A major difference between traditional political philosophy in China and the West is this: whereas classical Chinese thought always considers the establishment and maintenance of political order in the context of the natural world, this has rarely been a consideration in the Western traditions. Although correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm are central to much Neo-Platonic thought, Islamic philosophy, and Medieval and Renaissance thinking, these traditions rarely advocate modeling political order on the order of the cosmos. (One reason for this being that God takes precedence over the natural world.) The attention paid to the powers of Heaven and Earth throughout the Chinese tradition suggests that political philosophy in the West might have been missing something important. And since the current dominance of Western-style political institutions with their disregard of the natural world has brought us to the brink of environmental catastrophe, we have good reason to question their ideological bases in the light of Chinese philosophy, and ask whether this different way of thinking doesn’t have some ideas worth adopting and adapting.

Environmental catastrophe wasn’t looming nearly so large in the early 1980s when Roger Ames wrote his pioneering “Study in Ancient Political Chinese Thought,” The Art of Rulership. But looking at those ancient texts in political philosophy now, in the context of global warming, one is struck by how much they emphasize the importance for political rule of understanding and cultivating the ways of Heaven and Earth. The chapter that follows
is both a complement and a compliment to *The Art of Rulership*, elaborating some of its themes concerning the natural world. Because of geographical proximity, I was one of the first to receive a copy of that work when it came out in 1983. I am sorry the acknowledgment is so belated.

The Mandate of Heaven

Whereas Western philosophies have tended to focus on the social and political in isolation from the natural world, ancient Chinese thought always considers “the three realms”—Heaven, Earth, humans—“as one.” The notion of Heaven (*tian*) evolved over the centuries, from originally meaning a sky God who ruled the cosmos, then *fate* in the sense of an all-encompassing power beyond human control, the *sky* (as in “the heavens”) and the rest of the natural world (“Heaven-and-Earth”), and eventually to an impersonal standard for human conduct. At no time did it signify a transcendent realm beyond this world, as in the dualistic metaphysics of the Platonist or Christian traditions, since the three realms were always regarded as belonging together, as one. And from the continuous interaction between Heaven and Earth come the “myriad things,” including human beings.

By the time philosophy got underway in China, “Heaven” had become a relatively impersonal force of nature that reigned over the worlds of Earth and humans beneath it, ordering and regulating “All under Heaven” (*tianxia*), the whole World. Although Heaven was in some sense a higher power than Earth, the two were also complementary; and as “Heaven-and-Earth” in the sense of the natural world they were on a par with each other, like *yang* and *yin*. Insofar as human existence is always understood as unfolding from the interactions among the Heavenly and Earthly powers, good government will bring order to it by appreciating that any human society flourishes, or fails to flourish, always in this broader context of the natural world.

Patterns of order obtain across the three realms such that, just as Heaven reigns over the world beneath, so in the human realm the ruler reigns likewise—and for this reason the king, or emperor, was known as the “Son of Heaven” (*tianzi*). (Moving again from macrocosm to microcosm: the father rules the family, and the heart-mind orders the body politic that is the individual.) And just as the Heavens are open and expansive rather than closed or self-centered, and behave impartially toward all they oversee, the good human ruler practices these same virtues. He accords with the will of Heaven by correlating human activities with the patterning of natural processes. Since the Chinese understand the world as a field of relations, it’s natural to think of the individual always in the context of the family, and the family in the
society, and then the world of nature, and finally in the context of the whole World—“All under Heaven.”

In ancient times the Son of Heaven had the unique privilege of worshipping Heaven as the supreme deity and communing with it through ritual sacrifices. Whereas in the Western world rulers were legitimated by the Divine Right of Kings, the rule of the emperors in China was justified by the Mandate of Heaven (tianming), whereby the ruler reigns by virtue of, and in accordance with, Heaven's will.

A prime manifestation of the order of Heaven, aside from the paths of the sun and moon, is the movements of the planets and stars. “[The] celestial sign for the ‘transfer of the Mandate’ and the founding of a new dynasty was a triple conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars, sometimes briefly joined by the faster moving Venus and Mercury, which occurs approximately every 516 years.” And indeed, the successions to the Xia (possibly around 2092 BCE?) and the Shang (1576) and the Zhou Dynasties (1059) did take place in conjunction with the most remarkable astronomical events. To retain the Mandate of Heaven, the ruler must have advisors who understand astrology and can help him adjust his rule to the larger patterns of the heavens.

The idea of the Mandate of Heaven originated from the succession whereby the Zhou Dynasty overthrew the Shang in the eleventh century BCE. The Zhou claimed that the previous rulers had forfeited the Mandate of Heaven through their misrule, and took the success of their own rebellion as evidence that the Zhou king had received Heaven's Mandate to take over. The Duke of Zhou explained that “the Mandate was bestowed by Heaven in recognition of the potency of the founding king and withdrawn because of the diminished potency of the previous king.” It's all a matter of the potency of the ruler, which he “gets” (a connotation of the term de) from the powers of Heaven and Earth. Confucius famously says that what has “given life to and nourished excellence [potency] in him” is not he himself, but rather Heaven.

In the Analects the Mandate of Heaven is mentioned only twice, but in significant contexts. In recounting what he was capable of at various ages, the Master says that, after “taking his place” in society by the time he was thirty, he was able twenty years later to “understand Heaven's Mandate.” This suggests that it took time, years of experience and reflection, for him to see his life as a teacher, and the life of the self-cultivated ruler, in the context not just of social and historical strictures but also of what's given by the natural world and the biological body.

Confucius also cites the Mandate of Heaven as the first of three sources of awe for the cultivated gentleman (preceding “great men” and “the words of the sages”). By contrast, the petty person, narrowly focused on self-interest, is
incapable of understanding these, and especially anything as broad as Heaven's Mandate and the awe-inspiring order it manifests above and below.5

Mozi held a view of the Son of Heaven that is similar to the Confucians.

The three high counselors and feudal lords devote themselves to administering the government but they do not make up their own standard. There is the Son of Heaven to govern them. The Son of Heaven does not make up his own standard. There is Heaven to govern him.

The best emperor governs as the Son of Heaven by being empty of his own ideas, and thus impartial. Letting himself be governed by Heaven he allows the empire to be ordered by the forces of Heaven and Earth working through him as human intermediary. Mozi says of the "sage-kings" of the past who "accorded with Heaven's will:"

On high they honored Heaven, in the middle realm they served the ghosts and spirits, and below they cared for human beings. And so Heaven's will proclaimed, "These men impartially care for those I care for and impartially benefit those I benefit. Their care for the people is extensive and the benefit they bring is substantial." And so Heaven made it come to pass that they each became the Son of Heaven and were given the wealth of the whole World.6

The Mandate of Heaven is granted to great rulers so that they can let society accord with its natural envoirning conditions. If the ruler ignores the Mandate and governs for his own interests, if he fails to pay attention to the rhythms of the natural world when performing the rituals required by his position, the result will be inefficient agriculture, crop failure, starvation and misery—all signs that he has lost the Mandate and had better look for a different line of work.

When asked about a particular succession between emperors of dynasties, Mencius insisted that it is Heaven—and not a human being, even an emperor—who gives the empire to a new ruler, not directly but rather by "revealing itself through its acts and deeds."

When the new emperor was put in charge of sacrifices, the hundred gods enjoyed them. This showed that Heaven accepted him. When he was put in charge of affairs, they were kept in order and the people were content. This showed that the people had accepted him. Hence I said, "The Emperor cannot give the Empire to another."
The Mandate of Heaven can thus be discerned not only by the way the forces of Heaven and Earth respond to an emperor when he performs ritual sacrifices, but also, and more importantly, by the reaction of the people to their conditions. Mencius often emphasizes that a ruler is legitimated by the people’s long-term flourishing, and that their misery is a sign that the ruler has lost Heaven’s Mandate.8

The Historical Record

Let’s consider an objection to my claim that philosophical ideas from the Chinese tradition are relevant for the current environmental crisis: namely, China’s poor environmental record. If such ideas didn’t protect the environment in the past, how can they be of any help now, in these changed and changing times? Well, a brief survey of the environmental history, together with what the philosophers were saying about the natural world around them, shows that the problem lies not with the ideas but with a simple failure to implement them.9 Far more than their counterparts in the West, the Chinese thinkers warned time and again against environmental exploitation. Can’t we perhaps learn from this history and avoid failing yet again?

China has always been subject to devastating floods and droughts. The heavens dealt out so much destruction that the ancients—as in many cultures—came to believe that an angry Sky God was orchestrating these extreme weather events. In times of excess rain the Yellow River would burst through the levees built to contain it, to lethal effect. A catastrophic breach in the year 1117 is said to have killed a million people. As the population density increased the fatalities did too. In 1886 two million died when the Yellow River flooded. The polar opposite, lack of rain, could be even more deadly: in 1876, after three years of drought, some thirteen million people died from lack of water or food.10

Under such conditions projects to conserve water for drinking and irrigation of crops are a necessity. After nine years of flooding, an old story goes, the legendary first ruler of the Central Kingdom, Yu the Great, founder of the Xia dynasty, had many dikes constructed to contain the rivers. Ever since then it has been the responsibility of China’s rulers to manage the country’s system of waterways, which are used for transportation as well as irrigation. No society has achieved such great feats in the realm of hydrological engineering as the Chinese, who over the millennia have constructed complex systems of seawalls, levees, irrigation channels, dikes, watermills, and canals over a vast expanse of terrain. Mark Elvin has given a comprehensive account of these achievements in his definitive environmental history of China, The Retreat of the Elephants.11
Skills in irrigation allowed agriculture to become highly developed early on, but the evidence shows that the land was often so intensively cultivated that “migratory farming,” where people continually relocate in order to find better land, was a pervasive practice. The spread of agriculture during the first millennium BCE required the clearing of vast tracts of land for cultivation. The early Chinese, like many other peoples, found forests unsettling and antithetical to the spread of civilization, so they cleared land for settlement as well as farming. (This resulted in the “retreat of the elephants” who used to inhabit much of the land.) What distinguishes the Chinese case from others is that the mistrust of forests and exploitation of the earth and its waters went hand in hand with an extraordinary reverence for natural landscape (“mountains and waters”), as evidenced in their celebration over many centuries in the most consummate poetry and landscape painting.

The Chinese deforested the land to the point of major damage. Not only did they use wood for fuel, and for building ships, carts, bridges, and buildings, but since the custom was to bury the dead in coffins they also used a great deal of wood for funerals, in amounts proportional to a steadily growing population. Deforestation became steadily more widespread, and by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a severe shortage of timber in most parts of the country. Europe also suffered from a serious depletion of resources, reaching its most severe in the sixteenth century, but was able to resolve the problem by colonizing other countries and exploiting their natural resources. Lacking the military might of the European powers, and with political philosophies that didn’t encourage colonial adventures, China was unable to follow their example and had to make do with less. On top of everything else, population pressure was a perennial problem.

In spite of decades of government bans on using wood for all but the most necessary purposes, China’s current reserves of wood per person are only one-eighth of the world average, and it is now one of the most un-forested countries in the world. We now know what most ancient cultures didn’t: that deforestation leads to a variety of ecological problems. Forests prevent erosion of topsoil; through regulating snowmelt, they ensure a good supply of fresh water; and they provide habitat for birds, animals, and plants (sources of food when agriculture fails). Deforestation is thus a major factor behind the current environmental degradation in China.

China finally has a president in Xi Jinping who acknowledges the country’s “ecological vulnerability” and especially its “scarcity of forest resources,” and urges the people to plant trees for the “arduous mission of afforestation and ecological improvement.” He is thinking in a longer time frame than his predecessors—and also longer than the average Western politician nowadays, whose thinking extends only as far as the time of the next election. Thanks
to the way Chinese politics are constituted, President Xi is likely, by contrast, to be in charge for quite some time.

Documents dating back to the eleventh century BCE show an awareness on the part of the authorities of the need to restrain people from over-exploitation of natural resources. The oldest of these observes that local governors were responsible “for protecting rivers, mountains, forests, birds and other animals.”

A well-known story from the sixth century BCE tells of a high official who reproaches a Duke for fishing too early in the season, before the young fish have grown up. He cites the regulated fishing practices advocated “in ancient times” by the official known as “guardian of the waters.” When the people follow such regulations, this helps “the bright qi energies to rise.” The official “guardian of the animals” would enact corresponding regulations prohibiting the hunting or trapping of animals that are too young.

Furthermore, in the mountains the sprouts growing from coppiced trunks were not to be chopped off. In the wetlands, it was forbidden to cut the tender sprouts. . . . It was obligatory to protect the fledglings and the eggs of birds. As for insects, the eggs and pupae of ants were to be left untouched. The teaching of ancient times is that all beings should propagate themselves in abundance.

Another document, from the time when Confucius was a young man, records a high government minister expressing concern about possible ill effects on agricultural land of deforestation and draining of marshes. Such passages demonstrate an awareness stretching back three thousand years of the nature of ecological interactions and the need to restrain human interventions in them. However, as new developments in technology gradually granted people greater power over the natural world, under pressure from a growing population they continued to intensify their impact on the land.

Mark Elvin characterizes China’s chronic problem with the environment as “the exploitation of the environment at a rate overstressing its natural resilience and exceeding its capacity for self-renewal within a humanly relevant time frame.” It’s also a very contemporary problem for the world right now. And why can’t we act to slow global warming? Elvin’s diagnosis of the situation throughout much of China’s history still applies: “What has made the process hard to restrain by conscious action, even when there has been a fairly widespread appreciation of its damaging effects,” he continues, is “the pay-off in power.” In military, economic, and political power, rather than the power of the fine example or the philosopher’s ideas. These latter are integral with the powers of Heaven and Earth, and are according to the Confucian thinkers the best kind of power to use in governing.
Confucian Regulations

Exploitation of the natural world for human purposes has often elicited misgivings on the part of China's major philosophers. The first to raise doubts about deforestation was Mencius.

There was a time when the trees were luxuriant on the Ox Mountain, but since it is on the outskirts of a great city, the trees are constantly lopped by axes. Is it any wonder that they are no longer fine? With the respite they get in the day and in the night, and the moistening by the rain and the dew, there is certainly no lack of new shoots coming out, but then the cattle and sheep come to graze upon the mountain. That is why it is as bald as it is. People, seeing only its baldness, tend to think that it never had any trees. But can this possibly be the nature of a mountain?19

No, it can't be: the nature of a mountain is to be covered with trees, and it's the double neglect by humans (unsustainable extraction of timber and permitting over-grazing) that's compromising that nature.

Appeals like this tended to fall on deaf ears, in Mencius's time and after. Even so, the historical record shows that at least some people appreciated the interconnections between trees and other components of ecosystems, and especially the way forests prevent erosion of topsoil. The phenomenon was often couched in the language of the Five Agents, as in this explanation by Yu Sen, a commissioner for watercourses in the late seventeenth century.

The functioning of the Five Agents is such that failure to overcome is failure to generate. If now trees are scarce, wood will not overcome soil, and the nature of soil will be light and easily blown away, while the human character will become crude and fierce. If trees are plentiful, the soil will not fly up, and men will revert to refinement and good order.20

This is an excellent example of the cycles of the Five Agents in interaction, and involving humans.

Another crucial function that forests perform is the regulation of snowmelt, thereby ensuring a good supply of fresh water. And they naturally provide habitat for birds, animals, and plants—sources of food when agriculture fails. But these compelling ecological reasons for avoiding deforestation had no purchase in an era where wars demanded large quantities of timber.
Mencius goes on to draw an analogy between the Ox Mountain and the human being: just as the mountain loses its nature when deprived of its natural cover of vegetation, so if we humans “let go our true heart” we lose the natural endowment of humanity and become like animals. There’s an implication that it also works the other way round: the same desires that are destroying our natural environment are also eating away at our own nature as humans. If we fail to protect the natural covering of the mountain, we end up no better than the animals that help denude it. For Mencius, it’s a matter of “educating the heart” through keeping one’s desires to a minimum.21

A crucial part of the ruler’s task is then to restrain people’s greed when it threatens to disrupt the natural propensities of Heaven and Earth. Being innocent of free market ideology, Mencius understands that in situations where people’s short-term focus on their own gain prevents their seeing the larger picture, somebody has to intervene with regulations.

If you do not interfere with the busy seasons in the fields [by conscripting the men for a war], there will be more grain than the people can eat; if you do not allow nets with too fine a mesh to be used in large ponds, there will be more fish and turtles than they can eat; if hatchets and axes are permitted in the forests on the hills only in the proper seasons, there will be more timber than they can use.22

When there’s a sufficiency of foodstuffs to sustain life, and enough timber to properly house the dead, the people will be contented.

However, human nature being the way it is, people will use nets with a fine mesh if it’s to their advantage and they can get away with it, and they’ll hack down trees in all seasons if they can turn a profit by doing so. When resources are scarce, different groups will compete for them and before long there will be wars. And wars are notoriously devastating to the natural environment. Not only do armies fell trees and mine for material with horrific intensity, but they gain further advantage if they can destroy the enemy’s resource base by burning crops, or poisoning water supplies, or flooding their terrain.

As Mark Elvin has shown, those parties or states that were the most efficient short-term exploiters of human and natural resources tended to win their wars. Those that reshaped the environment through agriculture, water-control, and extraction of fuel and minerals, without regard for the longer-term consequences for the environment, were usually the victors—who would then find themselves dominating a land that was becoming progressively poorer
in resources. He cites from the definitive account by Donald Hughes of the environmental devastation wreaked by ancient Greece and Rome, where one finds the same prevalence of “social-Darwinist brutality” and wars:

The most damaging aspect of Greek and Roman social organization as it affected the environment was its direction toward war. . . . Ancient cities and empires were warrior-dominated societies, never at peace for very long. . . . Nonrenewable resources were consumed, and renewable resources exploited faster than was sustainable. As a result, the lands where Western civilization received its formative impulse were gradually drained.

Elvin comments that the brutality of the Eurasian classical world went with less self-understanding on the part of the perpetrators, and that the remarkable feature of the Chinese case is that the brutality appeared to be “more aware of its own nature.”

Seldom were wars more internecine than during the Warring States Period in China (475–221 BCE), which is also when philosophy first began to flourish widely and to encourage awareness of nature’s vulnerability. Some of the most prominent philosophers argued for protecting the natural environment and warned of the dangers of damaging it. Unfortunately, rulers with benign attitudes toward nature are not especially apt to flourish during times of war, and even after this period the number who were in this respect enlightened remained small. Economic development then became the goal, in favor of which environmental sustainability was regularly sacrificed. In general the highest officials favored securing their own power over caring for the natural environment, even if their counterparts at the level of local government were on occasion able to enact beneficial regulations.

Confucian philosophy would in general endorse the enterprise of engaging the powers of Heaven and Earth for the benefit of human society, and could be criticized from a Daoist perspective for focusing so much on the human realm as to become blind to exploitation of the natural world. However, the Confucian emphasis on sufficiency and moderation means that use of natural resources is to be kept within limits. And since the ruler’s primary responsibility is always the well-being of the people, it would be unjust for him to exploit those resources for personal gain.

In spite of this, Xunzi in particular has been characterized as an anthropocentric Confucian who advocates the exploitation of nature for the sake of humans, but this is a misrepresentation. In fact, he follows the Confucian tradition of aligning good government with the natural order, and he situ-
ates human beings—and the self-cultivated especially—firmly between the
powers of nature.

The gentleman is the triadic partner of Heaven and Earth, the
summation of the myriad things, and the father and mother of
the people. . . . The [five Confucian] relationships between lord
and minister [etc.] . . . share with Heaven and Earth the same
organizing principle.25

The ruler reigns in concert with the forces of nature, drawing inspiration
and strength from them, on the basis of his experience of interaction within
the family. And when Xunzi encourages intervention in the course of nature
for the benefit of human beings, this engagement has to be timely and to
respect natural limits.

How can glorifying Heaven and contemplating it,
be as good as tending its creatures and regulating them?
How can obeying Heaven and singing it hymns of praise
be better than regulating what Heaven has mandated and using it?
How can anxiously watching for the season and awaiting what it brings,
be as good as responding with activities that are seasonal?
How can depending on things to increase naturally
be better than developing their natural capacities so as to transform them?
How can contemplating things and expecting them to serve you
be better than administering them according to the opportunities they
present?
How can brooding over the origins of things
be better than assisting what perfects them?26

This passage has been read as advocating the exploitation of the natural
world, but Xunzi understands the relationship as an ongoing interaction, more
complex and mutually responsive than exploitation. The regulating and using
and administering go along with tending and responding and developing and
assisting. Note that it's the natural capacities of things that we are to develop,
rather than remaking their cores (as in nuclear fission or genetic modification)
to suit human purposes. This is classic Chinese sage behavior: intervening
gently so as to enhance what is already going on, by nature—though the
Daoists would want to downplay the “for human benefit” aspect.

Xunzi is more concerned than Mencius about the human tendency to
let desires get out of hand, and points out that unrestrained desires on the
part of the few often jeopardize the use of “the commons” by the many. In
discussing “The Regulations of a Sage King” he emphasizes that a primary
duty of the ruler is to forestall environmental destruction by enacting sea-
sonal regulations.

If it is the season when the grasses and trees are in the splendor
of their flowering and sprouting new leaves, axes and halberds
are not permitted in the mountain forest so as not to end their
lives prematurely or interrupt their maturation. If it is the season
when the giant sea turtles, water lizards, fish, freshwater turtles,
loach, and eels are depositing their eggs, nets and poisons are not
permitted in the marshes. . . .

The ponds, lakes, pools, streams, and marshes being strictly
closed during the proper season is the reason that fish and turtles
are in plentiful abundance and the Hundred Clans have surplus
for other uses. The cutting and pruning, growing and planting,
not being out of their proper season is the reason the mountain
forests are not denuded and the Hundred Clans have more than
enough timber.27

The traditional Confucian attitude toward the natural world combined a
respect for the powers of Heaven and Earth with a sense that some human
beings were capable of understanding natural patterns well enough to turn
some propensities to human advantage. But it’s also recognized that the wise
among human beings would know how to restrain this utility-driven enterprise
when appropriate, and that the sage-ruler will sometimes have to regulate the
activities of those whose desires render them less than wise.

The Confucian thinkers realized early on the importance of integrating
the political with the natural order. The Zhongyong emphasizes that “for the
person who would be the true king over the World” the way to rule is the
Middle Way: “Established between the heavens and the earth, this Way does
not run contrary to their operations.” The best ruler will be the sage, and
Confucius is cited as exemplary.

Only if one is able to make the most of the natural tendencies
of processes and events can one assist in the transforming and
nourishing activities of heaven and earth. . . .

Confucius modeled himself above on the rhythm of the
turning seasons, and below he was attuned to the patterns of
water and earth. He is comparable to the heavens and the earth,
sheltering and supporting everything that is. He is comparable to
the progress of the four seasons, and the alternating brightnesses
of the sun and moon.28

Anyone capable of self-cultivation can eventually, by aligning one's energies
with the forces of nature, come to amplify and modulate them, and thereby
benefit the whole world.

Numerous passages in the Confucian classics advise the ruler how best
to govern according to the seasons. The way not to govern—and this applies
to the ruler of the individual body as well as to the ruler of the state—is by
having a fixed image of goals to be pursued in disregard of environment or
time of year. The earliest Chinese calendar with philosophical import is to be
found in the “Almanac” chapters of the first twelve books of the Annals of Lü
Buwei, one for each month of the year. A consideration of the first chapter of
the first book, for the first month of spring, can give us a sense of the whole.

The almanacs begin with four brief sections. The first situates the month
astrophically, giving the sun’s location in the zodiac, and naming the constella-
tions that dominate at dawn and dusk. The second lists the month’s correlates
among the Five Creatures (scaly, feathered, naked [humans], furred, shelled),
the Five Notes (of the pentatonic scale), the Five Numbers, the Five Tastes
(sour, bitter, sweet, acrid, salt), and the Five Viscera (spleen, lungs, heart,
kidneys, liver). Then comes a short description of contemporary processes in
the natural world, such as “The east wind melts the ice, dormant creatures
begin to stir.” The last section concerns the Emperor: which apartment of
the imperial Hall of Light he resides in (he has to move every month to the
appropriate one), the accouterments of his chariot, the color of his robes and
kind of his ornaments, the nature of the food he eats—all of which must be
in accordance with the month.29

Then comes the ritual that the Emperor has to conduct at each time
of year, the background to which is the increase of qi energies during spring
and summer and their diminution during autumn and winter, as well as the
yinyang alternations throughout the seasons. In outlining the ruler’s duties,
the calendrical chapters of the Annals focus on the Five Potencies that drive
the Five Agents. Angus Graham paraphrases elegantly:

Thus at the beginning of the year . . . the Grand Historiographer
reports “Such-and-such a day is the start of spring; the fullness
of Potency is in Wood.” The ruler, wearing blue-green, then leads
out his nobles to welcome spring in the East suburb, rewards
civil officials, issues orders to be merciful and bountiful to the
people, pushes the plough three times to encourage farming, and
commands the superintendent of agriculture to take up residence
in the East suburb.

Correspondingly, when “the chill winds come, the white
dew falls and the cold cicada chirps,” the Historiographer reports
“Such-and-such a day is the start of autumn; the fullness of
Potency is in Metal.”

And so forth, for each of the twelve months, always aligning the ruler’s activi-
ties with the prevailing Agent and Potency.

After the Almanac sections comes a description of the measures that
must be taken at the particular time of year to protect the environment. In
the first month of spring, for example:

The Son of Heaven puts in order the statutes regulating sacrifice,
and commands that in making offerings to the mountains and
forests, streams and marshes, no female animals be used as vic-
tims. He issues orders to prevent the felling of trees; to prohibit
the overturning of nests; to forbid the killing of very young
creatures . . . fledgling birds, fawns, and eggs.

The basic principles are summed up as three general prohibitions:

Do not transgress the Dao of Heaven;
Do not contravene the pattern of order on Earth;
Do not disrupt the guiding principles of humans.

As long as the ruler and his advisors understand the Way of Nature and how
the Five Agents work, and take care to appoint the most competent officials,
agriculture will thrive, the people will be happy, and the ruler will be seen
to enjoy the Mandate of Heaven.

The Daoist Sage-Ruler

Not long after the time of Confucius the classical Daoist thinkers stressed
even more strongly the need to integrate the orders of society and nature.
Whereas Confucius developed a comprehensive humanism aimed at the good
of society as a whole, the Laozi advocates a distinctly non-anthropocentric
political philosophy for the purpose of integrating human existence with the
processes of the natural world, the energies of Heaven and Earth.
In the context of the unity of Heaven, humans, and Earth, Daoists would say that Confucians are too narrowly focused on the middle realm of human society, and so lack a robust engagement with the natural world above and below. For Confucius, the Way (dao) is generally the way of humans (the way of the sage, the way of the ancestors, and so forth), whereas the Daoist focus is softer and wider—on the Way as the unifying pattern of all three realms.

The Laozi’s view of the natural world is eminently realistic: even though the powers of Heaven and Earth provide all that human beings need to survive—and thrive, as long as they manage it properly—they are not especially concerned with the human species.

Heaven and Earth are not humane. . . .
The space between Heaven and Earth—
Isn’t it just like a bellows?
Even though empty it is not exhausted.
Pump it and more and more comes out.32

The worldview is trans-humanist and un-anthropocentric, insofar as humans are understood as beings irrevocably subject to the powers of Heaven and Earth. And so the Daoist sage-ruler empties himself of personal likes and dislikes to become a medium for the impartiality of those greater powers, letting them inform the social realm in its continuity with the natural. Roger Ames has pointed out this theme in the Zhuangzi too: “because the ruler shows no partiality, the country is properly ordered.”33

The Laozi at one point lists the “four greats” (meaning great things or processes) in the world: the Way, Heaven, Earth, and the King. Notice that even the greatest of humans comes last among the four. This ordering is then reversed when each great emulates, or models itself on, the next greater—or, more literally, “takes it as a law:”

Human beings [through the King] emulate Earth,
Earth emulates Heaven,
Heaven emulates Way-making,
Way-making emulates what is spontaneously so.34

This remarkably trans-anthropocentric approach to governing may appear paradoxical, but it actually makes sense insofar as any polity can thrive only in the context of a sustaining environment, and following the ways of nature is a good way to begin. When peoples ignore this, they risk, if their circumstances become straitened, going under.35 As with Mencius, Daoist politics are concerned to restrain the desires of those who are incapable of
self-restraint, so that human wants will not eclipse the will of Heaven (which is empty of desire). The Laozi thus calls for a distinctive form of representative government, in which the ruler represents in the human world the interests of Heaven and Earth and the myriad things.36

The text sometimes refers to the Way of Heaven and Earth as “unworked wood,” signifying natural simplicity before human culture has shaped it.

Were the nobles and kings able to respect this,
All things would defer of their own accord.
The heavens and the earth would come together
To send down their sweet honey,
And without being so ordered
The common people would see that it is distributed equitably.

The sage-ruler, as one whose awareness of natural energies allows him to align himself with them, is thus able to say:

We do things non-coercively
And the people develop along their own lines;
We cherish equilibrium
And the common people order themselves;
We are non-interfering in our governance
And the common people prosper themselves;
We are objectless in our desires
And the common people are of themselves like unworked wood.37

Acknowledging the dynamic equilibrium that characterizes most natural processes, the Laozi observes that “the Way of Heaven is to let some go where there is excess, and to augment where there is not enough.” The way of the human tends, perversely, to do the opposite: “It is to take away from those who do not have enough in order to give more to those who already have too much.” (Hard not to think of current regimes in the United States and United Kingdom.) A sage ruler who by contrast follows the natural course would win the world: “Who then in having too much is able to draw on this excess to make an offering to the world? There that can take what he himself has in excess and offer this to the World? Perhaps only those who are way-making.”38

Insofar as the Laozi offers a philosophy of images rather than concepts, the images are drawn mostly from the natural world. Water, and especially rivers, where the water flows continuously from a source, is the significant image in the present context.39 There is a prime example of flowing water as an image for life, and all existence, in the Analects:
The Master was standing on a riverbank, and observed, “Isn't life's passing just like this, never ceasing day or night!”

The broader point is that, as in the Buddhist view, everything passes away, eventually. The whole world is flow—as Heraclitus also remarked, at the beginning of the Western philosophical tradition.40

Xunzi writes about water in a similar vein:

Confucius was once gazing at the water flowing eastward. Zigong questioned Confucius about it, saying: “Why is it that whenever a gentleman sees a great stream, he feels the necessity to contemplate?”

Confucius replied: “Ah! Water—it bestows itself everywhere, on all living things, yet there is no assertion: in this it resembles Potency. Its direction of flow is to descend toward the low ground, and whether its course is winding or straight, it necessarily follows its natural principle: in this it resembles rightness. Things float along on its surface and its depths cannot be fathomed: in this it resembles knowledge. Its vast rushing waters are neither subdued nor exhausted: in this it resembles the Way.”

As Roger Ames remarks, this fine image of the way potency emanates and the sympathetic resonance it elicits, by way of wuwei, is an idea common to both the Daoist and Confucian traditions.41

Although the Laozi called dao one of the “greats,” it did so only tentatively (since to call it great would preclude its being small—which of course it also is, though without being any kind of thing). The passage goes on to say that its greatness comes from its “passing away:”

If forced to give it a name,
I would call it great.
Being great it is called passing away,
Passing, it is called distancing.
Distancing, it is called returning.42

The Way is great because its passing away—the same word as Confucius used of the river—is constant and inexhaustible, like a spring that never dries up. It goes far after coming, but then turns back: think of the cycles of yin and yang, where the increase in yin gives way, after the maximum, to an increase in yang—and so on, endlessly.

Another passage in the Laozi explicitly associates the flow of dao with water.
The highest efficacy is like water.
It is because water benefits everything
Yet vies to dwell in places loathed by the crowd
That it comes nearest to proper way-making.\textsuperscript{43}

These lines are followed by a series of attributes of the good ruler, among
which is his power to create order. And just as water settles in the lowest
places, which most people shun, so the ruler governs best from below.

What enables the rivers to be king over all the valleys
Is that they are good at staying lower than them. . . .
This is the reason that the sage in wanting to stand above the people
Must put themselves below them in what they have to say.\textsuperscript{44}

The Daoist view is not only that human beings will flourish if they emulate
natural processes, but also that this happens primarily because the best ruler
is the most consummate emulator—of water especially.

During imperial times (beginning with the unification of China under
the Qin Dynasty in 221 BCE), the Chinese greatly expanded their numerous
water-control projects. As mentioned earlier, they soon encountered the core
problem with large-scale systems of this kind, which is that they’re inherently
unstable. They are always far more expensive to maintain than to build in the
first place, since the necessary structures—sea-walls, levees, and polders used
to claim land for cultivation—are subject to constant wear and tear. And in
the case of rivers and waterways the continuous buildup of sediment means
that the dredging of channels and heightening of dykes generate a perpetual
burden of human work. Mark Elvin offers a comprehensive account of how
such massive projects lock people in to an unusually high-maintenance enter-
prise with steadily diminishing returns.\textsuperscript{45}

The instigators and directors of these hydrological projects were appar-
ently ignorant of the wisdom of the Daoist thinkers on the topic of water.
As the \textit{Laozi} remarks:

Nothing in the world is as soft and weak as water,
And yet in attacking what is hard and strong
There is nothing that can surpass it. . . .
There is no one in the world that does not know
That the soft prevails over the hard,
And the weak prevails over the strong,
And yet none are able to act accordingly.\textsuperscript{46}
The ancient Chinese engineers apparently never appreciated the nature of this power at the core of their hydrological projects: they were certainly never able to harness it satisfactorily.

A Daoist would doubt the wisdom of building dams—especially large examples of “the hard and strong”—in the first place. The Laozi also says, “Those who would grasp things lose them.” Which is never more true than in the case of water, whose flowing tends to elude human control. If you try to grasp water by making a fist you get only a few drops: what works is to cup your hands—a more open and far less aggressive action.

The history of China’s hydrological failures seems to confirm the Laozi’s acknowledgment of “rivers and seas” as “kings of the hundred valleys,” a high position that derives from their habit of “staying low.” If humans persist in trying to lord it over the aquatic powers, they remain blind to the more general Daoist admonition “not to contend” against the powers of Heaven and Earth.

**Syncretic Studies**

The most comprehensive account of political rule that’s grounded in the realms of Heaven and Earth comes from the *Huang-Lao Boshu* (Silk Texts), manuscripts that were discovered in 1973 in the excavation of the tombs at Mawangdui, which had been sealed in 168 BCE. The *Huang-Lao* is a syncretistic work, predominantly Daoist, but also influenced by Legalism: the “Lao” refers to Laozi, and the “Huang” to the legendary Yellow Emperor, Huangdi. The political philosophy it contains is distinguished by its having actually been put into practice in the courts of the Western Han (early second century BCE), before Confucianism became the official state philosophy.

Again, Huang-Lao assumes the unity of the three realms, Heaven-humans-Earth.

The way of one who realizes kingly rulership of the empire consists of a heavenly component, a human component, and an earthly component. When these three are employed in line with each other . . . one will possess the whole World.

The political ideas are based on what Western thinkers would call a philosophical naturalism—the view that that natural world is the basis for human existence and so provides standards of some kind—and the proposed system of law derives from natural law. Insofar as Heaven and Earth are taken as exemplary, we find the natural order cited as a justification for orders of
rank within human society. Just as there is high and low in the world of nature, so in the human world there is noble and base. And again the ruler is encouraged to reward and punish in keeping with the time of year: “To realize achievements during three seasons and to punish and execute during one season is the way of Heaven and Earth.”

Since the Way of Heaven and Earth manifests itself in complementary alternation between the forces of *yin* and *yang*, humans are enjoined to synchronize their activities with these alternations. The *Huang-Lao* also extends the operations of *yinyang* in natural phenomena (the seasons, dark-light, cold-hot, etc.) to human beings in their social activities (female-male, family relations, and so forth). Just as *yin* and *yang* alternate as active and passive forces in the natural order of things, so the ruler is advised to employ not only aggressive (masculine) initiative but also receptive (feminine) reserve. And indeed any time the ruler acts in ways contrary to the forces of *yin* and *yang*, “at worst the state will perish, and at the least the ruler will meet with disaster.”

The text’s recommendations pertain, as one would expect, not only to the activities of the outstanding person of the ruler, but also to those of the individual.

Only after one lines them up in accordance with the constant Way of Heaven and Earth will one determine wherein lies the cause of disaster and fortune, life and death, survival and demise, prosperity and decline. For this reason, one will not deviate from principle in one’s actions but will sort out the World.

Sorting out the World sounds like an eminently worthwhile enterprise, but one might well ask how humans are supposed to know “the constant Way of Heaven and Earth.” “Nature” is always, as we say today in quote marks, a social construction: there’s no such thing as heaven and earth in any real sense, since they are always experienced through some social and historical perspective or other. The *Huang-Lao* is aware of this issue, and proposes a straightforward solution:

The way to apprehend and understand is simply to be empty and have nothing... In his observations in the World, the one who grasps the Way is without grasping, without fixed positions, without impositional action, without personal biases.

After practicing this process of emptying, one eventually comes to experience the natural order directly, and to “understand without confusion.”
We find similar ideas in the *Huainanzi*, elaborated in greater detail. The “Art of Rulership” chapter begins by recommending again that the ruler’s activities and techniques should follow the natural order.

The art of rulership consists in managing without interfering and issuing wordless instructions. . . . The ruler’s conduct is a model for the world. His advancing and withdrawing respond to the seasons, his movement and rest comply with proper patterns. . . . Affairs emerge from what is natural, so that nothing issues from the ruler himself.

Because the ruler is attuned to the powers of nature and his actions “respond to the seasons . . . with proper patterns,” there is no need for him to issue explicit instructions or interfere in the affairs of the people.

The ruler gets attuned by refining the *qi* energies from Heaven and Earth that constitute his person, and can thus act as a medium for the quintessential *qi* of those greater powers. Like the legendary emperor known as the “Divine Farmer,” Shen Nong, he is thereby able to transform the people by emanating his “spiritual” or “godlike power.”53 This kind of “spirit transformation” has a powerful and extensive reach: “A great shout can be heard at most only within a hundred paces, but the human will can project over a thousand *li*.”

In a passage consonant with Xunzi’s invoking of the vast water-like emanations of potency through *wuwei*, the *Huainanzi* echoes Huang-Lao philosophy:

If the ruler is pure, tranquil, and non-active, Heaven will provide the seasons for him.
If the ruler is modest, frugal, and keeps to moderation, Earth will yield its wealth for him. . . .

Thus the ruler covers the world with his Potency. He does not act from his own wisdom, but follows what will bring benefit to the myriad people.

The more the ruler is able to channel the powers of Heaven and Earth to the benefit of the people, the more awesome his potency becomes in turn:

If the ruler defends the people against what does them harm and opens a way for the people to have what brings them benefit,
then his awesomeness will spread like the bursting of a dike or the breaking of a dam.  

Interesting that the one who protects people from water-caused disasters should resemble such a force of nature in his power.

The *Huainanzi* often invokes “an age of Utmost Potency” in the distant past, where human activity—and especially the minimal activity of the sage—is what maintains harmony with the environment. In that era,

The sage simply inhaled and exhaled the *qi* of *yin* and *yang*, and none of the myriad things failed to flourish as they acknowledged the sages’ Potency in harmonious compliance. At this time nothing was directed or arranged: separately and autonomously things completed themselves.

Those were the days, indeed. Roger Ames has remarked the strong Daoist strain in this political philosophy, whereby “when each particular is allowed to express its own natural potential without being distorted by external constraints, these elements will collectively function in a thoroughly integrated natural order.”

“The people of antiquity” are imagined to be able to “make their *qi* energy the same as that of Heaven and Earth,” and so they were able to “wander in an era of unity.” They could do this thanks to the pervasiveness of sympathetic resonance (*ganying*) throughout the field of *qi* energies. Although Ames notes the importance of the narrower Han Confucian idea of “the mutual influence of the human and nature” (*tian ren xiang ying*), he doesn’t mention the discussion of sympathetic resonance in chapter 6 of the *Huainanzi*. As a condition of everything in the energy field, sympathetic resonance accounts for interactions not only between human beings and natural phenomena, but also between the potency of rulers and the responses of the people.

According to the *Huainanzi*, when contemporary people come into conflict through competing to fulfill their desires, the ensuing disturbance of *qi* energy brings in its train, by sympathetic resonance, mayhem in the natural world too.

When the hearts of high and low become estranged from each other, noxious *qi* rises like a vapor; when ruler and minister are not in harmony, the five grains do not produce a yield.

This in turn ushers in an age of decline, when awareness of the Way is steadily diminished and human desires are given free rein.
Coming down to the age of decline:
People delved in mountains for precious stones.
They engraved metal and carved jade,
Pried open oysters and clams to get pearls,
Smelted bronze and iron,
And the myriad things were not nurtured.

People ripped open pregnant animals and killed young ones . . .
They overturned nests and broke eggs . . .
They bored wood to get fire,
Cut timber to build terraces,
Burned forests to make fields,
Drained marshes to catch fish,
So tortoises and dragons no longer frequented the earth. . . .

Thus yin and yang became twisted and tangled;
The four seasons lost their proper order;
Thunderclaps caused things to overturn and break.

Nature made chaotic, disasters and catastrophes, the myriad things thrown into confusion by ill-considered human intervention. There follows a series of extreme weather events, such that “the myriad things suffered premature deaths;” and on top of that “there were innumerable instances of misshapen shoots, non-blossoming flowers, and pendant fruit that died out of season.”

Blissfully unaware, the rich simply strove—as they often do—to get richer, “building great mansions, houses, and palaces” and adorning them with lavish artistry. The powerful among them grew yet more self-indulgent, to the point where such sumptuous extravagance “did not suffice to fulfill the desires of the rulers of men.” The result was further degradation of the natural environment and those whose livelihoods most immediately depended upon it, “the common people.” The silver lining to this dark cloud is that such dismal times provide an opportunity and challenge for a ruler of a quite different kind, one empty of desires and concerned above all for the welfare of the people.59

Stories like this—where the human race degenerates through the arrogant exploitation of the natural world for the satisfaction of extravagant desires, and thereby provokes a destructive response—are by no means confined to ancient China. Such authors as Hesiod, Ovid, and Pliny in the Western tradition call attention to similar patterns, often through the figure of Prometheus, where the backlash often comes in the form of a flood (as in the Book of Genesis).60 So are we really surprised now when, after throwing off the energy
balance of the planet by emitting enormous quantities of greenhouse gases, we find ourselves subject to more devastating storms and flooding and other natural disasters?

We are now in an age of decline where extravagance still fails to fulfill human desires, and the backlash from the global warming we have been fueling for decades is imminent—in the form of droughts as well as floods. Governments in the West have always governed as if their states, and human societies generally, existed in a vacuum, and as if the ever-present context of the natural world were of no relevance. Nor have political philosophers in the Western traditions ever suggested that this might be shortsighted. And what you get when you ignore the natural context is the risky situation the world is now in.

The Chinese thinkers have generally paid close attention to the context of Heaven and Earth, and many of their rulers did too. Now is the time to retrieve and act on this ancient wisdom. Doing so will benefit not only the Chinese but also the rest of us.

Notes

8. *Mencius*, 4A:9, 7B:14; 1B:6 and 1B:8.
21. Mencius, 7B:35.
22. Mencius, 1A:3.
27. Xunzi, 9.16b, 2:105. See also Huainanzi, 9.28, 331.
31. *The Annals*, 1/1.5, 63. For the third month of spring the proscription reads:

Allow out of the Nine Gates of the city no one with barbs and hand nets for hunting, or rabbit snares and nets, or gauze netting for birds, or poisoned food to feed to animals. . . . In this month, the Son of Heaven orders that foresters not allow the mulberry and silkworm oak to be felled. 3/1.4–1.5, 97.

34. Daodejing, 25 (translation modified).
35. See, for example, the stories in Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin, 2005).
37. Daodejing, 32, also 37; Daodejing 57.
38. Daodejing, 77.
42. Daodejing, 25 (translation modified).
43. Daodejing, 8.
44. Daodejing, 66.
46. Daodejing, 78.
47. Daodejing, 64.
50. Huang-Lao Boshu, 83:164b, 51:40b (Peerenboom, 45, 46).
51. Huang-Lao Boshu, 57:69a (Peerenboom, 47).
52. Huang-Lao Boshu, 43:3a, 53:52a (Peerenboom, 71).
59. Huainanzi, 8.1, 268–70; 8.6, 275–77.