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Confucianism: The Way of Concerned Consciousness

Confucianism, as examined by John and Evelyn Berthrong in their 2000 book *Confucianism: A Short Introduction*,¹ is far more than a simple ethical code; it is a "primordial religious sensibility and Praxis," a comprehensive "grand experiment built upon a unique and compelling vision of what it means to be human" (1, 11). Tracing its origins to Master Kong (Confucius) between 551 and 479 BCE, the tradition spans multiple eras of profound philosophical evolution, all unified by the central goal of humanness (*ren*) and the creation of a peaceful world (31).

The first age of Confucianism was characterized by the foundational figures Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi (1). Confucius himself did not seek to invent a new doctrine but rather to "restore the way of the ancient sages," though his efforts ultimately generated a new culture from the old (3). His most "radical suggestion" was the idea that humanness was not dependent on the "accident of birth," but on a "commitment to cultivating a humane life" (12). This conviction led to the extension of education, at least in theory, to anyone who wished to learn. In this initial period, the tradition was challenged by competing schools of thought, notably the Daoists, who promoted "non-action," and the Legalists, who sought power over virtue (13). Within the Confucian school itself, Mencius defended the view that human nature was "ultimately good," while Xunzi disagreed, believing it to be "evil or deformed" (14).

The Berthongs explain that the second major period emerged during the Han Dynasty, following the intellectual destruction caused by the draconian Qin Dynasty's policies against Confucian texts. Han Confucians, displaying subtlety and adaptability, incorporated elements from other schools to create a unified cosmological vision. A core conviction of this era was the "essential Unity of the cosmos," establishing a resonance and unity between heaven, earth, and humanity (16). This cosmic process was understood as a "ceaseless production, generative creativity", which required human participation for its completion. The Confucian theory of moral cultivation is characterized as a "form of concerned consciousness," whereby a person's life is directed by various forms of "intentionality" (17). This *concerned consciousness* forms the basis of the Confucian spiritual and ethical journey. The ultimate task before humanity is to assist the mind-heart—the center of the human person—to "broaden and deepen its connection with heaven, the family, and the world" (18). Self-cultivation is essential, requiring one to achieve a balance so that the result is harmony and peace. For Confucians, the person is never an "isolated, unconnected individual," but begins their nurture within the family, which is seen as "The Matrix of the person" (16, 91). This emphasis on *relationality* is captured in the five main virtues, which were linked by Han scholars to five cosmic phases and the five main social relations: *Ren* (humanness), *I* (righteousness/justice), *Li* (ritual/civility), *Zhi* (wisdom/discernment), and *Xin* (faithfulness) (90).

The authors argue that the journey toward full humanity, or *ren*, involves both vertical and horizontal dimensions (29). The vertical dimension refers to the desire to cultivate the self and put it in tune with the *Dao* (the Way), while the horizontal dimension involves cultivating "harmonious and respectful relations with other people" (29, 31). This journey progresses

through six stages, moving sequentially from the cultivation of self to the family, to the larger community, to the country, to the world, and finally outward to "a concern for the entire cosmos" (31-32).

Later periods saw continued debate and refinement. The Song Dynasty (960-1279) brought the third era, known as Neo-Confucianism, exemplified by Zhu Xi (20). Following this, the Qing era (1644-1912) Confucians questioned whether the Song and Ming (1368-1644) periods had been too heavily influenced by Buddhist thought (20). Throughout the tradition, Confucianism stood in contrast to Buddhism, which challenged Chinese culture's roots with its commitment to monastic and celibate life, and Daoism, which offered elaborate theories of salvation and practices aimed at "bodily immortality" (129, 132). Yet, during the Ming Dynasty, the three traditions were often viewed not as mutually exclusive but as "different aspects of the larger Way" (132).

In modern times, Confucians recognize that true human flourishing requires all five virtues to be "embedded in personal and social praxis" (186). While the tradition has historically been critiqued by feminist analysis as being "hopelessly authoritarian" and prone to compromise with authoritarian statecraft, modern Confucians argue that reform of the relationships between men and women is a main area of self-cultivation toward a more just model (27, 28). Ultimately, Confucianism is a comprehensive system that marries "spiritual discernment, philosophic speculation, and social interaction," with the fundamental commitment of realizing all the worthy human nature endowed by heaven (28, 31).

Works Cited

1. Berthrong, John, and Evelyn Berthrong. *Confucianism: A Short Introduction*. Simon and Schuster, 1 Oct. 2014.