristics of Confucian moral metaphysics lie in transcendence⁷ and immanence, and the reason for transcendence is that the basis of human morality comes from the transcendent *Tian*. In terms of the transcendent and immanent characteristics of Confucianism, Confucianism holds an attitude of universal love towards the universe. In that sense, Confucianism is also a kind of eco-philosophy. As for the relationship between humans and nature, Confucianism in the Song and Ming Dynasties constructs the overall relationship between humans and nature with the theory of 'the Unity of Heaven and Man by virtue', and thus advocates the realm of the oneness of all things. From the perspective of all things are one, all things in nature show the beauty of ShengSheng. The observation of nature by people is actually the recognition of the beauty of life, so Confucianism affirms the pursuit of natural aesthetics.

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7. According to Roger T. Ames, strict transcendence, in mainstream western civilisation, can be understood from the perspective of philosophy or theology. It asserts that an independent and superordinate principle A originates, determines, and sustains B, where the reverse is not the case. Such transcendence renders B absolutely dependent upon A, and thus, nothing in itself (Ames 2016:3).

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