

Viewpoint

The Chinese Civilisation Quest For The Great Harmony (大同 Da Tong) Through Humanness (仁 Ren)

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The 21st century world is in the midst of a paradigm shift as America's dominance gives way to a China-led Asian century. This is engendering expectations as well as trepidations not least because of the uncertainties that come with any changes, but the current transitional pains are compounded by our unfamiliarity with today's reemerging power, which is China. To start with, by most account a communist state by name only, how the PRC (People's Republic of China) will reshape the existing international order remains unclear and a source of anxiety to many. In recent years, Beijing has been returning to traditional philosophical and religious resources to help mitigate social and political challenges at home and abroad. As the Marxism sway diminishes, the contemporary Chinese seem eager and ready to reembrace their ancient ethos. Even so, a revitalised traditional China could well continue to be an enigma. This is because the Sinic civilisation with its Confucian underpinnings, espouses a view of the universe and belief system that is still relatively little understood by the non-Chinese world.

This paper is an effort to provide some insights into this increasingly dominant yet obscure civilisational power. In doing so, this paper will focus on two foundational Confucian principles, namely, the Great Harmony (大同 *Da Tong*) and Humanness (仁 *Ren*). Through these dual

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concepts, this paper will explain what constitutes the ancient Chinese world's ultimate concerns, i.e. telos, and how they set out to actualise these religious aspirations.

We start with an overview of the Chinese organic cosmology, where all things are perceived as essentially one. The doctrine of the Great Harmony is an outshoot of this unified view of the universe, which in turn defines ancient China's ultimate spiritual quest, namely, to achieve the harmonious co-existence of all things.

This study then examines the Humanness principle, which is an ethical precept key to the realisation of this grand vision. The Chinese frame this as a relational quest, in which harmony is achieved through the dispensation of compassion towards others. The doctrine of the mean (中庸 *Zhong Yong*) is another fundamental concept, whereby harmony is attained by pursuing the middle pathway.

The essay ends with a discussion at two critical social political strategies and institutions. The first is the concentric circle approach whereupon the quest for harmony begins from within the self, expanding outwards to embrace the family, society, state, the wider world, and the cosmos. The second, a central actor in the collective endeavour, is the sage king. Chinese sages believe that when bestowed with benevolent kingship, peace and order will prevail under the Heavens, heralding the Great Harmony.

The Great Harmony (大同 *Da Tong*)

The Tao gives birth to One,
 One gives birth to two.
 Two gives birth to three
 Three gives birth to all things.

All things have their backs to the female
 and stand facing the male.
 When male and female combine,
 all things achieve harmony.

Ordinary men hate solitude.
 But the Master makes use of it,
 Embracing his aloneness, realising
 He is one with the whole universe.²

In one ancient Chinese account of the origin, the beginning was the Way (道; *Dao*). This uncaused source of the universe is also at times variously associated with an all-encompassing cosmic field of energy called the *Chi* (氣).



Figure 3.1. Cosmic energy field, Chi (Chandra X-ray Observatory Center/NASA; as cited in McKinnon, 2017)

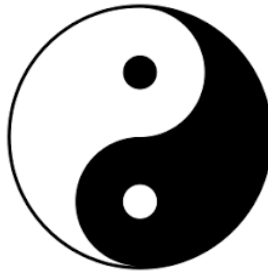


Figure 3.2. Yin and Yang

In this version of the origin, existence came into being when the *Dao* and the *Chi* divide into two, begetting a bifurcated yin and yang reality: light and darkness, hot and cold, material and spiritual. These are distinct yet symmetrical spheres, conceived as in a synthetical

² Poem translated by Mitchell (1988).

rather than antithetical relationship. Together, they perform a circular ‘dance’ that powers the flow of *Chi*, sustaining the phenomenal world. Thus, according to the ancient Chinese, out of the one, came forth the harmonic two, begetting in union the melodic whole (Wing-Tsit, 1963, pp. 65-90).

This imagery of monistic dualism defines the Chinese metaphysical aspirations. When asked about human beings’ ultimate concern, the Confucian exhortation is to live in concord with the Great Harmony; i.e. to synchronise the interconnected polarities in each and every person’s reality: body and soul, feminine and masculine, and this-worldly and other worldly, into a balanced state of existence. By so doing, we are said to have achieved the harmonious co-existence of all things, in unison with the cosmic *Dao*.

Humanness (仁 *Ren*)

The Chinese practical quest for cosmic union is governed by sets of ethical imperatives. Chief among them is the Confucian virtue of *Ren*, variously translated as benevolence or humaneness. In plain terms, *Ren* connotes the true essence of being a human, namely, to be proper. In Confucius’s words, “One should see nothing improper, hear nothing improper, say nothing improper, do nothing improper” (Analects 12: 1; as cited in Legge, 1971, p. 36).

One distinct trait to this Analects universal exhortation to propriety, common to all world traditions, is the Confucian focus on the relational dimension. The logogram for *Ren* is, in fact, a composite of two distinct common Chinese characters:

$$\text{人} + \text{二} = \text{仁}$$

Simply put, *Ren* is the conjoining of and interaction between two persons. This coupling underscores the Confucian emphasis on the social aspect of moral self-cultivation. To become *Ren*, one has to develop these virtues in conjunction with the other. “Wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others” (Analects 6:30; as cited in Legge, 1971, p. 15).

In Confucianism, the cultivation of *Ren* does not happen in a social vacuum but in the complex matrix of a communal order. Indeed, the Confucians were highly critical of individualistic spiritual quest that is detached from the world. The Buddhist monk's retreat into solitary isolation, in pursuit of personal enlightenment is one practice that has been subjected to harsh Confucian criticism.

Doctrine of the Mean (中庸 *Zhong Yong*)

The emphasis on relational bond is complemented by another central theme of Confucian thought, the *Zhong Yong*, commonly translated as the 'doctrine of the mean'.



Figure 3.3. *Zhong Yong* (LEO33-Sofokli at English Wikipedia, 2012)

These two characters express a broad Confucian ideal covering almost every aspect of human life. In practical terms, *Zhong Yong* signifies a wide spectrum of traits and virtues: ranging from moderation, rectitude, sincerity, equilibrium, and balance.

In sustaining human relationships, for example, one is extoling to preserve a rapport neither too intimate nor too remote. Likewise, in emotional expressions, neither in sadness nor in happiness should one be excessive: unbridled celebration can be as detrimental as uncontrolled wailing.

The overarching principle of *Zhong Yong* is to stay close to the centre and keep clear of the extremes. By staking out the middle pathway, we live in sync with the harmonic law of nature, thus manifesting the virtuoso of a holistic personhood.

Concentric Circle

The telos of a *Ren* and *Zhong Yong* guided relationship is to achieve the harmonious co-existence of all things. This is, undoubtedly, a grandiose

aspiration. However, the Confucian pathway to actualising this idealistic vision is through a realistic pragmatic action plan.

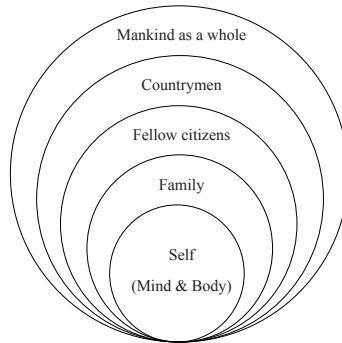


Figure 3.4. Concentric Circle (Bosio, 2017, p. 63)

Their strategy is to divide the grand scheme into a series of concentric circles, beginning with the foundational appeal to cultivate the individual self. Once the personal is attended to, attention is then expanded outwards through layers of widening groups from family to communities, provinces to nations, and the larger world to the wider universe.

“When the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated; when the family is regulated, the state will be in order; and when the state is in order, there will be peace throughout the world” (Great Learning, 1: 4).

Through this map of enlarging centres of influence and interests, the Confucians’ plan is to take a step by step approach in realising the Great Harmony. This incremental scheme underscores the Confucian priority and mindfulness that the ultimate telos is in fact the accumulative effects of small steps and building blocks, with the self and nucleus family forming the core. Unless these essential substructures are secured, the superstructure would have been laid upon fragile footing.

Sage King

Confucian universalism exhorts all to strive towards the Grand Harmony. Famed for its sanguine view of human as good by nature,

the Chinese idealists also concede that human potentials are realised unevenly, resulting in differentiated moral development. As such, though egalitarian at base, people do assume varied stations within the Confucian enterprise. In this hierarchical scheme where all possess a role but with variegated parts, the Confucian accord the greatest importance to one particular actor - the sage king.



Figure 3.5. King Yao, a Sage King (S, 2016)

A key tenet underpinning the Confucian benevolent kingship is that in order to govern others, one must first govern oneself according to the Heavenly Principles. If fulfilled, the personal virtue of a cultivated, upright sovereign could spread beneficent influence throughout the kingdom.

“When the ruler is benevolent, all are benevolent. When the ruler is righteous, all are righteous. Once the ruler attains rectitude, the state is well governed”.

This idea of ethical rulership is linked to the doctrine of non-action (无为 Wu Wei). The Confucians are convinced that when a sagely Emperor sits upon the throne, the power of his exemplary stature alone is sufficient to bestow peace and order under the Heaven, without much effort. In such a scenario, in the words of Wu Wei: the less the king does, the more gets done.

Differently put, by being the ‘calm centre’, the virtuous Monarch sets the standard upon the rest of kingdom revolves in unison. The Chinese believed that when these exceptional though rare wise rulers do appear, their presence would advance humanity’s progress towards the Great Harmony.

Conclusion

The PRC is in an unprecedented phase of radical transformation that is also emitting rippling effects on the makeup of the next world order. One factor that will potentially impact the outcome of these changeovers is the ancient Chinese philosophical and religious outlook, which is fundamentally at odds with the prevailing secular modernity worldview.

Subscribed to a unique organic cosmology, existence in the Confucian narrative emerges from, and will eventually return to *Dao*, or the *Chi*, the unified fountain of life. Meanwhile, with *Ren* and *Zhong Yong*, our task in this life cycle is to sustain a balance and rebalancing of the yin and yang coupling. At the social political level, through the expanding concentric circles of engagements and endowment of ethical leadership, the Chinese civilisation strives to bring about harmonious co-existence of all things.

As the 21st century China transits towards a postmodern age, the erstwhile atheistic PRC is expected to reembrace certain elements of its sacred heritages. This could reset the contemporary Chinese milieu upon its Confucian roots, a return to the past that will have profound implications for the future of China and the world at large.

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