ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN ASIAN RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony

Chenyang Li

ROUTLEDGE

"This is the most comprehensive and intriguing scholarly treatment of the concept of harmony in Confucianism. Li's arguments are clearly articulated with the support of erudite intellectual history, textual exegesis, and most convincingly, crystal clear conceptual analysis. This book is a must for those students and scholars in philosophy, China Studies, and East Asian Studies, who want to understand the core of Confucianism, both classical and modern."

Vincent Shen, Lee Chair in Chinese Thought and
Culture and Professor of Philosophy,
University of Toronto, Canada

"The ideal of liberty is central to the liberal tradition, but the value of liberty was not discussed in any systematic way prior to John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* in the nineteenth century. The ideal of harmony is central to the Confucian tradition, but perhaps even more surprising, not a single book-length manuscript has explored its value in the three thousand year Confucian tradition. Chenyang Li's book finally fills the gap. Westerners tend to think of harmony as synonymous with conformity and uniformity, but Li shows that this view is fundamentally mistaken. Li's comparative outlook is particularly helpful for helping the reader grasp what makes harmony a precious and unique value and why Confucians tend to think harmony is central to any decent ethical system. This book is a tour de force, a must read for anybody who wants to learn about the ideals that make Confucian-influenced cultures tick."

Daniel A. Bell, author of *East Meets West:*
Human Rights and Democracy in East Asia (2000) and
Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an
East Asian Context (2006)

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The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony

Harmony is a concept essential to Confucianism and to the way of life of past and present people in East Asia. Integrating methods of textual exegesis, historical investigation, comparative analysis, and philosophical argumentation, this book presents a comprehensive treatment of the Confucian philosophy of harmony.

The book traces the roots of the concept to antiquity, examines its subsequent development, and explicates its theoretical and practical significance for the contemporary world. It argues that, contrary to a common view in the West, Confucian harmony is not mere agreement but has to be achieved and maintained with creative tension. Under the influence of a Weberian reading of Confucianism as "adjustment" to a world with an underlying fixed cosmic order, Confucian harmony has been systematically misinterpreted in the West as presupposing an invariable grand scheme of things that pre-exists in the world to which humanity has to conform. The book shows that Confucian harmony is a dynamic, generative process, which seeks to balance and reconcile differences and conflicts through creativity.

Illuminating one of the most important concepts in Chinese philosophy and intellectual history, this book is of interest to students of Chinese studies, history and philosophy in general and eastern philosophy in particular.

Chenyang Li is Associate Professor of Philosophy and founding director of the Philosophy program at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2014
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Li, Chenyang, 1956-
The Confucian philosophy of harmony / Chenyang Li.
p. cm. – (Routledge studies in Asian religion and philosophy; 10)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Philosophy, Confucian. 2. Harmony (Philosophy) I. Title.
B127.C65L494 2013
113–dc23
2013011996

ISBN: 978-0-415-84474-1 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-88661-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Sunrise Setting Ltd, Paignton, UK

I dedicate this book to my grandparents.
Living closely with them during my childhood
contributed a great deal to who I am.

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Foreword

Although the expression "harmony" (*he* 和) as one of the central terms of art carries enormous philosophical weight in the Confucian tradition, in the Western literature on Chinese philosophy it has frequently been elided with a meaning of harmony not its own. Indeed, it can be fairly said that a student of Confucian philosophy cannot truly understand this Confucian way of thinking and living without coming to terms with what is the distinctively Confucian meaning of "harmony" (*he*), informed as it is by a particular cultural narrative. In this seminal study, Chenyang Li has brought more than a decade of his painstaking research on Confucian harmony into monograph form to address this problem and to bring this sense and this history of harmony into focus for us. He traces out the graphic and semantic etymology of this polysemic term, parsing its many layers of meaning, and through a close reading of the canons including the recently recovered archaeological finds, he explores the evolving history of its application to the various dimensions of the human experience from personal cultivation to cosmic harmony.

The logical and retrospective sense of harmony as conformity to and agreement with an antecedently existing pattern of order familiar in classical Greek metaphysics—what Chenyang refers to as the "innocent" or "consistent" harmony of conformity—has had little relevance for a tradition that takes the *Yijing* or *Book of Changes* cosmology as its interpretive context and as a continuing point of reference. The fluid process cosmology of the *Book of Changes*—a cosmology defined in terms of "ceaselessly generative procreativity" (*shengsheng buyi* 生生不已)—requires that harmony be understood as continuous, prospective, and emergent, and assuming as it does that the human being is "in the game" as a major player, requires our complicity in the achieving and sustaining of this dynamic harmony. The Confucian notion of harmony is conceived of as a generative, creative, and (dare we say) "aesthetic" process in which the heterogeneous and diverse elements of the cosmos including the human world—what are often referred to as "the myriad things" (*wanwu* 萬物)—are orchestrated into deep, harmonious relations that resonate with each other and entail productive tensions and resistance as well as agreement. Indeed, it is only when the tension that emerges from the real differences that obtain among things truly make a difference for each

other that the ideal of a complex, diverse, and inclusive Confucian harmony can be attained.

As an organizing strategy for this focused account of the Confucian sense of harmony, Chenyang has structured his chapters sequentially as an object lesson in how, in the Confucian tradition, a spiraling harmony is to be attained. In his narrative, Chenyang follows Confucius's dictum "to study what is near at hand and aspire to what is lofty" (*Analects* 14.35). He begins in the first chapters to provide an analysis of how "harmony" has been used in the canons by understanding it within a cluster of closely related terms: the playing of music (*yue* 樂), the observance of ritual propriety (*li* 禮), and the attainment of centrality and equilibrium (*zhong* 中). In the process of defining harmony (*he*) by appeal to context, he collates and translates the relevant textual materials and assembles the key passages thematically in a way that reveals the reach and the depth of this concept as it informs and is informed by the philosophical literature.

In the remaining chapters, Chenyang replicates the radial process of meaning-making by beginning from the Confucian project of personal cultivation and expanding outward to show how modulated human feelings are an integral element within the attainment of cosmic order and a sustainable natural environment. On the one hand he is decidedly reconstructive, using the authority of the historical and literary tradition to speak for itself in explaining its rich sense of dialogical harmony. On the other hand he is constructive, using this philosophical analysis creatively as a resource to address the pressing social, political, and environmental issues of our day. It is only by pursuing Confucian harmony amid the complex differences and often conflicted relations that mark our times that we can achieve a thriving humanity and a flourishing world.

In structuring his exploration in this manner, Chenyang is recalling a holistic, radial, and emergent sense of order perhaps most succinctly illustrated in the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), one of the foundational canons of Confucian philosophy that sets and anchors the Confucian project early in the tradition. The *Great Learning* describes the process of becoming consummately human, insisting that it is only through committing oneself to a resolute regimen of personal cultivation that one can achieve the comprehensive intellectual and moral understanding that will make the most of the human experience. The central message of this terse yet comprehensive document is that while personal, familial, social, political, and indeed cosmic cultivation is ultimately coterminous and mutually entailing, harmony must always begin from a commitment to personal cultivation. A commitment to achieving relational virtuosity within one's own family relationships is both the starting point and the ultimate source of personal, social, political, and indeed cosmic meaning. Each person stands as a unique perspective within their family, community, polity, and so on, and through dedication to deliberate growth and articulation, they are able to bring the resolution of the relationships that locate and constitute them within family and community into clearer and more meaningful focus and thereby contribute to the complex harmony of a flourishing cosmos. In achieving robust relations in one's family and beyond, one "appreciates" the cosmos by adding meaning to it, and, in turn,

this increasingly meaningful cosmos provides a fertile context for the project of one's own personal cultivation. As the *Great Learning* enjoins us, the ultimate source of cosmic harmony is the singularly important project of becoming consummate persons, and to achieve this, we must get our priorities right:

> From the emperor down to the common folk, everything is rooted in personal cultivation. There can be no healthy canopy when the roots are not properly set, and it would never do for priorities to be reversed between what should be invested with importance and what should be treated more lightly. This commitment to personal cultivation is called both the root and the height of wisdom.
>
> (*TTC* 1673)

The "root" and its product, a joyous "wisdom," are to be achieved as an organic and harmonious whole that grows together or not at all.

Chenyang in this comprehensive study, far from being partisan, is properly critical, but he is also able to quarry the Confucian tradition and lift out of it ideas that can be applied profitably to address less than productive attitudes in the increasingly complex world in which we live. Moral force, empathetic understanding, and the dignity of difference—all high values in the quest for Confucian harmony—have as much meaning for us today as they ever had in classical times, and are as necessary for the attainment of peace in our global community as they were in the now remote world of antique China.

Roger T. Ames
University of Hawaii

Preface

My decision to write this book originally grew out of my interest in a seemingly unrelated issue, that of the relationship between Confucianism and democracy. In *The Tao Encounters the West* (1999), I attempted to delineate a sustainable position for this relationship without overly liberalizing Confucianism. I appealed to the important Chinese value of harmony for guidance in dealing with creative tensions between Confucianism and democracy. In my view, Confucianism and democracy represent two value systems, and different value systems can co-exist in harmony. Since the Thirteenth International Conference on Chinese Philosophy in Västerås, Sweden, in 2003, I have presented my work on the Confucian ideal of harmony at various conferences and have published papers on the same theme in academic journals and books. It was by pure coincidence that the Chinese government began to promote "harmonious society" in September 2004, which further intensified my desire to rectify commonly held misconceptions of the Confucian philosophy of harmony. This book is an outcome of my decade-long effort on the subject.

Acknowledgements

Spending part of my childhood growing up in a mountain village in Shandong, about 500 kilometers from Confucius's birthplace, gave me first-hand experience of Confucian ways of life in rural China. I am deeply grateful to my late grandparents and their fellow villagers for that invaluable experience.

While writing this book, I became indebted to more people than I have space to acknowledge here. But I would be seriously remiss if I did not thank the following individuals for their inspiration, support, and assistance. David Hall and Roger Ames' insight regarding the primacy of aesthetic order in Chinese philosophy has had a major influence on my conceptualization of Confucianism, and I would like to acknowledge this intellectual debt. Anne Denman and Ruth Homrighaus read the manuscript and provided detailed suggestions for revision. Daniel A. Bell, Walter Benesch, Alan Chan, Ruiping Fan, Randall Hoon Yao Tong, How Zhan Jie, Yong Huang, Raeburne Heimbeck, Philip J. Ivanhoe, Sungmoon Kim, Joel J. Kupperman, Shangyuan Li Gang, Liang Tao, Michael Puett, Vincent Shen, Julia Tao, Brook Ziporyn, Li Jifen, and Sun Qingjuan all provided support and assistance in various forms along the way. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dorothea Schaefter and Jillian Morrison at Routledge for their able assistance in making this book a reality. Finally, I thank my wife, Hong Xiao; my daughter, Fay; and my son, Hansen, for their love, understanding, and care, and for helping me create and maintain a family that is, for the most part, harmonious.

A sabbatical leave from Central Washington University and a senior research fellowship at the Centre for Governance in Asia of the City University of Hong Kong in 2005–6 enabled me to write the main body of this book. A generous grant from Nanyang Technological University provided assistance during its finishing stage. I am grateful to all three institutions for their support. I have presented some of the chapters that follow at conferences, and I have appreciated and sometimes incorporated feedback from audience members.

The general idea of this book was first presented in the article of "The Confucian Ideal of Harmony," in *Philosophy East & West*, 56(4): 583–603 (2006). Much, however, has changed over these years. The first part of Chapter 2 is based largely on the article of "The Ideal of Harmony in Ancient Chinese and Greek Philosophy," in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 7(1): 81–98 (2008). The section on the *Zhongyong* in Chapter 5 is based on a section of "*Zhongyong*

as Grand Harmony—An Alternative Reading to Ames and Hall's *Focusing the Familiar*," in *Dao: Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 3(2): 173–88 (2004). An earlier version of the second half of Chapter 6 was published as "Confucian Moral Cultivation, Longevity, and Public Policy," in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 9(1): 25–36 (2010). An ancestor of Chapter 8 was published as "Harmony as a Guiding Principle for Governance," in Julia Tao, Anthony B. L. Cheung, Martin Painter, and Chenyang Li (eds.) (2010) *Governance for Harmony in Asia and Beyond*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 37–57. I hereby gratefully acknowledge respective publishers for giving me permission to use these works. Last but not least, I am grateful to Roger Ames, who has always been supportive and was kind enough to write a foreword for this book.

Abbreviations

CF	*Chunqiu Fanlu* (by Dong Zhongshu)
CTB	*The Chu Tomb Bamboo Strips* from *Guodian*
DDJ	*Daodejing*
FTC	*The Family Teachings of Confucius*
IB	*Inner Books of the Yellow Emperor*
RH	*Readings in History of Chinese Philosophy* (Chinese Philosophy Section of the Philosophy Department, Peking University 1963)
SW	*Shuowenjiezi*
TTC	*Thirteen Classics with Commentaries*
TTM	*Twenty-Two Masters*

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Introduction

If we were to choose just one word to characterize the Chinese ideal way of life, that word would be "harmony."[1]

Harmony is the most cherished ethical and social ideal in Chinese culture, particularly in Confucianism. Without understanding this concept, we cannot really understand Chinese culture and society. Unfortunately, this concept has been largely left out of serious scholarly study. While words for "harmony" are used frequently in the literature of Chinese culture, people seldom inquire what it means conceptually; few works have been dedicated to this subject. In our age, when conflicts are the trend, it is high time for serious study of the Confucian philosophy of harmony. What follows is the first book-length study of the Confucian philosophy of harmony in English. Integrating methods of textual exegesis, historical investigation, comparative analysis, and philosophical argumentation, I present a comprehensive treatment of this philosophy. My study traces the roots of the concept to antiquity, examines its subsequent development, and explicates its theoretical and practical significance for the contemporary world.

My central argument is that, contrary to a common view in the West, Confucian harmony is not mere agreement but has to be achieved and maintained with creative tension. Under the influence of a Weberian reading of Confucianism as "adjustment" to a world with an underlying fixed cosmic order, Confucian harmony has been systematically misinterpreted in the West and in contemporary China as presupposing a fixed grand scheme of things that pre-exists in the world to which humanity has to conform. This study shows that Confucian harmony is a dynamic, generative process, which seeks to balance and reconcile differences and conflicts through creativity and mutual transformation. As such, it is distinguished from mere conformity in two important ways. First, Confucian harmony is "deep harmony"; it does not presuppose a transcendent, static foundation. Without anything like the Platonic Forms or Pythagorean Numbers, the Confucian cosmos does not presume a pre-established order for conformity. Second, Confucian harmony is not without creative tension. To the contrary, seeing creative tension as a necessary manifestation of diversity in the world, Confucian philosophy takes it as the driving force toward harmony. Harmony is an active process in which heterogeneous elements are brought into a mutually balancing, cooperatively enhancing, and often commonly benefiting relationship. Through constructive

transformation, antithetical forces generate syntheses and conflicts reconcile into creativity.

In presenting Confucianism as a comprehensive philosophy of harmony, I do not intend to prove that it is a perfect philosophy. In my view, a philosophy embodies a configuration of values.[2] As such, it has strengths as well as weaknesses. Confucianism is no exception. Nevertheless, I attempt to show that the Confucian philosophy of harmony still possesses rich significance to the contemporary world.

The methodology of this book is both reconstructive and constructive. Like many other key Confucian concepts, the concept of harmony has appeared in numerous texts and played a prominent role in the Confucian philosophical tradition but has never been systemized into a single work. This book aims to remedy that deficiency, assembling the ideas surrounding harmony that recur in the vast literature of the Confucian tradition into a coherent view. I also attempt to inject new ideas alongside existing ones and to develop an account that will enhance understanding of issues important to Confucianism today. My constructive moves are conservative: they are more focused on extending existing philosophical ideas to tackle new questions than they are on creating something entirely new. Though both reconstruction and construction are present throughout this work, the first seven chapters are more reconstructive than constructive, whereas the last three chapters are the reverse.

In Chapter 1, I present an overview and a conceptual clarification of the concept of harmony in Confucianism by distinguishing Confucian harmony from either "innocent harmony" or "harmony by conformity," and identify Confucian harmony as one with creative tension. Chapter 2 launches an examination of the concept through its early evolution and presents a picture of how it took shape during the early periods of Chinese civilization. Readers who so wish can skip the etymological investigation by leaping to later parts of the chapter. For the purpose of highlighting the main characteristics of this Confucian ideal, a comparative study of the Confucian notion of harmony to its ancient Greek counterpart is conducted. Such a study will help put the Confucian ideal in perspective for readers familiar with Western philosophical tradition. Chapter 3 studies the relation between harmony and *yue* (樂 music). It shows how and why *yue* has been taken as the prototype of harmony in Confucianism, shedding additional light on the meaning of harmony. In Chapter 4, I focus on harmony and *li* (禮 ritual propriety), another key concept in Confucianism. The chapter aims to show how, in a Confucian view, ritual propriety is indispensable to harmony, as well as how harmony incorporates ritual propriety. Chapter 5 delineates the conceptual linkage between harmony and *zhong* (中 centrality and equilibrium), a concept that has been closely associated with harmony in Confucian philosophy.

The final five chapters examine the Confucian ideal of harmony as applied to various levels of human existence. Investigating harmony in the person, Chapter 6 presents the Confucian ideal of life through comprehensive personal cultivation. It investigates the often overlooked cultivation of *qi* in Confucian moral refinement as well as the ideal of the cultivated person. Chapters 7 and 8 move from

harmony in the person to harmony in the family and the state, with the latter discussing how the Confucian ideal society is to be realized through harmonious governance. Chapter 9 considers harmony in the human world, constructing a Confucian approach to international peace. Finally, Chapter 10 addresses the Confucian ideal of harmony in the entire cosmos, with an emphasis on today's environmental concerns. In the conclusion, I discuss the need for developing a harmony outlook in the contemporary world and propose the strategic and tactical aspects of harmony as an important area for future research. It is my hope that such a study will provide readers with a holistic picture of the concept of harmony in Confucian philosophy.

The material used in this book is mostly from the *Thirteen Classics* (十三經) and the *Twenty-Two Masters* (二十二子), as they are the most authoritative sources of Confucian philosophy specifically and of Chinese philosophy in general. When possible, I have also used material from texts that became available more recently, including the Guodian Chu Bamboo Texts and the Mawangdui Silk Texts. Most of the translations from Chinese texts used in this work are my own. The actual authorship of many of the classics cited herein is impossible to ascertain. I have deliberately stayed away from debating such issues. In some cases, the "author" is best understood as a person (or persons) who actually wrote the work, rather than the historical person bearing the name who may or may not have existed in the first place and may or may not have written the work if he did exist. What is important for my purpose is to show that relevant ideas were generated during roughly the same period when the work was produced and that these ideas contributed to the development of the ideal of harmony.

In keeping with custom, I have placed Chinese family names before given names. Some Chinese philosophers have published widely in English, and their names are already familiar to Western readers. In these cases, I have kept their names in the most familiar form.

The use of gender pronouns in discussing Confucian philosophy poses a challenge. Most Chinese words for persons in ancient times were not gender-specific. When discussing historical Confucian ideas, I have chosen to use male pronouns, not to reinforce stereotypes, but rather to reflect the fact that ancient philosophers most likely had males in mind when they discussed ideals. I use female pronouns where it is appropriate.