Volume 38 Issue 1

cjsae
the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
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The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
Editors-in-Chief: J. Adam Perry and Robin Neustaeter
French Language Editor: Jean-Pierre Mercier
Special Edition Editors: Jennifer Sumner and Emily Dobrich
www.cjsae-rceea.ca

38,1 June/juin 2026, 47–65
ISSN 1925-993X (online)

INTEGRATING CONFUCIANISM FOR A MORE HOLISTIC APPROACH TO TEACHING SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

This article explores the integration of Confucian principles into adult education for sustainability (EfS) to foster a more holistic understanding of sustainability that bridges Eastern and Western perspectives. Drawing on the philosophical teachings of Confucianism and their relevance to contemporary global challenges, the article highlights how Confucian concepts such as qi *(气); the Triad of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity; and the five constant virtues can inform and enhance sustainability education. By examining the intersections of Confucianism, adult education, and sustainability, the article underscores the potential of Confucianism to contribute to a sustainable future through moral self-cultivation, ecological ethics, and the development of a harmonious relationship with nature. The article also discusses how Confucian teachings can be integrated into the curriculum and pedagogical approaches of EfS, promoting lifelong learning and the development of just and sustainable learning environments globally. Through this exploration, the article aims to offer new insights into the role of traditional wisdom in addressing contemporary sustainability challenges and advancing global EfS.*

Résumé

L'article explore l'intégration des principes confucéens dans l'éducation des adultes sur la durabilité afin de promouvoir une compréhension holistique de la durabilité et d'établir des liens entre les perspectives orientales et occidentales. Il se base sur les enseignements philosophiques du Confucianisme et leur pertinence aux défis mondiaux modernes afin de montrer comment des concepts confucéens peuvent informer l'éducation sur la durabilité. En examinant l'intersection du Confucianisme, de l'éducation des adultes et de la durabilité, l'article présente ce que les enseignements du Confucianisme pourraient apporter à un avenir plus durable grâce à la cultivation de notre propre caractère moral, l'éthique écologique et les relations harmonieuses avec la nature. L'article suggère aussi comment incorporer les enseignements confucéens dans les programmes d'études et les approches pédagogiques pour promouvoir l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie et le développement de milieux d'apprentissage justes et durables à l'échelle mondiale. L'article

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offre de nouvelles perspectives sur le rôle de la sagesse traditionnelle dans les efforts pour surmonter les défis contemporains et promouvoir l'éducation des adultes sur la durabilité à l'échelle mondiale.

Keywords

Confucianism; education for sustainability (EfS); the five constant virtues; the Triad of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity; traditional wisdom

Mots clés

Confucianisme; éducation sur la durabilité; les cinq vertus; la triade du ciel, de la Terre et des êtres humains; sagesse traditionnelle

> If mankind is to survive, it must go back 25 centuries in time to tap the wisdom of Confucius.
>
> Hannes Alfvén (in Marnhan, 1988)

International scholar John Clammer (2021) has argued that most knowledgeable observers of our present global condition would agree that the trajectory of our civilization is not sustainable. The manifestations of this unsustainable path, ranging from escalating climate change and resource depletion to widening social inequalities and geopolitical tensions, are discernible across various domains. In the discourse on sustainability, a prevailing notion posits that the roots of our unsustainable world can be traced back to our consumptive culture (Clammer, 2021).

In recent years, there has been a noteworthy shift in the perception of culture within sustainability. Traditionally, culture was subsumed under the broader umbrella of the social dimension of sustainability (Lazar & Chithra, 2022). However, this outlook has evolved. With culture garnering increased attention as a distinct and crucial element in the pursuit of sustainability, it is now considered to be the fourth dimension of sustainability, alongside the well-established environmental, social, and economic dimensions (Lazar & Chithra, 2022). Culture, in its manifold expressions ranging from cultural heritage to cultural and creative industries and cultural tourism, has proved to be both an enabler and a driver of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability (UNESCO, 2016).

Defining culture has proven challenging for many researchers so far. Various perspectives have been considered, yet a definitive and universally accepted definition remains elusive (Assadourian, 2010). In his influential work *Cultures of Transition and Sustainability: Culture after Capitalism*, Clammer (2016) contended that culture is the medium in which humans live their lives; indeed, it often frames the ways in which we live those lives. Importantly, Clammer's perspective suggests that if our culture transforms, so can we, potentially altering the unsustainable trajectory of our world. Therefore, it becomes imperative for humanity to subject our culture to scrutiny, fostering a profound comprehension of its value and impact. One feasible approach to achieve this is to delve into human history and return to traditional cultures. By drawing wisdom from our ancestors, we may find valuable insights to guide a more sustainable future.

In this vein, the renowned physicist Hannes Alfvén, a Nobel Prize laureate from Sweden, asserted during the inaugural international conference of Nobel laureates in 1988 that if humanity is to endure, it must draw on the wisdom of Confucius dating back 25 centuries (Marnhan, 1988). Although the term *sustainability* is not explicitly mentioned in Confucian literature, concepts with similar meanings are deeply embedded within that literature. Numerous previous studies have explored the intersection between Confucian thought and sustainability (Mou et al., 2023; Ren et al., 2022). These explorations all underscore the broader compatibility of enduring Confucian values and principles within the context of adult education for sustainability (EfS).

Confucianism places a strong emphasis on education, viewing it as a vital process for cultivating moral character and developing a *junzi* (君子, noble person) (B. Li et al., 2023). Education in Confucian thought is not merely about acquiring knowledge, but also about fostering ethical virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, and propriety. Confucius advocated for equal access to education for all individuals, regardless of their background, and emphasized that teaching should be tailored to each student's abilities and needs. The process of learning in Confucianism involves active questioning, reflection, and self-cultivation, encouraging students to integrate knowledge with moral action. Furthermore, Confucian education promotes harmony among individuals, society, and nature, aiming to create a balanced and virtuous community. This holistic approach to education aligns with Jaimie Cloud's definition of EfS from the Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education, which emphasizes "an education that prepares people to be far-seeing enough, flexible enough, and wise enough to contribute to the regenerative capacity of the physical and social systems upon which they depend" (Griswold, 2016, p. 117). This definition of sustainability education underscores the philosophical viewpoints that shape educational approaches and the broader discourse on sustainability (Griswold, 2016).

In terms of adult EfS, existing research has explored the interconnection between Confucian teaching and learning principles and the context of sustainability education for adult learners, both within Chinese communities and globally (Lovren, 2015; Ngai & Singh, 2019; Sun & Kang, 2015; Zhang, 2008). These studies collectively emphasize that Confucian traditions provide a rich moral and philosophical foundation for sustainability education. Rooted in values such as education for all, lifelong self-cultivation, harmony, and social responsibility, Confucianism encourages a holistic vision of learning that extends beyond technical skills. Rather than viewing sustainability as a purely ecological or economic concern, these perspectives frame it as a deeply ethical commitment, requiring empathy, community care, and personal transformation. Integrating such principles into adult learning fosters a value-driven, inclusive, and socially engaged approach to sustainability that resonates across both Eastern and Western educational contexts. As De Bary (1998) observed, "Chinese and Confucian culture, traditionally, was about settled communities living on the land, nourishing themselves and the land" (p. 32). The wisdom that sustained Chinese communities for thousands of years offers valuable insights for contemporary EfS discussions. Therefore, the objectives of this article are threefold: first, to provide a brief introduction to Confucianism, clarifying the relationships among concepts such as Confucius, Confucianism, and Neo-Confucianism that frequently appear in this article; second, to explore the connections between core Confucian principles—such as Confucian ecological ethics and self-cultivation—and sustainability; and third, to discuss how integrating Confucian principles into EfS can foster a more

holistic understanding of it that embraces both Western and Eastern perspectives for adult learners. This article explores the intersection of Confucianism, adult education, and sustainability—three domains that, when brought into conversation, offer fresh insights for rethinking educational approaches in response to today's ecological and moral challenges. While Confucianism is often discussed in historical or philosophical terms, its core principles—such as lifelong moral self-cultivation, reverence for nature, and social harmony—bear important implications for adult learning and EfS. To guide the exploration of Confucianism's relevance to sustainability education, this article draws on the framework proposed by Schreiber-Barsch and Mauch (2019), which conceptualizes EfS through three interrelated components: contents, processes, and structures. By aligning Confucian ethical principles and pedagogical traditions with these dimensions, the article seeks to clarify how ancient philosophical insights can be meaningfully integrated into adult EfS. This framework will resurface later in the discussion to evaluate how Confucian concepts can be applied in educational practice.

Confucius, Confucianism, and Neo-Confucianism

Confucius (551–479 BCE) is the most renowned and influential philosopher, politician, and educator in Chinese history. Born into an aristocratic family during the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) in ancient China, Confucius dedicated his life to restoring peace and order to the dark era of his time through the teaching of self-cultivation of virtues (Yao, 2000). He believed in the restoration of social harmony through ancient rituals and music, which he considered crucial for maintaining societal order and personal virtue (Yao, 2000). Confucius's thoughts on human ethics and morality were meticulously recorded by his students in the *Analects*, emphasizing such virtues as *ren* (benevolence) and *li* (propriety or ritual) as essential to building social order. He portrayed *junzi* (the noble person) as a moral authority responsible for the betterment of society, advocating for individuals to become *junzi* with moral awareness and autonomy (Ivanhoe, 2000; B. Li et al., 2023; Yao, 2000). Confucius's teachings continue to influence Chinese society today, laying the foundation for Confucian education and scholarship (Yao, 2000).

The term *Confucianism* was coined by 16th-century Jesuits, who were among the first Europeans to encounter and describe the Chinese tradition of Confucian thought (Yao, 2000). Established by Confucius over 2,600 years ago, Confucianism is the dominant ethical and philosophical system in Chinese communities (B. Li et al., 2023; Y. Li et al., 2016; Yao, 2000). It is deeply embedded in Chinese culture, impacting educational, social, ethical, governmental, and economic aspects at all levels of society (Y. Li et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2018; Yao, 2000). The aim of Confucianism is to build a stable and harmonious society through ethics and morality by structuring relationships based on gender, age, and social status (B. Li et al., 2023). It prescribes proper behaviours according to hierarchical statuses and roles, emphasizing respect and obedience to leaders, who are expected to act with kindness and fairness (B. Li et al., 2023). In the family context, this is manifested as filial piety, where the young respect and care for their elders (Ching, 1972; B. Li et al., 2023). Education is central to Confucianism, and teachers, therefore, are highly respected in Confucian culture (Y. Li et al., 2016). Confucianism has also significantly influenced the cultures and histories of many East Asian countries and regions, including mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, as well as countries with significant Chinese minorities, such as Malaysia and Singapore (B. Li et al., 2023).

Confucianism underwent significant transformations during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE) with the rise of Neo-Confucianism, which integrated Daoist and Buddhist elements (Yao, 2000). Neo-Confucianism reinterpreted the ancient Chinese classics and established new philosophical frameworks, which became the official interpretations for education and state examinations (Yao, 2000). These developments further solidified Confucianism's influence in China and other East Asian countries (Yao, 2000). Neo-Confucianism emphasized naturalistic cosmology and the ethics of self-cultivation within an anthropocosmic vision, asserting that humans should harmonize with the universe through self-cultivation (B. Li et al., 2023; Tu, 1989; Tucker, 1991). This period saw the development of a more rational and dialectical Confucian system, focusing on ecological concerns and the unity of humanity and nature (Tucker, 1991).

Confucianism and Sustainability in a Philosophical View

Confucian Ecological Ethics

The theory of *qi* (气) is foundational to Confucian ecological ethics, as it illuminates how Confucian scholars perceive the cosmos and positions humanity within it. For early Confucian scholars such as Mencius, Wang Chong, and Wang Fuzhi, *qi* is understood as a force that connects and sustains all entities. Modern Confucian scholars have expanded on this concept: Mary Evelyn Tucker (1991, 1993) described *qi* as the material and psycho-physical element of the universe, while Tu Wei-Ming (1989) emphasized its spiritual vitality. In essence, *qi* is regarded as the source and foundation of all things, connecting and supporting the entire universe in a continuous process of transformation and growth. It is pervasive, vital, transformative, and all-encompassing. The concept of Yin-Yang, derived from the Chinese classic *I Ching*, symbolizes *qi*'s principles, representing complementary forces within the universe that enable growth, transformation, and cyclical change (Ching, 1993; Y. Li et al., 2016).

The understanding of *qi* is critically reflected in Confucian cosmology, which is characterized by two key concepts: organic holism and dynamic vitalism (Tucker, 1991). In Confucianism, the cosmos is viewed as a holistic, ever-changing, and spontaneously self-generating entity, brimming with energy and potential for transformation (Lin, 2020; Tu, 1989; Tucker, 1991). This perspective contrasts sharply with the materialist view of the cosmos, which perceives it as merely a lifeless, inanimate entity. In Confucianism, change and transformation are seen as processes that perpetuate various systems in the cosmos, including mineral, animal, and also humanity (Tucker, 1991). The fundamental metaphor in Confucianism for the human relationship with the cosmos is called Triad of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity (Tucker, 1991).

The triadic relationship between Heaven, Earth, and Humanity is evident as early as the third century BC in the writings of the Confucian scholar Xunzi (荀子, Master Xun) (Xunzi, 2014), and was further established by Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒), a prominent Confucian scholar instrumental in promoting Confucianism as state orthodoxy during the Han Dynasty (179–104 BC) (Ching, 1993). Since then, the Triad of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity has often been conceptualized in parental terms, with humans regarded as children of the cosmos (Tucker, 1991). Perhaps the most famous articulation of this

concept in Confucian literature is found in the *Western Inscription* by the eleventh-century Neo-Confucianist Zhang Zai (张载). He wrote:

> Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body, and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. (In Tucker, 1991, p. 66)

In Confucianism, the ultimate aspiration for many scholars is to "form one body with Heaven and Earth," a concept extensively explored during the Neo-Confucian period (Taylor, 1998; Tucker, 1991). This notion of oneness does not imply a material existence but rather emphasizes a spiritual unity with the cosmos (Ivanhoe, 1998). In Confucian thought, many natural phenomena and objects symbolize ethical virtues or human excellence, a concept Ivanhoe (1998) described as "human-nature analogues" (p. 67). For instance, in the *Analects*, Confucius likened a ruler who governs with virtue to the Pole Star, which remains constant while lesser stars revolve around it (see *Analects* 2.1, in Kong & Slingerland, 2013). This analogy underscores the Confucian belief that the intricate patterns and vitality of the cosmos are mirrored in human potential for virtue. By cultivating these virtues, individuals can form one body with Earth and Heaven (Ivanhoe, 1998). This perspective has become so integral to Chinese thought that it can be seen as a general worldview within the Chinese community (Tu, 1989).

The Confucian perspective on the cosmos and humanity's place within it offers a non-Western, anthropocosmic viewpoint on the human-nature relationship (Tu, 1989). Although Confucianism places special emphasis on human beings (Tu, 1989; Tucker, 1991, 1993), it does not value *only* human beings. It certainly does not suggest that human beings are the rulers of all other creations. As Nuyen (2008) concluded, "Confucianism is committed to the idea that nature has an inherent value, even though such value can only be understood through human reasoning" (p. 195). Rooted in the belief that humans are children of the universe, Confucian scholars argue that just as parents deserve filial respect, so do heaven and earth. This relationship advocates for the unity of humanity and nature, as opposed to the imposition of human will upon the natural world (Tucker, 1991). To fulfill this responsibility and become guardians of the universe, human beings must engage in the process of self-cultivation (修身, *Xiu Shen*) (Taylor, 1998; Tu, 1989; Tucker, 1991). In this process, the pursuit of knowledge is not aimed at expanding human control over nature but at aligning with nature's changing patterns to ensure that human actions and society are in harmony with nature's deeper rhythms (Tucker, 1993). Confucianism cautions against the unlimited exploitation of nature, reminding humans that, as an integrated part of the universe, we should actively harmonize our actions with the pace of natural change. Consequently, the transformation of nature in Confucianism is about learning to live harmoniously within one's natural environment and using it modestly to sustain basic livelihoods (Tucker, 1991), which is strongly relevant to sustainability discussions today.

Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation (修身, Xiu Shen)

Moral self-cultivation, or self-cultivation, is an important self-practice and self-reflection process and concept in Confucianism for an individual to become *junzi*. The core ethical

norms of Confucian moral self-cultivation are encapsulated in the concept of *wu chang* (五常), or the five constant virtues. These virtues are *ren* (仁, benevolence or humaneness), *yi* (义, righteousness), *li* (礼, propriety), *zhi* (智, wisdom), and *xin* (信, trustworthiness) (B. Li et al., 2023).

Ren (仁, benevolence or humaneness): In Confucianism, *ren*—often translated as goodness, benevolence, humanity, or human-heartedness—is the most significant virtue, described as a "single thread" that runs through all of Confucius's teachings (Fu, 2022; Kong & Slingerland, 2013; B. Li & Eilks, 2024; Ngai & Singh, 2019). The pictogram for *ren* combines the symbols for "two" (*er*, 二) and "person" (*ren*, 人), emphasizing its focus on interpersonal and social connections. *Ren* encompasses sentiments of love and care for others, highlighting virtues such as generosity, respect, kindness, sympathy, empathy, and tolerance (Ching, 1993; Kong & Slingerland, 2013; B. Li & Eilks, 2024). The roots of *ren* lie in familial affection, which then extends to a broader societal context, advocating kindness and respect toward others' families (Ching, 1993) and contributing to the building of a harmonious society. Additionally, *ren* is associated with Confucius's teaching of the Golden Rule: "Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire" (Kong & Slingerland, 2013, *Analects* 15.24). This universally applicable teaching can serve as a foundational value for many sustainable decisions, such as promoting non-violence, ending wars and poverty, and prioritizing the fulfillment of everyone's basic needs to ensure health and well-being for all. Neo-Confucians further developed *ren* to extend beyond human relationships to embrace the natural world, advocating for the compassionate treatment of all beings (Ching, 1972) and embodying the ecological consciousness in Confucian philosophy.

Yi (义, righteousness): In Confucianism, *yi* represents a sense of shame and disgust for morally wrong actions, serving as a standard for appropriate behaviour and ensuring a just distribution of rights, benefits, duties, and responsibilities to foster a harmonious society (B. Li & Eilks, 2024; B. Li et al., 2023). In the context of sustainability, practising *yi* encourages individuals to prioritize ethical principles and societal well-being over self-interest and profit (Kong & Slingerland, 2013, *Analects* 4.16). Furthermore, adhering to *yi* helps reduce social bias, as it involves making decisions guided by an internal moral compass rather than societal biases, aligning with those deemed morally right regardless of prior predispositions (Kong & Slingerland, 2013, *Analects* 4.10). *Yi* also underscores the importance of contextual and moral considerations when addressing complex issues, emphasizing that actions must be evaluated based on specific circumstances rather than rigid adherence to past actions or generalized rules. Confucius's approval of his conventionally tabooed son-in-law in *Analects* 5.1 can serve as a practical illustration of this principle. By marrying his daughter to a former criminal, Confucius defied traditional social norms, making a strong statement that true morality is independent of conventional social judgments, and highlighting the excessive and corrupt nature of punishments in his time (Kong & Slingerland, 2013).This principle is particularly relevant in the context of sustainability, where decisions and actions must be continually reassessed and adapted to the evolving needs and circumstances of both the environment and society.

Li (礼, propriety): *Li*, in Confucianism, encompasses not only grand religious ceremonies but also social etiquette and personal conduct rules (Ivanhoe, 2000). *Li* arises from the need to regulate human desires and emotions, which, in Confucianism, if left unchecked, can lead to competition, chaos, and the depletion of material resources due to

excessive human demands (Xunzi, 2014). Over time, *li* has provided a framework for appropriate social actions and interactions, restraining excessive behaviour, instilling humility, and preventing conflicts by prioritizing communal harmony over individual desires. It is a combination of education, training, discipline, restraint, authority, and legitimacy (Chaihark, 2003; B. Li & Eilks, 2024), guiding individuals in ethical social behaviours such as respecting elders, practising filial piety, and conducting marriages (Pang-White, 2021). In Confucianism, *li* is not rigid but adaptive, adjusting to environmental and social changes to maintain harmony (Kong & Slingerland, 2013). *Li* is crucial for promoting sustainability as it emphasizes restraining excessive human desires, prioritizing communal needs over personal interest. It also provides flexibility for individuals to balance outdated traditional values with contemporary challenges to foster a harmonious and sustainable society (Ivanhoe et al., 2009, p. 82, *Mencius* 4A17).

Zhi (智, wisdom): In Confucianism, *zhi* is understood as the discernment of morality—judging right from wrong and accumulating moral knowledge—characterized by the use of intelligence for self-cultivation and appropriate moral action (Guo, 2019; B. Li & Eilks, 2024). *Zhi* is achieved through continual learning, active reflection, and the practical application of values, emphasizing the development of virtuous character traits rooted in love and respect (Ivanhoe, 2000). During the Neo-Confucian era, Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming developed distinct methods for moral self-cultivation (Ivanhoe, 2000) to practise *zhi*. Zhu Xi emphasized a structured educational approach, advocating "obtaining knowledge by investigating things (*ge wu zhi zhi*, 格物致知)" through rigorous study and understanding of the inherent principles in all things. In contrast, Wang Yangming's principle of "unity of knowledge and action (*zhi xing he yi*, 知行合一)" emphasized immediate moral enlightenment through sincere effort, arguing that moral knowledge compels action and advocating for continuous self-scrutiny. In terms of sustainability, *zhi* is particularly relevant as it emphasizes the importance of acquiring sustainability knowledge (B. Li et al., 2023), teaching and learning that knowledge, and encouraging active reflection and constant efforts to apply that knowledge in daily life for a sustainable future.

Xin (信, trustworthiness): In Confucianism, *xin* encompasses both earning the trust of others and grounding knowledge in one's understanding and observation of the world (B. Li et al., 2023). It highlights the necessity of consistency between word and deed, embodying a commitment to both oneself and others. Neo-Confucian scholar Dai Zhen from the Qing Dynasty stated, "Between people, trustworthiness is the key to social relations and mutual support" (as cited in Ivanhoe, 2000, p.15). This perspective underscores that trustworthiness is not only an individual moral quality but also a crucial element in maintaining social cohesion and stability. In the context of sustainability, *xin* underscores an individual's dedication to adhering to sustainability principles, representing a promise to society at large. It also highlights the significance of consistency between word and deed, as well as the importance of trust and shared knowledge in collaborative efforts to address sustainability challenges (B. Li et al., 2023).

While the previous sections have laid a philosophical foundation for understanding the ecological and ethical dimensions of Confucianism, the next step is to explore how these principles can inform contemporary educational practices. In particular, this discussion turns to the intersection of Confucianism, adult education, and sustainability, examining how ancient insights might be integrated into lifelong learning for a more just and sustainable future.

Discussion: Confucianism, Sustainability, and Adult Education

The intersection of Confucianism, adult education, and sustainability offers a rich field for exploring how ancient philosophical principles can inform and enhance contemporary educational practices. For instance, Zhang (2008) analyzed the concept of lifelong learning within Confucianism, emphasizing the importance of integrating Confucian lifelong learning traditions with Western educational practices for Chinese adult learners. Zhang (2008) advocated for a transition from traditional teacher authority to a facilitator role, promoting a balance between collaborative and independent learning, and combining effort with enjoyment to establish a global lifelong learning culture. Sun and Kang (2015) further examined the benefits of "meshing" Confucian principles into work-based learning, arguing that such an integration could create a more holistic, lifelong, and globally inclusive approach to education that balances immediate workforce needs with broader human development goals. Additionally, Ngai and Singh (2019) explored how the Confucian virtue *ren* aligns with the goals of higher education in Hong Kong, which includes fostering lifelong learning, professional development, and the cultivation of ethically responsible citizens. The alignment between Confucian principles and EfS for adult learners in various contexts suggests that incorporating Confucianism into the EfS curriculum can foster a more holistic understanding of sustainability, integrating both Eastern and Western perspectives.

The relevance of Confucian principles in addressing contemporary global sustainability challenges has also been increasingly recognized in recent scholarly discussions. For instance, Ren et al. (2022) argued that Confucianism provides principles applicable in modern society to promote fairness, harmony, and sustainability in relationships, both interpersonal and with nature. Furthermore, Confucianism's emphasis on prioritizing the interest of the whole over individual profit can guide a rethinking of economic systems to prioritize societal well-being and environmental health (Ren et al., 2022). Mou et al. (2023) delved into the concept of "tian-ren-he-yi" in Confucianism, which refers not only to heaven or the sky, but also to universal truth, the natural order, and moral law, reflecting a cosmological view in which humans are part of a larger, integrated whole. They further drew comparisons between this cosmological thinking and the sustainable development goals (SDGs), a set of global goals established by the United Nations to promote social well-being, environmental protection, and economic sustainability. They identified several parallels between Confucian ideas and the SDGs, with the emphasis on harmony between humans and nature being the most evident. Other parallels include Confucius's focus on the importance of food quality and safety, the creation of peaceful and inclusive societies, the promotion of equitable quality education, and the advancement of well-being for all (Mou et al., 2023).

Despite the growing theoretical exploration of Confucianism's relevance to sustainability and adult education, there remains a significant gap in empirical research and proactive case studies that demonstrate how Confucian values can be operationalized in real-world educational contexts. Few studies document tangible implementations—such as field trips, community placements, service-learning projects, or sustainability internships—that are explicitly grounded in Confucian ethics. This situation arises from two key issues: first, whether philosophical or religious ideologies can effectively translate into real-world actions; and second, how Confucianism can be meaningfully integrated into sustainability education for adult learners in a tangible and practical manner.

Confucian Prescriptions for Environmental Action: Cultivating Love, Care, and a Sense of Companionship with Nature

The potential transformation of knowledge into action is a critical aspect to consider when discussing Confucianism's ability to foster a more holistic understanding of sustainability. Many researchers have highlighted the challenges of creating meaningful discourse that bridges historical religious or philosophical traditions with contemporary scientific perspectives, noting that mere ideas do not necessarily lead to action (Taylor, 1998). While many philosophical and religious traditions express reverence for nature, Confucianism distinguishes itself by offering a set of ethical principles and behavioural norms that can be operationalized into environmental practices. These prescriptions are not merely symbolic—they promote concrete actions, such as resource restraint, empathetic governance, and ecologically informed moral cultivation.

Building on Rodney Taylor's (1998) work on Confucianism's potential to help people form companionship with the world, this section articulates a three-tiered Confucian framework for environmental action: cultivating love and respect for nature, sustaining and caring for the environment, and forming a companionship with the cosmos. Each stage corresponds not only to internal moral development but also to concrete behaviours and policy-relevant implications that resonate in contemporary sustainability education and environmental governance.

Love and Respect Nature

Confucian environmental ethics begin with the foundational belief in the intrinsic connection between humanity and nature. This connection is grounded in the metaphysical concept of *qi* (vital energy), which permeates all life and matter, affirming that humans are co-participants in a unified cosmic order. As children of Heaven and Earth, humans possess not dominion but kinship with the natural world, laying the groundwork for an ethic of love and respect for nature.

Confucian literature is replete with teachings that reflect this deep love and respect for nature. For instance, *The Doctrine of the Mean* describes the natural world with reverence, highlighting the vastness and richness of Heaven, Earth, and their elements:

> The Heaven now before us is only this bright shining spot; but when viewed in its inexhaustible extent, the sun, moon, stars, and constellations of the zodiac, are suspended in it, and all things are overspread by it. The earth before us is but a handful of soil; but when regarded in its breadth and thickness, it sustains mountains like the Hwa and the Yo, without feeling their weight, and contains the rivers and seas, without their leaking away. (Confucius, 1885/2009, chap. 26)

This reverence is echoed in the *Analects*. In *Analects* 6.23, Confucius states:

> 6.23 The wise take joy in rivers, while the Good take joy in mountains. (Kong & Slingerland, 2013, p. 90)

Here, Confucius suggests that the wise find pleasure in rivers because they embody the continuous flow of talent and wisdom in governing the world. The Good, in turn, find joy in mountains as symbols of peace and stability. This parallel draws a direct connection between the virtues Confucius extols and the natural landscape, associating natural

features with moral cultivation. Further exemplifying this connection, Confucius reflects on the continuous flow of a river in *Analects* 9.17:

> 9.17 Standing on the bank of a river, the Master said, "Look at how it flows on like this, never stopping day or night!" (Kong & Slingerland, 2013, p. 122)

In this observation, Confucius likens the river's ceaseless flow to the ideal human journey toward Goodness, emphasizing a respect for the inherent order and constancy of nature. These passages are not merely poetic; they serve a pedagogical function. Confucius uses the rhythms and constancy of nature to instill a deep respect that should lead to restraint and reverent action. Furthermore, the importance of ecological literacy is underscored in *Analects* 17.9, where learning about birds, beasts, plants, and trees through the *Odes*, the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry for its educational and inspirational value, is encouraged (Kong and Slingerland, 2013).

Additionally, Confucianism emphasizes the importance of adhering to natural laws when interacting with the environment, rather than exploiting it for human desires. This is illustrated in *Mencius* 6B11, where Mencius praises Yu's method of water control for following the natural course of water, ensuring harmony with nature, in contrast to Bai Kui's detrimental approach (Ivanhoe et al., 2009, p. 141). Similarly, in *Mencius* 4B26, the importance of aligning with nature's laws is underscored, advocating for a respectful and unforced approach to both water management and human self-cultivation (Ivanhoe et al., 2009, p. 91).

Care for and Sustain Nature

When humanity cultivates an awareness of love and respect for nature, the second level of the Confucian prescription for environmental action is to care for and sustain nature. In Confucianism, humanity holds the responsibility of being guardians of nature, a duty that extends beyond caring for and empathizing with humankind to encompass all things in the universe (Cheng, 1998). Therefore, Confucian teachings are rich with references to caring for all things in nature. Mencius, for instance, expressed empathy for animals' suffering, as seen in the following passage:

> 1A7. This is the way of the noble person in regard to animals: if he sees them alive, then he cannot bear to see them die, and if he hears their cries, then he cannot bear to eat their flesh. (Ivanhoe et al., 2009, p. 8)

Mencius hoped that if rulers governed with such compassion toward all living creatures, it would alleviate the suffering of millions. This passage reflects the Confucian belief that all creatures, including animals, possess a desire for life and a fear of death, challenging the notion that animals are soulless and do not experience pain.

The principle of caring for and sustaining nature is also reflected in the Confucian concept of taking only what is needed and preserving natural resources. The *Analects* records Confucius's ethical approach to hunting and fishing:

> 7.27 The Master would fish with a hook, but not with a net. He would shoot with a corded line, but would not aim at roosting birds. (Kong and Slingerland, 2013, p. 103)

This teaching indicates Confucius's concern for avoiding overfishing and his care for the natural breeding cycles of birds. These practices demonstrate Confucius's belief in acting with kindness and restraint toward animals, warning that excessive greed can harm both human society and nature.

Mencius similarly warned of the environmental consequences of unchecked human activity, as exemplified by his observation of the deforestation and overgrazing on Ox Mountain:

> 6A8. Mencius said, "The trees on Ox Mountain were once beautiful. But being situated on the outskirts of a large state, the trees were cut down by axes. Could they remain beautiful? Given the air of the day and the night, and the moisture of the rain and the dew, they did not fail to put forth new buds and shoots, but then cattle and sheep came along to graze upon them. This accounts for the barren appearance of the mountain. Seeing this barrenness, people suppose that the mountain was never wooded. But how could this be the nature of the mountain?" (Ivanhoe et al., 2009, p. 126)

Here, Mencius underscored the importance of sustainable practices to maintain the balance of nature, warning that the lack of such practices can lead to ecological destruction. It opposes overconsumption and suggests that virtuous living requires awareness of ecological limits.

Mencius further emphasized the importance of sustainable resource management to ensure the availability of resources for future generations. He advocated for responsible practices in agriculture, fishing, and forestry:

> 1A3. If the agricultural seasons are not interfered with, there will be more grain than can be eaten. If close-meshed nets are not allowed in the pools and ponds, there will be more fish and turtles than can be eaten. And if axes are allowed in the mountains and forests only in the appropriate seasons, there will be more timber than can be used. When grain, fish, and turtles are more than can be eaten, and timber is more than can be used, this will mean that the people can nourish their lives, bury their dead, and be without rancor. Making it possible for them to nourish their lives, bury their dead, and be without rancor is the beginning of kingly government. (Ivanhoe et al., 2009, p. 3)

Mencius's guidance illustrates the necessity of controlling human desires to use nature rationally and sustainably, reflecting a deep sense of care and responsibility toward the natural world. These passages go beyond symbolic gestures. They illustrate how Confucianism can inform sustainable policies, regulating natural resource use, prioritizing long-term environmental health, and embedding moral education into public life. This Confucian ethic of care can be operationalized in sustainability curricula by emphasizing intergenerational responsibility, community stewardship, and reflective consumption.

Form a Companionship with the Cosmos

The final and most holistic dimension of Confucian environmental action is the formation of a companionship with the cosmos, a concept introduced by Rodney L. Taylor in his

1998 article "Companionship with the World: Roots and Branches of a Confucian Ecology." Taylor explored the underlying themes in Neo-Confucianist Zhang Zai's *Western Inscription*, which emphasizes the intimate relationship between humans and nature and advocates for a sense of companionship with the entire world. As quoted earlier:

> Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body, and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. (In Tucker, 1991, p. 66)

This idea is not abstract metaphysics; it has practical implications. Neo-Confucian thinker Zhou Dunyi famously refused to cut grass because he saw it as a companion sharing the same *qi*-infused reality. Such actions exemplify the extension of *ren* from interpersonal ethics to ecological ethics.

Companionship with the world implies an anthropocosmic worldview: the realization of human potential is inseparable from ecological flourishing. In this sense, Confucianism offers a non-anthropocentric paradigm that centres interdependence and mutual care. Unlike Western models that often separate humans from nature, the Confucian framework embeds humans within a relational cosmology, suggesting a transformative basis for environmental consciousness. This vision can inform adult sustainability education by cultivating spiritual and ethical connections to the environment, fostering mindfulness in daily actions, and reinforcing ecological responsibility as a personal moral endeavour. In practice, this might involve classroom activities that combine ethical reflection with ecological awareness—for instance, guided discussions where learners analyze classical Confucian texts like Zhang Zai's *Western Inscription*, followed by journaling exercises that prompt them to articulate their own relationships with nature. Outside the classroom, educators could lead contemplative nature walks where participants are encouraged to observe the interconnectedness of life through the lens of *qi*, or engage in quiet reflection by rivers, forests, or mountains, mirroring Confucius's own reverence for natural spaces. Simple embodied practices, such as tai chi or breath-based mindfulness exercises, can also be introduced to help learners experience stillness, flow, and reciprocity—key elements of the Confucian cosmological worldview. These activities promote a relational understanding of the self as part of, rather than separate from, the cosmos. In this way, adult educators can create spaces where moral cultivation and ecological mindfulness co-evolve, grounding sustainability not just in knowledge, but in lived ethical practice.

In conclusion, Confucianism does more than express reverence for nature; it offers an integrated ethical system with prescriptive potential for environmental action. By cultivating love and respect, exercising care and restraint, and embracing companionship with the cosmos, Confucian teachings provide a culturally rooted, morally compelling, and practically applicable foundation for sustainability education and ecological stewardship.

Integrating Confucian Principles into Adult Education for Sustainability

To begin addressing the second guiding question—how Confucianism can be meaningfully integrated into adult EfS—this section explores emerging frameworks and practical strategies informed by Confucian ethics. While limited research exists specifically on

applying Confucian principles within adult EfS, promising insights can be drawn from adjacent educational models and philosophies.

The model developed by B. Li et al. (2023) offers a meaningful entry point for considering how Confucian principles might be applied in curriculum design. While the model was originally tailored to the context of secondary education in mainland China, its core components—clarifying what to teach, how to teach, and where learning occurs—resonate with key considerations in adult education. These curriculum dimensions—content, pedagogy, and learning environments—are particularly relevant when designing learning for sustainability. Grounded in Confucian moral philosophy and the German Didaktik tradition, this model aligns educational aims, content, pedagogy, and assessment with cultural traditions and ethical imperatives. Although originally designed for younger learners, it offers meaningful guidance for adult education settings. Notably, the model stresses the importance of helping learners internalize why sustainable living matters—it doesn't just teach how to perform sustainable actions. This aim aligns with the broader goals of adult education, which often emphasize reflective learning, personal growth, and lifelong ethical development. The model's emphasis on contextualized learning and ethical development resonates strongly with the broader aims of lifelong learning in sustainability education. It also provides concrete examples on how to combine certain Confucian principles with sustainability concepts.

In the framework put forward by B. Li et al. (2023), sustainability topics are infused with Confucian ethical reasoning. For example, when teaching about carbon footprints, the curriculum does not stop at explaining emissions mechanisms but extends to discussing whether frugality and energy conservation can be seen as modern expressions of the Confucian virtue *li*. When exploring biodiversity, the concept of *jing wu ai wu* (敬物爱物), respecting and cherishing all beings, is introduced to encourage students to reflect on how humans can coexist harmoniously with nature. In the context of a circular economy, the principle of *he er bu tong* (和而不同), harmony without uniformity, is used to guide students in exploring co-operation within diverse ecological systems. These concepts can also be embedded in adult learning programs through practices like storytelling, dialogue-based seminars, and culturally contextualized workshops, among many others, that help participants connect personal ethics to global environmental responsibilities through an understanding of Confucianism.

To further explore the potential of Confucianism in shaping curriculum in this domain, this discussion engages with the framework proposed by Schreiber-Barsch and Mauch (2019), which articulates the dynamic relationships between conceptualizations of sustainability, educational policy, and their enactment in adult learning and education (ALE). This exploration aims to offer preliminary directions for both scholars and practitioners interested in deepening the dialogue between Confucian thought and adult EfS.

In their contribution to the field, Schreiber-Barsch and Mauch (2019) aim to systematize the interrelated dynamics among conceptual approaches to sustainability, their interpretations in education policy, and their translation and application in ALE. By organizing these dimensions into three interlinked components—*contents*, *processes*, and *structures*—they offer a useful framework for moving sustainability from theory into practice in adult education settings. These components are further articulated through three guiding questions (p. 528):

- *Contents*: Which kinds of knowledge, capacities and values promise sustained significance for the individual, collective and society?
- *Processes*: How can we promote and sustain lifelong, life-wide and open-ended learning processes for individuals and collectives?
- *Structures*: What kinds of learning infrastructures promote sustainable and accessible opportunities to learn?

Schreiber-Barsch and Mauch's approach offers opportunities and pathways to explore the potential integration of Confucianism into adult EfS. Confucian thoughts, as discussed earlier, can offer approaches and many insights to the questions posed by Schreiber-Barsch and Mauch. The Confucian anthropocosmic concept of forming one body with Heaven and Earth can serve as a foundational value, encouraging humanity to prioritize living harmoniously with the cosmos, cherish the intrinsic values of it, and prevent the arrogance of anthropocentrism or unrealistic pure naturalism/ecocentrism. Confucian prescriptions for environmental actions, grounded in love, respect, care, and sustenance of nature, can invoke individual and collective behavioural change by triggering what Cajete (2018) calls *biophilia*, defined as "the innate instinct that we and other living things have for affiliation with other life and with the animate world" (p. 16), thus promoting a more friendly and eco-just society. Confucianism's five constant virtues also advocate for significant components of a sustainable future. For example, the virtue of *ren*, indicating love for all, could support the creation of a non-violent and just society where everyone's basic needs and human rights will be fulfilled. *Yi*, indicating moral right and wrong, could help eliminate social inequalities, biases, and discriminations. *Xin*, indicating the alignment between words and deeds, could be used to guide individual behaviours, and also to critically analyze socio-political initiatives, especially those claimed to be sustainability-oriented, and their actual practical consequences. These virtues can be considered as part of the *contents* that could be integrated into adult EfS when incorporating Confucianism.

In the context of the learning *process*, Schreiber-Barsch and Mauch (2019) propose future research directions that emphasize pivotal pedagogical approaches in education for sustainable development, such as participatory teaching and learning methods. Confucian principles and literature offer perspectives that could enrich these approaches. For instance, Confucian pedagogy highlights themes such as collaborative learning between students and teachers, reflective practice, and fostering societal transformation, which resonate with principles of Western critical education (B. Li et al., 2023). In addition, the learning concepts of *zhi xing he yi* (知行合一, the unity of knowledge and action) and *ge wu zhi zhi* (格物致知, obtaining knowledge by investigating things) are crucial aspects of (Neo-)Confucianism connected with scientific inquiry and self-scrutiny. Confucian moral self-cultivation, which advocates for a constant, self-directed learning process that involves both spiritual and practical restraint, is particularly significant. More importantly, this self-cultivation, aimed at becoming a *junzi*, is seen as a lifelong learning process and a way of learning to be truly human (Sun & Kang, 2015; Tu, 1989; Zhang, 2008), which is one of the main principles of EfS (Lovren, 2015). These Confucian concepts and methods all offer approaches to fostering sustainable learning processes for both individuals and collectives.

Learning *structures* also play a crucial role in the discussion of integrating Confucian

principles into adult EfS. Confucius articulated foundational ideas about the educational environment, emphasizing education without discrimination and the importance of tailoring education to individual needs, as seen in the *Analects* (11.22 and 15.39) (Kong & Slingerland, 2013). He advocated that everyone should have access to education, and that this education should be adapted to individual learning styles and requirements. While Confucianism's ability to achieve true educational equity is debatable—due in part to historical biases, such as its inherent gender biases and rigid social hierarchies (Ching, 1993)—the principles of non-discriminatory and individualized education offer valuable insights for developing just and sustainable learning infrastructures. In the context of adult EfS, these principles support the notion that education should be both universally accessible and adapted to regional and cultural contexts, thereby fostering more equitable and effective learning environments globally.

Taken together, these Confucian contributions suggest promising avenues for aligning ethical, pedagogical, and structural dimensions of adult education with the imperatives of sustainability. Further inquiry is needed to deepen this integration and to examine its implications in diverse adult learning contexts.

Conclusion

In the *Analects*, Confucius stated, "All that I teach can be strung together on a single thread" (Kong & Slingerland, 2013, p. 64). While identifying this "single thread" that leads to a sustainable future on a global scale is challenging, the roles of education and culture are undoubtedly central to this journey. Culture—often overlooked in early sustainability frameworks—shapes how people interpret their place in the world, relate to others, and understand their responsibilities to nature. It is through culture that values are formed, ethical behaviour is modelled, and worldviews are sustained. As such, sustainability education must be locally grounded, culturally relevant, and open to the contributions of diverse philosophical and ethical traditions.

It is indisputable that the current state of the world is unsustainable. While the path to a sustainable future is uncertain, it is a journey filled with possibilities and hope. In this context, it is essential that Western and Eastern ways of thinking recognize, as Sun and Kang (2015) have argued, that "the other side will not go away, [and in the context of globalization] probably should not" (p. 334). Therefore, integrating Confucianism into the discussion of adult EfS on a global scale is crucial. Confucianism not only promotes the development of a fully realized human being—encompassing social, moral, political, spiritual, and inner dimensions (Sun & Kang, 2015)—but also advocates for the acquisition of knowledge and skills supporting sustainable relationships with the family, society, and nature. While this article has focused on conceptual alignments between Confucianism and sustainability education, future research is needed to explore how these philosophical insights can be operationalized across different learning contexts. This includes developing culturally grounded pedagogical models, designing empirical studies that document learner outcomes, and critically examining how Confucian ethics are interpreted and applied in diverse cultural and political environments. Building this research nexus between adult education, sustainability, and Confucianism offers a valuable opportunity not only to diversify the theoretical foundations of sustainability education, but also to respond more meaningfully to the moral and ecological complexities of our time.

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