

Harmony in Confucian thought and building a community of shared future for mankind

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Abstract. A community of shared future for mankind (CSFM) is a new type of international system of win-win cooperation, the essence of which is to advocate for the creation of a harmonious human society. This political concept has many views coming from traditional Confucian thought, especially Confucian ideals of harmony. Interpreting CSFM from the perspective of harmony in Confucian thought can improve understandings of community and accordingly enhance its construction.

1 What is a “community of shared future for mankind”

With the increasingly close exchanges between countries, many challenges have emerged, including problems such as economic crises, wealth inequality, terrorism, refugee flows, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, worldwide attention is increasingly turning to questions such as how to facilitate harmony among countries, nations, and civilizations and how to jointly realize peace and prosperity for mankind.

In a keynote speech at the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva on January 18, 2017, “Building a Community of Shared Future for Mankind,” Xi Jinping proposed the concept of the five worlds. The five worlds comprise dialogue and consultation to build a world of lasting peace; joint effort and responsibility in building a universally secure world; adherence to a win-win approach to cooperation to create a world of common prosperity; engagement in exchange and mutual learning to build an open and inclusive world; and commitment to green and low-carbon initiatives for a clean and beautiful world. This is a new type of international system of win-win cooperation, the essence of which is to advocate for the creation of harmonious forms of coexistence across human societies.

This kind of political conception has many views coming from traditional Confucian thought, especially regarding harmony. Along these lines, Xi advised, “To understand present-day China and her people, one must delve into our culture lineages, and precisely make sense of the cultural soil that nourishes the Chinese nation whilst growing. Studying Confucius and Confucianism is a great way to understand Chinese national traits and characteristics as well as the origin of their inner world.” [1] Therefore, it is meaningful to re-examine Confucian thought on harmony and to unpack its enlightening role in building CSFM.

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2 The logical composition of Confucian harmony

Harmony is a state of facts in which things exist and develop in an orderly manner. Within Confucianism, harmony is the most precious political value, and is conducive to maintaining the stability of the country and promoting the prosperity of the society. Confucius thought, the stability of a country does not depend on the amount of wealth, but on whether the distribution is fair; it does not depend on the size of the population, but on the cohesion of people in spiritual pursuits, so he said, “For when the people keep their several places, there will be no poverty; when harmony prevails, there will be no scarcity of people; and when there is such a contented repose, there will be no rebellious upsets.” [2] Mencius said, “(For a war), Opportunities of time vouchsafed by Heaven are not equal to advantages of situation afforded by the Earth, and advantages of situation afforded by the Earth are not equal to the union arising from the accord of Men.” [3] It means that the victory or defeat of a war depends on the support of the people. If a country is harmonious within its members, it will be invincible.

2.1 Origin: benevolence

In the Confucian view, benevolence means loving all men. [4] Benevolence is something that everyone is born with and is caught up with blood relationships; for example, a lover loves their relatives first (love is different between relatives and others). Ultimately, the love between relatives is the most primitive and sincere. Therefore, Confucianism pays special attention to the morality of filial piety, which it regards as a basic requirement for an individual. Confucianism also advises that love spreads out like ripples between people. In Confucianism, love is an innate emotion that derives from the kindness in human nature. Mencius once said that when a person sees a child about to fall into a well, even if he does not know the child, his emotions will be unbearable.

Confucian social morality is based on benevolence. First, Confucian ethics advises that you should love others as you love yourself, take care of other people’s children like you would your own children, and respect other people’s elders as you would respect your own elders. Second, it maintains that you should support others if you want to stand and reach others if you want to realize your own goals. Third, it establishes that you should not treat others in ways you would not want to be treated. Notably, Confucianism situates its ethics as applicable to ordinary people; An individual who aligns with this ethics is called superior man-it is the goal of all Confucians. A society’s alignment with this social morality is powerful: if everyone strives to be benevolent, then social harmony will not be difficult to achieve. In such a context, “everyone who loves one another will also love all things in the world and an environment of peaceful cooperation and living will be created. Therefore, there is no distinction between the heaven, the earth, the myriad things and human beings. There is no difference between nation and nation. The world is a world of peaceful cooperation where everyone can live and work in peace.” [5]

2.2 Principle: righteousness

However, when unpacking social life, we must look beyond love and consider how to deal with evil. People have selfish desires and will harm others to safeguard their own interests. Therefore, Confucians must consider how to prevent a harmonious society from being destroyed by selfish desires. In response, Confucianism put forward the concept of righteousness in *The Doctrine of the Mean*, affirming it by arguing that “righteousness is the accordance of actions with what is right.” [6] It has two meanings:

First, it means that righteousness is an appropriate value standard for measuring behavior. Righteousness therefore regulates behavior; it captures what kind of behaviors people should follow when considering their own interests and those of others. Crucially, Confucianism maintains that communication and cooperation can only be achieved if both parties are righteous. Confucianism even regards righteousness as the essence and standard of a gentleman.

Second, it means that righteousness is an appropriate principle of social benefit distribution. To survive, humans require basic food, clothing, housing, and transportation. If there is a need for such basic things, then there will be interest; in such a context, Confucianism advises that a rational distribution principle is required, and this principle should be based on righteousness rather than utilitarianism.

Regarding the relationship between righteousness and profit, Confucianism situates righteousness as more valuable than profit. Without righteousness, society will be chaotic, and people will not be able to live in harmony. They thought, a person who held the power of the state are only interested in accumulating wealth, he must be under the influence of some small, mean, man. He may consider this man to be good; but when such man is employed in the administration of a State, calamities from Heaven, and injuries from men, will inevitably come at the same time. Although a good man may take his place, he will not be able to remedy the evil. So, *The Great Learning* severely criticized utilitarianism, arguing that “In a State, gain is not to be considered prosperity, but its prosperity will be found in righteousness.” [7]

In practice, righteousness is propriety. In the context of ancient Confucianism, righteousness involves moral obligation. Each person is a member of the social network and as such has a different role, such as being a father, husband, teacher, or leader. Each role involves a particular kind of social responsibility to others and the broader society. Everyone should act in line with their role; this is the value goal of human beings. In pursuit of this value goal, you can sacrifice everything, even life.

2.3 Method: harmony but not uniformity

Harmony but not uniformity is the principle of Confucian harmony. It comes from *The Analects of Confucius*, “The superior man is affable, but not adulatory; the mean is adulatory, but not affable.” [8] This is to say, a superior man will unite with people on principle and will never follow others blindly, and he will agree with others without being an echo. A mean will follow others blindly without regard for principle. The superior man embodies harmony but not uniformity.

In social life, differences and contradictions are unavoidable. In a state of harmony but not uniformity, different parties peacefully co-exist with respect for each other’s differences. Although they honor and stick to their differences, they still seek common ground. Put differently, harmony but not uniformity is not a kind of undifferentiated unity.

The principle of harmony but not uniformity approaches a communication with a particular ethics. During a communication that does not adhere to this principle, the weaker party will not follow principles in dealing with problems and will constantly cater to the other party. While this creates the appearance of harmony on the surface, the parties do not agree in their hearts. Meanwhile, the stronger party tends to reject dissidents and be as proud as Lucifer. Such a relationship is not and will never achieve true harmony.

How to achieve harmony but not uniformity? According to Confucianism, forming a harmonious state between people requires ideological and moral cultivation. People must “exercise forbearance and maintain a firm hold” [9]; specifically, *The Doctrine of the Mean* advises superior men must be abundant and gentle, enough to exercise forbearance and that to be strong and resolute is enough to maintain a firm hold. Here, “exercise forbearance”

means being able to accommodate other people's differing opinions. Meanwhile, "maintain a firm hold" means honoring differences by maintaining one's own standpoint instead of following the crowd or blindly seeking harmony.

2.4 Target: coexistence of all nations in harmony

"Coexistence of all nations in harmony" means that nations should not use force in international relations; instead, they should communicate with each other peacefully and cooperatively to live in harmoniously. This the goal of harmonious thought.

This concept originally emerged in *Yao-Dian* of *The Book of Historical Documents*, which mainly recorded the administrative politics and historical achievements of Emperor Yao. [10] In the text, Yao is praised for being morally pure, gentle and tolerant, able to carry forward the great virtues, having strong intimacies with family and friends. Additionally, Yao was celebrated for his ability to discern the future, which he could use to guide people into stable and harmonious relations and to coordinate various nationalities into a state of peace.

Confucius believed that the actual realization of coexistence of all nations in harmony lies in the important concept of propriety, which can refer to a kind of traditional culture in interaction. When countries are courteous to each other, friendly diplomatic relations will come true, and if friendly diplomatic relations want to be maintained, countries should be courteous to each other more. Propriety and harmony are in a mutual relationship.

Confucius also briefly mentioned relationships between ethnic groups. During his time, various ethnic groups fought to unify the world. In this context, Confucius advocated for the use of moral education and other cultural forms to influence and educate other ethnic groups, and did not agree with the use of force to unify the world. In *The Analects of Confucius*, he very much appreciated Kwan Chung's approach to assemble all the princes together without relying on military force, and praised him as benevolent. [11] Moreover, he also believed that cultures can influence each other, and that nations will look to excellent cultures. He wagered that an admirable culture could be cultivated by faithful and truthful words and steady and earnest actions—even among "uncivilized tribes" (of course, the term "uncivilized tribes" is inappropriate from today's perspective, and we should look at it objectively).

3 Considering the role of Confucian harmony in building a community of shared future for mankind

Today, the world remains characterized by an "unbalanced development system" [12] regulated by the early developed countries' control of world financial capital, monopoly on cutting-edge technology, and control over natural resources. Under this system, the development dividend is tilted toward these countries. If other countries want to change the current rules, they will inevitably conflict with these countries. This is the case with China. However, the global rise of developing countries has become an unavoidable trend. Therefore, it is crucial to consider how such conflicts may be avoided in the interest of achieving global common development. The concept of CSFM, which integrates Confucian ideals of harmony, offers a way forward.

3.1 Building a love for putting oneself in another's place

Basing on benevolence, Confucius think if you wish to establish yourself, seek also to establish others; wish to be enlarged yourself, seek also to enlarge others. [13] Applied to political thought, this ideal suggests that if our own country has developed and become stronger, then we must also help other less developed countries to grow alongside us. The

varied levels of development of different countries threatens to exacerbate the already serious gap between the rich and the poor, which is the root cause of turmoil in the world. The idea of CSFM has included the Confucian concept – benevolence - since its inception. This idea takes the world as a whole: it regards different races, regions, and countries as components of the broader human community, and supports developed and developing countries in achieving common, coordinated, and balanced development. This is reflected in the delivery of aid to African countries and the Belt and Road Initiative.

3.2 Establishing a sense of international responsibility

From the perspective of international exchanges, righteousness is far more complicated to realize between countries than between individuals. Due to the inconsistent interests of various countries and the absence of strong supranational organizations, it is difficult to achieve fairness and justice between countries. Nevertheless, if most countries have a sense of international responsibility - considering the common future of all countries in the world as well as the future of their own country, circumstances may vary. This is what CSFM advocate. After all, we live on a common earth, and the continuous deepening of globalization has closely linked the future of mankind. Few problems can be solved only by one country or even several countries. CSFM initiates the provision of an equal and just platform, a commitment to building stable and balanced relationships between major powers, and for nations to consider the long-term interests of all mankind—short-term domestic political objectives—in taking up emerging international affairs. Especially, CSFM emphasizes various countries not limit themselves to a zero-sum game; instead, they might better have a clear and rational understanding of the development and growth of other countries, recognize the different policies and concepts of other countries, and respect the core interests of all countries.

3.3 Seeking common ground while accepting existing differences

CSFM emphasizes seeking dialogue and consensus on the basis of mutual respect and recognition. Harmony but not uniformity is the ideological origin of this view; along these lines, this traditional cultural concept has shaped the Chinese nation's tolerant attitude toward different cultures. A similar view appears in *The Planet of Multiculturalism - Report of the International Panel of Experts of UNESCO*, which advises that the "uniformity of the cultures in the world is totally different from consistency, and it is not based on the elimination of various differences, but based on integrating these differences into a harmonious whole." [14] The diverse and excellent cultures formed over the long history of mankind is an indispensable and important part of CSFM. Every civilization is unique; there is no distinction between high and low, good and bad. Therefore, in international cultural exchanges, CSFM emphasizes recognizing and respecting the diversity of cultures and civilizations, eliminating cultural prejudice, learning from and inheriting the beneficial elements of human civilization, and giving them new connotations in combination with the development of the new era.

4 Conclusions

Confucianism is a school concerned with politics. It pursues the positive realization of its own ideals, advocates peace, and cares about the people. In contemporary society, it still affects China as a cultural gene. As far as CSFM is concerned, it wants to use peaceful means to enable every country to develop, rather than making China the new leader and hegemon.

Its essence is to provide a new development path that enables both developed and developing countries to achieve win-win results.

All in all, the contemporary iterations of Confucian thought in the concept of CSFM recalls excellent traditional Chinese culture and Chinese history, considers the laws of human social development, and judges the reality of human development. Interpreting CSFM from the perspective of Confucian harmony can improve our understandings of this key vision; meanwhile, moving forward, Confucian conceptions of harmony will also play an important role in promoting healthy international exchanges, world peace, and development.

Addenda

A community of shared future for mankind is the translated term of “Renlei minyun gongtongti (人类命运共同体)” in academic analysis. And CSFM is short for it. There are other similar translated terms, such as “community of common destiny” and “human community with a shared future”. See, e.g., J.P. Xi, *On Building a Human Community with a Shared Future*, Central Compilation & Translation Press, Beijing (2019).

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