



CONFUCIAN THOUGHT OF “HARMONY BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE” AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY CONSTRUCTION



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Abstract: In the ancient Confucian philosophy, the thought of “Harmony between Man and Nature” occupies a paramount position. The Confucian notion has a deep-rooted and extensive history, evolving and deepening over successive generations. Its contents are profound and intricate, encompassing a harmonious and integrated perspective on nature, a prioritization of righteousness over personal interest, and a sustainable development outlook. These ideas hold significant value as a point of reference for the establishment and advancement of contemporary social systems. This article aims to explore the origins and development of the concept of “Harmony between Man and Nature” while analyzing and reflecting on how this ideology influences the construction of present-day society.


Keywords: Harmony between Man and Nature. Confucianism. Contemporary Society. Perspective on Nature.

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Resumen: En la antigua filosofía confuciana, el pensamiento de la “Armonía entre el Hombre y la Naturaleza” ocupa un lugar primordial. La noción confuciana tiene una arraigada y extensa historia, evolucionando y profundizándose a lo largo de sucesivas generaciones. Su contenido es profundo e intrincado, y abarca una perspectiva armoniosa e integrada de la naturaleza, una priorización de la rectitud sobre el interés personal y una perspectiva de desarrollo sostenible. Estas ideas tienen un valor significativo como punto de referencia para el establecimiento y avance de los sistemas sociales contemporáneos. Este artículo pretende explorar los orígenes y el desarrollo del concepto de “Armonía entre el Hombre y la Naturaleza”, al tiempo que analiza y reflexiona sobre cómo influye esta ideología en la construcción de la sociedad actual.

Palabras clave: Armonía entre Hombre y Naturaleza. Confucianismo. Sociedad contemporánea. Perspectiva de la Naturaleza.

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CONFUCIAN THOUGHT OF “HARMONY BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE” AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY CONSTRUCTION¹

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Abstract: In the ancient Confucian philosophy, the thought of “Harmony between Man and Nature” occupies a paramount position. The Confucian notion has a deep-rooted and extensive history, evolving and deepening over successive generations. Its contents are profound and intricate, encompassing a harmonious and integrated perspective on nature, a prioritization of righteousness over personal interest, and a sustainable development outlook. These ideas hold significant value as a point of reference for the establishment and advancement of contemporary social systems. This article aims to explore the origins and development of the concept of “Harmony between Man and Nature” while analyzing and reflecting on how this ideology influences the construction of present-day society.

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INTRODUCTION

The exploration of the relationship between man and nature has been a timeless pursuit in the history of Chinese philosophy. In Zhang Dainian’s work *Outline of Chinese Philosophy*, he pointed out that “Chinese philosophy has a fundamental concept, which is the Harmony between Man and Nature” (Zhang, 2017, p. 15). However, it is important to note that the terms “nature” and “man” in this context should not be simply equated with their modern interpretations. The interpretation of “Harmony between Man and Nature” hinges on the understanding of the concept of “nature”. Different interpretations of “nature” lead to varying understandings of this harmony. Therefore, it becomes essential to elucidate the meaning of “Harmony between Man and Nature” by delving into the significance of “nature”. The ancient Chinese understanding of “nature” is incredibly complex. Scholars have offered different interpretations of this concept, and even a single scholar may have provided

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diverse explanations of “nature” in different contexts. Broadly speaking, within the context of the “Harmony between Man and Nature”, “nature” encompasses three main connotations. Firstly, it refers to the divine with religious undertones. Secondly, it embodies moral ethics with metaphysical implications. Lastly, it represents the natural phenomena (Guo; Chang, 2022, p. 15).

In the ancient Chinese sages’ philosophical thoughts, these three connotations of “nature” are distinct, yet they often intermingle and transform with one another. Among them, the “natural phenomena” is the closest to the modern concept of “nature”, encompassing two significances. Firstly, it refers to the sky, corresponding to the “earth”, including celestial bodies and phenomena, such as the sun, moon and stars. Secondly, it corresponds to the whole universe, encompassing heaven, earth and all things (Meng, 2022, p. 12). In the context of the “Harmony between Man and Nature”, there are generally two interpretations of “man”. The first pertains to human beings in a general sense, encompassing human power, humanity, human creations, human desires, and so on. The second specifically refers to sages or kings. It is said that “Heaven has four seasons (spring, summer, autumn, winter), kings have four political strategies (celebration, reward, punishment and admonition), and the sages emulate ‘the Way of Heaven’ to govern a country or society” (Ling, 1996, p. 26). In the second interpretation, the term “man” is limited to the kings and sages’ scope, implying that individuals within this category can achieve greater harmony with nature.

The term “Harmony between Man and Nature” was first explicitly proposed by Zhang Zai, a thinker during the Northern Song Dynasty. The thought has a long history, and its precise origin is challenging to trace today (Ding, 2020, p. 18). From a philosophical historical perspective, the Confucian thought of “Harmony between Man and Nature” underwent significant development during the pre-Qin, Han and Song dynasties, progressively revealing rich philosophical connotations.

1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF “HARMONY BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE”

1.1 FORMATION OF “HARMONY BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE”

During the pre-Qin period, which encompasses the Shang and Zhou dynasties, as well as the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the foundational concept of “Harmony between Man and Nature” took shape and flourished. During the Shang dynasty, the people lacked a scientific understanding of the natural world. They commonly held blind beliefs in deities and relied on divination and fortune-telling to assess safety and danger in various situations. The concept of “nature” was typically associated with the god ruling over the sky, and it was believed that this god held the supreme authority to govern and dominate human society. In the *Book of Rites*, there is a notable expression illustrating the

gods’ dominance over human society: “The people in the Shang dynasty respected the gods, leading the people to serve the gods. Ghosts were revered before rituals, and punishments were applied before rewards” (Dai; Zhang, 2019). The people in the Shang dynasty valued the worship of ghosts and gods, but disregarded the importance of etiquette and education. In this context, the term “god” specifically refers to the “Heavenly God” or “Heavenly Emperor”. Consequently, the relationship between nature and man during the Shang dynasty was characterized by the gods’ domination over people, strongly influenced by religious superstition (Fang; Wang, 2022, p. 173).

There was a significant shift in the understanding of the relationship when the Zhou dynasty prospered and the Shang dynasty was about to collapse. For the people of the Zhou dynasty, destiny is not solely determined by nature, but also depends on human virtue. It was believed that only those who possessed virtuous qualities would receive the nature’s blessings and protection. The *Tai Oath of Shang Shu* records King Wu’s warning to the alliance princes after defeating the Shang dynasty in 1048 BC: “The voice of the people is the voice of God” (Chen, 2019). The people of the Zhou dynasty changed their cognition from “the Mandate of Heaven is fixed and determines everything” to “the Mandate of Heaven is variable and influenced by morality”. Specifically, “the Mandate of Heaven” depends on whether the ruler is popular among the people, and those who are popular among the people can obtain the power to govern countries. During the Western Zhou Dynasty, the concept of “the emperor has no relatives, but virtue is the assistant” became popular. The thought of “the harmony of nature and man” in the Western Zhou Dynasty highlighted the importance of virtue as a persistent guiding principle for long-term governance by closely linking “the Mandate of Heaven”, morality and government issues. Additionally, the people in the Zhou dynasty inherited the thought of the Shang dynasty, but reduced emphasis on religious superstition, and incorporated political and personal ethics into the traditional perspective of destiny (Peng, 2023, p. 48).

The concept of “Harmony between Man and Nature”, during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, was primarily represented by Confucius’, Mencius’ and Xuncius’ ideas. Confucius expressed his perspective on “the Mandate of Heaven” through the phrase “The four seasons are moving, and all things are growing”. He believed that natural phenomena are manifestations of the nature’s will and considered “knowing destiny and fearing nature” as a virtue possessed only by a gentleman. For example, in *The Analects of Confucius*, Ji Shi’s Sixteenth stated: “A gentleman has three fears: ‘the Mandate of Heaven’, people in power, and the words of sages” (Confucius, 2018, p. 86). In *The Analects of Confucius*, Eight Dances also mentioned: “If someone has committed an offense or wrongdoing that goes against the natural order or the divine, they have no one to turn to for redemption or forgiveness” (Confucius, 2018, p. 38). In Confucius’ view, “the Mandate of Heaven” can be interpreted in two ways: one refers to the nature’s will, and the other refers

to the laws or principles governing the operation of all things in the world. The nature's laws objectively exist, and as nature's part, human beings must abide by these laws and maintain awe and respect for all things in the world (Li, 2021, p. 40).

Mencius developed Confucius' thought of "the Mandate of Heaven" into "the Way of Heaven", and "humanity" is the inheritance of "the Way of Heaven". "The Way of Heaven" is the nature's way or law and "humanity" is the principle or law of being a human being. Mencius believes that "the Way of Heaven" exists objectively and is the universe's foundation, while "humanity" is based on the "Way of Heaven". He also thinks that "humanity" aims to explore and achieve the "Way of Heaven" and realize the harmony between "humanity" and "the Way of Heaven" (Li, 2022, p. 4). There is a saying in "*Li Lou I of Mencius*": "There is a way to the attainment of sincerity in one's self: if a man does not understand what is good, he will not attain sincerity in himself. Therefore, sincerity is 'the Way of Heaven'. To think how to be sincere is the way of man" (Mencius, 2019, p. 52). In addition, Mencius also put forward the point of view that "He who has exhausted all his mental constitution knows his nature. Knowing his nature, he knows Heaven". Based on affirming "the Mandate of Heaven", he further emphasized that people have subjective initiative. The path of "exhausting all mental constitution - knowing own nature - knowing the heaven" achieves the integration of nature and man into one (Mencius, 2019, p. 55). Mencius's thought of "Harmony between Man and Nature" emphasizes not only conforming to the natural development of "the Way of Heaven", but also focusing on giving full play to people's subjective initiative of knowing heaven with sincerity, which has the nature of simple materialism (Peng, 2022, p. 86).

Xuncius believed that nature operates according to its evolution laws, and "the Way of Heaven" exists objectively, independent of human subjective will, that is, "nature is the true law". He also proposed the concept of "grasping and utilizing the endowments of heaven", suggesting that humans can understand and utilize the changing laws in nature for the humanity's benefit. However, humans need to use and rationally transform nature while respecting and conforming to the nature's laws. Human manipulation and nature's development should be limited in reasonable scope and must be "timely" and "regular" (Cheng; Liu; Zhao, 2018, p. 5).

1.2 DEVELOPMENT OF "HARMONY BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE"

From the Han and Tang Dynasties to the Song and Ming Dynasties, the idea of "Harmony between Man and Nature" has been valued by philosophers of all dynasties, and has been greatly developed with their efforts. During the Han Dynasty, Dong Zhongshu played a prominent role in promoting the thoughts of "Harmony between Man and Nature". Dong Zhongshu incorporated various philosophical perspectives and proposed two representative concepts: the similarity between nature and man, and the interaction between nature and

man. Dong Zhongshu advocated that nature and man share the same physical structure, emotions and moral consciousness. He stated, “Human beings have the spirit of joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness, and nature also possesses spring, autumn, winter, and summer. People and nature have the same characteristic in this aspect” (Dong, 2011). Based on the similarity between heaven and man, Dong Zhongshu emphasized the interaction between heaven and man, which refers to that people can perceive the will of “Heaven”, with only the ruler being qualified to communicate with “Heaven”. The ruler’s power derives from “Heaven”, but is also subject to the restrictions imposed by “Heaven”. Natural phenomena serve as warnings and admonishments from “Heaven” to the virtuous ruler.

In the annals of Chinese academic research, Dong Zhongshu’s thought rooted in the concept of “Heaven” was once classified under various labels, such as “idealism,” “theology,” or “theological idealism.” Such categorizations were influenced not only by historical factors, but also by the stringent expectations placed on ancient sages. However, as scholarly understanding has evolved, a more objective and rational perspective has emerged, leading to a recognition of the “ethical dimension of humanity” inherent in Dong Zhongshu’s ideas while also acknowledging the “religious dimension of theological purpose.” In addition, while Dong Zhongshu’s view on the relationship between “heaven” and “man” aimed to maintain an autocratic monarchy, it should not be solely interpreted in terms of political service. Dong Zhongshu’s philosophical system emphasized the harmonious relationship between “heaven” and “man.” He believed that human actions and social order should align with the heaven’s will to maintain a stable and prosperous society. While some may interpret his views as primarily serving the purpose of supporting an autocratic monarchy, it is essential not to solely construe his ideas within the context of political utility.

His thoughts also reflect that human activities are restricted by nature, and the two communicate with each other so that human society and nature can coexist and co-prosper (Si, 2021, p. 58).

With the continuous inheritance and development of Confucianism, Confucian scholars in the Song Dynasty gradually demystified and clarified the concept of “Heaven”, eliminating its unknowable aspects. In the opening chapter of Zhang Zai’s *The Western Inscription*, “[...] the term *Qian* is referred to as father, and the term *Kun* is referred to as a mother. People are so small, but they are living between heaven and earth” (Xuan, 2017, p. 32). *Qian* represents heaven while *Kun* represents the earth. Zhang Zai used this analogy to compare the universe to the human beings’ parents, with humans existing “amid the universe”, encompassed entirely within it. Zhang Zai believed that human beings were conceived and born by heaven and earth; thus, they are entirely dependent on them to survive. Furthermore, Zhang Zai also introduced the idea of “One *Qi* between man and nature”, elucidating that *Qi* is present everywhere, and everything in our world is composed of *Qi*. This idea demonstrates,

to a certain extent, the concept of “the harmony between man and nature” advocated by Zhang Zai. *Qi* is not directly visible. It generally has two manifestations: the first is manifested in all things, and the second is manifested in emptiness. Both manifestations of *Qi* are since *Qi* can gather or disperse, with gathering leading to visible forms in all things and dispersion leading to forms in the emptiness. The relationship between all things and emptiness is akin to that of water and ice, different states of matter. Therefore, as everything in the universe is a manifestation of *Qi*, humans, heaven and all things are unified in *Qi*, revealing that “Harmony between Man and Nature” (Liu, 2022, p. 193).

The School of Neo-Confucianism, led by Zhu Xi, held the view that the objective “principle” or “principle of heaven” serves as the universe’s foundation, the essence of all things, and the source of human ethics and morality. Achieving true humanity is accordingly manifested through understanding and adhering to this “principle”. In *Zhuzi Yulei*, the collection of Zhu Xi’s famous quote, he stressed that “The principle of heaven is only one legitimate reason in the world, and all activities must follow the law of heaven” (Zhu, 2008). Therefore, although “heaven” in the natural sense exists, it is not the focus that Zhu Xi pays attention to. Instead, he highlights the importance of following the heaven’s principle in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. There still exists a gap between heaven and human in the ethical sense due to the presence of an external and universally necessary “principle” that dictates their relationship. Furthermore, the existence of this “principle” hinders the harmony between man and nature.

Using the transcendental and universally necessary “principle” to explain the ethical meaning of “heaven” and using this as a starting point to explain the relationship between heaven and man, this kind of thinking gives a priori basis for “Harmony between Man and Nature”. But the thinking also gives people priori and irresistible external constraints and artificially forms a dichotomy between the heaven’s and humanity’s metaphysical realms. Zhu Xi was also unable to solve the theoretical problem that how the metaphysical “heaven” and the metaphysical “human” can be “unified”. In this context, the process of following “heaven” appears as a conscious effort to achieve harmony between man and nature, as those who “listen to the order of the heaven, follow the law, move with the times, and dare not use their own selfishness” can achieve the realm of harmony. However, this kind of thinking overlooks the human beings’ subjective will and only considers outward appearance. Consequently, the realm of “Harmony between Man and Nature”, achieved along this kind of thinking, has the meaning of “appearing to be variance when seemingly in harmony” to some extent. Afterward, the Mind School, represented by scholars Lu Jiuyuan and Wang Yangming, emphasized the subjective “heart” as the universe’s essence. According to this school, “one’s own heart” serves as the root of all things in the world and the source of human morality. The notion of “the Harmony between Man and Nature” is reflected in the recognition and understanding of one’s own heart and the practice of conscience (Zhu, 2017, p. 74).

2. CONFUCIAN THOUGHT AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

2.1 “HARMONY BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE” AND ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION CONSTRUCTION

Ecological civilization embodies humanity’s introspection and rejection of the negative ecological consequences brought about by industrial civilization. It represents the level of advancement achieved in the interactive relationship between humans and the natural world. Ecological civilization does not seek to eliminate material civilization and industrial progress, but rather aims to protect nature while transforming it. While developing social productivity, the natural state of the ecosystem should be preserved, and the ecosystem and various elements in the system should be in a harmonious state while the development benefits human beings themselves. In a broader context, ecological civilization encompasses not only the manifestation of human civilization, but also serves as a stage in human progress. It extends beyond being merely a developmental concept and encompasses the corresponding political, economic and cultural systems. The construction of contemporary ecological civilization goes beyond traditional pollution control and ecological restoration efforts, and it actively explores human morality and our existence within the ecological framework. The Confucian thought of “Harmony between Man and Nature” acknowledges that humans are an integral nature’s part, recognizing the value of all life forms. It advocates for ecological consciousness rooted in benevolence and love for all things. The ideal pursuit of “matching nature with virtue” aligns closely with the objectives of constructing a contemporary ecological civilization, sharing similar foundations and goals.

The core value goal shared by Confucianism and the construction of contemporary ecological civilization are the harmony between man and nature. However, the harmony advocated by Confucian thought does not imply abandoning the cognitive understanding of nature and reverting to a primitive state of unification between man and nature as seen in the era of natural economy. Instead, it emphasizes establishing a new man-nature relationship that recognizes our dependence on nature, to approach nature with a fresh perspective and new methods. This transformation in our understanding is achieved through the cultivation of human virtues, which requires raising our awareness of our existence to a deeper level and aligning our high-level lifestyle with ecological compatibility.

In the ideological system of “Harmony between Man and Nature”, as depicted in the *Book of Changes*, the concept of “heaven, earth, and man” constitutes the foundational elements known as the “three talents” (Ge, 2021, p. 157). These three components are considered fundamental and integral constituents that are essential for creating a balanced and unified organic whole. The emphasis of Confucianism on the “three talents” starts with placing importance on “man” and affirming the human beings’ value and preciousness. Meanwhile, it also recognizes the intrinsic value of everything not solely based on utilitarian

purposes, but as an integral part of “the Way of Heaven”. In the context of “the Way of Heaven”, the value of all things possesses undeniable rationality. “Humanity must be in line with ‘the Way of Heaven’. Man can live their lives according to the light of the sun and the moon, the order of four seasons, and the worship of ghosts and gods” (Zhi, 2018), which aligns with the perspectives of modern ecological philosophy.

In the *Theory of Heaven*, Xuncius stated that the heaven has its time order, the earth has its wealth and gifts, and people have their governance principles. He also stated,

Rather than merely admiring and contemplating heaven, it is preferable to preserve and manage its gifts. Instead of merely obeying and extolling heaven, it is better to adhere to its natural laws. Rather than simply yearning for favorable conditions, it is wiser to adapt to the seasons and harness the power of weather (Xun; Xie, 2001, p. 45).

This statement implies that people should act following the nature’s laws, leveraging their subjective initiative while not blindly following nature. It emphasizes the coexistence and fulfillment of duties by heaven, earth and human beings. Respecting and conforming to the nature’s laws are essential for achieving genuine success in the construction of contemporary ecological civilization. Without doing so, the ongoing environmental crises, social dilemmas and existential threats within the current ecological system will persist, posing risks to the human society’s long-term development (Zhang, 2019, p. 121).

The ecological ethical wisdom, embedded in Confucian thought of “Harmony between Man and Nature”, advocates for assuming moral obligations towards nature. It emphasizes treating nature well, avoiding excessive exploitation, and exercising self-restraint and control while pursuing one’s interests. *The Regal System of Xuncius* stated that “[...] in the system of the sage and king, the ax is prohibited from being taken into mountains and forests when vegetation is flourishing, to avoid the reckless felling of saplings and the interruption of their natural growth” (Ye, 2014, p. 93). This signifies the need for appropriate development and prudent utilization of natural resources. Moreover, the ecological awareness and ethics derived from Confucian thought, such as “The benevolent and all things are one”, “All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my” and “Harmony between the heaven and the earth”, expand the concept of green development within the construction of contemporary ecological civilization, enhance the moral realm and serve as an integral part of China’s ongoing ecological civilization efforts.

The current state of China’s ecological civilization is not promising. Both the natural and social environments, on which human beings rely, are deteriorating, and the human beings’ spiritual ecology is gradually becoming desolate. While the government attempts to regulate people’s behavior through relevant laws, the results have been unsatisfactory. Although laws are mandatory and binding, some individuals still take risks for personal gain,

exploiting legal loopholes. Faced with the choice between adhering to laws and regulations and pursuing personal interests, more people tend to prioritize their own interests. In this context, relying solely on institutional restraints and laws is insufficient. In addition to upholding the “rule of law” principle, appealing to the humanity’s moral force and advocating for the “rule of morality” are crucial for the current construction of China’s ecological civilization. Only through following the moral cultivation requirements of “Harmony between Man and Nature”, implementing moral transformation and striving for moral excellence, contemporary China can make significant progress in the construction of its ecological civilization (Ge, 2020, p. 144).

2.2 “HARMONY BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE” AND SOCIAL VALUE ORIENTATION

The essence of the Confucian thought of “Harmony between Man and Nature” lies in the paramount importance of achieving harmony between humanity and the natural world. Additionally, all kinds of social value orientations inherent in this concept should be duly recognized, such as a prioritization of righteousness over personal interest, appreciation of harmony, valuing human relations, and so on.

Zhu Xi once stated, “The theory of righteousness and benefit is the foremost principle for Confucians” (Chen, 2020, p. 35). Confucianism offers two distinct interpretations of the relationship between righteousness and benefit: firstly, righteousness pertains to moral principles, while benefit refers to material interests. The relationship between them encompasses the interaction between moral principles and material gains. Secondly, righteousness represents the nation’s collective interests, while benefit denotes personal and selfish desires. The relationship between them involves the correlation between public and private interests. The relationship between righteousness and benefit is fundamental for solving the relationship among social hierarchy, ethical norms, personal material interests and economic interests. Confucian teachings advocate that personal material and economic interests, including profit, wealth, pleasure and desires, should be pursued within the scope of “righteousness”. In other words, interests must be subordinate to righteousness.

The term “harmony” in “Harmony between Man and Nature” embodies the heaven and man’s unity, and the pursuit of overall interests and righteousness. Xuncius pointed out that the fundamental difference between humans and animals is that humans have “righteousness”. He said: “Humans are the most precious in the world for owning energy, vitality, knowledge, and righteousness” (Ye, 2014, p. 115). Humans cannot survive alone without society. “The ability to form social groups” is the human beings’ survival wisdom, and the community formed by human beings is different from animal groups. In the human community, everyone has their own position, which is what Xuncius called “division”. The reason why everyone can kindly be in their own positions is that people have “righteousness”.

Fundamentally speaking, it is precisely because of “righteousness” that “community” can evolve into a powerful human society. This community-oriented thinking inherently reflects the essence of collective interests. Traditional Chinese thought cherishes and upholds the “community’s” interests and values, highlighting the value and spiritual power of public interests. It posits that the individuals’ fate is intricately tied to the current society’s well-being. Only by integrating the individual and society, the harmonious society and its people’s unity can be effectively realized. When evaluating certain behaviors or making choices, individuals should consider not only their own interests, but also the impact of their actions on the country and society as a whole. Acting out of selfishness should not undermine the interest of the entire system. If all human activities are solely driven by personal interests, disregarding the others’ and society’s interests, disorder will replace harmony, leading to imbalances within society that ultimately undermine the individuals’, others’ and society’s welfare as a whole (Zeng, 2015, p. 29).

In the Confucian thought of “Harmony between Man and Nature”, the term “harmony” embodies the human beings’ continuous pursuit and the progress direction. In addition, the overall harmony, including the entire family’s and country’s harmony, is also the important connotation of the thought of “Harmony between Man and Nature”, which is also the goal that people continue to yearn for and strive for. Man is not only a purely natural person, but also a “social person”, a social existence closely related to others and society (country). Personal development is closely related to social development. On one hand, only a well-run society can guarantee the human beings’ survival and development. On the other hand, only when the individual integrates into the entire society and realizes the man and society’s harmonious unity, the individual’s development can be better promoted, and the individual and the society’s common progress can be realized.

The modern society’s development makes individuals more and more collectivized. It not only requires the improvement of individual ability and subjectivity, but also requires the creation of one’s own contribution to the collective. Therefore, promoting the group’s coordinated development and of self is an important standard for modern people. The idea of “emphasizing the group and self-restraint” in the thought of “Harmony between Man and Nature” is worthy of modern interpretation and transformation, so that it can be integrated into the individual’s consciousness, and promote the establishment of the value that there should be complementarity between the group and the individual, and integration between the public and the private. By doing so, human progress may be promoted, and the benign interaction of material and spiritual exchanges among people may be advanced (Huang, 2022, p. 118). Consequently, the whole society’s healthy operation and coordinated development can be realized.

Confucian ethics integrate human relations with human feelings. On the one hand, blood relationship is dyed with moral color and, on the other hand, philosophical thoughts are rooted in the society's daily life. The integration of feelings and principles is a guideline for the modernization of interpersonal relationships. If rationality is absolutized and instrumentalized one-sidedly, it will only bring regrets to people's spiritual life, make interpersonal relationships in society more material, and human emotions, thinking, etc. squeeze out from human society and then disappear. One reasonable factor, in the idea of “Harmony between Man and Nature”, is emphasizing emotion, believing that “there is nothing that can touch people's hearts before love”, and advocating that human behavior should “start with love and stop with ritual”. This introduces the Confucian thought of emphasizing emotion in interpersonal relationships into the realm of rationality, and integrates it into modern social life, making people reasonable and in line with emotions in social interactions, thereby realizing the complementarity of emotion and principles, and making people become a harmonious person with all-round development of knowledge, behavior, emotion and intention in society.

CONCLUSION

The concept of “Harmony between Man and Nature” has its merits, but it also possesses certain limitations that need to be addressed. For example, during the pre-Qin period, human society's level of social productivity and understanding of nature and natural phenomena were constrained, so Confucian thought, at that time, primarily viewed the transformation of things and the relationship between humans and nature as a cyclic process of reciprocation. Xuncius stated that “the beginning is the end, and the end is the beginning, without cessation or interruption”. This viewpoint hinders our comprehensive, in-depth, accurate and complete understanding of the laws governing the development of phenomena. Another limitation lies in discussion of Confucianism about the relationship between nature and man, which predominantly occurs at the level of human thought and fails to fully address the realities of production and everyday life. The limited cognitive range and subjective bias of Confucian philosophers, in understanding the relationship between nature and man, were largely shaped by the objective material conditions of their time.

Despite historical limitations, the concept of “Harmony between Man and Nature” can still serve as a philosophical framework and mode of thinking. It can provide valuable philosophical insights, serve as a reference to cope with the ecological crisis in contemporary society and comprehend the relationship between “nature” and “man”. Moreover, its inherent ethics serves as powerful spiritual motivations for promoting ecological civilization construction and sustainable development. Thus, exploring the concept of “Harmony between Man and Nature” can be considered one of the pathways toward discovering a more

ideal model for social construction. For more than two thousand years, the ideological system of “Harmony between Man and Nature” has been greatly developed by philosophers of all ages. Contemporary academic research should inherit this spirit, continuously broaden the research horizon, deepen the research level and tap its modern value.

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