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Mencius as the Architect of Confucian Humanism in East Asia

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Abstract

The present article aims at illuminating the defining facade of Confucian humanism, of which Mencius was the major architect. After reviewing Mencius's concept of humans, we tackle the major propositions of Confucian humanism as shared by Confucian thinkers in China, Korea, and Japan. We also envision the contemporary relevance of Confucian humanism in the twenty-first century.

Mencius's notion of humans may be observed on four counts: namely, (a) humans are endowed with moral instinct, predominantly "innate knowing" (*liangzhi* 良知) and "innate ability" (*liangneng* 良能); (b) the mind (heart-mind; *xin* 心) possesses universality and priority; (c) the mind is the origin of value-consciousness; and (d) the mind is capable of comprehending the mandate of Heaven. The keyword in Mencius's humanism is "becoming" rather than "being."

We also delineate the leading three propositions of Confucian humanism, namely, (a) humans are free agents of action; (b) the mind is the origin of moral values; and (c) the "homo-cosmic continuum" comprises the continuity between Heaven and human beings and the harmony between human beings and nature. The keyword of Confucian humanism in this regard is continuity as opposed to rupture. In a historical perspective, the major tenets of Confucian humanism stemmed from Mencius and developed by the later-day East Asian Confucian philosophers. In this sense and to that extent, we are warranted in characterizing Mencius as the architect of Confucian humanism.

Keywords: Mencius, Confucianism, humanism, mind, human nature

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I. Introduction

In an intercultural perspective, every culture has its own distinctive humanism (Rüsen 2009, 12). Therefore, there is no universal pattern of humanism with a definition satisfying everybody (Bullock 1985, 8). Humanism in Confucian culture has its own Chinese characteristics. It is a commonplace that Mencius (371–289 BCE) was the major architect of Confucian humanism in the history of East Asian Confucianisms. However, little has been said about why and how Mencius contributed to the formation of Confucian humanism in China and East Asia. The latest scholarship recounting Mencius treats Mencius in the classical context, Mencius's ethics and epistemology, Mencius and Neo-Confucianism and western philosophers but Mencius's humanism (Xiao and Chong 2023). My own studies of Humanism in East Asia do not focus on Mencius's humanism either (Huang 2010; Huang 2021, 7).

This article attempts to argue that Mencius's articulation of the concept of human beings laid the philosophical foundation of Confucian humanism centering upon the innate goodness of one's mind. Confucian humanism, as it manifested in the tradition of spiritual Confucianism, carries contemporary relevance in a global perspective for the twenty-first century. To unpack the above theses, I shall review Mencius's conceptualization of humans and grapple with the major propositions of Confucian humanism. Moreover, I venture to ponder over the contemporary relevance of Confucian humanism in our age of turmoil, anxiety, and uncertainty.

II. Mencius's Concept of Humans

When Mencius powerfully proclaimed "to be humane is to be human" (仁也者, 人也) (*Mencius* 7B.16), he was in effect announcing that Confucian humanism starts from this definition of what it means to be human. Therefore, I like to take Mencius's view of humans as the cutting-edge of Confucian humanism in East Asia. As I have illustrated elsewhere (Huang 2022, 56–60), Mencius's articulation of the substance of human being may best be observed in the following four theses:

A. Humans Are Endowed with "Innate Knowing" (*liangzhi* 良知) and "Innate Ability" (*liangneng* 良能)

In the first place, Mencius asserted that human beings possess a moral instinct, which he called "innate knowing" (*liangzhi* 良知) and "innate ability" (*liangneng* 良能). The word *liangzhi* 良知, which can be translated into English as "innate knowledge," is a dynamic term, whose function is very much akin to the function played by the software built into electronic products. Mencius insisted that humans possessed the heart (*xin* 心) of compassion, the heart of shame, the heart of respect, and the heart of right and wrong. Mencius maintained that the four kinds of human "heart/mind" (*xin*), which can, in turn, give rise to four kinds of virtue, are all originally embedded in our selves (*Mencius* 6A.6; see Lau 1984, 229). In the tumultuous times of the Warring States (480–221 BCE) era,[1] Mencius's manner of expression resurrected the dignity and majesty of the human being. When he argued for the position that inner moral virtues are "in me originally," he meant that for human beings to retain these four kinds of innate moral consciousness, they only have to avoid "lopping them down day after day" and turning their insides into "treeless hills" (*Mencius* 6A.8, as translated in Lau 1984, 231). Mencius adhered to a doctrine of natural equality.[2] As Torbjörn Lodén indicated, Mencius asserted that "to approve of what is good and wrong is innate, spontaneous, and natural" (Lodén 2009, 606). Mencius's line of reasoning leads us to think further. Is moral consciousness a basic instinct possessed by human beings? Or can such consciousness only be attained through learning? Or is it maybe that moral consciousness must be generated via human emotions?

[1] Historical reports indicate that from the fifth century BCE until the unification of the Qin empire in 221 BCE, the average number of wars in China every 30 years (with the exception of the period 374–340 BCE) amounted to 60 or so. See Hsu (1965, 64, table 6).

[2] Donald J. Munro remarked, "it is remarkable that a belief in cosmic hierarchies did not lead the Chou Confucians to a belief in natural inequalities among men as it did the Platonist in Greece" (Munro 1969, 49).

Mencius said,

> Slight is the difference between man and animal.[3] The common man loses this distinguishing feature, while the gentleman retains it. The legendary emperor Shun (舜) understood the way of things and had a keen insight into human relationships. Shun followed the path of morality (由仁義行). He did not just put morality into practice (非行仁義). (*Mencius* 4B.19, as translated in Lau 1984, 165)

If, according to scientific research, humans and chimpanzees share almost 99% of their DNA, then what Mencius was speaking about is the 1% which distinguished humanity from animality. We could say the advantages of this difference of 1% have not been realized in the average person, while they may have been in a person who is accomplished in self-cultivation. Mencius believed that people like the legendary Emperor Shun (舜) possessed an understanding of the general affairs of the world. He believed that such a person acted in accordance with the inherent morality (humaneness and righteousness) that "distinguishes him from animals," and does not simply engage in practicing "humaneness" (*ren* 仁) and "righteousness" (*yi* 義) for their own sake. Zhu Xi commented on the above-quoted passage from Mencius as follows:

> To act from morality, and not just put morality into practice,[4] implies that morality (*ren-yi* 仁義) is already rooted in the human mind (*xin*) and that all actions (*suoxing* 所行) originate therefrom. Not to merely recognize morality *(ren-yi*) as a beautiful (*mei* 美) concept while reluctantly practicing it is to practice it with the ease of nature (*an er xing zhi* 按而行之). (Zhu 2002, 412)

What was spoken about here by Mencius and Zhu Xi was a form of "innate knowing" or "innate ability" which was built into the human mind.

3 人之所以異於禽獸者幾希.

4 有仁義行, 非行仁義.

For this reason, Mencius further said, "A great man is one who retains the heart of a new-born babe" (*Mencius* 4B.12, as translated in Lau 1984, 163).[5] Zhao Qi 趙岐 (?–210), the very first commentator of the *Mencius* from the late Eastern Han dynasty, wrote the following note to this passage: "*great man* (*daren* 大人) is a name for the ruler (*jun* 君)" (Zhao 2000, juan 8, 65). Zhao's commentary is reflective of the intellectual tendencies that prevailed among the Han Confucians. Immersed in the atmosphere of the great unification of the Chinese Empire, to the Han dynasty Confucian scholars the word "great man" was directly associated with their notion of the ruler. However, in the pre-Qin Confucian thought of Confucius (551–479 BCE) and Mencius, the expression "great man" usually did not refer to the ruler but instead to a person of moral character, someone who "if he hurries and stumbles one may be sure that it is in benevolence that he does so" (*The Analects* 4.5, as translated in Lau 1992, 29).[6] Consequently, in comparison to Zhao Qi's argument, Zhu Xi's interpretation agrees more closely to the spirit of Mencius.[7]

B. The Universality and Priority of Mind

The second point is that Mencius was an ardent advocate of the view that the human "mind" (*xin* 心) possessed universality and priority. Considering "mind" as the counterpart to "things" (*wu* 物), Mencius offered brilliant answers to the problem of its definition. Mencius said, "My mind has not been stirred since the age of forty." When asked for clarification, Mencius replied, "I am good at cultivating my 'flood-like *qi*'" (我善養吾浩然之氣). He also pointed out that: "The will (*zhi* 志) is the commander over the *qi* 氣 while the qi is that which fills the body. Where the will arrives there the *qi* halts. Hence it is said, 'Take hold of your will and do not abuse your *qi*'" (*Mencius* 2A.2, as translated in Lau 1984, 57). Zhao Qi explained the word *zhi* as "what is thought by the mind"

5 大人者, 不失其赤子之心者也.

6 君子無終食之間違仁, 造次必於是, 顛沛必於是.

7 Zhu Xi commented, saying "A great person is great for not being tempted by things and for being fundamentally completely pure in one's heart" (2002, 409).

(心所念慮也).[8] Here, because Mencius believed the "mind" to be universal, thereby he also considered it to be necessary. But how can we establish the "universal necessity of the mind"? This question leads us to consider further the substance of the "mind."

C. Mind Is the Origin of Moral Value

The third point related to Mencius's notion of the human being was his belief that the human "mind" was the origin and the generator of value-consciousness. In his dialogue with Gongduzi (公都子), Mencius concluded his reflection on human morality with the cosmologically founded claim that it was "what Heaven has given me" (*Mencius* 6A.15, as translated in Lau 1984, 269), thereby elevating the ontological dimension of human existence.

As indicated above, Mencius maintained that the human mind is the generator of ethical value-consciousness. The mind, as a "greater body" (*dati* 大體), has the ability to reflect on things (*si* 思), while the "organs of hearing and sight," as "lesser bodies" (*xiaoti* 小體), lack such mental capacity. As the New Confucian philosopher Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995) succinctly noted, *si* was to reflect in the sense of practical reason, not that in the sense of cognitive reason (Mou 1985, 52). The *si* (reflection) in Mencius led to moral praxis. Moreover, each and every kind of value consciousness originated from the "mind." "That which a gentleman follows as his nature, that is to say, benevolence (*ren*), rightness (*yi*), the rites (*li*) and wisdom (*zhi*), is rooted in his heart (*xin*)" (*Mencius* 7A.21, as translated in Lau 1984, 271).[9] In that very sense, the dignity of man is established upon the "honors bestowed by heaven" (*tian jue* 天爵) and does not originate in "honors bestowed by humans" *(ren jue* 人爵) (*Mencius* 6A.16, as translated in Lau 1984, 239). For this reason, Mencius could justify showing disdain towards the aristocracy of his time. This stance was related to the atmosphere of the times in which Mencius lived. As the too-early-deceased historian Yin-lin

[8] Zhao *Qi* commented, "Will is what the mind thinks and considers" (志，心所念慮也) (Zhao 2000, vol. 3, 90).

[9] 君子所性，仁義禮智根於心.

Chang 張蔭麟 (Zhang Yinlin, 1905–1942) depicted, the Warring States rulers were addicted to outright gambling, and consequently often had to run away after losing everything in the game of warfare (Zhang 2008, 100). In the social climate of the Warring States period, Mencius's disdain for aristocrats was not provoked by his own arrogance but came from internal "flood-like *qi*." Because its root was morality (*daoyi* 道義), his contempt for the aristocracy was founded on what was "bestowed by heaven" and not on what was "bestowed by man."

From the view that the "mind" (*xin*) was the generator of human value-consciousness, Mencius went on to say that human moral consciousness was immanent. After indicating the fact that each and every human was endowed with the four kinds of mind to give rise of the four kinds of virtue, Mencius continued to cite the *Book of Odes* and stressed here that superior virtue was conferred by Heaven (*Mencius* 6A.6; see Lau 1984, 229).[10] He argued for the universality of moral consciousness. Thus, Mencius pointed out that since human beings are only fond of eating good food, listening to pleasant music, how could it then be the case that our minds do not possess "sameness" (*tongran* 同然)? And, moreover, what constitutes the "sameness" of the human mind? Even if human minds all pursue principle (*li* 理, also "structure; reason") and righteousness (*yi* 義), it is the sage who first attains the "sameness" of human mind before the rest of us do (*Mencius* 6A.7; see Lau 1984, 231). Therefore, it is principle and righteousness that cause our "minds" to feel happiness, just like the delight we experience when we eat delicious food.

D. The Resonance between Human Minds and the Heaven

The fourth point is that Mencius advocated the view that, once human beings have grasped the essence of "mind," they become able to make the leap to the origin of the great changes that underlie the universe. Mencius said, "For a man to give full realization to his heart (*xin* 心) is

[10] Mencius cited the Odes in quite a "liberal" fashion. He merged "interpreting" and "using" the texts together in citing the *Odes*. For a fuller discussion of Mencius's hermeneutics of the *Odes*, see Huang (2023, 343–57).

for him to understand his own nature (*xing* 性), and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven" (*Mencius* 7A.1, as translated in Lau 1984, 265). Yu Ying-shih 余英時 (1930–2021) argued that Mencius displayed a notion of unity of two different levels. The first level is "the unity of humans and self," and the other level is "the unity of human beings with the universe." In that way, we can attain the state of "the unity of heaven and humanity," where "what is above and what is below is in convergence with heaven and earth" (上下與天地同流) (Cf. Yu 2014, 129–31).[11] This resonance between human mind and Heaven constituted a Chinese version of the great chain of being.

To sum up, Mencius's humanism can be summed up by four propositions, namely, (a) man is endowed with moral instinct, predominantly "innate knowing" (*liangzhi* 良知) and "innate ability" (*liangneng* 良能); (b) the human "mind" possesses universality and priority; (c) the human "mind" is the origin of value-consciousness; and (d) the human "mind" is capable of comprehending the Mandate of Heaven. The keyword here is "becoming" rather than "being." Humans are able to transform the world through the endless effort of self-transformation starting form self-cultivation. Mencius's philosophy may be characterized as a philosophy of mind in the Confucian sense. Mencius asserted that the moral sense was internal in the mind of each and every one. The mind was the origin of moral value. Therefore, Mencius warned of the necessity of keeping one's mind unperturbed through the cultivation of the *qi* (氣, inner *élan*). Mencius insisted that the transcendence of one's life can be attained through immanent realization of the mind (*Mencius* 2A.2). In this way, the transcendence and immanence of one's life were merged into a harmonious whole.

III. Salient Aspects of Confucian Humanism

On the basis of Mencius's concept of humans, we are in a better position to appreciate the dominant ideas of Confucian humanism. Confucian

[11] The expression "上下與天地同流" are Mencius's words. See *Mencius* 7A.13 (see Lau 1984, 269).

humanism was traceable back to the eleventh century BCE when King Wu of Zhou 周武王 (r. 1049/45–1043 BCE) conquered the Shang (商). The founders of the Zhou dynasty, predominantly the Duke of Zhou 周公 (r. 1042–1036 BCE), expressed a profound "concerned consciousness" (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識)[12] in their political speeches as recorded in the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書). The Duke of Zhou warned the power elites of the early Zhou to be diligent and self-restrained so as to keep the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming* 天命) which they had acquired so painstakingly. The "concerned consciousness" exhibited by the founders of Zhou can be regarded as the incipient stage of Confucian humanism in early China. It was Confucius, an ardent admirer of the Duke of Zhou, who formulated Confucian humanism by enhancing humanity (*ren* 仁, benevolence) to stand out over all other virtues. Although the carriers of Confucian values were different in East Asian countries, be they the literati in traditional China, the *jusha* (儒者, じゅしゃ) in Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868), or the *yangban* (양반, 兩班) in Joseon Korea (1392–1910) (Hiroshi 1990, 13–30), they all shared to varying degrees the following three dominant convictions.

A. Humans Are the Free Agents of Action

Confucius firmly asserted that the Self is the decider of volitional orientation by indicating that "the practice of humanness depends on oneself alone, and not on others" (*The Analects* 8.1, as translated in Lau 1992, 109).[13] Confucius's confirmation of the free will of humans was vividly revealed by his comment on the official historian's writing of the assassination of the feudal lord in 607 BCE. As the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) had it:

> Chaou Ch'uen 趙穿 [Zhao Quan] attacked [and killed] duke Ling in the peach garden, and Seuen 宣 [Xuan] who was flying from the State, but had not yet left its hills behind him, returned to the capital. The grand historiographer wrote this entry, "Chaou Tun 趙盾 [Zhao Dun]

[12] This is a term coined by the New Confucian scholar Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1904–1982). For a discussion of this term, see Huang (2019, 149–58).

[13] 為仁由己, 而由人乎哉?

> murdered his ruler," and showed it in the court. Seuen [Xuan] said to him, "It was not so;" but he replied, "You are the highest minister. Flying from the State, you did not cross its borders; since you returned, you have not punished the villain. If it was not you who murdered the marquis, who was it?" . . . Confucius said "Tung Hoo 董狐 [Dong Hu] was a good historiographer of old time: his rule for writing was not to conceal. Chaou Seuen [Zhao Hsuan] was a great officer of old time: in accordance with that law he accepted the charge of such wickedness. Alas! If he had crossed the border, he would have escaped it." (Legge 1960, 290–91)

Confucius's comment implied a view that, as Zhao Dun decided not to punish the killer of the prince on his own free will, he must be held responsible for that assassination. It was on this ground that Confucius praised the writer of history as "a good historiographer of old times."

The best way to detect the Confucian stance in support of humans as free agents of action lay in their philosophy of history. Mencius was noted for his cyclical view of history as he proclaimed that there necessarily arose a true king in every five hundred years (*Mencius* 2A.13). However, Mencius announced that those who arose after the leadership of King Wen 文王 (r. 1099/56–1050 BCE) of Zhou were commoners. Yet, those of distinctive caliber arose without King Wen of Zhou (*Mencius* 7A.10). Mencius admitted that there were some propensities in history. However, he did not subscribe to historical determinism. On the contrary, Mencius stressed that human beings were able to create history by their own efforts. Undoubtedly, Mencius confirmed that humans were free agents of action.[14]

Another good example to illustrate Confucian humanism in this regard is the view of history espoused by Zhu Xi. In interpreting the evolution of Chinese history, Zhu Xi occasionally admitted that there was a propensity in history, which he referred to as *li* (理) (Zhu 2001, vol. 24, 3501)[15] or *lishi* (理勢) (Zhu 2001, vol. 20, 624),[16] that cannot be

[14] For a fuller treatment of Mencius's view of history, see Huang (2025, 295–324).

[15] "Gushi Yulun" 古史餘論 (Random Notes on Ancient History) in *Huian xiansheng Zhu Wengong Wenji* 晦庵先生朱文公文集 (Collected Writings of Mr. Huian), *juan* 7.

[16] "Jiyou nishang fengshi" 己酉擬上封事 (Memorial Submitted in 1169) in *Huian xiansheng Zhu Wengong Wenji*, *juan* 12.

stopped by human power. However, Zhu Xi insisted that it was only the sage who was able to investigate such principles of history and revise them (Zhu 2001, vol. 20, 624). In sync with his refutation of historical determinism, Zhu Xi asserted that humans were the free agents of action in history. In view of his interpretation of Chinese history (Huang 1994, 188–205), there was little doubt that Zhu Xi was a typical Confucian humanist, through and through.

We may argue further that because Chinese historians were deeply baptized in the spirit of Confucian humanism and saw humans as free agents of action, there has been a time-honored tradition of historical criticism (*shilun* 史論) in traditional historical writings. Historians customarily wrote short essays commenting on the deeds of given historical personages. It was through this historical criticism that traditional Chinese historians merged "value judgement" and "factual judgement" together in their writings of history.[17]

B. Mind Is the Origin of Moral Consciousness

The second tenet of East Asian Confucian humanism was the doctrine that human mind is the origin of moral consciousness. This doctrine stemmed from Confucius who announced that as soon as one bent his mind to humanity he attained it (*Analects* 7.29) and Mencius who claimed that humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom were rooted in mind (*Mencius* 7A.21). Mencius's theory of mind was of paramount importance as he asserted that value consciousness was embedded in one's self-aware mind (Lao 1981, vol. 1, 157; see also Huang 2025, 47–48). From Mencius onward, the majority of East Asian Confucians shared to varying degrees this proposition, particularly those of the Yang-ming school in China, Korea, and Japan.

In the evolution of Confucian humanism after Mencius in East Asia, three remarks may be made with regard to the concept of mind as origin of moral values. First, in terms of its substance, the human mind was the "metaphysical mind" that formed with the substance of

[17] For a fuller discussion of the tradition of historical criticism in traditional Chinese historiography, see Huang (2015, 25–39).

transcendence. The mind was also a "moral mind" that could generate morality (Mou 2022a, vol. 5, 44–45). The mind in the Confucian-Mencian philosophical context was not a "cognitive mind." In Joseon Korea, it was the Yang-ming philosopher Jeong Je-du 鄭齊斗 (1649–1736) who coined for the first time the very term "substance of mind" (*xinti* 心體) (Jeong 1995, series 160, 416).[18]

Second, in terms of the function of mind, East Asian Confucians agreed that the activities of the mind decided the form of the mind and eventually determined the future of the world. The tacit assumption in the above worldview was that the *modus operandi* of the world was dominated by that of the mind. East Asian Confucians devoted more attention to "the ethics of intention" than "the ethics of consequence." In the eyes of East Asian Confucian humanists, "intentions" were more important than "consequences" as the "intentions" of "the mind" decided the activities of "the mind," and resulted in the changes of the world.

Third, the majority of East Asian Confucians placed priority of mind over body and other matters. Zhu Xi submitted a memorial to Emperor Xiaozong 孝宗 (r. 1162–1189) in 1181, stressing "the emperor controlled the myriad of things under Heaven on the basis of his mind" (Zhu 2001, vol. 20, 639).[19] This was also the consensus among the Yang-ming Confucians in China, Korea and Japan. In East Asia, Confucian philosophers agreed that the *modus operandi* of the mind dominated that of the body and other matters.

Mencius's learning of mind in East Asian Confucian humanism might invite a number of criticisms. For example, Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997) once criticized that philosophers who engages in the "learning of mind" is "retreating into the inner citadel" of his mind (Berlin 1969 [1977], 135). This is probably not equitable at all, because just as adherents of Buddhism may respond that their retreat deep into the mountains is in fact to accumulate more energy which they will be able to use to benefit the masses after their return, Mencius could give the same

[18] For an excellent treatment of Jeong Je-du's philosophy of mind, see Chung (2020, 24–29).
[19] "Xinchou yenhe zouzha (2)" 辛丑延和奏劄二 (Memmorial Submitted in 1181, B) in *Huian xiansheng Zhu Wengong Wenji, juan* 13.

response to the doubts directed against the Mencian learning of mind.

Moreover, the "learning of mind" of Mencius is not at all escaping the world but rather engaging in the world, because the first and foremost tenet of their learning of mind advocates the priority of the "mind" over "matter" (*wu* 物, "objects"). In this way, they maintain that all things and objects which exist in the world have no independent reality, but either depend in their existence on the "mind" or change in accordance with it. While metaphysics was concerned with the problem of being and non-being, the Confucian learning of mind devoted overriding concern to the problem of the subjectivity of humans. The second tenet maintains the greater significance of human "intentions" over "consequences," and consequently also that the ethics of conviction is more important and possesses priority over the ethics of consequences. In addition to that, in the Confucian school of thought there also exists a kind of "Confucian project" (Yu 2004, 400). Even though the phrase "inner sageliness and outer kingliness" *(neisheng waiwang* 內聖外王) comes from Zhuangzi,[20] it does rather suitably describe ideas of the Confucian school. Mencius, for one, pointed out that "the world (*tianxia* 天下) has its basis in the state (*guo* 國), the state in the family, and the family in one's own self (*shen* 身)" (*Mencius* 4A.5; as translated in Lau 1984, 141). Thus, we could say that the learning of "mind" propagated by Confucius and Mencius was based on their knowledge of the interactive relationship between the human "mind" and the world.

C. Homo-cosmic Continuum

The third predominant idea of Confucian humanism in East Asia lay in the belief of the "homo-cosmic continuum." This belief in the continuity and harmony between humans and heaven had been a time-honored tenet since the "axial breakthrough" in the first millennium BCE. However, it was Confucius who created the new meaning of

[20] *Zhuangzi*, chapter "Tianxia" (天下) reads: "For this reason, the way of the inner sageliness and outer kingliness is obscure and unilluminated" (是故內聖外王之道, 闇而不明). See Guo and Wang ([1961] 2006, vol. 4, 1069).

this old doctrine. As Yu Ying-shih aptly argued, before the "axial breakthrough" it was the shamans who played the role of bridges of communication between humans and the gods. However, after the "axial breakthrough," the human minds of philosophers replaced the role of shamans in their strenuous effort to communicate with Heaven or the "Way" (*dao* 道) (Yu 2014, 193). After Confucius, there emerged a totally new type of "homo-cosmic continuum" in Chinese civilization.

This new "homo-cosmic continuum" after Confucius comprised two dimensions, namely, (a) the continuity between the Self and "Ultimate Reality" and (b) the harmony between humans and Nature. These two ideas were shared by two different types of Confucian humanism. As I have illustrated elsewhere (Huang 2021, 7), the ethno-historical and culturo-philosophical Confucian humanisms shared one thing in common. Both valued aspiring to the goal of identity as their central tenet. Confucian humanists stressed self-cultivation as a way of establishing an identity with one's self; and reading the classics as a way of searching to establish an identity with sages and, finally, with the Mandate of Heaven. Comparatively speaking, the ethno-historical humanists were more deeply baptized in the profound sense of time and, therefore, placed priority on scholarship over self-reflection and, by extension, reason over will. The culturo-philosophical humanists stressed the priority and importance of the human heart-mind, which was considered supra-temporal and supra-spatial. These two kinds of Confucian humanists shared the above-mentioned two ideas in common.

The first idea might be traceable back to Confucius who announced that he became able to comprehend the "Mandate of Heaven" *(tianming* 天命) when he reached the age of fifty. Mencius proclaimed those who comprehended their own minds were able to comprehend their human nature and eventually became able to comprehend Heaven (*Mencius* 7A.1). As Mou Zongsan indicated, humans became a "Real Unity" through the "Real Unification" between Objectivity and Subjectivity (Mou 2022b, vol. 28, 42–43). Humans as a "Real Unity" achieved the unity between mind and Heaven through transcendental as well as immanent resonance. This particular idea was shared by Confucian humanists in East Asia, particularly those of the Yang-ming school

of Neo-Confucianism such as Jeong Je-du in Korea and *Ōshio Chūsai* 大塩中斎 (1793–1873) in Japan.

The second idea in the homo-cosmic continuum in Confucian humanism was the unity between humans and Nature. The author of *Zhongyong* 中庸 (*The Doctrine of the Mean*) proclaimed that "all things are produced and developed without injuring one another" (*The Doctrine of the Mean*, ch. 30; see Chan 1963, 112). Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) announced that "the mind of Heaven and Earth is to produce things" (Chan 1963, 593). Wang Yang-ming 王陽明 (1472–1529) envisioned that "the great man regards Heaven and Earth and the myriad of things as one body" Chan 1963, 659). The above statements are different expressions of the same idea of the unity between humans and Nature.

This idea in Confucian humanism was embedded in the "correlative mode of thinking" (Needham 1956, 281), or the "correlative anthropocosmology" (Schwartz 1985, 350) in ancient Chinese civilization. This particular mode of thinking assumed a sort of "principle of synchronicity" (Jung 1977, xxiv) running through humans, Heaven, and Earth so as to constitute the "Great Chain of Being" (Lovejoy 1961, 3–23) with Chinese characteristics. In the Confucian worldview, humans and the myriad things shared the virtue of humanity *(ren* 仁) in common. Therefore, it is absolutely possible to formulate "one body" (*yiti* 一體) between humans and Nature.

To sum up, as I have argued elsewhere (Huang 2021, 3), in East Asian humanist traditions, human beings, through their endless efforts of self-transformation or self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身), were able to comprehend and communicate with Heaven (*tian* 天), which was the "Ultimate Reality" or "the whole of Being." Therefore, the doctrine shared by East Asian humanist traditions lay in the belief of harmony between human and Heaven (*tianren heyi* 天人合一). In this particular doctrine, the moral order in the human world and the cosmic order in the transcendent world (i.e., Heaven) were merged into a *harmonia mundi*. Moreover, this belief held that the moral human in his or her highest region became able to resonate with the "Ultimate Reality," therefore the religious dimension and the moral dimension of human beings constituted the two sides of the same coin of human existence

in the East Asian humanist world.

In the unfolding of the concentric circle of Confucian humanism, the mind occupied the central place. To East Asian humanist theorists, the human mind was a moral mind as opposed to a cognitive mind. And this moral mind was shared by the myriad things in the universe. Therefore, humans were "moral humans" while the universe was the "moral universe."

IV. Confucian Humanism in a Global Perspective of the Twenty-First Century

The foregoing passages have been devoted to a discussion of Mencius's articulation of humans and the defining characteristics of Confucian humanism. Now, we may appreciate the contemporary relevance of Confucian humanism in a global perspective of the twenty-first century.

In the first place, a belief in the homo-cosmic continuum (*tianren heyi* 天人合一) has been a salient aspects of Confucian humanism. This particular doctrine includes two aspects, namely, (a) the transcendental unity of the "ultimate reality" or "Mandate of Heaven" (*tianming* 天命) in immanence and (b) the harmony between humans and Nature. The second aspect has become especially relevant to our twenty-first century. The year 1962 signifies the annus mirabilis when Rachel Carson's (1907–1964) *Silent Spring* was published. That book ignited the "Ecological Revolution" in the 1960s and has since paved the way to the long-range Deep Ecology movement that aims at a new paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to egocentrism and environmental activism (Sessions 1995, 19–25). However, the Deep Ecology movement, as indicated by Paul Thompson, has not paid enough attention to the agricultural ethics of the Western philosophical tradition (Thompson and Thompson 2018, 13). Moreover, this movement has devoted scant attention to the philosophy connecting Man and Nature found in Asian philosophical traditions, predominantly Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Among the so-called "three religions" in East Asia, Confucianism contained five key concepts in ecological thinking

with distinctively Confucian characteristics, namely, (1) harmony, (2) reconciliation, (3) the homo-cosmic continuum, (4) correlative thinking, and (5) organism. The "climate emergency" has become so imperative to humankind today (Ripple et al 2020). As I have argued elsewhere (Huang and Tucket 2023, 302–303), since Confucius, a great number of Confucian thinkers have placed emphasis on the fact that the human world and the natural world constitute a symbiosis. Confucian philosophers stress that humans, being a product of Heaven and Earth, have to join with Heaven's unending process of "ceaseless production and reproduction." The dynamics of "ceaseless production and reproduction" of the universe and the myriad things in the world lie in the virtue of humanity (benevolence). The Confucians urge us to nurture and harbor our own inner morality through self-cultivation (*Xiushen* 修身) so as to "unfold" it for the benefit of the family, society, the state and All Under Heaven. To put it in a nutshell, the Confucian tradition has illuminated for us a way leading to true reconciliation between humans and Nature in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Secondly, Confucian humanism has the potential to prescribe a remedy for the illness of our turbulent era. Since the inception of the twenty-first century, our world has witnessed constant internecine warfare in many places, predominantly the wars between Russia and Ukraine and between Israel and Hamas. Observers worldwide have worried that the tension in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea may ignite a third world war. The way to melt swords into ploughshares lies in reconciliation between the opposing parties. A true reconciliation may be made possible on the basis of the philosophy of intersubjectivity which is the core value of Confucian humanism.

As I argued recently,

> In the twenty-first century when we are striving for "reconciliation," the East Asian Confucian discourse on "*ren* (仁)" reached a new height, for in its focusing on interpersonal relationships, it neither makes one completely abandon one's self by following others, nor does it make people completely surrender themselves to following only their own self. Hence, the latent intellectual resource of "intersubjectivity" that the Confucian *ren* (仁) hides inside itself is exactly what is required by humankind in the twenty-first century. (Huang 2022a, 37–38)

Pertaining to the "intersubjectivity" that we are urgently in need of today, the eighteenth-century Korean Confucian philosopher Jeong Yak-yong's views were illuminating. Putting aside Zhu Xi's paradigmatic metaphysics, Jeong Yak-yong asserted, "Humaneness (*ren* 仁) is nothing but the human (*ren* 人). Two humans constitute humaneness (二人為仁). Humaneness is when father and son fully realize their roles, and when the ruler and his minister fully realize theirs" (Jeong 2002, juan 6, vol. 9, 15–16; Cf. Hwang 2015, 81–92). Jeong Yak-yong had ushered a return to Mencius's concept of humanism, which Mencius had articulated thus: "'Benevolence' (humanity) means 'human.' When these two are conjoined, the result is 'the way'" (*Mencius* 7B.6, vol. 2, as translated in Lau 1984, 293).[21] Jeong Yak-yong extrapolated the principle of intersubjectivity from Mencius's thesis of "to be humane is to be human." Jeong's innovation to Confucian humanism lay in his stressing the principle of intersubjectivity, which carries tremendous new meanings to our century of fluctuation and suffering.

Thirdly, Confucian humanists in East Asia devoted overriding concern to the day-to-day life of common folks at the expense of ideology. The consensus among the Confucian humanists was that to be humane was to be human. I have indicated earlier that eighteenth-century East Asia had witnessed an anti-metaphysical chorus composed by Itō Jinsai and Ogyū Sorai of Japan, Jeong Yak-yong of Korea, and Dai Zhen of China. Among the vocalists of "practical learning" (實學 *shixue, jitsugaku, silhak*), Dai Zhen's calling might be the most mind-bending and touching. Dai Zhen launched a vehement attack against the fact that the power of interpretation of "principle" *(li* 理) had been monopolized by the power holders, the elders, and the social superiors at the expense of the common folks, the younger generations, and the inferiors (Dai 1991, vol. 1, 161).[22] All of these anti-metaphysical Confucian philosophers exhibited the true spirit of Confucian humanism that placed the day-to-day life of common people over abstract ideology.

To a large extent, the major wars in our twenty-first century are attributable to the conflicts of political ideologies. Although some schol-

21 孟子曰：「仁也者，人也. 合而言之，道也」

22 For an insightful treatment of Dai Zhen, see Lodén (2016, 113–45).

ars after World War II announced optimistically "the end of ideology" (Bell 1962), the return of political ideology in our century has made many wars inevitable. In this historical context, Confucian humanism appears to be an efficient medicine to the illness of our century.

All in all, the ideas of "homo-cosmic continuum" and inter-subjectivity, as well as keen-sighted attention to common people's life in Confucian humanism, carry contemporary relevance to our twenty-first century in a global perspective.

V. Conclusion

On the basis of the above observations, some concluding remarks are in order. First, the essence of East Asian Confucian humanism as articulated by Mencius was a kind of "philosophy of subjectivity." The Confucian "philosophy of subjectivity" contained three theses, namely, (a) humans are moral subjects who are free agents of action, (b) the human mind retains autonomy and is the origin of value-consciousness, and (c) humans are moral persons who, through their endless spiritual exercise, are able to comprehend the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming* 天命), which is the "moral universe." Therefore, the "homo-cosmic continuum" can be achieved.

Indeed, as the eyes of Confucian humanists in East Asia were glued by the day-to-day life in this mundane world, the "relational subjectivity" and social ethics became particularly well-developed (Rošker 2023). However, this is not to say that the humans are the "one-dimensional" existence. On the contrary, the humans in the Confucian humanist thinking were "multi-dimensional" and may become able to communicate or resonant with the "ultimate reality." All of the three defining façades of Confucian humanism were deeply embedded in Mencius's concept of humans. It seems justifiable to say that Mencius was the major architect of Confucian humanism.

Secondly, the central core of Confucian humanism was the human mind. Pertaining to the functions of mind in Confucian humanism, two observations may be made, namely: (a) The activities of the mind defined the "self." The theory that Confucian humanists advocated

was "morality is inherent, to approach the mind to reflect on human nature" (仁義內在，即心見性).[23] The "self" in East Asian Confucianisms was not the "divided self" as analyzed by William James (1842–1910) (James 1909, 139–56). Instead, the "self" in Confucian humanism was a "tripartite self" (Raphals 2023, 208) which combined mind, body, and spirit into a harmonious whole. The keyword in the Confucian humanists' concept of "self" was "continuum" rather than "rupture" or "divide." (b) The space that human mind unveiled was unlimited. The Confucian humanists insisted that the cultivation of self led to regulation of family and pacification of the world. The construction of space for one's self-cultivation was ever expanding (Lewis 2006, 1). The keyword of Confucian "self" was "becoming" rather than "being."

Thirdly, Confucian humanism was the best manifestation of what I recently called as "spiritual Confucianism." As I have illustrated recently, "as compared to political Confucianism, which is concerned with the art of politics, spiritual Confucianism urges a radical return to the basics, namely, the transformation of the self as the foundation and starting point of the transformation of the world. In this way, spiritual Confucianism is an orientative philosophy that addresses the functions of cognition (of human nature), purification, doctrine, and habituation of the self, as do the other self-cultivation philosophies of Greece and India" (Huang 2025 [forthcoming]; Cf. Gowan 2021, 18). In the twenty-first century, material culture has been developing at an amazing speed at the expense of spiritual culture. Spiritual Confucianism as manifested in Confucian humanism aimed at self-cultivation and self-transcending may serve as a way out from the gigantic predicaments of humankind in the twenty-first century and beyond.

[23] Mou Zongsan said, "Mencius represents the theoretical path, the central idea of which is that of 'innate morals' (*renyi neizai* 仁義內在), which discusses human nature by approaching the mind. Mencius thus insisted on the view that since morality is innate to the human mind, we can speak about 'approaching the mind to reflect on human nature (*jixin jianxing* 即心見性),' that is, we can discuss human nature by means of the human mind" (Mou 2022b, vol. 28, 57).

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