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Neo-Confucian Governance, Ecological Civilization, and Epistemic Autonomy

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Abstract

This study investigates the contemporary relevance of Chinese philosophical traditions and governance paradigms in reshaping global humanistic discourse. By exploring classical Confucian concepts such as Tianxia (All Under Heaven), Datong (Great Harmony), and Ren (Benevolence), alongside Daoist ecological holism and Legalist statecraft, this article articulates a modern framework for epistemic sovereignty and global governance in higher education. Furthermore, it critically examines China's modern discourse on 'Ecological Civilization' (Shengtai Wenming) and the ethics of digital technology in East Asia. The paper demonstrates that integrating Chinese epistemic lineages provides an essential counterweight to Western hegemonies, fostering a multipolar, harmonious, and ecologically sustainable global community.

1. Introduction: Reimagining Humanism from an East Asian Paradigm

The global academic landscape has long been dominated by Western Enlightenment models of knowledge, which emphasize individual autonomy, rationalism, and a mechanical view of nature. While these paradigms have spurred technological advancement, they have also contributed to ideological polarization, social fragmentation, and severe global ecological crises. In response, scholars across East Asia are turning to ancient Chinese philosophical traditions to construct an alternative, relational humanism.

China's intellectual history offers over three millennia of continuous reflection on ethics, statecraft, cosmic harmony, and human flourishing. Rather than viewing the individual as an isolated rational agent, traditional Chinese philosophy conceptualizes human existence within an interconnected web of social relationships and cosmic order.

This article proposes a re-examination of global humanities through Chinese epistemic frameworks. By integrating classical Confucian, Daoist, and contemporary governance concepts into higher education, this paper aims to advance epistemic pluralism, deconstruct Eurocentric universalism, and offer novel insights into pressing twenty-first-century dilemmas.

2. Classical Chinese Epistemologies and Political Philosophy

At the core of classical Chinese thought lies the concept of Tianxia (All Under Heaven), a holistic worldview that envisions the world as an inclusive, boundaryless community bound by moral responsibility. Developed during the Zhou Dynasty and refined by Confucian thinkers, Tianxia provides an alternative to Westphalian state-centric geopolitics, prioritizing shared moral harmony over competitive sovereignty.

Confucian philosophy, anchored in the concepts of Ren (Benevolence/Humaneness), Li (Ritual Propriety), and Datong (Great Harmony), emphasizes that personal self-cultivation (Xiushen) is the foundation of family harmony, state governance, and global peace (Ping Tianxia). This relational ontology contrasts sharply with Western atomistic individualism, arguing that human identity is realized through duties and moral commitments to others.

Complementing Confucianism, Daoist philosophy—primarily articulated in the Laozi and Zhuangzi—introduces the principle of Ziran (Naturalness) and Wuwei (Non-coerced Action). Daoism cautions against over-regulation and human domination over nature, advocating instead for aligning human institutions with the natural rhythms of the universe (Dao). Together with the pragmatic institutional insights of Legalism (Fajia), these traditions form a multi-layered intellectual apparatus capable of informing modern debates on ethics, governance, and ecology.

3. Colonial Encounters, the Century of Humiliation, and Epistemic Reconstruction

The encounter between China and Western imperial powers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—often termed the 'Century of Humiliation'—profoundly transformed Chinese intellectual life. The forced opening of treaty ports, unequal treaties, and the decline of the Qing Empire led Chinese intellectuals to critically interrogate their literary and philosophical heritage.

During the May Fourth Movement of 1919, reformers debated the roles of 'Mr. Democracy' (De Xiansheng) and 'Mr. Science' (Sai Xiansheng) alongside traditional values. While some early twentieth-century scholars advocated radical Westernization, prominent thinkers such as Liang Qichao, Xiong Shili, and later the New Confucians (Mou Zongsan, Tu Weiming) sought to synthesize Chinese ethical wisdom with modern institutional frameworks.

In recent decades, Chinese academia has engaged in a conscious project of epistemic reconstruction. Rather than uncritically adopting Western social science paradigms, Chinese scholars are formulating indigenous concepts and methodologies in sociology, international relations, and philosophy. This effort seeks to restore China's epistemic sovereignty and contribute indigenous intellectual products to the global academic community.

4. Ecological Civilization (Shengtai Wenming) and Daoist Environmental Ethics

One of the most significant theoretical contributions of modern China to global discourse is the concept of 'Ecological Civilization' (Shengtai Wenming). Embedded in national policy and academic research, Ecological Civilization seeks to transcend the industrial paradigm of resource extraction and environmental degradation.

This modern framework draws directly from traditional Chinese cosmological concepts, particularly the Confucian unity of Heaven and Humanity (Tianren Heyi) and the Daoist veneration of nature. Unlike Western anthropocentric environmental ethics, which often treat nature as external to human welfare, Chinese philosophy regards nature and humanity as a single, organic whole.

In higher education, the integration of Ecological Civilization into the humanities redefines the relationship between technology, economics, and environmental stewardship. It provides a moral and philosophical rationale for sustainable development, carbon neutrality, and ecological preservation across the Global South.

5. Digital Governance, AI Ethics, and Technohumanism in East Asia

The rapid growth of China's digital economy, artificial intelligence industry, and smart infrastructure has made East Asia a primary hub of technological innovation. However, the rise of advanced algorithmic systems also poses fundamental ethical questions regarding data privacy, technological determinism, and human agency.

Chinese scholars are applying classical ethical systems to formulate distinct approaches to AI ethics and digital governance. Confucian virtue ethics, for instance, emphasizes that algorithmic systems must serve human well-being, social harmony, and collective good rather than merely maximizing corporate profits or individual utility.

Furthermore, China's efforts in establishing ethical standards for generative AI and digital platforms highlight the importance of state responsibility and social stability in technological oversight. By bridging traditional philosophical ethics with digital governance, East Asian humanists offer valuable models for managing the socio-cultural impacts of emerging technologies globally.

6. Conclusion: Toward a Multipolar World of Shared Destiny

Reimagining the humanities through a Chinese lens is not an exercise in cultural chauvinism, but an invitation to genuine cross-cultural dialogue and epistemic co-existence. The complexities of the contemporary world require intellectual contributions from all major civilizations.

Concepts such as Tianxia, Ecological Civilization, and relational Confucian ethics provide essential resources for resolving global challenges, from climate change and technological disruption to geopolitical rivalry. By embracing epistemic pluralism and deconstructing Eurocentric biases, higher education can foster a truly global humanism.

Ultimately, the goal of a decolonized humanities is to realize a 'Community with a Shared Future for Mankind'—a world where diverse cultural lineages contribute jointly to peace, moral wisdom, and ecological sustainability.

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