

Hangzhou International Congress, “Culture: Key to Sustainable Development”, 15-17 May 2013, Hangzhou, China

Understanding Ecological Civilization: The Confucian Way

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I have argued that we are entering a new Axial-Age. The main reason for such an assertion is the rise of ecological consciousness in the latter half of the twentieth century. Indeed, since the 1960s when, with the help of the vision of the astronauts, our naked eye is able to see our earth (The Blue Planet) in its entirety, a phenomenon unprecedented in human history emerged with profound implications for human self-understanding. The advances in science and technology in the last half a century have so empowered the human capacity to know ourselves (body, heart, mind, soul, and spirit) and our environment that we are currently in possession of a comprehensive and integrated knowledge of our earth. We have a quantifiable appreciation of the earth’s minerals, plants, biology, animals, soil, water, and air. Even a primary school student has access to the information of ourselves and our environment in breath and depth that was utterly unimaginable even a decade ago. It is vitally important to note that knowledge as power as well as cognition has enhanced manifold in such a way that a single minicomputer that is available to millions all over the world possesses the calculating capacity comparable to that available to the entire Pentagon in 1976. In short, our ability to effect, if not the control, the world around us is

million times greater than our ancestors in the advent of the Axial-Age. Simply put, an innocent teenage anywhere in the globe has the destructive power to damage the world, including human lives, greater than any tyrant in human history only a few decades ago.

One of the most tragic scenarios in our human condition nowadays is that as our rational observation of the vulnerability of environment refines as a result of the enhancement of our cognitive capacity, our awareness of the inability of the human species to deal with its viability proportionately increases. This trajectory leading toward an irreversible path of self-destruction seems inevitable. The case of China is pertinent here. The current leadership has wisely announced that the Chinese developmental strategy has been broadened to include cultural and ecological dimensions. It is encouraging that the single-minded approach to economic growth based on the market mechanism and calculated exclusively in terms of GDP since the Deng Xiaoping era of reform and opening has been significantly revised. However, the harsh reality of maintaining an above 7% growth rate mainly based on export orientation and domestic consumption compels central, provincial, and local governments to rely heavily on pollution prone industries and private ownership of automobile for their performance. As a result, the desperate need of environmental protection has to be relegated to the background to allow the so-called “hard reason of development” to take the central stage. With more than 10 million private cars pouring into the lifeworld in China on a yearly basis, urban dwellers in Hangzhou, Kunming and Chengdu as well as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou will continue to suffer from air pollution, traffic jam, and mean-spiritedness as the real experience of being Chinese in everyday existence.

Against this background, Confucian humanism as the most influential habits of the heart in Cultural China consisting of the

People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and Singapore and the Chinese diaporic communities throughout the world offers a vision of learning to be human that is worth considering as a rich resource for human survival and flourishing the the 21st century. Confucian humanism a form of spiritual humanism substantially different from the secular humanism of the modern West has been instrumental in shaping a Chinese cultural identity that is profoundly meaningful for Cultural China, Confucian East Asia, the Asia Pacific Region, and the global community. I would simply identify five salient features as basis for further exploration:

1. There are four inseparable dimensions of human experience that must be taken into consideration in any conceptualization of humanity in the 21st century: (1) The cultivation of the self as a holistic process of spiritual exercise for human self-realization which involves the wholeness of the body, the sensitivity of the mind, the purity of the soul, and the expansiveness of the spirit. (2) The harmonization of the community which entails the regulation of the family, the governance of the state, and the maintenance of world order. (3) Sustained and harmonious relationship between the human species and nature, and (4) Mutual responsiveness between Heaven and Humanity.
2. Humanity forms one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things. Nature is always part of a human communion. It is never conceived of, let alone treated as, a collection of senseless matters to be manipulated or abused.
3. "Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother. Even such a seemingly insignificant creature as I finds niche in their midst. All that fills the universe is my body and all that directs is universe is my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters and all things are my companions."

4. I am related to all people in a differentiated way, but as I extend my feeling of intimacy outward from my family to neighborhood, local community, nation, and the world, I find myself connected by a common bond/ Likewise, I am related to all members of the animal kingdom, the life world, and the inanimate universe in a differentiated way, but I am connected with all modalities of being by a sense of consanguinity.
5. I am a human being not by choice. Even though I choose to be a Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, or a Hindu, I am critically aware that I am a human being among other human beings. As a concrete and living human being here and now, care for the earth as my proper home is dictated by my common sense as well as my faith in the survivability of the human species.

In the Axial Age civilization, great spiritual leaders such as Confucius, Socrates, Buddha, Christ, and Mohamed have taught humanity to be informed, knowledgeable, wise, and spiritual. There are different paths toward human flourishing. Cultural diversity, religious pluralism, and multiple forms of modernity will continue to characterize the ideological landscape of the human community. The care for the earth, our true home, underlies all diverse, pluralistic, and multiple modes of human development. The New Axial Age, all religious traditions must cultivate a humanist (anthropocosmic) vision. Guided by this vision, the emerging Chinese cultural identity must be open, pluralistic, and self-reflexive. This requires ecumenicalism, cosmopolitanism, a sense of reverence for the transcendent, sensitivity to the concrete and patient watchfulness.

