

Chapter 16

Confucian Harmony: A Philosophical Analysis

Chenyang Li

He 和 (harmony, harmonization) is the most cherished ideal in Chinese culture, and more specifically, in Confucianism. Focusing on the Confucian ideal of *he* developed during the classical period, this chapter explores its meaning and provides a philosophical analysis and exposition.

1 The Confucian Ethical, Political, and Metaphysical Ideal of *He*

“*He*和” is usually translated in English as “harmony,” though it may be more appropriately rendered as “harmonization” in many contexts. The word predates Confucianism. Its earliest form can be found in inscriptions on bones and tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty (sixteenth to eleventh century BCE.) and later more frequently in inscriptions on bronze utensils of the Zhou Dynasty (1066?–256 BCE.) (see Guo 2000). In the earliest Confucian texts, we can find numerous occurrences of “*he*.” The meaning of *he* in these texts mostly has to do with sounds and how sounds interact with one another. It was probably used more frequently as a verb than a noun. The *Yijing: Zhong Fu* 易經·中孚 states, “a crane sings in the woods and its baby birds respond (*he*) to it” (TTC 1980: 71). The *Zuozhuan: Zhuanggong 22nd Year* 左傳·莊公二十二年 states, “male and female phoenixes fly together and their sounds mutually respond (*he*) vigorously” (TTC 1980: 1775). The *Shijing: Zhengfeng* 詩經·鄭風 contains the expression “responding (*he*) to

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C. Li (✉)

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
e-mail: Cyli@ntu.edu.sg

brothers with songs” (TTC 1980: 342). In the *Analects*, we find “when Confucius sang with others and saw someone did well, he always made the person repeat the song before he responded (*he*)” (*Analects* 7.31; TTC 1980: 2484). Finally, in the *Zhouli: Diguan* 周禮·地官, there is the statement, “to use [the musical instrument] *chun* to respond (*he*) to drums” (TTC 1980: 721). In all these instances, “*he*” evidently is used to describe how various sounds, of animals, of people, and of instruments, respond to one another. This meaning of “responding” is preserved in the modern Chinese language when “*he*” is used as a verb (with the fourth tone), as in “*he shi* 和詩,” namely composing a poem in response to another poem by someone else. Xu Shen 許慎 (30–124) in his lexicon *Shuowenjiezi* 說文解字 defines “*he*” simply as “mutual responsiveness (of sounds)” (*Shuowenjiezi* 1992: 57). As a lexical definition, Xu’s is a report of these usages of “*he*” in earlier texts. It summarizes the root meaning of the word.

However, mere mutual responsiveness is not yet harmony. Harmony results only when sounds respond to one another in a mutually enhancing way. One of the earliest definitions of *he* as harmony, several 100 years before Xu Shen, can be found in the *Guoyu* 國語, a classical text written during the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) in close association with the Confucian tradition. In the chapter “*Zhouyu B* 周語上,” it is stated that “when sounds correspond and mutually *bao* one another it is called *he*” (Lai 2000: 166). “*Bao* 保” has a number of interrelated meanings such as “protect” (*bao hu* 保護), “nurture” (*yang yu* 養育), “rely on” (*yi kao* 依靠), “stabilize” (*an ding* 安定), and “assure” (*bao zheng* 保證) (*Sources of Terms* 1995: 117).

Understood in this way, *he* is not just that sounds mutually respond; it is that various sounds respond to one another in a mutually promoting, mutually complementing, and mutually stabilizing way. In this sense, some of the expressions cited above can be interpreted as harmonization. For example, the expression in the *Zuozhuan: Zhuangong* 22 can be interpreted as that “male and female phoenixes fly together and their sounds harmonize with vigor” (TTC 1980: 1775). The expression in the *Zhouli: Diguan* can be read as saying, “to use [the musical instrument] *chun* to harmonize the [sounds of] drums” (TTC 1980: 721). As such, expressions like “the *he* of the five sounds”¹ in the *Zuozhuan: Xigong* 24th Year 左傳·僖公二十四年 do not merely mean the mutual response of sounds, but also the harmonious interplay of these sounds (TTC 1980: 1818). “*He*” is used here as a noun, standing for a (dynamic) state of music rather than simply one sound responding to another. Therefore, we may conclude that the original meaning of *he* as harmony comes from the rhythmical interplay of various sounds, either in nature or by human beings, that is musical to the human ear, and that the prototype of *he* is found in music.² From the notion of *he* as the harmonious interplay of sounds, it is not difficult to see how it can be expanded, by analogous thinking, to mean harmony in other things and hence harmony in general.

¹Ancient Chinese used a five-tone scale in music.

²Another source of the early meaning of “*he*” is the word “*shu*,” which means the mixing of wine with water. See Li 2008.

Thus, we can say that, philosophically, harmony presupposes the existence of different things and implies a certain favorable relationship among them. Understood this way, harmony is not about conforming to a fixed order in the world. To the contrary, it is about creating orders.

One of the earliest ideas of *he* was proposed by a pre-Confucian scholar-minister, Shi Bo 史伯 (551–475 BCE). In the *Guoyu: Zhengyu* 國語·鄭語 Shi Bo elaborates on *he*:

Harmony (*he*) is indeed productive of things. But sameness does not advance growth.³ Smoothing one thing with another is called harmony. For this reason things come together and flourish. If one uses the same thing to complement the same thing, it is a dead end and will become wasted (Lai 2000: 746).

This is so because,

A single sound is nothing to hear, a single color⁴ does not make a pattern, a single taste does not satisfy the stomach, and a single item does not harmonize (Lai 2000: 747).⁵

According to Shi Bo, *he* was the philosophy of ancient sage-kings and it enabled their societies to prosper:

Therefore, the early kings mixed Earth with Metal, Wood, Water, and Fire, and produced varieties of things. They balanced one's taste with the five flavors, strengthened the four limbs in order to guard the body, harmonized (*he*) the six measures of sounds to improve the hearing, made the seven parts of the body upright to maintain the heart/mind, balanced the eight body parts to complete the whole person, established the nine social rules to set up pure virtues, and put together the ten offices to regulate the multitude. Therefore, there came into existence thousands of categories and tens of thousands of methods used in calculating millions of things and evaluating myriads of properties. They maintained constant incomes and managed countless items. Therefore the kings had land of nine provinces and had incomes to raise the multitude. They taught the people adequate lessons and harmonized (*he*) them as one family. Thus, it was harmony (*he*) at the highest level (Lai 2000: 746–747).

These sage-kings also set themselves as examples in promoting *he*:

The early kings married their wives from other families, sought wealth in all directions, and chose ministers who could remonstrate with the ruler. This way they reconciled a multitude of things. They were engaged in harmonization (*he-tong*) (Lai 2000: 747).

For Shi Bo, a harmonious world must be a diverse world. This is so because a healthy and prosperous world relies on its diverse things to go together. This is why the ancient sage-kings sought diversity. As in good cooking and in good music-making, a healthy family must consist of spouses from different tribes, a prosperous nation must seek wealth from various sources, and a good government must have

³I here translate “*ji* 繼” as “advance growth.” See the *Analec*s 6.3, “the superior person helps those in emergency but does not advance the cause of the rich” (*junzi zhouji bu jifu* 君子周急不繼富) (TTC 1980: 2478).

⁴Literally it reads “a single thing” or “a single item.” In his commentary of *Zhouli: Chunguan: Baozhangshi* 周禮·春官·保章氏, Zheng Xuan writes, “*wu* means color” (*wu se ye* 物,色也) (TTC 1980: 819).

⁵“聲一無聽,物一無文,味一無果,物一不講。” The *Shuowenjiezi* defines *jiang* (講) as “harmonizing (和解也)” (*Shuowenjiezi* 1992: 95).

ministers capable of holding different opinions. Harmony out of diversity produces a lively world; sameness without adequate difference can only lead to a dead end.

The *Zuozhuan: Zhaogong 20th Year* 左傳·昭公二十年 records a discussion of *he* by another scholar-minister, Yan Zi 晏子(?-500 BCE):

Harmony (*he*) is like making soup. One needs water, fire, vinegar, sauce, salt, and plum to cook fish and meat. One needs to cook them with firewood, mingle (*he*) them together in order to balance the taste. One needs to compensate for deficiencies and reduce excessiveness. The virtuous person (*junzi*) eats [such balanced food] in order to purify his heart/mind (TTC 1980: 2093).

The cook needs different things to make a balanced soup. She needs ingredients that taste and smell very different. Water and fire are usually seen as diametrically opposed to each other, yet neither is dispensable for cooking. One important aspect of good cooking is to be able to balance one excessive flavor with another. Yan Zi believes that enjoying such harmonized food can purify a virtuous person's heart/mind (*xin*). He continues:

Sounds are like flavors. Different elements complete one other: one breath, two styles, three types, four instruments, five sounds, six measures, seven notes, eight winds, and nine songs. Different sounds complement one another: the pure and the impure, the big and the small, the short and the long, the fast and the slow, the sorrowful and the joyful, the strong and the tender, the late and the quick, the high and the low, the in and the out, and the inclusive and the non-inclusive. Listening to this kind of music, the heart/mind of the virtuous person (*junzi* 君子) is purified (TTC 1980: 2093-4).

For Yan Zi, good music (e.g., a symphony) requires a variety of sounds in various modes. A good musician is like a good cook, capable of mingling together various sounds, some in sharp contrast, to make a coherent and harmonious piece. Like a good soup, enjoying such good music can also purify people's heart/mind.

Based on this understanding of *he*, Yan Zi argues that *he* must be distinguished from another notion, *tong* 同 (sameness). In Yan Zi's conversation with the duke of Qi, the duke evidently confuses *he* with *tong* when he praises how harmonious (*he*) it is between him and his minister Ju 據. Yan Zi points out that the relationship between the duke and his minister Ju is described more appropriately as *tong*, not *he*. Yan Zi uses the above examples of cooking and making music to show that *he* is not to be confused with *tong*. Yan Zi says that the moral of his examples of *he* also applies to the relationship between the ruler and ministers. He says:

When the duke says "yes," Ju also says "yes;" when the duke says "no," Ju also says "no." This is like mixing water with water. Who can eat such a soup? This is like using the same kind of instruments to produce music. Who can enjoy such music? This is why it is not all right to be *tong* (TTC 1980: 2094).

For Yan Zi, this kind of relationship between the duke and his minister Ju is sameness or conformity, not harmony. A harmonious relationship presupposes that they have different perspectives and different views on various issues. One may say that *tong* without adequate differences precludes harmony, and such a state is like a soup made of only one ingredient or a symphony composed of only one kind of instrument. A soup made of only one ingredient is tasteless, a symphony composed

of only one instrument is boring, and a government consisting of only one voice is stagnant and dangerous.

The thought of Shi Bo and Yan Zi was later appropriated in the Confucian classics *Zuo zhuan* and *Guoyu*.⁶ *He* later became a central ideal in Confucianism. In the *Analec*s 13.23 Confucius (551–479 BCE) adopts the ideal of *he*, making *he* a criterion for the good person (*junzi*). He says that “The *junzi* harmonizes but does not seek sameness, whereas the petty person seeks sameness but does not harmonize” (TTC 1980: 2508). For Confucius, a sensible person should be able to respect different opinions and be able to work with different people in a harmonious way. A major function of *li* 禮 (rites, rituals of propriety) is precisely to harmonize people of various kinds. The Confucian disciple Youruo 有若 is recorded in the *Analec*s 1.12 as saying that “of the functions of *li* harmonization is the [most] precious” (TTC 1980: 2458). There is little need to emphasize how Confucius valued the use of *li*.⁷ Confucius and Confucians see a direct connection between *li* and *he*. They take *li* to be a central aspect of government and believe that, through the good use of *li*, good government results in a harmonious society. According to the *Zhouli: Tianguan* 周禮·天官, another Confucian classic, one of the six primary functions of the state official Greater Minister is “[to minister] state rituals (*li*), in order to harmonize the nation” (TTC 1980: 645).⁸

Mencius (372–289 BCE), too, highly values *he*. He comments that among the three important things in human affairs, the harmony of people is the most important: “good timing is not as good as being advantageously situated, and being advantageously situated is not as good as having harmonious people” (*Mencius* 2B1; TTC 1980: 2693). In order to achieve a major goal in social affairs, one would need all three: good timing, being advantageously situated, and having harmonious people. The most precious thing, however, is to have people who work harmoniously with one another. Mencius praises Liu Xiahui 柳下惠 as “the sage who is able to harmonize” (*Mencius* 5B.1; TTC 1980: 2741). Liu is well known for his familiarity with *li* and for his conviction of harmonious co-existence.⁹

Xunzi 荀子 (313?–238 BCE) also emphasizes *he*. In the *Xunzi: Xiushen* 荀子·修身, he concurs with Confucius on the importance of *li* to harmony. Xunzi says that “[only] when following *li* is one harmonious and regulated” (TTM 1986: 289). He also echoes Confucius in saying that “To harmonize with others by goodness is being reasonably accommodating” and “to harmonize with others by wickedness is fawning” (*Xunzi: Xiushen*; TTM 1986: 289). For Xunzi, harmony is not without principle. This strikes a similar note to Confucius, whose ideal of harmony is

⁶ Unlike the *Zuo zhuan*, the *Guoyu* is not one of the Confucian 13 Classics. But it has been attributed to the same author as the *Zuo zhuan* and has a similar philosophical orientation.

⁷ For my discussion of *li*, readers can see Li 2007.

⁸ Beside *li* (禮), *he* is also closely related to other key Confucian concepts such as *li* 理, *ren* 仁, and *yi* 義. Space does not allow me to expand my study into these concepts in relation to *he* in the present chapter.

⁹ When the state of Qi attacked Liu Xiahui’s native state Lu in 634 B.C.E., Liu sent off people to persuade the ruler of Qi “not to harm one another” (Lai 2000: 295).

“harmony without mindlessly following others” (*Liji: Zhongyong* 10; TTC 1980: 1626).

He is not just about human relationship. The *Jiaotesheng* 郊特牲 chapter of the Confucian classic *Liji* 禮記 states, “when *yin* and *yang* harmonize, the myriad things get their due” (*Liji*; TTC 1980: 1446). Xunzi elaborates on the same idea in more detail: “with the great transformation of *yin* and *yang*, the generous supply of the wind and the rain, the myriad things each get harmonized so they can live, and get their nurture so they grow” (*Xunzi: Tianlun*; TTM 1986: 327). Here Xunzi concurs with the *Yijing*, the *Tuanzhuàn* 彖傳 chapter of which develops the notion of “grand harmony” (*taihe* 太和): “How great is the *Qian* 乾 (Heaven)! From it the myriad things originate under Heaven....With the changes of the *Qian* way, the myriad things all keep on their own path of life. Thus they preserve the grand harmony” (*Yijing*; TTC 1980: 14). “Grand Harmony” is the most important ideal in the *Yijing*. The world is full of different things, yet all these things harmonize as they go through incessant changes. Confucians have faith in this ultimate harmony of the world.

Perhaps the most concentrated articulation and elaboration of this Confucian ideal of harmony is found in the *Zhongyong* 中庸 chapter of the classical text *Liji*. The *Zhongyong* states, “Centrality is the great foundation under Heaven, and harmony is the great way under Heaven. In achieving centrality and harmony, Heaven and Earth maintain their appropriate positions and the myriad things flourish” (*Liji*; TTC 1980: 1625). In a separate essay I have argued that, in the *Zhongyong*, centrality is the way to achieve harmony (Li 2004). Without harmony, Heaven and Earth would be out of their proper places, and nothing in the world would be able to flourish. Therefore, harmony is the highest ideal in the *Zhongyong*. The *Zhongyong* lays out the foundation for Confucian metaphysics and promotes harmony as the highest ideal.

Harmony, as understood in Confucianism, can take place at various levels. It can take place within the individual. A person can harmonize various parts of his or her body, the mind-heart, and various pursuits in life into a well-functioning, organic whole (Li 2010). Harmony can take place between individuals at the level of the family, the community, the nation, and the world.¹⁰ This may include harmony between societies, harmony within a society with different ethnic groups (or political organizations), harmony within the same ethnic group with different kinships, and harmony within the same kinship. Harmony also can take place between human beings and the natural universe. Confucianism does not exclude intrapersonal harmony, which Daoism emphasizes, but Confucianism puts tremendous weight on interpersonal harmony, such as harmony between ruler and ministers, parents and children, husband and wife, between siblings and between friends. It also places tremendous weight on the harmony between human society and the natural world. Its ultimate goal is to achieve grand harmony throughout the cosmos.

¹⁰For an insightful discussion of intercultural harmony from a Confucian perspective and its implications for the contemporary world, see Shen 2003. For a detailed explication of Confucian harmony at these levels, see Li 2013.

For Confucians, harmony defines the kind of life a person should live, the kind of society people should construct, the kind of world humanity should maintain. The difference between harmony and disharmony is one between right and wrong, good and bad, and success and failure. The *Wuxing* 五行 text of the Guodian Chu Bamboo Slips, which is generally accepted as a Confucian text, states that “the harmony of the Five virtuous practices is called Virtue; the harmony of the Four practices is called Goodness. Goodness is the way of humanity. Virtue is the way of Heaven” (Liu 2003: 69). The Four virtuous practices are Humanity, Appropriateness, Propriety, and Wisdom; the Five virtuous practices also include an additional Sageliness. The harmonious practices of these virtues are the way of humanity and the way of Heaven. They are the right way.¹¹ Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE), the influential Han Confucian, declared that “the greatest virtue is harmony” and advocated to “use central harmony in managing society” (Dong 1986; TTM 1986: 805). For Dong, the ability to harmonize in the world is indeed the most precious.

As far as the need for harmony is concerned, Confucians tend to see more consistency than distinctions between the “private” and the “public” (as is seen in Western liberalism), between the political and the non-political, and between human society and the natural world. When persons and things are engaged in a healthy, stable interplay and each gets its due, it is deemed as harmony; the opposite as disharmony. When a plant is harmonized with its surroundings it thrives; when a person is harmonized with his environment, he flourishes. The ideal of an individual is not only to harmonize within one’s own person, but also with other individuals. The ideal of a society is not only to harmonize within the society, but also with other societies. The ideal of humanity is not only to harmonize among its members but also with the rest of the cosmos as well.

2 A Philosophical Analysis and Exposition of *He*

Based on the study in Sect. 1, I would like to make the following observations concerning the Confucian notion of harmony. First, harmony is a metaphysical as well as an ethical notion; it describes both how the world at large operates and how human beings ought to act. Harmony is the Way, the Confucian way. Second, harmony is by its very nature relational. It presupposes the co-existence of multiple parties; “a single item does not harmonize.” As far as harmony is concerned, these parties possess relatively equal significance. Harmony is always contextual; a mentality of harmony is a contextual mentality. Epistemologically, it calls for a holistic approach. Persons of harmonious mentality see things, and make judgment of things, in relation, in context, not in isolation or separation. In this connection, harmony is not a one-directional “adjustment” in conformity to pre-existing cosmic orders as Max Weber has read it (Weber 1951: 152–53). The requirement of harmony places a constraint on each party in interaction, and, in the meantime, provides a

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of the Confucian harmony of virtues in the *Wuxing*, see Li 2011.

context for each party to have optimal space to flourish. In the Confucian view, the world is not there just for one item or one kind of thing. It is for the “myriad things.” Nothing in the world can claim absolute superiority to all others. Parties in a harmonious relationship are both the condition and the constraint to one another’s growth. A harmonious relationship implies mutual complement and mutual support between the parties (Cheng 1991: 187). There is mutual benefit, even though harmony cannot be reduced to mutual benefit. Third, Confucian harmony is by no means “perfect agreement” as is often (mis)understood. In harmony, co-existing parties must be in some way different from one another; while harmony does not preclude sameness of all kinds, sameness itself is not harmony. Harmony is different from stagnant concordance in that harmony is sustained by energy generated through the interaction of different elements in creative tension. Although a harmonious relationship in society may involve friendliness and love, friendliness or love is not a necessary condition for harmony. Even unfriendly parties can co-exist in harmony. This point, as I will show shortly, has implications for an appropriate understanding of the relation between harmony and strife.

In what follows, I will first articulate a Confucian view on the relation between harmony, sameness, and strife, then explore in the context of Confucian philosophy why harmony is so important to Confucians, and finally, through a brief comparison of Confucianism and Christianity, try to answer some questions about Confucian harmony by discussing issues regarding gaps or potential gaps between moral ideals and their implementation.

It is important that we do not simple-mindedly interpret the Confucian attitude toward sameness. Difference and sameness between things exist at various levels. Confucians do not advocate difference for the sake of difference, nor do they reject sameness altogether. Obviously, even though the sage-kings are said to have sought spouses from other tribes, the couples were all human beings (i.e., a kind of sameness). Even though one would need different instruments in order to make good music, they are still musical instruments (i.e., another kind of sameness). Indeed, some ancient Chinese texts advocate a certain kind of sameness. For instance, in the *Jingfa* 經法: *Sidu* 四度 of the Silk Texts of the Mawangdui Han Tombs, is the statement that “Joining the Heaven and Earth, responding to the people’s will, establishing both the civilian and military service, this is called the superior *tong* 同 (sameness)” (Chen 2007: 103). Of course, the “superior *tong* 上同” is not just any kind of sameness; it is sameness at the optimal level. Confucius also advises us “not to plan together with people of different roads (pursuits)” (*Analects* 15.39; TTC 1980: 2518). Conversely, we should plan together with those following the same (*tong*) roads. Mencius praises the sage-king Shun 舜 “good at *tong* with others” (*Mencius* 2A8; TTC 1980: 2691). Furthermore, the *Zuozhuan*: *Chenggong* 16th Year 左傳·成公十六年 states that: “when people live in abundance, they will be together harmoniously and listen [to the ruler’s commands]” (TTC 1980: 1917). The expression of “being together harmoniously” combines both “*he* 和” and “*tong* 同.” We can say that, at an appropriate level, sameness is an ingredient of harmony and, as such, must be maintained and valued. Therefore, the kind of sameness that ancient and Confucian scholars reject must not be understood as sameness per se,

but “over-presence of sameness,” like the one between the duke and his minister Ju in the Yan Zi story. An over-presence of sameness can occur in many ways. It can be caused by a lack of diversity when diversity is called for. For example, a cook only has one kind of ingredient for a soup. It can be caused by forced sameness when sameness is sought for the sake of sameness. For example, a powerful person forces the same opinion on everyone else, or a fawning person pretends the same view in conformity to his superior for ulterior purposes; both undercut conditions necessary for harmony.

For Confucians, over-presence of sameness, whether seeking spouses within the same tribe or making music with the same type of instrument, is not conducive to harmony. Even though members of a stamp collection club have to share common interest at some level (i.e., they are fond of collecting stamps), collecting the same stamp, e.g., the Year of the Monkey stamp issued by the U.S. Post Office in 2004, does not make a good stamp collection club; such a club will probably not last, because this kind of sameness “does not advance growth,” as Shi Bo said. In the political arena, even though laws must be made to treat everyone equally (a kind of sameness), making laws that overly demand uniformity is not conducive to good society. What kind of sameness is appropriate to harmony is always a contextual matter and cannot be determined in absolute terms. Because the harmony orientation takes conflict as its primary opponent, there is a tendency to overlook the other side of the danger, namely the over-presence of sameness. Ancient scholars emphasize the difference between harmony and sameness because people tend to confuse them, taking mere sameness as harmony. Strictly speaking, over-presence of sameness is a lack of harmony, and therefore it is a kind of disharmony.

While emphasizing the harmonious interplay of different things, Chinese philosophers appear to have not given much attention to strife, or they may have left the impression that strife is to be avoided for the sake of harmony. A certain type of strife, however, is inherent in harmony. This point is implied in the ancient scholars’ emphasis on the difference between harmony and sameness (*tong*).

Harmony presupposes differences and has to be achieved through differences. Difference entails, at least potentially, strife. We may say that there can be two kinds of strife between various things. The first kind I call tension and cooperative opposition. Different things in a relationship have tension between them in that they compete, at a minimum, for space and time. For instance, people at a busy train station heading in various directions may experience tension and opposition (potential conflict); they may step in one another’s way. Tension and opposition like this are obviously not harmony; they can jeopardize harmony. This happens, for instance, when the tension and opposition between busy people erupts into a stampede. Opposing parties, however, can also be harmonized without harming one another. For example, this happens when people at a busy train station take turn, make room for one another, and move forward in an orderly way, even though in different directions. The transition from mere tension and opposition to harmony takes coordination or cooperation of the involved parties, either consciously or unconsciously. Taking a panoramic view of such a busy station, one has to marvel how a harmonious scene is being produced by people heading in different, even opposite, directions.

This kind of difference as tension and opposition is a pre-condition for harmony; without it there is mere sameness rather than harmony.

The second type of strife is more severe. It is the kind in which one force aims at destroying or eliminating the other or others. For example, a murderer kills innocent people, and wolves eat sheep. Let us call this second type antagonistic opposition. This type of strife is either itself disharmony or a key element of disharmony. In this case, harmony is achieved through overcoming strife. An overcoming process may take one of two forms. First, it can be the elimination of strife. We remove a serial murderer and the community is restored to harmony. However, for Confucians, elimination is not the prototypical path to harmony. For the most part, harmony can be achieved through the second form by putting strife under control without elimination, namely by turning the second type of strife into the first type. Whereas a large population of sheep tends to increase the population of wolves, the population of wolves has to be lowered when they over-eat sheep to cause a shortage in food supply. Eventually, the wolves and the sheep have to strike a balance through some kind of natural “negotiation.”¹² When harmony is achieved, the sheep provide food for the wolves while the wolves weed out the unhealthy and keep the sheep population in check. Of course, sometimes violent disharmony is inevitable. On the individual level, the strife between a wolf and a sheep may end in elimination. Where the population of wolves and the population of sheep strike a balance, some sheep and/or wolves have already been lost in the process. In cases like this, Confucians would say that strife between the two individuals serves as an instrumental step toward harmony in the long run and at a large scale for the world. Dong Zhongshu writes, “the system of Heaven and Earth integrates harmony and disharmony, centrality and non-centrality; these are employed timely to be most effective” (Dong 1986; TTM 1986: 805). Since harmony is not only a state, but more importantly a process, disharmony is necessarily present during the process of harmonization.

In this sense, human beings can exist harmoniously with nature even though we have to consume natural resources. In order to survive, we have to consume, and therefore to eliminate lives in nature. But we can do it in a balanced way and achieve harmony with nature. Unlike the natural world, human beings have the capacity to play an active role to promote harmony in the world. This capacity enables human beings to avoid unnecessary damage and harm in achieving harmony. For instance, imposing too large a human population burden on nature may eventually destroy the human habitat, and consequently reduce the human population to a level bearable to Earth. But human beings have the power to restrain their behavior and to maintain a balance with nature before such a catastrophe takes place.

Confucian harmony is not pure submissiveness or absolute avoidance of conflict. In Sect. 10 of the *Liji: Zhongyong*, Confucius’s disciple Zilu 子路 asks about strength. Confucius identifies two types of strength. One type is the strength of the northerners, who will fight unto death for the right cause; the southerners have a different kind of strength: they are tolerant and flexible, and they do not avenge the

¹² Obviously human beings can affect the level of the balance between the two populations, so can other species.

unjust. Confucius approves both types of strength, including the strength of “central standing without leaning to one side” (*Liji*; TTC 1980: 1626). This passage suggests that Confucius endorses an integration of both kinds of strength into a harmonious interplay, rather than simply taking the mean between the two. The strength of the northerners may appear extreme (“to fight unto death”), but at times it is necessary in order to achieve and maintain harmony in the large picture of human affairs. Therefore, it should not be ruled out. This is why Confucius tells Zilu that “the *junzi* harmonizes without following the flow” (*Liji*; TTC 1980: 1626). To blindly follow the flow of other people is what Xunzi has called “fawning” as opposed to “reasonably accommodating” (*Xunzi: Xiushen*; TTM 1986: 289); it will lead to an over-presence of sameness rather than long-term harmony. A harmony deteriorating into over-presence of sameness loses internal energy; it cannot maintain itself as harmony and needs renewal.

On this understanding, Confucian harmony is not mere agreement without difference; it is not to preserve peace at any cost. Harmony is harmonization; real harmony is a dynamic process. It does not rule out strife, but uses strife in order to achieve greater harmony. Harmony comes from, and is maintained through, harmonization; it requires action. Having faith in God does not mean that Christians will not fight for their cause. Similarly, Confucians do not just sit there waiting for harmony to present itself. To the contrary, Confucians have a mission in life: to harmonize the world in the process of the formation of the triad with Heaven and Earth. What makes Confucianism a philosophy of harmony rather than a philosophy of strife is that it takes harmony as the ultimate goal and measures success or failure of an action by whether it contributes to greater harmony in the world.

Then, why is harmony so central to Confucianism? Admittedly, Confucianism is not the only tradition that values harmony. After all, who would not think harmony to be a good thing? My point is that, in comparison with other major world traditions, Confucianism gives harmony utmost importance not matched by most major world traditions and it holds firmly that harmony can be realized. Here I would like to show that the absence of a pre-determined fixed order in the Confucian cosmos and the Confucian belief in the goodness of human nature are among the main reasons why harmony is so central to Confucianism.

David Hall and Roger Ames have pointed out insightfully that Confucian harmony, or *he*, marks the difference between Western “Truth-seekers” on the one hand and Chinese “Way-seekers” on the other (Hall and Ames 1998: 180).¹³ For Hall and Ames, “Truth-seeking” is the prototypical mode of doing philosophy in the West, while “Way-seeking” is its counterpart in China. Seeking “Truth,” with a capital “T,” is to look for something absolute, eternal, and ultimately true, like Plato’s Forms. In contrast, the Chinese Way is not pre-set and needs to be generated through human activities. In Hall and Ames’ terminology, whereas Westerners typically follow a logical order in their interpretation of the world, the Chinese typically follow an

¹³ Obviously, not all Westerners are “Truth-seekers” and not all Chinese are “Way-seekers.” But to the extent that these two patterns have been the predominant tendencies respectively, I believe that Hall and Ames are right.

aesthetic order. Logical order is achieved by application to a given situation of an antecedent pattern of relatedness. Aesthetic order is achieved by the creation of novel patterns (Hall and Ames 1998: 16). Aesthetic order requires openness, disclosure, and flexibility. In the Chinese aesthetic order, various things have to be synthesized in order to generate a harmonious whole, like *yin* and *yang*, and the five processings (*wuxing* 五行).

In support of Hall and Ames' interpretation, I would point out that ancient Chinese cosmology holds the belief that the world has evolved from chaos, the belief that there is a process from no order to the generation of an order, as articulated in such texts as the *Huainanzi: tianwenxun* 淮南子·天文训 and later in Zhou Dunyi's 周敦颐 *An Explanation of the Diagram of the Great Ultimate (Taiji tushuo* 太极图说). Based on this belief, the Chinese order is fluid and open-ended; the order of *yin* and *yang*, and of the five processings at most provides a general direction rather than a detailed road map for human action.

This Confucian understanding of world order differs significantly from some other major world traditions (see Li 2008). In Christianity, for example, God created the world with a purpose for each and every part of it. The will of God is carved in nature as natural law. God has set up order in the world and boundaries between all parts of the creation. Accordingly, the right way in this world is to follow God's rules and to obey the order given by God. Unlike most major world traditions, Confucianism does not believe in an anthropomorphic God as creator. Consequently, in the Confucian world there is no order or natural law from God. Without a pre-set fixed order, the world has to generate an order of its own. Although sometimes the Confucian Heaven (*tian* 天) appears to play a role that resembles the Christian God in some way, it is not a transcendent power as the Christian God is.¹⁴ The Confucian Heaven is a member of the Triad Heaven-Earth-Humanity (*tian-di-ren* 天地人), and it does not have the power to impose a pre-determined order on the world from without. Rather, as merely one member of the Triad the Confucian Heaven needs to achieve order through coordination with the other two-thirds, namely Earth and Humanity.

For Confucians, therefore, order in the world has to be achieved through harmonization. Take again the example of the populations of sheep and wolves. On the Confucian thinking, there is no fixed order from God about their populations. Nature keeps a balance between the two. Ancient Confucians believe that the will of Heaven is revealed through the people. When the ruler loses the mandate of Heaven, it is time for the people to replace him. Perhaps the fact of the matter is that there is no such thing as the mandate of Heaven. Rather it may be that when the ruler is so oppressive and causes so much social disharmony that the people can no longer put up with him, it is time to replace him with another ruler, with one who can

¹⁴Some people may think otherwise. Here I follow Hall and Ames' interpretation (Hall and Ames 1998). Perhaps we should distinguish popular Chinese beliefs and Confucian theology here. An average person may believe that Heaven is a fixed entity and that Heaven has set a pre-determined order in the world. Confucian theology, as delineated in such texts as the *Liji:Zhongyong* and the *Yijing*, clearly offers a different view.

harmonize with the people. Confucians see a harmony (not necessarily friendliness) coming out of this continuous interplay of opposing forces. Through such interplay various parts of the world “negotiate” with one another in order to strike a balance, not from a pre-destined principle but through some kind of “compromise,” some kind of “give-and-take.” It is like rocks and water in the river: both can have their way yet both have to yield in some way. In such a world, any order that exists has to be an outcome of harmonization.

Elsewhere I have argued that in Chinese social practice, the Chinese understanding of truth plays an important role that differs from the West (Li 1999: Chap. 2). The Chinese typically do not see truth as correspondence with an objective fact in the world; rather they understand truth more as a way of being, namely being a good person, a good father or a good son. For them there is no objective truth carved in stone and, consequently, there is not an ultimate fixed order in the world for things to operate. The Confucian Dao is the process of generating an actual order in the world rather than a pre-given fixed order itself. Without pre-determined truth, humanity in coordination with Heaven and Earth has to set boundaries for themselves and for other things as they move forward in the world.

Between being too principled and being too flexible, Christian theology is more likely to risk the former than Confucian theology, and Confucian theology is more likely to risk the latter than Christian theology.¹⁵ Acting out of principles (e.g., the Ten Commandments) from God, the Christian stands firm, but she may misunderstand God (as during the Crusades); being principled leaves her little room for flexibility: God is always right and so are God’s commands. Acting on the ideal of harmony, Confucians have few specifics to go by before they themselves make the specifics, and being made by human beings, the specifics should never be taken as absolute. Thus Confucians tend to be less rigid, but risk being too flexible in the pursuit of harmony. It would be naïve, however, to think that a happy union of the Christian and the Confucian would solve all the problems: such a union carries the weakness of not being principled enough when needing to be principled and of not being flexible enough when in need of flexibility.

In addition to the absence of a pre-determined fixed order in the world, the Confucian belief in harmony has been re-enforced by a faith in the goodness of human nature. Early on in history, Mencius articulated and argued emphatically that human nature is good. His doctrine has had a long-lasting influence on the Confucian tradition. This notion sets the orientation for Confucians to look for ways to resolve conflicts in society without elimination. This orientation is fundamentally different from that of looking to identify and eliminate “evil-doers” in the world. In order to root out “evil-doers,” the primary approach would be to attack and destroy the enemy as effectively as possible; negotiation is merely a waste of time and of

¹⁵This is not to say that a Confucian may not be as stubborn as a Christian on one’s commitment to a particular moral ideal. But the typical Confucian has less faith in an objective Platonic moral order set in the universe than the typical Christian, and therefore the Confucian’s fundamental moral principles are less clearly cut. In this regard, the Confucian probably stands at the mid-point between the “water-like” Daoist and the “righteous” Christian.

opportunity. On the other hand, in order to work out differences between people who are basically good, the primary approach should be looking for ways to negotiate with them; even though confrontation cannot always be ruled out, it should be minimized. Based on the Confucian belief in the goodness of human nature, it is readily conceivable that the world at large is not fundamentally antagonistic to human existence, because the non-human world, which is incapable of consciously harming others, is either benign or neutral toward humanity. Therefore, harmonization, rather than elimination, should be the primary consideration in dealing with problems in the world.

In practice, the ideal of harmony translates into a kind of pragmatic attitude or mentality. It is this mentality that makes the whole world of difference between the philosophy of harmony and the philosophy of combativeness. The attitude of harmony has a strategic significance. It makes us more willing to engage in negotiation, more willing to compromise, and less willing to resort to confrontation and conquest. It enables us take into consideration the whole picture of an issue and give each party its due. Therefore, it is more conducive to peaceful solutions to problems in the world.

At this point, it is appropriate to discuss issues related to the Confucian ideal of harmony and its implementation. First, having faith in harmony does not imply that things always harmonize. As a cherished ideal, harmony provides the guideline as well as an account of certain cultural patterns in Confucian society. Having faith in harmony is to have faith in a world that gives everything its due and lets the myriad things flourish. However, things may not always harmonize. In Christianity, God's will is not always followed by human beings; natural law gets violated; and not all Christians love their neighbors as they should. Similarly, in the Confucian world, harmony is not always achieved and maintained; disruptions take place and disharmony ensues; not all Confucians cherish harmony as much as they should. A Confucian who has faith in the harmony of the world is somewhat like a Christian who has faith in God, even though God and harmony are by no means parallel: Sometimes things go terribly wrong; yet a Christian would keep her faith that things eventually will turn around because all is in the hands of God; similarly, a Confucian in trying times would believe that disharmony is temporary and harmony will prevail. It is harmony as the ultimate ideal that makes the Confucian world a meaningful world, and it is harmonization that gives the Confucians a sense of sacred mission in the world.

Second, embracing an ideal does not imply a consensus on its application. Under the same ideal, people may seek different ways to implement it. Christians may not agree with one another on how they should put God's words into practice, even though they share a common belief in God and a common belief that one should obey God's will. Similarly, although Confucians take harmony as their highest ideal and all strive for its achievement, they may not always agree with one another on how harmony is identified and how it is best achieved. It is possible that what is called "harmony" by one person may be disguised oppression to another. Indeed, there have been times when under the name of "harmony" oppression persisted, just as oppression under the name of God existed in the history of Christianity. Obviously

it is not the case that once we embrace the concept of harmony, all problems will disappear. My aim in this chapter is to elucidate the Confucian concept and ideal of harmony, not to provide a precise conception of harmony on a particular issue. Just as Christians need to figure out among themselves what God's words mean to them, Confucians have to translate the ideal of harmony into specific terms. Nevertheless, for Confucians it is still important to promote the ideal of harmony rather than disharmony, and to prioritize the goal of harmony, just as it is still important to promote justice rather than injustice, even though we may not agree on exactly what justice is in a specific case.

Finally, one may ask, how are you supposed to promote harmony when your enemy is attacking you? In a world of conflicts today, isn't the Confucian ideal of harmony a mere naiveté? The Confucian would respond as follows: When your enemy is attacking you, you need to protect yourself. If he slaps your right cheek, you should not give him your left cheek. Harmonization requires action and resolve to overcome disharmonious elements in the world. However, you must understand that in the long run, the best life is to be lived in harmony and peace. Therefore, you should avoid doing extreme things that create or perpetuate your enemy, and even when you engage in fighting with your enemy, you should try to turn conflict into harmony. In other words, one should maintain a harmony mentality rather than the combatant mentality. The Confucian classic *Zhouli: Dongguan* 周禮·冬官 states that "harmony results in peace" (*he ze an* 和則安) (TTC 1980: 914). Peace cannot be obtained and maintained without harmony. Temporary peace through oppression and suppression is not real peace, and it does not last. In order to achieve real peace and to maintain peace throughout the world, we would do well to learn from the Confucian ideal of harmony.

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