

Article

Confucius' Belief in Natural Deities and Sacrifice

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Abstract

The diversity of religious traditions and the increasing prevalence of religious pluralism, along with critical reflections on scientism and the relationship between philosophy and religion, have stimulated global scholarly discussions on Confucianism—its identity as a tradition of learning, its religious dimensions, and its relation to religion in general. These discussions have been further enriched by the discovery of early Confucian texts and renewed examination of existing Confucian classics. As the founder and chief architect of Confucianism, and as both a perceiver and teacher of its truths, Confucius demonstrated a distinct religious consciousness in his teachings and practices. This is reflected in his beliefs concerning spirits and deities, his views on sacrifice, and his ritual awareness—not only through his faith in Heaven and the Mandate of Heaven and his reverence for ancestral spirits, but also in his belief in natural deities. However, Confucius's conception of natural deities and his associated sacrificial views remain relatively underexplored. This paper examines how Confucius distinguished between the physical and the divine aspects of nature, recognized the connection between the order (or disorder) of these two realms and political governance, maintained faith in natural deities, and advocated for corresponding ritual practices. By systematically reconstructing Confucius's beliefs regarding natural deities, this study aims to fill a significant gap in current research.

Keywords: religion; Confucianism; nature; spirits; ritual

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will examine Confucius' belief in natural deities and his perspective on sacrifice. The necessity and significance of this discussion arise from the historical and contextual background surrounding the topic. The understanding and debate among Confucian scholars regarding whether Confucius' thought and Confucianism can be classified as religious have undergone substantial transformations due to three pivotal developments over time.

The first development is the evolution of people's comprehension of history. History is no longer viewed as a straightforward narrative of global advancement; instead, it is recognized as complex and multifaceted. Human activities are now understood to be accompanied by contingency and uncertainty, challenging the notion of historical determinism as an unyielding principle in historical interpretation¹. Furthermore, the transformation of Chinese thought and culture from the Shang-Zhou period to the Eastern Zhou era is no longer understood as a straightforward linear evolution from religion to philosophy. The Shang-Zhou period already contained elements of early philosophical thinking, while the Eastern Zhou era continued to encompass religious traditions—such as the theistic framework found in Mozi's teachings—rather than manifesting in purely philosophical forms.



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At most, it can be said that philosophy achieved relatively mature development during this time (Z. Wang 2011, pp. 26–27, 107–77).

In relation to this turning point, significant changes have occurred in people's religious perspectives, particularly in China.² From the New Culture Movement to China's reform and opening-up, the dominance of scientism and materialism led many to view religion as a superstitious realm in opposition to science and reason. It was perceived as a spiritual anesthetic for humanity and as an antiquated phenomenon that should be eradicated from the annals of human history. For instance, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 posited that aesthetic education could supplant religion, Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 suggested that art could serve as a substitute, Hu Shi 胡适 argued that science could replace it, and Feng Youlan 冯友兰 contended that philosophy could fulfill the role of religion. Additionally, Feng Youlan asserted that the reason China has traditionally lacked a unified religion is due to its philosophical heritage. The inherent extra-worldly impulses and aspirations of individuals render religious ideas and practices the most significant and captivating aspects of life for many people. China should be considered an exception due to its profound engagement with philosophy. An optimistic prediction was made by Feng that "in the future world, mankind will replace religion with philosophy, and this perspective aligns with traditional Chinese thought. A man need not be religious, but he must be philosophical" (Feng 2013, p. 6).

However, many of these predictions have proven to be inaccurate. Since the 1980s, China's critique of scientism and rationalism has led to a reconciliation between science, reason, and religion, fostering a pluralistic understanding of religious beliefs among the populace. Religion is not confined to monotheistic faith; it encompasses any pursuit of transcendental and ultimate values. Furthermore, religion is not a static entity; it evolves in response to human existence. It remains a vital source of meaning and value for individuals seeking a significant life. As a result of recognizing the importance of religion, Confucianism is no longer viewed solely as a philosophical system. Acknowledging and affirming the religious aspects of Confucianism, and even categorizing it as a type of religion, underscores its significance and value. Previously, Confucianism was regarded solely as a philosophy, reflecting its intellectual sophistication. The current perspective that views Confucianism as a religion suggests its capacity for transcendence (Togawa et al. 1989; Taylor 1990; Ren 2000; Tu and Tucker 2003–2004; A. Sun 2013; Ro 2014).

Third, the recently discovered early Confucian texts, particularly the "Yi Zhuan 易传" texts from the Mawangdui silk manuscripts and the Confucian texts from the Guodian Chu Tomb Bamboo Slips, Shanghai Museum Bamboo Slips, and Qinghua University Bamboo Slips, not only enhance the corpus of early Confucian literature but also reveal that the Confucian documents from the Eastern Zhou Dynasty encompass a broader scope than previously understood, indicating that the early Confucian tradition is more intricate than commonly acknowledged. Furthermore, these findings substantiate the early existence of the Book of Rites, a text concerning Confucius and his disciples rather than a Han Dynasty composition. This evidence suggests that the suspected *Kongzi Jiayu* 孔子家语 cannot be dismissed as merely a fabricated work; rather, the accounts of Confucius and his disciples contained within are credible and resonate with other extant documents and records. Both the Book of Rites and the *Kongzi Jiayu* provide substantial insights into the religious beliefs of Confucius and his disciples within early Confucianism. Additionally, the text "Great Drought of the State of Lu," (*Lubang dahan* 鲁邦大旱) housed in the Shanghai Museum, further corroborates Confucius' religious beliefs and his veneration of natural deities.³

These three developments have led to a shift in perception, prompting people to view Confucius and Confucianism not merely as a single philosophy but also as encompassing religious ideas.⁴ Confucius' teachings are no longer framed as an exclusive choice between

philosophy and religion. Extensive discussions regarding Confucius' beliefs in deities and spirits have significantly illuminated the religious dimensions of both Confucius and later iterations of Confucianism.⁵ This is undoubtedly the case. However, Confucius' religious beliefs extend beyond the worship of a singular heavenly deity and the veneration of multiple gods and spirits; they also include a belief in natural deities. The exploration of this particular aspect of faith appears to be notably underrepresented in current scholarship. The *Great Drought of the State of Lu* substantiated Confucius's belief in natural deities. Numerous historical documents reveal that Confucius's belief in nature and deities encompasses several interrelated dimensions. He asserted that nature functions as a system imbued with divinity. Furthermore, he maintained that the harmonious order or disorder of nature is intricately linked to human activities and behaviors. Confucius emphasized that to sustain the synergy between human actions and the natural order, and to rectify disorder while rebuilding trust, individuals must express their inner piety through explicit physical actions and sacrificial ceremonies directed toward the natural deities. Collectively, these dimensions form the foundation of Confucius's belief in natural gods.

The central argument of this paper operates within a deliberately defined purview. It is not concerned with elaborating the general religious character of Confucius or early Chinese Confucianism, nor with proposing novel comprehensive viewpoints on these matters. Instead, the study interrogates a precise topic: the conception of "natural spirits" within the Confucian religious framework. It does so by drawing upon foundational research on the religion of Confucius and his tradition, the textual credibility of key early works, and contemporary religious studies methodologies. This particular dimension is singled out for scrutiny because it represents a crucial element that has been largely eclipsed and nearly forgotten due to various historical and intellectual circumstances.⁶

2. Duality of Nature: Physical and Divine

Confucius' belief in the divine essence of nature and his reverence for spirits was premised on the conviction that nature itself is intrinsically divine and inhabited by spiritual beings. This amounts to affirming that Confucius recognized both the sacred character of the natural world and the reality of spirits, and maintained a posture of faith toward them. Herein lies a contradiction: one cannot coherently believe in something while simultaneously denying its existence. A notable example of this inconsistency can be found in Gong Mengzi of the Warring States period. As recorded in the *Mozi: Gong Meng*, Gong Mengzi explicitly denied the existence of ghosts and spirits in the world, yet he nevertheless insisted that people should learn and perform sacrificial rites. Mozi, who affirmed the existence of ghosts and gods, criticized Gong Mengzi for his denial while simultaneously advocating for the performance of sacrificial rites. This situation resembles learning "guest rites" in the absence of guests or crafting "fish nets" without fish, highlighting an inherent contradiction. If this scenario does not apply, one might consider Xunzi's assertion that "the gentleman thinks of literature, and the villain thinks of God" ("Discourse on Heaven", the *Xunzi*). In any case, Confucius does not conform to this characterization. Some individuals interpret his statement, "He sacrificed to the dead, as if they were present. He sacrificed to the spirits, as if the spirits were present" (the *Analects* 3.12) as evidence of his disbelief in ghosts and deities (Guo 2001; Liu 2004). The term "as if" is employed in a manner that suggests the existence of something that is, in fact, absent. However, Confucius utilized the term "as if" to convey that, since "God" lacks a physical form and cannot manifest directly, individuals should cultivate inner piety when making offerings to deities, behaving as though the gods were present.⁷ The subsequent remark by Confucius, "I consider my not being present at the sacrifice, as if I did not sacrifice" further supports this interpretation. An increasing number of scholars affirm Confucius' belief in a singular God

of Heaven alongside a belief in multiple deities, including ancestral spirits. Furthermore, it is important to note that Confucius also acknowledged the existence of natural deities. This indicates that his belief system encompasses a cohesive unity that integrates reverence for heaven, ancestors, spirits, and natural gods.

Confucius was a philosopher, a religious scholar, and a devout believer. An either-or dualistic perspective would reject this compatibility. Some argue, as Feng Youlan suggests, that Confucius can only be classified as a philosopher, excluding the roles of a religionist and a believer. However, Confucius embodies a multifaceted character. This complexity is also evident in his understanding of two types of nature: divine and physical. It is difficult to assert that Confucius lacked consciousness regarding physical nature, natural heaven, and the divine. On the contrary, it is widely accepted that he possessed an understanding of nature in the physical sense, as well as a conceptualization of heaven.⁸ Indeed, many interpret “heaven” (tian 天) in Confucius’ response to Zi Gong 子贡—“Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?” (the *Analects* 17.19)—as referring to the natural world. Furthermore, the “birds, animals, and plants” that Confucius encouraged people to study are regarded as elements of the natural order. Thus, it is implausible to assert that Confucius lacked an understanding of nature in the physical sense. The critical question is whether this physical understanding of nature must exclude or contradict his awareness of the divine nature. Does this imply that Confucius lacked a divine conception of nature? The answer is no. Those accustomed to the exclusive truth claims and singular religious frameworks of monotheistic traditions may find such a perspective perplexing. How can one entity possess multiple natures? How can an individual hold seemingly divergent belief? Yet this very quality constitutes a defining characteristic of Eastern religious thought. Philosophically, truth is not conceived as a monolithic absolute; rather, every truth finds its completion through an opposing yet complementary counterpart. From the standpoint of faith, diverse deities fulfill humanity’s multifaceted spiritual needs.

In the consciousness of early Chinese people, religious, philosophical, and scientific understandings of nature were not distinct but deeply interwoven. This synthesis is vividly reflected in the thought of Confucius, in whom the physical and divine dimensions of nature coexisted. Confucius explained the origin and evolution of all things through a dual process involving both physical nature and divine nature. Indeed, any attempt to reduce Confucius’s “view of nature” to a purely “physical nature” proves fundamentally inadequate. A passage from the *Liyun* chapter of the *Book of Rites* offers a clear illustration:

“Human rites are grounded in the Taiyi 太一 (primordial energy), which formed heaven, earth, and all things. From Taiyi emerged the differentiation of heaven and earth, the transformation into Yin 阴 and Yang 阳, the change into the four seasons, and the dispersion into guishen 鬼神 (spirits or spiritual forces). The descending impulse of Taiyi is referred to as Ming 命 (mandate), which aligns with the natural order of Heaven and serves to harmonize the principles of heaven, earth, and humanity. When this Mandate manifests in human life, it is called ‘nurturing’.”⁹

夫礼必本于太一，分而为天地，转而为阴阳，变而为四时，列而为鬼神，其降曰命，其官于天也，协于分艺，其居于人也曰养。

In Confucius’s understanding, this cosmic evolution and coordination system constitutes an ordered unity of the physical and the divine. When anomalies occurred, he attributed them to disharmony between these two natures—not, as Xunzi 荀子 later argued, to purely natural causes. In his *Discourse on Heaven* chapter, Xunzi explained phenomena such as solar and lunar eclipses, unseasonable winds and rains, and the appearance of un-

usual stars as mere results of the transformations of Yin and Yang, with no involvement of Shenling 神灵 (spirits or deities). He maintained that such events, though strange, should not be feared. Xunzi's interpretation reflects a broader shift toward natural-philosophical rationality, moving away from the religious traditions of the Yin and Zhou periods. Confucius, by contrast, largely inherited those traditions. In this worldview, the natural world was imbued with divinity and populated with deities—yet this was not equivalent to European animism or pantheism. This early Chinese tradition not only embraced animistic beliefs but also maintained a profound faith in a supreme Heaven or deity that transcended all spirits and divine beings—a conviction that Confucius himself shared and upheld.

Confucius's consciousness of the divine dimension of nature can be inferred from the objects of his ritual practice. If we adopt the natural-philosophical rationality of Xunzi, droughts—like floods—would be understood merely as outcomes of transformations in heaven and earth and the interplay of yin and yang, with no divine or spiritual agency involved. Yet when confronted with a severe drought, Confucius explicitly advocated making sacrifices to the mountain and river spirits.

The excavated text *The Great Drought of the State of Lu* provides new evidence for this narrative. In 480 BCE, when the State of Lu suffered a major drought, Duke Ai turned to Confucius for advice. Confucius proposed two countermeasures, one of which was to urge the Duke not to spare precious ritual objects—such as jade tablets, bi-discs, coins, and silk—and to use these valuable human goods to sacrifice to the mountains and rivers. This clearly indicates that Confucius regarded mountains and rivers as possessing divinity and inhabited by spirits, and believed that by making offerings to them, rain could be induced. It was widely held in early Chinese thought that wind and rain were closely linked to mountains and rivers. As the “Jifa 祭法” chapter of the *Book of Rites* states:

“Mountains, forests, rivers, valleys, and hills can generate clouds, give rise to wind and rain; when strange phenomena are seen therein, they are called spirits.”

山林川谷丘陵能出云，为风雨，见怪物，皆曰神。

For Confucius, the capacity of mountains and rivers to produce wind and rain was not merely a natural process—it arose from the will of the mountain and river spirits themselves.

For Confucius, divinity and spiritual presence were not limited to mountains and rivers—they permeated countless aspects of the natural world. In the Chinese imagination, even up to contemporary folk belief, nature is never merely a natural organism, as abstracted in philosophical discourse; it is also a living spiritual organism. Among the general populace, belief in natural deities remains very much alive in everyday practice. During traditional Chinese festivals, especially the Spring Festival, it is common for people to burn incense and perform the kowtow ritual.¹⁰ Beyond paying respect to ancestral spirits, most of the entities worshipped are natural deities: the earth has its Earth Deity, mountains have Mountain Deities, waters have Water Deities, wells have Well Deities, and even roads have a Road Deity—the list is extensive. Nearly every facet of life connected to daily existence is regarded as possessing divine nature, and it is customary to make offerings to these spirits during festive occasions. Even under a modern political system that upholds materialism and atheism, these folk religious practices persist, carried on within households in a familial context.¹¹

This was even more the case in early China, particularly in the time of Confucius and his disciples. Extensive passages in the *Book of Rites* attest to Confucius and his followers' continuation of the natural deity worship tradition dating back to the Yin and Zhou dynasties. Notably, Confucius's belief in natural spirits formed part of his broader religious worldview, which included the worship of Earth Deities (*dìqì* 地祇)—a tradition inherited from the Yin and Zhou into the Spring and Autumn period. *Dìqì* serves as a general term for

terrestrial objects of worship, encompassing the community earth altar, deities of the four directions, mountain spirits, and river gods. This system existed alongside two other major categories of belief: that of Heaven Deities (Tian) and that of human ancestors or ghosts.¹²

Confucius' belief in natural deities was consistently situated within a comprehensive religious framework. As articulated in the *Liyun* chapter of the *Book of Rites*, he explained:

“The ancient kings, concerned that rituals might not permeate the lives of the common people, established a sacred order through a hierarchy of worship: they sacrificed to the Heavenly Emperor in the suburban altar to affirm the supremacy of Heaven; venerated the Earth God at the capital to enumerate the blessings of the land; performed the grand rite in the ancestral temple to root virtue in humanness; honored the spirits of mountains and rivers to acknowledge their sacred presence; and conducted the five local sacrifices to ground all human endeavors in spiritual practice.”

先王患礼之不达于下，故飨帝于郊，所以定天位也；祀社于国，所以列地利也；禘祖庙，所以本仁也；旅山川，所以俟鬼神也；祭五祀，所以本事也。

This system integrated belief in Heaven (Tian) and the Supreme Deity (Shangdi) with polytheistic nature worship and ancestral veneration. These distinct religious forms co-existed at different levels of significance, maintaining both hierarchical and parallel relationships within the same spiritual ecology. This multi-layered, integrative structure represents a fundamental distinction between Chinese—and broader East Asian—religious traditions and the monotheistic framework characteristic of European Christianity. This phenomenon can be at least partially attributed to distinctive Chinese cognitive patterns—namely associative thinking, harmony-in-diversity, and holistic ambiguity.

3. Order and Disorder: Natural Order and Human Political Affairs

Early Chinese religions and philosophies posited that the universe constitutes a highly harmonious and unified whole. They maintained that heaven, earth, humanity, and all entities are interconnected, interactive, symbiotic, and coexistent. Any disruption within one link of this chain could precipitate disorder in others, potentially leading to chain reactions. In the context of Chinese thought, all entities are interrelated; heaven and humanity are linked, as are human order and natural order. Moreover, human actions are believed to influence the transformation of heaven and earth. This perspective fosters a mode of thinking that seeks to understand whether natural phenomena and orders are normal not only through observations of nature but also by examining human and political affairs for explanations. This mode of thought possesses a peculiar, almost mystical quality. Humanity appears fragile before the majesty of nature, yet as participants within it, we wield profound influence over its workings. Nature, in turn, selectively embraces virtuous human actions while resisting those that lack moral foundation—creating a remarkable harmony between the two. Today, humanity's adverse impact on the climate has provoked nature's retaliation—a clear causal relationship explicable through physical principles. Within Confucius's framework of natural divinity, rulers who harmed the populace would not escape celestial scrutiny. How meaningful it would be if such divine oversight could also redress wrongs between individuals and among nations.

In the “*Wuyijie*五仪解” chapter of the *Kongzi Jiayu*¹³, Duke Ai of Lu inquired whether a state's survival, destruction, misfortune, and blessing were truly predetermined by the Mandate of Heaven.¹⁴ Confucius responded unequivocally:

“Survival and destruction, misfortune and blessing, all stem from human action; neither celestial portents nor terrestrial anomalies can override this principle.”

存亡祸福皆己而已，天灾地妖不能加也。¹⁵

When pressed by the duke to explain his reasoning, Confucius offered two historical examples. During the reign of Shang Zhou 商纣, a small bird was said to have given birth to a large bird at the corner of the city wall. Diviners interpreted this anomaly as highly auspicious, proclaiming that “the state would surely flourish and its renown spread wide.” Taking this as Heaven’s endorsement, King Zhou grew complacent, neglected governance, and indulged in wanton excess—ultimately leading to his personal downfall and the dynasty’s collapse. Confucius remarked that this demonstrated how one could “defy Heaven through misconduct, transforming apparent blessings into calamity.” In contrast, Confucius cited the case of his ancestor *Taiwu* 太戊 (son of *Taigeng* 太庚). During his reign, the deterioration of ritual and law was accompanied by unnatural phenomena: a mulberry-and-artemisia tree grew wildly in the court hall, reaching the thickness of two clasped hands within seven days. Diviners warned it presaged the state’s doom. Yet instead of resigning to fate, *Taiwu* took it as Heaven’s admonition. He cultivated virtue, practiced the Dao, and governed with diligence. Within three years, order was restored, harmony prevailed among the people, and neighboring states pledged allegiance. Confucius observed that *Taiwu* had thereby “transformed calamity into blessing through virtuous conduct.” Confucius concluded:

“Thus, celestial disasters and earthly anomalies serve to warn rulers, just as dreams and visions may caution officials. But no omen can prevail over good governance, and no vision can outweigh virtuous action. Only those who understand this can achieve the highest form of rule—and only an enlightened sovereign attains such wisdom.”

故天灾地妖，所以儆人主者也。寤梦征怪，所以做人臣者也。灾妖不胜善政，寤梦不胜善行。能知此者，至治之极也，唯明王达此。

From the perspective of pantheism or animism, the universe is permeated with diverse deities and spirits, and no thing or phenomenon exists apart from their influence. Within this worldview, humans maintain purposeful and conscious connections with these spiritual entities—relationships that often resemble multiple covenants and mutual commitments. For any ancient agricultural society, favorable weather for crops and the avoidance of natural disasters were among the most vital aspirations. Humanity exists within a vast cosmic system—so how should people relate to the operation and order of heaven, earth, and nature? A fundamental consideration is how humans ought to properly engage with the functioning and regularity of the physical world.

Chinese philosophers held that seasonal weather and agricultural prosperity represent the normative order and proper state of nature. Human activities, they believed, must align with the sequence, timing, and rhythm of celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, and stars. Confucius offered one of the earliest systematic answers: all human actions must follow the characteristics and order of heaven, earth, and nature, and must harmonize with their activities and cycles. In contemporary terms, Confucius may be understood as both a natural ecologist and an advocate of human–nature synergy. He consistently maintained that social order originates from exemplary models, and accordingly adopted the approach of relying on sagely figures to mediate between humanity and nature. The sage thus served as an intermediary, conveying nature’s authentic voice and legislating for humanity in accordance with its principles. The laws established by the sage were necessarily rooted in heaven and earth, drew their essence from yin and yang, took the four seasons as their overarching structure, followed the sun and stars as their guiding markers, used the months as their measure, attended by spirits and deities, and grounded in the five phases (*wuxing*). It was precisely by taking heaven and earth as their foundation that the sage could encompass all things; by drawing from yin and yang that they could

discern the nature of humanity; and by structuring life around the four seasons that they could motivate timely action. By observing the sun and stars, they ensured orderly progression; by dividing the year into months, they distinguished levels of achievement; by honoring spirits and deities, they encouraged reverent conduct; and by aligning with the five phases, they ensured continuous renewal. Through cultivating human nature as their ground, they placed humanity at the center; and by husbanding the Four Spirits as their flock, they secured lasting sustenance.

According to Confucius, human beings can achieve not only a fulfilling material existence but also develop their adaptability to nature by adhering to its principles and cooperating with it. This ongoing process of adaptation culminates in unique human characteristics. Wise rulers, particularly those embodying the ideals of Confucian sage-kings, should align their governance with these human adaptations and natural habits. This notion is further supported by another assertion from Confucius: the sage aligns with the sentiments of the people. For instance, those residing in mountainous regions should find contentment in their environment rather than migrating to the plains. Similarly, individuals living near water should remain satisfied in their locale, avoiding migration to the Central Plains to prevent exhausting the populace. The management of resources such as water, fire, metal, and wood in dietary practices must adhere to seasonal variations. Additionally, marriages and titles should correspond to the age and merit of individuals. The utilization of labor must respect agricultural cycles. By following these principles, the likelihood of natural disasters, such as floods and droughts, as well as the occurrence of famine and disease, can be significantly reduced.

Heaven bestows the Great Way, Earth offers its treasures, and humanity contributes its moral sentiments—thus Heaven, Earth, and humans each fulfill their distinct roles. When Heaven sends down sweet dew, Earth brings forth sweet springs; the mountains yield resources for precious vessels and carriages; the Yellow River presents the dragon-horse bearing the Hetu 河图 (River Chart); and phoenixes and qilin 麒麟 gather at the suburban sacrifice—all manifesting a cosmic harmony between the natural order and human virtue. Just as the *Liyun* chapter of the *Book of Rites* said:

“In the vast marshlands, tortoises and dragons dwell in the royal ponds, while the eggs and offspring of birds and beasts are so abundant that one may glimpse them simply by bending down. All this harmony stems from the wisdom of the former kings, who cultivated ritual propriety to comprehend righteousness, and embodied sincerity to achieve profound accord with nature. They governed with reverence: they did not let mountains block rivers, nor islets encroach upon the central plains—yet they never exhausted natural resources. They wisely utilized water, fire, metal, and wood; provided food and drink in accordance with the seasons; arranged marriages appropriately; and conferred honors according to virtue and age. In employing the people, they acted in harmony with them. Thus, there were no floods, droughts, or plagues of insects; the people knew no famine, nor were they troubled by malevolent spirits. In this state of perfect harmony, Heaven withheld nothing of its Way, Earth yielded its treasures freely, and humanity offered its sentiments without reservation. Sweet dew descended from Heaven; sweet springs welled up from the earth; mountains provided materials for precious vessels and carriages; rivers produced the dragon-horse bearing the Hetu; phoenixes and qilin gathered at the suburban altars. Truly, this was no accident—it was the natural result of the former kings’ practice of ritual to attain righteousness, and their embodiment of sincerity to achieve unity with all things.”

故圣王所以顺，山者不使居川，不使渚者居中原，而弗敝也。用水、火、金、木，饮食必时，合男女、颁爵位必当年德，用民必顺，故无水旱昆虫之灾，民无凶饥妖孽之疾。故天不爱其道，地不爱其宝，人不爱其情。天降膏露，地出醴泉，山出器车，河出马图，凤皇麒麟，皆在郊徼。龟龙在宫沼，其余鸟兽之卵胎，皆可俯而窥也。则是无故，先王能修礼以达义，体信以达顺，故此顺之实也。

What a magnificent vision of harmony between humanity and nature! However, since the advent of the modern era, anthropocentric thinking has become thoroughly instrumental in character. Humanity has relinquished its traditional reverence for nature, a stance that stands in profound contrast to the values that guided pre-modern societies. It is imperative that we now turn back to heed the wisdom of our ancestors.

Ecological harmony is never achieved by nature alone—it emerges through humanity's conscious following, accommodation, and participation in the natural order. Confucius regarded the qilin, phoenix, tortoise, and dragon as four spiritually potent and numinous creatures. He taught that when humans nurture these symbolic beings, a deeper harmony extends to all living things: when the dragon is nurtured, fish do not flee in panic; when the phoenix is kept in virtue, birds do not scatter in fear; when the qilin is respected, wild beasts do not run away; and when the tortoise is honored, human understanding remains free of error. This vision of co-existence finds earlier expression in the words of *Jizi* 箕子, who explained to King Wu that auspicious signs in nature arise when the five climatic phenomena—rain, sunshine, warmth, cold, and wind—follow their proper sequence and timing. Only then does the natural world flourish, yielding abundant harvests and lush growth. In the *Zhuangzi*, harmony between humanity and nature is portrayed as an ideal attainable only in a primordial, pre-civilized state—one that recedes as human society grows increasingly complex. Confucianism, however, offers a different vision: harmony with nature is not lost through civilization, but achieved through it. For Confucians, such harmony stands not as a forgotten innocence, but as the highest expression of a refined and ethical culture.

Throughout the various epochs of human civilization, the pursuit of harmony has remained a constant ideal—harmony among people, between humanity and the divine, and between humans and nature. Yet in our contemporary world, achieving these three forms of harmony appears far more challenging than it was for the ancients. Interwoven and accumulating factors have intensified conflicts between humans and nature, between different religious traditions, and among diverse communities—from global warming to international warfare, these tensions reflect a discord absent in earlier eras.

In classical Chinese thought, particularly within Confucianism, harmony between humanity and nature was not seen as a passive outcome of natural processes, but as the result of dynamic interaction among the “Three Powers” (*sancai* 三才)—Heaven, Earth, and Humanity. Each contributes uniquely to the cosmic order: as the excavated Confucian text *Three Virtues* (*Sande* 三德) states, “Heaven provides timeliness, Earth provides resources, and Humans provide effort.” This echoes Mencius’ triad of “favorable timing, geographical advantage, and human harmony.” The wise ruler does not rely on coercion or cunning, but aligns with these three virtues—honoring Heaven’s cycles, nurturing Earth’s bounty, and upholding human moral constancy. And as the *Three Virtues* expresses:

“Revere Heaven’s decrees, promote Earth’s measures, maintain the Dao for peace. O Heaven, O Humans—on what do they rely to be close, and not lose themselves? Knowing Heaven allows one to follow the seasons; knowing Earth secures resources; knowing Humans brings about closeness.”

敬天之敬，兴地之矩，恒道必平。天哉人哉，凭何亲哉，没其身哉。知天足以顺时，知地足以固材，知人足以会亲。

Humanity thus stands not apart from, but alongside Heaven and Earth—not only as one of the “Three Powers” with distinct cosmic functions, but as an active participant in the creative processes of the universe. As the *Doctrine of the Mean* affirms, when humanity achieves centrality and harmony, “Heaven and Earth maintain their proper order, and all things are nourished.”

Confucius’ disciples regarded him as the inheritor of the sage-king model. According to this vision, when humans live in harmony with nature, nature itself responds by recognizing and rewarding the virtuous sage-ruler, revealing auspicious signs and blessings. This constitutes Confucius’ fundamental logic of coordination between humane governance and the natural world—a logic deeply rooted in early Chinese thought, as captured in the maxim: “Do good, and a hundred auspicious signs will descend from Heaven” (“Yixun” 伊训 chapter of the *Shangshu* 尚书). It reflects a worldview in which the ruler’s virtue brings natural order, the ruler’s goodness evokes heavenly omens, and the ruler’s morality is met with cosmic affirmation.

In Confucian thought, *li* 礼 (ritual propriety) as expressed through ceremonial practices and bodily gestures oriented toward the natural and divine order serves to demonstrate humanity’s reverence for Heaven, Earth, all things, and the spirits. Its purpose is to establish mutual understanding and trust between humans and nature, and between humans and the divine. As articulated in the *Liqi* 礼器 chapter of the *Book of Rites*:

“Conform to the seasons, utilize the earth’s resources, comply with the spirits, and align with human hearts—this is what governs all things. Thus, Heaven provides the timing of life, Earth offers its appropriate geography, human officials exercise their capabilities, and things, when used rightly, bring benefit.”

合于天时,设于地财,顺于鬼神,合于人心,理万物者也。是故天时有生也,地理有宜也,人官有能也,物曲有利也。

Any deviation from this principle constitutes a loss of propriety, which ruptures the tacit harmony between humans and nature, and between humans and the divine:

“If Heaven does not bring forth and Earth does not nourish, the *junzi* 君子 will not regard it as *li*, and the spirits will not be appeased. For those who dwell in the mountains to use fish and turtles as ritual offerings, or those who dwell in marshes to offer deer and boars—the *junzi* would say they do not understand *li*.”

故天不生,地不养,君子不以为礼,鬼神弗飨也。居山以鱼鳖为礼,居泽以鹿豕为礼,君子谓之不知礼。

In relation to nature, humanity must be acutely aware of what ought and ought not to be done, and what can and cannot be done—or else face the consequences. The text *Three Virtues* thus admonishes rulers that a great ruler should not undertake deeds beyond his capability, nor alter what can be accomplished. He must not repeatedly delay the agricultural seasons, or severe famine will surely follow. And lacking compassion for those in hardship will lead to the loss of the people’s affection. Large-scale water projects that interfere with farming are called “bringing floods upon oneself.” Expressing joy at a funeral invites disorder from neighboring peoples. Major military campaigns that delay agricultural work are termed “disaster and pestilence”—such calamities arise from the failure of the yearly harvest. Conversely, when the ruler acts as he should, favorable outcomes follow:

Not neglecting the agricultural seasons pleases the Supreme Deity (*Shangdi* 上帝), and disasters are averted. Under divine protection, no harm befalls the state. Heaven never fails to respond to people’s good words and good deeds. When people pursue goodness, Heaven complies; when they seek happiness, Heaven concurs; when they strive for prosperity, Heaven supports them; when they aspire to longevity, Heaven grants it.

Ultimately, governance must align with Heaven's timing, utilize Earth's materials, and mobilize human labor in harmony with the natural and moral order.

In Chinese philosophical tradition, harmony between humanity and nature—and the natural order itself—is understood as the result of human beings, particularly rulers, adhering to the cosmic order and showing reverence to its spirits and deities. Conversely, disorder in the natural world is viewed as a consequence of humanity's transgression against nature and its failure to honor these spiritual forces. Within this framework, the primary agent responsible for such transgressions is the ruler; accordingly, the ruler is also the first to bear the repercussions. In Confucius and broader Confucian thought, the ruler's violation of natural harmony and disregard for the spirits—along with the resulting consequences—are often manifested through tangible natural disasters, particularly what were categorized as “anomalies” or “strange phenomena.” These are interpreted in moral and ritual terms, expressed through concepts such as the ruler's “loss of virtue” (*shide* 失德) or “loss of ritual propriety” (*shili* 失礼).

Let us turn to the text *The Great Drought of the State of Lu*. This drought took place in the 15th year of Duke Ai of Lu (480 BCE). As recorded in the *Zuo Zhuan* under the 15th year of Duke Ai “In autumn, the eighth month, a great yu [rain-seeking sacrifice] was held,” and we know that the drought occurred in the autumn of that year. Duke Ai reigned from 494 to 468 BCE, a total of twenty-seven years. According to the *Zuo Zhuan*, during this period the State of Lu experienced one earthquake (in the 3rd year of Duke Ai), one fire (in the 4th year), and two pestilences (in the 12th and 13th years). There was only one major drought—the one in the 15th year of Duke Ai.

Confucius had returned to Lu in the 11th year of Duke Ai (484 BCE), after fourteen years of traveling among the states. Although he held no official position, Duke Ai received him with respect and frequently consulted him as an advisor on matters of governance, rites, and music. Historical texts record multiple instances of Duke Ai “asking” Confucius for guidance. On this occasion, the duke turned to Confucius for methods to alleviate the disaster.

The means of relief, Confucius suggested, lay in addressing the root causes of the drought. He believed the calamity was the direct result of Duke Ai's misgovernment. With characteristic candor, Confucius confronted the duke: Was not this great drought caused by your governance and your own words and deeds having “failed in punishments and virtues”—that is, having lost both legal integrity and moral righteousness? To save the people, he urged, the foremost task was to “rectify punishments and virtues.” At the same time, as previously mentioned, he also advocated the offering of precious goods in sacrifice to the mountains and rivers.¹⁶

Confucius consistently attributed disruptions in the natural order and occurrences of disaster to failings in the ruler's governance. The case recorded in *The Great Drought of the State of Lu* was not an isolated one, but part of a broader interpretive tradition. In northern China, with its clearly defined four seasons, the growth, fruiting, and decline of plants and trees follow a regular, recurring rhythm. Whenever this cycle was breached by anomalies, Confucius turned to human conduct—particularly the conduct of those in power—for explanation.

The *Zuo Zhuan* records under the entry for the year of Duke Ding: “In winter, the tenth month, frost fell and killed the bean crops.” Here, the “tenth month” follows the Zhou calendar, which corresponds to the eighth month of the Xia (or lunar) calendar—a time when frost is unseasonable and thus considered a climatic aberration. Another account appears in the “*Neichu Shuo*” 内储说 of the *Han Feizi* 韩非子, where Duke Ai of Lu asked Confucius about a differing record in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*: “In winter, the twelfth month, frost fell but did not kill the beans.” In this case, the twelfth month of the Zhou

calendar matches the tenth month in the Xia calendar, a time when frost is expected. Here, the anomaly lies not in the frost's timing, but in its unusually mild effect. Whether these two entries reflect different accounts of the same event, or whether the abnormality lay in the untimely frost in one case and the resilient beans in the other, Confucius's conclusion was consistent. As he is recorded to have said:

"If even Heaven may stray from its course, and plants defy the frost, how much more might the people defy a ruler who has lost the Way?"

天失道，草木犹犯干之，而况于人君乎？

Beyond the cases of untimely frost and anomalous drought, other records from the State of *Lu* show Confucius consistently interpreting unusual natural events through the lens of human governance. One such instance involves a locust plague. According to the *Zuo Zhuan* under the twelfth year of Duke *Ai* of *Lu*, a locust disaster struck in the tenth month of summer. When *Jisun* 季孙 asked Confucius how such an outbreak could occur at that time of year, Confucius attributed it to errors in the official calendar. He explained that he had learned:

"Once the Fire Star recedes, insects should finish hibernation. Yet now the Fire Star still moves westward—this is the calendar officer's mistake."

火伏而后蛰者毕。今火犹西流，司历过也。

This explanation is further elaborated in the "*Bianwu*" 辨物 chapter of the *Kongzi Jiayu* 孔子家语, where *Jikangzi* 季康子 pressed Confucius on how many intercalary months had been omitted. Confucius replied:

"By the tenth month of summer, the Fire Star should have vanished from the sky. Since it is still visible, the intercalary month must have been missed for the second time."

于夏十月，火既没矣。今火见，再失闰也。

Another revealing episode concerns a fire that destroyed several ancestral temples in *Lu*. At the time, Confucius was in the State of *Chen* 陈, accompanying its Marquis on a leisurely excursion, when passers-by brought news that a government building in *Lu* had caught fire and the flames had spread to the ancestral temples. Upon hearing this, Confucius immediately identified the affected temples as those of Duke *Huan* (r. 711–694 BCE) and Duke *Xi* (r. 659–627 BCE). The Marquis, astonished, asked how Confucius could know this from such a distance.

Confucius explained that, according to ritual principles, temples dedicated to ancestors of significant merit and virtue are preserved and not dismantled. However, the kinship ties linking the current ruler to Dukes *Huan* and *Xi* had lapsed, and their virtue was no longer deemed sufficient to warrant the temples' preservation. Since the state itself remained intact, Heaven had sent fire to remove these two temples—implying that the two dukes had, in effect, suffered divine retribution for their insufficient virtue. A few days later, when a messenger from *Lu* arrived and confirmed that the fire had indeed destroyed the temples of Dukes *Huan* and *Xi*, the Marquis of *Chen* remarked to *Zigong*, "Only today do I truly understand the sage's worth." Seizing the moment, *Zigong* urged that, since the sage's insight had been so powerfully demonstrated, the Marquis should more earnestly adopt his teachings and implement his moral instruction.

Confucius consistently interpreted the causes of natural disasters through the lens of the ruler's governance—a perspective not confined to the State of *Lu* but extended to other states such as *Song* 宋. The *Zuo Zhuan* records that in the autumn of 683 BCE, *Song* suffered a severe flood. Duke *Zhuang* of *Lu* sent an envoy to convey his condolences, remarking:

“Heaven has sent relentless heavy rain, damaging the millet harvest. Why has it shown such disregard for the common people?” The ruler of *Song* responded by promptly assuming responsibility, stating: “This disaster is indeed due to my own lack of reverence toward Heaven. Heaven has sent down this calamity, troubling your honored ruler to express concern. I humbly receive your great kindness, though I am unworthy of it.”

Upon hearing this, *Zang Wenzhong* 臧文仲, a minister of *Lu*, praised the ruler of *Song*, observing:

“The State of *Song* may yet prosper. Yu 禹 and King Tang 汤 admitted their faults, and their rise was majestic; Jie 桀 and Zhou 纣 blamed others, and their fall was swift.” (The *Zuo Zhuan*, Duke Zhuang, Year 11)

“禹、汤罪己，其兴也悖焉；桀、纣罪人，其亡也忽焉”

When a state encounters misfortune, it is ritually proper for its ruler to refer to himself humbly and speak with caution and reverence. As recorded in *Han Shi Wai Zhuan* 韩诗外传, when Confucius learned of this incident, he too remarked that “the State of *Song* has hope.” When his disciples asked why, Confucius explained:

“In the past, Jie and Zhou refused to acknowledge their faults, and their ruin came swiftly. Cheng Tang and King Wen knew to take responsibility for their errors, and their prosperity was vigorous. To err and then correct oneself—is that not the mark of integrity?”

昔桀、纣不任其过，其凶也忽焉；成汤、文王知任其过，其兴也勃焉。过而改之，是不过也。

Confucius’ interpretation of natural disasters as consequences of moral failure—rooted in the frameworks of “the unity of Heaven and humanity” (*tianren heyi* 天人合一) and “the harmony between spirits and humans” (*shenren heyi* 神人合一)—firmly situates his thought within the broader tradition of interpreting phenomena through the lenses of *zaiyao* 灾妖 (catastrophes and portents), *guaiyi* 怪异 (anomalies), and *zaiyi* 灾异 (calamitous anomalies). This mode of explanation, with its early origins, matured during the Han dynasty and continued to shape Chinese intellectual and political discourse across subsequent centuries.

Etymologically, *zai* 灾 originally denoted droughts and floods; *yao* 妖 initially described beautiful women, later extending to anomalous or abnormal occurrences; while *yi* 异 meant “appointment” or “employment,” eventually signifying that which is extraordinary. As the lexicon *Shiming* 释名 clarifies, *yi* 异 refers to that which “differs from the normal (*chang* 常).”

The *Zuo Zhuan* offers nuanced distinctions in its use of these terms. Under the 16th year of Duke Xuan, it differentiates “fire” from “disaster”: “a fire caused by humans is called ‘fire’ (*huo* 火); a fire sent by Heaven is called a ‘disaster’ (*zai* 灾).” Similarly, the *Zuo Zhuan* (Duke Xuan, Year 15) categorizes *zai* and *yao* in general terms: “Heavenly irregularities are *zai*; terrestrial irregularities are *yao*.” Each describes forms of natural abnormality—*zai* referring to celestial disturbances, and *yao* to terrestrial oddities. Confucius’ own pairing of “*tianzai* 天灾” (Heaven-sent disasters) and “*diyao* 地妖” (earthly portents) reflects this conceptual division.

The Shanghai Museum bamboo slip text *Three Virtues* links *zai* and *yi* in a single warning system:

“If one should be mindful but is not, Heaven sends down *zai*; if one should desist but does not, Heaven sends down *yi*.”

忌而不忌，天乃降灾；已而不已，天乃降异。

Here, both are understood as forms of celestial admonition.

By the Han dynasty, the compound term *zaiyi*灾异 gained currency, though its semantic emphasis shifted: *zai* came to refer primarily to terrestrial disasters such as droughts, floods, and earthquakes, while *yi* denoted celestial signs like eclipses and meteor showers. Han scholars systematized these as graded divine warnings: terrestrial *zai* served as initial, milder admonitions to the ruler; if these went unheeded, celestial *yi* followed as severe reprimands.

This precise hierarchical interpretation was not present in the Eastern Zhou. According to *Three Virtues*, a ruler's persistent moral negligence would provoke the simultaneous arrival of disasters and anomalies (Z. Wang 2015, pp. 172–82). Although Confucius employed the concepts of *zai*, *yi*, and *guai* 怪 (the strange), he did not combine *zai* and *yi* into a single term.

Finally, *Han Shi Wai Zhuan* 韩诗外传 draws upon an external “Tradition” (*zhuan* 传) to illustrate—through both positive and negative exemplars—the correspondence between human governance and cosmic order:

“The ‘Tradition’ says: Those who govern well follow the proper course of human emotions and innate tendencies, observe the order of yin and yang, comprehend the relationship between root and branch, and harmonize the connection between Heaven and humans. Thus, Heaven and Earth nurture life, and all living beings flourish. Those who do not know how to govern cause emotions to exhaust innate nature, allow yin to override yang, permit the secondary to oppose the primary, and lead people to deceive the *qi* of Heaven. They are reared without good faith, constrained unsuitably—hence disasters arise, strange anomalies appear, all living beings are harmed, and the annual harvest fails to ripen.” (Volume 7, the *Han Shi Wai Zhuan*)

《传》曰：善为政者、循情性之宜，顺阴阳之序，通本末之理，合天人之际，如是、则天地奉养，而生物丰美矣。不知为政者、使情厌性，使阴乘阳，使末逆本，使人诡天气，鞠而不信，郁而不宜，如是，则灾害生，怪异起，群生皆伤，而年谷不熟。

The passage concludes soberly:

“Therefore, when action harms virtue and inaction offers no remedy—when the hesitant manage affairs and the desperate remain ignorant—the natural order is daily overturned, yet they still wish to govern effectively. As the *Book of Songs* says: “All falls to ruin and violence, and no one knows the cause”

是以其动伤德，其静无救，故缓者事之，急者弗知，日反理而欲以为治。《诗》曰：废为残贼，莫知其尤。¹⁷

Confucius and early Chinese thought regarding calamities and omens instructed people to confront natural disasters not by censuring Heaven, but by accepting responsibility and enduring its admonishment. Through introspection and moral reform, humanity could restore the broken covenant of mutual trust between Heaven and humankind.

4. Belief in Natural Deities and Ritual Worship

In the great early Chinese tradition, the belief in natural divinity and deities was intrinsically bound to sacrificial rites and ceremonies—a core component of the religious systems of the Yin and Zhou dynasties.¹⁸ Why did humans, in their belief and desire to communicate with deities, need to engage through sacrifices and ritual? Deities are formless and imageless, silent and voiceless; yet they can manifest their righteous will through tangible and visible signs—whether auspicious omens or calamities. Human piety and devotion, likewise formless and silent, must be conveyed to the deities through visible and audible

forms: rites, music, sacrificial offerings, and bodily gestures. These serve to express inner reverence, to pray for divine protection, to give thanks for blessings received, to confess faults and seek forgiveness, and more. In summary, the aims behind early Chinese belief in deities and the practice of sacrificial rites were threefold: to seek divine protection, to express gratitude and indebtedness, and to engage in moral repentance and self-reform in the presence of the sacred.

In the framework of early Chinese religious belief and ritual practice, the interaction between humans and deities was understood as a form of sacred diplomacy, grounded in the Confucian ethic of reciprocity as applied to the divine-human relationship. (1) Petitioning for divine protection entailed seeking a pledge from the deity, thereby establishing an invisible covenant and a relationship of mutual trust. (2) Expressing gratitude and indebtedness represented the human party's reciprocation—thanking the deities for their guardianship and bestowed blessings. (3) Repentance and moral reform involved confessing one's faults before the deities in order to obtain their understanding and forgiveness. This tripartite structure formed the core of political ethics and sacred diplomacy in classical Chinese religion—a ritual expression of the Confucian spirit of mutual obligation extended to the spiritual realm.

A canonical example is found in the response of King Tang of Shang to a prolonged drought. Engaging in profound self-reflection, he adopted the method of “self-atonement.” As recorded in the *Zuo Zhuan* (Duke Zhuang, Year 11)¹⁹, unlike tyrants such as Jie and Zhou, who rapidly fell from power, exemplary rulers like Yu and Tang prospered precisely through such acts of “self-atonement.” The *Shang Shu* further attests: “If there is guilt, it lies with me, the One Man; I dare not excuse myself” (*Zuidang zhen gong, fufan zishe*. 罪当朕躬, 弗敢自赦).

According to the “*Universal Love III*” of the *Mozi*, Tang declared during a great drought: “The empire is suffering great drought—surely because I have offended Heaven above.” 今天大旱, 即当朕身履, 未知得罪于上下。

He then offered his own person as a living sacrifice, using liturgy to appeal to the deities:

“I, the solitary one, dare to use a black ox to announce to the Supreme Sovereign of Heaven: ‘If there is good, I dare not conceal it; if there is offense, I dare not pardon it. Judgment rests in the heart of God. If the myriad regions have committed offenses, may they fall on me alone. If I have committed offenses, let them not extend to the myriad regions.’”

有善不敢蔽, 有罪不敢赦, 简在帝心, 万方有罪, 即当朕身; 朕身有罪, 无及万方。

This account illustrates that Tang, though exalted as the Son of Heaven and possessing all worldly wealth, did not hesitate to offer his own body as a sacrifice in communication with the Supreme Deity and the spirits. The “*Dalue*” 大略 chapter of the *Xunzi* further preserves the liturgy Tang recited in his rain-prayer:

“Has my governance lost balance? Have the people been brought to distress?

Why does the rain not come in such extremity?

Are palace women overly favored? Are bribes openly accepted?

Why does the rain not come in such extremity?

Do slanderers flourish? Have calumniators risen?

Why does the rain not come in such extremity?”

政不节与? 使民疾与? 何以不雨至斯极也! 宦室荣与? 妇谒盛与? 何以不雨至斯极也! 苞苴行与? 谗夫兴与? 何以不雨至斯极也!

Through this ritual address to Heaven, *Tang* sought forgiveness for his failings, praying that the deities would send down sweet rain and extend their grace to all living beings.

Belief in natural deities was inextricably linked to sacrificial rites in early Chinese tradition—so much so that these visible, structured ceremonies served as a primary medium through which Confucius gave expression to such belief. Confucianism, deeply characterized by its humanistic commitment to ritual and music (*liyue* 礼乐), reflected Confucius's lifelong aspiration to restore the rites-and-music system of the Western Zhou, which had crumbled during the Spring and Autumn period.

Sacrificial ritual constituted an integral part of Confucian practice and of China's millennia-long tradition of elaborate ceremonial observance—often summarized by the classical formula, “three hundred rites and three thousand rules of demeanor” (*liyi sanbai, weiyi sanqian* 礼仪三百，威仪三千). Unsurprisingly, it also became a major target of critique during China's modern Enlightenment, when traditional rituals—particularly their hierarchical and anachronistic aspects—were often deemed incompatible with modern social life (Fingarette 1972, pp. 1–30). Yet it must be acknowledged that ritual, as a mode of human existence, remains indispensable; human society cannot function entirely without ceremonial form.

Past and present critics have sometimes dismissed Confucian ritual as empty formalism—or even hypocrisy—but such charges tend to conflate flaws in performance with flaws in ethical principle. Confucius not only advocated sacrificial offerings to natural deities but also established foundational norms for their conduct. Central among these was the requirement that the chief officiant and all participants be genuine believers, whose inner hearts were moved by piety and reverence (Qin 2020). As emphasized in the *Jitong* 祭统 of the *Book of Rites*:

“Of the five canonical rites, none is more important than sacrifice. Sacrifice does not come from without—it springs from within, born of the heart. With a heart of reverence, one performs it through ritual. Thus, only the worthy can fully realize the meaning of sacrifice.”

礼有五经，莫重于祭。夫祭者，非物自外至者也，自中出生于心也；心怵而奉之以礼。是故，唯贤者能尽祭之义。

This idea resonates with Confucius's own teaching that sincerity is essential in sacrifice—without it, the act loses its meaning:

“If I do not participate in a sacrifice with full sincerity, it is as though I did not sacrifice at all.” (the *Analects* 3.12)

吾不与祭，如不祭。

The spiritual communion between the human heart and the divine in such rites reflects a core Confucian conviction: that true virtue is an inner attainment made visible through embodied, ritual action.²⁰

Secondly, sacrificial practice operates within a well-defined jurisdictional framework. Both the officiant and the objects of worship are bound by hierarchical and territorial limits—an integral aspect of the classical ritual system. In other words, sacrifice was characterized by exclusivity and boundaries: different ranks of authority corresponded to distinct sacrificial targets and domains. Those performing rites were strictly forbidden from overstepping their designated roles. As articulated in the *Book of Rites* · *Quli* 曲礼:

“The Son of Heaven sacrifices to Heaven and Earth, the four directions, mountains and rivers, and the five tutelary deities, throughout the year. The feudal lords sacrifice to the spirits within their domains—to its mountains and rivers and the five tutelary deities—throughout the year. The grand officers sacrifice to

the five tutelary deities throughout the year. The *shi*士 (knights/scholars) sacrifice only to their own ancestors.”

天子祭天地，祭四方，祭山川，祭五祀，岁遍。诸侯方祀，祭山川，祭五祀，岁遍。大夫祭五祀，岁遍。士祭其先。

In the *Book of Rites · Liyun*礼运, Confucius emphasized that sacrifices to natural spirits constituted one category within a broader system of collective worship—which included celestial deities, earth altars, ancestral temples, and mountain and river spirits—noting that “mountains and rivers serve to host ghosts and spirits. (山川所以俟鬼神也)” Moreover, spirits associated with different geographical spaces fell under specific jurisdictional boundaries; to transgress these was to exceed one’s ritual authority.

Should one perform sacrifices beyond their designated scope, the spirits would not accept the offerings. As the *Book of Rites · Quli II* states:

“Among all sacrifices, there are those which, once abolished, may not be restored; and those which, once established, may not be abolished. To sacrifice to a spirit that is not one’s proper object of worship is called ‘presumptive rites’.”

凡祭,有其废之莫敢举也, 有其举之莫敢废也非其所祭而祭之, 名曰淫祀。

Confucius explicitly condemned the act of “sacrificing to spirits not one’s own” as a form of flattery—*chǎn* (谄)—as recorded in the *Analects* 2.24. According to the *Zuo Zhuan* (Duke Xi, Year 10), it is clearly stated that “spirits do not accept sacrifices from those not of their proper kind, just as the people do not sacrifice to ancestors outside their own lineage 神不歆非类, 民不祀非族.” Sacrifices offered beyond one’s ritual jurisdiction not only fail to be received by the spirits but also bring no blessing to the officiant—as summarized in the *Book of Rites · Quli II*: “presumptive rites bring no blessing. 淫祀无福”.

It is precisely within this framework that Confucius praised the conduct of Duke Zhao of Chu. As recorded in the *Zuo Zhuan* (Duke Ai, Year 6):

“Duke Zhao once fell ill, and divination indicated that ‘the River [God] is causing the calamity.’ The duke, however, refused to perform the sacrifice. When his ministers urged that offerings be made in the suburban altar, he replied: ‘According to the sacrificial regulations of the Three Dynasties, one must not exceed the bounds of one’s domain. The rivers Jiang, Han, Sui, and Zhang mark the territorial limits of Chu. Misfortune or blessing comes accordingly—it is not without cause. Even if I lack virtue, the Yellow River is not to blame.’ Thus, he did not perform the sacrifice.

初, 昭王有疾, 卜曰: ‘河为祟。’王弗祭。大夫请祭诸郊。王曰: ‘三代命祀, 祭不越望。江、汉、睢、漳, 楚之望也。祸福之至, 不是过也。不谷虽不德, 河非所获罪也。’遂弗祭。孔子曰: ‘楚昭王知大道矣。其不失国也, 宜哉!’

Confucius, on hearing this, remarked: ‘Duke Zhao of Chu understood the great principle. It is no accident that he did not lose his state.’ “Confucius’s praise for Duke Zhao rested on two key grounds: first, the duke emphasized the role of virtue in governance rather than shifting responsibility to supernatural forces; second, he adhered scrupulously to the ritual norm that one must not sacrifice to spirits beyond one’s designated jurisdiction—since the Yellow River lay outside the sacrificial scope of Chu. Both principles—ethical self-cultivation and ritual propriety—were central to Confucius’s teachings.

Third, sacrificial offerings were governed by explicit regulations. The tacit understanding and trust between humans and deities were established through prayer and materially expressed through ritual offerings. As recorded in *The Great Drought of the State of Lu*, Confucius advised Duke Ai of Lu, during the severe drought, not to begrudge the

use of precious objects such as “jade tablets, bi-discs, silks, and brocades” when sacrificing to the mountain and river spirits. Confucius also criticized *Zigong* for his reluctance to provide a live sheep for the *gaoshuo* 告朔 (new moon) ceremony, not because he valued the animal lightly, but because he sought to preserve the integrity and symbolic meaning of the rite. When *Zigong* proposed abolishing the sacrificial sheep on the grounds that the ceremony had lost its practical function, Confucius replied pointedly: “You care about the sheep; I care about the ritual. 尔爱其羊，我爱其礼”. As to the appropriate quantity and quality of offerings, the guiding principle was to align with the standards set by the ritual system—neither falling short nor exceeding what was proper. The *Book of Rites* articulates this ideal:

“Only the worthy can prepare offerings fully, and only full preparation enables a proper sacrifice. Therefore, in the sacrifice of the worthy: they bring forth sincerity, loyalty, and reverence; they present the required objects; they conduct it in accordance with ritual; they settle it with music; and they harmonize it with the season” (*Jitong*, the *Book of Rites*).

唯贤者能备，能备然后能祭。是故，贤者之祭也：致其诚信与其忠敬，奉之以物，道之以礼，安之以乐，参之以时。

The same text further emphasizes two complementary aspects of sacrificial practice:

(1) The completeness of the offerings, which symbolizes total accordance with the Way:

“In the sacrifice of the worthy, blessings are sure to be received—not what the world commonly calls blessings. ‘Blessing’ means completeness, and completeness is the name for perfect harmony... When nothing fails to accord, it is called ‘complete.’ This means inner fulfillment and outer conformity with the Way.”

贤者之祭也，必受其福。非世所谓福也。福者，备也；备者，百顺之名也。无所不顺者，谓之备。言：内尽于己，而外顺于道也。

(2) The integration of external offerings and internal intention:

“All that Heaven produces and Earth rears, whatever is fit for offering, is presented, displaying the abundance of things. Externally, all objects are provided; internally, the intention is utterly full—this is the heart of sacrifice.”

凡天之所生，地之所长，苟可荐者，莫不咸在，示尽物也。外则尽物，内则尽志，此祭之心也。

In practice, whether more or fewer offerings were appropriate could be adapted to the sacrifice’s circumstances. Just as more frequent sacrifices were not necessarily better, nor were more numerous offerings always superior.²¹ Thus, Confucius advocated: “In rites, rather than extravagance, better be frugal. 礼，与其奢也，宁俭” (the *Analects* 3.4). Indeed, this dimension is frequently overlooked by critics. While they are quick to dismiss Confucian rites as empty formalism, they consistently ignore what might be termed Confucius’s concept of the “uncrowned rites”—that profound inner reverence and spiritual devotion which, though lacking visible regalia, possesses the solemn authority of a king without a crown.

5. Conclusions

In summary, this study has examined Confucius’s belief in natural deities and his views on sacrifice through three principal dimensions. It demonstrates that Confucius’s religious outlook encompassed not only faith in Heaven (*Tian*) and the Mandate of Heaven, as well as ancestral polytheism, but also a distinct and coherent belief in natural deities. As an integral yet often overlooked component of his broader religious doctrine, this as-

pect of Confucian thought has received relatively little scholarly attention. By exploring it in depth, this inquiry seeks to address that gap, thereby illuminating the significant role that belief in natural deities played within the complex structure of Confucius's religious worldview.

Based on this inquiry, we may discern a broader historical trajectory: from the Three Dynasties through the Eastern Zhou period, the Chinese religious tradition established by Confucius and Confucianism demonstrated remarkable vitality and continuity.²² Although for an extended historical period Confucianism was oriented toward becoming a state religion—a state-sanctioned form that concluded in the late Qing Dynasty—it was ultimately not eradicated by the New Culture Movement, nor by the revolutionary period from 1949 to 1979. While scientism, positivism, materialism, and atheism remained powerful forces and appeared triumphant on the surface, my research suggests that in the great debates of the New Culture Movement, science did not achieve total victory, nor was religion entirely defeated (Z. Wang 2018). This dynamic persists in contemporary China. Although overt religious expression may not be prominent, substantial latent forces endure, and religious faith (in the broad sense) continues to shape the spiritual world of the Chinese people. During festivals honoring spirits and deities, incense continues to burn unceasingly among Chinese communities. Yet institutionalized, church-centered religion has never been the dominant form in China. What continues to characterize the Chinese spiritual landscape is elite religion and the beliefs of social elites—whether expressed through lay Buddhism, Daoism, or Confucian scholarship. Religious faith is never truly established by external imposition. Without inner devotion, even daily church attendance holds little meaning. This explains why Confucianism insists that ritual and sacrifice must originate from sincere reverence; otherwise, it is better to forgo external forms altogether.

Expanding our perspective reveals a profound paradigm shift: just as classical physics and the mechanistic worldview yielded to relativity, vitalism, and organic philosophy, and as scientism and materialism gradually made way for complexity science, humanistic values, and ecological ethics, so too have religious beliefs evolved toward new forms of pluralism.²³ Faith has transcended narrow theistic definitions to encompass commitment to ideals, values, and existential meaning. The reverence for nature that humanity increasingly lost in the modern era is now being consciously restored. While technologically driven economic forces and instrumental rationality remain influential, ethical frameworks—particularly religious ethics—are reasserting their relevance in new ways. The natural ethics and bioethics inherent in Daoism and Buddhism already guide their adherents toward respecting and revering nature. Similarly, Confucianism's vision of cosmic unity and its holistic interconnection between humanity and all things provide a robust traditional foundation for constructing ecological and natural ethics in China. Confucius's belief in natural spirits coexisted harmoniously with his emphasis on "understanding the principles of nature." From a rigid formal logical standpoint, such coexistence may appear contradictory—as though A cannot simultaneously embody B or C. Yet complex science, ethics, and spiritual worldviews do not treat binary logic as the only valid framework. In Confucian thought, nature is dynamic, functional, and self-organizing; its vitality, consciousness, and agency are not matters of absolute presence or absence but of degree and manifestation. To describe nature as rational or divine reflects a difference in emphasis, not a mutually exclusive choice. Humanity imbues nature with spirit and value, while nature, in turn, endows human life with meaning, faith, and a sense of reverence. For Confucius and the tradition he inspired, these two movements are mutually reinforcing.

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Notes

- ¹ For the collapse of historical determinism, see Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism* (Popper 1957).
- ² In my view, "religion" constitutes a synthesis of polytheism and pluralistic rationality, a convergence of transcendent and secular values, and a unity of inner experience and external validation. The realm of "divine spirits" integrates meditative and intuitive forces that lie beyond manifestation—along with the awe they evoke—with tangible imagery and symbolic representations, such as figurative and pictorial forms. Extensive research has been conducted on early Chinese conceptions of divine spirits. For instance, refer to *Searching for Spirit: Shen and Sacrifice in Warring States and Han Philosophy and Ritual* (Sterckx 2007). I advocate a pluralistic understanding of religion and the divine, rejecting all forms of religious monism. To me, "sacredness" encompasses not only humanity's conceptions of the sublime and majestic nature of the divine, along with the reverence and faith directed toward it, but also the sublime and majestic qualities that humans attribute to specific entities and symbols—such as justice, love, freedom, and life itself. For further exploration of this dimension, see Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (Otto 1958).
- ³ Methodologically, the re-evaluation of early Chinese texts—through the integration of newly excavated materials with received documents, as well as advances in the study of works such as the *Book of Rites* and the *Confucian Family Sayings* and the verification of their overall reliability—has generally established a new foundation for exploring Confucius and early Confucian thought. For further reference, see Li Xueqin's *Lost Texts on Bamboo Slips and Silk Scrolls and the History of Scholarship* (X. Li 2001), Qiu Xigui's *Ten Lectures on Chinese Excavated Texts* (Qiu 2004), Li Ling's *Bamboo Slips, Silk Manuscripts, and Ancient Books: The Flow of Scholarly Thought* (L. Li 2008), and Yang Chaoming and Song Lilin's *Comprehensive Interpretation of The Confucian Family Sayings* (Yang and Song 2009). It is worth noting that significant skepticism toward early Chinese history and texts persists in overseas scholarship, particularly in Europe and America, due in part to insufficient engagement with newly excavated manuscripts and early Confucian literature. By contrast, in Japan, such skepticism has been substantially tempered, largely because many Japanese scholars have actively incorporated these newly discovered texts and conducted extensive research on them. Additionally, the primary editions of classical texts used in this thesis are as follows: Sun Qinshan, *Lunyu Benjie* (Q. Sun 2013); Yang Tianyu, *Liji Yizhu* (Yang 1997); Yang Chaoming and Song Lilin, *Kongzijiayu Tongjie* (Yang and Song 2009); and Li Ling, *Guodian Chujiang Jiaoduji* (L. Li 2002).
- ⁴ For studies on Chinese religion and Confucian religion or religiosity, see Christian Jochim's *The Religious Spirit of China* (Jochim 1991); Togawa, Hachiya, and Mizoguchi's *History of Confucianism* (Togawa et al. 1989); Chen Lai's 陈来 *Ancient Religion and Ethics: The Roots of Confucian Thought* (Chen 1996), and Tu Weiming's *On the Religious Nature of Confucianism* (Tu 1999).
- ⁵ For insights into Confucius' religious views and beliefs, refer to Benjamin Schwartz's "The Religious Dimension of Confucianism and the Concept of 'Ming'" (Schwartz 2009, pp. 175–89). Zhao Fasheng's 赵法生 "Confucius's Concept of Heaven's Mandate and Forms of Transcendence" (Zhao 2011, pp. 79–88) and "Confucius's Philosophical Breakthrough and the Religion of the Three Dynasties" (Zhao 2024, pp. 14–24).
- ⁶ Regarding the methodology of religious studies, I adopt research approaches pioneered by anthropologists that remain valid today—such as the framework developed by Malinowski (Malinowski 1986, pp. 3–78)—as well as insights from theologians and philosophers like Paul Tillich (Tillich 1957).
- ⁷ Confucius's explanation of spirits and deities in *The Doctrine of the Mean*, along with the rituals honoring them, corroborates this point: "The Master said, 'The virtue of spirits and deities is truly magnificent. They cannot be seen when looked upon, nor heard when listened to, yet they permeate all things and cannot be separated from them. They cause all people under heaven to purify themselves, don their finest garments, and perform sacrifices in their honor. They are ever-present, as if above us, as if beside us.'"
- ⁸ The ancient Chinese concept of "Heaven" was multifaceted. Feng Youlan identified five distinct meanings: Heaven as material substance, Heaven as sovereign or will, Heaven as destiny, Heaven as nature, and Heaven as principle or reason (see Feng 2000, p. 281). Ikeda Tomohisa posits three primary interpretations: religious, philosophical, and scientific (see Ikeda 2005, p. 101).
- ⁹ Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by the author.
- ¹⁰ In Beijing, China today, during the Ghost Festival, old residents of the capital city still burn special paper symbolizing money at major intersections without restraint. Despite polluting the air and obstructing pedestrian traffic, officials, fully aware of the inappropriate nature and impact, remain powerless to intervene. State-sponsored atheism often functions as a political slogan rather than a deeply held conviction; it ultimately fails to resonate with the intrinsic spiritual dimensions of the human heart.

- 11 I grew up in a rural family. Although my father was a Party member and even served as the deputy secretary of the village Party branch, none of this affected the traditional rituals of worshiping deities during festivals in our household.
- 12 The term “heavenly deities” generally refers to God, the Sun, the Eastern Mother, the Western Mother, clouds, wind, rain, and snow. “Human spirits” refer to former kings, former lords, former ministers, former fathers and mothers. For further reference on this topic, see Chen Lai’s *Ancient Religion and Ethics: The Roots of Confucian Thought*. (Chen 1996, pp. 119–24).
- 13 This account also appears in the *Jingshen* 敬慎 chapter of the *Shuoyu* 说苑.
- 14 This tradition is extremely ancient, as recorded in the Book of Documents: “Sacrifices were offered to the Supreme Deity, rites performed for the six ancestral deities, offerings made to the mountains and rivers, and worship extended to all the gods.”
- 15 This is also the logic of a nation’s rise and fall as recorded in *The Commentary of Zuo*.
- 16 After presenting his disaster relief proposals to Duke Ai, Confucius asked Zigong for his opinion on the suggestions. Zigong’s response revealed his candor and skepticism toward sacrificial traditions. He acknowledged that urging the ruler to rectify punishment and virtue was appropriate, but deemed the practice of sacrificing precious objects to mountains and rivers overly pedantic.
- 17 A notable principle recorded in *The Outer Transmission of the Han Poetry* (Vol. 8) posits a direct bureaucratic accountability for cosmic disorder: should nature fall into chaos, the officials governing celestial and terrestrial affairs are to be deemed responsible.
- 18 For information on sacrificial rites in early Chinese Confucian etiquette, see Wang Jun’s *Sacrificial Rites in Ancient China* (J. Wang 2015).
- 19 Other early texts also document this episode with slightly more elaboration. See, for example, the chapters “Shun ming” in *The Annals of Lü Buwei* and “Zhushu Xun” in the *Huainanzi*. While these accounts differ in certain details, they nonetheless corroborate the occurrence of a severe drought during the reign of King Tang.
- 20 The sincerity of the heart is indeed equated with reverence for the divine: “The Son of Heaven and the feudal lords all till the fields; the Queen and the noble ladies all raise silkworms. They personally demonstrate their sincerity and devotion. Sincerity and devotion are called ‘fulfillment’; fulfillment is called ‘reverence.’ Only when reverence is fulfilled can one properly serve the divine spirits. This is the way of sacrifice.” (*The Book of Rites: Sacrificial Rites*)
- 21 On this point, the *Book of Rites · Ji yi* offers a guiding principle: “Rituals should not be performed too frequently, for frequency leads to weariness, and weariness breeds disregard. Nor should rituals be held too sparingly, for sparseness results in neglect, and neglect leads to forgetfulness.” 祭不欲数，数则烦，烦则不敬。祭不欲疏，疏则怠，怠则忘。
- 22 Research emphasizing continuity in the religious traditions of early China across the Yin and Zhou periods, rather than a simple linear shift from religion to philosophy, is addressed in several key studies. See, for example, Chang Kuo-chih, “Continuity and Discontinuity: A Draft of a New Theory of the Origins of a Civilization” 连续与破裂：一个文明起源新说的草稿, in *The Bronze Age of China* 中国青铜时代 (Chang 1999, pp. 484–96); and Chen Lai, *Ancient Religion and Ethics: The Roots of Confucian Thought* 古代宗教与伦理：儒家思想的根源 (Chen 1996, pp. 95–223). Important articles include Cui Bo, “Exploring Yin-Zhou Religious Thought: Starting from Oracle Bone Inscriptions and the *I Ching*” 殷周宗教思想探析——以甲骨文和《易经》为考察中心, (Cui 2005, pp. 49–60); Yu Zhiping, “A Study on Confucian Attire, Confucians, and Religious Life in the Yin-Shang Period” 殷商时期儒服、儒者及其宗教生活考, (Yu 2011, pp. 5–12); and Hong Xiuping, “The Humanistic Turn in the Yin-Zhou Period and the Religious Nature of Confucianism” 殷周时期的人文转向与儒家的宗教性, (Hong 2014, pp. 36–53).
- 23 This emerging scientific paradigm transcends the limitations of singular causal determinism. As a new mode of thinking, its profound resonances with both Eastern and Western philosophical traditions have gained increasing recognition and scholarly attention. For further exploration of this interdisciplinary convergence, see Capra and Dong’s relevant discussions (Capra [1975] 1999; Dong 1991).

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