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# Earth Charter, ESD and Chinese Philosophies

YUNHUA LIU and ALICIA CONSTABLE

## Abstract

This article examines the relationship between the Earth Charter and education for sustainable development (ESD), as part of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. The areas of shared interest between the two are assessed and the invaluable nature of the Earth Charter as a resource outlining global values and principles for a sustainable, peaceful Earth asserted. Through an examination of the traditional Chinese philosophies of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, symmetries with the Earth Charter principles are explored and the importance of linking the Earth Charter and ESD with local culture, belief systems and indigenous knowledge is emphasised. Methods for infusing these values and principles in education are proposed and the role of the Earth Charter as a base for linking the local and global in order to foster knowledge, values and skills for sustainable development at the individual, institutional and societal levels through formal, nonformal and informal learning settings is highlighted.

**Keywords:** Earth Charter, education for sustainable development, traditional Chinese philosophy, global values, local culture

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**Yunhua Liu** is the Director of Shangri-la Institute for Sustainable Communities, a Chinese NGO that works on education for sustainable development in the formal and nonformal education sectors in China. Before the establishment of Shangri-la Institute in 2007, Ms. Liu served as the Director of the WWF China Education Program for more than 10 years. Email: YHLiu@shangrilainstitute.org

**Alicia Constable** has been working for the Shangri-la Institute for more than two years. She has an MSc in Development Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and has worked in the areas of education and development in China for more than five years. Email: aconstable@shangrilainstitute.org

‘The overall goal of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is to integrate the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning’. What are these principles, values and practices? What is the role of the Earth Charter (EC)? What are its linkages with traditional Chinese values? How can these values and principles be infused in education?

The Earth Charter was drawn up in 2000, after a decade-long participatory process involving the input and influence of diverse cultures and faiths. Through the development of a set of common principles which have resonance around the globe, are inclusive and emphasise universal responsibility, the EC has provided an ethical framework needed for a just, sustainable and peaceful earth. The EC has now been endorsed by a great number of international organisations and governments. The EC embeds the ideas of sustainable development and has provided inspiration for the future direction of sustainable development (SD). The EC is therefore a useful tool for education for sustainable development (ESD) and the integration of SD into all aspects of education and learning.

ESD aims to achieve many of the principles laid out in the EC through the development of knowledge, skills and values conducive to SD. This has been embodied by the UN Decade of ESD (DESD), which describes ESD as ‘the integration of the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning, to provide every individual with the opportunity to acquire the values, competencies, knowledge and skills that enable him or her to contribute to a humane, socially just, economically viable and ecologically sustainable future’ (UN 2009).

It is vital that ESD should cover a broad range of knowledge, skills and values that incorporate economic, ecological and social aspects with cultural aspects as an overarching theme (Bonn Declaration 2009).

Similarly, the EC also pinpoints the importance of ecological integrity, social and economic justice and democracy, nonviolence and peace, in order to achieve four broad commitments (Earth Charter 2009):

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.
2. Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion and love.
3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable and peaceful.
4. Secure Earth’s bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

## **KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND VALUES FOR ESD**

Therefore, to integrate the principles, values and practices for SD, knowledge and skills for SD need to be learnt and values nurtured which will shape each individual and each community to participate, take responsibility, reflect and improve on their practice and take action for a sustainable future. A brief outline of the knowledge, skills and values for ESD, as pinpointed by international organisations and academics, follows.

## Knowledge

A holistic view of ecological, social, economic, political, technological and cultural aspects and an understanding of the way they interact with one another (UN 2009).

## Skills

This includes communication, the ability to live together, critical thinking and reasoning skills, creativity, the ability to change and adapt to change (Ouane 2002), problem solving, personal and social skills, literacy and numeracy, IT, the ability to learn, technological, economic, political, social and psychological skills needed to live more sustainably (Huckle 2000).

## Attitudes and Values

Attitudes and values may be said to include the following (Huckle 2000; Earth Charter 2009):

- Commitment to the wellbeing of human beings and other living things
- Sense of justice and equality
- Respect for diversity and plurality
- Commitment to peace, tolerance, rationality and open mindedness
- Commitment to working with others to bring about more sustainable futures
- Commitment to the sustainable use of resources
- Sense of spiritual wealth rather than an emphasis on material wealth

Values underpin the learning of knowledge and skills needed for SD, for without the internalisation of these values the necessary changes in the way we act will not be sustainable.

Tucker and Grim (1998: xvi) note that 'Our crisis is not only the result of economic, political and social factors, but is also a moral and spiritual crisis, which will require broader philosophical and religious understandings of ourselves as creatures of nature, embedded in life cycles and dependent on ecosystems'.

In the current environmental crisis, and in view of the broad consensus among experts and policy makers that the current mainstream systems of politics, economics and livelihoods are not sustainable, we need to rethink worldviews and ethics. We need to reposition ourselves, reconsider our ways of thinking and acting, and research alternative ways of being that are sustainable. Indigenous knowledge and traditional culture can offer invaluable insights into ways of thinking and doing that have been sustainable for thousands of years. The wisdom embedded in these traditions can offer new (or revised) ways of understanding ourselves.

## ANCIENT CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

Many of the principles laid out in the EC are also embedded in ancient Chinese philosophy: Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism commonly emphasise respect for

others, social harmony, interconnectedness with nature and the Earth. These philosophies can offer insights into new ways of thinking and acting, adding depth and understanding to the global ethics of the EC.

What follows is a brief discussion of these three philosophies and their relevance for the EC and SD.

## **Confucianism**

Confucianism emphasises companionship with the world, compassion towards people and living things including animals, grass, trees and rivers, appreciation for the embeddedness of life in a series of interdependent concentric circles of relationships, the profound reciprocity between humans and the natural world and the idea of the universe as a vast integrated unit (Cai 2006a, 2006c).

Confucian ethics are based on the idea of a series of concentric circles, radiating outwards, representing oneself, one's family, one's community and so on. It emphasises the strong interconnectedness of the world and everyone and everything in it. The central point is the starting point—oneself. The emphasis is on self-cultivation and learning, continually modifying and improving one's own thoughts and actions to create harmony within oneself. This will contribute to harmony within the family—the first concentric circle surrounding oneself—and then harmony at the community level, the next concentric circle, and so on for society, nation and the Earth (Bary 1998).

As Bary (1998: 33) has put it, 'ecological problems can only be managed on a global scale, the infrastructure between home, locality and state (national or international) is also vital. But without home, we have nothing for the infrastructure, much less superstructure, to rest on'.

Steven Rockefeller asserts the usefulness of the Confucian symbol of concentric circles to express 'the worldview embedded in the Earth Charter'; 'At the heart of this image is a world-affirming, relational spirituality that invites us to identify ourselves with and extend our sympathy and compassion to all peoples and to all living beings and to share responsibility for the future of our world' (Rockefeller 2009).

Chang Tsai explains the Confucian understanding of the universe as interconnected:

Forming one body with the universe can literally mean that since all modalities of being are made of ch'i, human life is part of a continuous flow of the blood and breath that constitutes the cosmic process. Human beings are thus organically connected with rocks, trees and animals. (Tu 1998: 113)

A widespread and long-enduring practice stemming from Confucianism is Chinese Geomancy or feng shui, the art of aligning buildings to harmonise the flow of ch'i<sup>1</sup> between humans and the environment. Tapping into the natural ch'i of a place by correctly positioning a building or grave within an environment will have positive implications on health, wealth and happiness. Inappropriate positioning within an environment has the opposite negative effects (Weller and Bol 1998). Geomancy emphasises the power of certain places, the value of their preservation and the need to maintain harmony with these landscapes. This is also in line with the respect for the Earth and protection of nature outlined in the EC.

The Chinese tradition of harmony within oneself, one's family, one's community, harmony with nature and with the whole cosmos is in accordance with the principles of the EC. Confucianism's emphasis on collective needs rather than individual needs adds strength to the EC's call for global responsibility and global action.

## Daoism

The second great indigenous Chinese system, Daoism (Taoism), has been one of the main components of Chinese traditional culture, and has had a huge influence on the Chinese people's way of thinking, working and acting (China Taoist Association 1997). Daoism encourages a deep appreciation of nature and the cultivation of the art of living in a harmonious balance with nature and other people. It emphasises the concept of interdependent and complementary opposites, Yin and Yang, to show that all things must be in balance (Gu 2008; Cai 2006b).

Yin and Yang are often portrayed as black and white shading sharing equal parts of a circle, each continuously originating and being transformed into the other. This is the quintessential symbol of Daoism, representing the harmony that comes from balance in all things. When yin and yang are in harmony, the energy of life is created. Thus, we must also strive for harmony in the relationship between humans and nature.

The most important Daoist text, the *Dao De Qing* (Book of Changes), summarises our relationship with the Earth: 'Humanity follows the Earth, the Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows the Tao and the Tao follows what is natural' (Gu 2008: 127).

This quote encapsulates the Daoist belief that humans should attach great importance to the Earth and live according to the Earth's rhythms. As human beings, we should let nature take its own course and practice noninterference with nature (Wang 1999). Daoists believe that those who have a deep understanding of the relationship with nature will treat nature well and learn from it (China Taoist Association 1997). Thus, Daoists emphasise the importance of learning about nature in all its forms, another theme that is central to the principles of the EC and ESD.

Daoists practice frugality and refrain from overindulgence or overuse because they believe it will eventually result in defeat or failure. This Daoist principle can be linked to the EC's Principle no. 7 and is in line with the main thrust of SD.

## Buddhism

Although Buddhism did not originate in China, it entered China circa 265 BC,<sup>2</sup> and has had a profound influence on Chinese culture and thought. In turn Chinese Buddhism has been shaped in various ways by Chinese culture, integrating the ideas of Confucianism, Daoism and other indigenous philosophical systems to form new schools of Buddhism unique to China.

Buddhism emphasises the value of all life and the interconnectedness of people and the Earth, rivers and mountains. Buddhism teaches its adherents to cultivate a way of life that is in harmony with the natural world (Liu 2002).

As with Daoism, Buddhism regards nature as sacred and as a source of wisdom and peace. This is illustrated in the common practice of worshipping sacred mountains

and lakes, and the taboo on polluting or damaging such places. The protected places around sacred mountains are expansive because Buddhist lamas believe that bigger areas are less likely to be disturbed in a manner that would upset the spirits. This has obvious benefits for nature conservation. This emphasises the importance of a respectful and caring attitude towards nature, which is also evident in the EC.

Holding the view that we are an intrinsic part of all existence, the Buddha taught that respect for life and the natural world is essential to achieving and promoting a life that is liberated from suffering. To be in harmony with all living beings and to learn to appreciate the interconnectedness of the Earth and all living things, Buddhism advocates a simple life and moderation in the acquisition of material things. This is again encompassed in Principle 7 of the EC.

### **WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM TRADITIONAL CHINESE PHILOSOPHY?**

Although this wisdom and philosophy was realised thousands of years ago, it is relevant to the crises the world faces today. The emphasis in traditional Chinese philosophy on harmony with nature, our surroundings and within ourselves, our families, communities and as one interconnected Earth community provides a useful way of understanding the worldview embedded in the Earth Charter. The emphasis on the collective and individual learning for the good of the collective, in contrast to the West's 'importance of the individual and emphasis on self' (Fossey, et al. 1997), is valuable for the implementation of the EC principles, which need collective effort. By taking a balanced approach between the two, whereby individuals are given opportunities to fulfil their potential and nurture the knowledge, skills and values needed to become informed, responsible, active and capable citizens of the Earth, whilst at the same time keeping a global perspective and contributing to collective learning and action, ESD can be facilitated.

The ideas of respecting nature and spending time appreciating nature supports the value of place-based learning and the need to link theoretical knowledge with practical experiential learning, for example, through field visits or outdoor activities, which is important in learning the full range of knowledge, skills and values defined for ESD.

Many aspects of ancient Chinese philosophies have strongly influenced Chinese culture and ethical values. However, some aspects of these principles did not become mainstream or have been diluted over time. Reconnecting with local culture not only allows people to better understand their heritage, but also provides a basis for studying the principles of the EC and linking oneself to the global community. By reconnecting with local culture and by learning about other cultures and traditions, the principles for ESD and the EC can be strengthened and methods for implementing these principles within the local and global context can be harnessed. They can also provide spiritual and moral education for sustainable living as outlined in Principle 14d of the EC.

## THE ROLE OF THE EC IN CHINA

The Earth Charter is an invaluable resource outlining global values and principles for a sustainable peaceful Earth, but for these values and principles to be adopted and for action to be taken, people also need to root them in their own context and local culture.

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 example, 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. In the Bazhu community, Weixi county, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan villagers have considered the EC, and recognise and agree with many of the principles. However, they also expanded on it to include some other values that reflect their Buddhist beliefs and local ethics, such as:

- A sense of interconnectedness with nature (humans as part of nature)
- A sense of solidarity and unity as opposed to competitiveness (at local, regional, national and global levels)
- A sense of the collective needs rather than an emphasis on the individual.

Understanding the links of global principles with local values, culture and belief systems can strengthen the impact of the EC and the process of ESD by helping communities to relate the global values to their daily lives. Such an approach is more likely to result in changes in thought and action that are conducive to SD.

In this way, the EC 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.

## INFUSING THE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES OF THE EC IN EDUCATION

The integration of the EC principles into all aspects of education and learning requires the facilitation of a learning process, which develops the values, knowledge and skills needed for SD. This learning needs to take a global perspective and also link to the local context so that localised and appropriate action can be taken.

The learning should not just occur in schools, but in formal, nonformal and informal learning settings and should involve all sectors of society: teachers and community educators, community members, young people, governments, monasteries or other community organisations, businesses and corporations, etc.—they all need to participate for the changes in thinking and action to be meaningful and effective at a local, regional and global level.



Suggested interventions include:

- Providing practical training and capacity building
- Developing resources that connect the local context with the global context, and entail interactive and practical activities to develop the knowledge, skills and values for SD. These resources could include teaching manuals, community packs, school activity packs, textbooks and leaflets.
- Linking theoretical learning with practical application
- With ESD as the common focus, establishing learning partnerships or mechanisms that link the formal, informal and nonformal learning settings to combine their expertise, knowledge, skills and values for ESD
- Engaging all sectors of society, for example, businesses, the government sector and the media, to create change at broader levels and influence policy.
- Constructing strategic partnerships, such as joint projects between schools and with communities
- Facilitating community based projects
- Establishing community learning centres
- Sharing best practices at broader levels and engaging in cross-cultural dialogue.

## **LEARNING AT THREE LEVELS**

A process of learning for SD (ESD) should be facilitated at the individual, institutional and societal levels and all learning (in formal, nonformal and informal settings) should be geared towards SD.

At the individual level, more opportunities should be created for individuals to fulfil their potentials and learn about ESD not just in schools but also in nonformal and informal settings, in order that they can develop their potentials and acquire knowledge, skills and values conducive to SD. Learning at the individual level should be a combination of formal, informal and nonformal learning settings. Efforts should be made to link the three spheres of learning in order to enhance knowledge, skill and value acquisition for SD. More opportunities should be created for cultural exchange and inter-cultural dialogue to promote cultural understanding and harmony. Experiential and place-based learning, which will instil respect for one's natural surroundings, should be encouraged.

Institutional (or community) level learning can be facilitated by a mechanism (such as a joint project or civil society organisation) that promotes collective learning, collective wisdom, collective voices, collective decision making and cooperation, leading to collective learning and action at the institutional level. Shangri-la Institute initiatives, for example, include Community Learning Centres where community members can explore their philosophies alongside the EC principles, explore and revitalise their traditional cultures, understand and explore nature and their surroundings, acquire the knowledge and skills needed to protect their surroundings and SD (individually and through shared learning), and centre the principles of the EC within their own cultural beliefs and understandings.

Learning at the societal level can be facilitated through the building of partnerships which can promote shared learning for SD: between communities, nature reserves, government institutions, NGOs, businesses, religious or political institutions and schools, universities, etc. This can result in improvements in structures and processes at the societal level such as allocation and management of resources and coordination or control of economy and society. The establishment of platforms at the local, regional, national and international level to share and reflect on the learning and experiences and promote intercultural learning to inform a process of adaptation, also facilitates social learning.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

To integrate the practices of SD and the values and principles of the EC into all aspects of learning and education, knowledge, values and skills for SD need to be facilitated at individual, institutional and societal levels, in formal, nonformal and informal learning settings. Experience in China demonstrates that drawing on the EC as a global framework and linking it with the local context and traditional values facilitates the application of global values through local actions, which will contribute to a more sustainable, just and peaceful world.

## Notes

- 1 Ch'i or qi can be roughly translated as spirit, energy, essence or life force.
- 2 The first written reference to Buddhism appeared in China in A.D. 65, but may have entered China as early as 246 BCE to 221 BCE. Most recent Chinese sources cite the date as ca. 265 BC. Available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism\\_in\\_china](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_in_china) (accessed 9 January 2010).

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