

# Chapter 6

## The Confucian Conception of Transcendence and Filial Piety

Qingxin K. Wang

### 6.1 Introduction

The religious dimension of Confucianism has been subject to intense controversy ever since Ricci Matteo, a Jesuit missionary, visited China in the late 16th and early 17th centuries: the late Ming period of China. The radical Chinese intellectuals existing after the May Fourth Movement of 1919 have denied altogether that Confucianism has a religious dimension. In the past several decades, many new Confucian scholars outside of mainland China have done admirable work in an attempt to restore the religious dimension of Confucianism. Drawing heavily on the Lu Xiangshan-Wang Yangming school of neo-Confucianism, which emphasizes the power of the subjective mind and the denial of the objective existence of the transcendent world, these scholars share the view that the Confucian religion does not make a strong distinction between transcendence and immanence. They characterize the religious concerns of Confucianism, such as cosmological orientation, communitarian ethics, and modes of individual self-cultivation for becoming a sage, as this-worldly (Tu 1985, 1989; Liu 1972; Ames and Hall 1987). In fact, they do not claim that Confucianism is a religion. Rather, they suggest that Confucianism manifests a “religious worldview” that is characterized by its cosmological orientation for harmonizing the triad among Heaven, Earth and man. The fact that they refrain from using the word “religion” to characterize Confucianism is closely associated with their understanding of a religion modeled on those religions of Western origin (such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), which are characterized by “theism, personal salvation, and natural/supernatural dichotomies” (Tucker 2004, pp. 2–3). In other words, because there is a lack of natural/supernatural dichotomies and a strong distinction between transcendence and immanence, Confucianism does not concern itself with theism and personal salvation.

---

Q.K. Wang (✉)

College of Public Management, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China  
e-mail: wangqingxin@tsinghua.edu.cn

While the recent scholarship on Confucian spirituality has made an important advance, it still faces important limitations in addressing the religious worldview of Confucianism because these scholars have restricted themselves to the writings of Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming, consequently neglecting the classical Confucian texts and the neo-Confucianism of the Cheng Yi-Zhuxi School, which had been the dominant orthodox state ideology for nearly 800 years until 1911.

Jiang Qing's scholarship is important because he has gone beyond the work of the Lu-Wang school and its contemporary followers in his restoration of Confucianism by reviving the tradition of Political Confucianism developed by Xun Zi and by highlighting the parallel relationship between the Lu-Wang school and Xun Zi's Political Confucianism. More specifically, Jiang's work directs us to the writings of Xun Zi as a means for rediscovering Chinese rationalism, which is necessary for constructing contemporary Chinese institutions. In light of the juxtaposition of the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions, which exerted significant influence on the development of Western civilization, Jiang proposes Confucianism be re-classified into two different strands: Mind Confucianism and Political Confucianism. According to him, Mind Confucianism emphasizes the cultivation of personal virtues. It does not reject the teachings of ancient Confucian classics or the teachings of the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism, but focuses on the Lu-Wang school of neo-Confucianism, which stresses the power of the subjective and free human mind. Political Confucianism refers to those classical writings that stress the art of political governance based on Confucian institutions and rules pioneered by Xun Zi. Furthermore, Jiang argues that the relationship between Mind Confucianism and Political Confucianism is parallel to the relationship between the Greek rationalist tradition and the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. This is because Political Confucianism was developed on the basis of a rationalism similar to the Greek rationalist tradition, which paved the way for the European Enlightenment, and Mind Confucianism was founded on a metaphysics similar to that of the Judeo-Christian tradition. With this reclassification, Jiang's work has established an important foundation for the future study of Confucianism by making it comparable to Western civilization and by highlighting the importance of re-examining the religious dimension of Confucianism as it compares to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Drawing on a variety of classical Confucian texts, I argue in this chapter that Confucianism is as much a religion as the major religions of Western origins are, because Confucianism shares the same kinds of ultimate concerns despite some important differences. Specifically, my arguments are as follows. First, contrary to the mainstream literature, there is in fact a dichotomy between the natural and supernatural worlds with a strong distinction between transcendence and immanence in Confucianism. Filial piety and ancestral worship are expressions of the Confucian religion in the existence of the transcendent world. Through acts of filial piety and ancestral worship, the transcendent world is affirmed. The *qi* (spirits), ancestral deities (*gui shen*), and family bloodline are the

connection between the transcendent realm and the immanent realm. The difference between Confucianism and Western religions is that Confucianism believes in a kind of polytheism, with Heaven, Earth, ancestral deities, sagely deities, and other kinds of deities co-existing in the transcendent world (or the numinous world) and exercising power and influence on the human realm, while major Western religions believe in monotheism. Second, there are strong ultimate concerns in Confucianism about the eternity of human lives, specifically; Confucianism is primarily concerned with the eternity of clan or family bloodlines rather than individual lives. Alternatively, Western religions are mainly concerned with the eternity of individual human lives. To put it differently, Confucianism is concerned with the salvation of the family bloodline, rather than individual lives, which are the domain of Western religions.

Lastly, like Christianity and other Western religions, Confucianism is also concerned with the realization of the ideal person and the ideal world. However, there is an important difference between Confucianism and Western religions. While Western religions hold that the ideal person and the ideal world do not exist in the human realm, Confucianism finds that the realization of the ideal person and the ideal world is possible in the human realm (or this world), rather than in the other world (or the numinous world). For Confucianism, the Confucian religious faith expressed in the form of filial piety serves as the ontological foundation for the cultivation of virtue and self-transformation. Self-cultivation is the foundation of transforming society into a harmonious ideal world on Earth, similar to the Christian notion of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Through the cultivation of virtues and steadfast adherence to the system of rites, family affairs will be properly managed, political affairs will be justly governed and eventually the world will be pacified so that there will be eternal harmony among Heaven, Earth, and man. Ultimately, for Confucians, filial piety is the ontological foundation for transforming this world into the world of eternal harmony or the creation of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

## 6.2 The Confucian Conception of Heaven (*tian*)

An all-encompassing supreme authority of the entire cosmic world of spirits was first conceived of during the Shang dynasty, the second ancient dynasty in recorded history (around 1766–1122 B.C.), in Central China. This personalized supremely transcendent power came to be known as *Di* or *Shang Di* (the high god). While some archaeologists have argued that the high god originally referred to a powerful ancestral god of the Shang royal clan, providing a major source of legitimacy to justify the Shang kings' political power, the majority of archaeologists agree that the high god referred to an all-encompassing transcendent deity, which ruled over the entire universe. This high god not only ruled over the entire kingdom of spirits (ancestral spirits and natural spirits included), but also gave birth to the Shang and Zhou people.

Moreover, the high god also provided a foundation for the kings of the Shang people to claim their legitimate authority to rule over the Shang people. In other words, the high god provided the moral basis for the universal king to claim his political authority in the human world (Schwartz 1985, pp. 30–31). In the words of David Keightley, the high god has dominion “over rain, wind and other atmospheric phenomena, harvests, the fate of urban settlements, warfare, sickness and the king’s person. He may share some of his functions with other spirits, but his ultimate sovereignty is indisputable” (Keightley 1985, p. 33).

The name of this transcendent authority was changed to *tian* (Heaven) by the founders of the Zhou dynasty, the dynasty succeeding the Shang dynasty, but the essential nature and all-encompassing power over the universe remained largely unchanged until the end of the last Chinese dynasty in 1911. From the Zhou dynasty onwards, Heaven’s transcendent power again provided political legitimacy for the universal kings in the human world and justified their exercise of political power, which was captured by a more elaborate doctrine known as “the Mandate of Heaven” (*Tian Ming*).

The appropriate conception of Heaven has become very controversial in the modern era in light of its many different interpretations after the revolution of 1911. Influenced by the Western Enlightenment ideas of science and democracy, many have criticized the Confucian belief in supernatural powers, attributing them to China’s backwardness, and have begun to advocate the view that the Confucian notion of Heaven refers to the “impersonal” physical order of nature. Only a small group of scholars has maintained the Confucian notion of Heaven that connotes a moral consciousness of the cosmic order or a personal god. Jiang’s view is a good representative of this latter type. This chapter follows Jiang’s view in holding that the Confucian conception of Heaven refers to a transcendent power. This is because, as Schwartz aptly reminds us, the new understanding of a Confucian conception of Heaven after 1911 has been heavily influenced by a radical antagonism between a human world centered on the human subject as the sole source of meaning and an indifferent “valueless” or even hostile universe in the post-Cartesian West. In fact, in the Chinese tradition, there is no such sharp distinction between the human world and the valueless universe. The problem applies to the contemporary understanding of the Confucian conception of Heaven (*tian*). In contrast to the post-Cartesian West, the Confucian tradition has never established such a “rigid antithesis between Heaven as ‘order of nature’ and Heaven as cosmic consciousness”. As Schwartz argues, the Confucian conception of Heaven is very similar to the Judeo-Christian conception of God, even though Heaven does not speak as God does in the Judeo-Christian conception (Schwartz 1985, pp. 120, 126).

We can find much evidence in the classic Confucian texts to support the Classical Confucian view that Heaven is a transcendent power. As Confucians believe, Heaven is the ultimate creator of the cosmos and all things, including human lives. Moreover, Heaven has a moral consciousness because it provides material abundance to sustain the lives of its creations. The benevolent virtue of

Heaven lays the foundation for all human virtues. As the *Book of Odes* says, “Heaven produces the teeming masses, and where there is a thing there is a norm.” *The Book of Change* praises Heaven’s biggest virtue as its benevolence toward living things.

Furthermore, Heaven creates humans with the innate moral potential of fulfilling Heaven’s moral purpose, which is known as *Tian Ming* in Chinese (or the Mandate of Heaven), as well as moral rules to govern their relations on the basis of the benevolent virtues (*ren*) and justice (*yi*). This is evident in the introduction to *The Book of Change*. In other words, Heaven is immanent in humans, that is, Heaven’s spirits live in the human heart so that humans acquire the potentiality of Heaven’s benevolence. This is similar to the Christian conception of the immanence of God. The introduction to the Confucian classic *Zhong Yong* reads, “What Heaven imparts to man is called human nature. To follow our nature is called the Way. Cultivating the Way is called education” (Chan 1963). Thus, Mencius firmly believed that human nature was innately good because humans are created by Heaven and are governed by Heaven’s moral rules. As Mencius said, humans are born innately with four different kinds of moral potentials: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. In Mencius’s own words,

the heart of compassion is possessed by all men alike; likewise the heart of shame, the heart of respect and the heart of right and wrong. The heart of compassion pertains to benevolence, the heart of shame to dutifulness, the heart of respect to the observance of the rites, and the heart of right and wrong to wisdom. Benevolence, dutifulness, observance of the rites and wisdom do not give me a luster from the outside; they are in me originally (Lau 1970, p. 125).

Moreover, Mencius said, “for a man to give full realization to his heart is for him to understand his own nature, and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven. The retention of his heart and the nurturing of his nature are the means by which he serves Heaven” (Lau 1970, p. 145).

Lastly, like God in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Heaven is capable of enforcing his moral order. Heaven can punish those who do not comply with heavenly laws. As Confucius says in the *Analects*: “when you have offended against Heaven, there is nowhere you can turn to in your prayers” (Lau 1979, p. 69). Likewise, Mencius also says that Heaven can reward compliance with Heavenly rules and punish the violator of these rules: “those who are obedient to Heaven are preserved, those who go against Heaven are annihilated” (Lau 1970, p. 79).

Specifically, Confucius’ faith was based on the existence of the golden age of the three ancient dynasties, whereas Mencius’ faith was founded on his belief in the goodness of human nature (Ivanhoe 2004, 2007, pp. 211–220; Tucker 2004). In any case, Confucius and Mencius, as well as numerous other classical Confucians, had strong faith in the existence of Heaven as a transcendent power with a good will to maintain the moral order of the world.

### 6.3 The Confucian Conception of Deities

Unlike Christianity, which believes in three worlds: heaven, the earthly world, and hell, Confucians believe in the existence of only two worlds: the earthly world (*yang jian*) and the other world (*ying jian*), or the numinous world. While Western religions conceive of the earthly world as transient and consequently attach great importance to personal salvation in order to achieve the eternal happiness of the personal soul in the Kingdom of Heaven, Confucianism believes that the numinous world may be eternal but also may not be all bright. Instead, Confucianism conceives of the earthly world as the most amazing and beautiful world created by the mysterious and benevolent power of Heaven and believes in the possibility of attaining the greatest happiness in the earthly world through the cultivation of virtue and self-transformation. Thus, Herbert Fingarette made an important point when he observed that Confucianism views the secular world as the sacred world (Fingarette 1972).

Moreover, unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Confucian tradition conceives of the numinous world of polytheism. While Heaven is the ultimate creator of all things and exercises the ultimate power in the human realm, there are different kinds of deities that can also exercise certain power and influence the human realm. Thus, they are to be respected and worshipped. There is a wide range of deities, including those of rivers, mountains, ancestors, and the Confucian sages who made an exceptional contribution to the Confucian scholarship during their lifetime and whose names were enshrined in the Confucian temples. I will focus on the conception of ancestral deities below because it is the most popular and has continued to persist in the religious practices of most parts of contemporary rural China.

Confucians conceive of every human being as a spiritual being living inside the human body. When the human body is dead, the spiritual being will leave the body and continue to live in a transcendent world for eternity and will continue to exercise an important but mysterious power over his or her descendants in the human realm. For example, the Confucian classic, *The Book of Rites* (Chapter 24), reads,

Confucius said, the *qi* is the manifest spirit of divine beings (*shen*); the *po* is the manifest spirit of ghosts (*gui*). To worship them together is the top priority in educating the ordinary people. . . Everyone will have to die and return to the earth eventually. The human remains are called ghosts (*gui*) and will degenerate and become a part of the earth. The divine spirits (*qi*) will leave the human body and rise up to the heaven. When the people feel the presence of the divine spirits, they will be sad and sorrowful. The spirits (*qi*) are the essence of the myriad things and the manifest power of divinity. Because of the essential power of the divine spirits, they are treated with high honor. They are referred to as spiritual deities (*gui shen*) to be respected and worshipped by the ordinary people. Numerous high officials are in awe of them, and the hundreds and thousands of the ordinary people submit to them (Chapter 24, my translation).

Likewise, the classic, *Zhongyong*, states,

Confucius said how abundant the display of power of spiritual beings is! We look for them but do not see them. We listen to them but do not hear them. They form the substance of all things and nothing can be without them. They cause all people in the world to fast and purify themselves and to put on the richest dresses to perform sacrifices to them. Like the spread of overflowing water they seem to be above and to the left and to the right. *The Book of Odes* says, “the coming of spiritual beings cannot be surmised. How much less can we get tired of them?” Such is the manifestation of the subtle. Such is the impossibility of hiding the real” (Chan 1963, p. 102).

#### 6.4 The Connection Between Ancestral Deities and Family Blood Lines

From the Confucian perspective, life exists not just in the form of individual human beings, but in the form of a biological familial bloodline with all members of the clan family integrated as a biological entity traceable to ancestral gods. The physical bodies and lives of descendants are seen as the biological extension of the lives of parents and ancestral gods. The moment humans are given birth by their parents, they become integrated parts of the family bloodline. This mysterious biological reality will never change. Thus, protecting one’s physical body and life is like protecting the physical bodies and lives of parents and ancestors. *The Book of Rites* reads, “Master Zeng said, our physical bodies are an integral part of our parents’ physical bodies. When we act through our parents’ physical bodies, how can we not respect the bodies?” (chapter 24). Likewise, as recorded in the *Analects* (Book Eight), Confucius’ disciple Zengzi, the author of the *Book of Filial Piety*, showed his students that he protected his body so well that he dared not harm a dint of his body while he was dying. Zhu Xi, the neo-Confucian sage of the Song period, interprets Zengzi as believing his body was given to him by his parents and, consequently, that any harm to his body would constitute an insult to his parents.

The Confucian religious belief that parents and children are integrated parts of one biological entity is also evident in the two famous but controversial stories recorded in the *Analects* (Book 13, chapter 3) and the *Mencius* (Book 7, Part I) respectively. In the story from the *Analects*, when the Duke of She brags that in his country “there was a man called upright Kung. His father stole a sheep and Kung bore witness against him.” Confucius replies: “In my country the upright are different from this. A father will protect his son and a son will protect his father” (Waley 1938, p. 96). In the story in the *Mencius*, an official asked Mencius what Shun, the exemplar sage king of antiquity, should do to his father, if his father was accused of committing some murderous crime. Mencius replies, “Shun would look upon casting aside the empire as no more than discarding a worn shoe. He would have secretly carried the old man on his back and fled to the edge of the Sea and lived there happily, never giving a thought to the Empire” (Lau 1970, p. 153). Commenting on the story in the *Analects*, Benjamin Schwartz rightly suggests that “it is not that he approves of

stealing. It is that the sacred familial ties are so overriding in importance that even in a case as painful as this they must be preserved” (Schwartz 1985, pp. 102–103). But Schwartz only focuses on the ethical importance of this choice and does not recognize the religious meaning of this story.

Due to lack of attention to the religious implications of these passages, these controversial stories have been subject to various misinterpretations. Some even suggest that such typical Confucian conduct constitutes a consanguinism that imparts a very corrupted practice of family-oriented favoritism (Liu 2007). In fact, Confucian familial favoritism is religious-faith-related and virtue-oriented (Fan 2008).

The Confucian conception of all clan members as integral parts of the biological whole is similar to the Biblical conception of all Christians in the New Testament as being integral parts of one single unit. For example, the First Book of Corinthians reads,

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. . . . But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it (I Cor 12:12–14, 24–27).

This is to say, there are significant similarities between Confucianism and Christianity in this regard.

## 6.5 The Meaning of Ancestral Worship and Religious Rites

Worshipping ancestors is a very important part of the religious lives of the traditional Chinese. While Heaven is the ultimate creator of our physical lives, ancestors and parents are the direct creators of our lives and the transmitters of the family bloodline. In other words, together with Heaven and Earth, ancestors and parents have participated in the creation of lives and the transformation of the world by giving birth to our lives. Thus, Confucians emphasize that they are worthy of respect and honor.

Confucians believe that worshipping rituals are an essential process of communicating with ancestral deities and receiving their blessings. When worshippers come to the ancestral temples to perform proper rituals and to think about their deceased ancestors in their hearts and minds, the ancestral deities will appear in the temples and hear the prayers of the worshippers. Confucians faithfully believe that it is important for the descendants to observe the proper religious rituals because ancestral deities continue to exert power and influence over their descendants after they depart from the human world. As Benjamin



Schwartz writes, “ancestors can confer benefits or inflict woe on descendants who do not abide by their rituals. They in turn are much dependent for their sustenance and welfare on the proper ritual behavior of the lineages to which they belong” (Schwartz 1985, p. 22).

Moreover, worshipping ancestor deities makes us remember where we come from and the great debts we owe to our ancestors, thus appreciating the precious gift of life that we receive from them. Lastly, worshipping ancestors also reminds us to pay back the debts we owe to our ancestors and to avoid humiliating our ancestors by cultivating the virtues and seeking harmony within social relationships and the world.

Chapter 24 of *The Book of Rites* states it clearly,

All the rites under Heaven include the rites to worship the original creator of the universe, the rites to worship spiritual deities, the rites to maintain social harmony, the rites to achieve righteousness and the rites to maintain humility. Worshipping the original creator enhances the foundation of our understanding of the world, worshipping spiritual deities makes us respect their power, performing the social rites makes the people discipline themselves, performing the righteous rites helps reduce the conflicts between the superior and the subordinates, performing the rites of humility reduces social competition and conflicts. All together, these are the five kinds of rites to govern all under Heaven. . . .

. . . The ancient sages thought this was not enough and thus established temples for worshipping these deities. They built different kinds of ancestral temples to distinguish ancient ancestral deities from more recent ancestral deities. The main reason for doing this was to teach the people to worship their ancestral deities and deceased parents in order for them not to forget where they came from.

Benevolent men always worship and remember their ancestors and parents because they do not want to forget where they came from. Therefore, they pay respect to their ancestors and express love to their deceased parents. They do their best to perform the religious rituals and pay back the debts they owe to their ancestors and do their best to worship them [my own translation].

Likewise, chapter 9 of *The Book of Rites* reads as follows:

Thus it is that the dark-coloured liquor is in the apartment (where the representative of the dead is entertained); that the vessel of must is near its (entrance) door; that the reddish liquor is in the hall; and the clear, in the (court) below. The victims (also) are displayed, and the tripods and stands are prepared. The lutes and citherns are put in their places, with the flutes, sonorous stones, bells, and drums. The prayers (of the principal in the sacrifice to the spirits) and the benedictions (of the representatives of the departed) are carefully framed. The object of all the ceremonies is to bring down the spirits from above, even their ancestors; serving (also) to rectify the relations between ruler and ministers; to maintain the generous feeling between father and son, and the harmony between elder and younger brother; to adjust the relations between high and low; and to give their proper places to husband and wife. The whole may be said to secure the blessing of Heaven (Legge 1967, pp. 370–371).

. . . They proceed to their invocations, using in each the appropriate terms. The dark-coloured liquor is employed in (every) sacrifice. The blood with the hair and feathers (of the victim) is presented. The flesh, uncooked, is set forth on the stands. The bones with the flesh on them are sodden; and rush mats and coarse cloth are placed underneath and over the vases and cups. The robes of dyed silk are put on. The must and clarified liquor are presented. The flesh, roasted and grilled, is brought forward. The ruler and

his wife take alternate parts in presenting these offerings, all being done to please the souls of the departed, and constituting a union (of the living) with the disembodied and unseen (Legge 1967, p. 371).

Thus, this Confucian understanding of the significant meaning of ancestor worship and sacrificial rites explains the continued presence of widespread ancestral temples and clan associations in rural China and in overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. It also explains the long and important tradition of recording the names of members of the family bloodline in the Records of the Clan family (*zu pu*) maintained by the Chinese people.

## 6.6 The Meaning of Filial Piety

Filial piety is the most important and concrete expression of the Confucian religious faith. It provides the transcendent connection between the Heavenly realm and the human realm. To be filial is to remember where we are from and to seek to pay back the debts we owe to our ancestors and parents for the precious gift of life we have been given by properly conducting religious ceremonies in their honor.

From the Confucian classic, *The Book of Filial Piety*, we read,

Confucius said, humans are the most valuable creation in the world. Filial piety is the most honorable human act. There is nothing more important than honoring the father among all the acts of filial piety. There is nothing more honorable than worshipping him on a par with Heaven after his death (Chapter 9, my own translation).

From another Chapter of the same classic, we find,

When worshipping rituals are conducted in ancestral temples, the ancestral gods will come to the temples. The consummate acts of filial piety lead to a spiritual connection between humans and their ancestral gods, allowing the glorification of ancestors in the four seas and the cultivation of all human virtues (Chapter 16, my own translation).

Furthermore, to be filial is to respect and honor the moral wishes of all our creators, Heaven, ancestors, and parents. To put it differently, to be filial is not just to love and honor our ancestors and parents; it is to avoid humiliating their names, to glorify them by showing love and compassion to other people, to cultivate our virtues and to carry out our social obligations. Thus, it has been an important Confucian tradition to emphasize that a benevolent man (*junzi*) will seek the three so-called social accomplishments: contributing to the betterment of the society and the world, striving for perfect virtues, and establishing academic scholarship (*li gong, li de, li yan*). These accomplishments are important for proving he is worthy of being a descendant of the family bloodline (*rong zong yao zu*). This also explains why the Chinese consider “saving face” as

particularly important because the “face” of a Chinese individual not only represents the self-esteem of that individual, but also the honor of his family, his clan family, and his ancestors as well.

As *The Book of Zhongyong* (Chapter 19) states,

Confucius said, King Wu and Duke Chou were indeed eminently filial. Men of filial piety are those who skillfully carry out the wishes of their forefathers and skillfully carry forward their undertakings. . .to revere those whom they honored, to love those who were dear to them, to serve the dead as if they were served while alive, and to serve the departed as they were served while still with us: This is the height of filial piety (Chan 1963, pp. 103–103).

Furthermore, Confucius says in *The Book of Filial Piety* (Chapter 1),

Our physical bodies, hairs and skins are all gifts from our parents and cannot be shamed. This is the starting point of filial piety. Establishing oneself and practicing virtues in accordance with the Way and making one’s name remembered by the people of future generations in order to glorify the names of one’s parents, this is the consummation of filial piety [my own translation].

Similarly, chapter 16 of *The Book of Filial Piety* reads, “Worshipping rituals are needed in ancestral temples to show respect and love for the deceased parents and ancestors so that they will not be forgotten. Cultivating virtues and behaving cautiously are necessary so that ancestors will not be humiliated” [my own translation]. Likewise, we can find similar thought throughout Confucian classics, including *The Book of Rites*. Generally, Confucians hold that there are three necessary acts of filial piety. The first is to honor one’s parents, the second is not to humiliate their reputation, and the third is to take good care of them. For most Confucians, since our parents give birth to us, we can only be considered filial when we take good care of our physical bodies. Only when we do not harm our bodies and do not disgrace our names can we be considered completely filial.

Thus, filial piety motivates people to cultivate virtues through learning and to seek the self-realization of moral virtues. The role of filial piety is very similar to the love of Christians for Jesus Christ. Once Christian believers develop their faith in Jesus, their savior, their intense love for Jesus may be transformed into a love and caring for other people because they believe they owe so much to God and Jesus that their loving other people is one way of paying back their debts of gratitude to God and Jesus. Thus, the way filial piety inspires and motivates people to self-cultivate the virtues is very similar to the way Jesus inspires and motivates Christian believers to pay back their indebtedness to God by promoting their souls and cultivating the virtues. For example, in the New Testament in the Book of Matthew (18:21–35), Jesus used the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant to describe that every man owes to God. Likewise, St. Paul wrote in the first book of Corinthians that all Christians should do everything to glorify God.

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—Even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, to be filial does not mean just taking good care of one's parents and paying due respect and tribute to one's ancestors and glorifying them. To be filial also means that every male has the obligation preordained by his ancestral gods to ensure that the family bloodline continues to survive and thrive in the earthly world. In practice, this means that he has the obligation of fathering male descendants and ensuring the healthy growth of his descendants so that the family's biological bloodline can continue to prosper and live eternally. Unlike the Western religions that regard individual human beings as totally independent in the earthly world and attach great importance to personal salvation for the eternal happiness of the souls in the Kingdom of Heaven, Confucianism conceives of the earthly world as the sacred world and thus is not concerned with the salvation of personal souls in the numinous world. Instead, Confucianism attaches great importance to the thriving of the family bloodline in the earthly world. While each individual human being is very precious as an integral part of the clan family's biological bloodline, the Heavenly rule dictates that it is impossible for each individual being to survive and live eternally in this earthly sacred world. Nonetheless, it is possible for the family bloodline to survive and live in the earthly world eternally so long as each generation of male descendants carries out their utmost filial obligations and fathers a new generation of male descendants. That is why Mencius said, "there are three ways of being an unfilial son: the most serious is to have no heir" (Lau 1970, p. 86). This is the Confucian conception of salvation if there is one. However, this Confucian conception of salvation takes the form of the eternal survival of the family bloodline in the earthly world, rather than the salvation of the individual souls in the numinous world.

## **6.7 The Relation Between Filial Piety and Cultivating Benevolent Virtue (*ren*)**

From the Confucian perspective, filial piety not only connects life in this earthly world to life in the other (numinous) world, it also serves as the foundation of all human virtues in this earthly world. This is because filial piety is the most original and natural love of one human being toward another and it serves as an example for setting the standard of human beings loving people outside of the family circle. Because humans are endowed with the Heavenly innate potential to love all humans, it is possible for a human being to learn to extend his love of family members to others outside of the family. By loving one's parents and ancestors and by paying back the debts owed to

them, one learns to love others outside of one's family. Ultimately, filial piety serves as the ontological foundation for self-transformation and the creation of the ideal ethical socio-political order in this earthly world.

In particular, [chapter 9](#) of *The Book of Filial Piety* points out,

Children's love toward their parents is naturally nurtured because parents take close care of their children. Such love intensifies as children grow into adults and take care of their parents. The sages teach people to respect authority because children naturally respect the parental authority. The sages teach people to love other people because children naturally love their parents. The teachings of the sages are accepted by the people without stringent enforcement. The political authority of the sage kings can be respected by the people without stringent enforcement. The reason is because the sages go back to the roots of love and respect for authority to establish their teachings [my own translation].

Similarly, Mencius said, "there are no young children who do not naturally love their parents or will not respect their elder brothers when they grow up. Loving one's parents is benevolence; respecting their elder brothers is righteousness. What is left to be done is to simply extend these to the whole empire" (Lau 1970, p. 148). Finally, Confucius states in *The Book of Rites* (Chapter 24), "to teach everyone to love starts with loving one's own parents, so that people will live in harmony" [my own translation].

This is why all Confucians of different eras have treated filial piety as the foundation of all other human virtues and have also closely associated filial piety with the ability to govern a country. As Confucians see it, a king who is a genuinely filial son will know how to pay back his debts of gratitude toward his parents by showing great compassion to his subjects and carrying out the heavy obligations of governing the country. This point is clearly shown in chapter 20 of *The Book of Zhongyong*:

The ceremonies of sacrifices to Heaven and Earth are meant for the service of the Lord on High [i.e., High God], and the ceremonies performed in the ancestral temple are meant for the services of ancestors. If one understood the ceremonies of the sacrifice to ancestors it would be as easy to govern a kingdom as it is to look at one's palm (Chan 1963, pp. 103–104).

For Confucians, all roots of the family bloodline can ultimately be traced to Heaven (*tian*), the ultimate creator of the universe. When one extends the act of filial piety to the extreme, all men in the world become brothers because every human being ultimately comes from Heaven, although through different and various family bloodlines. That is why it is said that "all men within the four seas are brothers" in the *Analects* (see Lau 1979, p. 113). Accordingly, Heaven or the High God underlies the Confucian family-based religious and moral commitments of which filial piety is the cardinal idea. Unless one is a filial child, one cannot become a benevolent person toward others.

## 6.8 Conclusion

A rough outline of the Confucian conception of transcendence will be sketched below. There are two worlds, the earthly world consisting of living human beings and the myriad of things, and the other (numinous) world consisting of transcendent spiritual beings including Heaven and the ancestral deities. Heaven is the ultimate creator and regulator of both worlds. The whole of every biological family bloodline consists of two integrated parts: one part living in this earthly world, which includes all visible phenomena, and the other part consisting of the ancestral deities submerged in the other world, which is the invisible noumena that exist eternally. All members of a clan family, whether they are in the earthly world or the numinous world, are connected through the bloodline. The life of a family bloodline is eternal, so long as each generation of male descendants fathers a new generation of male descendants. Thus, the Confucian notion of salvation takes the form of the continuity of the family bloodline in the earthly world, as opposed to the salvation of personal souls in the numinous world as is conceived by Western religions. The clan family bloodline and filial piety are expressions of the Confucian religious faith and they constitute the ontological foundation of this unique Confucian religion.

For Confucians, it is possible to create the kingdom of greatest happiness, or the Christian Kingdom of Heaven, in this earthly world rather than in the other world. There are at least two reasons for this positive faith. First, there is an abundance of love and family happiness around countless lives in this world. This is what the Chinese call *tian lun zhi le* (the heavenly happiness). Second, self-transformation through the cultivation of virtue and the creation of an ideal ethical socio-political order in this world is possible due to the heavenly-endowed innately good human nature in everybody. Heaven creates the universe and humans for a moral purpose, that is, to transform the world into a perfect world whereby all men are transformed into benevolent men. This is like the Christian idea of establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. Humans participate in transforming the world and creating the kingdom of heaven by cultivating the virtues founded on filial piety. But cultivating virtues is just a first step in the creation of the kingdom of heaven. Creating the kingdom of heaven also involves managing family affairs properly, governing political affairs properly, and eventually pacifying the world. This is the Confucian conception of the moral purpose of Heaven in creating the universe and humans, in which men participate in the transformation of the world to fulfill the moral will of Heaven.

The essence of this ideal is a world of great harmony or the unity among Heaven, Earth, and Man. This continues to be the aspiration of contemporary Confucians all over the world, not only in China. This ideal is summarized in *The Book of Rites* as follows:

When the grand course was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky; they chose men of talents, virtue, and ability; their words were sincere, and what they cultivated was harmony. Thus men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were all sufficiently maintained. Males had their proper work, and females had their homes. They accumulated articles of value, disliking that they should be thrown away upon the ground, but not wishing to keep them for their own gratification. They labored with their strength, disliking that it should not be exerted, but not exerting it only with a view to their own advantage. In this way selfish schemings were repressed and found no development. Robbers, filchers, and rebellious traitors did not show themselves, and hence the outer doors remained open, and were not shut. This was (the period of) what we call the Grand Union (Legge 1967, pp. 364–365).

In summary, Confucianism as a religion has been denied or misunderstood by many modern Chinese and overseas intellectuals, including neo-Confucian scholars. Following Jiang Qing's thought, I have argued in this Chapter that we cannot understand the nature of authentic Confucianism without recognizing its transcendent dimension. Drawing on a variety of classical Confucian texts, I have shown that Confucianism is as much a religion as are the major religions of Western origin. It shares similar kinds of ultimate concerns that are characteristic of Western religions, although it also has certain unique features. Importantly, the Confucian religious conception of transcendence and the connection between the secular world and the religious world presents a moderate alternative to the Post-Cartesian modern Western antithesis between the secular and religious worlds. It avoids the radical swing between the two extremes, which has characterized contemporary Western society: the extreme of a secular hedonism or nihilism on the one hand and the extreme of religious fundamentalism on the other. The Confucian religion as well as its emphasis on filial piety can present itself as a moderating force in the contemporary world of clashing civilizations.

## References

- Ames, R. and Hall, D. 1987. *Thinking Through Confucius*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Chan, Wing-Tsit. 1963. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton University Press.
- Fan, Ruiqing. 2008. "Consanguinism, Corruption, and Humane Love: Remembering Why Confucian Morality Is not Modern Western Morality." *Dao* 7:21–6.
- Fingarette, H. 1972. *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Ivanhoe, P. J. 2004. "Death and Dying in the Analects." In *Confucian Spirituality*, edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker, and Tu Weiming, 220–232. New York: Crossroad.
- Ivanhoe, P. J. 2007. "Heaven as a Source for Ethical Warrant in Early Confucianism." *Dao* 6:211–20.
- Keightley, D. 1978. *Sources of Shang History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Lau, D. C., trans. 1970. *Mencius*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Lau, D. C., trans. 1979. *Confucius the Analects*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Legge, J. (trans.). 1967. *Li Chi* (The Book of Rites), vol. I. New York: University Books.
- Liu, Shu-Hsien. 1972. "The Confucian Approach to the Problem of Transcendence and Immanence." *Philosophy East and West* 22:45–52.
- Liu, Qingping. 2007. "Confucianism and Corruption: An Analysis of Shun's Two Actions Described by Mencius." *Dao* 6:1–19.
- Schwartz, B. I. 1985. *The World of Thought in Ancient China*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Tu, Weiming. 1985. *Confucian Thought: Self-hood as Creative Transformation*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Tu, Weiming. 1989. *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Tucker, M. E. 2004. "Introduction." In *Confucian Spirituality*, edited by Tu Weiming, and Mary Evelyn Tucker, 1–38. New York: Crossroad.
- Waley, A., trans. 1938. *The Analects of Confucius*. New York: Random House.