



Education for Sustainable Development and Chinese Philosophical Traditions

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The three main faiths or traditional philosophies of China include **Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism**. In China these faiths have intermingled for centuries and each has influenced the others, thereby creating a uniquely Chinese faith or traditional philosophy. The three philosophies commonly emphasize respect for others, social harmony, and interconnectedness with nature and the earth, which are all in line with the concept and purpose of sustainable development. Another fundamental concept is that of the collective effort, rather than emphasis on the individual, which adds strength to the call of sustainable development for global responsibility and global action. All 3 philosophies emphasize the importance of frugality and refraining from greed; i.e. ‘being more instead of having more’, which is also essential for sustainability. Learning and acquiring knowledge for everyone’s benefit is also significant in traditional Chinese philosophy, and a must for sustainable development: “I am not one who was born with

knowledge, but...works hard to seek knowledge.” “There should be education for everyone without distinction.” (Ding, 2007)

Harmony is the key tenet in Chinese philosophy and Chinese thought. Harmony with the universe and the natural environment, harmony between humans and nature, and harmony between people are all stressed in the ancient Chinese classics. To value harmony is to effectively avoid extreme attitudes and confrontational actions, to reduce the conflicts between people and promote stability. (Li, 2009) Confucianism teaches about self-cultivation to achieve harmony within oneself, as a prerequisite for harmony within one’s family, with others, nature and the whole world. Confucius said, “The gentleman aims at harmony, and not at uniformity. The mean man aims at uniformity and not at harmony.” (Ding, 2007) Daoism encourages a deep appreciation of nature, and the cultivation of the art of living in harmonious balance with nature and

other people, (Gu, 2008, Cai, 2006) while Buddhism advocates harmony through compassion for all sentient beings and non-violence.

Harmony with nature is also explicitly outlined, and is in line with the respect for the earth and protection of nature necessary for sustainable development. Feng shui (or Chinese Geomancy), which stems from Confucianism, emphasizes the power of certain places, the value of their preservation and the need to maintain harmony with these landscapes. There are also many positive references to the natural environment, and comparisons of nature with positive human traits. For example: "those who are wise, being active, flexible and wide-ranging, are thought to have a natural correspondence with and delight in flowing water, while those who are jen, "perfectly good," being still, stable and immovable are thought to have a natural correspondence with and delight in mountains." (Ivanhoe, 1998)

Daoism emphasizes being at one with nature, in an interconnected harmonious state. Similarly to Confucianism, Daoism emphasizes respect for nature, and the ways in which we can learn from nature for our own benefit: "The perfect goodness is like water. Water approaches all things, instead of contending with them. It prefers to dwell where no one would like to stay; Hence it comes close to Tao (Dao). A man of perfect goodness chooses a place to dwell as water, He has a heart as deep as water, He offers friendship as tender as water, He speaks as sincerely as water, He rules a state as orderly as water. He does a thing a properly as water, He takes action as timely as water. Like water, he never contends with others, So he never commits a mistake." (Gu, 2008)

This deep respect for nature is illustrated by the Daoist respect and emphasis on the value of wild places, which are protected. Both Daoism and Buddhism practice the worshipping of sacred mountains and lakes, and the taboo of polluting or damaging such places.

Buddhism regards nature as sacred and as a source of wisdom and peace and teaches its adherents to cultivate a way of life that is in harmony with the natural world (Liu, 2002).

In ancient Imperial China, harmony with nature was a main principle of the Imperial Rites, a set of rituals which laid out responsibilities to be carried out by the government and by individuals. The Imperial Rites predate Confucius, but later became part of the organized religion which he recommended, which emphasized the value of the soil, sun, moon and earth, as highlighted by the temples of the same name in Beijing.

Frugality is central to traditional Chinese philosophy. Daoists practice frugality, and refrain from over-indulgence or over-use because they believe it will eventually result in defeat or failure: "Too much amassment leads to great loss; Knowing contentment avoids disgrace; Knowing when to stop avoids danger; Thus one can be long in safety." (Gu, 2008)

Buddhism advocates living simply and moderation in the acquisition of material things. A central tenet of Buddhist teachings is the 3 poisons of human suffering, which include greed, anger and ignorance. Buddhist teachings explain that because of our connectedness, these personal poisons are reflected in our society. Greed, for example, is reflected in the destruction of the environment. [1]

Confucianism also looks at this through the perspective of selfishness. For example, though Confucianism emphasizes self-cultivation, it is with the explicit intention of helping others: "Cultivate yourself, put your family in order, run the local government well, and bring peace to the entire country". (Zhou, 2006)

Teaching and communicating the vision of sustainable development

Many of the traditions and philosophies of China, including indigenous knowledge and traditional practices, pass on and teach about the values and vision of sustainable development. For example, this may be through the depiction of nature as sacred, by emphasizing respect for nature, and the need to learn from and with nature and from each other, all of which are directly linked to the vision of sustainable development. This may form an explicit visioning exercise of sustainable development, as interpreted through individual faiths, or it may be an expression of beliefs within that faith, which correlate to sustainable development.

For example the picture below is a Thangka painting done by young monks at Dongzhulin Monastery in the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. It was painted in traditional style, as a vision of local sustainable development.

In many of China's traditional faith systems, teaching and communicating these beliefs or visions takes the form of storytelling, singing and dancing, art, rituals (e.g. the worship of trees, mountains and lakes), and protection of sacred animals (such as the Black-necked Crane), as well as through books and oral histories which still heavily draw on proverbs and the philosophy of ancient sages.

Differences also exist in the way that the different traditional Chinese philosophies teach about key concepts such as harmony. For example, Confucianism provides a moral code for engagement in the world of human affairs, while Buddhism encourages detachment from that material world, with the exercise of compassion as the main engagement.

Approaches to ESD and using the Earth Charter

The Shangri-la Institute for Sustainable Communities (SISC) has been working with local communities in different parts of China to facilitate ESD by reconnecting with local culture for more than 14 years. ESD and social learning are the main mechanisms employed for sustainable community development, with an emphasis on combining modern knowledge and science with traditional values, Indigenous Knowledge and local practices.

For example communities in Shangri-la, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, have used the Earth Charter as a framework, linking it to their own knowledge and local Buddhist beliefs to create a community development plan, which involves the creation of a Community Nature Reserve. Students and teachers participating in the Water School for a Living Yangtze in Mianyang, Sichuan have been using the traditional Daoist deep respect for water



as a way to explain the importance of sustainable water resource management to local communities. In Shanghai, schools and communities have revived Confucian ideas about harmony with the environment to realign local values with global concepts of ESD.

Understanding the links of global principles with local values, culture and belief systems can strengthen the impact of the Earth Charter and the process of ESD by helping communities to relate these global values to their daily lives. Such an approach is more likely to result in changes in thought and action that are conducive to Sustainable Development. In this way, the Earth Charter can be used as a framework for linking the local and the global. It can be added to and adapted for local interventions, to translate global principles into local actions, appropriate for the local context.

Contributing to the transition to a sustainable world

In contrast to many Western concepts, the importance of the collective rather than the individual is central to China's traditional philosophies. If we are to be successful in transitioning to a sustainable world, this is something that we all need to move towards: collective responsibilities, collective wisdom and collective action.

Confucianism states that personal achievement and learning is measured by his or her contribution to others (e.g. to family, community, society, the rest of nature and the universe) as the "Four To's" by Zhang Zhai from the Song dynasty (960–1279) illustrates:



"To cultivate spirituality in society, to establish the Tao (the way) for human beings, to restore the lost teachings of the past sages, and to build a peaceful world for future generations."

(Gong, 1994³⁶)

Sustainable development and environmental protection is a common responsibility. As such, we need to find a balance between "individual rights and common responsibilities" (Lubbers et al, 2008) if we are to achieve sustainable development. The Earth Charter provides a useful tool for discussion of this theme:

"...the Earth Charter tries to overcome exaggerated individualism and dangerous short-term thinking..." (Lubbers et al, 2008)

In this regard a lot can be learned from traditional Chinese teachings, which as we have seen emphasize the collective, and individual learning for the good of the collective. By taking a balanced approach between the two whereby individuals are given opportunities to fulfill their potential and nurture the

36. This text has been re-translated from the original Chinese by the authors.

knowledge, skills and values needed to become an informed, responsible, active and capable citizen of the earth, whilst at the same time keeping a global perspective and contributing to collective learning and action, ESD can be facilitated.

Contributing to ESD efforts worldwide

Many of the principles that the ESD and the Earth Charter advocate are echoed in traditional Chinese philosophy and teachings. More awareness of this would facilitate global understanding and strengthen calls for frugality and collective action. For example, this could include the inclusion of Thangka paintings and calligraphy of Chinese wisdom on posters depicting ESD around the world. Mindfulness, which is also emphasized in Chinese wisdom, and key in many traditional art forms such as the tea ceremony, calligraphy, painting, Tai Qi and Qi Gong can be a useful tool for Sustainable Development, since it can focus attention on the source of resources and their value.

The union of different faiths and philosophies within China can also offer great wisdom to ESD globally, particularly in demonstrating how different perspectives and ideas can work harmoniously together, and strengthen and enrich existing knowledge, skills and values.

Tools that contribute to education reform through the mainstreaming of ESD, and the promotion of place-based learning are an important contribution to the linkage of the local with the global. Dialogue between people from different backgrounds and faiths can promote understanding and social harmony. The Earth Charter is a very effective tool. As a spiritual humanism, Confucianism's project for human flourishing involves four dimensions: self, community, Earth, and Heaven. Character building, the primary purpose of Confucian moral education, begins with self-cultivation. But education is more

to the linkage of the local with the global. Dialogue between people from different backgrounds and faiths can promote understanding and social harmony. The Earth Charter is a very effective tool for this as it provides a global ethical framework for discussion and consideration.

The communication and teaching of traditions is very important and can include things like, for example, a poster or video of different faiths or traditions and how they link or contribute to ESD. In this way the commonalities between faiths would be promoted, which would enhance a feeling of collective responsibility, and inform collective wisdom and collective action.

Although much of the Chinese traditional philosophy greatly emphasizes harmony with nature and correlates to ESD, it is worth pointing out that in China, this wisdom has not necessarily been adopted into the mainstream, and as is the case in many places, beliefs do not always translate into effective protection. (Elvin, 2004) Without these deep-rooted beliefs systems however, China's natural environment could be in a much worse situation than it is today. ESD is a powerful mechanism and platform for re-connecting with traditional Chinese culture and philosophy in order to facilitate the collective wisdom and action required for sustainable development, in China and beyond.

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