



Research Article

Unity of Heaven and Humanity: Ecological Philosophy in the Pre-Qin Period

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Abstract

The concept of Unity of Heaven and Humanity (Tian Ren He Yi) constitutes one of the foundational worldviews of Chinese civilization. Emerging from a long agrarian tradition, it reflects an enduring vision of the interconnectedness between human beings and the natural world. This paper examines the Pre-Qin understanding of Tian Ren He Yi as an early ecological worldview that is neither merely mythological nor purely philosophical, but a moral-cosmological framework integrating reverence for nature, sensitivity to seasonal rhythms, and ethical restraint. It argues that this concept functioned simultaneously as a metaphysical principle and a normative guide for human-nature relations, while offering valuable insights for contemporary debates on sustainability and environmental ethics. Drawing on close textual analysis of major classical works—including the *Zhouyi* (*Book of Changes*), *Liji* (*Book of Rites*), and *Zhuangzi*—the study explores three interrelated dimensions: (1) conceptions of natural order and seasonal cycles; (2) ritual practices of gratitude, worship, and sacrifice to Heaven; and (3) approaches to the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. Building on the interpretive frameworks of Roger T. Ames, John Grim, and Mary Evelyn Tucker, the paper interprets Pre-Qin cosmology not as myth or religion in the conventional sense, but as a relational ethical system in which metaphysics, ritual practice, and ecological responsibility are inseparably intertwined. The paper contends that Pre-Qin ecological thought presents a relational and non-anthropocentric alternative to environmental philosophy. Rather than positioning humans as masters of nature, it emphasizes harmony, reciprocity, and moral responsibility within the broader cosmic order. By highlighting the ethical and political implications of Unity of Heaven and Humanity, this study contributes to contemporary environmental philosophy by introducing a distinctive Eastern perspective for rethinking sustainability, ecological governance, and the relationship between humanity and the natural world.

Keywords

Pre-Qin Philosophy, Unity of Heaven and Humanity, Ecological Ethics, Chinese Cosmology, Human-nature Relations, Environmental Humanities

1. Introduction

China, with its extensive historical heritage, developed a rich agricultural civilization profoundly influenced by human interactions with nature. In ancient times, nature represented

a formidable and mysterious force, initially perceived by humans with awe, reverence, and fear. Early human communities, indistinct from their natural surroundings, attributed supernatural and spiritual significance to natural phenomena,

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embodying their experiences in rituals and beliefs. Historical accounts attribute the significant philosophical shift of clearly distinguishing between human and divine domains to legendary rulers Zhuanxu and Emperor Yao. However, despite this distinction, ancient Chinese societies maintained a profound spiritual connection with natural phenomena, epitomized by practices involving witchcraft and ritual intermediation, through which communities sought divine favor, especially during natural calamities.

From early on, traditional Chinese culture developed philosophical inquiries into the relationships and interdependencies between natural phenomena and human society. Central to this philosophical heritage is the concept of “Harmony between Heaven and Humanity”, which emphasizes balance and integration between human activities and the natural order. Over time, this culminated in the formation of the worldview—Unity of Heaven and Humanity.

Following the interpretive frameworks of Roger T. Ames and John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *this paper treats Pre-Qin cosmology not as myth or religion, but as a system of relational ethics—an ontological worldview in which ritual, metaphysics, and ecological conduct are integrated*. It specifically analyzes three dimensions: first, ancient conceptualizations and knowledge regarding natural laws and temporal rhythms; second, practices of gratitude, worship, and ritual sacrifice to heaven; and third, historical strategies for the conservation and protection of natural resources (including plants, animals, landscapes, and water resources, etc.). This paper contributes to the emerging field of environmental philosophy by foregrounding a Pre-Qin ecological worldview as a valuable non-Western framework for rethinking sustainability.¹

2. Calendrical Consciousness and the Agricultural Ethics of Early Dynasties

In early Chinese civilization, human communities relied on fishing, hunting, and later agriculture as their primary modes of subsistence, forming cultural practices deeply attuned to the rhythms of the natural world. While humans made effective use of natural resources, they were simultaneously constrained by the cyclical patterns and limitations imposed by nature itself. These reciprocal conditions gave rise to a heightened awareness of ecological balance and seasonal change. Mythological narratives, such as that of Pangu separating Heaven and Earth and transforming into elements of the natural world, symbolically established a cosmological foundation for the affinity between humans and nature.

Due to the limited productivity of early society, the human-

nature relationship was characterized by reverence and passive dependence. People observed and honored natural phenomena, often through ritualized expressions of gratitude and worship. This early worldview was marked by deference rather than domination, positioning humanity as a participant in, rather than a master over, the natural order. In contrast to early Western traditions that have historically emphasized human sovereignty over nature, ancient Chinese cosmology posited a holistic vision in which subject and object, human and nature, formed an indivisible whole. This ontological unity laid the groundwork for the enduring ideal of harmony between Heaven and Humanity.

2.1. Calendrical Consciousness and Agrarian Time

During the Xia Dynasty, environmental challenges such as floods and droughts were frequent and deeply affected daily life. The *Book of History* recounts the story of Gun, appointed during the reign of Emperor Yao to manage catastrophic flooding. Gun’s approach—constructing barriers to obstruct water flow—ultimately failed after nine years. His successor, Yu, adopted a radically different strategy: he worked with the natural terrain, dredging rivers and guiding water along its natural courses. According to the text, Yu “cut trees along the hills to serve as signposts or boundary markers, identified and named high mountains and large rivers as the boundaries of states.” (*Book of History*) By following the contours of the land and respecting natural patterns, Yu achieved not only flood control but also a model for ecological governance.

Yu’s method exemplified the principle of adapting to nature rather than attempting to conquer it. His division of the territory into nine regions based on topographical features established a geo-political and ecological framework for managing rivers, mountains, lakes, and plains in accordance with their inherent characteristics. This early form of environmental engineering, deeply embedded in cosmological thinking, promoted the idea that peace and order could be attained through alignment with the rhythms of nature. Such practices reflect a foundational ethos in Chinese ecological thought: human flourishing is inseparable from the harmonious functioning of the natural world.

The Xia Dynasty further institutionalized this ethos through calendrical systems that aligned human activity with natural and astronomical cycles. Based on careful observation of the sun, moon, stars, and phenological changes, the Xia developed a calendar to structure seasonal agricultural and social activities. One key example appears in the *Yi Zhou Shu* (逸周书, *Lost Book of Zhou*), which records prohibitions attributed to

¹ While previous studies have emphasized harmony and interdependence, e.g., Tu Weiming has evolved the Confucian concept of “Unity of Heaven and Humanity” into an ecological philosophical framework [10]; Meng Peiyuan systematically articulates the ecological dimensions of Confucian *Ren-xue* (仁学), contending that the extension of *Ren* to the natural world forms the ethical foundation of Confucian ecological thought [3]; Qiao Qingji reconstructs Confucian ecological thought by

proposing a tripartite framework that delineates the core dimensions of Confucian ecological philosophy [8]. This paper foregrounds the normative and political dimensions of “Unity of Heaven and Humanity”, arguing that it anticipates contemporary environmental governance discourse.

Yu: “Do not deforest with axes in spring, in order to protect the growth of grass and trees; do not cast nets in rivers during summer, in order to protect the growth of fish and turtles.” The rationale behind these prohibitions was to ensure that each species could develop in accordance with its seasonal rhythm. The text continues: “Thus, all life thrives appropriately, each thing retains its nature, human beings fulfill their roles, and nature operates according to its timing, leading to abundance and prosperity for all.” (*Yi Zhou Shu*) These early calendrical guidelines, along with the *Xia Xiaozheng* (夏小正, The small calendar of the Xia)—a text recording monthly observations of celestial phenomena, phenological indicators, which provided the temporal framework for both agricultural activities and the corresponding social duties of the ruler and officials—demonstrate a sophisticated grasp of temporal cycles and their ethical significance. As Wang Lihua notes, this calendrical coordination between natural and social rhythms laid the groundwork for a culturally embedded ecological time-consciousness: The Xia Dynasty’s seasonal rituals and prohibitions not only reflected people’s understanding of nature, but also constituted the institutional foundation for rhythmically organized social life [9].

The Shang Dynasty continued the tradition of revering nature through a complex system of sacrificial rites directed toward both celestial and terrestrial deities. The cosmos was understood hierarchically, with “Heaven” presiding over both human affairs and natural phenomena. All human actions, especially those of political leaders, were seen as subordinate to the mandate of Heaven, known as “Destiny” (tianming 天命). According to Sima Qian in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, King Tang of Shang once instructed his people to “open the net on one side” (wang kai san mian 网开三面), demonstrating a principle of mercy toward hunted animals. This story illustrates a form of ecological benevolence: a recognition that even when human beings exert power over other life forms, restraint and reverence remain essential. To some extent, this gesture of compassion toward non-human creatures can be seen as reflecting the moral dimension of Shang-era ecological awareness, in which natural life was embedded within a cosmological and ethical order.

The Zhou Dynasty further advanced the idea of ecological governance by implementing explicit regulations to limit the over-exploitation of natural resources. Rulers promulgated laws governing logging, fishing, and hunting, ensuring that such activities conformed to the reproductive and growth cycles of plants and animals. King Wen of Zhou institutionalized this philosophy through decrees that reflected his commitment to virtue as a guiding principle in governing nature. As recorded in the *Yi Zhou Shu*, he cautioned,

In the forests and mountains, axes were not to be used out of season, so as to allow the growth of trees and grasses; in the rivers and marshes, nets were not to be cast out of season, so as to allow the growth of fish and turtles; neither fawns nor eggs were to be taken, so as to allow the growth of birds and beasts.

This emphasis on seasonal regulation reflected a growing awareness among Zhou thinkers of natural rhythms and their implications for sustainable human livelihoods. The *Book of History* affirmed this ethos, noting that “the key to solving the people’s food problem lies in grasping the seasons and organizing production accordingly.” (*Book of History*) Thus, the notion of acting in accordance with seasonal rhythms (yi shi 以时) became foundational for agriculture, animal husbandry, and environmental management. Recognizing and respecting the patterns of nature became both a practical necessity and a moral obligation. By aligning their activities with the flow of the seasons, Zhou society laid the groundwork for long-term coexistence with the natural world, foreshadowing later Confucian and Daoist approaches to ecological ethics.

At the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty, the notion of “Destiny” was increasingly intertwined with morality. The *Book of History* states, “Heaven is fair and impartial; it always supports those who are virtuous.” This articulation laid the philosophical groundwork for what might be termed an early form of natural ethics. In the Zhou worldview, Heaven was not merely a celestial force but a moral arbiter, whose favor was contingent on human virtue. Due to the era’s low level of productivity, human beings perceived themselves as vulnerable within the broader natural order and thus accepted their subordination to Heaven’s will. In this framework, the ethical relationship between humanity and nature was mediated by reverence for cosmic order. The *Book of Songs* captures this sentiment vividly during a period of severe drought under King Xuan of the Western Zhou: “Why do you treat the people in this way?” The king laments, as the entire nation—from the outskirts to the palace—turns toward Heaven in desperate hope for relief. In such expressions, nature appears mysterious and awe-inspiring, its power capable of both nurturing and punishing human society. People placed their trust in Heaven, appealing to its justice and mercy during times of crisis. This reverential posture toward nature, though partly rooted in fear, simultaneously fostered an ethic of harmony and humility. Thus, ecological consciousness in the Zhou period was not merely instrumental but morally imbued: to live in accordance with Heaven’s mandate was also to live in balance with the natural world.

2.2. Sacrificial Practices and Ritual Ecology

Sacrifice, in early Chinese society, served not only a spiritual purpose but also functioned as a mechanism for regulating the human relationship with the forces of nature. Mountains, rivers, and land were all considered sacred entities and thus became objects of worship. The ancients believed that mountains could serve as medium between Heaven and Earth, with mountain deities presiding over ecological transformations. As the *Guoyu* (国语, *Discourses of the States*) states: “The gods of the mountains and rivers all contribute to the benefit of the people”. Consequently, the grasses, trees, soils,

stones, and creatures inhabiting these sacred spaces were imbued with spiritual significance and protected accordingly.

Sacrifices to nature deities were acts of reverence and gratitude toward Heaven and Earth for their generative powers. They reflected an ethic of ecological humility rooted in the belief that human beings must align themselves with the rhythms and mandates of the cosmos. This moral logic extended to practical governance, as seen in the Zhou Dynasty's prescriptions for harvesting and hunting in accordance with seasonal cycles. Such ritualized timing reflected the deeper cosmological values embedded in the rites: "Therefore, those above honor Heaven, those below venerate Earth, and the reverence for ancestors and sovereigns comprise the three central pillars of ritual propriety [2]."

During the Western Zhou period, King Wen formulated the Fa Chong Ling (伐崇令, Decree for the Campaign Against Chong), a military edict notable, as recorded in the *Shuo Yuan* (说苑, *Garden of Stories*): "Do not kill indiscriminately, do not destroy dwellings, do not fill wells, do not cut down trees, and do not scatter the six types of livestock. Those who violate these commands shall not be pardoned from death [1]." This declaration exemplifies an early codification of wartime environmental ethics, limiting harm to both human and natural life. In addition, the Zhou court established a complex bureaucratic system to manage and protect natural resources. Official posts such as Shan Yu 山虞, Lin Heng 林衡, Chuan Yu 川虞, and Ze Yu 泽虞 were designated to oversee the mountains, forests, rivers, and marshlands respectively. Their responsibilities included seasonal regulation of hunting, logging, fishing, and fire prevention. These roles were coordinated under broader administrative bodies of Yu Heng 虞衡—an institutional system that was inherited and further developed by later dynasties—and Sou Mu 蓐牧, which were specifically tasked with ensuring that ecological exploitation occurred in a timely and respectful manner. This early institutionalization of ecological management reflects a systematic effort to align governance with natural rhythms and the profound sensitivity to ecological integrity of this period.

These administrative measures, grounded in cosmological and moral reasoning, marked the beginning of conscious environmental governance. They also laid the ethical groundwork for the Confucian ideal of "Ren", or benevolence, as an organizing principle of both social and natural order. Indeed, in Zhou moral discourse, metaphors of nature—such as "Gan Tang" 甘棠, a pear tree associated with virtuous governance—were often invoked to praise officials. This symbolic convergence between moral virtue and natural imagery constitutes an early form of ecological aesthetics, which envisioned harmony between governance, ethics, and nature.

The land, as the source of sustenance and life, was understood in early Chinese culture as having an intimate relationship with humanity. Proper management of human-land relations was considered vital to ecological wellbeing and the long-term stability of civilization. This reverence for the earth

was ritually expressed in widespread land worship practices, including the construction of She 社 temples and the designation of specific festival days to honor the Earth deity. These practices reflected both gratitude for the land's fertility and a spiritual imperative to care for it. The *Rites of Zhou* records the existence of an official position known as Caoren 草人, whose responsibility was to oversee the cultivation and maintenance of arable land. Zhou officials were already conscious of the importance of improving soil fertility, advocating for soil enrichment and the planting of suitable crops based on local conditions. Moreover, the text details the implementation of a fallow-tillage system, in which agricultural land was alternately cultivated and left to rest. This rotational practice not only optimized yields but also preserved the vitality of the soil, reflecting an early awareness of ecological sustainability. The integration of land stewardship into state bureaucracy reveals the Zhou dynasty's advanced understanding of natural governance and its philosophical commitment to the symbiotic relationship between humans and the natural world.

The Zhou ritual system further reflected ecological sensibilities through sacrificial architecture and practice. In the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, the belief in the animacy of all things—all living things have spirits—underpinned rituals of veneration and gratitude toward nature. This worldview found architectural expression in the construction of the Mingtang 明堂, a ceremonial hall where the ruler aligned himself with cosmic order through ritual observances. As a ritual space, the Mingtang symbolized the cosmological unity between Heaven and Humanity, embodying the ecological value of mutual correspondence between natural rhythms and human governance. Regulations surrounding the emperor's activities within the Mingtang were calibrated to mirror celestial and seasonal cycles,

The Son of Heaven resided in different chambers of the Mingtang in accordance with the changing seasons. He donned seasonally appropriate robes, partook of food attuned to the time of year, listened to music aligned with the rhythms of the month, performed sacrifices to the relevant deities, and administered state affairs in accordance with the duties proper to each month—thereby completing a full cycle over the course of twelve months [4].

Thus, he aligned himself with the movements of Heaven and responded to the transformations of the seasons, embodying the principle of Heaven-human correspondence. The Mingtang, by mirroring the heavens and adapting to seasonal cycles, served as a ritual and spatial manifestation of the Zhou understanding of cosmological order. It embodied their systematic effort to codify the rhythms of nature into institutional frameworks. The synchronization of human governance with celestial transformations affirmed that Heaven and Humanity shared an interdependent destiny. This model of time-conscious governance—respecting seasonal transitions, following natural rhythms, and organizing production accordingly—was first poetically articulated in the *Book of Songs*, marking the emergence of a uniquely Chinese ecological vision

grounded in ritual, astronomy, and moral cultivation.

Rituals, then, did more than encode social hierarchy—they expressed cosmic order and ethical cosmology. They served as acts of reciprocation to the natural world, honoring its creative power while asserting human responsibility. This reciprocal logic laid the foundation for a distinctive moral ecology in early China—one in which all things in nature deserved to be treated with respect and ethical consideration. As Zhao Zai-guang has argued, “The Zhou Dynasty was the most ecologically conscious period in Chinese history, a condition inseparable from the widespread flourishing of ritual culture at the time [5].” The Zhou vision of a harmonious world order grounded in ritual and reverence thus forms a key antecedent to the modern concept of a shared future between humanity and nature.

2.3. The Moral Order of Heaven and Earth

The interdependence between nature and human society was keenly recognized by early Chinese thinkers. The *Discourses of the States* recounts that during the second year of King You of Zhou’s reign, earthquakes struck the regions surrounding the Jing River (Jingshui 泾水), Wei River (Weishui 渭水), and Luo River (Luoshui 洛水). Boyangfu 伯阳父, then serving as Grand Historian (太史, Taishi) in charge of astronomical and calendrical observations, reportedly exclaimed, “Zhou is doomed!” His dire prediction was grounded in a cosmological understanding of Qi, the vital force animating Heaven and Earth. Boyangfu believed that disturbances in natural order—such as seismic activity and the imbalance of Yin and Yang—heralded sociopolitical collapse. He argued that when the headwaters of great rivers run dry, it signifies the end of dynasties: When the Yi River (Yishui 伊水) and Luo River dried up, the Xia perished; when the Yellow River dried up, the Shang perished. Therefore, when mountains crumble and rivers are exhausted, it is the sign of a state’s demise.

True to his warning, in the eleventh year of King You’s reign, the three rivers indeed dried up, Mount Qi (岐山) collapsed, and the Zhou state fell into chaos. This historical narrative vividly illustrates the deeply ingrained belief that the health of the natural world was inseparable from the fate of human society. Nature was not merely a passive backdrop to political life but an active participant whose well-being mirrored and influenced human destiny.

From this perspective, protecting mountains, forests, rivers, and lakes was not only an environmental concern but a matter of existential importance for state survival. The Zhou understanding of Heaven, Earth, and governance pointed toward a cosmological community of shared fate—a view in which ecological collapse was a harbinger of moral and political disorder. In this worldview, safeguarding the natural world was tantamount to safeguarding humanity itself.

The *Book of Changes* articulates a cosmological worldview wherein all beings are born from the interplay of Heaven and Earth. The operation of these cosmic forces is termed the Dao,

the foundational principle from which human morality derives. As the text declares: “The alternation of Yin and Yang 阴阳 constitutes the Dao; that which follows it is good; that which completes it is the nature (of things).” (*The Ten Wings the Yi-jing*) Goodness, therefore, is not an abstract moral principle but a natural expression of living in harmony with the rhythms of Heaven and Earth. To be virtuous is to emulate the Dao—to act in accordance with Yin and Yang, to observe proper timing, and to adapt one’s conduct to the seasonal patterns of nature. The *Book of Changes* encoded this cosmology into a sophisticated system of 64 hexagrams, each representing dynamic transformations associated with the four seasons, twelve months, twenty-four solar terms, and seventy-two phenomenological phases.

This cosmological scheme established a blueprint for aligning human affairs with natural phenomena through the use of trigrams and symbols. These elements comprised a comprehensive interpretive system encompassing the Dao of Heaven, the Dao of Earth, and the Dao of Humanity. In exploring the relationship between Heaven and Humanity, the *Book of Changes* advocates for emulation of the natural world. The sage, as ideal moral agent, is one who mirrors the operations of Heaven and Earth, understanding and conforming to the inherent laws of all living things.

Thus, the text presents an ecological epistemology: understanding nature’s laws and rhythms is essential to both moral cultivation and societal harmony. The continued flourishing of humanity and the natural world is dependent upon this attunement to the Dao of Heaven—an imperative that lies at the heart of early Chinese ecological thought.

Harmony between Heaven and Earth is the generative force behind all living things. To sustain this harmony, people must come to know, respect, and emulate the Dao of Heaven and the Dao of Earth. In doing so, they uphold not only natural law but also social harmony. The sages—exemplars of moral and cosmic alignment—are those who attune themselves to temporal rhythms and cosmological principles. As Li Xiang notes, this attunement constitutes a profound sense of responsibility and bearing: “to maintain the naturalness, completeness, and continuity of the operation and development of all natural things and the evolution of human beings [6].” Such responsibility is rooted in the value of a shared destiny between humanity and nature. It reflects a vision of ecological interdependence, wherein ethical behavior toward the nature is inseparable from the flourishing of human civilization. By following the Dao and embracing this cosmic responsibility, early Chinese thought offers not only a theoretical framework but a practical path for achieving the harmonious coexistence of humans and the natural world.

In sum, early human societies in China developed the belief that “all things have spirit”, arising from their contemplation of the natural world. This animistic perspective endowed rocks, trees, animals, and humans alike with spiritual essence, and situated them within a shared kinship of life. On this conceptual foundation, nature worship took root, giving rise to a

worldview in which humanity and the nature were seen as inseparable.

During the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, this reverence for nature underpinned practical measures for ecological conservation. The sacred status of natural entities led to the ritual veneration of Heaven and Earth, and the implementation of seasonal bans and resource protections—practices that contributed to environmental preservation. In the Zhou Dynasty, the theory of “Destiny” further articulated a vision of cosmic interdependence between nature and human society.

This framework cast nature as both legislator and moral exemplar. On one hand, nature “legislated” for humanity by governing the rhythms to which social and agricultural activities had to conform. The ancients learned to align their actions with seasonal changes and celestial patterns. On the other hand, nature also “established virtue” by embodying the moral order of creation. The sages discerned in the generative processes of Heaven and Earth the highest forms of moral conduct—harmony, restraint, and reciprocity. Thus, respecting the timing of Heaven, conforming to the Dao, and aligning moral life with the virtues of the cosmos formed the ethical bedrock of the early Chinese worldview. This cosmological ethic ultimately provided the conceptual grounding for the doctrine of the “Unity of Heaven and Humanity”, which became a core principle of Chinese ecological thought and civilizational identity.²

3. Confucian Moral Cosmology and Ecological Virtue

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods—a time marked by persistent warfare and the decline of ritual and musical norms—the classical notion of “Heaven” (Tian) underwent significant reinterpretation. Amid social disintegration and the rise of competing philosophies, the concept of Heaven lost some of its ritualistic grandeur and was reframed by various philosophers as a moral and cosmological force.

Drawing upon the Zhou dynasty’s theory of Destiny, the emerging “Hundred Schools of Thought” engaged deeply with the relationship between Heaven and humanity. No longer conceived solely as an impersonal natural order, Heaven was increasingly viewed as possessing moral intention—a will that aligned with virtue and justice. This evolving understanding reflected growing philosophical concern with the moral implications of human action and its consequences for both society and the natural environment.

Simultaneously, the development of agricultural civilization brought about rapid population growth and heightened demand for natural resources. The over-exploitation of forests,

meadows, and arable land led to environmental degradation, while intensified desires—amplified by changing social institutions—exacerbated the imbalance between humans and nature. Philosophers across traditions began to identify this ecological strain as a moral issue, calling for restraint, alignment with natural rhythms, and a rearticulation of the human place within the cosmos. In response, a broad consensus emerged across philosophical schools that affirmed the ecological value embedded in the ideal of the “Unity of Heaven and Humanity”.

3.1. Heaven (Tian) as a Moral Force

Confucianism, in particular, developed a vision of Heaven as a moral agent whose will aligned with virtue and order. This cosmological view underpinned the Confucian concept of Ren, which extended beyond human society to include care for the natural world. As Mencius famously stated, “By honoring one’s own elders and extending that respect to the elders of others, and by cherishing one’s own children and extending that care to the children of others,” (*Mencius*) one cultivates a universal moral sensibility. Confucianism broadened this ethic to encompass all living things, envisioning a moral community of shared destiny among humans and nature.

This principle of benevolence is evident in the *Analects*, which records that Confucius “fished with a line but not with a net, and shot at flying birds but not at those roosting.” Such actions reflect a conscious respect for the biological cycles and reproductive needs of other species. Likewise, the *Book of Rites* prescribes seasonal hunting taboos: sacrifices to mountains, forests, rivers, and lakes must be conducted without harming female animals, and rulers are forbidden from encircling game during hunts. These practices were not merely ritual observances—they embodied a recognition of ecological balance and the need to moderate human desire in order to maintain the flourishing of life.

In this way, Confucianism embedded ecological sensitivity within a broader framework of ethical governance, advocating for harmony not only within society but also between human beings and the natural world.

Of course, while Confucianism framed these ethics through a human-centered lens of social and moral cultivation, they had objectively beneficial consequences for the natural world. On one hand, Confucian thought explicitly discouraged excessive exploitation of resources by advocating the moderation of desire (*jie yu* 节欲). On the other, this desire-restraint reflected the broader virtue of Ren itself. Whether toward human beings or non-human life, the Confucian imperative was to act with compassion, restraint, and moral sensibility.

Confucius observed that “Heaven has the virtue of cherish-

² For a broader philosophical framework, see Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary*, who frames “Unity of Heaven and Humanity” as a relational cosmology grounded in embeddedness rather than dualism, which emphasizes harmonious coexistence between humans and nature [13]. This paper builds on such

interpretations but emphasizes “Unity of Heaven and Humanity” as a form of early ecological normativity, highlighting its resonance with sustainability discourse.

ing life,” (*Analects*) attributing to Heaven not only a generative capacity but an ethical disposition. From this, he derived the human Dao—one that must be congruent with the Dao of Heaven. Nature, in this view, possesses moral directionality; it leads and teaches. As environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston III suggests, nature “prods thoughts that educate us, that lead us out (*educio*) to know who and where we are, and what our vocation is [11].” Through nature, human beings discover their temperament, moral identity, and ethic of bearing toward the natural world.

Thus, for Confucius, ecological awareness was not separated from moral cultivation. The natural world was to be treated ethically, not simply for pragmatic reasons but because it reflects and shapes our moral capacities. This is why, in the *Analects*, it is said that “the wise delight in water; the benevolent delight in mountains.” This sentiment reflects not merely aesthetic appreciation but a profound spiritual alignment: the wisdom finds fluidity and joy in water; the benevolence finds serenity and constancy in mountains. Nature becomes the mirror and measure of human virtue.

Nature also occupies a central place in the thought of Mencius, who emphasized that human nature is divinely endowed by Heaven. “One who exhausts his heart knows his nature; knowing his nature, he knows Heaven,” (*Mencius*) Mencius asserts, drawing a moral continuity between self-cultivation and cosmological awareness. To “preserve one’s heart-mind (*xin* 心) and nurture one’s nature (*xing* 性)” (*Mencius*) is, in this view, the way to serve Heaven. Here, human flourishing is inseparable from ecological awareness: humanity and the natural world are part of a continuous moral and ontological whole.

In Mencius’ account, to help Heaven fulfill its generative role is to cultivate one’s inner moral capacities and to extend care outward toward all living things. This commitment to moral extension implies not only social benevolence but also ecological empathy: a disposition to respect, adapt to, and protect the natural world. Because human nature originates from Heaven, it must be aligned with the benevolence of Heaven.

Central to Mencius’ moral philosophy is the innate human capacity for compassion. All people, he claims, possess the incipient heart of empathy—a spontaneous concern for others’ suffering. He interprets Ren, as the very virtue of Heaven and Earth, and argues that it should extend beyond family or society to encompass all forms of life: “Men of virtue love and care for their loved ones; they are therefore kind to other people. When they are kind to people, they treasure everything on earth.” (*Mencius*) Thus, benevolence in Mencian ethics entails both human-centered compassion and a wider reverence for life. To love others is to respect life; to respect life is to engage natural resources with restraint and care. Benevolence means that kindness must be practiced both inwardly and outwardly—toward people, animals, plants, and the nature at large.

Mencius also articulates a spiritual ideal of ecological re-

sponsibility. “The gentleman has three things in which he delights,” he writes, “the second is that, when he looks up, he has no occasion for shame before Heaven.” (*Mencius*) This aspiration to live in moral harmony with Heaven expresses a deep awareness of the human role within the cosmic order. The virtuous person, for Mencius, lives with integrity in both spiritual and ecological terms, his virtue “extends above and below, flowing in unison with Heaven and Earth.” (*Mencius*)

By linking inner cultivation with outer ecological concern, Mencius offers a philosophical model of sustainability grounded in moral self-awareness. In his framework, humans are not lords over nature, but participants in a shared moral world. The ecological vision of Mencius thus reinforces the broader Confucian project of harmonizing human desire with cosmic order, providing a crucial dimension of the Pre-Qin doctrine of the “Unity of Heaven and Humanity.”

3.2. Heaven (Tian) as a Natural Order

Confucianism also acknowledged Heaven as an objective and impersonal reality—not subject to human will, but nonetheless imbued with moral and cosmological significance. As Confucius observed, heaven does not speak, yet “the four seasons move in order and the myriad things are born.” (*Analects*) This silence does not denote indifference but rather the constancy and regularity of the natural world. The changing of the seasons and the generative processes of life reflect underlying natural laws that humans must observe and respect.

Based on this recognition of natural temporality, Confucius stressed the importance of acting in accordance with the time. In matters of governance, for example, he advised: in governing the people, “economize expenditures and love the people; employ them at the proper times.” (*Analects*) This means that rulers should align policy and labor mobilization with the rhythms of the agricultural calendar, avoiding disruptions to essential subsistence work. Such timing is not only a matter of efficiency but a moral imperative: to govern by the Dao of Heaven is to align with its cycles and maintain harmony between human society and the natural world.

Xunzi offered a distinctive voice within Confucian thought by emphasizing the constancy (*chang* 常) of nature. He asserted, “The ways of Heaven are constant. They do not exist because Yao is on the throne, nor do they disappear because Jie is the ruler.” (*Xunzi*) This declaration highlights the independence of natural processes from human affairs and implies that moral order must be constructed through human effort aligned with nature’s enduring patterns.

For Xunzi, the constancy of Heaven demands that human actions be attuned to seasonal rhythms. Activities such as cutting trees or harvesting plants must be carried out in a timely and measured way to ensure sustainable outcomes. He elaborated:

Ploughing in spring, hoeing in summer, harvesting in autumn, and storing in winter—when all is done in proper time, grain will be plentiful and the people will have ample

food. Pools and rivers, lakes and ponds should be fished at the right time so that fish and turtles can thrive and be harvested sustainably. Trees must be felled and cultivated in season, so the forests will not be depleted, and timber will remain abundant. (*Xunzi*)

Xunzi thus underscores the ecological significance of temporal discipline. Human flourishing depends on understanding and respecting the cycles of nature—not through mystical reverence, but through rational governance and ethical restraint. His philosophy reinforces the idea that natural laws are impersonal and unchanging, and that sustainable development requires aligning human activity with these constants. This pragmatic Confucian outlook complements the moral emphasis of Confucius and Mencius and enriches the ecological dimension of the doctrine of “Unity of Heaven and Humanity.”

From this perspective, humanity and nature form an inseparable unity. Human activity—especially in agriculture, resource use, and governance—must follow the temporal rhythms of nature to ensure the thriving of all living beings. Xunzi explicitly linked the constancy of Heaven with the moral success of human society. As he stated, “If you conform to its laws, you will prosper; if you act against them in chaos, you will perish.” (*Xunzi*) This ethical maxim encapsulates Xunzi’s ecological vision: that the path to enduring human prosperity lies in adaptive harmony with the stable yet dynamic patterns of the natural world.

Xunzi further distinguished humans from animals by emphasizing the unique human capacity for social organization and rational governance. “Among all creatures, human beings are the noblest,” (*Xunzi*) he declared, precisely because of their ability to live collectively and establish ordered societies. This sociability grants humans the responsibility to align themselves with Heaven—not through domination, but through informed participation. This notion of “participation” 参 implies that humans must grasp the distinction between the natural and the human while also recognizing their interaction. Humanity must not attempt to control Heaven but should govern human affairs in a way that mirrors Heaven’s impartial governance of nature. In doing so, human beings become co-participants in the cosmic process.

Xunzi also emphasized the necessity of rational planning rooted in the understanding of Heaven, Earth, and the dynamics of Yin and Yang. This knowledge enables wise governance and agricultural productivity. While Xunzi acknowledged the instrumental value of nature, he argued that its use must conform to natural law. “To grasp and utilize the endowments of Heaven” (*Xunzi*) is not to exploit nature indiscriminately, but to respect and obey its inherent patterns.

In this spirit, Xunzi wrote that human use of natural resources must aim to “benefit the world,” not to serve selfish ends. This broader moral horizon highlights a collective ecological ethic: if Heaven nurtures all life and Earth offers its bounty, then humans must use these gifts wisely, seasonally, and sustainably. When Heaven and Earth fulfill their functions,

and when all beings fulfill their purposes in accord, a harmonious and well-governed world naturally follows.

Human survival and flourishing are premised on nature; therefore, human actions must respect and follow natural rhythms, uphold natural order, and act in accordance with the Dao. The agrarian structure of early Chinese civilization preserved the relative autonomy of nature while embedding human life within it. As the modern philosopher Alfred Schmidt insightfully observed, “As long as nature is appropriated through agriculture and is therefore absolutely independent of men, men are absolutely identical with nature. They lapse, so to speak, into natural existence [12].” In this way, the ideal of the “Unity of Heaven and Humanity” also reveals a profound cultural psychology of respect, care, and symbiosis with the natural world.

3.3. Benevolence Extended to the Natural World

Confucian benevolence was also extended to encompass animals, plants, lands, and other natural entities. Mountains, rivers, and forests held particular significance in this worldview—not only as vital ecological resources but as spiritual and moral symbols. For example, ancient texts regarded trees as medium between Heaven (nature) and humanity (society), and abnormal changes in vegetation were often interpreted as omens of sociopolitical disorder. Consequently, these natural features became prominent objects of ritual sacrifice and reverence.

Modern scholar Qiao Qingji 乔清举 rightly observed that Confucian philosophy is inherently ecological [7]. Through careful observation of nature, Confucianism developed a systematic understanding of the interdependence between Heaven and humanity and articulated a moral vision in which all living beings were integrated into a single community of life. This framework affirmed the intrinsic worth of natural entities and encouraged their ethical treatment.

Confucianism also constructed a moral community based on the respect of nature, affirming the intrinsic value of all natural lives and thus treating natural lives morally. This aligns with Roger T. Ames’s interpretation of Confucian role ethics, which emphasizes contextual moral relationships extending to nature.

Confucianism’s view of nature contains ecological ethical values, which is in harmony with the connotation of contemporary ecological ethics. Aldo Leopold, the “father of ecological ethics” in the United States, similarly emphasized the necessity of establishing ethical relationships between humans and the land (including soil, water, plants, and animals, etc.), and that human beings should take responsibilities and obligations toward the natural world [16]. He hopes to achieve harmony between humanity and nature by building a pyramidal ecological system.

In this comparative light, Confucianism’s ecological in-

sights—though framed within a distinct cultural and cosmological context—nonetheless enrich contemporary environmental ethics. By emphasizing restraint, reverence, and moral engagement with the natural world, Confucian thought provides enduring guidance for rethinking the ethical foundations of human-nature relations. This ethical alignment is further elaborated in the *Book of Rites*,

Master Zeng stated: “Trees should be felled in their proper season, and animals should be killed in their proper time.”

Confucius added: “It is not filial piety (xiao 孝) to cut down trees or kill animals out of season.”

These teachings suggest that even routine human activities must respect the rhythms of the natural world. Timing, moderation, and reverence are thus integrated into Confucian ecological ethics as expressions of moral cultivation. Through this attention to timing and restraint, human actions align with the cosmic order and affirm the principle of the “Unity of Heaven and Humanity.”

In Confucian view, respecting the temporal rhythms of nature was not only a practical matter but a moral obligation. Confucius believed that whether cutting down trees or slaughtering animals, such acts should occur with time—that is, in accordance with natural cycles. Observing proper timing reflected reverence for life and was, in his view, aligned with filial piety.

This principle of timeliness was also emphasized by Mencius. He noted that seasonal transitions—growth in spring, flourishing in summer, reaping in autumn, and storing in winter—represented the fundamental rhythms of nature. Violating these rhythms, he warned, would disrupt ecological balance and lead to scarcity. Mencius stated, “If one does not work against the seasons, the grain will be inexhaustible; if one does not fish with fine-mesh nets, the fish and turtles will be inexhaustible; and if one cuts trees in the proper season, the timber will be inexhaustible.” (Mencius) Such prescriptions reflect a broader ecological ethic grounded in respect for the regenerative capacities of the natural world. Mencius also invoked the image of the Mount Niu, whose once lush forests were devastated by over-exploitation. Despite its natural vitality, relentless human interference left it barren—a warning against unrestrained consumption.

Together, Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi advocated a philosophy of desire restraint and acting in accordance with seasonal rhythms, all of which support the sustainable development of natural life. Their teachings align closely with modern ecological values, reinforcing the ideal of building a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature.

3.4. Rites, Music, and Ecological Harmony

According to Confucianism, the practices of extending benevolence to the natural world contributed to a vision of harmony in which human, social, and natural systems are mutually reinforcing. It further illustrates the depth and complexity

inherent in the Confucian concept of Li (礼, rites/ ritual propriety). On the one hand, the Confucian “Li” is embodied in the broader cultural system of Li Yue (礼乐, ritual and music). “Music manifests the harmonious resonance of Heaven and Earth; ritual embodies their inherent cosmic order.” (*Book of Rites*) In ancient China, music serves as the most sublime medium for manifesting the will of Heaven and conveying its numinous essence. Music embodies the sprite of Heaven and Earth and articulates the normative order of the Heavenly Mandate. Thus, “the highest music 大乐 resonates in perfect harmony with Heaven and Earth.” (*Book of Rites*)

Music, as an expression of emotional and moral resonance, was seen as an echo of nature’s own rhythms. In society, music promotes harmony in interpersonal relationships, while ritual regulates hierarchical distinctions and social order. Confucius emphasized that governing through rites and music reflected not only societal structure but also cosmic principles: rites mirror the order of Heaven, Earth, and all living beings; music embodies the harmony between Heaven and Earth. Both are rooted in the Qi of the cosmos and conform to the Dao of Heaven. Different kinds of music generates distinct effects on society. Xunzi underscored it, emphasizing its capacity to shape collective conduct. In his *Discourse on Music*, he offers a systematic analysis of how the moral character of musical expression—whether upright or deprave—produces corresponding ethical and social outcomes: depraved music 奸佞之声 engenders a rebellious Qi that stirs base desires and fosters moral decay, ultimately leading to social disorder. In contrast, orthodox music 正声 cultivates the heart-mind by nurturing harmonious Qi, guiding individuals toward virtue and fostering societal harmony.

The ritual-musical system became foundational to ancient Chinese civilization and helped sustain cultural continuity over millennia. As part of this system, music was viewed as communicating with the cosmos. The five musical tones (Gong 宫, Shang 商, Jue 角, Zhi 徵, and Yu 羽) corresponded to natural and human elements; their balance symbolized social and ecological equilibrium. This deep alignment is illustrated in the Guqin 古琴 composition “*High Mountains and Flowing Water*,” whose melodies imitate the grandeur of mountains and the flow of rivers. Like landscape painting or poetry, such music expressed a unity between the human spirit and the natural world. It embodied the literati’s aspiration to dwell spiritually within nature, reinforcing the ecological ethic inherent in Confucian aesthetics.

On the other hand, rites also emphasized that appropriate human behavior should foster the growth and flourishing of all living things. Nature, in Confucianism, functions as a moral community—an arena where ethical interaction between humans and the cosmos unfolds. The regularity of nature, as perceived through seasonal rhythms and natural cycles, required sages to formulate rules and regulations that aligned human actions with cosmic patterns. Only when human activities conformed to the Dao of Heaven and were conducted in

proper seasonality could a well-ordered society be achieved. This ethical synchrony between human intention and natural law lies at the heart of Confucian ecological governance, where sustainable social order is grounded in reverence for temporal and cosmic harmony.

The principle of “Unity of Heaven and Humanity” thus encompasses both the ontological connection and the distinctiveness between Heaven and human, grounded in reciprocal interaction rather than homogeneity. Its ecological implication lies in fostering a model of coexistence that is synergistic rather than oppositional. All entities in nature are viewed as part of a shared unity, where Heaven and humanity maintain differences while existing in interdependent harmony.

While scholarly debate continues over whether the Confucian understanding of “Unity of Heaven and Humanity” is directly equivalent to modern ecological thinking, it is clear that the doctrine entails a vision of ethical interaction between humans and the nature. As an inherent dimension of Confucian *Li*, this principle also offers meaningful insight into contemporary environmental issues.³ It encourages us to rethink our relationship with nature not merely in terms of utility, but through a moral lens grounded in mutual respect and sustainable coexistence. As Roger T. Ames argues, the Confucian cosmology of Heaven entails a relational and processual vision of ethics wherein humans participate in the generative patterns of the cosmos [13]. This participatory ontology reshapes ecological responsibility as a form of co-creativity rather than stewardship, aligning closely with recent efforts to rethink environmental ethics through relational worldviews.

In short, pre-Qin Confucianism affirmed the intrinsic harmony between humanity and nature, shaping the doctrine of “Unity of Heaven and Humanity” as both a cosmological vision and an ethical imperative. Whether conceptualized as a sentient Heaven or a natural order, this framework placed benevolence at its core. Confucians emphasized the alignment of human conduct with natural rhythms and moral laws, advocating a synergy between subjective agency and objective regularity. The doctrine of “Unity of Heaven and Humanity” thus offers not only philosophical insight but also a foundational resource for contemporary ecological thought. To apply it meaningfully today, one must distill its ethical essence while critically reinterpreting it beyond its religious and mythological trappings. Recasting “Heaven” as the ecological totality of nature, this vision underscores the enduring significance of natural harmony and moral responsibility within the Chinese philosophical tradition.

4. Daoist Metaphysics and the Principle of Non-Interference

Building upon the foundation of the “Unity of Heaven and

Humanity,” pre-Qin schools developed distinct understandings of Heaven that emphasized either its moral will or its natural spontaneity. Among these, Daoism stands out in articulating a metaphysical framework centered on the Dao, an ineffable principle that governs the cosmos. In contrast to the anthropocentric tendencies of other traditions, Daoism posited that nature operates spontaneously and independently of human intervention—a concept captured in the idea that “The Dao models itself on what is naturally so.”

By closely observing the cyclical and patterned behavior of natural phenomena, early thinkers recognized that the rhythm of the cosmos followed a self-sustaining and regenerative order. These rhythms, though beyond human control, were not chaotic; rather, they manifested a coherence that enabled the continuity of life. The proper response to such a world was not domination but alignment: to follow the Dao was to conform to the Spontaneous Nature.

4.1. Dao as Cosmic Principle and Wu-wei

The Dao-centered cosmology served not only as a metaphysical account of the universe but also as a moral paradigm for human conduct. Daoist ethics prioritizes aligning human conduct with the spontaneous processes of nature, advocating adaptation and reverence rather than the imposition of anthropocentric will. In doing so, Daoism offered a compelling ecological ethic: humans should not seek to control nature, but to live in accordance with it, preserving balance and fostering harmony. This philosophy of restraint, reverence, and attunement remains a powerful contribution to environmental thought and continues to inspire ecological sensibilities today.

In Daoist cosmology, *Heaven* is understood as objective and devoid of intentional will. Laozi introduced the concept of Dao as a metaphysical principle distinct from the phenomenal world, representing both the origin of all existence and the governing pattern of nature’s operation. The Dao is nameless, wordless, self-generating, and inexhaustible. It exists independently, transcends change, and sustains all things through a ceaseless cyclical process.

Remarkably, around the same historical period, ancient Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus also contemplated the universe’s origin and laws, positing fire as a primal element that underpinned the cosmic order. Both Laozi’s Dao and Heraclitus’ Fire reflect a recognition of the regularity and dynamism inherent in nature.

Laozi articulated the generative process of the universe using numerical symbolism: “The Dao gave birth to One; One gave birth to Two; Two gave birth to Three; and Three gave birth to all things in the universe.” (*Daodejing*) This reflects the progression from unity to multiplicity via the interplay of Yin and Yang. Similarly, the Pythagorean tradition in Western philosophy employed the concept of number as the foundation

³ John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker describe Confucian ritual as a moral ecology in *Ecology and Religion*, integrating human behavior with seasonal and cosmic patterns [14]. This paper expands that view by tracing how ritualized ecological

restraint functioned in governance, moral cultivation, and statecraft across the Pre-Qin landscape.

of reality, suggesting that “I” is the origin of all things. Despite differing cultural contexts, both traditions converged on the insight that all life shares a common cosmic origin and that humans are embedded within a unified natural order.

Laozi further emphasized that humanity should follow the Dao by emulating the natural world: “Man models himself on Earth; Earth on Heaven; Heaven on the Dao; and the Dao on that which is naturally so.” (*Daodejing*) For Laozi, nature represents the ideal model of order and conduct. Daoist ethics emphasized wu-wei, or non-coercive action, which does not imply passivity, but rather an active non-interference that aligns human action with the natural rhythm of the cosmos.

Thus, harmony between humans and nature depends on avoiding the imposition of subjective will upon the world. As Laozi observed, “Dao creates all things, and De nurtures them.” (*Daodejing*) This vision presents a model of mutual flourishing, where humans thrive by honoring the generative capacities of nature rather than disrupting them. If human behavior violates this balance, Laozi warns of inevitable consequences: “Not knowing the constant and acting recklessly leads to misfortune.” (*Daodejing*) To live wisely, therefore, is to preserve one’s innate awareness, respect natural limits, and dwell in attunement with the Dao. Such insight continues to offer a profound ecological message: sustaining life on Earth requires not mastery over nature, but partnership with its rhythms and respect for its integrity.

Laozi further developed the idea of wu-wei as a central ethical principle grounded in the Dao. Wu-wei is not about passivity or doing nothing; rather, it refers to a form of wise, non-coercive engagement with the world. As Laozi explains, it means assisting all things to develop according to their own nature, rather than acting through arbitrary or subjective interference. This ethos calls for aligning human behavior with the spontaneous processes of the natural world, allowing each thing to unfold in accordance with its inherent pattern.

Closely related to this is Laozi’s advocacy for *jian* 俭, or thrift, which entails frugality and the restraint of excessive desires. According to Laozi, unbridled human desire increases the exploitation of natural resources, ultimately leading to harm: “There is no greater calamity than discontent; no greater fault than greed.” (*Daodejing*) By limiting material desires and practicing contentment, individuals not only cultivate personal well-being but also support the sustainability of the broader ecosystem.

In this way, the Daoist vision of ecological ethics integrates spiritual moderation with practical environmental awareness. When humans are content with sufficiency and know when to stop, they avoid overconsumption and help maintain ecological balance. Daoism thus offers a compelling model of environmental restraint rooted in metaphysical humility and ethical self-regulation—principles that continue to resonate in contemporary ecological discourse. This emphasis on natural rhythms and ethical governance resonates with Edward Slingerland’s interpretation of wu-wei as “effortless action” aligned with emergent order—a Daoist principle with direct relevance

to ecological self-regulation and sustainability practices [15].

Wenzi also contributed to this Daoist vision by articulating ecological values such as timeliness and adaptive practice. As he observed, one should “follow the terrain by forming mountains in high places and pools in low ones” (Wenzi). These remarks reflect the Daoist emphasis on situational appropriateness and harmony with the natural landscape. Rulers, therefore, were advised to act in accordance with the seasons and to avoid excessive interference with the nature. Wenzi cautioned against hunting entire animal herds, killing young animals, draining ponds for fish, or burning forests for game—all of which violated natural rhythms. Like Laozi, Wenzi endorsed wu-wei and opposed the exploitative practice of “draining the pond to catch fish.” He linked environmental degradation to human greed, warning that such excess leads to imbalance and disaster. His ecological critique underscored the need to reconcile Yin and Yang and to ensure the flourishing of all living things. In Wenzi’s ideal moral society, both humans and nature thrive when each is allowed to follow its own course.

4.2. Xinzhai 心斋, Zuowang 坐忘 and Xiaoyao 逍遥

Zhuangzi also contributed profoundly to the Daoist ecological vision, extending the principle of wu-wei into a cosmological ethic of unity. In his thought, all life emerges from the generative activity of Heaven and Earth, and humans, as part of this natural process, are inseparable from the totality of existence. Human bodies, livelihoods, and descendants are not autonomous but are momentarily sustained by the harmony of Qi—the vital force entrusted temporarily by the cosmos. Life and death, then, are simply transformations of Qi: life is its gathering; death, its dispersal.

This ontological understanding underlies the well-known account of Zhuangzi singing after his wife died—not as an act of defiance, but of attunement to nature’s continuous change. For Zhuangzi, the movement of life is governed by natural cycles, and the ultimate return of all beings to the Dao is both inevitable and natural. Recognizing this, he advocated an epistemic and ethical stance rooted in “Yi Dao Guan Wu” 以道观物—observing things in light of the Dao.

Such observation requires spiritual practices like *zuowang* (坐忘, sitting in forgetfulness) and *xinzhai* (心斋, fasting of the mind), through which individuals dissolve rigid ego boundaries and cultivate unity with the cosmos. This leads to the realization that “Heaven and Earth were born with me, and all things are one with me.” (Zhuangzi) Zhuangzi’s vision thereby transcends categorical distinctions between subject and object, affirming an ecological worldview in which human and nature are mutually constituted and ontologically interdependent.

Zhuangzi extended this Daoist worldview by emphasizing the ontological continuity and mutual adaptation among all

living beings. In his cosmology, all things originate from the Dao and are inherently interconnected; no life form exists in isolation. Instead, each entity exists in dynamic interrelation with its surroundings, forming a web of complementary relationships. Human life, like that of other beings, is embedded in this web and shaped by its rhythms.

For Zhuangzi, the proper ethical response to this condition is not mastery but participation—living in a way that supports the flourishing of the whole. Humans, as part of nature, ought to abide by Heaven, to cherish all things, and to follow the natural course of development and transformation. This entails recognizing and aligning with the inherent spontaneity of the world, cultivating an attitude of *xiaoyao* (逍遥, carefree wandering), but more accurately understood as a state of liberated attunement to the Dao. In this state, the boundary between self and world dissolves, and human beings move freely in accord with the unfolding of nature.

Zhuangzi maintained that all things operate in accordance with the Dao, and any disruption of this order invites calamity. He used the allegory of Shu 倏 and Hu 忽, the kings of the South and North Seas, who drilled openings into the body of Hundun (浑沌, Chaos)—the emperor of the center being devoid of the seven sensory orifices. After seven days of forced intervention, Chaos died, symbolizing that human imposition on nature disrupts the original harmony. For Zhuangzi, the integrity of nature lies in its wholeness, objectivity, and self-regulation. He writes,

Heaven and Earth possess the greatest beauty but do not speak; the four seasons follow their clear laws without discussion; all things have their inherent principles but do not explain them. (Zhuangzi)

To live in accordance with the Dao, therefore, is to honor the intrinsic tendencies of the natural world—to follow the natural instincts of things rather than impose arbitrary human standards. Zhuangzi concludes, “In exploring and experiencing the beauty of Heaven and Earth, we may come to understand the patterns of evolution and development that govern the universe.” (Zhuangzi) In this vision, *wu-wei* becomes not only a mode of action but also a form of ecological wisdom—an attunement to the rhythms and integrity of the natural world.

Zhuangzi further argued that to live harmoniously with nature and with oneself, one must dissolve distinctions between the self and the external world, arriving at a realm of spiritual freedom. This state of unity allows one to grasp the true meaning of existence and the cosmos. Through practices such as *zuowang* and *xinzhai*, he emphasized attuning the self to the Dao and shedding artificial divisions, and then realized the realm of “Heaven and Earth were born with me, and all things are one with me.” (Zhuangzi)

The well-known butterfly dream encapsulates this metaphysical stance: “I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man.” (Zhuangzi) Here, Zhuangzi collapses the distinction between subject and object, waking and dreaming, thereby suggesting that harmony with nature is achieved

through a dissolution of fixed boundaries.

At his death, Zhuangzi rejected elaborate burial rituals, proclaiming, “I will take Heaven and Earth as my coffin, the sun and moon as my jade discs, the stars as my pearls, and all things as my burial offerings.” (Zhuangzi) This poetic declaration reflects his integration of the self within the cosmos. Zhuangzi’s ideal of *xiaoyao* thus represents not only personal spiritual liberation but also a philosophical foundation for Chinese natural aesthetics—raising immediate natural experience to a transcendent, reflective plane that would inspire centuries of artistic and ecological sensibility.

The spiritual ethos and ethical orientation of traditional Chinese culture may be encapsulated in the maxim: Follow the Dao of Heaven and venerate human culture. Daoism, in particular, furnished a theoretical foundation for the ecological value of “a community with a shared future for humanity and nature” through its central concept of the Dao. The Dao is not merely the governing principle of the natural world; it is also the inherent nature of both the cosmos and the human being. As a spontaneously arising and self-regulating order, the Dao transcends anthropocentric interpretation. In the modern context, Daoist teachings such as “knowing the constant,” “knowing contentment,” and “knowing when to stop” retain profound ecological relevance. They remind us that human flourishing cannot be achieved by pursuing self-interest at the expense of the natural world. Rather, because humans and the myriad things share a common origin and destiny, sustainable development must rest upon respect for, adaptation to, and active maintenance of the balance between humanity and nature.

4.3. Different Perspectives on Natural Order

The principle of following nature also found resonance in other pre-Qin philosophical schools, particularly in Legalist thought. Legalism recognized the potential conflict between burgeoning population growth and the scarcity of natural resources, which they saw as a source of social unrest. As articulated in the *Hanfeizi*: “It is because the population is large and property is scarce, and because people labor hard but lack sufficient provision, that conflict arises.” This observation underscores the necessity of acknowledging the finitude of natural resources and the importance of their prudent management. Within this framework, Legalism implicitly affirms that human flourishing depends upon respecting the constraints and carrying capacity of the natural world—a perspective that anticipates key principles in modern theories of ecological sustainability.

Guanzi posited that although the myriad things in the world differ in form, they all abide by certain invariant principles, termed *ze* 则—rules or norms of operation that are eternal and unchanging. In this vision, Heaven, Earth, and humanity constitute an integrated whole, and it is only through alignment with these universal laws that harmony—what *Guanzi* referred to as the “Three Degrees” 三度—can be achieved: namely, the auspiciousness of Heaven, the suitability of the

Earth, and the social harmony among people. Central to this alignment is timeliness. *Guanzi* records seasonal guidelines for human activity: in spring, one should plant trees and avoid harming animals; in summer, hunting and the killing of birds and beasts are to be restricted; in autumn, shortages should be replenished; and in winter, fishing and hunting should be prohibited. This seasonal ethic demonstrates an acute ecological awareness: that a principled and cyclical use of natural resources ensures the flourishing of both human society and the nature. If this balance is disturbed, *Guanzi* warns, nature will retaliate, and human suffering will ensue. The implication is clear: humans and nature form a community of shared destiny, and only through knowledge, reverence, and conservation of the natural world can sustainable order be maintained.

Guanzi also believed that ecological protection was essential to sound statecraft. It asserted, “A ruler who fails to prudently protect and manage mountains, forests, rivers, and grasses should not be made king of the state.” (*Guanzi*) Sustainable governance, according to *Guanzi*, required timely and regulated exploitation of forests and mountains—practices underpinned by restraint of human desire. *Guanzi* established specialized institutions to oversee ecological management and emphasized preventive measures such as forest fire control. By framing environmental stewardship as a criterion of legitimate rule, *Guanzi* foreshadowed a principle increasingly echoed in today’s discourses on sustainability: that the health of nature and the stability of society are inextricably linked.

Guanzi also emphasized the foundational role of soil and water as essential resources for human survival. To ensure their preservation, he advocated afforestation as a key method for maintaining ecological balance. In its worldview, mountains and rivers, grasses and trees, water and soil constituted the structural pillars of the ecological environment and were indispensable to the survival and flourishing of human life. Recognizing that humanity and nature form a community of life, *Guanzi* stressed that humans have a duty to follow and protect natural processes. Its theory of urban planning, termed Yin Tian Jiu Di (因天就地, conforming to the laws of Heaven and adapting to the shape of the Earth), exemplifies this integration of natural and human concerns. It wrote:

Make use of the materials and resources endowed by nature, and choose locations conducive to urban development. The layout of cities need not conform rigidly to traditional norms, nor must roads adhere inflexibly to established rules. (*Guanzi*)

In practice, this meant that urban planning should be shaped by topographical realities and that population settlement should be governed by the land’s ecological carrying capacity. *Guanzi*’s advocacy for aligning human behavior with environmental constraints illustrates a keen awareness of resource limitations and the need for adaptive, harmonious coexistence with nature.

Zou Yan 邹衍, the leading figure of the Yin-Yang school, proposed that all phenomena in the world operate according to cyclical patterns governed by the interaction of Yin and

Yang and the Five Phases. He extended this cosmological model to the domain of human society, arguing that dynastic succession itself followed the rhythmic transformation of elemental forces. On this basis, he formulated the Theory of the Cycle of the Five Virtues 五德终始说, whereby each ruling dynasty embodied a dominant elemental virtue—such as wood, fire, earth, metal, or water—in accordance with cosmic time. This system not only articulated a metaphysical order but also provided normative guidance, encouraging rulers to align governance with the natural rhythms and moral imperatives of Heaven and Earth. In doing so, Zou Yan contributed to the broader ecological ethos of pre-Qin thought by reinforcing the imperative to observe and harmonize with the patterns of the natural world.

As conscious and purposive beings, humans are capable of reshaping their environments in ways that enhance survival and development. This dynamic relationship between humanity and nature is not fixed but evolves through continuous interaction, adaptation, and reconstruction. The engineering marvel of Dujiangyan 都江堰, constructed during the Warring States period, exemplifies this harmonization of human need with natural disposition, redirecting river currents without disrupting ecological balance. Similarly, the traditional Mulberry Fish Pond system in Zhejiang Province—originating in the Spring and Autumn period—represents an early form of agro-ecological model that integrates mulberry cultivation, sericulture, and fish farming into a sustainable and circular system, which mirrored the ideal of a symbiotic relationship between human life and the rhythms of nature.

During the Pre-Qin period, nature was not conquered but revered. Rooted in the smallholder agrarian economy and the ritual order of patriarchal clan society, early Chinese attitudes toward nature emphasized an introspective and relational ethos. This orientation fostered a worldview in which harmony with nature was achieved through the regulation of both external conduct and internal heart-mind. Observing the rhythms of Heaven, optimizing the use of Earth, and affirming the interdependence of all life were not merely utilitarian strategies but early expressions of ecological consciousness. This historical embeddedness of human-nature interaction resonates strongly with the cosmological and ethical frameworks of the Pre-Qin philosophers.

The dialectical insights developed in this period regarding the relationship between Heaven and humanity laid enduring conceptual foundations for Chinese ecological civilization. In particular, the doctrines of “Unity of Heaven and Humanity” and “The Dao models itself on what is naturally so” embody profound ecological wisdom. These ideas continue to bear relevance today—not merely as cultural artifacts, but as living philosophies capable of guiding contemporary reflection on sustainability, environmental ethics, and the possibility of a more harmonious coexistence between human beings and the natural world.

5. Conclusion

The Pre-Qin view of nature, rooted in the doctrine of the “Unity of Heaven and Humanity,” provides a richly textured ecological philosophy that integrates metaphysical insight, ethical conduct, and ritual practice. Unlike Western environmental ethics that often stress stewardship or justice, the Pre-Qin view emphasizes ontological embeddedness, ritual resonance, and cyclical time as ethical principles.

Across the classical traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism, and Yin-Yang cosmology, we observe a consistent emphasis on harmony, interdependence, and moral responsibility in human-nature relations. Rather than advocating dominion over the natural world, these philosophers promote an ethos of reverence, desire-restraint, and alignment with cosmic rhythms. This worldview emerged from the socio-economic and cosmological structures of early agrarian society, but its implications extend far beyond its historical context. It offers a valuable counterpoint to anthropocentric paradigms, providing philosophical resources for reimagining sustainable human futures. Particularly in the face of accelerating ecological crises, the Pre-Qin legacy invites contemporary reflection on the virtues of restraint, in season, and mutual flourishing.

By revisiting and critically engaging these ancient ecological insights, we are reminded that environmental ethics need not be invented anew, but may instead be deepened by drawing on diverse civilizational heritages. As John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker have emphasized, indigenous traditions like Chinese cosmology offer deeply rooted alternatives to anthropocentric environmental models [14]. Their call for an “ecological civilization” draws explicitly on Confucian and Daoist paradigms, reaffirming the global relevance of “Unity of Heaven and Humanity” for contemporary ethical responses to planetary crises. Similarly, Roger T. Ames emphasizes that Confucian role ethics instills relational responsibility, a framework in which humans are embedded participants in a shared moral and ecological order—an idea anticipated by the Pre-Qin vision of cosmic and social harmony [13]. As such, this essay offers a systematic analysis of the ecological dimensions of “Unity of Heaven and Humanity”; we may conclude that the Pre-Qin vision of a world where humans dwell poetically within nature—rather than apart from or above it—remains a vital and generative tradition for our ecological imagination today. In this regard, I hope this essay laid a solid foundation for cross-cultural comparative research in related fields.

Author Contributions

Kang Huifang: Conceptualization, Resources, Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Methodology, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing

Data Availability Statement

No data were created or analyzed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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