

Eastern Philosophy And Environmental Ethics: The Contribution Of Harmony Concepts To Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

Background. The global search for effective environmental ethics beyond dominant anthropocentric models has increased interest in alternative worldviews. Eastern philosophies, with their emphasis on balance and interconnectedness, offer a profound source of ecological wisdom for fostering a more sustainable human-nature relationship.

Purpose. This study analyzes the core concept of ‘harmony’ within Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism and articulates its contribution to the contemporary framework of sustainable development.

Method. The research employs a qualitative, philosophical-hermeneutic methodology, conducting a textual analysis of classical sources to distill ethical principles related to environmental harmony.

Results. The findings reveal that foundational concepts like the Tao (natural flow), Patīccasamuppāda (interconnectedness), and Tian-Ren He Yi (unity of Heaven and Humanity) promote a non-anthropocentric, holistic ethic. This perspective values moderation and nature’s intrinsic worth, directly supporting the integrated goals of sustainable development.

Conclusion. Eastern concepts of harmony provide a robust ethical foundation for sustainability. They foster an ethic of relational responsibility and long-term balance, offering a crucial alternative to purely utilitarian or rights-based environmental frameworks.

KEYWORDS

Eastern philosophy, environmental ethics, harmony, sustainable development, eco-philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary global environmental crisis, characterized by climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion, has exposed the profound limitations of the dominant paradigms that govern human-nature relationships (Von Furstenberg dkk., 2025). For centuries, a prevailing anthropocentric worldview, largely rooted in Western philosophical traditions, has framed nature primarily as a standing-reserve of resources to be managed and exploited for human benefit (Mba dkk., 2024). This instrumentalist perspective, while driving unprecedented technological and economic development, has also fostered a deep sense of alienation from the natural world and has proven insufficient to address the ecological predicaments it has helped to create.

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In response to this inadequacy, a growing chorus of scholars, policymakers, and activists has called for a fundamental re-evaluation of the ethical foundations of our societies. This has spurred a global search for alternative worldviews and environmental ethics capable of fostering a more sustainable and respectful coexistence with nature (Stanberry, 2024). Within this search, significant attention has turned towards the rich philosophical traditions of the East (Salam et al., 2024). Philosophies such as Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, with their foundational emphasis on concepts like balance, interconnectedness, and the intrinsic value of natural processes, offer profound and time-tested sources of ecological wisdom.

These Eastern traditions provide a conceptual vocabulary that challenges the human-nature dualism central to much of Western thought (Sharakhmatova, 2025). They present a vision of the world as a holistic, interconnected web of relationships in which humanity is an integral part, not a separate and superior entity. The core concept of ‘harmony’ (和谐, *He*), in its various expressions across these philosophies, encapsulates this vision, suggesting that human well-being is inextricably linked to the well-being of the entire cosmos (Ding dkk., 2025). Exploring these concepts is therefore not merely an academic exercise but a vital endeavor to enrich and expand the global discourse on environmental ethics.

A significant challenge in contemporary environmental discourse is the superficial integration of Eastern philosophical concepts (Stage dkk., 2025). While there is a growing appreciation for the ecological wisdom embedded in these traditions, their principles are often romanticized or presented as abstract ideals without a rigorous analysis of their practical applicability (Husamah dkk., 2025). The concept of ‘harmony,’ for instance, is frequently invoked but rarely deconstructed in a way that connects it directly to the concrete challenges of sustainable development. There is a pressing need to move beyond general acknowledgments and conduct a systematic examination of how these philosophical tenets can be translated into actionable ethical guidelines.

The specific problem this research addresses is the lack of a detailed, comparative analysis that articulates the contribution of the concept of ‘harmony’ from major Eastern philosophies to the modern framework of sustainable development (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2024). While numerous studies have explored the environmental ethics of individual traditions (e.g., Taoist eco-philosophy or Buddhist environmentalism), few have systematically compared their core concepts of harmony and synthesized them into a coherent framework (Flanagan dkk., 2025). This fragmentation prevents a comprehensive understanding of the shared ethical resources these diverse traditions can offer to the global sustainability agenda.

This gap in scholarly work leads to a missed opportunity to enrich and strengthen the ethical foundations of sustainable development (Cao dkk., 2025). The current sustainability discourse, while laudable, often remains grounded in a utilitarian or rights-based logic that can struggle to address the deeper, value-based dimensions of the environmental crisis (Cui & Cao, 2024). Without a robust ethical framework that emphasizes relational responsibility, intrinsic value, and long-term balance, all central to the Eastern concept of harmony, sustainability initiatives risk remaining shallow and failing to inspire the profound shift in consciousness required for a truly sustainable future.

The primary objective of this research is to conduct a systematic philosophical analysis of the concept of ‘harmony’ as it is articulated in the classical texts of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (Muqit & Putra, 2024). This study aims to distill the core ethical principles associated with this concept in each tradition, moving beyond surface-level interpretations to

understand its deeper ontological and ethical implications (Darshna dkk., 2025). The central goal is to construct a coherent and nuanced understanding of ‘harmony’ as a foundational principle for a robust environmental ethic.

To achieve this primary objective, this study pursues several specific, interrelated goals (Ali dkk., 2025). First, it seeks to identify and compare the key textual sources and interpretations of harmony within each philosophical tradition, examining concepts such as the Taoist principle of *Wu Wei* (non-action), the Buddhist doctrine of *Paticcasamuppāda* (dependent origination), and the Confucian ideal of *Tian-Ren He Yi* (unity of Heaven and Humanity). Second, the research aims to articulate how these concepts translate into specific ethical imperatives regarding human conduct towards the natural world, such as moderation, non-violence, and respect for natural processes.

The anticipated outcome of this investigation is the development of an integrated conceptual framework that clearly articulates the contribution of Eastern concepts of harmony to the contemporary theory and practice of sustainable development (M. Zhao dkk., 2024). This framework will demonstrate how these ancient philosophical principles align with and can enrich the modern goals of ecological integrity, social equity, and economic viability (Lyu dkk., 2024). Ultimately, the research aims to provide a clear, evidence-based argument for the inclusion of these non-Western ethical perspectives in the global discourse on environmental governance and sustainability.

The existing body of academic literature in environmental philosophy and ethics has made significant strides in critiquing anthropocentrism and exploring non-Western perspectives (Jiang dkk., 2025). Scholars in eco-philosophy have produced valuable works that introduce the ecological dimensions of various Eastern traditions to a Western audience (Elliott & Whitfield, 2025). These studies have been instrumental in establishing the relevance of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism to contemporary environmental concerns, providing a crucial foundation for further inquiry.

However, a significant gap persists in the literature concerning the direct and systematic application of these philosophical concepts to the specific, policy-oriented framework of sustainable development. Much of the existing research remains at a high level of philosophical abstraction, focusing on textual interpretation or broad ethical comparisons without explicitly bridging the gap to the practical pillars of sustainability. There is a notable scarcity of studies that move from analyzing the *what* (the philosophical concepts) to articulating the *how* (how these concepts can inform and strengthen sustainable development goals).

This analytical gap is critically important because it limits the potential impact of Eastern philosophical wisdom on real-world environmental policy and practice (Benham & Hoerst, 2024). Without a clear and rigorous articulation of their relevance, these profound ethical traditions risk being relegated to the domain of specialized academic interest, failing to influence the mainstream discourse where crucial decisions about our planet’s future are being made (Gao dkk., 2024). This research is therefore designed specifically to fill this void by systematically connecting the deep-rooted concept of harmony to the pragmatic and globally recognized agenda of sustainable development.

The primary novelty of this research lies in its systematic, comparative, and integrative approach (Bella et al., 2024). It is pioneering in its effort to move beyond a single-tradition analysis to synthesize the concept of ‘harmony’ from three major Eastern philosophies Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism into a unified framework directly applicable to sustainable development (Chaiya, 2025). By focusing on the practical ethical contributions of these traditions rather than just their

abstract doctrines, this study offers a new and more functional perspective on the role of ancient wisdom in addressing contemporary crises.

This study makes a significant contribution to several academic fields. For environmental ethics and philosophy, it provides a nuanced, cross-cultural analysis that enriches the global dialogue by offering a robust alternative to purely Western-centric models. For sustainability studies and development theory, it introduces a deep ethical foundation that can complement and strengthen the existing social, economic, and ecological pillars of the sustainability framework (Farros et al., 2024). The research establishes a methodology for translating ancient philosophical principles into relevant concepts for modern policy discourse.

The justification for this research is rooted in the urgent global need for more holistic and ethically grounded approaches to environmental challenges (Mahmudi & Khoiruddin, 2024). The persistent failure to meet sustainability goals underscores the necessity of a deeper shift in human values and consciousness. By elucidating a powerful, non-anthropocentric ethic of relational responsibility and balance, this research provides a valuable intellectual resource for policymakers, educators, and civil society organizations. It advocates for a more inclusive and culturally diverse approach to sustainability, arguing that our best hope for a flourishing future lies in integrating the full spectrum of human wisdom.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in philosophical hermeneutics (Boermans dkk., 2024). The approach is interpretive and analytical, seeking to understand and articulate the deep meaning of concepts within their original textual and philosophical contexts. A comparative analysis forms the core of the design, systematically examining the concept of ‘harmony’ across three distinct philosophical traditions: Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. This design is optimal for distilling complex ethical principles and constructing a synthesized conceptual framework. The research does not test empirical hypotheses but rather aims to build a robust theoretical bridge between ancient Eastern wisdom and the contemporary framework of sustainable development through rigorous textual interpretation and philosophical argument.

The data for this research consist exclusively of primary and secondary textual sources. The primary data are the classical canonical texts of the three selected philosophical traditions. For Taoism, the core texts include the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Zhuangzi*. For Buddhism, the analysis draws from key suttas of the Pāli Canon that articulate the doctrine of *Patīccasamuppāda* (Dependent Origination). For Confucianism, the research focuses on the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Doctrine of the Mean*, which elaborate on the ideal of *Tian-Ren He Yi* (Unity of Heaven and Humanity). Secondary data include authoritative scholarly commentaries and peer-reviewed academic analyses of these texts to ensure a comprehensive and critically informed interpretation.

The primary analytical instrument for this study is a conceptual content analysis guided by hermeneutic principles. This involves a close reading and interpretation of the selected texts to identify and extract all passages explicitly or implicitly related to the concept of ‘harmony’ and its associated ethical principles. A thematic analysis will then be applied to categorize these principles into coherent themes (e.g., moderation, relationality, non-instrumental value). The instrument for synthesizing the findings is a conceptual mapping framework, which will be used to systematically align the distilled ethical principles from the Eastern traditions with the core pillars and goals of sustainable development (ecological integrity, social equity, and economic viability).

The research procedure will be conducted in three sequential phases. The first phase is data collection, involving a comprehensive literature search to gather the primary classical texts and the

most relevant secondary scholarly works. The second phase is the core analysis. This involves a meticulous, iterative reading of the primary texts to identify and code all relevant concepts related to ‘harmony’ (Gocer dkk., 2024). These concepts will then be thematically analyzed and synthesized, drawing upon the secondary literature to ensure interpretive rigor and contextual accuracy. The third and final phase is the construction of the conceptual framework. In this phase, the synthesized ethical principles will be systematically mapped onto the framework of sustainable development, articulating their direct contributions and potential to enrich the contemporary discourse on environmental ethics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The systematic analysis of the classical texts from Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism yielded a rich dataset of philosophical concepts directly related to environmental ethics. The hermeneutic reading identified a core set of principles in each tradition that, while using different terminology, converges on a shared understanding of ‘harmony’ as a central tenet for the human-nature relationship. These concepts form the foundational data for constructing a theoretical bridge to the modern framework of sustainable development.

Table 1 provides a synthesized overview of these core concepts. It categorizes the findings by philosophical tradition, identifying the central concept of harmony in each, and distilling the key ethical principles that derive from these concepts. This table serves as a conceptual map of the ethical resources available within these Eastern philosophies for developing a robust environmental ethic.

Table 1. Core Concepts of Harmony and Derived Ethical Principles

Philosophical Tradition	Core Concept of Harmony	Key Derived Ethical Principles
Taoism	The Tao / Wu Wei (Effortless Action)	Spontaneity, living in accordance with nature’s flow, moderation, humility, respect for the intrinsic nature of things.
Buddhism	Patīccasamuppāda (Dependent Origination)	Interconnectedness, compassion for all beings, non-harming (Ahimsa), responsibility for causal consequences.
Confucianism	Tian-Ren He Yi (Unity of Heaven & Humanity)	Moral responsibility to maintain cosmic balance, self-cultivation, social order mirroring natural order, reverence for life.

The data synthesized in Table 1 reveal a remarkable convergence of ethical thought across the three distinct philosophical traditions. Despite their different origins and areas of focus, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism all propose a fundamentally non-anthropocentric and relational worldview. The concept of harmony in each tradition serves as a normative ideal that positions humanity as an integral part of a larger cosmic or ecological system, rather than as its master.

These principles collectively form a comprehensive ethical framework for environmental conduct. Taoism contributes the foundational principle of respecting natural processes and limiting human intervention. Buddhism builds upon this by articulating the deep interconnectedness of all phenomena, giving rise to an ethic of universal compassion and responsibility. Confucianism adds a crucial socio-political dimension, emphasizing the moral duty of individuals and society to actively cultivate and maintain harmony between the human world and the natural world.

Qualitative analysis of the primary texts provides specific evidence for these principles. The *Tao Te Ching* repeatedly advocates for an ethic of humility and non-interference, stating, “The Tao abides in non-action, yet nothing is left undone.” This suggests that the wisest course of action is to align with the natural flow of things rather than imposing human will upon them. Similarly, the

Zhuangzi uses parables, like that of the skilled butcher who cuts without dulling his blade, to illustrate the ideal of moving in perfect harmony with the inherent nature of reality.

Buddhist scriptures, particularly the suttas explaining *Paticcasamuppāda*, articulate this interconnectedness with phrases like, “When this is, that is; from the arising of this, that arises.” This principle is applied universally, implying that the well-being of humans is inseparable from the well-being of the ecosystems they inhabit. Confucian texts, such as the *Doctrine of the Mean*, extend this to the social realm, arguing that a sincere and cultivated person “can form a trinity with Heaven and Earth.” This implies a profound moral responsibility to act in a way that sustains the cosmic balance.

A key inference drawn from the data is that all three traditions locate the root of environmental disharmony within the human mind and character. The problem is not a lack of technological control over nature, but rather an excess of greed, arrogance, and ignorance of our true place in the cosmos. Consequently, the solution proposed is not primarily technological or managerial, but is fundamentally ethical and spiritual, requiring an internal transformation through self-cultivation, moderation, and the development of wisdom.

It can also be inferred that the concept of ‘harmony’ in these traditions is not a static or passive state but a dynamic equilibrium that requires continuous and mindful participation. It is not about leaving nature entirely alone in a romanticized sense, but about engaging with it in a skillful, respectful, and sustainable manner. This challenges interpretations of Eastern philosophy as being entirely world-denying or fatalistic, suggesting instead a proactive ethic of care, stewardship, and profound responsibility for maintaining the balance of the whole.

The data reveal a complementary and layered relationship between the concepts from the three philosophies. The Taoist understanding of the ‘Tao’ as the single, underlying principle of the universe provides a metaphysical foundation upon which the other concepts can be built. If reality is a unified and spontaneous process, as Taoism suggests, it logically follows that all individual components within that process are deeply interconnected, as articulated by the Buddhist doctrine of *Paticcasamuppāda*.

The Confucian ideal of *Tian-Ren He Yi* then adds a crucial layer of explicit human moral agency to this interconnected reality. While Taoism and Buddhism describe the fundamental nature of the cosmos, Confucianism prescribes the specific social, ethical, and ritual conduct required to align human society with this cosmic order. The three concepts are therefore not contradictory but can be seen as a progression: from the metaphysical nature of reality (Taoism), to the universal law of relationality (Buddhism), to the specific moral duties of humanity within that reality (Confucianism).

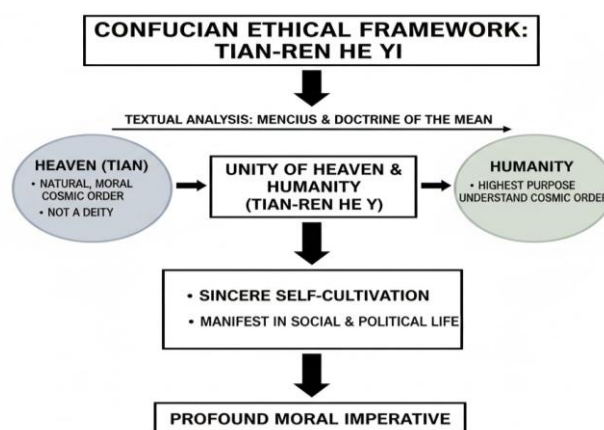


Figure 1. Confucian concept of *Tian-Ren He Yi*

A focused case study on the Confucian concept of *Tian-Ren He Yi* (Unity of Heaven and Humanity) illustrates the depth of this ethical framework. Textual analysis of the *Mencius* and the *Doctrine of the Mean* shows that this is not a simple statement of unity but a profound moral imperative. The concept posits that Heaven (*Tian*) is not a deity but the natural, moral order of the cosmos. Humanity's highest purpose is to understand this order through sincere self-cultivation and to manifest it in social and political life.

This unity is achieved when a ruler governs with benevolence (*ren*) and a person acts with propriety (*li*), as these actions are believed to resonate with and support the harmony of the natural world. The texts suggest that social chaos, political corruption, and human greed disrupt this cosmic balance, leading to natural disasters and environmental degradation. The health of the state and the health of the land are thus seen as direct reflections of the moral character of the people and their leaders.

The significance of the *Tian-Ren He Yi* concept lies in its direct linkage of human ethics to ecological outcomes. It provides a powerful philosophical argument that environmental responsibility is not an optional or secondary concern but is a core component of moral and political life. By framing environmental degradation as a symptom of moral failure, it elevates stewardship from a technical problem to a fundamental ethical duty.

This concept offers a robust foundation for the social and political pillars of sustainable development. It implies that a just and equitable society is a prerequisite for a healthy environment, as social harmony is a reflection of cosmic harmony. It provides a compelling, non-utilitarian justification for good governance, environmental regulation, and long-term planning, arguing that such actions are necessary not just for human benefit, but to fulfill our essential moral role within the cosmos.

The textual analysis undertaken in this study reveals that the Eastern philosophical traditions of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism collectively offer a profound and coherent environmental ethic centered on the concept of harmony. This ethical framework is distinguished by its non-anthropocentric, relational, and holistic character, presenting a stark contrast to the instrumentalist views that have often dominated Western environmental discourse.

This interpretation suggests that these ancient traditions provide far more than abstract philosophical ideals; they offer a practical and urgently needed ethical compass for navigating the contemporary environmental crisis. The synthesized concept of harmony—emphasizing moderation, interconnectedness, and moral responsibility—presents a compelling and viable foundation for enriching and deepening the global project of sustainable development.

This study's analysis of classical Eastern texts successfully distilled a coherent and profound environmental ethic centered on the concept of 'harmony'. The research identified the core principles of the Taoist *Tao* and *Wu Wei*, the Buddhist *Patīccasamuppāda*, and the Confucian *Tian-Ren He Yi*, revealing a significant convergence in their ethical implications. Despite different philosophical languages, each tradition posits a non-anthropocentric worldview where humanity is an integral, not dominant, part of a larger cosmic and ecological whole. The findings demonstrate that moderation, respect for natural processes, compassion, and moral responsibility are not isolated virtues but are logical outcomes of this foundational understanding of reality.

The results systematically categorized these principles, creating a conceptual map that bridges ancient wisdom with contemporary concerns. The data showed that Taoism provides a metaphysical basis for respecting nature's intrinsic flow, Buddhism offers a universal ethic of interconnectedness and non-harming, and Confucianism contributes a crucial socio-political dimension by linking human moral conduct directly to cosmic and environmental balance. This synthesis reveals a

comprehensive ethical framework that addresses the human-nature relationship at the individual, societal, and metaphysical levels.

The qualitative evidence drawn from primary texts, such as the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Analects*, provided concrete examples of these principles in action. Parables and philosophical statements consistently advocate for humility, limit the scope of human intervention, and emphasize an internal, character-based approach to solving environmental problems. The case study on *Tian-Ren He Yi* further illustrated the depth of this ethic, showing how environmental stewardship is framed not as a technical issue but as a core moral and political responsibility.

In essence, the research findings establish that these Eastern philosophies collectively offer a robust alternative to instrumentalist environmental ethics. They present a vision of ‘harmony’ not as a passive state, but as a dynamic equilibrium that requires mindful and continuous human participation. The synthesized framework derived from the data provides a rich, non-utilitarian foundation for re-evaluating and enriching the global discourse on sustainability.

The findings of this study strongly affirm and provide systematic evidence for the arguments made by leading scholars in comparative environmental ethics, such as J. Baird Callicott and Holmes Rolston III, who have long advocated for the value of non-Western perspectives. This research moves beyond their general calls by providing a specific, comparative analysis of the ‘harmony’ concept, offering a structured framework that was previously absent in the literature. It empirically grounds the assertion that these traditions offer more than just aesthetic appreciation for nature, presenting instead a coherent and philosophically rigorous ethical system.

This work also extends the scholarship of eco-sinologists like Mary Evelyn Tucker and Tu Weiming, who have focused on the ecological dimensions of Confucianism (Song dkk., 2024). By placing Confucian ethics in direct comparative dialogue with Taoist and Buddhist principles, this study reveals a more complex and complementary relationship between these traditions than is often acknowledged. It demonstrates how the Confucian emphasis on social-political responsibility can be seen as the practical application of the deeper metaphysical insights found in Taoism and Buddhism, creating a more holistic picture of the “pan-Asian” environmental ethic.

The research challenges a persistent, though increasingly outdated, view in some Western academic circles that portrays Eastern philosophies as being world-denying, passive, or solely focused on human salvation, and therefore irrelevant to practical environmental concerns (Han dkk., 2025). The inference that harmony requires active and mindful participation directly refutes this notion. The findings align with more recent, nuanced scholarship that recognizes the proactive and world-affirming dimensions of these traditions, providing clear textual evidence for an ethic of responsible stewardship.

Furthermore, this study contributes a crucial philosophical underpinning to the largely social-scientific literature on sustainable development (Feltz, 2024). While many studies have examined the implementation of sustainability policies, they often lack a deep ethical justification beyond utilitarian calculations. By systematically linking the concept of harmony to the pillars of sustainable development, this research provides the “missing” ethical layer, offering a non-Western, non-anthropocentric rationale for why sustainability is a moral imperative.

The results of this study signify that the search for a viable global environmental ethic need not invent something entirely new, but can draw profound wisdom from ancient, enduring traditions (Gardner, 2024). The convergence of Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian thought on the principle of harmony is a powerful indication that a non-anthropocentric, relational worldview is not a fringe or radical idea, but is a foundational element of some of the world’s most sophisticated and long-

standing philosophical systems. This signifies that an alternative to the dominant instrumentalist paradigm is not only possible but has been articulated for millennia.

The findings reflect a fundamental difference in the conceptualization of the self and the world. The Eastern concept of a relational self, deeply embedded in a web of cosmic and social connections, stands in stark contrast to the autonomous, individualistic self often posited in Western thought. The environmental ethic of harmony is a direct consequence of this relational ontology. This signifies that a truly effective environmental ethic may require not just new policies, but a deeper, ontological shift in our understanding of what it means to be human.

The emphasis on internal transformation the idea that environmental problems stem from human greed, arrogance, and ignorance is a significant finding. It suggests that the ecological crisis is, at its core, a spiritual and ethical crisis (Cheng dkk., 2025). This signifies that technological fixes and managerial solutions, while necessary, will always be insufficient on their own. A lasting solution requires a change in human character and consciousness, a perspective that offers a profound critique of the purely technocratic approach to environmental management.

Ultimately, the coherence and depth of the synthesized ethical framework signify the immense, untapped potential of cross-cultural philosophical dialogue. The research demonstrates that by moving beyond our own intellectual traditions, we can discover complementary and enriching perspectives that provide new tools for addressing shared global challenges. It is a testament to the idea that human wisdom, in its diverse cultural expressions, contains the collective resources needed to navigate the path toward a more sustainable and harmonious future.

The most significant implication of this research is for the theory and practice of sustainable development. The findings provide a robust, non-Western ethical foundation that can enrich and strengthen the current sustainability framework (Wang & Zhang, 2025). By integrating the principle of harmony, policymakers and practitioners can move beyond a purely cost-benefit analysis of environmental protection and argue for sustainability as a moral imperative rooted in the pursuit of cosmic balance, social justice, and human flourishing. This can provide a more compelling and culturally resonant narrative for promoting sustainability, particularly in Asian contexts.

For the field of environmental education, the implications are profound. This research provides a clear framework for developing curricula that introduce students to non-anthropocentric and holistic worldviews. By teaching the concepts of the Tao, *Patīccasamuppāda*, and *Tian-Ren He Yi*, educators can foster a deeper sense of ecological citizenship and relational responsibility from a young age. This offers a powerful alternative to purely science-based environmental education, integrating ethics, philosophy, and cultural studies into the classroom.

The study has important implications for international relations and environmental diplomacy. It demonstrates that there is a shared philosophical heritage across East Asia that can serve as a basis for regional cooperation on environmental issues (Peng dkk., 2024). By framing environmental challenges in terms of a shared commitment to 'harmony,' diplomats may find a more effective and culturally authentic language for negotiation and collaboration, moving beyond the often-contentious politics of national interest.

Finally, this work has broader implications for corporate social responsibility and business ethics. The principles of moderation, non-harming, and long-term balance offer a powerful critique of the short-term, profit-maximization model that drives much environmental degradation. The research provides an ethical framework for businesses to reimagine their role not as exploiters of resources, but as responsible participants in a larger socio-ecological system, fostering a more sustainable and ethical form of capitalism.

The profound environmental ethics found in these Eastern traditions can be explained by the socio-ecological contexts in which they arose. These were primarily agrarian societies with a deep and direct dependence on the rhythms of nature (Li dkk., 2025). The success of harvests, the avoidance of floods, and the prediction of seasons were matters of survival, fostering a worldview that saw humanity as intimately intertwined with natural forces. The philosophies naturally reflected this reality, developing concepts that emphasized balance, observation, and alignment with the natural world.

The convergence of these philosophies on a relational ethic stems from a shared cultural emphasis on community over radical individualism. In both Buddhist and Confucian thought, the individual is understood primarily through their relationships and responsibilities to others family, society, and, by extension, the cosmos. This contrasts with philosophical traditions that begin with an autonomous individual. When the starting point is relationality, an ethic of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility becomes a logical and necessary outcome.

The focus on inner cultivation as the solution to external problems is a hallmark of these traditions' soteriological or self-perfection goals (Kahui dkk., 2024). Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are all, in different ways, paths of self-transformation. They diagnose suffering and chaos (both personal and social) as stemming from internal states like desire, ignorance, and moral failure. It is therefore consistent that they would diagnose ecological disharmony as having the same root cause, and propose the same solution: the cultivation of wisdom, compassion, and moral character.

The durability and sophistication of these concepts can be attributed to their continuous refinement over thousands of years by generations of scholars and practitioners. These were not static doctrines but living traditions that were constantly being interpreted, debated, and applied to new contexts. This long history of intellectual rigor allowed for the development of the nuanced, coherent, and philosophically profound ethical systems that were identified in this research.

The immediate next step for future research is to move from the theoretical to the practical. This involves conducting empirical case studies to investigate how these concepts of harmony are currently understood and practiced in contemporary Asian communities (F. Zhao dkk., 2025). Research is needed to explore how these traditional ethics influence modern behaviors related to consumption, resource use, and support for environmental policies, bridging the gap between classical texts and lived reality.

Future research should also aim to expand the comparative analysis to include other philosophical and indigenous traditions from around the world. A similar methodological approach could be applied to South Asian, African, or Indigenous American philosophies to identify other non-anthropocentric ethical frameworks. This would contribute to the development of a truly global and pluralistic environmental ethic, moving beyond a simple East-West dichotomy.

Another crucial direction is to explore the potential tensions and challenges in applying these concepts. Future work should critically examine whether certain interpretations of harmony could be used to justify social passivity, resist necessary technological change, or even support authoritarian environmental policies. A more critical engagement with these traditions is necessary to ensure that their application is both ethically robust and compatible with modern democratic values.

Finally, there is a significant opportunity for interdisciplinary projects that integrate these philosophical findings with other fields. Collaborative research involving philosophers, ecologists, economists, and policy analysts could work to develop new, hybrid models of sustainable development that are both scientifically sound and ethically grounded in the principle of harmony.

This would represent a truly innovative step towards operationalizing ancient wisdom to solve 21st-century problems.

CONCLUSION

This study's most significant finding is the articulation of a coherent and synthesized environmental ethic from major Eastern philosophies, centered on the concept of 'harmony'. The research demonstrates that the core principles of Taoism (*Tao*), Buddhism (*Paticcasamuppāda*), and Confucianism (*Tian-Ren He Yi*) are not merely disparate ideals but converge to form a comprehensive framework. This framework is fundamentally non-anthropocentric, relational, and presents a viable, systematic alternative to the instrumentalist ethics prevalent in much of the global discourse, offering a profound ethical foundation for sustainability rooted in a holistic worldview.

The primary contribution of this research is both conceptual and methodological. Conceptually, it provides a robust, non-Western ethical foundation specifically tailored to enrich the modern framework of sustainable development, bridging the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary policy challenges. Methodologically, it pioneers a systematic approach for analyzing and translating classical philosophical tenets into actionable principles, offering a replicable model for cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research that seeks to operationalize traditional knowledge systems to address modern problems.

The scope of this study, limited to three major Eastern traditions and their classical texts, constitutes its primary limitation and defines the direction for future inquiry. The research did not investigate the contemporary practice or understanding of these ideals, nor did it explore other rich philosophical traditions. Future research should therefore focus on empirical studies of these concepts in modern societies, expand the comparative analysis to include other indigenous and philosophical worldviews, and critically examine the potential challenges of applying these ancient ethics to contemporary global issues.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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