Confucianism and Ecology

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Updates by Forum on Religion and Ecology

There are few works that directly connect ecology and the study of Confucianism. However, there is a growing body of literature that provides insight into the cultural, philosophic, historic, economic, and religious elements of Confucianism that do bear upon any consideration of the modern ecological worldview. This bibliography is divided into two parts: texts specifically related to the topic of Confucianism and ecology and, general, supportive reference works (by region) for understanding the larger context of Confucianism and ecology.

**Texts Specifically Related to Confucianism and Ecology**


This is a review of *Confucianism and Ecology*, which is a collection of essays that was published in 1998 by the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions as part of the book series on Religions of the World and Ecology.


This is a collection of thirteen new essays on the relationship between world religions and deep ecology. In examining how deep ecologists and the various religious traditions can both learn from and critique one another, the following traditions are considered: indigenous cultures, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, Christian ecofeminism, and New Age spirituality. Contributors include Nawal Ammar, David Landis Barnhill, John E. Carroll, Christopher Key Chapple, John B. Cobb Jr., Roger S. Gottlieb, John A. Grim, Eric Katz, Jordan Paper, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and Michael E. Zimmerman.


In this work, the author discusses the ways in which destructive and injurious natural phenomena were experienced by the founders of Daoism and Confucianism. In particular, the author considers two views that these Chinese thinkers had of the relationship between benevolent and malevolent forces of nature. One view is said to be anthropocentric insofar as it interprets destructive natural forces as consequences of bad human actions. According to the other view, natural forces are
to be accepted as part of the flow of the Dao, regardless of whether they appear painful or injurious to humans.

Berneko, Guy. “Ecohumanism, the Spontaneities of the Earth, Ziran, and K = 2.” Journal of Chinese Philosophy 31, no. 2 (2004): 183-194. In this essay, Berneko discusses the contribution of Daoism, Neo-Confucianism, systems theory, and Thomas Berry’s “Ecozoic” sensibilities for facilitating a sustainable future. Berneko argues that the basic principles and formulae articulated in these different perspectives offer insights that are greater than those offered by a single culture alone, and that together, these perspectives avoid the problems of reductionistic, dualistic, or merely utilitarian imperatives.


Black, Alison Harley. Man and Nature in the Philosophical Thought of Wang Fu-chih. Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1989. Introduces the Confucian theory of qi (material force or vital energy) that is at the heart of Confucian views of nature. Black provides insights into the very complicated Confucian theory of vital energy and explains how this theory informs the philosophy Wang Fuzhi. For Confucians, qi is the basis for all theories of the natural world and hence is crucial to the Confucian understanding of ecological issues.

Blakeley, Donald N. “Listening to the Animals: The Confucian View of Animal Welfare.” Journal of Chinese Philosophy 30, no. 2 (2003): 137-157. In this essay, Blakeley articulates the ethical significance of animals for Confucianism. Blakeley argues that, from the Analects to Mengzi and through Neo-Confucianism, the Confucian tradition consistently describes the goal of becoming humane (ren) as not only involving respect for the values of other human beings, but also involving respect for natural phenomena such as animals.


Bruun, Ole and Arne Kalland, eds. Asian Perceptions of Nature: A Critical Approach. Richmond, Surrey: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1995. This book is a collection of scholarly essays concerned with the variety of ways in which Asian peoples perceive the relationship between humans and the environment. This essays in the volume are interdisciplinary, including research from anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and geographers. In taking a cross-cultural approach, this book includes essays that discuss perceptions of nature among the different religions of Asia, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto, and indigenous traditions.


Chuk-ling Lai, Julian and Julia Tao. “Perception of Environmental Hazards in Hong Kong Chinese.” Risk Analysis 23, no. 4 (2003): 669-684. This article is a summary of the ways in which people of a sample from Hong Kong perceive the risks associated with various environmental hazards. The authors consider the role that Confucianism has in influencing the way in which these people perceive such risks. The study found that women, less educated people, and the elderly perceived more environmental risk than did men, more educated people, and younger people.

This anthology addresses the relationship of the world’s religious traditions to environmental concerns. Various chapters focus on the religious traditions of India and China, Abrahamic faiths, and Indigenous cultures. Also included are chapters on the environmental significance of philosophy, pantheism, romanticism, aestheticism, educational practices, and the Gaia hypothesis.


Beginning with the same understanding of the word “religion” as the “response to the sacred,” contributors to this volume present the Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, African religious, and Chinese responses to issues of overconsumption, environment, and demographics. Utilizing Tillich’s correlational methodology, the contributors remark that if the global market economy is a powerful new religion, then economics functions as its theology. Chapters, therefore, include, “The Religion of the Market,” “Sustainability and the Global Economy,” and “Self as Individual and Collective: Ethical Implications.”


In this book, the author discusses numerous political, historical, and economic factors involved with the widespread environmental degradation in contemporary China. The author also discusses the role of Confucian and Neo-Confucian thought in shaping Chinese attitudes regarding the relationship between humans and the natural environment. This work includes research from historical inquiry, case studies, and interviews.


This is an account of over 3,000 years of Chinese history, particularly with a view to the history of the relationships between humans and the environment. Elvin explores a wide variety of environmental phenomena and shows how different aspects of Chinese traditions have contributed to environmental degradation in China. He uses the decline in the elephant population of China as a symbol for the entire history of environmental degradation in China. Elvin’s investigation intertwines many threads of Chinese cultural history, including its politics, economics, aesthetics, and religious traditions (particularly Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism).


This is a collection of scholarly essays exploring the relationship between humans and the environment throughout the history of China. The essays deal with a variety of topics, including the ecological significance of Chinese religions (including Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism).


In this essay, Fan argues that Confucian environmental ethics can be best understood as a form of “weak anthropocentrism.” In this context, weak anthropocentrism means that Confucianism is anthropocentric—interpreting intrinsic value as a mainly human phenomenon, and this anthropocentrism is “weak” insofar as it is oriented toward cosmic principles.


In this older interpretation of Chinese and Confucian views of nature and the physical sciences, Forke reveals how cosmological worldviews define how human beings see themselves as parts of nature and how this has meaning for the development of human ecological theory and practice. Ecology is always related to view of nature and Forke provides an overview of how classical Chinese thought interpreted the natural world.


Gale provides a translation of an early, classical debate on the role of government in the development and promotion of
industry. Gale examines questions regarding a possible governmental monopoly on the production of iron and salt, as well as social, political, and philosophic issues concerning human relations with the natural and social worlds. The Confucian tradition has always been concerned with nature conservation and this text reveals how questions regarding the human relationship to the natural order were framed in terms of an economic policy debate.

This essay reviews the common claim that Confucian ethics is supported by a cosmology that views the world as organismic, nontranscendent, and nondualistic. The author shows to what extent this claim is actually articulated in the works of scholars such as P. J. Ivanhoe, David Nivison, R. P. Peerenboom, Henry Rosemont, and Tu Wei-Ming.

In this article, Grange considers the relationship between John Dewey’s concept of “experience” and the Confucian concepts of the dao (“the Way”), de (“excellence”), and ren (“humanity”). According to Grange, Dewey and Confucius both argue that the growth and development of the human being can only happen if the human being is continually experiencing deeper connections with society and with the natural world.

A modern study of the history of the development of Chinese cosmological worldviews that assists the reader in understanding the philosophic and scientific background of Confucian theories regarding the natural order. Covers the history of Chinese cosmology from the classical period to the end of the imperial order.

In this article, Huang argues that determinations of values (what one “ought” to do) are not independent of determinations of facts (what one “is”). After reflecting on basic problems in Western ethical theory from Plato to Kant and contemporary philosophy, Huang articulates what he calls a “Neo-Confucian ontological virtue ethics” (p. 453), which is based on the identification of virtue and nature expressed by the Cheng brothers, Hao and Yi.

Reflecting on the work of the scholar of Chinese philosophy and religion Wing-tsit Chan (1901-1994), Inada shows how Chinese ethics are based on the cosmological and ecological principles implied in the concept of Dao (“the Way”). Inada considers Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist contributions to the Chinese understanding of Dao.

Noticing that the Western paradigm in economics is lacking a moral dimension in relationship to nature, Jenkins argues that the Chinese worldview offers conceptual resources that make it possible to place economics within a more encompassing socio-ecological context. Jenkins looks at Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, and popular religious practices that contribute to the Chinese worldview. Although these traditions contain ideals of harmony and the perfectibility of human nature, Jenkins notes that they also contain utilitarian impulses that have been quite problematic insofar as they have contributed to increases in environmental degradation.

In discussing the significance of animals in the thinking Mengzi (Mencius), the author argues that, although Mengzi ate the meat of animals, this does not contradict the compassion toward animals that is promoted by Mengzi and other Confucians. Because love and compassion take place according to relationships, Mengzi accounts for the possibility that one’s treatment of animals can only be as benevolent as is possible within the context of one’s relationships.

This is a brief review of Confucianism and Ecology, which was published in 1998 by the Harvard Center for the Study of

Miller, James and He Xiang. “Confucian Spirituality in an Ecological Age.” In Chinese Religions in Contemporary Societies, ed. James Miller, 281-300. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Press, 2006. The authors of this essay discuss the ecological implications of contemporary forms of Confucian spirituality. This work includes discussions of passages from important Confucian and Neo-Confucian texts, and it accounts for the work of prominent scholars of Confucianism and ecology, including Tu Weiming, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Berthrong.

Needham, Joseph. Science and Civilisation in China. 8 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954—. A multi-volume history of traditional Chinese science, including material from the ecological sciences (e.g., earth and biological sciences). This enormous project is helpful for those interested in the development of Chinese ecology. Various volumes in the series contain exhaustive bibliographies for additional reading.


Selin, Helaine, ed. Nature Across Cultures: Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures. The Hague and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003. This book contains various scholarly articles that account for the role of the natural environment in non-Western worldviews. Some essays deal with general problems in this area of study, including problems relating to the study of indigenous knowledge, the environmental implications of other worldviews, and the problematic distinction between "Western" and "non-Western." Other essays deal specifically with the significance of the environment for particular indigenous communities, including discussions about indigenous peoples from Japan, Sub-Saharan Africa, Australia, Oceania, and the Americas. This book also includes essays on the role of nature in Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam.

Shapiro, Judith. Mao’s War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. In this book, Shapiro considers the impact of Mao Zedong’s political rule on the Chinese people as well as the Chinese land, showing how abuses of the natural environment are often interrelated with abuses of human beings. This book considers the role of Maoist ideology in supporting industrial development while suppressing the ancient Chinese traditions, including Confucianism, and ignoring the cautious procedures of Western scientific method.

Snyder, Samuel. “Chinese Traditions and Ecology: A Survey Article.” Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion 10, no. 1 (2006): 100-34. This article is a broad survey of research undertaken in studying the intersection of Chinese traditions (e.g., Confucianism, Daoism, folk practices) with problems relating to ecology and environmental ethics. This paper can serve as a guide for someone beginning research into the relationship between Chinese religions and ecology.

Tao, Julia. “Confucian Environmental Ethics: Relational Resonance with Nature.” Social Alternatives 23 no. 4 (2004): 5-9. In this article, Julia Tao considers some ways in which the moral tradition of Confucianism can facilitate a better understanding of the relationship between humans and the natural world. Tao argues that, for Confucianism, it is possible for humans to cultivate a balanced and harmonious relationship with nature by discerning the interpenetration and interdependence between the way of humans and the way of nature.

A study of the thought of an important contemporary Japanese Confucian, including a section that deals with the ecological crisis. One of the few studies in English that illustrates how modern Confucians are thinking about the ecological crisis—Confucians believe that human beings are part of nature and that they have a responsibility for maintaining harmonious relationships with the natural world.


This essay considers the Classical Confucian view of Heaven, man, and moral virtue in light of key passages from Lun Yu (the Analects of Confucius), Meng Tzu (the works of Mencius), and Hsun Tzu (the works of Hsun Tzu). It then looks at the Neo-Confucian ethical vision involving metaphysical models for moral action and a vision of unity. The essay concludes with a conversation between the author and the Japanese Neo-Confucian thinker Okada Takehiko on the subject of the use of animals in science.


A standard history of early modern Japan (ca. 1600–1868) that includes material on Japanese theories and debates about forestry management. Totman also provides a review of how pre-modern Japanese governments and intellectuals attempted to deal with the natural environment. Ecology has a long history in Japan and this study illustrates how ecological concerns have been connected to economic, political, and social factors in that country.


In this essay, Tu pays particular attention to the implications of Confucianism for facilitating a response to the present ecological crisis facing the world. Tu describes the Confucian worldview as “anthropocosmic” (rather than anthropocentric), because Confucianism views the relationship between Heaven, Earth, and humanity as a dynamic and interpenetrating unity.


In this essay, the author explores the resources of the Confucian tradition for helping promote a global ethic that can respond to the challenges of the contemporary ecological crisis. In particular, Tucker considers the Confucian view of Heaven, Earth, and humanity as interconnected in a cosmos of organic holism and dynamic vitalism.


In this essay, Tucker accounts for the role of nature in Neo-Confucianism. Tucker describes the anthropocosmic worldview of Neo-Confucianism, according to which the cosmos is an organic whole characterized by the dynamic interpenetration of humans, Earth, and Heaven.


A collection of scholarly papers on aspects of Confucian thought about ecology examining the philosophy and history of Confucian culture in relation to ecological concerns. Includes supplemental bibliographies appended to the articles.

This volume presents papers on the role of worldviews, particularly religious ones, in responding to the environmental challenge. Introductory essays explore necessary spiritual resources that aid us in transcending an ever-present “Enlightenment mentality” (Tu Wei-Ming). Additional essays in this section present prospects for a scientifically and culturally grounded international environmental ethic (J. Baird Callicott). Subsequent essays explore a wide range of religious traditions: Native North American (John Grim), Judaism (Eric Katz), Christianity (Jay McDaniel), Islam (Roger E. Timm), Baha’i (Robert A. White), Hinduism (Christopher Key Chapple), Buddhism (Brian Brown), Jainism (Michael Tobias), Taoism, and Confucianism (Mary Evelyn Tucker). A final group of essays on contemporary ecological perspectives examine topics such as: the ecological worldview (Ralph Metzner), cosmology and ethics (Larry L. Rasmussen), ecofeminism (Charlene Spretnak), Whitehead’s philosophy (David Ray Griffin), deep ecology (George Sessions), “Ecological Geography” (Thomas Berry), and “Cosmogenesis” (Brian Swimme).

This book contains descriptions of over 200 hundred Chinese gardens, public and private. The author considers the ways in which Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist ideals have influenced ethical and aesthetic aspects of Chinese gardening practices. Along with historical and cultural information, this book contains hundreds of photographs of Chinese gardens.

This work accounts for the political and cosmological dimensions of the early Chinese worldview. The author accounts for the role of Confucian and Daoist principles in shaping political and cosmological ideals. Furthermore, the author shows how the political and cosmological dimensions of early Chinese culture affected and transformed one another.

This essay is a summary of the Neo-Confucian thought of Wang Yang-ming (1472-1528). Yamauchi discusses the environmental implications of Yang-ming’s thinking, emphasizing that the basic moral principle for Yang-ming involves the unity of knowledge and action.

In this essay, Yu considers the implications of Confucianism for bioethical problems regarding the relationship between humanity and nature. According to Yu, Confucianism can help humans understand the interpenetration of humanity and nature precisely because Confucianism can help humans learn to distinguish the way of humans from that of the natural world.

This essay discusses the sensibilities expressed in the Chinese notion of tianrenheyi (the unity of humanity and Heaven), which is a basic principle in Confucianism. Weber discusses the contemporary philosophical significance of tianrenheyi, considering its implications for morality, spirituality, and the meaning of transcendence. According to Weber, tainrenheyi implies that the relationship between oneness and particularity is one of mutual co-implication.


General Reference Works


**Monographs: China**


Ho uses paleo-archaeological evidence to investigate the potential indigenous origins of the Shang civilization. His analysis begins with a look at agriculture, pottery, bronze metallurgy, numerals, and script dating from the early fifth millennium BCE and proceeds to topics such as Chinese literature, ancestor worship, and contemporary technological advances.


**Monographs: Japan**


Tucker, Mary Evelyn. *Moral and Spiritual Cultivation in Japanese Neo-Confucianism: The Life and Thought of Kaibara*
A Neo-Confucian philosopher fascinated by the flora and fauna of Japan, Ekken understood and studied the natural world. Although most Confucians were known for their interest in cosmology, albeit removed from the details of the natural world, Ekken is one of those rare Confucians who both studied and wrote about nature and ecology.


Monographs: Korea


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