

Conflict, Peace and Ethical Solutions : A Confucian Perspective on War¹

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Abstract

The Confucian perspective on war is based on the universality of the Way, believing that a war that violates the Way is unjust, while an army that is to fulfil the Way will win victory without causing violence. However this paper argues that Confucianism should not be defined as a just war theory, because it has a fundamental inclination towards ethical pacifism, namely, taking moral influence rather than war as the solution of disorder and conflict. Can the Confucian way be transformed so that it will be conducive to the peace and harmony of the world in the twentieth century? Having examined the significance and implications of the early Confucian masters' discussion of conflict, peace and ethical solutions, this paper reaches a positive answer to the question that these remarks are of value for us to seek a way out of conflict and war the world is faced with today.

Key Words : Confucianism, Just war, Peace, Ethics, International relation

We are now in a world of conflicts, and a variety of theories concerning the justice or injustice of war have been promoted and put into practice. In order to explore the modern influence of traditional ethics, this paper comes to critically examine a particular perspective on conflict and peace which has been of significance for East Asian nations. This perspective is found primarily in the writings and conversations of the Confucian masters in early China, particularly Confucius (Kongzi, 551-479 BCE), Mengzi (385?-312? BCE) and Xunzi (310-219? BCE)².

Confucianism and War

Having originated in a chaotic and violent time known as the Spring and Autumn (771-476 BCE) and the Warring States (475-221 BCE) period, Confucianism was presented as an alternative to war and conflict, and its doctrines evolved primarily around the questions of how to restore social harmony, and how to reconcile political conflicts. The early Confucian masters condemned war as cruel and causing suffering, and undertook the seemingly impossible task of rectifying disorder and pacifying the greatly stirred hearts and

minds of the people. They considered it their heavenly endowed mission to search for harmony among the people and reconciliation between competing states. In this way they projected a particular perspective on war and peace.

Contrary to the widely held presumption that traditional Confucian thought is predominated by an exclusive predisposition to non-violent solutions for all problems of statecraft and inter-state conflicts, however, the Confucian masters did not blindly oppose war of all kinds³. In fact opposing war in general while encouraging the use of certain kinds of military force in particular cases is a common feature of most schools of thought developed in early China⁴. For example, Mohists (*Mojia*) committed themselves to universal love (*jianai*) and opposed aggressive war (*feigong*) on the ground of utilitarian considerations, but at the same time they fought fiercely to defend weak states⁵; Daoists (*Daojia*) fundamentally discredited war and armament as the way to chaos and death, but the authors of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* also frequently talked about how to wage wars more skilfully⁶. Compared with these schools, the Confucian views on war and peace are more complicated in composition and more influential in history. On the one hand, Confucians oppose war because they believe that war is contrary to the Way, and brings about nothing but suffering, injuries, social injustice and disorder. Their opposition to war and conflict makes them a part of the peace movement initiated by leading thinkers during the Spring and

¹ This paper is a revised version of a presentation to the Conference on 'War and Reconciliation: Perspectives of the World Religions' organised by The Global Ethics & Religion Forum at Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, May 26-28, 2003. The author wishes to thank Dr. Joseph Runzo and Dr. Nancy Martin, the executive and associate directors of the forum, for their invitation and for all comments on the paper by the audience.

² The quotations from the Confucian texts used in this paper come primarily from a number of English versions, but with my own modifications. For *Lunyu*, Lau, tr. 1979; de Bary and Bloom, tr. 1999: 45-63. For *Mengzi*, Lau, tr. 1970; de Bary and Bloom, tr. 1999: 116-158. For *Xunzi*, Knoblock, tr. 1988, 1990, 1994. For *Zhongyong*, Chan, tr. 1963: 95-114.

³ Scobell, 2001: 100-127.

⁴ Gawlikowski, 1991: 367-373.

⁵ According to Mozi (fl. 479-438 BCE), the founder of Mohism, all the people are the subjects of Heaven. Offensive warfare (seizing a state, overcoming its army and massacring its subjects) brings no benefits to Heaven on high, no benefits to the spirits in the middle realm, and no benefits to mankind below (Watson 1967: 53-54).

⁶ In the *Daodejing* we can read such passages as follows: 'He who assists the ruler with Dao does not dominate the world with force. The use of force usually brings requital. Wherever armies are stationed, briars and thorns grow. Great wars are always followed by famines' (ch.30; Lau, tr. 1963: 35). But we also find that war and fighting are not completely excluded from the views of Daoists: 'One who excels as a warrior does not appear formidable; One who excels in fighting is never roused in anger; One who excels in defeating his enemy does not join issue; One who excels in employing others humbles himself before them' (ch. 68; Lau, tr. 1963: 75).

Autumn period. On the other hand, they permit or justify certain kinds of military engagement as the means of preventing chaos, liberating the people from tyranny, and restoring justice. Their permitting certain wars seems to have brought them close to the position of Legalists (*Fajia*, such as Shang Yang, d. 338 BCE; Han Fei, d. 233 BCE) and military strategists (*Bingjia*, such as Sun Wu, 6-5 century BCE; Sun Bin, 378-301 BCE,) who favour war and coercion as an efficient tool to strengthen the state and to establish social order.

How should we understand this seemingly Confucian 'dilemma' with regard to war and peace? To answer this question we must turn to the concept of Dao, the Way. Differing from Daoists who use Dao as the ultimate origin and mystical reality from which the world comes into existence and by which myriads of things and beings act and live, Confucians extend the original meaning of *dao* as a road or path to the universal Way, metaphysical as well as ethical. The Way is thus the fundamental principle of the universe (Heaven and Earth) and the source of the meaning and value of human life, manifested in the wisdom of the ancient sage-kings, in the teaching and character of Confucius, and in the ways of life of 'good people' (*shanren*). The Way is both the prerequisite and the guarantee of a harmonious world, a peaceful society and a good life, and without it the transformation of the universe would break down, human society disintegrate, the state be weakened and the world fall into chaos.

To D.C. Lau, the well-known translator of *the Analects of Confucius* and *Mencius*, the Confucian 'Dao' is 'a highly emotive term and comes very close to the term "Truth" as found in philosophical and religious writings in the West'⁷. Like many so-called orthodox traditions both in China and in other parts of the world, early Confucian masters tended to regard their Way as the only truth in the world and the only way to peace and harmony. In order to establish and keep their dominant status, Confucian followers fought against other doctrines such as Mohism, Legalism, Daoism and later, Buddhism, labelling them as either morally wrong or spiritually contaminating. This dogmatic approach would have led, as did those religious fundamentalist sects, to a fanatic promotion of (religious) war against, or (political) execution of, other traditions, had there not been a flexible stance regarding different cultures and theories within Confucianism as well. Confucianism is essentially not a fundamentalist doctrine. One of its ideals is the middle way (*zhongdao*) or the mean (*zhongyong*), which is said to be the ultimate virtue (*zhide*) and of the greatest significance for human life. Confucius once rebuked some of his disciples who could only follow

⁷ Lau, tr. 1970: 11.

what had been taught, insisting that 'In dealing with the world the gentleman does not set his mind either for or against anything; he follows whatever is right'⁸. Following a similar line, Mengzi rejects the stubbornness of holding only to one point, because he believed that this would damage the Way⁹. The Confucian Way is thus characterised by the co-existence of dogmatism and flexibility, and of exclusiveness and inclusiveness. While dogmatism and exclusiveness frequently create new conflicts and intensify old ones, flexible and inclusive attitudes often reduce and modify them, addressing current problems while keeping a balance between conflict and reconciliation.

On such a theoretical ground, the early Confucian masters constructed a very special perspective on war and presented a particular way to peace and reconciliation. This perspective is both religious and secular: its view of war is based on belief in the Way of Heaven, and that its way to peace corresponds to the mandate of Heaven; but its applications are concerned with the real people, and its discussion of the causes of war is centred on social environment and human errors. Unlike leaders of some other traditions who claim to be purely pacific, Confucians tend to take a realistic view on war and peace. Upholding peace as an ideal, religious, political as well as ethical, Confucians seldom eliminate totally the possibility of going to war. In the field of ethical theories, the modern distinction between deontology and utilitarianism does not apply here, and the Confucian justification or condemnation of war is both based on principle and on consequences. As far as its application is concerned, the Confucian perspective contains the key elements of all three major traditions in terms of peace and war: pacifism, realism and just war theory, which have been discussed in detail in the West¹⁰. In brief we can illustrate this perspective through the following five points:

- (1) The perspective on war and peace is part of the Confucian political blueprint. Peace and harmony is the highest political ideal. However, if harmony cannot be achieved naturally, or if there appear to be man-made obstacles to peace, then a war that is aimed to remove these obstacles is

⁸ *Lunyu*, 4:10; Lau, tr. 1979: 73.

⁹ *Mengzi*, 7A:26; Lau, tr. 188.

¹⁰ 'The pacifists...concludes that war is the consummate evil and rejects it under all circumstances. The realists...concludes that the resort to force constitutes a rejection of the rule of law...These views reflect a tension between the negative duty not intentionally to harm innocent people, on one hand, and the positive obligation that innocent persons be protected, on the other...Historically, the Just War Tradition has provided an alternative to these two extremes'. (Christopher 1994: 1)

justifiable¹¹. When Mengzi comments that there was no single war during the Spring and Autumn period that can be justified (*chunqiu wu yizhan*), he implies that it is possible for a war to be right or righteous or just (*yizhan*), if certain conditions are met¹². Although *yi* in this context cannot be totally identified with 'just' or 'justice' in Western ethics, it does refer to the condition that a war must meet in order to be right.

- (2) Confucian political ideals are defined by their moral visions. War in a Confucian context is invested with an ethical mission and purpose. The issues of war and peace have therefore become essentially ethical: they are not only concerned with the justice of war, namely whether or not, on what conditions and for what moral purpose making use of force is morally permissible, but also concerned with justice in war, namely what rules govern the process of war¹³. A war that fulfils its ethical requirements would be seen as a tool to fulfil the Heavenly Way in the human world (*ti tian xing dao*). It is thus believed that since the Way of Heaven is manifested in human virtue and good character, victory or failure comes primarily from the moral force of an army and its leader, not its military power.
- (3) In conjunction with religious, political and moral justifications, consequentialist considerations are also central to the Confucian perspective. Confucians praised some war as necessary for justice in order to 'console the people and punish the guilty' (*diao min fa zui*)¹⁴, or to 'prohibit violence and prevent harm [to the people]' (*jin bao chu hai*)¹⁵. Causing death, suffering and destruction is taken as one of the key reasons for the injustice of a war, while a just war is the one that brings happiness and benefits to the people and reduces, if not totally gets rid of, pain and suffering.

¹¹ In this sense, the Confucian perspective seems to support the view that takes peace and justice as interdependent: 'Justice is regarded as the precondition of peace in the concrete political order. The pursuit of justice, even by force, can in some circumstances be the only way to fulfill the duty to promote both peace and justice' (Hollenbach 1983: 22-23).

¹² *Mengzi*, 7B:2; Lau, tr. 1970: 194.

¹³ According to Richard B. Miller, the just war tradition in the West has developed two sets of criteria for assessing the justice of war, the and the *jus in bello*: 'The *jus ad bellum* is designed to answer what might be called the "when" or "whether" question: when, if ever, is resort to war ethically acceptable?...The *jus in bello* is designed to answer what might be called the "how" or "methods" question: What methods are morally acceptable once recourse to war has been justified?' (Miller 1992: xiv).

¹⁴ *Mengzi*, 3B:5; Lau 1970: 110.

¹⁵ *Xunzi*, 15: 2; Knoblock 1990: 228.

- (4) Fundamentally humanistic, the Confucian perspective generates an idealistic picture of how a just war is won: even before the army of humanness and righteousness (*ren yi zhi bing*) arrives, 'from near and far people would come to offer submission'. Following the Way and supported by the people, the army triumphs but 'does not even bloody its swords' (*bin bu xue ren*)¹⁶. Violating the Way and contradicting virtues, an unjust war would be followed only by a few and would be doomed to failure.
- (5) Admitting the possibility of just war, the Confucian perspective cannot be simply classified as a just war theory. There is a fundamentally pacifist tendency in the perspective. For Confucians, even as the means to the resolution of conflicts, war is still second to skilful administration and moral education. Central to the Confucian perspective is the conviction that political order and harmony originates from the inner peace and harmony of the people. Retribution or 'eye for eye' is contrary to the Confucian Way, and it is believed that violence of any form cannot achieve permanent peace. The way to peace and reconciliation must be through education and self-cultivation to build up the sense of propriety (*li*), to make people more humane (*ren*), and to conform to righteousness (*yi*). Humane and righteous, the world would not see war and conflict any more, and peace and harmony would follow naturally.

Confucian Way and Just War

The Confucian Way is highly political in contents and applications, assuming that harmony and peace would prevail if the Way is followed, and that cruelty and killing would arise when the Way is abandoned. Confucians lay the responsibility for peace and social harmony primarily on the shoulders of a ruler. For a ruler, to follow the Way is to have a virtuous character. With a cruel and immoral ruler no state would be at peace, and no inter-state relationship be harmonious. Only benevolent and virtuous rulers could rule without force, bring conflicts to an end peacefully, and prevent violence effectively, as Confucius proclaimed: 'After a state has been ruled for a hundred years by good men, it will do away with cruelty and killing'¹⁷.

Politics in Confucianism is thus essentially a branch of ethics. For the faithful followers of Confucius, to take part in politics is primarily to apply moral norms in administration and to extend ethical virtues to all aspects of social life.

¹⁶ *Xunzi*, 15: 2; Knoblock 1990: 228.

¹⁷ *Lunyu*, 13:11; Lau, tr. 1979: 121.

To govern is not to impose one's will on the people. Rather, it is to set a good example for the people and for other states¹⁸. When asked about killing those who were against the Way so that the people could be deterred from doing evil, Confucius countered that 'In administering your government what need is there for you to kill? Just desire the good yourself and the common people will naturally be good'¹⁹.

If they solely relied on the autonomy of the ruler to prevent killing and war, Confucians would be simply idealistic or even naïve moralists. As in all pre-democratic societies, traditional China did not have constitutional measures to supervise and monitor the character and behaviour of the ruling class. To solve this problem, Confucians provide three religio-ethico-political means to keep guard over the monarch: the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*), the ancestral tradition (*zu zong zhi fa*), and the 'holy' rites, ritual and codes of conduct (*li*). Whether they are effective and practical in reality or not, the ideas behind these measures provide Confucians with the first reasons for justifying certain kinds of war.

It is firmly believed among Confucians that without the support of spiritual powers and without the mandate endorsed by Heaven, no government can be legitimised. As the Son of Heaven (*tianzi*) the ruler must be responsible to the ultimate authority: 'Those who are obedient to Heaven are preserved; those who are against Heaven are annihilated'²⁰. Confucian masters saw great political significance in this religious belief, and some of them interpreted the Mandate of Heaven in terms of the will of the people, just as the *Book of History* puts it: 'Heaven sees with the eyes of its people. Heaven hears with the ears of its people'²¹. It is in this sense that Mengzi puts forward a primitive democratic doctrine of 'sovereignty in people'. When weighing the three most important elements for the stability and prosperity of a country, he gives priority to the people: 'The people are of supreme importance; the altars to the gods of earth and grain come next; last comes the ruler'²².

Violating the Way, namely, having a bad character, abusing rites and ritual and being cruel to the people, a ruler would be seen as having lost the spiritual blessing of Heaven and the ancestors, and should therefore be ousted as the

¹⁸ 'To govern is to be correct. If you set up an example by being correct, who would dare to remain incorrect?' (*Lunyu*, 12: 17) 'If a ruler is himself upright, his people will do their duties without orders; but if he himself be not upright, although he may order they will not obey'. (ibid. 13: 6)

¹⁹ *Lunyu*, 12:19; Lau, tr. 1979: 115.

²⁰ *Mengzi*, 4A:7; Lau, tr. 1970: 120.

²¹ Legge, tr. v. III; 1872: 292.

²² *Mengzi*, 7B:14; Lau, tr. 1970: 196.

ruler. This is what is termed as 'removing the mandate' (*geming*) from an unworthy ruler: under an immoral rule people would complain to Heaven, and Heaven would then 'withdraw' its mandate and endow it on those of brilliant virtues. This results in the change of dynasties. Based on such spiritual and political tenets, Confucians have at least in theory justified the rights of the people to rise up and overthrow an immoral and unjust government in the name of Heaven. This kind of war or fight is considered just or right or righteous because it is believed to be a necessary process to terminate the rule of a tyrant and to console the people on behalf of the spiritual authority. The wars initiated engaged by the Confucian sage-kings such as King Tang of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600-c. 1046 BCE) and King Wu of the Zhou Dynasty (c. 1045-256 BCE), for example, were praised for overthrowing the tyranny of Jie (r. ?-1600? BCE) and Zhou (r. ?-1045? BCE). Believing that the justice of these wars was manifested fully in their liberation of the people ('rescuing them from water and fire'), Mengzi claimed that the army had been welcomed by the people with 'baskets of rice and bottles of drink'²³.

There have been extensive discussions about what makes a war just in the Christian tradition and in contemporary ethics. According to G.E.M. Anscombe, a war must fulfil all seven conditions in order to be just:

- (1) There must be a just occasion: that is, there must be violation of, or attack upon, strict rights.
- (2) The war must be made by a lawful authority: that is, when there is no higher authority, a sovereign state.
- (3) The warring state must have an upright intention in making war: it must not declare war in order to obtain, or inflict anything unjust.
- (4) Only right means must be used in the conduct of the war.
- (5) War must be the only possible means of righting the wrong done.
- (6) There must be a reasonable hope of victory.
- (7) The probable good must outweigh the probable evil effects of the war.²⁴

It seems that these conditions have also been considered and examined by Confucians, albeit in quite different terms and with different emphases. Besides overthrowing tyranny, Confucians have provided other qualifications for a just war. First, a war can be justified if it is waged by the highest authority, namely engaged by the legitimate ruler to punish those who have violated the Way: 'When the Way prevails in the world, the rites and music and punitive expeditions are initiated by the king'²⁵. Punitive expeditions (*zheng*) are thus

²³ *Mengzi*, 1B:11; Lau, tr. 1970: 70.

²⁴ 'The Justice of the Present War Examined', in Miller (1992: 126-7).

²⁵ *Lunyu*, 16:2; Lau, tr. 1979: 139.

taken as the necessary tool to rectify irresponsible military engagement (*zhan*) and disorder (*luan*). Believing that maintaining the hierarchical order is the key to social justice, Confucius strongly opposed the war of one lord against another, because such a war was only the means to expand one's own territory and to increase the wealth of one's own state at the expense of others, and because such a war could generate nothing but killing and misery.

Secondly, if it only regarded war as a tool for maintaining the status quo, the Confucian perspective would be too conservative to be of any positive significance. Confucians go well beyond the hierarchical constraint in their justification of a war, and argue that the justice of a war lies in the good cause it is aimed at. They do not insist that all wars must be initiated by the superior to punish the inferior in order to be right. In the days of the Confucian masters, a fixed order among the people and between the states had been broken and the command of the king over his subject-states very much weakened. In the name of restoring peace and the moral order, Confucius attempted to justify the interference of one state in the affairs of the other. It is recorded that a minister of the state of Qi murdered his lord (Duke Jian). Upon hearing this news, Confucius washed himself ceremonially and went to the court of Lu, requesting an army to be sent to punish him²⁶. For Confucius, even if it is of an aggressive or interventionist nature, a war started for a righteous cause is not only justifiable but also needed. Mengzi and Xunzi openly argued that the killing of a ruler who acted contrary to humaneness and righteousness was not regicide at all, but the punishment of the tyrant. For Mengzi, 'One who despoils humaneness is called a thief; one who despoils righteousness is called a robber. Someone who is a robber and a thief is called an outcast. I have heard of the punishment of the outcast Zhou but never of the slaying a ruler'²⁷; while Xunzi disputed against the thesis that 'Jie and Zhou Xin truly possessed the empire; Tang and Wu usurped it and stole the throne', and claimed that 'to execute a tyrannical lord is like executing a "solitary individual"²⁸. These prove that in upholding the rightness of such a war to save the people from a tyrant (*fa xia jiu min*)²⁹, Mengzi and Xunzi have in effect permitted what we can probably term as 'humanitarian intervention'.

Thirdly, the just nature of a war must be defined by moral virtues, and the means of engaging war must be ethically sound (*ius in bello*). It is essential for the leader of a war to gain the adherence of the people; to gain the adher-

²⁶ *Lunyu*, 14:21; Lau, tr. 1979: 127.

²⁷ *Mengzi*, 1B:8; Lau, tr. 1970: 68.

²⁸ *Xunzi*, 18: 2; Knoblock, tr. 1994: 35.

²⁹ *Mengzi*, 5A:7; Lau, tr. 1970: 146.

ence of the people one must adhere to the Way. What then is the Way? For Confucius and Mengzi, the Way is but the virtues of humaneness and righteousness. Xunzi explained the Way further in terms of six virtues or moral principles: propriety (*li*), righteousness (*yi*), polite declining (*ci*), deference (*rang*), loyalty (*zhong*) and trust (*xin*). A benevolent ruler would not perform even a single act that is unjust or that would result in the execution of even one innocent man, although he might gain the empire by doing so³⁰. Since Confucians require that no innocent man be killed in a war or justice of the war would have been lost, they have effectively demonstrated that their perspective on war is fundamentally non-violent.

War of Non-violence

Can war and violence be separated, or can a war proceed without violence? Confucians seem to believe that war does not necessarily involve violence, and the justice of war lies in its non-violent nature. A similar thinking of the difference between war and violence has also been reflected in contemporary ethics. In his *Against The Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society*, Stanley Hauerwas argues:

Certainly war entails violence, but yet the very description war seems to propose a different moral evaluation than violence. At the very least, war denotes purposive human activity which violence does not always imply³¹.

In order to examine the non-violent nature of the Confucian perspective on war, we need again to return to the doctrine of the Way. As the ultimate principle of the universe and the consummate expression of moral virtues, the Way can be possessed not only by individuals but also by states. Possessing the Way, a ruler would be followed, supported and welcomed by the people; while departing from the Way, he would see the people abandon him, hate him and fight against him. It is from this understanding that Confucians argue that a just war is the one that wins without fighting and killing.

Although admitting that there are occasions in which war is unavoidable, Confucians nevertheless abhor the dire effects of war and fighting, and endeavour to confine injuries and suffering to the minimum. Seeing that the justness of war can be claimed by the opposing parties and that it is not easy to evaluate these claims as true or false, Confucians do not simply give up their effort to

³⁰ Xunzi, 11: 1; Knoblock, tr. 1990: 150.

³¹ Hauerwas 1992: 170-1.

reach a morally sound judgement of war³². Rather, they undertake a consequentialistic examination of war and advocate a perspective that takes into account the effects of war, arguing for the war that brings about least suffering and employs least violence, while opposing a war that causes miseries and suffering for the majority of the people. In arguments they demonstrate certain features in common with utilitarian ethics. A general utilitarian view is that a war is right, if, and only if, it brings about the greatest possible amount of happiness or the reduction of suffering for the greatest possible number of the people. Confucian ethics, however, differs from utilitarianism on many accounts. While utilitarian ethics centres on the sensational pleasure or pains of individuals, Confucianism places much emphasis on the collective happiness and suffering of the people as a social unit, the ultimate presence of which are in the harmony or disorder of the state or the family. As we have seen above, both Mengzi and Xunzi condemned the killing of an innocent man, even by doing this the whole empire could be secured. This has clearly pointed to a deontological position that there is an intrinsic value in human life and that violating the principle of righteousness a war with 'good' consequences would become not good or unjust.

Based both on principle and on consequence, Confucians particularly oppose offensive war because they believe this kind of war would end in nothing but chaos and disorder. In the war-torn world where the Confucian masters lived, aggressive war caused severe destruction and human costs, employed the most violent means, and brought about the worst misery and suffering. The Confucian condemnation of this kind of war not only comes from their worries about its moral dangers, but also is due to their deep concern for the people's life and interests. In order to conduct offensive campaigns, the ruler would have to recruit a large army, in which 'The people are robbed of their time so that they are unable to plough and weed their fields, and nourish their parents. Their parents then suffer from cold and hunger, while brothers, wives, and children are separated and scattered abroad'³³. This kind of war is in effect a process of 'pushing the people into pits and into water', and is therefore both morally wrong and strategically disastrous.

Is there any war without evil consequences and without violating moral principles then? The logic of Confucian arguments for just war confirms that it

³² At this point Confucians departed from the position of Daoists. Daoists took a skeptical view of moral judgment, as expressed by Zhuangzi that 'From my point of view, the principle of humanity and righteousness and the doctrines of right and wrong are mixed and confused. How do I know the difference among them?' (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 2; Chan 1963: 188).

³³ *Mengzi*, 1A:5; Lau, tr. 1970: 53.

is possible. For Confucians, a 'good' war is the one led by a benevolent man who follows the Way and who has been endowed with the Mandate of Heaven. The war is therefore intended to reduce or even totally get rid of suffering, either by overthrowing a tyrant who has been inflicting horror and harm upon the people, or by defending a weak state that has been under unjust attack. War cannot be justified for conquering lands and cities, because this kind of war would result in brutal killing and death: 'In wars to gain land, the dead fill the plains; in wars to gain cities, the dead fill the cities'³⁴.

Only the war that follows the Way and relieves the suffering of the people will be supported by many people, both in one's own state and in the state that is to be defeated. It is vital for any war to be supported by the people: losing the people's hearts the ruler would lose the people, and losing the people he would definitely lose the Empire³⁵. With the support of the people a virtuous king would win the Empire, without the support of the people even the sage kings like Tang and Wu 'would be unable to achieve certain victory'³⁶. Since it brings benefits to the people and is supported by the people, the war will win over the enemy without resorting to fighting and killing. This is explained by Mengzi as that :

One who has the Way will have many to support him; one who has not the Way will have few to support him. In extreme cases, the latter will find even his own flesh and blood turning against him while the former will have the whole Empire at his behest. Hence either a gentleman does not go to war or else he is sure of victory, for he will have the whole Empire at his behest, while his opponent will have even his own flesh and blood against him³⁷.

Contrary to those who argued for unifying the country by using military force and engaging in fighting, Mengzi proclaimed that only those who had no pleasure in killing and who were disgusted with cruelty were able to unite all under Heaven (*tianxia*). For him, the virtues of kindness and compassion are the source of power and the reason of victory, while losing the virtues a ruler would definitely lose the battle, because, as Mengzi reasons, 'If you should go and punish such princes, who is there to oppose you?'³⁸ It is in this sense Mengzi confidently explains that the most benevolent has no enemies in the

³⁴ *Mengzi*, 4A:14; Lau, tr. 1970: 124.

³⁵ *Mengzi*, 4A:8; Lau, tr. 1970: 121.

³⁶ *Xunzi*, 15: 1; Knoblock, tr. 1990: 219.

³⁷ *Mengzi*, 2B: 1; Lau, tr. 1970: 93.

³⁸ *Mengzi*, 1A: 5; Lau, tr. 1970: 53.

Empire, and there would be no bloodshed if he waged war against the most cruel³⁹. In his examination of the three ways of gaining control over states, Xunzi propagates the kingliness as the true way of winning without killing. Xunzi argues that 'the essential principle of warfare consists in nothing more than being good at gaining the support of the people'. How to gain the support of the people⁴⁰ Not by military power but by the moral force of the ruler's character:

The true king tries to win the people; the lord-protector to acquire allies; the powerful to capture land. One who tries to win the people makes proper servants of the feudal lords; one who tries to acquire allies makes friends with them; one who tries to capture land makes enemies of them⁴¹.

With numerous enemies around, the state would be in danger and the ruler become imperilled. Thus Xunzi lists three ways to peace, security and prosperity: to strengthen the influence of moral virtues; to make use of friendship and trust; and to employ military force. The consequence for the war of using military force is that the 'number of casualties is great' by which the people would hate the conqueror with vehemence⁴². A true king does not act in this way. Rather he wins through the loftiest humaneness, the most admirable justice and the most marvellous majesty:

Wherever his army is, it has an effect like that of a spirit; wherever it travels, it produces transformation; and like seasonable rains it pleases and gives joy to all⁴³.

He thus triumphs without having to engage in a fight, gains his objectives without resort to force, and submits the whole world to his rule without his armies exerting themselves. This is how a war can be won without killing and suffering.

Causes of War and the Way to Peace

Admitting that war in some situations is unavoidable and arguing that in some cases war can restrain evil and protect the innocent, most Confucians are nevertheless in line with the pacifist tradition rather than with just war theory. There is a fundamental difference between the just war tradition in Christianity

³⁹ *Mengzi*, 7B: 3; Lau, tr. 1970: 194.

⁴⁰ *Xunzi*, 15: 1; Knoblock, tr. 1990: 219.

⁴¹ *Xunzi*, 9: 6; Knoblock, tr. 1990: 98.

⁴² *Xunzi*, 9: 7; Knoblock, tr. 1990: 99.

⁴³ *Xunzi*, 15: 5; Knoblock, tr. 1990: 232.

and the Confucian perspective. Stanley Hauerwas has presented a Christian manifesto on war and peace, in which the Christian attitude towards war and non-violence is said to be :

A witness to God's invitation to join a community that is so imaginative, so rich in its history that it gives us the means to resist the temptation to give our loyalties to those that would use them for war⁴⁴.

The Confucian perspective does not contain anything like God's justice, nor does it associate peace with the religious community. Confucians argue for 'just war' only in a rigorously disciplined manner. Having permitted war only in a strictly ethical context, Confucians deny justice or rightness to all kinds of violence. Confucius refused to answer queries concerning military formations and said that 'I have heard about sacrificial vessels, but have learned nothing about the deployment of troops'⁴⁵. Confucian masters always preferred to bring peace and harmony to the world by the power of virtues rather than securing peace through war. For Confucius, a man who unites the whole country (*tianxia*; all under heaven) without resorting to weapons of war and chariots is the one of benevolence and kindness⁴⁶, and the most efficient way to defend one's country against aggression is not to strengthen its arms but to maintain trustfulness among the people: As far as the security and peace of a state is concerned, trust from the people is the first priority, while food and arms are only the second and third⁴⁷.

Mengzi did not recommend war either as a general tool for social and political conflicts. Rather he condemned those as grave criminals who were proud of themselves as experts in military formations and at waging war, and cried that 'those who are skilled in war should suffer the most severe punishments'⁴⁸. He opposed all the wars during the entire period of Spring and Autumn (770-476 BCE). In his mind wars between states were unjust and unrighteous, and wars within a state were against benevolence, because they were all motivated by selfish concerns and personal ambitions⁴⁹. In contrasting those lords who waged war to conquer other states and the humaneness of ancient sage-kings, Xunzi highly praised the Duke of Zhou that 'by keeping his

⁴⁴ Hauerwas, 1992: 198.

⁴⁵ *Lunyu*, 15:1; Lau, tr. 1979: 132.

⁴⁶ *Lunyu*, 14:16; Lau, tr. 1979: 127.

⁴⁷ *Lunyu*, 12:7; Lau, tr. 1979: 113.

⁴⁸ *Mengzi*, 4A:14; Lau, tr. 1970: 124.

⁴⁹ *Mengzi*, 7B:2; Lau, tr. 1970: 194.

army inactive and giving his people rest, he demonstrates his affection and love for all the people'⁵⁰.

On the one hand Confucians said that there might be some wars that were just and necessary, but on the other hand all the cases that were presented had happened only in the remote and idealised past. This in effect means that for these Confucian masters all the wars in the real world were aggressive, and were launched by the rulers of bad character to satisfy their selfish interests. Therefore acting against humaneness⁵¹, or in other words 'putting profit before righteousness'⁵² is the chief cause of war and chaos. Xunzi undertook the task of examining the causes of war and concluded:

As a general principle, those who engage in aggression, if they do not do so in order to gain a reputation, do so in order to make a profit from it, and, if that is not the case, are provoked to it by anger⁵³.

It seems that Confucians hold the rulers responsible for war and conflicts. However, if Confucians just blamed the leaders of states for all warfare, then their perspective would be too simplistic. In fact they also explore the deeper reasons for war and conflict, and believe that the cause of war is rooted in human nature and human society. Believing that humans are born with a good nature, Mengzi argues that had their good nature been well cultivated and preserved, then we would not see any conflict and war in the world. The good 'heart' is lost primarily due to two reasons: external damage and internal neglect⁵⁴. Taking a negative view on human nature, Xunzi believes that war and conflict are the result of following natural instincts and desires:

The nature of humans is such that he is born with a love of profit. Following this nature will cause its aggressiveness and greedy tendencies to grow and courtesy and deference to disappear. Humans are born with feelings of envy and hatred; indulging these feelings causes violence and crime to develop and loyalty and trustfulness to perish⁵⁵.

Then, how can humans do away with violence and what can be done in order to reconcile conflict? Different as they are in terms of human nature,

⁵⁰ *Xunzi*, 9: 19; Knoblock, tr. 1990: 110

⁵¹ *Mengzi*, 4A:3; Lau, tr. 1970: 119.

⁵² *Mengzi*, 1A:1; Lau, tr. 1970: 49.

⁵³ *Xunzi*, 10: 14; Knoblock, tr. 1990: 136

⁵⁴ *Mengzi*, 6A:8; Lau, tr. 1970: 164-165.

⁵⁵ *Xunzi*, 23: 1; Knoblock, tr. 1994: 151

Confucius, Mengzi and Xunzi agreed that only benevolence and righteousness could save humans from killing each other, and lead humans to peace and harmony. Instead of competing for the satisfaction of one's own interests, Confucius called for an altruistic attitude toward other people and other nations: 'If you want to establish yourself, then help others to establish themselves; if you want to develop yourself, then help others to develop themselves'⁵⁶. Humans must learn how to treat others as themselves. This is what he says in the so-called Golden Rule: 'What you would not want for yourself, do not do to others'⁵⁷. The core of the Confucian virtues is consideration and compassion, which is humaneness. Humaneness is, in Confucius' words, 'loving people'⁵⁸. If humans love others, treat as their own parents the parents of others, and treat as their own state the state of others⁵⁹, then all the people within the four seas would be brothers⁶⁰, where is the cause for war? and what conflict, if it happens, cannot be reconciled?

For Confucians, in order to prevent war, to reduce suffering and conflict to the minimum, and to make virtues prevail in the world, the most effective and efficient way is moral education. In education Confucians emphasise rites/ritual and the sense of propriety: treating others according to social conventions and refining oneself into a noble character, winning respect through the virtuous way of life, rather than by competition and fighting.

Education is to train the people with moral principles and moral codes of conduct. Confucian education is a life-long process, in which everyone must cultivate himself consciously in daily life. Cultivating one's own character is the only path to the reverence for others, to bringing peace and security to one's fellow men and to bringing peace and security to all the people⁶¹. In terms of educational methodology, there are some differences between Confucius, Mengzi and Xunzi. Confucius gives priority to self-control and to following the traditional rules of propriety (*ke ji fu li*), and optimistically believes that 'If for a single day one can master oneself and return to propriety, the whole world will return to humaneness'⁶². Mengzi argues that all people have a heart that cannot bear to see the suffering of others. The ancient kings cultivated and developed this heart so that they had a humane government (*renzheng*) by which peace and

⁵⁶ *Lunyu*, 6:30; Lau, tr. 1979: 85.

⁵⁷ *Lunyu*, 15:24; Lau, tr. 1979: 135.

⁵⁸ *Lunyu*, 12:22; Lau, tr. 1979: 116.

⁵⁹ *Mengzi*, 1A:7; Lau, tr. 1970: 56.

⁶⁰ *Lunyu*, 12:5; Lau, tr. 1979: 113.

⁶¹ *Lunyu*, 14:42; Lau, tr. 1979: 131.

⁶² *Lunyu*, 12:1; Lau, tr. 1979: 112.

harmony prevailed in the world, while the troubles and chaos of his own days were due to the fact that most people left this heart unattended and uncultivated⁶³. Xunzi emphasises the value of 'ritual principles, precepts of moral duty, laws and standards'⁶⁴. By following the teachings of the sage and abiding by the rules of law and moral codes, Xunzi argues, humans will transform their own (bad) nature into benevolence and righteousness and yield their claim to others, and will eventually do away with cruelty, competition, conflict and war.

To modern people, moral education and self-cultivation may seem too weak to have an effective impact on the real politics of the real world, and may be too individual-based to construct harmonious international relations. But for Confucians this is part of an inspiring ideal, which encourages them to strive for peace, even for which they have to give up their riches, rank and lives. In the Confucian perspective each individual's own nature and destiny are closely related to the nature and destiny of others, and to the nature and destiny of the world. Confucians believe that world peace and harmony will not come true unless each of us has developed our nature and fulfilled our destiny. If everybody, every group of people and every nation adopts this attitude towards themselves and towards others, the world would have no competition, conflict and war.

The idealistic and enthusiastic pursuit of peace and harmony is the noble motive for Confucians to dissolve contention and to solve conflict. However, in reality mere education and self-cultivation are not always able to reduce conflict and to avoid aggression, either in the past or at present. In the light of this, some Confucians could see no other way but to withdraw from a chaotic society to concentrate on their own moral growth. In a positive sense, the Confucian withdrawal demonstrates their determination to shun away from unjust and immoral practices; in a negative sense, however, it holds one's own peace above the peace of the world, which sounds more like the moral egoism some Daoists might have embraced than the moral altruism many Confucians said they were pursuing. Retreat from the world may serve individuals well in a particular time, but it should not be expected to work out an efficient way to end or reduce conflict in society, nor to rid the world of war and fighting. In this sense, the Confucian way to non-violence and total pacifism is better described as an admirable vision, rather than an efficient path to peace and harmony.

Historical Legacy: A Critical Examination

⁶³ *Mengzi*, 1A:6, 2A:4; Lau, tr. 1970: 54, 81.

⁶⁴ *Xunzi*, 23: 2; Knoblock, tr. 1994: 154.

The Confucian perspective on war discussed above was initiated by Confucius, developed by Mengzi and completed in the hands of Xunzi. Throughout more than 2000 years of history, this perspective has been well integrated into Chinese culture, politics and mind-set, and has influenced heavily the Chinese view of war and peace. Apart from Confucianism, other schools of thought such as Legalism and Daoism have also played an important role in shaping and reshaping the Chinese view of war and her struggle for peace and reconciliation. Each of the successive imperial governments tended to make free use of took some Confucian ideas to justify its warfare while adding to the 'Confucian' perspective other elements that were useful to its own strategy. It is therefore important that in examining the historical heritage of the Confucian perspective, we should not only refrain from giving the credit for good practices in Chinese history solely to Confucians, but also desist from blaming Confucianism for all the undesirable ideas and incidents that arose in history.

As many other elements of the Confucian tradition, the historical legacy of the Confucian perspective is indeed both positive and negative. Placing the justness of war on the moral ground, Confucians have deliberately intensified the interaction between war and ethics, and required moral justification to be the first condition for victory and peace. This created a unique culture of war in Chinese history: in order to win over the hearts of the people, each side of a war would first claim its cause to be just and benevolent, making the world know that it was going to carry out the Way on behalf of Heaven (*ti tian xing dao*) to relieve the people and punish the guilty (*diao min fa zui*). On the one hand this ritual-like preparation makes war a tool for ethical purposes, and the process of war is therefore disciplined by ethical norms, by which the cruelty of war is to some extent confined or reduced. On the other hand it has significantly increased the hypocrisy of war, making use of moral justification as the fig leaf of one's ambition to conquer others, and to cover up the misery and suffering war is going to cause or has caused⁶⁵.

The Confucian perspective has also had an impact on understanding international relations and how to deal with China's neighbours. Although the Confucian writers often addressed the nations other than the 'Central Kingdom' as barbarian (*hu, fan, man, yi, and di*), they did not agree that aggressive war should be waged in order to submit them to the rule of China. The difference between the Confucian China and her surrounding neighbours is believed to be

⁶⁵ In one sense this moral strategy may not be so unique to the Confucian tradition. It has been used in many other cultures and is still used by modern powers to justify their military campaigns through mass media such as television and newspapers.

that between the civilised and the 'barbarian'⁶⁶. It seems that the contrast is also widely used to justify a war in the modern world, perhaps not between the civilized and the barbarian, but between democracy and dictatorship, or between protecting human rights and violating human rights. What is special to the Confucian perspective is the prominence given to the moral influence that a virtuous character generates, rather than military showdown or threatening. On the one hand Confucius believed that 'Barbarian tribes with their rulers are inferior to Chinese states without them'⁶⁷. On the other he argued that the barbarian could be transformed into the civilized purely through the moral influence:

The Master wanted to go and live among the Nine Barbarian tribes of the east. Someone said, "They are rude. How can you put up with their rude ways?" The Master said, 'Once a gentleman settles amongst them, what rudeness will there be?'⁶⁸

This has in effect ruled out any necessity of war in dealing with other states that are substantially 'inferior' to or different from, one's own. Since the priority is given to moral influence, then even when it is necessary to fight its way into the so-called 'barbarian' region, the 'army of justice' is aimed to win over the hearts of the people rather than to occupy their territories or conquer their cities. Here again it is the virtues and good characters, not the force and military triumph, that are believed to be the key⁶⁹. According to Mengzi, the moral force of a benevolent ruler would be so strong that he would be welcomed rather than resisted even by all barbarian peoples: 'When he marched on the south, the northern barbarians complained; when he marched on the east, the western barbarians complained. They all said, "Why does he not come to us first?"'⁷⁰

⁶⁶ The Confucian usage of the 'barbarian' needs some explanation. In the mind of a Confucian, the difference between the civilised and the barbarian is not in what has been achieved, but in how it has been achieved, not in what tools are used but in how they are used. Between righteousness and profit, equality and efficiency, contentment and contending, virtue and power, propriety and wealth, priority is always given to the former. In other words, the civilised do things according to ritual or rules of propriety while the barbarian do not know, or ignore, or behave contrary to, them.

⁶⁷ Lunyu, 3:5; Lau, tr. 1979: 67.

⁶⁸ Lunyu, 9:14; Lau, tr. 1979: 98.

⁶⁹ A well known story from the period of the Three Kingdoms (220-265 CE) well illustrates this part of the Confucian perspective. This story goes as such: Zhuge Liang (181-234), a great prime minister of the Shu and a staunch Confucian follower acquired the whole-hearted submission from the southern barbarians by capturing their chief seven times and letting him go seven times.

In military reality, however, the conquest of the hearts and the conquest of the land can seldom be separated. When the latter happens, some Confucians would lean to a more or less Legalist argument that a short period of violence could be compensated by its long-term benefit of peace and harmony. However, even at this time, the Confucian support for war against neighbouring nations is conditional on the ethical purpose and beneficial consequence of the war. For Confucians the only justifiable aim of any border wars is to bring tranquillity to the borders and to establish lasting peace and harmony between China and her neighbours. Under the influence of this perspective, imperial governments in later Chinese history either strengthened economic ties to secure peace and harmony with neighbouring nations, or avoided wars by associating them with the royal family through an arranged marriage (*heqin*).

However, more often than not the potential conflict between China and her neighbours was much more complicated than marriage could solve, and in most cases marriage and negotiation were only able to postpone rather than eliminate the pending war. Whatever happened, the intention of Confucian scholar-officials was to make maximum efforts to reduce the painful consequences of war and to give peace a chance once again. Such political goodwill and peaceful purpose reflect the Confucian perspective on war, reveal the utilitarian nature of the Confucian way, and also demonstrate the positive influence of the highly moralising perspective on war and peace.

Concluding Remarks

Whether or not the Confucian tradition has contained a religious dimension is an open question. There is little doubt, however, that the Confucian perspective on war is based on the universality of the Way, and is rooted in a belief in Heaven. In terms of its understanding of the spiritual ultimate, Confucian flexibility is of value for our perspective on war and reconciliation. All religions and all religious sects would claim to be peaceful traditions, but religious disputes have caused more war than many other factors in human history. The problem probably lies in the fact that most religions would take a dogmatic view on the teachings of their spiritual leaders. It seems clear that in order to reduce the possibility of war, we need more urgently than ever before to achieve the reconciliation of different religious beliefs, and to take an inclusive, rather than exclusive, attitude towards other religions.

As an ancient tradition, the Confucian perspective on war and its way to

⁷⁰ Mengzi, 7B:4; Lau, tr. 1970: 194-195.

peace and reconciliation are contingent on historical conditions. While admitting that it can be taken as a historical mirror for us to reflect on our thinking and practice, we must see that the perspective carries the colour of the past and needs to be re-examined in the perspectives of a wider world, in which conflicts are more frequent, more complicated and much less easily to be reconciled. Can the Confucian perspective on war be opened to today's thinking and practice in terms of war and conflict? Or in other words, can the Confucian way to peace and reconciliation be transformed so that it will be conducive to the peace and harmony of the world? Our answer to these questions is certainly positive. The Confucian reasoning about war and about its just and unjust character still holds the power to sway contemporary Chinese views, and can shed light on our thinking of war and peace in the twenty-first century.

Glossary

binjia	兵家	li	禮
bin bu xue ren	兵不血刃	luan	亂
Chunqiu	春秋	<i>Lunyu</i>	論語
chunqiu wu yizhan	春秋無義戰	Man	蠻
ci	慈	Mengzi	孟子
dao	道	mojia	墨家
daoja	道佳	rang	讓
<i>Daode jing</i>	道德經	ren	仁
di	狄	ren yi zhi bing	仁義之兵
diao min fa zui	弔民伐罪	renzheng	仁政
fajia	法佳	shanren	善人
fa xia jiu min	伐夏救民	Shang Yang	商夢
fan	番	Sun Bin	孫玲
fei gong	非攻	Sun Wu	孫武
geming	革命	Tang	湯
heqin	和親	ti tian xing dao	替天行道
hu	苒	tianming	天命
ke ji fu li	克己復禮	tianxia	天下
Kongzi	孔子	tianzi	天子
jian	簡	wu	武
jian ai	兼愛	xin	信
Jie	傑	Xunzi	荀子
jin bao chu hai	禁暴除害	Yi	夷

yi	義	zhongdao	中道
yi zhan	義戰	Zhongyong	中庸
zhan	戰	Zhou, Zhou Xin	紂, 紂辛
zheng	徵	Zhuangzi	莊子
zhide	至德	zu zong zhi fa	祖宗之法
zhong	忠		

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