

Time: A Unique Perspective on the Relationship between Heaven and Humanity in Confucianism

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Abstract

The present paper develops into three main parts, trying to clarify the value of time (*shi* 時) in the traditional Confucian philosophical texts and historical literature. The original meaning of time in Confucianism was contained in the seasons' change. Since the changing of the seasons was thought of as a basic principle of Heaven, Confucians gave time more implications when they linked it with their understanding of the mandate of Heaven. People followed the principles of Heaven by the direction of time through two kinds of regulatory mechanisms: the observance of ritual and through the ideal of the gentlemanly personality (*junzi renga* 君子人格). Rituals set rules to govern the outward appearance of regular life and the ideal of the gentlemanly personality which was inherently accordant with the spirit of Heaven was thought to make one's actions more spontaneous and sincere. Kongzi taught people to be moral, using concepts like *wen xing zhong xin* 文行忠信, but it is not easy to explain the significations of Confucian ideas about morality without understanding certain necessary conditions. This is the subtle and difficult part of following the time, since people could find directions for doing so in a book but the act of actual observance depends primarily on one's own judgment about when it is right for things to actually occur. Confucians had the wisdom to choose the right time, make correct decisions and act along with it so as to fulfill the mandate of Heaven. In this regard, time is an essential concept for examining the relationship between human and Heaven in Confucianism.

Keywords: time, ritual, gentleman personality, mandate of Heaven, *cheng*

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1. Setting up the Problem

Mengzi 孟子 (Mencius, 372-289 BCE) once said, “Kongzi is the sage of time.”¹ In other words, Kongzi 孔子 (Confucius, 551-479 BCE) was skilled at adjusting his actions according to the occasion at hand, a skill which was described by Mengzi as knowing “when it was proper to go into office, then to go into it; when it was proper to keep retired from office, then to keep retired from it; when it was proper to continue in it long, then to continue in it long; when it was proper to withdraw from it quickly, then to withdraw quickly.”² In Confucian thought, these skills and abilities are each dependent upon what can be called the “time-dependent mean” (*shizhong* 時中). The concept of “time” in this term refers to a more complicated interpretation than its common meaning. “Time” here has a connotation based on a full consideration of the situation one finds oneself in, including the temporal situation, the location, the relationship, the causal chain, the environment and all other similar sociotemporal elements.

In Confucianism, the external surroundings people deal with are not all objective situations. External surroundings are instead regarded as directly connected to who they are and what they do (as well as what they *should* do). In some cases, the situations people involved are exactly the outcomes which have a connection with their moral personality and ethical practice. However, the living world in Confucianism does not develop in a linear way. Every decision people make is regarded as an extraordinarily complex process influenced by all the elements, visible and invisible. In Confucian context, these elements can be interpreted mainly as “time.”

The aim of this paper is to examine this special concept of time in Confucianism from different angles. Time gets its philosophical character from its original meaning of seasons’ change. The paper will firstly start with the order of the seasons (*sishi zhixu* 四時秩序) and other implications inherent to the the concept of time in early Confucian thought. The paper will then focus on how to choose the right thing among the seemingly countless homogeneous time points and lastly, how to act like a true gentleman (*junzi* 君子) by taking one’s responsibility to act in accordance with the mandate of Heaven (*tianming* 天命).

It is important to note that the concept of time was not discussed as a separate problem throughout the long history of Confucian philosophy. Time is frequently invoked as something much closer to a mutual dimension in Confucianism in which texts and thoughts unfold before our eyes simultaneously. So the paper will examine a range of Confucian texts like

1 Mengzi, “Wanzhang xia” 萬章下: “孔子, 聖之時者也。”

2 Mengzi, “Gongsun Chou shang” 公孫醜上: “可以仕則仕, 可以止則止, 可以久則久, 可以速則速, 孔子也。”

the *Lunyu* 論語, the *Liji* 礼记, the *Zhouyi* 周易, the *Guoyu* 国语, the *Zuozhuan* 左传 and others, trying to establish how the meaning of time contains some degree of intrinsic consistency, and how Confucian thought shared the same basic spirit of the time concept even in texts the *Xunzi* 荀子, which held an entirely different attitude towards Heaven.

2. The Order of the Seasons

In one passage of the *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects) Kongzi said, “Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?”³ By watching the stars change their positions and feeling the seasons circulate, Chinese ancestors gradually changed their perceptions towards nature into a more and more humanistic interpretation. Heaven (*tian* 天) here is not God or the Creator of the universe, though a conception of a being like this did play an important part in the thought of the Shang dynasty 商 (1600-1046 BCE). Rather, Heaven here should be understood as the basic order of nature and the most crucial principle of the human world.

Although Kongzi used the word “heaven” as a principle of nature which neither knows nor cares what human beings do, it was a concept that synthesized several other important ideas. One of the ideas which makes use of the concept of Heaven, is the idea of the “mandate of Heaven,” which has long been regarded an essential concept in Confucian thought. As Rainey explains, by Kongzi’s time, the idea of the “mandate of Heaven,” which developed in the early Zhou 周 (1046-256 BCE) to explain the legality of the political power, had been broadened to apply to individuals who were chosen, or ordered, by Heaven to live up to what Heaven required of them.⁴ Kongzi said he realized the mandate of Heaven at the age of 50.⁵ In Kongzi’s thought, fulfilling the mandate of Heaven is a serious responsibility that should be carried out with reverence all the energy one has, since the more one understands the propensity of Heaven and brings relevant fields into focus in oneself, the greater is one’s influence over the actual world. Within Confucian thought, following the mandate of Heaven means striving to do the right thing at the right time on the proper occasion, and it is a desire to fulfil this urge which largely explains the origin and importance of ritual (*li* 禮) within the Confucian tradition.

In the primitive stage, the typical mark of time is the movement of the sun. As Wang points out: “In particular seasons, heaven manifests specific

3 *Lunyu*, “Yanghuo” 陽貨: “天何言哉, 四時行焉, 百物生焉. 天何言哉?”

4 Rainey, *Confucius & Confucianism: The Essentials*, 59.

5 *Lunyu*, “Weizheng” 為政: “吾十有五而志於學, 三十而立, 四十而不惑, 五十而知天命, 六十而耳順, 七十而從心所欲, 不逾矩.”

commands. Human action must be synchronized with the movement of the sun. In fact, the word for season, *shi* 時, is also the acting in a timely way. The character itself contains an image of the sun: 日. The use of the movement of the sun to structure time and place comes together with reverence for the sun most clearly in the fields of astrology and calendrics.⁶ The sky concerns both the calendar and the seasons as they relate to farming and ritual. “The images of heaven provide the timing for all kinds of actions, including the ruler’s policies for scheduling punishments and rewards. The condition of the weather guides farmers to plant or harvest. The stage of things indicates the proper timing for ordinary people. All of these factors are integral parts of human affairs.”⁷

Heaven provides the propriety for people through the provision of time, and in this sense time is basically equal to *dao* 道, which gradually forms diversity of value and significance. Eno concludes *dao* is the genetic basis of virtue, and that it was believed to protect the virtuous and punish, or at least render nugatory, actions directed against them.⁸ Heaven provides the natural and cultural context for human growth, and in return, it is altered and augmented through human flourishing. A classic instance is the new doctrine raised by Confucians during the Han dynasty 漢 (206 BCE-220 CE).

During the Han dynasty, the theories of *ying-yang* 陰陽 were developed by Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104 BCE) and other Confucians in an effort to explain everything in the universe under the influence of Chen-Wei theology (*chenwei shenxue* 讖緯神學). It was at this period that the great structure of “*yin-yang*-five elements-four Seasons-eight directions” 陰陽-五行-四時-八方 was developed. Its proponents believed that we lived in a universe ruled by this structure, in accompaniment with the ongoing interaction between heaven and human beings.

In his *Gist of the Six Schools* (*Lun liujia yaozhi* 論六家要旨), Sima Tan 司馬談 (d. 110 BCE) effectively summarizes the view of this school:

Yin Yang, the four seasons, the eight positions, the twelve measures and the twenty-four restrictions all have their own teachings and commands. One who follows them will flourish, and one who goes against them, if they do not die, will decline. But it is not necessarily like this, and thus I say “it restrains people and multiplies what they fear”. In the spring, things are born, in the summer they grow, in the fall they are gathered, and in the winter they are stored. This is the great order of the way of Heaven. If it is not followed then one lacks the warp and woof of the world. Thus I say, “Regarding the order of the four seasons, it is by greatly following along that one cannot be lost.”⁹

6 Wang, *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*, 26.

7 Wang, *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*, 27.

8 Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery*, 83.

9 Sima, *Lun liujia yaozhi*: “夫陰陽四時，八位，十二度，二十四節各有教令，順之者昌，逆之者不死則亡，未必然也，故曰‘使人拘而多畏’。夫春生夏長，秋收冬藏，此天道之大經也，弗順則無以為天

It may seem like a strict obedient system, but as Chang and Kalmanson point out, Confucians cherish the collaboration or interaction of Heaven and human being rather than stressing mere human obedience to transcendental law. This is partly because, for Confucians, ultimate reality is constituted by the interrelatedness of things and events, not by the will of an external agent or prime mover.¹⁰ This emphasis on interrelatedness is also fundamental to the Confucian worldview or thinking pattern.

In Dong Zhongshu's thought, if bad things about to happen, Heaven will warn people, and the ruler especially, in advance, which usually leads to the mitigation or disappearance of the disaster after people correct their mistakes. Heaven wants people under it to be perfect, doing proper things on proper occasions with the guide of time and season. So Heaven in Confucianism is not simply a natural phenomenon exhibiting a certain potential but is comprised of consummate persons (sages) who embody the potency of Heaven and serve as examples for others.¹¹ In the traditional political world, Heaven is always a divine symbol of the current emperor, and in the context of Confucian thought, Kongzi and other sages, especially those who lived in ancient times, like the Three Sovereigns and the Five Emperors (*sanhuang wudi* 三皇五帝), are described as being equal with the sun, moon and other celestial objects. From this point of view, Heaven can be seen as a metaphor of the world's order, and time provides a method for people to reach it. Those who succeed in recognizing the choice of Heaven and perfectly following this order modeled by history can be thought of as a real sage like sun and stars shining in the sky.

3. Choosing the Right Thing According to Time

With all the implications contained in the concept of time, it was natural for Confucians to emphasize the thinking pattern of choosing the right thing according to time. The *Book of Changes* (*Zhouyi* 周易) says:

Nothing can exceed the great images of heaven and earth, and nothing can transcend the flexibility of the change of seasons.¹²

What a great idea of following the time!¹³

下綱紀，故曰‘四時之大順，不可失也’。”

10 Chang and Kalmanson, *Confucianism in Context: Classic Philosophy and Contemporary Issues, East Asia and Beyond*, 89.

11 Chang and Kalmanson, *Confucianism in Context: Classic Philosophy and Contemporary Issues, East Asia and Beyond*, 90.

12 *Zhouyi*, “Xici zhuan shang” 繫辭傳 上：“法象莫大乎天地，變通莫大乎四時。”

13 *Zhouyi*, “Sui” 隨，“Tuanzhuan” 彖傳：“隨。大亨貞無咎，而天下隨時。隨時之義大矣哉。”

“Following the time” (*suishi* 隨時) is an important idea in the *Book of Changes*. The key point of the *Book of Changes* is change, and the key principle of change is exactness in “following the time.” This wisdom book even includes a specific chapter dedicated to explaining the hexagram Sui (*suigua* 隨卦) with some line statements (*yaoci* 爻辭) implying that to follow the time is to follow the good and virtue, which always leads to auspicious (*zhenji* 貞吉) results.

With the instruction of time, the abstract heavenly requirements turned into specific behavioral laws with operable sequences and particular goals for people under it to follow. Time also obtained its authority and significance from Heaven during this conversion process. In this sense, time and ritual can be seen to be very closely intertwined.

The Annals of Zuo (*Zuozhuan* 左傳) says, “Rituals should be made and practiced in a way which complies with the time [of Heaven].”¹⁴ The *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) also says, “Rituals follow the time of Heaven.”¹⁵ Ritual, in these contexts, can be regarded as a sequence of constant timelines, which contain everything, as Ivanhoe observes, from high religious ceremonies to the conduct of government, as well as things like one’s personal deportment and behavior.¹⁶ The concept of time restricts people in different levels just as the proper observance of ritual does. In its most basic form, this can be seen in ritual observances like having meals at the correct time,¹⁷ and in more important ways through the instruction that one should behave properly at correct occasions, but the adherence to the forms of ritual and an awareness of time always combine in specific events. The spirit of the “time-dependent mean” should be active in people’s life at every minute and in every aspect, providing a divine standard from Heaven for their daily routine. Like Wang describes, how does one choose the proper date for various important tasks, ranging from rituals to farming? On which day should one perform what kinds of sacrifice? What time during the day should one carry out a particular ritual?¹⁸ The answers to these questions were not random, but based on basic principles written in their ritual books.

People’s daily life could not proceed without the guidance of time and furthermore, time also was thought to have been instrumental in the succession of dynasties, as seen in this remark from the *Liji*: “Yao abdicated and gave the throne to Shun and Shun did the same thing to Yu, Tang of Shang killed King Jie and King Wu made a conquest of Yin, it was all about time.”¹⁹ In this context, time is approximately the same with Heaven. That

14 *Zuozhuan*: “禮以順時。”

15 *Liji*, “*Liqi*” 禮器: “禮也者, 合于天時, 設於地才, 順於鬼神, 合于人心。”

16 Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, 4.

17 *Shangshu*, “*Yaodian*” 堯典: “食哉! 唯時。”

18 Wang, *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*, 26.

19 *Liji*, “*Liqi*” 禮器: “堯授舜, 舜授禹, 湯放桀, 武王伐紂, 時也。”

each ruler was chosen by Heaven just means that it was time for them to rule the state.

In Confucian thought, the fact that opportune time is necessary for success is partly because of the correlativity between time and rightness or appropriateness. Chang and Kalmanson think that in the Confucian tradition, Heaven as immanent force expresses the ineluctability of situations. The different configurations of Heaven provide a context for the actualization of ten thousand things and events, including the self-realization of humans.²⁰ There are certain ordinances that can be written down in words, but for most specific circumstances people find themselves, there is no precisely prescribed action exactly appropriate for the situation. This is why Kongzi did not teach rule-based behaviors too much, since in his theory, rightness or appropriateness is based more on one's status, one's role, and the specifics of the particular situation than on fixed adherence to prescribed rules. So while the ritual books can arrange when to eat and what to wear, and even define the meaning of propriety, they cannot say exactly when is the proper time for observance of various ritual actions, nor what an individual should choose in a particular situation in light of all the complex circumstances. The concept of time in ritual rules present a more programmatic feature, but when we talk about the real occurrence of ritual behaviors, actions which are full of human initiative, the concept of time takes on a more creative characteristic, since consideration of time in the particular requires the person involved to possess a higher moral quality and individual attainment to make right decisions at each unique point in their life. Therefore Rainey's observation that "what is right is based on one's status" is quite true.²¹ Similarly, the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) posits a particularly close relationship between awareness of time and attaining the status of being a true gentleman: "the superior man actualizes the mean because he is always with it."²² According to this view, the spirit of time is part of the gentleman personality which inheres in one's mind. Of course the virtue of the time-dependent mean contains the aspect of timeliness, which means that although physical time affects one's practical action, once an action is born of one's gentlemanly personality and moral sense, the feeling of obedience will appear to vanish and individual initiative will hold the dominant position instead. This is what Kongzi said about "I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right."²³

20 Chang and Kalmanson, *Confucianism in Context: Classic Philosophy and Contemporary Issues, East Asia and Beyond*, 90.

21 Rainey, *Confucius & Confucianism: The Essentials*, 31.

22 *Zhongyong*: "君子之中庸也,君子而時中."

23 *Lunyu*, "Weizheng" 為政: "吾十有五而志於學,三十而立,四十而不惑,五十而知天命,六十而耳順,七十而從心所欲,不逾矩。"

Chang and Kalmanson argue that humans are not explicable by a single given design which underlies natural and moral order in the cosmos. In their view, human beings are concrete individuals participating in specific situations. As such, individual beings are not obliged to comply with objective and universal standards; instead they re-create themselves by maximizing their own potentials in response to changing environments.²⁴ Aristotle (384-322 BCE) provided us with a similar thought when he talked about the practical wisdom that was contained in the virtue of soul. In his book *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggested that practical wisdom is concerned with particular facts, and particulars come to be known from experience.²⁵ In his theory, practical wisdom and intellect (*nous*) are opposite things, since the intellect is concerned with first principles while practical wisdom is concerned with particulars, but they both contain a capability of directly understanding objects directly and obtaining a correct understanding through intuition. The Confucian view of time was never rooted as deeply in the philosophy of soul as in Aristotle's theory, but Confucian thinkers had obviously asked many of the same questions about practical actions. In fact, this this is one of the primary concerns of the *Lunyu*, which is full of references to what Kongzi said, did, and even what clothing he wore on different occasions. The measure of appropriateness does exist in the practical area, but it cannot apply to other people unchangeably. Following the time or judging what is right is exactly the kind of virtue that is individually unique while still sharing the same fundamental grounding in moral common sense.

The true gentleman with the virtue of the time-dependent mean can choose the right thing spontaneously in situations that exceed those prescribed by hard ritual rules. This ability is particularly clear in this passage from Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200):

The ancients wrote The *Book of Changes* for divination and people today are fettered by its old conventions. The sages judged right and wrong and chose the right according to time only when affairs appeared before them, they never arranged things item by item in advance.²⁶

In Zhu Xi's view both the process of thought and choice of action happened inherently and actively in the mind and conduct of the sage, a weighing and choosing which took place before any restrictions imposed by ritual guidelines came to mind. "Are gems and silk all that is meant by

24 Chang and Kalmanson, *Confucianism in Context: Classic Philosophy and Contemporary Issues, East Asia and Beyond*, 88.

25 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1142a.

26 Zhu Xi *yulei* 67: "古人作《易》，只是為筮；今說《周易》者，乃是硬去安排。聖人隨時取義，只是事到面前，審驗個是非，難為如此安排下也。"

propriety?”²⁷ The question from Kongzi proved that there is something else inside the rituals which cannot easily find from the form of sacrificial vessels or external behaviors. This deeper spiritual connotation may show a different appearance in different historical circumstances, but they are all in keeping with the virtue of the time-dependent mean which guarantees that every person carrying this spirit will be capable of choosing the right thing among all the potential possibilities in any given situation.

4. Acting Properly Corresponding to the Right Time

Kongzi always emphasized the effort of becoming a true gentleman as central to achieving the ultimate aim of one's life in history, but this process is not simply about individual effort. As previously mentioned, time is a great factor that can affect whether things go well or not. As a consequence, it becomes vitally important for people to catch and seize their chances when the time is right. Once Fan Li 范蠡 (536-448 BCE) said, “If the time is not ripe, do not push it to grow; if effort is not enough, do not force victory. Stay calm and take the world into account, waiting for the comers and grasping the opportunity to succeed.”²⁸ This development of the skill needed for this kind of time-awareness is called virtue (*de* 德) in Confucianism, which is etymologically related to obtainment (*de* 得) and was eventually connected to the good (*shan* 善). As Ivanhoe has observed, Western philosophers have tended to be much more concerned with trying to define what the good is, while Chinese thinkers have focused more on the problem of how to become good.²⁹ Besides self-cultivation, time is the most important element to help a gentleman achieve both goodness and success. It is time that provides the opportunity to obtain the essential elements one needs for a career, and it is also time that provides the historical conditions particular to the one who is striving to become good.

Although to some extent time is objective, irresistible and full of possibilities (the great ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously said that no man can step into the same river twice), whether one could luckily get the right time or not is a certain event when we look back in history. There is no paradox of contingency and necessity here, as the superficial contradiction between these two positions is due primarily to a difference in perspective. In the view of time, time just manifests as diverse types of events, people, relationships and conflicts, which carry no judgment of right or wrong. But things appear totally opposite within a the context of the

27 *Lunyu*, “Yanghuo” 陽貨: “禮雲禮雲, 玉帛雲乎哉?”

28 *Guoyu*, “Yueyu xia” 越語 下: “時不至, 不可強生; 事不究, 不可強成。自若以處, 以度天下, 待其來者而正之, 因時之所宜而定之。”

29 Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation*, 1.

concept of fate (*ming* 命). Fate is a concept that focuses on personal situations under a certain kind of order coming from Heaven, an order which is irresistible and inconvertible, one which no one can avoid or alter. In Confucian thought, fate is not generally used to predict things about to happen; instead, fate is invoked when a person is actually involved in some specific situation, particularly when the outcome of their situation is linked to the mandate of Heaven. They think it is fate for them to fail or win. Admitting the concept of fate does not make Confucians determinists, as they hold dear to the significance of action³⁰ before things are settled. If there is no room of expectation for a higher ideal, there is no need for either endless self-cultivation or waiting for the appropriate time. Consider the following statements from the *Xunzi*, the *Zhouyi*, and the *Zhongyong*:

True gentlemen learn broadly and think deeply, cultivating themselves to wait for the right time.³¹

True gentlemen do not show off their talents, they wait until the right time has come.³²

True gentlemen stay calm and are at peace to wait for their mission while the mean men (*xiaoren* 小人) put themselves in danger to ask for good fortune.³³

This kind of Time-Fate view (*shiming guan* 時命觀) posits that ancient sages possessed the great ideals of “self cultivation, family harmony, country management and world peace” (*xiushen qijia zhiguo ping tianxia* 修身齊家治國平天下) on the one hand, and on the other hand, had the capability to endure a long period of waiting, or just resigned themselves to lifelong obscurity. If the right time were to come, however, they would certainly be ready, willing, and able to grasp the opportunity to achieve their lofty ideals and ambitions.

The *Book of Changes* says, “True gentlemen improve themselves in virtue and do valuable things just in hope of catching the right time.”³⁴ Similarly, Fan Li said, “Do not be lazy when you are given an opportune time, because it will not come again once it leaves. And if you do not catch the opportunity with effort, it will change into a disaster.”³⁵ To be given an opportune time can be seen as being chosen by Heaven for some opportunity. And as mentioned, this is a serious responsibility which one ought not avoid.

30 “孔子絕不是學院式哲學家或書齋中不問世事的學者，他一生的一個突出特點是行動。實踐、活動、奮發，在他那裡獲得了鮮明的意義。我們用‘行動主義’一詞來概括他的這一特點。” See Wang Zhongjiang, *Rujia de jingshen zhi dao he shehui juece*, 6-7.

31 *Xunzi*, “Youzuo” 宥坐: “君子博學深謀，修身端行，以伺其時。”

32 *Zhouyi*, “Xici zhuan” 繫辭傳: “君子藏器于身，待時而動。”

33 *Zhongyong*: “君子居易以俟命，小人行險以徼幸。”

34 *Zhouyi*, “Qian” 乾, “Wenyan zhuan” 文言傳: “君子進德修業，欲及時也。”

35 *Guoyu*, “Yueyu” 越語: “得時無息，時不再來，天予不取，反之為災。”

However, what exactly is the mandate of Heaven? Or what is the highest life goal of Confucians? In general, Confucians would like to rebuild the world with rituals flourished as they did in the Zhou dynasty. Kongzi once said: “Zhou had the advantage of viewing the two past dynasties. How complete and elegant are its regulations! I follow Zhou.”³⁶ From the point of view of the individual, completing the requirement of Heaven means cultivating oneself with various capabilities, such as the performance of ritual, attainment in music, archery, driving carriages, writing and math (*li yue she yu shu shu* 禮樂射禦書數). Kongzi concluded his enumeration of the areas in which a virtuous person should cultivate themselves by stating: “Let the will be set on the path of duty. Let every attainment in what is good be firmly grasped. Let perfect virtue be accorded with. Let relaxation and enjoyment be found in the polite arts.”³⁷ These are the criteria for common people to become fully cultivated within the Confucian tradition.

From the perspective of social community, true gentlemen who carry the mandate of Heaven would be expected to care about people around them with great benevolence, and their care for others should expand outward in concentric circles, beginning with their family (parents, brothers and sisters) and eventually reaching strangers. While this has frequently led scholars to conclude, as Yung argues in her article, that self-sacrifice for the benefit of others is a general ethical rule in Confucianism,³⁸ I would suggest that this may be a misunderstanding of the idealized Confucian relationship between oneself and others. The mere fact that Confucianism advocates putting the interest of the others first or elevating the public interest to a position of superiority does not mean that it requires one to injure their own interest. On the contrary, making decisions in this way would be seen as helping them accomplish their own interest as true Confucians. When Confucians begin to pursue the mandate of Heaven, they commence a journey of creative self-transition.³⁹ In this process, people will find out what makes them become true gentlemen is never the isolated moral ego, but the general humanity whom they make commitments to. As Ivanhoe observes, Confucian thought holds that individuals can fundamentally transform themselves, that such transformation was necessary for spiritual fulfillment, and that it had extraordinary power to affect others around them in dramatic and profound ways.⁴⁰ So the superficial conflict of interests which appears to exist between Confucians and others is

36 Lunyu, “Bayi”八佾: “周監於二代，鬱鬱乎文哉！吾從周。”

37 Lunyu, “Shuer”述而: “志于道，據於德，依于仁，游於藝。”

38 Yung, “In What Way Is Confucianism Linked to Public Service Motivation? Philosophical and Classical Insights,” 286.

39 “君子通過長期深入挖掘他自己的生存基礎的無止境過程，發現他的真正的主體性不是一種孤立的自我，而是創造性轉換的真正源泉。於是對內在精神性的尋求和對社會責任性的承諾之間的表面衝突，不再有效了。” See Du, *Rujia sixiang xinlun: chuangzaoxing ziwu de zhuanhuan*, 73.

40 Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, 7.

essentially invalid. The so called self-sacrifice in this sense is just another way of saying self-fulfillment, which will in the meantime benefit the whole society.

Lastly, from the perspective of Heaven, it could be interpreted as *cheng* 誠 for people to follow its demands. Mengzi described *cheng* as “everything is here in me, there is no joy greater than, on introspection, to find that one is truly sincere.”⁴¹ The Confucian notion of *cheng*, which means sincerity with integrity or creativity, represents the summation of Confucian values. Contrary to Western ideals of sincerity, Ashton argues, which insist upon being true to oneself as a distinct individual, *cheng* involves integrating oneself with concrete others through personal, co-creative interactions.⁴² The *Doctrine of the Mean* also uses the concept of *cheng* to describe the ideal relationship between Heaven and humanity. “Sincerity is the way of Heaven. To think how to be sincere is the way of man.”⁴³ Although following Heaven is not the virtue of *cheng* itself, in part because human efforts always contain defects, trying hard to fit Heaven’s requirements is still a gentleman’s immanent duty. The nature of Heaven and the essence of humanity are linked together by *cheng*. The intrinsic consistency of Heaven and humanity makes sure that a path between common people and sages is opened through the cultivation of virtue and the practice of the time-dependent mean.

In fact, while it is entirely one’s own business to cultivate oneself and achieve one’s life goals, Confucian philosophy connected human affairs with Heaven’s will so as to obtain an order or encouragement from a divine attribute. Improving oneself in virtue then becomes Heaven’s requirement; governing a country and keeping it at peace is no longer just an individual ambition but also a demand by Heaven. Heaven gets its moral character and guides people under it, and the one who eventually achieves Heaven’s goal is assured of their becoming a real sage in his world.

Kongzi neither talked about the nature of Heaven nor how it works, but he understood himself as having a commission from Heaven and claimed that it was only Heaven who truly knew him. At one point in *The Lunyu*, an official says of Kongzi “The kingdom has long been without the principles of truth and right; Heaven is going to use your master as a bell with its wooden tongue.”⁴⁴ What this statement makes clear is the Confucian belief that a transformation of the self fulfils a larger design, inherent in the universe itself, which a cultivated person could come to discern. Lodén considers it is true that Kongzi saw morality as basically somehow rooted in Heaven, but Kongzi also considered it man’s duty to realize this capacity and model himself

41 Mengzi, “Jinxin shang” 盡心上: “萬物皆備於我矣。反身而誠，樂莫大焉。”

42 Ashton, “Role Ethics or Ethics of Role-Play?,” 14.

43 Mengzi, “Lilou shang” 離婁上: “誠者天之道也，思誠者人之道也。”

44 *Lunyu*, “Bayi” 八佾: “二三子，何患於喪乎？天下之無道也久矣，天將以夫子為木鐸。”

after Heaven, and thus achieve the unity of heaven and man.⁴⁵ This command from Heaven implies a close relationship between Heaven and Confucian practitioners. But this divine relationship has nothing to do with religion or mysticism. It is about *dao* deeply hidden in human nature within the living world, which has been reflected to Heaven by Confucians and is then transmitted back to humanity as a divine order. This is what Kongzi was talking about when he said: “A man can enlarge the principles which he follows; those principles do not enlarge the man.”⁴⁶

5. Conclusion

Confucian thought made important use of time in its philosophy, seeing time as a physical phenomenon as well as the inspiration for and evidence of a divine, moral order. The conversion of time from a purely physical phenomenon to a principle closely connected with the mandate of Heaven meant that everything looked different in Confucianism. This was seen most clearly in the insistence that everything in a Confucian's life should obey time's rule, an insistence most evident in the observance of rituals, designed to show adherents what was appropriate for them to do as well as when they should do it. Confucianism further claims that those seeking to become true gentlemen will realize that they wish to obtain the mandate of Heaven, they must follow the time, which requires them to choose and act properly in every movement of their life according to time. The close relationship between time and Heaven guarantees the rightness and virtuousness of each time-dependent behavior, such that any person who eventually achieves Heaven's order, as well as his or her own aim, will become a real sage and true gentleman in the world.

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45 Lodén, *Rediscovering Confucianism: A Major Philosophy of Life in East Asia*, 42.

46 Lunyu, “Wei Lingong” 衛靈公: “人能弘道, 非道弘人.”

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時

—— 一個考察儒家天人關係的獨特視角

賈禎禎

中文摘要

從中國傳統儒家的哲學文本和歷史文獻出發，本文主要從三個方面入手，試圖闡釋儒家思想中“時”這一概念的價值與意義。在儒家思想中，“時”的原始意義蘊含在四時的變化之中，由於四時變化同時也被解讀為天或自然運行的基本法則，當二者從意義上被勾連在一起，“時”便獲得了更多的思想內涵。人們根據“時”的規則進一步服從天的規則，其途徑有二：一表現為禮的外在約束，一表現為與天命貫通的君子人格的內在自然發顯。孔子教人以文、行、忠、信，但孔子之教人從不脫離具體情境，這就是遵從“時”之精神的微妙和困難之處——人們能夠在禮儀典策中找到規範，但在真實發生的具體情境之中，當下的判斷與決策卻總是具有唯一、獨特和不可重複的特性。然而真正的儒者具備這種選擇的智慧，他們能夠在恰當的時境中做出正確的選擇，跟隨“時”的要求以至於履行自身天命的職責。從這一意義上說，“時”在考察儒家天人關係的這一問題上，確實是一個本質又獨特的概念和視角。

關鍵詞：時，禮，君子人格，天命，誠