

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Environmentalism From a Confucian Perspective: Record of a Roundtable Discussion

Agne Veisaite<sup>1</sup> | Vytis Silius<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Philosophy, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), Ma Liu Shui, Hong Kong | <sup>2</sup>Department of Philosophy, Vilnius University (VU), Vilnius, Lithuania

**Correspondence:** Agne Veisaite ([agneveisaite@gmail.com](mailto:agneveisaite@gmail.com))

**Received:** 13 May 2025 | **Accepted:** 4 August 2025

**Funding:** The authors received no specific funding for this work.

**Keywords:** Chinese philosophy | Confucianism | environmentalism

## ABSTRACT

The 四海为学 “Collaborative Learning” is an online academic forum that hosts a range of lectures, book discussions and roundtables each year, creating a space for collaboration, as well as bringing different opinions into a conversation. The roundtable on “Environmentalism” aligned with the forum’s aims, bringing together three prominent scholars into a conversation that was rich in shared insights yet divergent in opinions. Yumi Suzuki opened the discussion by challenging the common tendency in Chinese philosophy to address environmental issues through Daoism, exploring what Confucianism has to offer instead. As a philosophy concerned with social issues, Confucianism sought productive ways of working with nature without excessively limiting human progress. Jean-Yves Heurtebise offered a contrasting view, provocatively suggesting that early Chinese philosophy has little to offer in addressing today’s environmental concerns, which he sees as transcultural and beyond the scope of cultural particularities. Marion Hourdequin, however, emphasized that while ecological issues are global, different cultures “foreground” different values, highlighting social relations and collective responsibility in the *Analects*. Although Confucius is often seen as conservative, Hourdequin notes that the *Analects* is all about social change. Rather than retreating into tradition, we might, like Confucius, “stay with the trouble”—facing current environmental challenges while drawing from ancient philosophies. This article synthesizes the key points of the roundtable discussion and concludes by highlighting central insights that situate Confucian thought within broader efforts to rethink ecological degradation and strategies for addressing it.

## 1 | Yumi Suzuki

In her talk “Environmental Thought in Early Confucianism,” Dr. Yumi Suzuki from University of Bern, challenges the misconception that environmental concerns are a recent phenomenon. The rapid technological progress in early China brought deforestation, desertification, and soil erosion as early as the second millennium BCE. Suzuki points out that while Chinese

philosophy is often favored for addressing current environmental challenges, early China experienced significant ecological degradation due to its rapid technological progress. With heavy reliance on agriculture, Chinese society developed innovative water management techniques for the Yangtze and Yellow rivers, extensively cultivating crops and animals to support the growing population. Yet, precisely for these reasons, early China developed a sophisticated agricultural economy and

The paper has been written in collaboration with the 四海为学 “Collaborative Learning” project. It is a record of a roundtable discussion that was held on 06-12-2024.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2025 The Author(s). *The Philosophical Forum* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC.

effective environmental policies to protect its natural resources. Although Confucianism is seldom considered in discussions on environmental concerns, Suzuki explains how early Confucians pioneered policies and techniques on a societal scale, managing technological progress in the face of limited natural resources.

Suzuki addresses Ruth Mostern's study, arguing that flooding in ancient China may have been caused by widespread artificial landscape modification (Mostern 2021). Suzuki further elaborates that wild animals were often forced out of their natural habitat due to expansive agricultural development. Tigers, elephants, deer, and other wild creatures were also hunted for meat, fur, hides, tusks, ivory, and sacrificial offerings. Suzuki observes that Zhuangzi's criticism of humans exploiting non-human beings for their own extensive needs, such as utilizing geese, horses, and trees, was not metaphorical stories but reality-based observations.

Despite challenging the notion of environmentally conscious ancient China, Suzuki elaborates that the increasing scarcity of natural resources compelled early Chinese society to adopt environmental protection measures and initiate philosophical ideas to address these challenges. Although philosophical ideals may not have always aligned with everyday practices, the early Confucians sought practical ways to address environmental concerns. Unlike Daoism, which prioritizes nature over technological progress, Confucianism emphasizes harmony between human and natural worlds without detriment to human development. By introducing historical and philosophical examples, Suzuki demonstrates how the early Chinese attempted to work and collaborate with nature while also ensuring the evolution of civilization.

The legendary tale of Yu the Great illustrates the exemplary story of the collaboration between human and natural worlds. Suzuki elaborates that the legend of Yu, who managed to control flooding in ancient times, remains one of the most popular folk stories in Chinese literature. The legend links back to the fertile soil of the major rivers in ancient China that allowed its civilization to flourish. Yangtze and Yellow rivers provided clean water for daily use, enriched the land with fertile soil, and offered various aquatic animals and plants. However, the massive rivers also posed a threat to the lives of the people. Suzuki further notes that the philosopher Guan Zhong, who lived around the 7th century BCE, identified five major disasters for the state: water, drought, atmospheric conditions, pestilence, and insects. He considered water-related disasters the greatest danger, requiring the utmost care.

The legendary Yu successfully addressed this crucial issue by implementing a flood control system. According to the legend, Yu took over the task from his predecessor and father, Gun, who had unsuccessfully attempted to manage the floods. After struggling for nine years, Yu finally succeeded by employing advanced hydraulic engineering techniques for existing and newly built dikes, dams, canals, and drainage systems. However, the most interesting part of Yu's achievement was not his intense focus on technology; instead, the shift occurred due to Yu's deep understanding of the nature (*xing* 性) and the *dao* 道 of water. Rather than following Gun, who attempted to hinder water's flow with high levees by forcing it into unnatural paths, Yu leveraged the

natural movement of the river and allowed it to flow in its natural direction. Suzuki highlights one of the critical insights of early Chinese thought: sages and legendary figures were praised for their cultural and technological achievements in taming natural forces, but they did so by cooperating and following natural patterns instead of opposing them. This approach led to the development of effective Chinese technology that attempted to work with nature rather than exert control over it.

Suzuki also turns to Confucian philosophy that attempted to address practical ways of dealing with natural resources. She presents that Xunzi (310–238 BCE) believed in two separate realms: one governed by heaven and the other governed by humans. He thought that humans should focus on areas where their efforts can be most effective rather than interfering with the realm governed by heaven. Instead of focusing on issues outside human control, Xunzi suggested ways to improve human behavior. He emphasized the importance of a well-ordered society where everyone competently fulfills their duties, from field workers to rulers. Suzuki explains that the government had specific positions responsible for natural resources. Xunzi, for example, mentions five key officers in this area: The Master of Cups arranges sacrificial animals such as oxen, sheep, and pigs; the Director of Public Works maintains irrigation facilities, repairs dikes and bridges, and manages water reservoirs; the Overseer of Fields manages agricultural projects, inspects soil quality, and arranges seeds; the Master of Provisions regulates the nurturing of mountain forests, marshes, trees, grasses, fish, and turtles; and the Village Master is in charge of domestic animals and horticulture training (Hutton 2014). Suzuki highlights that the establishment of specialized roles for managing wood, water, land, and animal skins was already in place in the Zhou dynasty (11th–3rd centuries BCE), showcasing an early and sophisticated division of labour.

While early Chinese society experienced deforestation and other environmentally harmful human interventions, regulatory mechanisms for controlling the impact of human behavior were addressed as early as the 3rd century BCE. Suzuki describes various prohibited behaviors towards nature during breeding and growing seasons, as documented in the *Almanac for the Twelve Months* and the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* (239 BCE). For instance, during the first month of spring, it was forbidden to use female animals for sacrifices. It was also prohibited to cut down trees, disturb nests, or hunt very young animals, including those in the womb, as well as fledgling birds, fawns, and eggs. In the second month of spring, measures were taken to maintain water levels in streams, marshes, and ponds to prevent them from drying up. In the third month of spring, barbs and nets for hunting, rabbit snares, gauze netting for birds, and poisoned food for animals were also prohibited. Even when hunting was allowed, the number of prey was strictly regulated. Other interventions included but were not limited to harvesting indigo plants, burning wood for charcoal, and bleaching cloth in the sun during the second month of summer.

In addition, the historical texts also described the importance of offerings made by rulers to the spirits of mountains, forests, streams, springs, and marshes multiple times a year. There was a belief that if the ruler violated these rituals, it would lead to disorder and natural calamities. Thus, the harmonious and

orderly co-existence between the human and natural worlds was believed to be established from above. If a ruler approaches the natural habitat with caution and imposes limits on greed, disorder can be averted. According to Suzuki, ancient China's technological, economic, and cultural advancements were associated with wise rulers, mythical figures, and divine beings. It was believed that sage rulers Yao, Shun, and Yu (24th–22nd centuries BCE) had established an orderly society by driving away ferocious wild animals and noxious insects, preventing natural disasters, and presenting themselves as morally exemplary models.

The cultural accomplishment of establishing a harmonized relationship between humans and nature, as well as the capacity to mitigate natural disasters, was not only recognized as a technical triumph but also contributed to the moral and ethical authority of the sages. The realms of heaven, earth, and humanity were not viewed as separate entities but as interconnected and reliant on each other. It was believed that a wise and ethical ruler could bring about favorable natural conditions, while natural disasters were seen as a sign of corrupt leadership. Suzuki observes that the natural world was seen as a reflection of the country's ethical and political situation. Therefore, the question of how to respond appropriately to the changing conditions of the natural world was a crucial political concern directly affecting the ruler.

Suzuki notes that early Chinese were concerned with harmony between humans and nature, but there was little consensus among early philosophers on what is considered to be natural or inevitable (*ziran* 自然). Although early Daoist texts, especially the *Daodejing*, favored the natural as unaltered modes of being, Confucians understood civilizational advancement as a natural constitution of human nature and as a part of *dao*. Suzuki gives an example of silk production to illustrate this Confucian perspective. She explains how Han Ying, a scholar under Emperor Wen of Han (180–157 BCE), believed that the nature of silkworms' cocoons is to produce silk. However, it could not be completed without female workers who boiled these cocoons in hot water to extract their natural patterns. Silk represents the way Confucians viewed civilization—a refined result achieved through mutual interaction between humans and the natural world. Confucians did not aim to preserve nature in its wildest forms, nor did they attempt to control it by force; such efforts were deemed futile through legends of antiquity. Instead, Confucians sought to recognize natural patterning in the attempt to work with it. They viewed nature not as a raw, independent, and unchanging entity but as evolving and congruent with human progress.

## 2 | Discussion on Yumi Suzuki's Talk

Marion Hourdequin, a professor at Colorado College, initiated the discussion by asking to what extent we can draw wisdom, insights, and frameworks from ancient China when addressing human relations in today's global community.

In response, Suzuki drew a brief comparison between Confucian and Daoist thought. She noted that while Daoism may seem like a more intuitive candidate for addressing current environmental

concerns, it focuses on personal and therefore individual relationships between humans and nature. Confucianism, on the other hand, has the potential to address larger political issues. As Suzuki presented in her talk, Confucianism provides practical wisdom for balancing societal needs and limited natural resources. Suzuki further noted that Confucianism can address intra-cultural relations, including international competition for natural resources. While it would be too far-fetched to suggest that early Confucians considered sustainability, they nonetheless delved deeply into the matter of sharing, using, and preserving natural resources for the collective benefit of society, demonstrating ideas that transcend ancient times and resonate with contemporary global challenges.

Jean-Yves Heurtebise, a professor at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan, continued the discussion by noting that the idea of preserving nature often arises as a response to the transformative changes brought about by civilization. He agreed with Suzuki's point that human progress inevitably leads to changes in natural conditions. Heurtebise questioned the historical plausibility of the legendary sages and asked to elaborate on how we can trace the historical origins of ecological thinking.

Suzuki observed that the beginning of civilization inevitably forced people to recognize the conflicting outcomes of human progress and its impact on the surrounding nature. She pointed out that such considerations are absent when people live in mobile hunter-gatherer communities. Civilization brings about a growing population and stationary settlements, necessitating not only the utilization of nature but also questions of the preservation of natural resources for yearly cycles. Suzuki also stressed the importance of historical and anthropological background in shaping the environmental thought of different cultures. She noted that the Chinese civilization, which heavily relied on its major rivers, similar to how Egypt relied on the Nile, developed very differently from Ancient Greece. Ancient Greece, not being an agricultural society, concentrated on marine trade routes rather than taming rivers. Even natural calamities differed—instead of dealing with floods, they were more concerned about volcanic eruptions. Thus, while it is hard to determine the historical accuracy of legendary figures, it is plausible to consider how ancient China addressed its environmental concerns based on how it coped with emerging challenges, such as flooding rivers and limited natural resources.

## 3 | Jean-Yves Heurtebise

Jean-Yves Heurtebise presents a critique of the so-called “Chinese ecological civilization” (*zhongguo shengtai wenming* 中国生态文明), which was first introduced by Hu Jintao at the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007. Heurtebise questions whether early Chinese ideas on harmony between humans and nature align with the country's historical development and its current environmental challenges. He echoes Suzuki, noting that ecological issues inevitably arise with the beginning of civilization and technological progress. Heurtebise argues that while early Chinese philosophy showed environmental awareness, it did not lead to a more positive impact on nature during the rapid development of Modern China. Heurtebise presents five critical arguments against the Chinese

ecological civilization (CEC), drawing from both historical records and contemporary environmental issues.

First, Heurtebise argues that the promotion of so-called ecologically conscious China is a political slogan that does not align with its actual environmental practices. In 2006, Pan Yue, the former vice-director of the Environmental Protection Bureau of the People's Republic of China (PRC), noted that China's rapid economic progress over two decades had led to the economic achievements that took the West a century to attain. Nevertheless, he recognized that the rapid development also accumulated a century's worth of environmental challenges. Pan Yue suggested integrating traditional Chinese culture to provide guidance and ecological wisdom as an integral part of CEC rather than adhering to "Western logic." However, Heurtebise notes that this approach is misleading as it inaccurately attributes environmental issues solely to the Western world. He emphasizes that China's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have consistently risen due to its rapid development, leading China to become the world's largest CO<sub>2</sub> emitter by 2007. Heurtebise suggests that relying on traditional wisdom as a solution for reducing environmental impact has not affected China's escalating CO<sub>2</sub> emissions or influenced growing environmental concerns in tangible ways. Thus, introducing the notion of CEC as a solution for environmental issues has failed to produce positive outcomes in practice.

Second, according to Heurtebise, the CEC is rooted in a conceptual framework that does not reflect its historical records. *People's Daily* in 2015 combined Pan Yue's ideas with Tu Weiming's article on Neo-Confucianism and ecology, highlighting the ecological aspect as essential to Chinese civilization. Tu's article discussed the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world in Wang Yangming's philosophy (1472–1529), emphasizing the significant implications of neo-Confucianism for the sustainable future of the global community. However, Heurtebise is skeptical whether these ideas align with China's historical development. His reasoning echoes Suzuki's observation when he notes that deforestation resulting from rice cultivation was already a significant issue in imperial China. Heurtebise also points out the Maoist movement of the Great Leap Forward, which promoted human domination over nature (*ren ding sheng tian* 人定胜天) and contributed to deforestation to expand grain cultivation. He contends that China's development throughout its history was driven by the notion of dominating nature rather than led by environmental awareness.

Third, Heurtebise points out that early Chinese texts do not encompass the notions of "ecology" and "nature" as we understand them today. Therefore, attributing environmental significance to the ancient text is misleading. The modern ecological concept of "nature" is relatively new in China; the terms "nature" and "environment" took on their modern meanings in the Chinese language in the early 20th century (Weller 2006). Drawing parallels with the Western context, Heurtebise observes that the Western understanding of nature also continuously evolved in line with historical developments. He exemplifies that the Ancient Greek-Roman concept of *Phusis* (Nature) was initially associated with the general idea of growth and later came to encompass the entire universe or Cosmos. During the Modern Scientific Revolution period, nature became associated with matter and movement, particularly the movement of atoms

and the laws governing these movements. The Romantic era brought about yet another understanding of nature in response to the Industrial Revolution, shifting the conception of nature to include the surrounding environment, such as plants, rivers, animals, and mountains. Finally, the discipline of "Ecology," developed by Aldo Leopold, further broadened the meaning of nature to include conservation.

Similarly, the early Chinese texts do not hold implications of "ecology" and "nature" as understood today. Heurtebise emphasizes the importance of restraining from imposing anachronistic views on classical texts for political purposes. His perspective resonates with Suzuki's observation that the early Chinese did not have a consensus understanding of nature. Heurtebise points out that translating the notion of *tian* 天 as nature alone does not capture its full range of meanings, which include "heaven", "sky", "cosmos", "environment", among others. In addition, Heurtebise points out that translating "tian" as "God", as many missionaries have done, is just as misleading as the current trend of translating "tian" as "environment." Both approaches impose meanings from foreign discourses onto early Chinese terminology. Using notions such as *tian* interchangeably with nature is a retrospective and misguided interpretation. Consequently, he argues that portraying the modern idea of CEC as stemming from Chinese antiquity is conceptually misleading; ancient Chinese did not address "nature" in today's terms to begin with.

Fourth, Heurtebise argues that the concept of "Chineseness" within the CEC is not a neutral descriptor. Instead, it should be interpreted within the broader framework of Occidentalism. Heurtebise takes the term from Buruma and Margalit (2005) and explains it as a perspective that views the West as capable of achieving great economic success but lacking in spirituality and understanding of human suffering. Occidentalists consider the European Enlightenment as the era of Darkness, perceiving individual freedom and scientific rationalism as foreign values that may corrupt traditional non-Western societies. Heurtebise notes that Occidentalism originated among German romantic writers in response to the French Enlightenment. He compares 19th-century Germany and 20th-century China, emphasizing that both nations felt compelled to reinforce their own culture in response to foreign influences. According to Heurtebise, the idea of CEC resembles a "greener" version of Liang Shuming's (1893–1988) Easternization, which focused on the messianic idea of saving the West from its moral deficiencies and crass materialism (Fung 2010). Heurtebise argues that the concept of CEC is an essentialist approach, portraying the East as environmentally conscious and the West as exploitative.

The fifth argument is what Heurtebise refers to as the epistemological critique of the CEC. He notes that framing culture as potentially altering the economy and infrastructure is an argument that goes against Marxist principles. According to Marx, the economy is the foundation for cultural structures, not vice versa. Given that the Communist Party of PRC considers itself grounded in Marxism, Heurtebise questions whether CEC, as rooted in culture, is logically compatible with Marxist ideology. He scrutinizes the concept of CEC as a facade for political purposes; regardless of whether we characterize the Western economy as "capitalistic" or the Chinese one as "socialist," both have equally detrimental impacts on the environment. Heurtebise



provocatively suggests that no amount of wisdom from the *Laozi* or the *Yijing* can counteract the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from Chinese factories. The science of industrialization has little cultural particularism; it transcends national boundaries. Advancing industrialization and mitigating its adverse effects require a collaborative, transcultural scientific effort.

Heurtebise argues that the Anthropocene results from trans-cultural rather than monocultural influence, given that nations worldwide are all pursuing development and global influence. Therefore, looking at the Anthropocene through cultural lenses hinders its recognition as a universal and transcultural phenomenon. The misleading division between Eastern and Western traditions, with the East seen as environmentally conscious and the West as ecologically harmful, for Heurtebise is captured through the concepts of “Green Orientalism” and “Brown Occidentalism”. Green Orientalism refers to both portraying China (or some essentialised “East”, more broadly) as traditionally environmentally conscious and holding the West responsible for current ecological issues. Brown Occidentalism similarly suggests that the West is primarily responsible for the pressing environmental challenges such as global warming and biodiversity loss. “Brown Occidentalism” advocates for a departure from Western cultural values as an essential step in effectively addressing environmental challenges. Heurtebise points out that the concept of Brown Occidentalism is connected to a “naïve and tragic” emergence of “self-Orientalization.” As specified by Arif Dirlik (1996), self-Orientalization is a misguided and poignant attempt to shield oneself from the cultural assimilation that comes with globalization. According to Heurtebise, it is naïve to try isolating one’s culture from globalization, particularly when its economy is deeply intertwined with it. It is also tragic because instead of resisting “foreign hegemony,” such efforts result in the loss of internal cultural diversity and the reinforcement of domestic social control.

Heurtebise suggests that the concept of CEC should be understood through Timothy Luke’s “green governmentality” framework (Luke 1995). Luke’s idea of geopower is an extension of Foucault’s biopower. Biopower means that the State controls its population through biomedical terms such as birth rate, longevity, and state of health. Geopower, on the other hand, refers to a new type of control that focuses on natural resources instead of human demography. The goal is not to avoid epidemic diseases but the scarcity of materials. Heurtebise points out that the CEC, as promoted by the PRC, similarly focuses on the technical and administrative aspects of environmental policies while disregarding the direct involvement of civil society. He provocatively suggests that the CEC resembles an “eco-panopticon” with Chinese characteristics more than an ecologically conscious society.

Lastly, Heurtebise suggests that the idea of CEC is giving way to an even “greener” approach based on Aboriginal wisdom. He notes that many anthropologists advocate returning to Aboriginal wisdom as a framework for addressing urgent environmental concerns. According to Heurtebise, Western intellectuals have always toyed with the idea of salvation through some otherness. In the 18th century, for example, intellectuals sought to diminish the church’s influence by promoting progress and science. Then, in the 19th century, they emphasized

art and beauty as a counter-reaction to materialism brought on by progress and science. Moving into the 20th century, they turned to Marxism and Maoism as an antidote to capitalism while critiquing the previous narrative of art for art’s sake. Ultimately, intellectuals began to promote Chinese culture and Aboriginal wisdom in response to Western technological artificiality. Heurtebise argues that addressing environmental issues through cultural narratives is simply a new form of intellectual escapism.

Heurtebise concludes that humans achieve their “metaphysical goal” in a negative way by destroying earthly living conditions. He believes that although the correction and solution to environmental issues must be found, it cannot be addressed through “culturalist narratives” such as the CEC or Aboriginal wisdom. As Heurtebise has been arguing in his lecture, it is merely an “Opium of intellectuals.” Instead of intellectualizing eco-particularities of the distant past, Heurtebise advocates for global scientific solutions that exceed cultural boundaries.

#### 4 | Discussion on Heurtebise’s Talk

Suzuki began discussing Heurtebise’s talk by revisiting the differences between ancient Greek and ancient Chinese thought. Suzuki emphasized Aristotle’s notion of the Ladder of Nature, which established a hierarchical view of humans and other beings, placing humans at the top of all creatures. Suzuki raised a thought-provoking question about how Heurtebise might respond to individuals who recognize this human-centered narrative inherited from the Greeks and who argue that it may have influenced the way Western cultures approached the natural world.

Heurtebise acknowledged that many scholars highlight deeply anthropocentric frameworks in both Ancient Greek and the Judeo-Christian traditions. However, he suggested examining whether anthropocentric ideas were evident in practice in later Western history. The medieval economy of Western Europe, rooted in such Christian values as humility and frugality, had minimal environmental impact, according to Heurtebise. He recognized that elites often ignored these principles by indulging in excessive consumption but suggested that this behavior was more of an exception than a rule among the general public. Heurtebise also pointed out that the medieval Church did not embrace the notions of progress and growth commonly linked with environmental degradation. Additionally, he highlighted how the Christian belief in the afterlife was a restraint against over-indulgence. The focus was not on attaining maximum wealth, but rather on behaving in ways that would be deemed appropriate by God in the afterlife. In contrast, as society became more secular and the Christian worldview declined, there was a cultural shift towards “living life to the fullest”, potentially leading to increased consumption and, thus, rising environmental issues.

Heurtebise pointed out that despite traditional Chinese civilization having a more robust environmental awareness, it may not have had a lesser environmental impact from a historical standpoint. The ideas of the past do not necessarily align with human expansion in the present times. He noted that scholars in

the humanities tend to classify the Anthropocene as beginning with industrialization in the 19th century or with colonization. However, geologists and the broader scientific community count the Anthropocene starting with globalization in the middle of the 20th century. Heurtebise aligned with the latter and suggested that all humans participating in the global economy bear responsibility for it.

Marion Hourdequin raised a second question, asking to clarify the term “self-Orientalism”. In response, Heurtebise explained that “self-Orientalism” was coined by Arif Dirlik. It refers to the phenomenon where Asian individuals internalize negative Western characterizations of themselves and reinterpret them as positive traits. For example, Hegel, a Eurocentric orientalist thinker, claimed that only the West possessed logic and the capacity for self-governance while portraying Asians as emotional and irrational. Self-Orientalism would involve embracing these negative assessments and reinterpreting them as positive traits. Through self-orientalization, individuals tend to reinforce their so-called Asian characteristics, distancing themselves from features that may be human universals or found between cultures. Ultimately, Heurtebise concluded, self-Orientalization means defining oneself in opposition to others and emphasizing the differences rather than common features.

## 5 | Marion Hourdequin

Marion Hourdequin is a Professor at Colorado College. She took a different approach than the two previous speakers and presented a somewhat autobiographical account of what she found resonant in early Confucian philosophical texts when she first encountered them. Hourdequin focused on the early Confucian resources related to social values and how we think about relations with one another and the broader world because these resources are relevant and helpful to the issues in contemporary environmental ethics. Hourdequin started her talk by situating herself vis-à-vis the two previous discussants. She endorsed Suzuki's accent on Confucians' social and institutional orientation in addressing ecological problems, compared to Daoists, who are more often drawn into contemporary environmentalist discussions. She also stressed the importance of Heurtebise's ideas regarding how traditions come into dialog with one another and how they are framed internally and externally.

Hourdequin further explained her methodological stance as rooted both in environmental ethics and a particular perspective in comparative philosophy. She sees environmental ethics as concerned with the relationship between humans and the broader world. In this sense, for Hourdequin, it can be summed up as the question: how can we live well in the world and in relation to one another? Regarding comparative philosophy, Hourdequin relies on the ideas of Thomas Kasulis, expressed in his book *Intimacy or Integrity* (Kasulis 2002). In this book, Kasulis talks about the overlap and commonality among diverse traditions. Still, one of the things that makes traditions somewhat distinct from one another is how they tend to foreground or background different things. Hourdequin explained that if we portray the dominant culture of the United States as foregrounding the ideas of freedom and autonomy, it does not mean these ideas cannot be found elsewhere. They will be foregrounded

differently. At the same time, American culture also has concepts of community and connectedness but prioritizes them differently from the cultures that primarily foreground these ideas. Thus, as Hourdequin maintained, it is instructive to see how different traditions understand and mobilize different conceptual resources.

The first idea that Hourdequin finds relevant to contemporary environmental thinking lies in the question she sees present in the *Analects* of Kongzi (Confucius): should one engage or withdraw from corrupt societies? Hourdequin asserts that Kongzi is grappling with issues of social change. That may be surprising because Kongzi is often seen as a conservative traditionalist who does not like change. However, Hourdequin suggests that this text can be read as being all about social change. Kongzi and other early Confucians generally are very unhappy with the state of the world. They lamented the degree of conflict and fractiousness that characterized their time and sought to return to greater harmony in which collective flourishing was possible. Hourdequin points out that the *back-to-the-land* movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States endorsed the idea that civilization is corrupt and we can save ourselves by withdrawing from civilization. In her view, Kongzi is saying that is not a solution because the virtue of humanity or humanness is fundamentally relational. Hourdequin paraphrases Donna J. Haraway and claims that Kongzi's suggestion is to “stay with the trouble.” In the words of Hourdequin, we must muddle through and stick with one another in these complex situations where there is no purity to be had.

The second idea relevant to contemporary environmental ethics, for Hourdequin, is the relational conception of the self that we find in early Confucianism and how it might provide insights into discussions about collective action problems. Global climate change is often framed as a kind of giant collective action problem where each agent (human individual or a nation-state) is incentivized to continue emitting fossil fuels or consuming while wanting others to curtail their consumption. As Hourdequin points out, collective rationality would require us all to curb our consumption of fossil fuels. Still, at the individual level, this incentive seems to conflict with that requirement because the costs of my consumption are externalized to the whole society.

Hourdequin maintains that this has led to the suggestion that individual action has no impact on collective action problems because individual efforts will not have any effect in the absence of everyone agreeing to do something. According to this view, system change is the only route forward; however, that change is entirely independent of the actions of individual agents. This way of framing the conversation strongly dichotomizes the difference between acting individually and collectively. Here, Hourdequin sees the early Confucian resources as helpful because, in the *Analects*, there is a conception of the self as embedded in the community and relations. Generally, Confucians emphasized families, and Kongzi has been recorded as saying that virtue is never solitary; it always has a neighbor. Thus, we can draw insights from others for our actions. As Hourdequin puts it, the relational conception of the self suggests that an individual nation-state, an institution, or a person in acting is not acting alone. Those actions are always connected in various

ways to the thinking and the actions of others. There is a communicative and also moral value in the way we choose to act in a collective.

The third point of interest for environmental ethics, according to Hourdequin, is the intergenerational focus of Confucian ethics. Hourdequin emphasized that climate change is an intergenerational challenge, but many dominant contemporary political and economic institutions are highly oriented toward short-term returns or short-term election outcomes. Thus, even though people care about future generations, our institutions do not support such long-term concerns. On the other hand, in early Confucianism, Hourdequin sees an exciting perspective on intergenerational relations that begins in the family. The family is a central place where we learn empathy and gratitude and where we learn to reciprocate. That also results in an understanding that learning is necessarily intergenerational: not only do children learn from their parents and grandparents, but Kongzi also acknowledges the possibility of learning from his students. The intergenerational nature of Confucian ethics is also seen in reverence for ancestors and veneration of rulers who successfully created social harmony and supported ordinary people. Thus, intergenerationality is important both within the family and in society at large.

Hourdequin summed up her talk by highlighting the fundamental goal of early Confucianism in its advocacy for social change. In Hourdequin's words, it is the implementation of an intergenerational project that seeks mutual flourishing. As an additional remark, Hourdequin pointed out the peculiarity of the Confucian concept of harmony (*he* 和), which in Early Confucianism does not seek sameness. Instead, it is a harmony that allows for the recognition of difference and complementarity. For Hourdequin, such a concept of harmony is very salient for contemporary thinking about relations among people and with a broader world.

## 6 | Open Discussion

Dr. Suzuki endorsed the idea expressed by Hourdequin, claiming that there is an activist spirit in Confucian thinking that encourages people to stay with the problems and address them rather than retreat from them. Suzuki pointed out that in the Confucian Classical book of *Mengzi*, we see him trying to change the minds of the rulers he speaks with without offending them, thus achieving a change in government policies. Suzuki also commented in favor of highlighting the intergenerational nature of Confucian ethics. According to Suzuki, we often see Kongzi concerned with a change in the next generation, even if things can not improve during his lifetime.

Prof. Heurtebise joined the discussion by explaining the historical background of the reception of Daoist and Confucian ideas through complicated translation and cultural reception processes that influenced, for example, the American counter-culture of the Beat Generation. He then suggested that there might be a need to go beyond these two quite stereotypically perceived Daoist and Confucian responses, positioned as alternatives. The Daoist response, according to Heurtebise, is often seen as a retreat of the sage or a poet into the mountains and caring more about nature

than society. Meanwhile, the Confucian response tends to focus on relationality, portraying humans as “relational animals” who are not that interested in going beyond that societal realm. Heurtebise suggested that today, we need to think about our relations to the human and the nonhuman realms of our reality. Thus, neither the Daoist advocacy of retreating to nature alone nor the Confucian human-centered concern is a sufficient response to current environmental challenges. One has to think about sociability not only in human terms.

Hourdequin responded by indicating that while Confucianism and Daoism are often set in opposition to one another, there is an interesting complementarity between the two. Both traditions have some form of the idea of *wuwei* 無為, variously translated as non-action, effortless action, or non-coercive action. Hourdequin suggested seeing this idea in terms of a receptive engagement with the world or attunement with the world. Thus, in *Zhuangzi*, one can find resources on how to attend to the non-human through the depiction of a variety of non-human creatures in the text. Similarly, early Confucian texts often use water analogies and talk about rivers and agriculture.

Heurtebise further suggested that, in terms of comparison, the Chinese and Roman empires would be a more adequate and appropriate comparison than the comparison between ancient Chinese and Greek worlds. There are similar administrative structures; there was a similar expansion of the empire by expanding agriculture and people moving to the frontiers where they encountered foreign tribes that had to be pacified and conquered. Thus, we should not extrapolate this constant opposition between Asia and the West because it seems that Roman culture had many similarities with Chinese culture.

Suzuki added that it would also be interesting to think about Greek paganism, where various gods were associated with different powers of nature, as Poseidon was associated with the ocean or Zeus with the sky. This, too, reminds us of the animism of East Asian cultures. It is interesting to make a comparison between the ancient Chinese and Greeks because they did not have direct cultural contact. Thus, we can see each of their distinctive characteristics through this comparison. Suzuki also indicated that it is reasonable to question how much direct borrowing from Asian traditions can help Westerners solve contemporary problems, as it is impossible to remove the Christian background from Western thinking.

Sara Rubio from Princeton University, the moderator of the discussion, continued the discussion with the question of whether the widespread interpretation that ancient Chinese and Greek cultures didn't have an opposition between nature and culture is correct; and whether this is a useful argument to pose in relation to environmentalism.

Heurtebise replied by indicating that the French anthropologist Philippe Descola argued that the idea of separation between nature and culture emerged only later in ancient Chinese and Greek cultures. Ascribing the principle of analogy for both Chinese and Greek ways of thinking, Descola explains that different descriptions of nature and culture there meant not a complete separation but rather an analogy between different kinds of order.

## 7 | Conclusion

The roundtable discussion on “Environmentalism” provided a reflection on environmental challenges through the lens of Chinese philosophy. While Heurtebise was skeptical about the relevance of addressing such issues through Chinese philosophy and ancient wisdom more broadly, Suzuki and Hourdequin shared observations on how Confucianism can be applied to rethink ecological degradation. Although Daoism is often addressed as a more intuitive approach for reflecting on environmental issues, scholars brought Confucianism as a viable alternative. Early Confucians sought ways to address ecological degradation without hindering human progress, as China faced this challenge from the start of its development. Scholars agreed that, in fact, Confucian thinking has an element of activist spirit; Confucius was concerned with effecting change for present and future generations, providing an action-oriented philosophy built on relationality with others. Confucian thinking helps to recognize ecological challenges as stemming from and yet being addressed by society, calling for a proactive intra-generational approach to rethinking environmental issues.

---

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### References

- Buruma, I., and A. Margalit. 2005. *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies*. Penguin Books.
- Dirlik, A. 1996. “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism.” *History and Theory* 35, no. 4: 96–118.
- Fung, E. 2010. *The Intellectual Foundations of Chinese Modernity: Cultural and Political Thought in the Republican Era*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hutton, E. (Transl.). 2014. *Xunzi = 荀子: The Complete Text*. Princeton University Press.
- Kasulis, T. P. 2002. *Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Luke, T. W. 1995. “On Environmentality: Geopower and Ecolknowledge in the Discourses of Contemporary Environmentality.” *Cultural Critique* 31: 57–82.
- Mostern, R. 2021. *The Yellow River: A Natural and Unnatural History*. Yale University Press.
- Weller, R. P. 2006. *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan*. Cambridge University Press.