

# The Concept of Heaven in Confucianism and Emerson's Transcendentalism

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## Abstract

Confucius' philosophy had played a part in the development of the social and political conceptions of modern West. It was remarkable that Emersonians were a very potent factor in bringing Confucianism into American life. Confucius' views on heaven and sincerity were related to Emerson's Transcendentalism.

For Emerson, Confucius was the greatest thinker in Chinese history. Emerson clearly showed his respect and admiration for Confucius. He quoted *the Sayings of Confucius and Mencius* as illustrations of his ideas. He copied a passage from the Chinese Classics explaining well the action of Confucius into his Journals. One quotation from Confucius Emerson used twice: "I will say with Confucius, 'If in the morning I hear of the right way, and in the evening die, I can be happy.'" (朝聞道 · 夕死可矣)

Confucius sometimes used Tien (天) as a synonym for Fate or for Nature. The term Tien was employed to stand for nature at large and for the energy and activity displayed by a power other than that from human. It indicated the great and invisible power of nature. Nature in Emerson's mind and heaven in Confucius' mind were transcendental. Both of them respected Nature as a divinity and believed that it was a power working for righteousness in the universe.

Key words: Confucianism, Transcendentalism, heaven, Tien (天), Tao (道), the way of heaven

My Chinese book does not forget to record of Confucius, that his nightgown was one length and a half of his body. {1}  
--Emerson's *Journals* for 1843

The whole writings of Confucius and the Confucian scholars can be termed Confucianism. It has embraced some of the most admirable elements of traditional religion, such as a respect toward Heaven and worship of ancestors. Confucius advocated that man can be sage through self-cultivation and inner enlightenment. As a cultural influence, Confucianism is probably the steering wheel of our mental and institutional development. In philosophy, Confucianism stands for an ideal of human relationship in harmony with the universal order. In ethics, it stands for a rationalized social order. In literature and in art, it stands for the clarification of man's experience and the crystallization of life. In short, Confucianism is affiliated to humanistic thinkings. And this humanism underlines the whole stream of Chinese thought.

In *The Encyclopaedia Americana* Walter Harding said:

It would be wrong to attribute American transcendentalism solely to the influence of the German transcendentalists. The Americans were basically eclectic in their philosophy and borrowed ideas from their amazingly widespread reading in such esoteric sources as the religious books of the Orient (particularly the *Bhagavad Gitā* of Hinduism and *the Sayings of Confucius*) {2}...

Transcendentalism maintained that man had ideas that came not through the five senses or the powers of reasoning. It asserted that man had a spiritual body within a physical body. It implied a belief in the superiority of intuition to sensory knowledge. The transcendentalists termed it variously as the oversoul, the conscience, or the inner light. The tie that bound Emerson to Confucius was their common belief in the goodness of man. Confucius himself said very little about Human Nature. He mentioned it once in the *Analects* "By nature, men are nearly alike ; by practice, they get to be wide apart." {3} (性相近也，習相遠也) The Confucianist theory of the goodness of human nature became obvious after the appearance of Mencius. He said: "From this case we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration is essential to man , that the feeling of shame and dislike is essential to man, that the feeling of modest and complaisance is essential to man, and that the feeling of approving and disapproving is essential to man." {4}(由是觀之，無惻隱之心，非人也，無羞惡之心，非人也，無辭讓之心，非人也，無是非之心，非人也) Mencius actually meant that human nature is good. Mencius said: "Water indeed will flow indifferently to the east or west, but will it flow indifferently up or down? The tendency of man's nature to good is like the tendency of water to flow downwards." {5} (水信無分於東西，無分於上下乎，人性之善也，猶水之就下也) Mencius considered that man has the innate good ability and innate good knowledge of morality. Confucianists did not attempt to live in touch with an Over-Soul as Emerson did. However, they regulated their social order on the basis of moral concept.

New England Transcendentalism came into the world in 1836 when Emerson's "Nature" was published. Were New England Transcendentalists merely the imitative followers of German Idealism? The answer was clearly shown in "The Transcendentalists", which was a lecture that Emerson delivered at the Masonic Temple in Boston.

"It is well known to most of my audience that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental from the use of that term of Immanuel Kant, of Königsberg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the sense, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas or imperative forms,

which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that there were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them Transcendental forms. The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man's thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to that extent that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought is popularly called at the present day Transcendental.”{6}

Then, what is New England Transcendentalism? It stimulated a “renaissance” in American literature. The first exponent of it was Ralph Waldo Emerson. It was influenced by the formal philosophy of Immanuel Kant, but Emerson greatly modified it. It applied this philosophic idealism and religious enthusiasm to the practical reform of American social institutions.

Transcendentalism was a distinct philosophical system. Practically it was an assertion of the inalienable worth of man. Theoretically it was an assertion of the immanence of divinity in instinct. The aim of the Transcendentalists was high. They professed to look not only beyond facts, but to principles. The final aim of the Transcendentalists might be said to have been the awakening to the inner life, the soul. Emerson always tried to mediate between mysticism and practicability, between Transcendentalism and science. He was a pragmatist not only in theory but also in practice.

Confucius' philosophy had played a part in the development of the social and political conceptions of modern West. It was remarkable that Emersonians were a very potent factor in bringing Confucianism into American life. Confucius' views on heaven and sincerity were related to Emerson's Transcendentalism. Frederic Ives Carpenter gave a detailed account of how Emerson came into contact with Confucian ideas:

In his (Emerson's) Journals for that year (1830) he noted that the Golden Rule was to be ascribed to Confucius, and that the Confucian Classics contained “Promising definitions” of Nature, Law, and Instruction. Then in 1843, the “Sheking”, or Chinese book of odes, appears among his list of books read during the year. In 1836, the date of the publication of *Nature*, he first read “Marshman's *Confucius*”, and copied many sentences ascribed to Confucius into his Journals. One of these: “How can a man remain concealed”, appeared also in his first volume of *Essays*. In 1837, however, in reading the *Asiatic Journal*, he came in contact with what he labeled “the mountainous nonsense of Chinese diplomacy”, and the impression of China is reflected in an essay on “The Conservative” in 1841. In 1838 he was again reading “Confucius” and quoted in his Journals for that year. “Action, such as Confucius describes the speech of God.” Again in 1841 he listed Confucius; and in 1843 he read over the “Sheking”. In that year he read for the first time a complete translation of *The Four Books* of the Chinese Classics; copying many sentences from them in his Journals. Many of these quotations reappear in his later *Works*—and almost every volume includes one or two illustrative sayings taken from the Chinese Classics. His later Journals, likewise show a continued, although never intense interest in them. {7}

For Emerson, Confucius was the greatest thinker in Chinese history. Emerson clearly showed his respect and admiration for Confucius. He quoted *the Sayings of Confucius* and *Mencius* as illustrations of his ideas. He copied a passage from the Chinese Classics explaining well the action of Confucius into his Journals. One quotation from Confucius Emerson used twice: "I will say with Confucius, 'If in the morning I hear of the right way, and in the evening die, I can be happy.'" {8} (朝聞道 · 夕死可矣) But Emerson always felt that this 'right way' of Confucius was apt to lead through social convention to formalism.

The concept of Heaven as a power that "works for righteousness in the universe" was revealed in Confucius' sayings many times. The term Tien (天) was employed to stand for nature at large and for the energy and activity displayed by a power other than that from human. It indicated the great and invisible power of nature: "The workings of Heaven above have neither sound nor smell." {9} (上天之載 · 無聲無臭) "Does Heaven speak? And yet the seasons run their appointed courses and all things in nature grow up in their time. Look at the Heaven there: does it speak?" {10} (天何言哉 · 四時行焉 · 百物生焉 · 天何言哉)

Confucius emphasized the necessity for full recognition of the eternal laws of the universe and their operation. Confucius said, "Without knowledge of the Decree of Heaven, a man cannot be a gentleman." {11} (不知命 · 無以為君子也) The same concept was voiced in the words from the "Doctrine of the Mean": "Thus it is that the gentleman lives out the even tenor of his life, calmly waiting for the fulfillment of his destiny, whereas the petty man takes to dangerous courses, expecting unpredictable strokes of luck." {12} (故君子 · 居易以俟命 · 小人 · 行險以徼幸) And "He (the gentleman) does not complain against Heaven above nor does he condemn men below." {13} (君子不怨天不尤人)

Confucius himself set forth the concept of following the ordinances of Heaven. He (on one occasion of great personal danger from an enemy) was heard to say, "Heaven has given me this moral and intellectual power within me; what can Huan T'ui do to me?" {14} (天生德於予 · 桓魋其如予何?) And "Despite the death of King Wen (who founded this civilization) is not the cause of this civilization still with us here now? If Heaven is going to destroy all civilization in the world, it would not have been given to a moral of this late generation to understand this civilization. But if Heaven is not going to destroy all civilization in the world—what can the people of K'uang do to me?" {15} (文王既沒 · 文不在茲乎 · 天之將喪斯文也 · 後死者不得其與於斯文也 · 天之未喪斯文也 · 匡人其如予何)

Mencius used the concept of Heaven in the same breath as Confucius. A famous saying by Mencius thus goes, "That is why Heaven, when it is about to place a great responsibility on a man, always first tests his resolution, wears out his sinews and bones with toil, exposes his body to starvation, subjects him to extreme poverty, frustrates his efforts so as to stimulate his mind, toughen his nature and make good his deficiencies." {16} (天將降大任於斯人也 · 必先苦其心志 · 勞其筋骨 · 餓其體膚 · 空乏其身 · 行拂亂其所為 · 所以動心忍性 · 曾益其所不能)

Man may become the co-worker with the spiritual forces which constitute Heaven by means of sincerity. “Doctrine of the Mean” declared: “Sincerity is the way of Heaven.” {17} (誠者天之道也) “In the world, only he who possesses penetrating sincerity is able to fulfill his nature completely.” {18} (唯天下至誠，為能盡其性)

Emerson said in his essay “Manners”: “It is easy to push this deference to a Chinese etiquette; but coolness and absence of heat and haste indicate fine qualities. A gentleman makes no noise; a lady is serene.” Emerson insisted on courtesy and manners which he found in “Doctrine of the Mean”. In the passages of “Spiritual Laws” Emerson said: “When a man speaks the truth in the spirit of truth, his eye is as clear as the heavens. When he has base ends and speaks falsely, the eye is muddy and sometimes asquint.” {19}

The pursuit of sincerity is the task assigned to man. It may be regarded as man’s own contribution to the fulfillment of the Tao (道). In the Confucian system Tao owns a great philosophical meaning. It signifies different though related concepts. The three main concepts are: Tao as the way of nature-- “In vastness and depth it is like the Earth. In transcendence and intelligence it is like Heaven. Infinite and eternal, it is boundless.” {20} (博厚配地，高明配天，悠久無疆); Tao as the way of man according to the arrangements of nature-- “The Ordinance of Heaven is what we call the law of nature. To fulfill the law of nature is what we call the Way.” {21} (天命之謂性，率性之謂道，修道之謂教); and Tao as the way that man actually follows, as the issue of his subjective nature-- Confucius said to his disciples: ‘Seek for the Way.’ {22} (子曰：志於道)

As the manner and course pursued by nature, Tao may be denoted as the way of heaven-- Tzu-kung said, ‘You will often hear the Master speak on the subjects of art and literature, but you will never hear him speak on the subjects of nature or Heavenly Way.’ {23} (子貢曰：夫子之文章，可得而聞也，夫子之言性與天道，不可得而聞也。) Man, who pursues Tao, establishes himself in it by cultivating his own self. And he will prove to be a gentleman. A gentleman will make Tao the main object of his thoughts and doings— “Thus the life of the gentleman is unobtrusive yet grows more and more visible whereas the life of the petty man is ostentations, but it is more and more doomed to ruin.” {24} (故君子之道闇然而日章；小人之道，的然而日亡。君子之道，淡而不厭，簡而文，溫而理，知遠之近，知風之自，知微之顯，可與八德矣) Confucius said, ‘A gentleman is in search of the Way, not a mere living. Farming sometimes leads to starvation, and education sometimes to official preferment. A gentleman should be solicitous about the Way, not anxious about poverty.’ {25} (君子謀道而不謀食，耕也，餒在其中矣，學也，祿在其中矣，君子憂道不憂貧) A gentleman will study it and “set his will” on it. {26}

Man who pursues his way in accordance with his nature will attain sincerity and dwell in it constantly. He makes an effort to become so high as to be co-equal of heaven. “Now the Master cannot be equaled, just as no man can climb up to the sky.” {27} (夫子之不可及也，猶天之不

可階而升也)

Confucius sometimes used Tien (天) as a synonym for Nature. In Emerson's "The Transcendentalist": "Nature is transcendental." {28} It is generally known that Emerson was very fond of Nature. He taught his children how to recognize the birds by their songs. He knew the names of all the plants; he took daily walks to Walden Pond. He was a gardener and orchard keeper. He often wandered alone in woods so that he might return to the inner self. Emerson's interest in nature was more than theoretical. He was a possessor of profound insight into the center of nature. The most important result of Emerson's long engagement with nature was the publication of "Nature" in 1836. In "Nature" Emerson said: "Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul." {29} We may say that this is a description of Emerson's view of nature. Emerson's definition of nature is a broad one. Nature is the way things are, and is considered as an appendix to the soul. In "The Over-Soul" Emerson said: "We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul." {30}

Emerson regarded the visible as changeable and transient, and the invisible as everlasting and unchangeable. He asserted that "the visible world and the relation of its parts, is the dial plate of the invisible" {31}; "the visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world." {32} The inner is the invisible laws of nature, and the external is the visible forms of nature.

In "Nature" Emerson showed that it was essential for man to go through the severe process of self-discipline and self-purification, overcoming "the prevalence of secondary desires—the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise." {33} "Every thing the individual sees without him corresponds to his states of mind." {34} As the result of such self-purification, we could return to the inner self. Accordingly, man must be of the same quality with the universe, as a small scale of the universal life. This was Emerson's interpretation of nature and man. In the chapter called "Beauty", Emerson outlined a theory of nature. "Such is the constitution of all things, or such the plastic power of the human eye, that the primary forms, as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight in and for themselves." {35} Nature provided us with the standards of beauty. "Nature is the sea of forms," he said, and "the standard of beauty is the entire circuit of natural forms." {36} "No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty," said Emerson. {37} It could not be explained, but it was the explanation for other things.

Emerson described the main benefits we got from nature. In the chapter "Commodity", Emerson asked, Who could fail to be impressed by "the steady and prodigal provision that has been made for his support and delight on this green ball which floats through the heavens?" {38} In Emerson's mind it was the practical usefulness of nature.

Nature in Emerson's mind and heaven in Confucius' were transcendental. Both of them respected Nature as a divinity and believed that it was a power working for righteousness in the

universe. There is, however, a difference between Confucius and Emerson: Confucius was more humanistic while Emerson was more metaphysical.

Emerson considered that Confucius had made many contributions to the history of thought in the world. Emerson took the personality of Confucius as an example of human greatness. On the other hand, Emerson's personal and literary effect upon younger writers was very profound. Beyond Emerson's influence on individual authors, his general influence on the culture and thought of America was also tremendous. He stood on the threshold of modern American literature and thought. New England Transcendentalism advocated by Emerson represented not only one of the most striking historical peaks in American culture, but also a cast of thought which was close to Confucianism.

## NOTES

1. Frederic Ives Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia*, New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1968, 232.
2. Walter Harding, "Transcendentalism", *The Encyclopaedia Americana*, 30 vols, Danbury: Grolier Incorporated, 1998, 3-4.
3. James Legge, trans., "Analects", English Translation of The Four Books, Taipei: The Council of Chinese Cultural Renaissance, 1979, Ch.17, Art.2.
4. "Mencius", BK 2, Pt.A, Ch. 6.
5. Ibid., BK. 6, Pt. A, Ch. 2.
6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Transcendentalist", *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 12 vols, New York: AMS Press, 1979, Vol. I, 275.
7. *Emerson and Asia*, 233.
8. *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. XII, 195 and Vol. X, 117.
9. James Legge, trans., "Doctrine of the Mean", *English Translation of The Four Books*, Taipei: The Council of Chinese Cultural Renaissance, 1979, Ch. 33, Art. 7, 37.
10. "Analects", Ch. 17, Art. 19, 112.
11. Ibid., Ch. 20, Art.3, 123.
12. "Doctrine of the Mean", Ch. 14, Art. 4, 21.
13. Ibid., Ch. 14, Art. 3, 21.
14. "Analects", Ch. 7, Art. 22, 63.
15. Ibid., Ch. 9, Art. 5, 69.
16. "Mencius", Bk. 6, Pt. B, Ch. 15, 271.

17. "Doctrine of the Mean", Ch. 20, Art. 16, 28.
18. Ibid., Ch. 22, 29.
19. "Spiritual Laws", *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. II, 156.
20. Ibid., Ch. 26, Art. 1, 31.
21. Ibid., Ch. 1, Art. 1, 15.
22. "Analects", Ch. 7, Art. 6, 61.
23. Ibid., Ch. 5, Art. 12, 53.
24. "Doctrine of the Mean", Ch. 33, Art. 1, 36.
25. "Analects", Ch. 15, Art. 31, 104.
26. Confucius said to his disciples: 'Seek for the Way.' (子曰：志於道) "Analects", Ch. 7, Art. 6, 61.
27. "Analects", Ch. 19, Art. 25, 120.
28. "The Transcendentalist", *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. I, 339.
29. "Nature", *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. I, 4.
30. "The Over-Soul", *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. II, 269.
31. "Nature", Vol. I, 33.
32. Ibid., 34-35.
33. Ibid., 30.
34. "History", *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. II, 23.
35. "Beauty", *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. I, 15.
36. Ibid., 23.
37. Ibid., 24.
38. "Commodity", *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. I, 12.

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