

# CONFUCIAN HEAVEN (天 *TIAN*): MORAL ECONOMY AND CONTINGENCY

YOUNGSUN BACK

*Sungkyunkwan University*

**Abstract.** This paper examines the Confucian concept of *tian*, conventionally translated into English as “Heaven.” The secondary literature on *tian* has primarily focused on the question of what *tian* is: e.g., whether *tian* is an anthropomorphic deity or a naturalistic force, or whether *tian* is transcendent or immanent. Instead, this paper locates *tian* with respect to the ethical life of human beings, and argues that the two conflicting concepts of “moral economy” and “contingency” are main characteristics of *tian*. This paper further investigates these characteristics in Kongzi’s and Mengzi’s ethical thought: how they conceptualized moral economy and contingency, and how their different conceptualizations shaped their respective ethical programs: Kongzi’s ethics of faith and Mengzi’s ethics of confidence.

## I. INTRODUCTION

One of the main reasons it is difficult to gain a clear understanding of the Confucian concept of Heaven (hereafter *tian* 天) is a paucity of information. Traditional Confucian writings seldom contain direct discussions of *tian*; these writers did not try to prove or demonstrate what *tian* is, in what place and in what form *tian* exists.<sup>1</sup> As Yü Ying-shih rightly observes, the Chinese tradition did not produce a discipline parallel to theology, the systematic inquiry about the nature of God, that

---

<sup>1</sup> This was especially true of the early period. When Neo-Confucian thinkers treated metaphysical issues, they were more interested in discussing the notion of *tian*, particularly in relation to *li* 理 (principle).

developed in the West (Yü 2002: 76).<sup>2</sup> Unlike Western theologians and philosophers, Confucian thinkers wrote as if they all knew and agreed on what *tian* is.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, Hall and Ames's phrase, "implicit cosmology," captures the Confucian situation accurately: "The cosmological ground of his [Kongzi's] elaborated philosophy was a starting point derived from tradition, largely absorbed intact and simply assumed in his discussions with his followers." (Hall and Ames 1987: 198) Thus, it is only we who do not know what early Confucians tacitly thought about *tian*, and it is up to modern scholars to uncover the Confucian concept of *tian* and delineate its characteristics.

The Confucian concept of *tian* derived from an earlier sense of *tian* that was characteristic of the Zhou 周 dynasty. Early writings about the Zhou founders argue that *tian* transferred its mandate to rule from the Shang 商 to the Zhou. The *tian* of the Zhou was also closely associated with Shangdi (上帝 Lord on High), a deity at the apex of the Shang pantheon.<sup>4</sup> However, Shangdi and *tian* appear to differ from each other in at least two ways. First, the term *di* 帝, "lord" or "ruler," suggests the strong anthropomorphic character of Shangdi, whereas the term *tian*, which has as one of its main senses "sky," implies a close affinity between *tian* and Nature. Perhaps an even more important difference comes from the distinct religious systems of the Shang and Zhou.<sup>5</sup> Shang kings

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Loudon makes a similar remark: "Confucius, we may say, is thus religious but not theistic." He means that Confucians relied on *tian*, i.e., a more-than-human power, for moral values and obligations, but their understanding of *tian* is nothing like the personal God of the Western religions (Louden 2002: 79).

<sup>3</sup> However, this does not mean that all traditional thinkers shared exactly the same meaning of *tian*. While sharing a similar concept of *tian*, thinkers conceptualized it differently.

<sup>4</sup> In her investigation of the identity of Shangdi, Sarah Allan (2007) challenges the common assumption that Shangdi was the god of the Shang and *tian* was that of the Zhou. According to her explanation, Shangdi was the spirit of the pole star and controlled the ten suns, which were identified with the Shang ancestral spirits. *Tian* referred to the celestial body which Shangdi and the other ancestral spirits inhabited. As a result, Allan argues that *tian* was used to refer to Shangdi as a synecdoche.

<sup>5</sup> Many scholars consider the emergence of the doctrine of *tianming* to signify a rupture between Shang and Zhou: a shift from religion to philosophy, from an amoral religious system to a moral one, or from a magical world view to a rational, humanistic one. However, recent scholarship suggests that there was no abrupt change between Shang and Zhou. David Keightley's works show that the Shang ritual system had already undergone significant changes between the reign of Wu Ding 武丁 (21st, circa 1200-1181 BCE) and the reign of Zu Jia 祖甲 (23rd, Wu Ding's son, circa 1170-1151 BCE).

believed that through divination they could interpret the intentions of spirits and through ritual offerings they could appease and influence the decisions of spirits. On the other hand, as the Zhou doctrine of *tianming* 天命 (Mandate of Heaven) indicates, Zhou kings believed that *tian* oversees human actions and rewards the good and punishes the bad. Consequently, unlike the Shang system, which revolved around correct ritual praxis, the Zhou system was established more clearly and directly on a moral basis. Thus, we might distinguish between a Shangdi of the Shang that was an amoral, anthropomorphic deity and a *tian* of the Zhou that was a moral, naturalistic or anthropomorphic, force.

Problems, however, arose in part because there was no dramatic rupture in usage or concept between Shangdi and *tian*. Despite the new and frequent appearance of the term *tian* in Zhou materials, Shangdi continued to be invoked and used interchangeably with *tian* in many of the Confucian classics. This overlap between Shangdi and *tian* rendered the concept of *tian* even more abstruse and complicated. Some scholars attribute the complexity of *tian* to its evolution from a more ancient Shangdi. Others speculate that the newly-introduced naturalistic *tian* of Zhou absorbed the characteristics of its forerunner, Shangdi (Hall and Ames 1987: 202-204). Whichever may have been the case, it is plain that *tian* embraces both naturalistic and anthropomorphic, and has both moral and amoral attributes. For example, in his study of the development of the concept of blind fate in early China, Chen Ning (1997b) divides *tian* into two entities: a moral deity vs. an amoral, impersonal force. On the other hand, Michael Puett, who reads *tian* as one entity, finds a tension within the notion of *tian* and portrays it as a capricious deity; particularly in the *Mengzi*, he notes, *tian* grants humans the possibility to become fully moral, but *tian* often frustrates human being's completion of the moral mission and sometimes even actively prevents it (Puett 2005: 53).<sup>6</sup>

---

In his *To Become a God*, Michael Puett also challenges the common assumption of a discontinuity or dramatic break between Shang and Zhou. By investigating the complexities of ritual practices of Shang and Zhou, he argues, "The Zhou conquest simply meant a replacement of the Shang pantheon with the Zhou pantheon, but the general ritual principles were much the same." However, I think, this does not mean we cannot find any meaningful differences between the Shang and Zhou religious systems. See Keightley 1984 and 2004; and Michael Puett 2002.

<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Franklin Perkins argues that *tian* in the *Mengzi* is indifferent to moral order in a very similar way to *tian* in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Xunzi*. See Perkins 2006.

In their discussions of *tian*, Hall and Ames argue that the debate over whether *tian* should be considered an anthropomorphic deity or a naturalistic force is wrong-headed. Instead, they claim that the notion of *tian* should be discussed in terms of transcendence and immanence. According to Hall and Ames, in early China, neither Shangdi nor *tian* was ever presented as a transcendent deity that stands apart from human beings and does not intervene in the world. Unlike the transcendence of the Western deity, they argue, what matters most to Confucians was that *tian* is unquestionably immanent, meaning that *tian* is not a creative force or principle and there is no transcendental value imbedded in *tian* (Hall and Ames 1987: 204-208). Yü Ying-shih, on the contrary, proposes “inward transcendence” as a distinctive form of transcendence and argues that in the Chinese tradition, transcendence is seated within human hearts, not exclusively in the external world (Yü 2002: 68-69). Moreover, disagreeing with Hall and Ames, Kelly Clark in a recent article tries to prove that in Kongzi’s thought the transcendent is still operative and important and the concept of *tian* is keenly anthropomorphic (Clark 2009: 236).

Despite all the differences in these studies on *tian*, their primary focus is more or less on the question of what *tian* is: anthropomorphic deity vs. naturalistic force, transcendent vs. immanent. What is absent or inconspicuous in the secondary literature on *tian* is human beings. For traditional Confucian thinkers, *tian* was meaningful, for the most part, in its relation to human beings. Accordingly, their discussions of *tian* were not set apart from humans; *tian* concerned how people become fully human, how they live worthy and satisfactory lives, and how they achieve a harmonious society. Hall and Ames correctly point out that the anthropomorphism of *tian* was not an essential issue for early Chinese thinkers (Hall and Ames 1987: 202). Whether a deity or force, *tian* was at the center of Confucian ethical thought. Therefore, a critical question for us to ask is how Confucians conceived of *tian* in their ethical life: in what ways *tian* relates to and acts on human beings and what kind of attitude human beings have toward *tian*.

In this respect, Hall and Ames’s definition of *tian* is insightful and telling. By projecting the traditional Chinese feudal structure onto *tian*, they point to the correlation between *tian* and the world; just as an emperor is identified with his empire, *tian*, as ruler of the world, refers to the world itself. In light of this, they redefine it, “*Tian* is rather a general designation for the phenomenal world as it emerges of its own

accord.” (Hall and Ames 1987: 207) That is to say, *tian* refers to the world where human beings live their lives. What is distinctive about their view is that according to their description of the immanent cosmos of early China, the world had no pre-existing value or order that humans should discover and follow; the world is so of itself.<sup>7</sup> In my view, however, the world that Confucians perceived and in which they lived was not an uncolored blank sheet as they claim. Confucians viewed the world strictly in *moral* terms and their conception of *tian* will shed light on their particular way of understanding the world.

In what follows, I will first explore the Confucian way of thinking about the world through their conception of *tian*, and in doing so, I will characterize *tian* in terms of two conflicting concepts: “moral economy” and “contingency.” Based on this general outline of *tian*, I will further investigate the ways in which Kongzi 孔子 and Mengzi 孟子 conceived of *tian*, how they differ in their conceptualizations of moral economy and contingency, and why they differ in such a way.

## II. TIAN: MORAL ECONOMY AND CONTINGENCY

In his brief survey of early Confucian conception of *tian*, Ivanhoe remarks, “Some important early Confucians ground their ethical claims by appealing to the authority of *tian*, ‘Heaven,’ insisting that Heaven endows human beings with a distinctively ethical nature and at times acts in the world.” (Ivanhoe 2007: 211) Not only early Confucians, but also almost all subsequent Confucian thinkers, except for a few such as Xunzi 荀子, believed that our moral nature is given by *tian* and following this moral nature is commanded by *tian*, despite all the variant understandings of *tian* and human nature (性 *xing*). Kongzi declared, “*Tian* has given me this virtue”<sup>8</sup>; in the *Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸 *Zhongyong*), it is said, “What *tian* decrees, this is called [human] nature”<sup>9</sup>; and Mengzi said, “To

---

<sup>7</sup> In his review of Hall and Ames’s book, Philip Ivanhoe disagrees with their description of the immanent cosmos of Kongzi and Kongzi’s role as a creative innovator. According to Ivanhoe, Kongzi was not a flexible innovator but a transmitter of tradition; Kongzi discovered order that had already been laid down by the former sages. Therefore, unlike Hall and Ames, Ivanhoe considers that in Kongzi’s cosmos, moral values are already in the world. In response to this, Hall and Ames would answer that the tradition itself was a creation of the former sages. As I will examine in the following, the world of Confucians, however, was not value-free. See Ivanhoe 1991.

<sup>8</sup> 天生德於予 *Lunyü* 7.23.

<sup>9</sup> 天命之謂性 *Zhongyong* 1.

preserve one's mind and nourish one's nature is the way to serve *tian*.”<sup>10</sup>

Then, does *tian* just command us to pursue virtue and leave us completely to ourselves? Ivanhoe points out that *tian* acts in the world *at times*; but, in some sense it might be more accurate to say that *tian* is acting in the world *at all times*. If we follow Hall and Ames's definition, *tian* is not only the ruler of the world, but also refers to the world where human beings live their lives.<sup>11</sup> In this scheme, human beings cannot live their lives without having any relation to *tian*. In one way or another, *tian* is constantly concerned with the world and with people. In the following, I will examine two different but closely related ways that *tian* is related to human beings: moral economy and contingency.

To begin with, early Confucians believed that *tian* rewards the good and punishes the bad. As Poo Mu-chou (1998: 38) observes, the justice of *tian* was never questioned in the *Book of Documents* (尚書 *Shangshu* or 書經 *Shujing*). King Tang 湯, the founder of the Shang dynasty, said, “The Way of *tian* is to bring good fortune to the good and disaster to the dissolute.”<sup>12</sup> His minister, Yi Yin 伊尹 admonished the heir-apparent, saying, “Shangdi alone follows no fixed path, sending down all blessings upon the good-doer and sending down all miseries upon the evil-doer.”<sup>13</sup> In addition, the justice of *tian* is suggested sometimes even without invoking a distinct agent of *tian* or Shangdi. Yu 禹, the legendary founder of the Xia 夏 dynasty, said, “Accordance with the right is auspicious; following what is opposed to it is inauspicious, and these follow like shadows or echoes.”<sup>14</sup> In the former two cases, there is an active agent to reward and punish. In contrast, in the latter case, there is no such an agent; the good prosper and the bad suffer, just as shadow follows an object and an echo follows sound. Despite this difference, these cases reveal a shared belief that there is a certain connection between one's moral worth and the outcomes of one's own actions.

Particularly in the early period, favorable outcomes that were expected to be brought by moral excellence were specific goods, such as longevity and kingship, which I call “non-moral” goods.<sup>15</sup> One of the most conspicuous examples is the doctrine of *tianming* (Mandate

<sup>10</sup> 存其心 養其性 所以事天也 *Mengzi* 7A1.

<sup>11</sup> *Tian* has multiple layers of meaning: for example, *tian* refers to the whole world, the way the world operates, and also the agent behind such operations.

<sup>12</sup> 天道福善禍淫 “The Announcement of Tang” 湯誥.

<sup>13</sup> 惟上帝不常 作善降之百祥 作不善降之百殃 “The Instructions of Yi” 伊訓.

<sup>14</sup> 惠迪吉 從逆凶 惟影響 “The Counsels of the Great Yu” 大禹謨.

of Heaven): a virtuous person flourishes by becoming king, whereas a tyrant comes to a tragic end, losing his power. Accordingly, Shun 舜, a man of utmost virtue, was appointed to the throne from a humble position, and King Wen's 文 illustrious virtue led Zhou, a small vassal state, to rule the whole world in place of Shang.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, tyrants like King Jie 桀 and King Zhou 紂, notorious for their depravity and debauchery, brought ruin upon themselves as well as their states.

In addition to kingship, usually accompanied with power and wealth, longevity is another kind of non-moral good bestowed on good people. For example, Shun not only enjoyed power, wealth, and honor, but he also lived an extremely long life. What is important here is not the factual accuracy of this legend, but people's belief in it; furthermore, this belief is not about Shun *per se*, but about virtuous people like Shun living long lives. Kongzi expressed this belief in his own words in the *Lunyu* 論語 (*Analects*), "Benevolent people live long lives,"<sup>17</sup> and in the *Doctrine of the Mean* he also said, "Given his great virtue, [Shun] could not help but live a long life."<sup>18</sup>

I call this "moral economy": a general, broadly conceived, connection between moral worth and non-moral outcomes.<sup>19</sup> However, moral

---

<sup>15</sup> Non-moral goods refer to all sorts of things, such as wealth, health, power, status, and honor, which do not belong to moral goods, that is, virtues. The distinction between moral and non-moral goods can be understood in terms of Alasdair MacIntyre's distinction between external and internal goods in his prominent chess game example (MacIntyre 2007:188-191). In her study of Kongzi's concept of the good life, Amy Olberding uses Linda Zagzebski's terms "admirable" and "desirable" to designate these two classes of goods (Olberding 2013: 419).

<sup>16</sup> These two stories, Shun's ascension to the throne and King Wen's conquest of Shang, are the two most momentous narratives of Confucian political theory: both stories go against hereditary succession, instead, following moral excellence as the standard of political authority. According to Mark Csikszentmihalyi, these two stories of nonhereditary succession represent the dual modes of political legitimation by moral standard: Shun's story, in the time of peaceful government, and King Wen's story, in the time of violent rule (Csikszentmihalyi 2003: 224). The doctrine of *tianming* applies to both stories. However, the doctrine of *tianming* was originally a Zhou invention, allegedly that of the Duke of Zhou. It seems that as the doctrine of *tianming* came to prominence as the norm for dynastic changes and imperial succession, the story of Shun was subsumed under the powerful rubric of the *tianming* discourse.

<sup>17</sup> 仁者壽 *Lunyu* 6.23.

<sup>18</sup> 故大德 必得其位 必得其祿 必得其名 必得其壽 *Zhongyong* 17.

<sup>19</sup> I am indebted to Philip Ivanhoe for discussions that helped me to develop my particular sense of "moral economy." It is important to note that things that are counted as favorable non-moral goods differ in time. For example, kingship had been considered

economy is a comprehensive term; there are various forms and kinds of moral economy. First, moral economy has a broad spectrum in terms of the tightness of the connection between moral worth and non-moral outcomes: at one end of the spectrum, this connection is so tight and straightforward that there is an almost automatic link between them, and at the other end, this connection is so loose and opaque that it passes beyond human comprehension and becomes almost non-existent. For instance, Mozi 墨子 believed in a mechanical connection between moral actions and non-moral outcomes, whereas Kongzi believed in a less evident and less straightforward connection.<sup>20</sup> Second, moral economy can be subdivided into different types depending on the way that the relationship between moral worth and non-moral outcomes is explained and characterized. For example, in the case of Mozi, it is largely through divine retribution that this connection is secured. On the other hand, Mengzi relied more on rationalistic and causal accounts to explain this connection, which we will examine later.

Despite all its various forms and modes, the crux of moral economy lies in the *necessity* involved in the connection between moral worth and non-moral outcomes; that is, regardless of causes or agency and regardless of duration, one's moral excellence will bring favorable outcomes in the end. Moral economy is none other than the belief in moral necessity that good people prosper and bad people suffer, eventually and ineluctably.<sup>21</sup>

---

as one of the important non-moral goods in early period, but by the time of Kongzi and Mengzi, political position substituted for kingship. Moreover, as society became more complicated and diversified, the connection between moral worth and non-moral goods was difficult to maintain. For instance, in Zhu Xi's case, he replaced specific items of non-moral goods with a more abstract form of benefit or well-being. In addition, different moral goods are valued in different societies. For this issue, see Alasdair MacIntyre's seminal article, "The Nature of the Virtues" (MacIntyre 2007: 179-203).

<sup>20</sup> For example, the famous chapter "Explaining Ghosts" 明鬼 in the *Mozi* highlights a system of a strict moral economy. According to Mozi, spiritual beings, as deputies of *tian*, are directly involved in rewarding and punishing human beings.

<sup>21</sup> Chen Ning uses the term "moral determinism" to describe this belief that the good is to be rewarded and the bad is to be punished (Chen 1997b: 142-143). However, he seems to be more interested in the effect of this belief, that is, the emphasis on man's moral responsibility, rather than the belief itself. Nevertheless, I think the term "determinism" is inappropriate or misleading in describing this moral belief. In his study on fate and fatalism, Robert Solomon distinguishes determinism from fatalism; determinism involves "logical, scientific, or causal necessity," whereas fatalism involves "narrative necessity." What Solomon means by narrative necessity is that certain actions or events or outcomes should happen, regardless of causes or agency, and they are necessary in terms



This simple belief in moral economy, however, is not something new or unique; it has been prevalent in many culturally and religiously different traditional human societies. The Buddhist doctrine of *karma* and Christian teachings on heaven and hell are simply two among many. Furthermore, the belief in moral economy has not completely disappeared even in the scientific and rationalistic minds of modern people.

However, it is worth emphasizing that moral economy was important in the thoughts and lives of traditional Confucian thinkers. Particularly, early Confucians firmly believed that virtuous living would bring one certain non-moral goods, such as health, wealth, power, and honor. And, *tian* was the foundation of this moral economy; either as an agent – to reward the good and punish the bad, or as a way the world works – the good prosper and the bad suffer. This is one of the most important attributes of *tian* in relation to human beings. *Tian*, as a source for ethical warrant, not only provides us with a moral nature but also maintains the moral economy of the world, giving good fortune to the good and bad fortune to the bad.

Unfortunately though, moral economy does not always function; good people sometimes suffer and bad people often get by or even succeed. This is why some of the poems in the *Book of Poetry* (詩經 *Shijing*) called into question the justice of *tian*.<sup>22</sup> Many scholars point

---

of the overall plot or purpose. On the other hand, Solomon explains, “Determinism is the science-minded thesis that whatever happens can be explained in terms of prior causes and conditions.” Unlike fatalism, which highlights the significance of events in the overall plot, determinism is interested in giving a causal account for events. However, Solomon notes, fatalism is often confused with determinism because fatalism does not negate causal explanations. As I pointed out, Mengzi also provided a kind of causal account for the relationship between moral worth and non-moral outcomes. However, Mengzi’s ultimate purpose was that by giving causal explanations he tried to emphasize the necessity involved in this connection. In other words, like the relationship between determinism and fatalism, moral economy does not necessarily oppose causal accounts. If we apply Solomon’s term, moral economy involves moral necessity. See Solomon 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Poo Mu-chou rightly observes that some poems in the *Book of Poetry* express an ambivalent attitude toward *tian*: “What is interesting is that while on the one hand the poems reveal a strong need for the protection of Heaven, on the other hand they show a sense of skepticism about the justice of Heaven” (Poo 1998: 38). He further adds that this is quite a distinctive phenomenon since in the official and formal writings found in the *Documents* or in bronze inscriptions, the justice of *tian* was never doubted. According to his explanation, unlike the *Documents* and bronze inscriptions, which were produced mainly by and for the ruling class, the *Book of Poetry* reflects the religious mentality of commoners. However, I do not think that this clear demarcation of the popular and

out that as a result, the problem of theodicy was introduced in early China.<sup>23</sup> One of the most puzzling questions throughout Confucian history was Kongzi's failure in his political mission. Even with his moral excellence, Kongzi was unable to become a sage king, and this led Han 漢 Confucians to claim that Kongzi was indeed an uncrowned king (素王 *suwang*).<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Kongzi himself was deeply troubled by the fates of several good but unfortunate people during his own lifetime: his favorite disciple, Yan Hui 顏回, died young even before Kongzi himself, and another disciple, Bo Niu 伯牛 suffered a fatal illness.

I call this failure of moral economy "contingency": a case in which a connection between moral worth and non-moral outcomes is somehow broken so that the world is felt to be beyond human comprehension and beyond human control. Cases that fall outside moral economy all belong to the category of contingency: such as the suffering of the good and the prosperity of the bad, including Kongzi's political failure and Yan Hui's untimely death, cases in which one's virtue did not guarantee favorable non-moral outcomes.

What is more intriguing is that Confucians equally appealed to *tian* for the failure of moral economy, i.e., contingency. As a consequence, *tian* is responsible not only for moral economy but also for contingency. When Yan Hui died, Kongzi opined, "Ah! *Tian* has left me bereft! *Tian* has left me bereft!"<sup>25</sup> When Mengzi failed to meet Duke Ping of Lu 魯平公, he explained to his disciple, "My not meeting the lord of Lu was due to *tian*."<sup>26</sup> Particularly for such occasions, when one's moral worth did not produce favorable non-moral outcomes, Confucians often subscribed to *ming* 命, usually translated into English as "fate."<sup>27</sup> For instance, upon the

---

elite religion would provide an accurate depiction of religiosity in early China. Rather, I think that skepticism toward the justice of *tian* was largely shared by both classes. Poo also acknowledges that the notion of moral *tian* created a schism within the religion of the ruling class.

<sup>23</sup> Yearley 1975: 432-433; Eno 1990: 27; and Chen 1994.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of various images of Kongzi during the Han, see Csikszentmihalyi 2002.

<sup>25</sup> 噫 天喪予 天喪予 *Lunyu* 11.9.

<sup>26</sup> 吾之不遇魯侯 天也 *Mengzi* 1B6.

<sup>27</sup> The following example indicates that the close relationship between *tian* and *ming*: Zixia 子夏, a disciple of Kongzi, famously said, "Life and death are a matter of *ming*; wealth and honor depend on *tian* (死生有命 富貴在天 *Lunyu* 12.5)." In his study of the excavated text from Guodian 郭店, Dirk Meyer explains the way that a new concept is introduced through parallelism in the Warring States period. In light of Dirk Meyer's

illness of Bo Niu, Kongzi lamented, “It is all over! It is a matter of *ming*.”<sup>28</sup>

There has been much discussion on the term *ming*, trying to pin down its precise meaning. Some scholars distinguish *ming* 命 from *tianming* 天命, arguing that *ming* refers to “fortuitous fate,” whereas *tianming* refers to “moral imperative.” Some scholars find inconsistency in the meaning of *ming*: *ming* refers to “moral imperative” or “fortuitous fate.” Another group of scholars insist on the consistency of the meaning of *ming*, even though they recognize the two different usages of *ming* in Confucian texts; what they try to do is either choosing one of the two meanings or reducing one to the other.<sup>29</sup> However, in my view, it is not that the two different meanings – moral imperative and blind fate – are inherent in the term *ming*, but that the seeming inconsistency in the meaning of *ming* is due to the ambivalent characteristics of *tian*.

Looking at the term, *ming* originally means “to command,” and when this term is used in Confucian moral discourse, it implicitly refers to *tianming*, “the command of *tian*.” That is to say, *ming* is coming from *tian*: *tian* is the subject who gives commands and humans are the recipients of such commands. As Tang Junyi aptly points out, *tian* and human beings are interrelated through *ming*:

The term ‘*ming*’ represents the interrelationship or mutual relatedness of Heaven and man. ... Now, since *ming* as such is to be perceived in the interrelationship of Heaven and man, we can say that it exists ... in the mutuality of Heaven and man, i.e., in their mutual influence and response, their mutual giving and receiving. Past commentators on the term ‘*ming*’ have always fallen into one or the other of two extremes – regarding it either externally in Heaven only, or internally in man only. (Tang 1962: 195-196)

Accordingly, *ming* is not an independent entity; *ming* is a relational concept between *tian* and human beings. To put it another way, without understanding the characteristics of *tian* and its relationship to human beings, we cannot have a complete understanding of *ming*.

In order to understand this complex notion of *ming*, we should keep in mind that *tian* generally supports a moral economy of the world,

---

explanation, the parallel pattern in the above quotation suggests that *tian* and *ming* are interchangeable, which means that these lines imply, “Life and death depend on *tian*, and wealth and honor are matter of *ming*.” (Meyer 2011: 58)

<sup>28</sup> 亡之 命矣夫 *Lunyü* 6.10.

<sup>29</sup> For a brief summary of the previous scholarship on Kongzi’s view on *ming*, see Chen 1997a.

but at times it does not; *tian* is also responsible for the contingency of the world. From the perspective of human beings, *tian* commands us to be good through our moral nature, and *tian* will either reward us correspondingly or not. Accordingly, *ming*, the command of *tian*, is felt to be a moral imperative when it normally brings us the commensurate non-moral outcomes according to our moral worth, but *ming* is also felt to be a fortuitous fate when our moral worth does not bring us such outcomes. Consequently, the world governed by *tian* seems to be under our control at certain times, but at other times, the world is beyond our control and comprehension.

Benjamin Schwartz notes this particular configuration of the Confucian world when he states:

When Confucius tells us that at the age of fifty he knew the *ming* of Heaven, he may mean that he has a clear understanding of what it is that is not in his control as well as of what is his true sphere of autonomous action. (Schwartz 1985: 126)

According to Schwartz's explanation, the *ming* that Kongzi understood at fifty was neither moral imperative nor fate. Rather, it was both: the comprehensive reality, the reality that is composed of the two realms, controllable and uncontrollable. On this account, *ming* is not a simple term, which has two distinct meanings. More precisely, *ming* is a complex concept relating to the whole of reality; *ming* is none other than the fine line that divides reality into two realms, within and beyond human control. What should be noted here is that when Schwartz states that at fifty Kongzi understood "what it is that is not in his control," his control does not mean Kongzi's physical or magical power; it strictly refers to his moral power, the capacity of his moral action.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the part of the world within human control specifically refers to the sphere where his moral action in some way exerts influence (moral economy), and the part of the world beyond human control refers to the sphere where such influence has no impact (contingency).<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> When we say moral action in the early Confucian context, it is more broadly conceived than the way contemporary moral philosophers do. For early Confucian thinkers, all human actions are moral actions; that is, every human action has moral value and is worthy of evaluation, either as good or bad, right or wrong. Henry Rosemont makes a salient point in this respect: "In all strictness we should not call the Confucian position a theory of moral actions. Therefore, I will refer to it as a moral theory of human action." (Rosemont 1976: 53)

This particular understanding of the world is also revealed in Kongzi's lamentation upon Bo Niu's illness: "It is all over! It is a matter of *ming*. How could such a man have such an illness! How could such a man have such an illness!"<sup>32</sup> In the first part, Kongzi's appeal to *ming* draws attention to the contingency of the world: Bo Niu's virtue did not ensure favorable outcomes and there are things that humans cannot control. However, in the second part, the repetition of his lament, "How could such a man have such an illness!" evinces his strong belief in moral economy: a good person like Bo Niu is supposed to live a long and healthy life. In other words, the cases of contingency *conversely* reflect the belief in moral economy. It is thus worth noting that moral economy and contingency are not unrelated to each other; they are linked with each other like two sides of the same coin. In the Confucian world, moral economy and its failure together constitute a comprehensive reality.

Through this, we can understand the way Confucians conceived of the world, which is quite different from our own. Suppose, a modern physician had a chance to look into Bo Niu's illness, the physician would ask what his family history is and whether or not he was exposed to any infection, but he would never ask whether Bo Niu is a good person. It is absurd for him to connect a patient's moral character with his physical condition.<sup>33</sup> However, for early Confucians, such linkage was natural: for them, a good person is supposed to live a long and healthy life, as well as a life of affluence and high-position, overall a flourishing life.

---

<sup>31</sup> However, some scholars interpret "the realm within human control" more narrowly than I describe above. For example, Edward Slingerland holds that the area of human control refers to the realm of self-cultivation. This indicates that in Kongzi's view, what is firmly in our own hands is only our pursuit of virtue and the remaining is beyond our control. Then, is this an accurate description of Kongzi's vision?: we should cultivate virtue and accept whatever comes to us. I agree that this is a basic tenet of Kongzi's teaching. However, if we have a closer look at his ethical thought, his picture is more complicated. We can say that he believed that the project of self-cultivation is in our own hands. In addition to this, he also believed that our virtues will normally bring favorable non-moral goods, even if the connection between moral worth and non-moral outcomes is not always guaranteed. In sum, for Kongzi, we can control our pursuit of virtue and also through our virtue we can exert influence in the important, non-moral areas of human life, albeit not necessarily. See Slingerland 1996: 568.

<sup>32</sup> 亡之 命矣夫 斯人也而有斯疾也 斯人也而有斯疾也 *Lunyu* 6.10.

<sup>33</sup> If moral character, broadly conceived, includes things like a desirable life style, with regular exercise and not smoking or not heavy drinking, then we can say that even a modern physician connects a patient's moral character with his physical condition and that one's moral character does play a role in one's physical condition.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case; but, even the failure of moral economy, i.e., the contingency of the world, was not regarded as a sign of randomness. Along with the workings of moral economy, its failures were also comprehended in moral terms: Bo Niu should not have such an illness. To sum up, Confucians viewed the world strictly with *moral eyes*.

These two poles of moral economy and contingency were an underlying assumption for most Confucian thinkers, and they tried to cope with the problem of contingency in the world of moral economy. Kongzi and Mengzi were no exceptions, but they differed in their ways of understanding moral economy and contingency. In what follows, I will examine Kongzi's and Mengzi's ethical thought: how they conceptualized moral economy and contingency, and how their different conceptualizations shaped their respective ethical programs: Kongzi's ethics of faith and Mengzi's ethics of confidence.

### III. KONGZI AND MENGZI: MORAL ECONOMY AND CONTINGENCY

First of all, even though both Kongzi and Mengzi maintained a belief in moral economy, they lived in a contingent world; they found good people often in miserable situations. Nevertheless, they had significantly different understandings of moral economy and contingency. Simply put, Kongzi thought that moral economy *can fail*, whereas Mengzi believed that moral economy *never fails*. First, I will outline Kongzi's conceptualization of moral economy and contingency and then compare it with Mengzi's.

A good way of understanding Kongzi's conceptualization of moral economy and contingency is through an analogy found in *Lunyu* 9.22: Kongzi said, "There are instances that sprouts fail to produce blossoms, are there not? There are instances that blossoms fail to produce fruits, are there not?"<sup>34</sup> For a variety of reasons, sprouts often wither without

<sup>34</sup> 苗而不秀者 有矣夫 秀而不實者 有矣夫 *Lunyu* 9.22. Even though it is not clear in what context this analogy is employed, it is interesting that Kongzi's analogy is very similar to that of *karmic* process. The *Nikāyas* often employs the same analogy: *karma* (action) is a seed, *karmic* result is its fruit, and *karmic* process is its fruition. Once we plant a seed, we have to wait until it bears fruit. In the meantime, however, many factors such as soil, wind, rain, and temperature affect the ripening of fruit. Accordingly, the exact same action (the same seed) could have different outcomes. Furthermore, since there are so many variables in the process of fruition, it is hard to expect when and how and why certain *karmic* results come about. More importantly, what is at stake in the

putting forth blossoms and flowers often fade without bearing fruits. In a similar manner, the seeds of a good deed sometimes fail to produce the corresponding fruits, just as in the cases of Bo Niu and Yan Yuan. Kongzi expressed Yan Hui's death as *buxing* 不幸 (unfortunate) and a deceiver who manages to survive as *xing* 幸 (fortunate).<sup>35</sup> The words "fortunate" and "unfortunate" both indicate unexpected outcomes, that is, the contingency of the world. This suggests that moral economy can fail.

However, of great importance is the underlying assumption behind Kongzi's analogy that sprouts, normally, are supposed to bloom and flowers, normally, are supposed to bear fruits. Likewise, good deeds, normally, are expected to bring favorable outcomes and bad deeds, normally, are expected to incur unfavorable outcomes. For Kongzi, these are the norms. Therefore, the longevity and healthy state of virtuous people is a standard path, and the untimely death of bad people is nothing to be surprised about.<sup>36</sup> In Kongzi's view, the world revolves around the principle of moral economy, but with some anomalies. Thus, when exceptions may occur, even if regularly or with great frequency, they are deviations from the normative principle of moral economy.<sup>37</sup> Kongzi set moral economy as the norm and marginalized its occasional failures as being mere exceptions to the rule.

What is of even greater importance is that despite the fact that Kongzi admitted exceptions to the rule, he was determined to adhere to the norms of moral economy and to disregard or even reject exceptional cases as legitimate or meaningful counterexamples. For instance, concerning cases in which good results come from bad actions, Kongzi declared, "Wealth and honor attained through immoral means have as much to do with me as passing clouds."<sup>38</sup> He is saying that even if

---

doctrine of *karma* is not the comprehension of mysterious *karmic* operation, but the belief in inevitability of *karmic* consequences: the belief that the good will prosper and the bad will suffer, no matter what the exact *karmic* process is. This is moral necessity and a strict moral economy.

<sup>35</sup> *Lunyu* 6.3, 11.7, and 6.19.

<sup>36</sup> According to Ivanhoe, in Kongzi's view, those who do not follow the Way are better off dead. See Ivanhoe 2002: 223.

<sup>37</sup> If exceptions occurred with greater regularity than the norms, it would be hard to believe in the justice of *tian*. However, the very thing that makes it hard to believe is, ironically, what makes the belief firm and complete, more or less, like the Book of Job. Moreover, Kongzi's belief was in the normativity of moral economy rather than the actual realization of moral economy.

<sup>38</sup> 不義而富且貴 於我如浮雲 *Lunyu* 7.16.

a certain action brings us favorable non-moral goods, if that action is not ethically proper, those favorable goods derived from it are not the proper objects of enjoyment. They are as insubstantial and unreliable as passing clouds. For him, these exceptional cases are not worthy of consideration partly because they do not conform to the norms of moral economy.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, concerning cases in which bad things happen to good people, Kongzi did not pay much attention to the fact that moral economy failed. For example, if we look at some poems in the *Book of Poetry*, poets reproached *tian* for being unjust and unkind for allowing such cases.<sup>40</sup> However, while Kongzi did attribute these cases to *tian* or *ming*, he did not harbor a grudge against *tian*.<sup>41</sup> Instead, he turned his gaze to people in such situations and looked at how they behaved. Hence, he praised Yan Hui for being content in the midst of poverty: “How admirable Hui is! Living in a mean dwelling on a single bowl of rice and a ladle of water is a hardship most men would find intolerable, but Hui does not allow this to affect his joy. How admirable Hui is!”<sup>42</sup> Consequently, Kongzi did not take the occasional failure of moral economy as a serious threat, just as it is natural that sprouts sometimes fail to bloom. Much more important was his own determination to live up to the principle of moral economy; even though the world did not always operate according to the principle of moral economy, he organized his own world meaningfully around moral economy and appreciated the development of his virtue.

Mengzi, the successor of Kongzi, however, made a significant change in the mode of moral economy: moral economy was no longer an object of belief, but rather became a self-evident truth. Unlike his predecessors, who assumed that there is a necessary connection between moral worth and non-moral outcomes, Mengzi tried to give a logical and plausible account for the workings of moral economy. For example, when King Hui of Liang 梁惠王 asked what kind of person could unite the world, Mengzi answered that a person who does not like killing people could

---

<sup>39</sup> Of course, the reason Kongzi pursued virtuous living is because it is the proper way of living. This is a view from the perspective of an individual moral agent. On the other hand, the above quotation is explained from the perspective of the way the world works (moral economy), and I think these two kinds of explanation do not necessarily contradict each other.

<sup>40</sup> For instance, see “Jie Nan shan” 節南山 (Mao 191).

<sup>41</sup> 子曰 不怨天 *Lunyu* 14.35.

<sup>42</sup> 賢哉 回也 一簞食 一瓢飲 在陋巷 人不堪其憂 回也不改其樂 賢哉 回也 *Lunyu* 6.11.



unite the world. In his explanation:

Does your Majesty not know about young rice plants? Should there be a drought in the seventh or eighth month, these plants will wilt. If clouds begin to gather in the sky and rain comes pouring down, then the plants will spring up again. This being the case, who can stop it? Now in the state amongst the leaders of men there is not one who does not like killing people. If there was one who does not, then the people in the state will crane their necks to see him coming. This being truly the case, the people will turn to him like water flowing downwards with a tremendous force. Who could stop it?<sup>43</sup>

When the world is filled with cruel and brutal rulers, people naturally long for a benevolent leader as if they were plants waiting for rain in drought. When a virtuous person appears, people are drawn to him like water flowing downward. This is self-evident because people like and are attracted to those who care for them and hate and seek to avoid those who harm them; particularly in times of tyranny, their yearning for a virtuous leader intensifies.

This seemingly apparent correlation between virtue and its natural consequences, however, had not caught the eyes of Mengzi's contemporaries and predecessors, or at least, it was articulated neither in the *Documents* nor in the *Lunyu*.<sup>44</sup> The doctrine of *tianming*, which is also about virtuous people's becoming rulers, highlights the agency of *tian*; it was primarily owing to *tian* that virtuous people prosper and tyrants suffer. This suggests that without the belief in a moral *tian*, its moral economy could not successfully sustain itself. Mengzi, however, shifted his attention from the agent behind moral economy to the workings of moral economy itself and backed up his picture of how things work with logical and plausible accounts. As a consequence, his conception of moral economy became natural and so of itself.<sup>45</sup> For Mengzi, the operation of moral economy itself was *tian*.

<sup>43</sup> 王知夫苗乎 七八月之間旱 則苗槁矣 天油然作雲 沛然下雨 則苗淳然興之矣 其如是 孰能禦之 今夫天下之人 牧 未有不嗜殺人者也 如有不嗜殺人者 則天下之民皆引領而望之矣 誠如是也 民歸之 由水之就下 沛然孰能禦之 Mengzi 1A6.

<sup>44</sup> It is not that Mengzi's predecessors negated this apparent relationship between virtue and its outcomes. Rather, they were simply more interested in *tian* as an agent.

<sup>45</sup> Franklin Perkins also points out this aspect: Mengzi did not rely on any direct intervention of *tian*, but more on the natural causal relations between a virtuous ruler and his success. See Perkins 2006: 304-305.

Despite this rational justification, Mengzi's moral economy also encountered frequent obstacles. Like Kongzi, Mengzi himself did not succeed in his political career, and so like Kongzi, he admitted contingency in his moral universe.<sup>46</sup> However, Mengzi's notion of contingency has significantly different ethical implications from that of Kongzi's. In Kongzi's view, contingency, however frequent or infrequent it might be, connotes the failure of the normative principle of moral economy. In contrast, Mengzi's contingency does not hint at all that the moral economy can fail. Moral economy is always at work, but there are other, external conditions, that contribute to the shaping and timing of final outcomes.

For example, Mengzi's disciple, Gongsun Chou 公孫丑, once asked why the illustrious virtue of King Wen did not enable him to succeed in replacing the tyrant King Zhou.<sup>47</sup> As a matter of fact, it was King Wen's son, King Wu 武, with the assistance of his younger brother, the Duke of Zhou 周公, who finally defeated King Zhou. Gongsun Chou's question betrays doubt, or at least, ambivalence toward the belief in moral economy: the eminent virtue of King Wen did not guarantee him favorable and expected outcomes in his lifetime. Without hesitation, Mengzi offered three specific reasons for this seeming failure of moral economy: 1) the long tradition of the Shang, founded by the sage King Tang and inherited by several virtuous rulers; 2) the assistance of worthy officials around King Zhou; and 3) the inferiority of King Wen's power in terms of land and population, compared to that of King Zhou.

According to Mengzi, these three are external conditions and they are external in that they are beyond human control. In a similar occasion, Mengzi enunciated, "These were owing to *tian* and were not something

---

<sup>46</sup> Like Kongzi, Mengzi used the same word, *xing* 幸 (fortunate), for unexpected favorable outcomes of bad action: for instance, a case in which a wicked ruler does not lose his state. See *Mengzi* 4A1.

<sup>47</sup> This question was prompted when Mengzi told Gongsun Chou, "To rule the state of Qi is as easy as turning over one's hand (以齊王 由反手也)." *Mengzi* 2A1. Gongsun Chou was perplexed because if ruling the state is that easy, how could it be possible that a virtuous ruler like King Wen was unable to complete his mission during his lifetime? (King Wen was also believed to live more than 100 years.) Here, his mission is to become the ruler of the world and replace the tyrant Zhou and to harmonize the world by the moral transformation of the people. Of course, Gongsun Chou did not explicitly ask why King Wen was unable to defeat King Zhou. But, it is implicit in his question that even the illustrious virtue of King Wen did not bring him the most favorable outcomes and failed to bring order to the world in his lifetime.

that could be brought about by human beings.”<sup>48</sup> Obviously, the long tradition of the Shang and the worthy officials of King Zhou were not things that King Wen could make or change. The third reason, the size of King Wen’s land and people, however, appears to allow for some measure of control, because he might have expanded his land and population. And yet, from the perspective that they were initially a given condition, inherited from his father, they are still beyond his control, even though he might change that situation in the future by his own efforts.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, all these external conditions, together with King Wen’s virtue, contributed to the final outcome: he was not able to complete his mission, but it was brought to fruition by his son.

Not only did Mengzi articulate the existence and role of external conditions, he also put great emphasis on their significance. He quoted from an old saying of the people of Qi 齊, “You may be wise, but it is better to make use of circumstances; You may have a hoe, but it is better to wait for the right season.”<sup>50</sup> You must be wise and virtuous, but you also have to meet right *shi* 勢 (circumstances: spatial) and proper *shi* 時 (time: temporal) in order to succeed.<sup>51</sup> External conditions are important because, they often play a decisive role in determining final outcomes. However virtuous King Wen was, all the obstacles surrounding him made it difficult for him to achieve his mission during his lifetime and left success to his son.

In this respect, Mengzi’s notion of contingency and that of Kongzi do not seem far from each other. Both agreed that one’s virtue does not always guarantee favorable outcomes: flowers are supposed to bloom, but sometimes fail to do so due to various reasons. Nonetheless, there is a critical difference between their ways of dealing with the failure of moral economy. On the one hand, Kongzi acknowledged that flowers can fail to bloom; his focus was more on the fact that moral order can

<sup>48</sup> 皆天也 非人之所能為也 *Mengzi* 5A6.

<sup>49</sup> Therefore, when I use the word, “external condition,” it does not refer to all outer conditions of humans, but specifically refers to the situation that is given: “being beyond human control.”

<sup>50</sup> 雖有智慧 不如乘勢 雖有鎡基 不如待時 *Mengzi* 2A1.

<sup>51</sup> According to Robert Eno, these two terms, *shi* 勢 and *shi* 時 (with different tonal intonation), are not etymologically related, but have a close conceptual relationship. They are spatial and temporal dimensions of a single concept: “the shifting circumstances of the experienced world which for the actual field for all applied learning.” See <<http://www.iub.edu/~p374/Glossary.html>> [accessed 6/3/2016].

be broken and how people respond to such events. On the other hand, Mengzi was much more interested in *why* flowers sometimes fail to bloom and he identified various reasons that affect the whole process. As he rationalized the process of moral economy, he did exactly the same for contingency.

Although their differences are primarily a matter of focus or perspectives, they renders their ethical systems significantly different from each other. In the case of Kongzi, moral order can be broken; on the contrary, for Mengzi, moral order is always at work. Mengzi's rationalization of moral economy makes it a self-evident truth: one's moral worth naturally induces favorable consequences. Nevertheless, the reason that moral economy *appears* to fail from time to time is because there exist other contingent factors that influence the process of moral economy. In other words, one's virtue may end up with an unhappy ending, but this does not necessarily mean that moral economy is defective or inoperative. In Mengzi's view, moral economy, albeit at times rising above the water and at times sinking under the water, is always at work. He safeguarded the workings of moral economy by separating out contingent factors from it.

Consequently, his rationalization of moral economy and his comprehension of external conditions enabled him not to show much regret or grief when his virtue did not bring favorable outcomes. To give an example:

When Mengzi left Qi, Chong Yu asked him on the way, saying, "Master, you look somewhat unhappy. I heard from you the other day [quoting Kongzi], 'A gentleman does not reproach *tian* and does not blame other people.'" [Mengzi replied,] "That time and this time are one and the same. Every five hundred years a true king should arise, and in the meantime, there should be men renowned in their generation. From Zhou to the present, it is over seven hundred years. Judging the numbers, five hundred years have passed. Examining the time, it must be possible [that such individuals rise]. It must be that *tian* does not yet wish to bring peace to the world. If *tian* wishes to bring peace to the world, who is there in the present time other than myself? Why should I be unhappy?"<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> 孟子去齊 充虞路問曰 夫子若有不豫色然 前日虞聞諸夫子曰 君子不怨天不尤人 彼一時 此一時也 五百年 必有王者興 其間必有名世者 由周而來 七百有餘世矣 以其數則過矣 以其時考之則可矣 夫天未欲 平治天下也 如欲平治天下 當今之世 舍我其誰也 吾何為不豫哉 Mengzi 2B13.

When Mengzi realized that he might not have an opportunity to assist a king, he did not show much frustration or regret, but remained confident. He might be understood as saying, “I have already reached a certain level of moral excellence, why should I be unhappy? It is not my fault that I do not meet with the opportunity.” This is in stark contrast to Kongzi’s response. When Kongzi realized that his political mission might not succeed, he bemoaned and wailed: “Ah! *Tian* has left me bereft! *Tian* has left me bereft!”<sup>53</sup> and “I am done for!”<sup>54</sup> Even though Kongzi had tried to perfect his virtues and succeeded to do so, when moral economy failed, he was deeply troubled and frustrated. In Ivanhoe’s description:

An admission of struggle and doubt would be more characteristic of Confucius than Mencius. Mencius never seems to experience, or at least reveal, the personal struggle and doubt we find in the record of Confucius’s teachings. (Ivanhoe 1988: 158-159)

Therefore, in the *Mengzi*, we do not find any lamentation as heartfelt as that of Kongzi, but instead, a sublime moral confidence.<sup>55</sup> This difference between Kongzi and Mengzi originated in part from their different conceptualizations of moral economy; moral economy can fail vs. it never stop working.

To summarize, both Kongzi and Mengzi lived in a contingent world, in which one’s virtue does not always guarantee favorable non-moral outcomes. Nevertheless, both of them continued to believe in moral economy, and yet, their conceptions of moral economy differed from each other. I call Kongzi’s moral economy a *voluntarist* moral economy

---

<sup>53</sup> *Lunyu* 11.9. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the most popular interpretation during the Han dynasty is that Yan Hui’s death was considered as a sign from *tian* that Kongzi would not succeed in becoming the sage king. For a detailed discussion of this passage, see Csikszentmihalyi 2011.

<sup>54</sup> 吾已矣夫 *Lunyu* 9.9. As the phoenix and the River Map (Hetu 河圖) never appeared, Kongzi considered the absence of good omen as a sign that he would not be able to implement his Way in the world.

<sup>55</sup> Irene Bloom seems to agree with this general portrayal of Mengzi, his sublime moral confidence. However, she points out that his confidence appears to have faded in the closing passage of *Mengzi* 7B38. She goes on to argue that in the *Mengzi*, we find the interplay of confidence and doubt, optimism and pessimism, moral idealism and sober realism, which became the core of the Confucian tradition. In general, I do not disagree with her opinion. However, as she points out, “The optimism of the opening dialogues is more typical of the text as a whole; the final monologue is, in fact, rather unusual in the *Mencius*,” I think the defining characteristic of the *Mengzi*, particularly in comparison with the *Lunyu*, is more of confidence than doubt. See Bloom 2002: 233-251.

and Mengzi's a *rationalistic* moral economy, and I call their ethical systems "the ethics of faith" and "the ethics of confidence," respectively.

In the case of Kongzi, even though he believed that the world revolves around the principle of moral economy and tried to marginalize its occasional failures as mere deviations, he realized and accepted that moral economy indeed can fail. When moral economy failed, he was puzzled and frustrated because he did not comprehend (or he was not interested in) the reason why it failed. However, the harsh reality of life did not make him waver in his belief in moral economy and the justice of *tian*. What is more important was his *voluntary* choice to live up to the norms of moral economy. The source of his belief was not coming from the external world, but resided within himself: the belief that virtues are invested within him by *tian*.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, even if the world did not follow the principle of moral economy, he was able to keep pursuing virtues. Moreover, he did not blame *tian* for injustice probably because in his view the issue was our inability to comprehend the profound intention of *tian*.

On the other hand, Mengzi's rationalistic moral economy never fails. His moral economy is a self-evident truth, just as shadow follows an object and an echo follows sound. Even though there are external conditions, which facilitate or obstruct the workings of moral economy, he believed that one's moral excellence will bring favorable outcomes in the end, albeit not in the near future or even in one's lifetime. Therefore, Mengzi advised Duke Wen of Teng 滕文公 "If you do good deeds, then amongst your descendants in future generation there will rise one who will become a true king."<sup>57</sup> Unlike Kongzi, this is not a volitional belief,

---

<sup>56</sup> 天生德於予 *Lunyu* 7.23. *Lunyu* 7.23 and *Lunyu* 9.5 describe the situation where Kongzi was in danger by the people of Kuang and by Huan Tui. As a matter of fact, the exact implication of these two passages is hard to pin down. Some traditional commentators interpreted that since *tian* had given virtue to Kongzi and *tian* did not intend to destroy culture, the people of Kuang and Huan Tui could not harm Kongzi. As it actually turned out, Kongzi survived these dangerous situations. However, my interpretation is different from this. Given Kongzi's view that virtues do not always produce corresponding outcomes, counterfactually, Kongzi might have been harmed in those situations. Accordingly, these passages are less likely to demonstrate the mysterious protection of *tian* and the marvelous effects of virtue. Instead, my interpretation is that Kongzi expressed his firm determination that any circumstances, even one that is life-threatening, can neither change the way he is nor his ardent pursuit of virtue: Kongzi might be understood as saying, "Whatever might happen to me, I will not give up my pursuit of virtue."

<sup>57</sup> 苟爲善 後世子孫 必有王者矣 *Mengzi* 1B14.

but a strong conviction based on his rational understanding of the way the world operates. Of course, Mengzi continued to advocate Kongzi's ethics of faith and famously declared that human nature is good, but at the same time, his ethical system received a solid support from his confidence in the workings of moral economy. For him, moral economy is something comprehensible by human beings, and his confidence enabled him to remain unperturbed amidst the vicissitudes of life: one's virtue will prevail in the end.

The difference between Kongzi's ethics of faith and Mengzi's ethics of confidence is also rendered explicit in their uses of two terms; "to understand *tianming* (*zhi tianming* 知天命)" and "to establish *ming* (*liming* 立命)," respectively.<sup>58</sup> As is well known, Kongzi recounted that he understood *tianming* at the age of fifty. There has been a controversy over what Kongzi actually understood at fifty, but David Schaberg gives an insightful observation. According to Schaberg, the command of *tian* was not yet known and this unknown language of a future command is how Kongzi understood *tian* (Schaberg 2005: 44). This indicates that Kongzi's treatment of *ming* is mainly a matter of knowledge. As I said earlier, Kongzi's attitude toward *tian* seems to hint at the incomprehensibility of *tian*, or the limitation of human comprehension. We should follow our moral nature and cultivate our virtues, but whether or not we are able to finish out our full life span and live a life equipped with various non-moral goods is ultimately up to *tian*.

On the other hand, Mengzi's attitude is more of action, "to establish fate." He believed that there is a possible and meaningful way to construct and maneuver one's life; one's pursuit of virtue is not merely satisfactory in itself, but also the best means to take us to a life with various non-moral goods. In Mengzi's ethics of confidence, the arbitrariness involved with contingent *tian* and its subsequent anxiety was considerably reduced. As he started to naturalize *tian* and rationalize moral economy, *tian* became something that could be comprehended and thus acted upon. Mengzi's ethical program moved toward optimism, confidence, and human control.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have tried to understand the Confucian concept of *tian* through the two conflicting concepts of moral economy and contingency

---

<sup>58</sup> Mengzi 7A1.

and argued that these two concepts reflect the Confucian way of understanding the world. Confucians viewed the world with moral eyes; part of the world that is beyond human control and comprehension (contingency) and part of the world that is under human control (moral economy). Based on this general outlook on *tian*, I argued that Mengzi developed an ethical system that is quite distinctive from Kongzi's; for Mengzi, moral economy is always at work. What, then, motivated Mengzi to make such different claims about moral economy and contingency? And what were the ethical consequences of such claims?

Mengzi was an ardent follower of Kongzi, but he was also known for his distinctive position as a defender of Confucian teachings. I think that Mengzi's strong confidence in moral economy was largely a response to Mozi's attack on the Confucian notion of *ming* (fate or contingency). As Franklin Perkins points out, Mozi did not directly criticize early Confucians for being fatalists; rather, he was more worried about the dangers their more contingent view of *ming* was likely to bring about (Perkins 2008: 427). One of the possible dangers with such a view is that in a contingent world, it is difficult to ascribe moral responsibility to individuals. In making this claim, Mozi argued that it was tyrants like King Jie and King Zhou who created the belief in fate in order to avoid their responsibilities for the fall of their states and this belief was spread and perpetuated by people who were lazy and poor.<sup>59</sup> Mozi warned that where the necessary connection between one's moral action and its outcomes is broken, people shirk their responsibilities and neglect their duties, ending up in miserable and disastrous situations.

In order to respond to this external criticism, Mengzi needed to secure the tight linkage between moral worth and non-moral outcomes. On the one hand, by rationalizing moral economy, he was able to recover a strong faith in the workings of moral economy, and on the other hand, by separating out contingent factors, he was able to elucidate the proper sphere of human endeavor. Accordingly, even in a contingent world, he was able to place an unparalleled emphasis on each individual's moral responsibility. Throughout the *Mengzi*, he consistently insisted that everything is up to individual: "What proceeds from you will return to you again,"<sup>60</sup> "There is neither good nor bad fortune which man does not

---

<sup>59</sup> *Ming* was a creation of the evil kings and was perpetuated by poor people. It was not something that the benevolent spoke of (命者 暴王所作 窮人所術 非仁者之言也). "Against Fate III" 非命下 (37.10).

<sup>60</sup> 出乎爾者 反乎爾者也 *Mengzi* 1B12. This is a quotation from Zengzi 曾子.



bring upon himself,”<sup>61</sup> and “When *tian* sends down calamities, there is hope of weathering them; when man brings them upon himself, there is no hope of escape.”<sup>62</sup> Mengzi’s answer to Mozi’s criticism is summed up in the following phrase: “Look for it within yourself!”<sup>63</sup> Even if Mengzi admitted the contingency of the world, his ethical system did not tolerate people who shirk their responsibility. I think his rationalistic moral economy presented a reasonable and in many ways compelling response to Mozi.

*Acknowledgement.* This work was supported by the Academy of Korean Studies Grant funded by the Korean Government (MEST) (AKS-2011-AAA-2102).

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allan, Sarah. 2007. “On the Identity of Shang Di 上帝 and the Origin of the Concept of a Celestial Mandate (*Tian Ming* 天命),” *Early China*, 31: 1-46
- Bloom, Irene. 2003. “Practicality and Spirituality in the *Mencius*,” in *Confucian Spirituality*, edited by Tu Wei-ming and Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Crossroads), pp. 233-251
- Chen, Ning. 1994. “The Problem of Theodicy in Ancient China,” *Journal of Chinese Religions*, 22: 51-74
- Chen, Ning. 1997a. “Confucius’ View of Fate (*ming*),” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 24.3: 323-359
- Chen, Ning. 1997b. “The Genesis of the Concept of Blind Fate in Ancient China,” *Journal of Chinese Religions*, 25: 141-167
- Clark, Kelly James. 2009. “Tradition and Transcendence in Masters Kong and Rorty,” in *Rorty, Pragmatism, and Confucianism*, edited by Huang Yong (Ithaca: State University of New York Press), pp. 227-254
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mark. 2002. “Confucius and the *Analects* in the Han,” in *Confucius and the Analects*, edited by Bryan W. Van Norden (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 134-162
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mark. 2003. “Confucianism,” in *God’s Rule: The Politics of World Religion*, edited by Neusner Jacob (Washington D. C.: Georgetown University Press), pp. 213-232

<sup>61</sup> 禍福無不自己求之者 *Mengzi* 2A4. A similar theme is also found in *Mengzi* 4A8.

<sup>62</sup> 天作孽 猶可違 自作孽 不可活 *Mengzi* 2A4 and 4A8. This is a quotation from “*Taijia*, Part 2” 太甲中 of the *Documents*.

<sup>63</sup> 反求諸己 *Mengzi* 2A7

- Csikszentmihalyi, Mark. 2011. "Allotment and Death in Early China", in *Mortality in Traditional Chinese Thought*, edited by Amy Olberding and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press), pp. 177-190
- Hall, David and Roger T. Ames. 1987. *Thinking through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press)
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 1988. "A Question of Faith-A New Interpretation of Mencius 2B:13", *Early China*, 13: 133-165
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 1991. "Thinking through Confucius. By David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames", *Philosophy East and West*, 41.2: 241-254
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2003. "Death and Dying in the Analects", in *Confucian Spirituality*, edited by Tu Wei-ming and Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Crossroad), pp. 220-232
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2007. "Heaven as a Source for Ethical Warrant in Early Confucianism", *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 6.3: 211-220
- Keightley, David. 1984. "Late Shang Divination: The Magico-Religious Legacy", in *Explorations in Early Chinese Cosmology*, edited by Henry Rosemont, Jr. (Chico, CA: Scholars Press), pp. 11-34
- Keightley, David. 2004. "The Making of the Ancestors: Late Shang Religion and Its Legacy", in *Religion and Chinese Society, Volume I: Ancient and Medieval China*, edited by John Lagerwey (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press), pp. 3-64
- Louden, Robert B. 2002. "What Does Heaven Say?: Christian Wolff and Western Interpretations of Confucian Ethics", in *Confucius and the Analects*, edited by Bryan W. Van Norden (New York: Oxford University Press), 73-93
- Lupke, Christopher (ed.). 2005. *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press)
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2007. *After Virtue* (third edition) (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press)
- Meyer, Dirk. 2011. *Philosophy on Bamboo: Text and the Production of Meaning in Early China* (Leiden: Brill)
- Olberding, Amy. 2013. "Confucius' Complaints and the Analects' Account of the Good Life", *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 12.4: 417-440
- Perkins, Franklin. 2006. "Reproaching Heaven: The Problem of Evil in Mengzi", *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 5.2: 293-312
- Perkins, Franklin. 2008. "The Moist Criticism of the Confucian Use of Fate", *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 35.3: 421-436
- Poo, Mu-chou. 1998. *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press)
- Puett, Michael. 2002. *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press)

- Puett, Michael. 2005. "Following the Commands of Heaven: The Notion of Ming in Early China", in *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture*, edited by Christopher Lupke (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), pp. 46-96
- Rosemont, Henry Jr. 1976. "Notes from a Confucian Perspective: Which Human Acts Are Moral Acts?", *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 16.1: 49-61
- Schaberg, David. 2005. "Command and the Content of Tradition", in *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture*, edited by Christopher Lupke (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), pp. 23-48
- Schwartz, Benjamin. 1985. *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press)
- Slingerland, Ted. 1996. "The Conception of Ming in Early Confucian Thought", *Philosophy East and West*, 46.4: 567-581
- Solomon, Robert C. 2003. "On Fate and Fatalism", *Philosophy East and West*, 53.4: 435-454
- Tang, Junyi. 1962. "The T'ien Ming [Heavenly Ordinance] in Pre-Ch'in China", *Philosophy of East and West* 11.4: 195-218
- Van Norden, Bryan W. (ed.) 2002. *Confucius and the Analects* (New York: Oxford University Press)
- Yearley, Lee H. 1975. "Toward a Typology of Religious Thought: A Chinese Example", *The Journal of Religion*, 55.4: 426-443
- Yü, Ying-shih. 2003. "Between the Heavenly and the Human", in *Confucian Spirituality*, edited by Tu Wei-ming and Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Crossroad), pp. 62-80