



Session 5: Confucian Way of Heaven

The Importance of *Tian* 天 in Confucianism

- Heaven is the **source of Confucian spirituality** and is identified as its **transcendental power**.
- The Commentators of the ***Book of Changes*** believed that the ancient sages looked up to **observe the pattern of Heaven**, and looked down to **examine the order of Earth**, so that they gained the knowledge about the cause of various affairs and understand the circle of life and death (Chan, 1963a: 265).

Session 5-1 Confucian Meaning of Heaven (Tian天)

- The character for Heaven (*tian*) is traditionally defined as the 'Supreme Ultimate' (至高无上) (*Shuwen jiezi Zhu*, 1981:1).
- Modern scholars vary in their renderings of these Chinese characters.
- Difficulties in deciphering the character **Tian**天:
 - natural sense;
 - philosophical sense/moral sense,
 - religious sense
- **it is impossible to give a clear-cut definition on Tian天; 'Heaven' is only a convenient but inaccurate translation of the Chinese character *tian*.**

Cheng Yi 's definition of Heaven

- Heaven in Chinese religions as well as in the Confucian tradition has **multidimensional implications** and these implications are related to one another.
- A Neo-Confucian master, Cheng Yi (1033-1107) , attempted to unify all the dimensions of Heaven:
 - **Spoken of as one**, Heaven is the Way.
 - **Spoken of in its different aspects**, it is called
 - **heaven** with respect to its **physical body**;
 - the **Lord (Ti)** with respect to its **being master**;
 - negative and positive **spiritual forces** with respect to its **operation**;
 - **spirits** (shen) with respect to its **wonderful functioning**,
 - **chien[True]** with respect to its **nature and feelings**
 - (Chan, 1963a:570)

Confucian Understanding of *Tian*

- Among many meanings of Heaven, three are most frequently referred to in a Confucian context:—————
- In its **metaphysical and physical connotation**, Heaven, often in conjunction with, and/or in opposition to, the Earth, refers to the **universe**, the **cosmos**, the **material world**, or simply, **Nature**.
- Applied in the **spiritual realm**, it signifies an **anthropomorphic Lord** or a **Supreme Being** who presides in Heaven, and rules over or governs directly the spiritual and material worlds.
- In a **moral context**, it is understood to be the **source of ethical principles** and the **supreme sanction of human behaviour**, and some scholar suggest that its principle can be identified with **Natural Law** in modern European philosophy.



Confucian Understanding of *Tian* (2)

- Most importantly, the Confucian Heaven functions as the **Ultimate or Ultimate Reality**, to which human beings are **answerable** with respect to fulfilling their destiny.
- The Way of Heaven **predetermines** the Way of Humans and **underlies** the Way of Harmony.
- The diverse **spiritual, ethical** and **natural** meaning of Heaven establish the Way of Heaven as the foundation of **Confucian views of the world, the universe, and human society**.

Session 5-2:

Confucian Understanding of Religious *Tian*

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- Heaven is the focal point where all Confucian beliefs converge and that Confucians take Heaven as their **ultimate spirituality authority**.
 - As the transcendental Being, Heaven is believed to have **the power to determine the course of the natural and the human world**, although the majority of the later Confucians look askance at an **absolute creator** or anthropomorphic Lord (di), preferring the **ultimate enforcement of Natural Law**.
 - In the mind of Confucians, Heaven is the **transcendental power that guarantees harmony** between the metaphysical and the physical, between the spiritual and the secular, and between human nature and human destiny.

Temple of Heaven



History of *Tian* as a Supreme Lord

- In the Confucian classics and in imperial religious practices, **Heaven is referred** to as a **divine being** who **controls** and **determines** the human world.
- **Heaven** as a **natural deity** (sky god) of the **Zhou tribe** was transformed into the **supreme ruler** of the **Zhou Dynasty** (1046-771BCE)
- Shang Dynasty (1600-1046BCE) the anthropomorphic character **Shangdi** (the Supreme Lord) was believed to have derived its corporate or generic dimension from an early conception of the father of a lineage.

Tian in Imperial Religious Practice

- Political needs accelerated the process of promoting Heaven to the **highest rank in the spiritual world** and **merging Heaven and the Lord** in a manner most acceptable to the people:
- New title of Tian for religious and political practices:
- the **spiritual Supreme Ruler**: *huangtian shangdi* 皇天上帝 = the August/Imperial Heaven the Lord on High
- Heaven was depicted as an **all-powerful, supreme, purposive administrator** or **ruler of the universe**, ruling over and judging all human and natural affairs throughout time and space.
- Heaven is said not only to possess the **divine executioner**, but for each of Heaven's affairs there is its proper official (Fung, 1952:30).

The Court of Tian 天庭



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Session 5-3 Confucian Concept of Mandate of Heaven

- **Mandate of Heaven**天命: legitimise or disqualifies the taking over of one dynasty by another or the execution of the royal power to crush rebellions.
- The destiny of a dynasty depended upon the continuing blessings from Heaven.
- **Heaven would make know its approval** of human affairs by **manifesting blessings** or **condemnations** in the forms of, for instance, **good harvests** or **natural disasters**.



Confucian Concept of Revolution and Mandate of Heaven

- Confucians firmly believe that it is essential for any new Dynasty to have received the **Mandate from Heaven**, and that the preservation of the Mandate is a necessary condition for a dynasty to continue its rule.
- Any political change could be justified only if it was recognised as **what had been 'decreed' by Heaven**,
- The replacement of one dynasty by another was only possible if it had been blessed by Heaven.

Dong Zhongshu's Picture of Heaven:

- He considered Heaven '**the most spiritual**' and '**the Lord of all gods**'; and **the great-grandfather** of all humans
- As the great ancestor of humans, Heaven is believed to have **constructed human life** and **endowed humans with their nature**.
- **Heaven is** not only the **creator of life**, the **supreme governor** of the universe, but also a just **administrator** of human affairs.
- **Heaven is revered** not for the **deliverance rewarded** to those who have prayed for it. **Heaven is revered and respected with awe** in the sense that Heaven is regarded as the **final sanction of human behaviour and social changes**.
- Wrongdoing and violation of moral principles which for the time being cannot be corrected and punished are believed to be eventually corrected and punished by Heaven (who is closely 'watching' and passionately concerned with the world below).
- It is therefore regarded as **the most serious crime to offend Heaven or to violate the Way of Heaven**

Session 5-3:

Confucian Moral Heaven

- Confucianism directed traditional spiritual belief in Heaven into **rational and moral directions**:
- Heaven is not treated as a **passive sanction or guardian**, but more positively as the **initiator of virtues** (the **Way of Heaven generates** the moral power in human beings)
- **A strong sense of mission** that issues from Heaven gives Confucius confidence in the transmission of ancient wisdom and culture:
- When asked why people did not understand what he had been teaching, Confucius emphasised the fulfilling of one's own mission that was endowed by Heaven:
- 'I do not complain against Heaven nor do I lay the blame on other people. I study thing on the lower level but my understanding penetrates the higher. It is Heaven who knows me' (Lunyu, 14:37).

Confucian Tenets of Heaven

- Firstly, Confucian **confidence** in the course of human life and its **optimism** about the future are grounded firmly in faith in Heaven.
- **Confucian belief in personal fate** that the courses of life or death, wealth or poverty, success or failure, depend upon Heaven.
- (For Confucians, whether or not their **efforts are recognised or praised** by others is of **little concern**. What matters is whether or not they have done their best to **fulfil their duties**).
- Secondly, the **Way of Heaven can be known** through studying human affairs (things on the lower level), and the study of human life is thus the path to understanding the Way of Heaven (principles on the higher level).
- Thirdly, **Heaven is the final judge of individuals and of their values and merits**. With faith in the Ultimate, individuals would not be blown off course by their successes and failures in the world.

Heaven and Moral Principles

- The conception of Heaven as the **Supreme Being** is closely related to the understanding of Heaven as **a set of moral principles** (义理之天)。
- two aspects Confucian doctrine:
- **Heaven is supreme** because it is the **embodiment and source of moral virtues**, and
- **Heaven** can **generate** and **bring out illustrious virtues** (in humans) because it is the ultimate principle of transcendence.
- The close relationship between its **moral** and its **transcendent** implications distinguished **Heaven** as the Confucian **Ultimate** from the **God** as the **creator** of theistic traditions



The Way of Heaven and Political Mandate of Heaven

- **The Way of Heaven lies primarily in the moral path which people lead in their life:**
- Heaven endows humans with the Mandate, by which the world can be ruled justly.
- Just rule can be exercised only if the people are satisfied in a moral way.
- **Endowing or withdrawing the Mandate is a matter of moral judgement.**
- **Mandate of Heaven** is understood to be the same as **the will of the people**, by which the legitimacy of a government is given and confirmed.

Generating Power of Heaven and Moral Cultivation and Education

- Heaven's generating power is understood as 'conferring' on the people their moral nature, so that they can follow and develop the Way from their own nature in a variety of ways.
- As Heaven embodied in human nature is identified with the Way, cultivation of the Way becomes the source of Confucian doctrine and instruction (jiao).
- It is believed that instruction and education of this kind will lead to goodness, truth and perfection in general, and to personal integrity and sincerity, family loyalty and responsibility, communal reciprocity and sound common sense in particular.



Transcendence from finite secular to infinite and sacred

- Having only a short span of life and for most part living in a chaotic environment, individuals are not always able to be confident in their destiny.
- It is the Way of Heaven that gives Confucians an assurance of attaining the ultimate.
- In a sense, the attainment of the Ultimate in a Confucian context means to attain to secure the infinite and sacred ideal in a life that is finite, historical, secular and cultural.

What are the Heavenly Moral Principle

- Confucians believe that Heaven and its relation to the Earth **set up a model for, and lay down the principles of human moral codes.**
- For example, just as Heaven is above and the earth below, so too the sovereign is placed over his ministers and subjects, parents over their children, and a husband over his wife.
- It is believed that of all creatures born from the refined essence of Heaven and Earth, **the human race is the nobles because we alone able to practices Heavenly principles in our life** and behave according to proper relationships either at home or abroad.
- Among humans, only those who have cultivated their nature revere the Mandate of Heaven, while those who lack virtue do not respect it.

Neo-Confucian Understanding of Heaven

- Neo-Confucians developed the moral conception of Heaven and applied the Way of Heaven to daily life.
- **Heaven = (moral) principle (li)**, hence the Principle of Heaven (tianli) becomes another name for the Way of Heaven.
- **Heaven = (innate) heart/mind**, hence the Way of Heaven is nowhere but in the heart/mind.
- The principle of Heaven cannot be understood unless the heart/mind has been extended; and an individual cannot become one body with Heaven unless he has explored his own nature (chan, 1963b:13).
- **Heaven, the Way of Heaven, principle, nature** and the **Heart/mind** are regarded as being essentially the same:
- **Cheng Yi**: 'What is **received** by man and things **from Heaven** are called **destiny**. What is **inherent in things** is called **principle**. What is **endowed in man** is called **nature**. And as the **master of the body** it is called the **mind**. In reality they are all one' (Chan, 1963a:567).



Session 5-3

Heaven as Nature or Natural Law

- Heaven as the **anthropomorphic divine ruler** and as the **embodiment and generator of supreme virtues** is the key to understanding the Confucian way of Heaven.
- However, there is also a **naturalistic dimension** with respect to the Confucian Ultimate in which Heaven is primarily taken as Nature, and the Way of Heaven as something similar to **Natural Law**.
- **The concept of Nature and Natural Law** is an important constituent element of the Confucian doctrine of Heaven, and is one of the **underlying ideas of Confucian rationalism**.
- The concept of Heaven as Nature leads to the harmony between human beings and their environment.

Xunzi's Understanding of Heaven

- The majority of Confucians focus their attention on the Way of Human but do not exclude the Way of Nature

- Xunzi nevertheless developed the conception of Heaven as Nature within the Confucian tradition:
- 'the constellations follow their revolutions; the sun and moon alternately shine; the four seasons present themselves in succession; the Yin and Yang enlarge and transform; and the wind and rain spread out everywhere' (Knoblock, 1994:15).
- This opened up a Confucian trend in which a naturalistic understanding of the world and of human beings was developed and extended.
- **Naturalistic Confucians take Heaven as the ultimate source of human life, i.e. Heaven is the force behind all the diversity and variety resulting from constant and regular changes.** Therefore, Natural Law in a Confucian context is the principle of constant changes, by which all things are given life and all events run their course.

Understanding of Heaven in the *Book of Changes*

- In the is book, the **greatest virtue of Heaven and Earth** is said to be in its **constant production**, because change (*yi*) is a process of production and reproduction (*shengsheng*).
- Thus the **Way is the interaction between the *yin* and the *Yang***: 'the successive movement of yin and yang constitutes the Way', and this statement is understood in the later Confucian development as meaning that 'the **nature [of humans] and the Way of Heaven** are but **change**' (chan, 1963a: 268, 266, 506).
- **The Way of Heaven** is in the **change of the two cosmic forces** and the change is the primary power motivating all changes and developments.

Extremely Confucian naturalistic view

- **Wang Chong** developed this understanding to an extremely naturalistic view and made it clear that '**the Way of Heaven is that of spontaneity**', that is, the yang and the yin arise and decline in the four seasons and things themselves reach maturity.
- The understanding that the Way of Heaven is the Way of spontaneity was accepted and further developed in the **Mysterious Learning** of the **Wei-Jin Dynasties** and in Neo-Confucianism of the Song-Ming Dynasties.
- One of the Neo-Confucian masters, **Cheng Hao**, once remarked: '**What is spontaneous in Heaven** is called the **Way of Heaven**. Heaven's allotment to this to all creatures is called the **Decree (Mandate) of Heaven**' (Fung, 1953:514).

Heaven and Taiji

- Heaven = taiji, the Supreme Ultimate, the fountainhead from which all things come into being.
- The Great Commentary (*dazhuan*) of the *Book of Changes* first speculates on the Supreme Ultimate in the system of changes.
- The **Supreme Ultimate** generates the **Two Modes**, the yin and yang. The Two Modes generate the **Four Forms** (the major and minor yin and yang, which become the four seasons). The Four Forms generate the **Eight Trigrams** which present heaven, earth, mountain, lake, fire, water, thunder and wind (Wilhelm, 1967:318).
- The mutual interaction between the Way of Heaven and the Way of Earth (gangrou xiangmo) and between the Eight Trigrams (bagua xiangdang) generates all beings and things (zhang, 1982:27).

Heaven as Nature and the Concept of Qi

- Heaven as Nature is closely related to the conception of Qi, the vital material force.
- In early Confucian writings, the concept is not clearly defined, as demonstrated in the Mengzi where the night force (yeqi) and the moral force (haoran zhiqi) are discussed.
- Only in the works of the Later Han Scholars, He Xiu (129-182), Zheng Xuan and Liu Shao (182?-245?) was the concept of qi used unambiguously to refer to the profound and fundamental material force of the universe
- The Confucian doctrine of material force was completed in the hands of Zhang Zai. Zhang identified Heaven with the Great Vacuity (Taixu) that is the original state of material force, the Way of Heaven with the Great Harmony (taihe) and the Mandate of Heaven with the ceaseless operation in material force (qi)

Zhang Zai's Statements

- The Great Vacuity has no physical form.
- It is the original substance of material force...
- as the Great Vacuity, material force is extensive and vague. Yet it ascends and descends and moves in all ways without ever ceasing...
- If material force integrates, its visibility becomes effective and physical form appears.
- If material force does not integrate, its visibility is not effective and there is no physical form...
- From the Great Vacuity, there is Heaven.
- From the transformation of material force, there is the Way.
- In the unity of Great Vacuity and material force, there is the nature of (man and things).
- And in the unity of the nature and consciousness, there is the mind. (chan, 1963a: 501,503,504)

Zhang's Way of Heaven

- Zhang also explored the way of material force.
- Material force changes according to the law of nature: 'In the process of production, some (things) come first and some afterward. This is Heaven's sequence. In the interrelationship and assumption of shape (by those things), some are small and some large, some lofty and some lowly. This is Heaven's orderliness' (Fung, 1953:482).
- Therefore, the cosmic evolution is the process of integration and disintegration of material force, and this is done in accordance with Heaven's sequence (tian xu) and orderliness (tian zhi).
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- The heavenly order and sequence of material force is the Way of Heaven.



Qi and human nature

- As far as human nature is concerned, heavenly principle and material force point to two different directions, and human moral characters can be explained by the difference of their material constitution.
- According to this interpretation, material force has its gender, the yin and the yang. They yin and yang powers flow in their ways, so there are the four seasons; they move in different directions, so there are the Five Elements (wu xing).
- The Five Elements possess each other, and their mutual transformation is the Way of Heaven: 'The Yin and yang and Five Elements constitute the true substance of the Tao' (Dai Zhen 1723-77)
- The Way of Heaven is that which natural courses follow and by which all things are done. Therefore, it is equivalent to the Confucian conception of principle, and Heaven and principle are used together to indicate the Way of heaven (tianli).

Heaven and the Way of Humans

- The commentaries in the *Book of Changes* identified Principle with Heaven, and the study of Principle with the attainment of the Mandate of Heaven:
- 'by the exhaustive study of Principle (li) and complete development of the nature, one attains to (heavenly) Decree'.
- In the Book of Rites, the passage that 'Heaven gives birth to the people' is reinterpreted as meaning that 'all things originate from Heaven, humans originate from their ancestors' and the major sacrifices are 'to express gratitude toward the originators and recall the beginning' (Legge, 1968, vol.27:430-1).
- **Either as Nature or Natural Law, Heaven and the Way of Heaven underlie human life and are therefore closely related to the Way of Humankind.**

Readings

- **Li (ritual/rite) and tian (heaven/nature) in the Xunzi: Does Confucian li need metaphysics?**
- **Heaven as a Source for Ethical Warrant in Early Confucianism**
- by Philip J Ivanhoe
- **Retaining the Mandate of Heaven: Sovereign Accountability in Ancient China** ; by Luke Glanville
- **The Mandate of Heaven and Performance Legitimation in Historical and Contemporary China** ; by Dingxin Zhao