

An Exploration of the Philosophical Implications and Contemporary Value of the “Harmony between Heaven and Humanity” Thought in Confucianism and Taoism

Shan Luo

Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute, Jingdezhen 333403, Jiangxi, China

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: The idea of “the unity of heaven and man” has developed from the Pre-Qin period to the present, going through a long historical process. As an important concept in ancient Chinese philosophy, it is reflected in ecological awareness of man and nature, holistic awareness of man and society, as well as civilized awareness of man and life. To better achieve harmonious coexistence between man and nature, man and society, etc., and to attach importance to the system as a whole and follow the system’s laws in practice, it is also necessary to enhance one’s own cultivation to realize the value inheritance of the idea of “the unity of heaven and man”. This article will interpret the idea of “the unity of heaven and man” in Chinese excellent traditional culture from three aspects: related discussions on the idea of “the unity of heaven and man”, the philosophical implications of the idea of “the unity of heaven and man”, and the contemporary value of the idea of “the unity of heaven and man”.

Keywords: Harmony between man and nature; Man and nature; Ecological civilization

Online publication: May 26, 2025

1. Relevant Discussions on the Thought of “Harmony between Heaven and Man”

The thought of "Harmony between Heaven and Man" was first proposed by Zhuangzi and later developed into a system by the great Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu^[1]. This thinking originated from Taoism. "Dao" is the origin and law of all things in the universe. The ways of heaven, earth and man are all unified. As stated in "Deep Investigation of Names" in Chunqiu Fanlu, "All things follow their names, and all names follow the will of heaven. The relationship between heaven and man is thus unified as one."

All things follow their names, and all names follow the will of heaven. The relationship between heaven and man is thus unified as one. When heaven and man are in harmony and in accordance with the Dao, they complement each other in action, follow each other and support each other. This is called morality. Tang Yijie summarized "Heaven" as the ruling will of Heaven, the natural Heaven, and the Heaven of moral principles, combining the "will of Heaven" and "nature" into one, and endowing it with the color of "nature, principle and morality"^[2]. The thought of "Harmony between Heaven and Man" is an important part of traditional Chinese philosophy, emphasizing the harmonious unity of man and nature, and man and the universe. The birth and development of this thought have gone through a long historical process^[3]. In chronological order, the philosophical concept of "Harmony between Heaven and Man" can be traced back to the Pre-Qin period. In the early stage of human civilization, people's awe of the natural heaven gradually evolved into rational thinking

about the relationship between heaven and man. The dialectical and unified relationship between ancient Chinese laborers and the natural ecological environment, which is interdependent and mutually promoting, contains extremely rich wisdom and is an important part of Chinese excellent traditional culture^[4].

Since ancient times, the relationship between humans and nature has been the most fundamental proposition. Whether humans can handle this relationship well determines whether a civilization can continue^[5]. In contemporary society, the traditional philosophical concept of "harmony between man and nature" still demonstrates profound practical significance. It not only provides important theoretical guidance for building a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, but also has positive reference value for the overall coordinated development of society and the improvement of individual moral standards. The wisdom of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature contained in this ideological system can still play a unique role even after a thousand years and in modern times. Harmony between man and nature "expresses the value pursuit of a harmonious order and the essential understanding of survival and development^[6]". It can be seen that the idea of "harmony between man and nature" still has important practical guiding significance in today's era.

2. The Philosophical Implications of the “Harmony between Heaven and Humanity” Thought

The “Harmony between Heaven and Humanity” thought regards human beings and all things as an organic and inseparable whole^[7]. This philosophical proposition holds a core position in the traditional Chinese ideological system. Both Confucianism and Taoism have systematically expounded on it from different perspectives. From an ontological perspective, Confucianism elevates the concept of “Heaven” to the height of moral ontology, considering it not only the ultimate basis of ethical norms but also the highest criterion for evaluating human behavior.

Dong Zhongshu, an important representative of Confucianism, wrote in “Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals”: “Heaven also has the emotions of joy and anger, and the feelings of sorrow and joy, which correspond to those of human beings. By analogy, Heaven and humanity are one. “Dong Zhongshu explicitly proposed the core proposition of “the juncture between Heaven and humanity, combined as one” in his philosophical system and systematically expounded the philosophical thought of the homology between Heaven and humanity. Among them, human beings, as one of the Three Talents, together with Heaven and Earth, constitute the origin of all things. This “Heaven-human interaction” theoretical system has dual political functions: on the one hand, it provides a metaphysical justification for the feudal ruling order; on the other hand, it uses the sacred authority of Heaven to restrain the power of the monarch.

Tao Yuanming wrote in “Returning to the Fields”: “I cultivate the land in the southern wilds, and return to the fields to keep my simplicity. Long trapped in the cage of the world, I now regain my freedom in nature.” The “Harmony between Heaven and Humanity” concept expounded by the Taoist school essentially embodies the organic unity of human beings and nature. This thought advocates breaking free from the shackles of social norms and returning to the natural state of life, ultimately achieving a perfect fit between the subject’s spirit and the laws of nature. These two complementary ideological dimensions jointly shape a unique view of the relationship between Heaven and humanity in Chinese philosophical history, providing an important theoretical paradigm for understanding the relationship between the universe and human life in traditional thought. It explicitly puts forward the view that Heaven, Earth, and all things are born together with human beings and are of the same origin, attributes, structure, and laws, so human beings should follow nature and conform to it.

In summary, although Confucianism and Taoism have significant differences in the philosophical interpretation and value orientation of the relationship between Heaven and humanity, both deeply reflect the ultimate pursuit of overall harmony in traditional Chinese thought.

3. The Contemporary Value Implications of the Thought of “Harmony between Heaven and Humanity”

The core proposition of “Harmony between Heaven and Humanity” as an important crystallization of traditional Chinese philosophical thought, its theoretical value is reflected in both ontological and practical dimensions. From the ontological perspective, this thought profoundly expounds the essential and inseparable dialectical unity between human beings and nature, providing a unique philosophical perspective for understanding the integrity of the universe and human life. In the practical dimension, this thought not only constructs a complete worldview system for people but also provides value guidance and action criteria for human behavior in the methodological sense.

Since its formation, the thought of “Harmony between Heaven and Humanity” has been favored by all eras. This is not only because it embodies the ecological and natural view of harmonious coexistence between heaven and humanity, but also because it is the original value concept of the Chinese ideological system at the beginning of learning^[8].

This philosophical wisdom that combines theoretical depth and practical significance is not only a profound insight into the relationship between human beings and nature, but also an important ideological resource for guiding human practice. The idea of “harmony between man and nature” we talk about is essentially no different from the Taoist concept of “following the natural way”. When applied to reality, it can help us achieve the ideal of harmonious coexistence between man and nature that we have always pursued^[9].

3.1. Ecological Awareness of Man and Nature

As a core proposition of ancient Chinese ecological philosophy, the concept of “harmony between man and nature” holds a significant position in the traditional ideological system and has had a profound impact on people’s understanding and treatment of nature. We should gradually develop the habit of respecting nature in their daily lives and conduct specific analyses of economic and ecological benefits in their work to ensure the harmonious coexistence of the economy and the ecosystem^[10].

The “harmony between man and nature” concept places greater emphasis on the importance of biodiversity and the unique value of each life form^[11]. Guided by this philosophical thought, individuals are encouraged to deeply understand and cherish the value of all life forms. This idea prompts people to view every component of the ecosystem with a sense of awe and cultivate a deep understanding and respect for diverse life forms.

Under the influence of this thinking paradigm, humans have gradually developed a cognitive attitude of treating all species in the biological world equally, and this has become the basic principle for handling the relationship between man and nature^[12]. This also means that in our actions and decisions, we should consider the impact on the ecological environment and avoid destroying the natural environment and habitats of living beings. Maintaining biodiversity not only reflects respect for the ecosystem but is also an inevitable requirement for ensuring sustainable human development. This concept emphasizes that the richness of species and ecological balance are directly related to the quality of the environment on which human survival depends. In the long run, maintaining the integrity and stability of the biological system not only conforms to natural laws but is also a fundamental condition for the sustainable development of human civilization.

3.2. Holistic Consciousness of Human and Society

This philosophical proposition not only reveals the relationship between man and nature but also constructs a holistic worldview that includes the social dimension. This ideological system contains a profound concept of social harmony and a holistic thinking paradigm. The idea of “Harmony between Man and Nature” is rich in ecological wisdom: it regards man and nature as an organic whole, reveres nature, conforms to nature, is grateful to nature, and respects the laws of nature^[13]. This philosophical viewpoint is mainly reflected in the following theoretical dimensions: Firstly, from the ontological perspective, the idea of “Harmony between Man and Nature” embodies a systematic understanding of the universe and ecological holistic consciousness.

Secondly, at the level of value theory, this traditional wisdom embodies a profound sense of unity and wholeness. It

demonstrates its unity from four aspects: personal moral cultivation, family ethos building, internal social connections, and global harmony. This value expansion path from the small to the large is the internal logic that has enabled Chinese history to be passed down for thousands of years without interruption. This ideological tradition not only provides a unique perspective for understanding the relationship between the individual and society but also offers important ideological resources for ensuring the harmony and stable development of the entire society.

Thirdly, in the dimension of social relationship cognition, the philosophy of “Harmony in Diversity” constitutes an important theoretical dimension. This dialectical social view not only conforms to the development laws of objective things but also contains rich ethical values, thus becoming an important guideline for the practical activities of the Chinese people. Its core essence lies in: on the basis of fully acknowledging individual differences, through mutual respect and tolerance, ultimately achieving the organic unity of diverse elements.

Finally, in the pursuit of harmony, one of the core values of traditional Chinese culture is the concept of harmony. Chinese philosophy is a philosophy that pursues harmony. The concept of harmony in Chinese culture has dynamic characteristics, is constantly moving and changing, and exists in a spiral ascending state. In summary, the idea of “Harmony between Man and Nature” in the overall philosophy of human and society not only emphasizes the harmonious coexistence of man and nature but also the harmony and unity within society, reflecting a profound concept of social harmony and holistic consciousness.

3.3. Civilized Consciousness of Human Life and Nature

The idea of “Harmony between Man and Nature” offers profound life philosophy and a perspective on civilization development in terms of civilized consciousness of human life. The idea of “Harmony between Man and Nature” is an important source of thought for the concept of ecological civilization. It emphasizes the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, which is in line with the current sustainable development concept. It is not only an understanding of the laws of nature and the universe, but also a life attitude and value pursuit, reflecting the inherent wisdom of the Chinese nation and its pursuit of harmony and balance. The idea of “Harmony between Man and Nature” is an important manifestation of life philosophy. Through activities such as farming and breeding, people have close contact with the natural environment, gradually realizing the importance of natural laws, beginning to pay attention to environmental issues, and attempting to follow natural laws in production and life.

In the contemporary context of deepening globalization and modernization, the traditional philosophical concept of “Harmony between Man and Nature” provides important ideological resources for coordinating economic development with ecological protection and balancing short-term benefits with long-term sustainable development. The development of modern science and technology is like a double-edged sword^[14].

While enjoying the fruits it brings, humanity also faces multiple problems such as resource depletion, environmental pollution, and ecological imbalance. This wisdom continues to remind us that only by holding a reverent attitude towards the laws of nature and following the operation rules of the ecosystem can we ensure the sustainable prosperity of human civilization. The recognition of ecological civilization by the public is a long-term process that is gradual, internal, and slow. Therefore, we need to be prepared for a protracted battle^[15]. Only through the joint participation and continuous efforts of all members of society can we build a benign development pattern that integrates economic prosperity, social progress, and environmental protection. This philosophical wisdom not only injects lasting vitality into Chinese traditional culture, but also provides unique Eastern wisdom for solving contemporary global development problems.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Du Hui. The Traditional Thought of “Harmony between Heaven and Man” and the Construction of Ecological Civilization [J]. Journal of Cultural Studies, 2016, (08): 159-161.
- [2] Tang Yijie. On “Harmony between Heaven and Man” [J]. Journal of Chinese Philosophy History, 2005, (2).
- [3] Yang Xinxin. The Historical Origin and Modern Inheritance of the Thought of “Harmony between Heaven and Man” [J]. Banner, 2023 (5): 85-87.
- [4] Yang Xinxin. The Historical Origin and Modern Inheritance of the Thought of “Harmony between Heaven and Man” [J]. Banner, 2023 (5): 85-87.
- [5] Ge Feng. The Significance of the Thought of “Harmony between Heaven and Man” in the Legal Construction of Ecological Civilization [J]. Journal of China University of Political Science and Law, 2020, (04): 144-156 + 208.
- [6] Chen Jiwen, Zeng Tianxiong. Cultivating the Modernization of Harmonious Coexistence between Humans and Nature with the Thought of “Harmony between Heaven and Man” [J]. Journal of Ideological and Theoretical Education, 2023 (12): 88-96.
- [7] Yang Xinxin. The Historical Origin and Modern Inheritance of the Thought of “Harmony between Heaven and Man” [J]. Banner, 2023 (5): 85-87.
- [8] Zhang Yi. A Study on the Origin and Comparison of the Thought of “Harmony between Heaven and Man” in Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism [J]. Journal of Mudanjiang University, 2019, 28 (08): 13-16.
- [9] Yuan Huiling. Research on Traditional Chinese Ecological Ethics Thought and the Construction of Ecological Civilization [D]. Nanchang: Jiangxi Normal University, 2004.
- [10] Chen Wen. The Thought of “Harmony between Heaven and Man” and the Construction of Contemporary Ecological Civilization [J]. Frontiers, 2008, (11): 153-155.
- [11] Wang Chenxu. Philosophical Reflections on the Ancient Chinese Thought of “Harmony between Heaven and Man” [J]. Central Plains Literature, 2024, (32): 33-35.
- [12] Chen Jiwen, Zeng Tianxiong. Cultivating the Modernization of Harmonious Coexistence between Humans and Nature with the Thought of “Harmony between Heaven and Man” [J]. Journal of Ideological and Theoretical Education, 2023 (12): 88-96.
- [13] Ge Feng. The Significance of the Thought of “Harmony between Man and Nature” in the Construction of Ecological Civilization Rule of Law [J]. Journal of China University of Political Science and Law, 2020, (04): 144-156 + 208.
- [14] Hong Mei. The Contemporary Value of Cheng Hao’s Theory of “Oneness of All Things” [J]. Journal of Xiangtan University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), 2020(1): 163-166.
- [15] Zhang Su, Zhao Peng. The Thought of “Harmony between Man and Nature” in Taoism and the Construction of Ecological Civilization [J]. Social Sciences in China, 2012, (5): 170 - 173.

Publisher’s note

Whioce Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in Published maps and institutional affiliations.