

## 6. Conclusion

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The preceding chapters examined the four distinctive aspects of East Asian Confucian humanism. Yet one question remains: among the four aspects of Confucian humanism, which was the most important and fundamental?

In my view, the most important among these distinctive aspects was the East Asian Confucians' deep immersion in historical consciousness. In their eyes, the 'human person' was not merely *homo economicus* or *homo politicus*, but was deeply imbued with a sense of 'temporality'—and was thus *homo historicus*. Indeed, since the 'human person' in the East Asian Confucian tradition had such a profound sense of time consciousness, we are justified in labeling that person as 'multi-dimensional.' Legend has it that Confucius "transmitted the ancient traditions of Yao and Shun, and [...] modeled after and made brilliant the systems of King Wen and King Wu."<sup>1</sup> Following Confucius, East Asian Confucian humanism continued to exhibit a profound sense of time. It is important to note that time in East Asian Confucian thought was *not* a sort of Kantian transcendental "form of intuition."<sup>2</sup> Rather, it was indelibly marked by the human estate; it incorporated the dynamic context of each age, as well as all varieties of personal manifestations, etc. Time was by no means simply a mechanical record of celestial cycles. Many Confucians regarded 'universal laws,' such as 'the Way' and 'Principle,' and 'Eternal Paragons' such

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1 Wing-tsit Chan trans. and compiled, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), "The Doctrine of Mean," chap. 30, 111.

2 Norman Kemp Smith, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929, 1965), 65–91.

as ‘Yao,’ ‘Shun’ and the ‘Three Dynasties,’ as standards to follow, and worked hard to fulfill them in their own times. They constructed various material contents of each dynasty in repeated cycles. Thus, the Qin, Han, Tang and Song dynasties all went through cycles of establishment, decline, dynastic renewal and destruction. Some were corrupt and weak, with many disturbances and upheavals, while others set up grand programs that were praised, honored and celebrated by posterity. Historians later approved them, and their deeds were deemed to be worthy models for pacifying the world.<sup>3</sup> In Confucian culture, the significance and value of human life lay in the existential process of studying and grasping the moral paradigms of history. The reason why these moral paradigms could be adopted in different eras of human history was that the concept of time in that Confucian culture included a ‘supra-temporal’ character: East Asian Confucians affirmed that the study of history should be aimed at grasping a ‘supra-temporal’ principle, such as ‘the Way’ or ‘Principle’ or the foundational ‘moral imperative,’ and its ultimate goal was to realize the moral paradigms exactly in their own time and place.

Deeply imbued with this sense of time, the East Asian Confucians believed that time was the shaping force of history.<sup>4</sup> Their belief was much unlike that of the ancient Greeks who saw time as a force that would destroy the memory of the great events recorded in human history.<sup>5</sup> Over time, the East Asian ‘historical consciousness’ was elaborated and became the most important feature of East Asian Confucian humanism.

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- 3 Chun-chieh Huang, “Historical Thinking in Classical Confucianism: Historical Argumentation from the Three Dynasties.” In: Chun-chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher (eds.), *Time and Space in Chinese Culture* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 72--9, see Appendix A3.
  - 4 Kurida Naoki 栗田直躬 confirmed that the traditional Chinese concept of time included a response to external conditions, the pursuit of harmony, and the synthesis of natural and sociopolitical factors. See Kurida Naoki, *Chogoku shiso niokeru Shizen to ringen* 中國思想における自然と人間 [Nature and man in Chinese thought] (Tokyo: Iwanam Shoden Press, 1996), 149–184.
  - 5 Arnaldo Momigliano, “Time in Ancient Historiography,” *History and Theory*, Beiheft 6 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press), 15.

Although East Asian Confucians dwelt in the different social and political environments of China, Japan and Korea, they were all imbued with this 'sense of history' and shared, ancient 'core values.' They believed deeply in 'the perfectibility of the human person' and considered the human 'self' to be a free subjectivity capable of making moral determinations. They held that people should undertake ceaseless 'cultivation of the body' in order to achieve a 'mind-body continuum.' In East Asian Confucian humanistic thought, there was no Cartesian bifurcation of mind and body since, in their view, the human 'body' was transformed from a mere 'physical body' into what Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) called a 'phenomenal body.' Hence, the body's 'space' was not considered as a kind of objective 'space'; in their hands the body became a sort of mind-body 'chiasma.'<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this was a body that had undergone long-term immersion in the cultural tradition and values in order to become a Confucian 'body.' Because they shared a common set of core values that reflected the sedimentation of history, they saw the 'self' and the 'other' in present concrete interactions as experiencing inevitable tensions and clashes; yet they could still realize mutual a harmony on the basis of their shared cultural identity. In a word, East Asian Confucian humanism displayed a certain 'Confucian Communitarianism.' In the relationship between the 'human person' and 'nature,' East Asian Confucians regarded the human being as a 'moral person' and the universe as a 'moral universe,' and believed firmly that persons, cosmos and nature could form a 'homo-cosmic continuum.' In East Asian Confucian humanism, there was no Faustian spirit. East Asian Confucians held that once 'persons' had transcended deeply into their own nature, they would be able to understand the ultimate reality of the universe. Confucius' own assertion that, "At fifty, I understood the Mandate of Heaven," was an exquisite expression of the *relationship of resonance* between the 'human person' and the 'universe.'

Finally, if East Asian Confucian humanism took historical consciousness as the axis for connecting 'body' and 'mind,' 'self' and 'other,' 'culture' and 'nature,' how then are we to resolve the tension between the 'historicity' and 'transcendence' of the human person in East Asian Confucian humanistic thought?

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6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 148–149.

In pondering this key question for Confucian humanism, I always think of Confucius' notion of the "Mandate of Heaven." In the above discussion on the hermeneutical circle between the 'human person' and 'nature' (Chapter 2: The 'Heart' as the Mind-Heart of Personal-Cosmic Mesophysics), I explained that the "Mandate of Heaven" appears directly in the daily lives of the people, and added that it is only in the round of daily interpersonal activities that one can intuit the transcendent moral imperative and experience which resonate with the ultimate reality of the universe.

If we ventured to say that East Asian Confucians stressed that the moral endowment of the human person could be realized only in daily practice, such that the Confucian 'person' was a 'moral person,' then the 'gospel' of persons intuiting the "Mandate of Heaven" should refer to the 'person' as a 'religious person.' In this way, East Asian Confucianism healed the tension between the 'religious person' and the 'moral person.' On one hand, the 'religious person' of East Asian Confucianism had the characteristics expressed in Chapter 27 of *The Doctrine of the Mean*: utmost loftiness and brilliance, transcendence (entering the absolutely transcendent realm of the divine), and standing at the apex. Mencius spoke of "acting in unison with heaven above and earth below," and uniting with the "ultimate reality" of the universe. But, the 'person' as a 'moral person' dwells at ease in the mundane world and "follows the path of the Mean" when faced with the bitterness, challenges and conflicts of real life. However, on the other hand, the 'religious person' must also be a 'moral person.' Indeed, while the 'moral person' was foundational, these two sides were dialectically related or, as Zhu Xi put it, "inseparable yet distinguishable."

Amid the intimate relations—the symbiotic flourishing and resonance—between the transcendental Mandate of Heaven and the human person, East Asian Confucianisms, born as they are into a life steeped in historical culture, exhibit the humanistic world of thought where all the polarities of immanence and transcendence, secular and sacred, historical and supra-historical are merged into a harmonious whole.