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In Defense of a Conception of Confucian Harmony

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It is a great honor to have colleagues engaging in a meaningful discussion of my book. I appreciate my critics' thoughtful and constructive criticisms as well as exceedingly generous praises. Due to space limitations, I will confine my response to some key issues raised here.

I will begin with Yao Xinzhong's criticism of my claim and argument on the centrality of harmony in Confucian philosophy. Yao reads my view as being that harmony is *the* central concept or ideal in Confucian philosophy, which I take to mean that harmony has been the central concept or ideal in Confucian philosophy up to this point. Understood this way, that is not my argument in the book. My claims in the book are more moderate: in Confucian philosophy, harmony is "a central ideal," "a social and moral ideal" (p. 7),¹ "a central concept" (p. 20), "one of the most important concepts" (p. 18), and that "as a comprehensive philosophy, Confucianism is incomplete without harmony among its central concepts" (p. 20). I also state, "It is more appropriate to say that *ren*, ritual propriety, and harmony are all central concepts of Confucian philosophy" (p. 19). I come close to the position that Yao takes me to hold when I state, "If there is such a thing as 'the most important concept in Confucianism,' it has to be harmony" (p. 18). There is no contradiction here, however, because the latter is a conditional statement (that 'if A then B' leaves open that 'not A & not B'), and it is compatible with other statements cited here.

A main purpose of the book is to restore harmony's rightful place among the central concepts of Confucian philosophy, not to use it to replace all others. Yao accepts my claim that the *Analects* and the *Mencius* did not make the official list of "Confucian" (*Rujia*) classics until the Tang dynasty, but he objects that "few readers could imagine a Confucian philosophy without Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi." I do not think my account implies that we should study Confucian philosophy without Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi. It only implies that these texts did not gain

prominence in the tradition until later (around the ninth century C.E.) and we should respect the history of the philosophical tradition when we interpret it. I differentiate “Confucius’ philosophy” on the one hand and “*Rujia* philosophy” (儒家哲学) (which has unfortunately been labeled “Confucian philosophy” or “Confucianism” in the West) on the other. If we trace the *Rujia* tradition to Duke Zhou (周公) (eleventh century B.C.E.), we must accept the fact that the *Analects* and the *Mencius* did not make it into the *Rujia* canons in the first two millennia of the tradition, and we must take that into account in interpreting *Rujia* philosophy as a whole. While *ren* 仁 occupies a central place in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, it is not the case in the *Book of Change* (*Yijing* or *Zhouyi*). In reading the central theme of the *Yijing*, I follow the respected *Yijing* scholar Yu Dunkang, who holds explicitly that “the core idea of the *Zhouyi* is to pursue grand harmony as the highest goal” (Yu 2006, p. 5).

Yao suggests that perhaps a case can be made that harmony is the most important concept but not the most important virtue, whereas *ren* and *yi* are the most important virtues but not the most important concepts in Confucian philosophy. He then points out the difficulty of distinguishing concept from virtue as virtue concepts are nevertheless concepts. While I can appreciate the potential usefulness of such a move, my main point is that *ren* and *yi* mainly concern personal qualities whereas harmony is a comprehensive concept in Confucian philosophy, encompassing the whole realm of philosophy from personal ethics to social philosophy to metaphysics. (For discussions of Confucian metaphysics, see Li and Perkins 2015, particularly the chapters by Michael Puett and Brook Ziporyn, respectively.) Focusing on *ren* and *yi* without making harmony a central concept would restrict Confucian philosophy to ethics and social philosophy. It is troubling to claim that the central concept of Confucian philosophy is mainly about personal characteristics, such as *ren* or *yi*. The Confucian tradition has a comprehensive philosophy. It needs to be presented as such rather than as mere ethics. Concepts that are primarily ethical in character, such as *ren* and *yi*, cannot alone rightfully ground understanding of Confucianism as a comprehensive philosophy; we need general philosophic concepts such as harmony to do Confucianism full justice.

Yao argues that *Dao* 道 is more prominent than harmony in Confucian philosophy and should be central to Confucian philosophy. He writes, “Li himself already admits that ‘Harmony is the Confucian Way’ (p. 10). By this he implies that *Dao* 道 (the Way) is more fundamental to Confucianism than *he* 和 (harmony).” I do not believe there is an entailment between these two statements. That “Harmony is the Confucian Way” does not imply that “*Dao* 道 (the Way) is more fundamental to Confucianism than *he* 和 (harmony),” just as saying that “*ren* 仁 is the (most important) Confucian virtue” in no way implies that virtue (*de* 德) is more fundamental to Confucianism than *ren* is. My reluctance with regard to the concept of *Dao* comes from the fact that, in comparison with harmony, the concept of *Dao* is rather vague and less content-laden. Literally, *Dao* is “the Way.” In the Confucian classical literature, *Dao* is usually employed along with a modifier, for example *tian-dao* 天道 (Way of heaven), *di-dao* 地道 (Way of earth), *ren-dao* 人道 (the human Way), *ren-dao* 仁道 (Way of humanity), *wang-dao* 王道 (kingly Way), and even *ba-dao* 霸道 (Way of

hegemony).² Its meaning varies depending on the modifier used in context. It perhaps would add to our understanding of Confucian philosophy if *Dao* is made its central concept, but harmony is no less—arguably more—central to it.

We should differentiate two issues. One is what has been, up to this point, the central concept of Confucianism, if there has been one. The other is whether a concept such as harmony or *Dao*, should be or should become, from this point onward, the central concept of Confucianism. The answer to the latter question can be separate from the answer to the first question. I avoid making the first claim because I do not believe it would be a fruitful move and it may become a distraction from promoting harmony in the Confucian discourse. That strategy does not prevent us from arguing for the second claim, however. Like any living tradition, Confucianism is subject to reinterpretation, reorientation, and reform.³ Regardless of whether harmony has been the central concept of Confucian philosophy, we still need to answer the question of whether it should be or should become its central concept. Given the meaning of harmony and the importance of harmony as explicated in my book and for reasons discussed above, I am inclined to hold that harmony should become the central concept of Confucian philosophy, or that contemporary Confucian thinkers should take harmony as their central concept in developing and elucidating Confucian philosophy. But that is an argument for another day.

In questioning the Confucian philosophy of harmony, Yao looks to Chinese history:

Each dynasty represented a particular order of hierarchy. When this order gradually became fossilized and began to crack, it marked the beginning of replacing the old dynasty with a new one. In this process we cannot see any sign of the “deep harmony” that Li has argued for. Instead, we see that one set hierarchy is replaced by another. With the advent of a new dynasty, a hierarchy that is “new,” but more or less the same, would gradually be established. Throughout the process, where are the “renewal” and “self-generation” that Li has promised as the key to his concept of “deep harmony”?

This passage is perplexing. It feels like someone who is reading a Rawlsian work while checking the reality of the United States, which is by and large liberal in character, and who queries, “Where is the justice as fairness that you are promoting?!” I suppose a Rawlsian may reply, “Well, there isn’t that much, and that is precisely the reason why we need to promote such an ideal.” When people talk about “Confucianism,” they can be talking about two things. One is a philosophy as extrapolated in classical texts; the other is a cultural tradition that has been practiced in China (and other East Asian countries) along with Daoism and Buddhism. The two are related, but not the same. There is no contradiction in saying that Confucian philosophy has been misinterpreted or misapplied in real life, even though Confucian harmony undoubtedly has been practiced, to a degree, no doubt sometimes more and sometimes less. In the concluding chapter of the book, I caution that we should not conflate theory with practice or conflate philosophy with reality. The corpus of Confucian classics is enormous, subject to varied interpretations and reinterpretations. Failure of a particular idea to have been practiced well or adequately in reality does not pre-

clude the existence, nor diminish the philosophical value, of such an idea in the classics.

I do not believe that harmony and hierarchy are necessarily mutually exclusive. Sometimes hierarchy and harmony can co-exist, depending on the kind of hierarchy in question. There is presumably a form of hierarchy between the king and the minister, but they can form a harmonious relationship not to be confused with conformity, as explicated by Yan Ying (p. 11). There is presumably some kind of hierarchy between father and son. Yet arguably they can also form a harmonious relationship (see pp. 104–107). Confucian harmony does not reject all kinds of hierarchy in society, even though it opposes hierarchies detrimental to harmony.

Yao characterizes my presentation of Confucian harmony as “linear,” particularly in illustrating the five elements of harmony, namely heterogeneity, tension, coordination and cooperation, transformation and growth, and renewal. He finds this to be problematic: “there is more than one harmony at any given time and in any given circumstance; instead of one harmony following another in a single direction, many ‘lines’ of harmonies co-exist and co-function. How do these different and yet cross-connected lines of harmony interact with one another?” I also hold that there are many harmonies in the world at any given time and that there is no single linear sequence. I believe, however, that one of the best ways to present and expound a philosophical concept is to analyze it in a logical order. In the above-mentioned five elements, a sequential presentation from heterogeneity, to tension, to coordination and cooperation, to transformation and growth, and further to renewal makes the best sense to me, even though they may appear “linear.” Immediately following the discussion of these five elements, I caution that “Confucian harmony is multilateral and multifaceted. It cannot be achieved from any single Archimedean point” (p. 9). Moving on to present Confucian harmony in the person, family, society, and the world, I write:

This sequence, from harmony of the individual person to the family, and eventually to the entire world, should be understood as a logical order rather than a temporal one, however; strictly speaking, harmony in the person has to be realized in the process of harmonization in the family, the society, and the rest of the world. While a person’s self-cultivation cannot be separated from his effort to harmonize the rest of the world, as he becomes more mature his focus expands from self-refinement, to fostering a good family, to contributing to a good society, and so forth. (p. 90)

In the same vein, I also discussed tension and conflict between harmonies. I recognize that “not all kinds of conflicts can be contained or eliminated” (p. 13). Sometimes, harmony between individual sheep and wolves, for instance, is destroyed so that harmony at the population level can be maintained (p. 13). Sometimes there is a conflict between assisting one’s family and assisting the general public (p. 129). In chapter 9, I also specifically discuss appropriate ways to deal with various kinds of differences and conflicts (pp. 143–147). I understand, however, that more detailed analysis is needed in order to enhance our understanding of the Confucian philosophy of harmony. I thank Yao for pointing this out.

Finally, Yao raises the question of “why” harmony has become so important in Confucian philosophy:

These “why” questions demand an in-depth study of Chinese ways of thinking and living. Without an adequate analysis of these “whys,” the harmony philosophy that Li has constructed seems to stop at a level that does not yet penetrate the mind and heart of Confucians deeply enough.

It is true that I did not get into a formal exploration of why harmony became so central to Confucian philosophy, even though I briefly alluded to the desire by classical thinkers for a peaceful world during the chaotic Warring States period (p. 135). Honestly, I do not know what kind of philosophical (rather than historical) answer would count as satisfactory in addressing the “why” question. Yao deserves my thanks for raising this fascinating question.⁴

I am pleased that Wai Wai Chiu is in agreement with me on the conceptual status of Confucian harmony that I argued for in the book. Being primarily concerned with the coherence of my argument, Chiu frames his criticism in a clear structure. He questions the consistency of my four claims regarding harmony (as defined in the book). They are:

1. Harmony can exist naturally.
2. Harmony must be generated from norm-governing activities.
3. Humans have a special status in the world.
4. Harmony is the ultimate good.

I accept responsibility for all these claims, with just one caveat. When I discussed the need for norms (e.g., *li*, as Chiu quotes from page 84) in order to generate harmony, I was discussing harmony that involves human activities. Human harmony requires norms because as conscious beings we make decisions about actions that affect harmony, and such decision-making processes require norms. Chiu’s analysis attempts to show that these four claims are not compatible. First, he argues that if one accepts (1) and (2) one would have to give up (3) or (4). One would have to do so, Chiu says, because “if nature itself can actively generate harmony, and harmony is the ultimate good, then humans cannot improve upon nature,” and that if “humans have a special status because they can realize harmony in a better way (say, more efficiently, elegantly, consciously, rationally, etc.), then harmony itself is not ultimate, as it depends on something else for completion.”

I do not think this is the case. Harmony is not a categorical concept. A categorical concept is one where something is either totally in it or totally outside it. Kant’s “realm of ends” is a categorical concept, for example; members of the category are of equal standing as far as the category is concerned. In Kant’s case, all rational beings have equal rights and command equal dignity. Harmony is not like that, however. Even though something may have ultimate value, there can still be more or less of it. Harmony admits of degrees (p. 9). Just as a beautiful thing could be more or less beautiful, some things or states of affairs can be more or less harmonious. A harmo-

nious state of affairs can be improved, depending on whether it is conducive to greater harmony. There are both harmonies and disharmonies in nature, even though Confucians believe nature is largely harmonious (p. 14). Humans can enhance harmony in nature. Controlled burns or induced earthquakes can prevent major disharmonies like colossal fires or major earthquakes and help reduce natural disharmonies or make nature more harmonious. Chiu argues that if harmonies can be more or less, then there must be a criterion to measure them independent of harmony itself, and that is a problem. I do not think we need an external criterion at all. We can put John and Fred side-by-side and show that John is taller than Fred. Even though comparing two harmonious families (or two state parks) can be more complex, we do not have to appeal to criteria that are external to harmony.

Chiu's second objection is that if one accepts (1) and (3), namely that harmony can exist naturally and humans have a special status in the world, then one will have to give up (2) or (4), for two reasons. The first is that "one must substitute harmony with another value to preserve the privileged position of humans, and harmony is no longer ultimate." I do not think this follows. In the Confucian view, humans have the privileged position to be able to harmonize actively in society and with nature. Nowhere does this position imply that harmony is no longer of the ultimate value.

His second reason is that the special status ascribed to humanity implies "a pre-determined hierarchical structure to the world," and, he writes,

Within this structure each entity has its own position, with humans at the top. However, this means that harmony no longer requires any activity, as the structure is fixed. Under this view, humans have no need to establish anything with respect to harmony because their status has already been established.

In my view of Confucian harmony, the "hierarchical structure" is already an outcome of previous cosmological processes of harmonization, hence not predetermined. As discussed earlier, I do not think hierarchical structure and harmony are mutually exclusive. While hierarchy itself is not harmony, nor does harmony necessitate hierarchy, harmony can take place in a hierarchical structure. The food chain in nature is a sort of hierarchy, and harmony can be achieved at certain levels. A human institution can have a hierarchical structure and yet operate harmoniously. So, the combination of (1) and (3) does not exclude (2) or (4).

Chiu's third criticism is that if one holds (1) and (4), one must reject (2) or (3). This is so because, Chiu argues, "if one wants to insist that harmony can be generated from norm-governing activities yet without deliberation, one faces great difficulty in explaining why humans are privileged compared to entities in the non-human realm."⁵ I think there can be various reasons for why one can hold that humans have a special status in the world along with the claims that (1) harmony can exist naturally and (4) harmony is the ultimate good. One such reason, as suggested earlier, is that harmonies in nature can be improved and that humans possess a special capacity to improve harmony. In the Confucian view, human beings possess the special capacity to consciously and actively generate and promote harmony in the world, distinguishing them from all other things in the world. This does not imply, as Chiu

claims it does, that “harmony” in (1) and (4) are inconsistent in meaning. In the view I defend, natural harmony admits of degrees just as social (human) harmony does. Both can be improved or degraded. Only humans can exert conscious impact on them either way. It is not the case, as Chiu claims, that “‘harmony’ in claim (1) refers to harmony in its lesser form, and ‘harmony’ in claim (4) refers to harmony in its more completed form.” These two uses of “harmony” are consistent. Similarly, Chiu also argues that if one accepts the latter pair in each of the combinations above, one would have to reject one in the former pair, for similar reasons. My response to each of these objections in one direction should apply to the reversed cases as well.

I will now turn to Chiu’s criticism of my Confucian-Daoist comparison regarding harmony. In comparing Confucian harmony with Daoist harmony, I present two observations. First, whereas Daoist harmony, particularly in the *Zhuangzi*, is primarily between humanity and the natural world, Confucian sages in pursuit of harmony are *more* active in taking initiatives to generate harmony within society, though harmonizing the world is also part of the Confucian ideal.

Second, in promoting harmony, Confucians are *more* proactive than their Daoist counterpart. Whereas in Daoism harmony is *more* a matter of accommodating the natural world, which has a tendency to harmonize itself, Confucians emphasize the need to take action toward harmonization, including transforming society and the world in order to achieve harmony. Whereas the thrust of Daoism is to harmonize *with* the world, then, the thrust of Confucianism is to harmonize the world (p. 36). Chiu finds both claims “misleading.” He presents evidence to show that both philosophies share some common ideas, such as “*wuwei*” and involvement in human society. I do not, nor do I need to, contradict any of Chiu’s evidence of the overlaps between Confucianism and Daoism. Note that I acknowledge that these philosophies share largely the same sources for their conceptions of harmony, and I do not deny their similarities. My characterizations of their differences (not “distinctions” as Chiu portrays) are made in “broad strokes” and are about which one is “more” on something than the other (p. 34). Chiu’s detailed discussion is beneficial in helping us better understand Confucianism and Daoism. But it does little in refuting my general characterizations. General characterizations are about patterns of things. Individual counterexamples do not refute general patterns, just as the existence of vegetable fields in the American Midwest does not refute the claim that, in comparison with California, the Midwest has been more of an area of cornfields. (For more discussion of cultural patterns, see Li 2016b.)

Chiu characterizes the main difference between Confucianism and Daoism to be in the status that they ascribe to humans. Chiu’s characterization is not with regard directly to harmony, whereas my comparison is; the pertinent question is how the two philosophies differ in conceptualizing harmony. I do not deny the difference characterized by Chiu, but when we come to see the implications of such a difference for harmony, I think it leads right into the two points that I have made. If humans do not possess a special status in the Daoist view, then humans should harmonize with (the rest of) nature, and the best way would be for humans to follow the flow in

nature rather than playing an active major role in harmonizing nature, which Confucians advocate.

Fan Ruiping's criticisms challenge a fundamental aspect of my book, namely whether my characterization of the Confucian philosophy of harmony has a sufficiently solid foundation to be Confucian. Our key difference here, as I see it, is whether Confucians have to rely on the notion of a supernatural heaven (天 *tian*) as their foundation in establishing their moral philosophy. Fan holds that a supernatural heaven is essential to Confucian philosophy and that Confucian harmony must take such a heaven as its foundation. I do not hold such a view.⁶ I do not deny the element of a supernatural heaven in the historical development of Confucianism. Nor do I disregard its contemporary defenders. I recognize, however, that Confucian thinkers from early on have varied in relying on such a notion. Confucius apparently held *tian* as a divine force; Mencius took it mostly to be a force beyond human control, which is not necessarily divine in nature (see Feng 1961, p. 55).⁷ In Xunzi and later thinkers like Zhang Zai and Wang Fuzhi, *tian* is basically a natural force.

Now, the question is what we contemporaries should do with the notion of *tian* in reconstructing Confucian philosophy. My approach is to reconstruct a Confucian philosophy without having to rely on a supernatural heaven while remaining inclusive of approaches by religious Confucian thinkers (see chapter 10 on the "Heaven principle," pp. 164–165). I resist the temptation to rely on a supernatural divine force as the foundation of Confucian philosophy because I believe that this approach has lost much of its credibility and is no longer relevant to much of modern life. Today, it is no longer the optimal way to expound Confucian philosophy. (For more discussion of this matter, see Li 2007 and Li 2012.) My approach can be characterized as naturalist in the sense that it does not presume there was a mandate of heaven that defines the moral way even before humanity evolved into its current form. In my view, before humanity emerged in the world there was no mandate of heaven against such things as incest. In this regard, I am perhaps more Xunzian than anything else. For Xunzi, *li* was established to regulate the kind of being that we are born to be (see Li 2011). It was only after humanity evolved into what we are that moral injunctions became established to regulate human behavior on the basis of what we are.

Closely related to Fan's disapproval of my view on *tian* is his criticism of my account of the Confucian cosmogony of harmony. He contends that my naturalistic account of cosmic genealogy is "theoretically confusing and conceptually contradictory." In my account, harmony presupposes heterogeneity. Yet, the original *hundun* 混沌 (chaos) is undifferentiated and unsubstantiated (p. 28). How can the process of harmonization start in the first place if we begin with *hundun*? This is undoubtedly a powerful critique, pointing to something that has to be further clarified. I readily admit that I do not have a full-fledged theory of Chinese cosmogony. Nor do I pretend that this issue has been resolved. Due to the nature of the subject, any form of cosmological theory by philosophers has to be sketchy at best. I believe, however, that my position is still more plausible than that there is a supernatural force as the ultimate foundation with a pre-given order prior to any process of harmonization.

Furthermore, Fan suggests that if harmony is the function of *Dao*, as I cited from the *Daoyuan*, *Dao* must have a pre-given structure with differentiation, otherwise harmony would be impossible. There can be two conceptions of *Dao*. One is that *Dao* has a pre-set structure from the very beginning. According to this view, *Dao* is a body of eternal fixed rules or principles; it governs the universe by the same rules from the very beginning. The other conception is that *Dao* is itself an evolving process. The primordial *Dao* as *hundun* is the undifferentiated *Dao*. According to the latter, to say that “*Dao* gives rise to *yin* and *yang*” means that the evolving process of *Dao* leads to the rise of *yin* and *yang*. This approach implies that *Dao* both precedes *yin* and *yang* and that *Dao* manifests itself as *yin* and *yang*. Such a dynamic reading of *Dao* makes more sense than reading *Dao* as a pre-set structure.

Fan maintains that Confucian moral epistemology is foundationalist rather than coherentist. Moral rules in the foundation will not change:

[w]e need to recognize that such rules and judgments (such as the anti-incest rule) remain the authoritative and reliable moral convictions that are strongly immune to rejection in ordinary activities. They have commanded the Confucian allegiance and possess a certain presumptive epistemic authority in Confucian moral practice. When they clash with other principles (such as the principle of individual autonomy) or theories (such as the utilitarian theory), it is legitimate for Confucians to follow them and adjust or reject other principles or theories.

I also believe that Confucians should defend Confucian moral principles and rules when these principles and rules are in conflict with those of other traditions, as long as we are not fundamentalist about them. My position on the importance of moral principles can be found in the following statements:

Harmony does not permit simply following the flow of the world with no constraints; harmony has to be regulated by ritual propriety. Without ritual propriety, Confucian harmony cannot be achieved. (p. 64)

Ritual propriety embodies moral precepts. Confucian ritual propriety embodies Confucian moral precepts. It is not that moral precepts cannot be changed. Once they are established, they have relative stability, as in the case of rights (see p. 133).

Fundamentally speaking, however, I prefer a contextualist approach to moral epistemology. Contextualism in the sense used here implies two things. First, our moral precepts are grounded on the kind of beings we humans have evolved to be. Had humanity evolved in a radically different way, our moral precepts would have been different. It is not the case that moral precepts, Confucian or otherwise, already existed somewhere even before humanity came into existence. In this sense, there is no “pre-set” moral order in the world. (In other words, Confucian harmony is “deep harmony”—harmony “all the way down”!) In the meantime, as long as the large context remains intact, basic moral precepts should be preserved. Second, as human society evolves, human relations also change, and moral precepts have to be adjusted accordingly. For example, when transplanting human organs to save lives was not yet an option, preserving one’s entire body in death as a way to show filial duty

to parents made sense. Now that with advanced medical technologies the transplanting of human organs has become an important way to save lives, a moral precept to preserve one's entire body in death may no longer be appropriate.

In closing, let me thank my critics for their engagement and insights. For an author and a thinker, nothing can be more gratifying than when colleagues engage one's work in critical ways. For that reason, I am deeply indebted to Yao Xinzong, Wai Wai Chiu, and Ruiping Fan. I hope our exchange of ideas will enhance understandings of the Confucian philosophy of harmony and related issues.

Notes

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- 1 – All unattributed parenthetical page references are to Li 2014.
- 2 – For instance, *Xunzi*, “Wangzhi.”
- 3 – For a detailed discussion of this matter, see Li 2016a.
- 4 – For his own account of Confucian harmony, readers can see Yao's landmark book (2000), especially section 3 of chapter 3 (pp. 169–189).
- 5 – While some may hold that sages can follow norms without deliberation, most of us evidently cannot. I will not discuss this point here for the sake of space.
- 6 – For his strong and unwavering defense of the Confucian tradition and its relevance to the contemporary world, readers can see Fan 2010.
- 7 – For a detailed analysis of Mencius' view on “*tian*” and its various interpretations, see Perkins 2014. Similar to Feng, Perkins holds that “what seems more likely is that Mengzi has come to equate heaven with fate, *ming*. Heaven simply represents those forces or events in the world that are inexplicable and irresistible” (Perkins 2014, p. 123).

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