Values in China as Compared to Africa: Two Conceptions of Harmony

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VALUES IN CHINA AS COMPARED TO AFRICA:
TWO CONCEPTIONS OF HARMONY

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Introduction: Comparing Non-Western Value Systems

With the rise of globalization in the twentieth century, scholars in the West have sought in earnest to understand non-Western cultures, and have typically done so by comparing Euro-American societies with others. What is now beginning to emerge, however, are non-Western cultures seeking to understand themselves without the large mediation of a Western variable. This article is one instance of such a study. It compares values characteristic of sub-Saharan Africa (hereafter often simply "Africa") with those typical of China.

Of course, both parts of the world have been influenced by the West, and in profound ways. Nearly every country below the Sahara desert was colonized by a European power for several hundred years, while Mao's China was decidedly influenced by Marxism, and in the past thirty years both regions have changed dramatically in response to finance capitalism. What is less well known, however, are the ways in which values indigenous to Africa and to China continue to influence present-day behavior, as well as how these influences compare with each other.

With respect to Africa, I focus on precolonial values as they have been understood and lived for several hundred years and as they still affect twenty-first-century life, especially the communitarianism associated with talk of *"ubuntu,"* which means humanness in the Nguni languages of southern Africa. As for China, I concentrate on what is widely accepted there as the most influential non-Western value system, namely Confucianism, and especially on how it has affected Chinese ways of life in the post-Mao era. As I will demonstrate, core indigenous values of harmony still have noticeable bearings on thought and practice in both societies, which total more than two billion people.

Acknowledging a twenty-first-century context of sophisticated market economies and other Western influences such as Christianity, what similarities and differences are there between *ubuntu* and Confucian ethics, and, specifically, what are the conceptions of harmony that I contend are central to both? That is the overarching question I seek to answer, an inquiry that has not been systematically undertaken before from a philosophical perspective.[1]

I suggest that the ways in which indigenous sub-Saharans and Chinese tend to prize harmonious relationships mean that they are closer to one another than to typically Western moral perspectives. Readers will also learn, though, that the specific form of harmony that Africans tend to value differs in important respects from the

Confucian tradition and has had distinct implications for how people think and interact.

I begin by briefly addressing issues of methodology, explaining, for instance, what is meant by terms such as "Chinese" or "African" values. Then I sketch key elements, first, of indigenous African values, particularly as a function of common understandings of *ubuntu,* and, next, of Chinese values, with a focus on present-day Confucianism. I offer reasons to believe that harmony is central to both *ubuntu* and Confucianism, after which I consider the ways in which African and Chinese conceptions of harmony align and diverge in some political, economic, and social contexts. I conclude by briefly pointing to further research that it would make sense to undertake, if the comparisons made here are, by and large, accurate.

Key Methodological Concerns

My aim is to understand indigenous values characteristic of Africa and China as they continue to influence contemporary ways of life there. By "values" I mean in the first instance final goods, that is, conditions taken to be desirable for their own sake, and not merely as a means to something else. However, by "values" I sometimes also refer to conditions that are taken to be reliable means to obtain final ends. For example, patience is a plausible example of something that, while probably not good in and of itself, is thought to be a consistent producer of things that are, such as achievement.

What makes a value properly Chinese? And, more generally, when is it proper to use a geographical label to characterize something? I use geographical labels to refer to features that have been salient in a locale over a substantial amount of time (see Metz 2015a). They pick out properties that have for a long while been recurrent in a place in a way they have tended not to be elsewhere. So, calling something "Chinese" denotes a fairly long-standing characteristic in China that differentiates it from many other regions.[2]

Such a use of the term "Chinese" is not essentialist, for it does not imply that the relevant properties are to be found only in a certain location, throughout that location, or necessarily in it. Instead, to call a value "Chinese" simply means that it has for a long while been recurrently encountered in China and among those from China to a noticeable extent, in contrast with many other places. Similar remarks go for the use of terms such as "African" (or "sub-Saharan"), "Western," and the like.

The next methodological issue concerns how to determine whether a value has been prominent in a given locale. Two methods are mentioned by organizational anthropologist Geert Hofstede and psychologist Michael Bond, both renowned for their work on non-Western values. First, they note that values can be "inferred from data about collective behavior," such as the way a country distributes its wealth or the occasions for political violence in it (Hofstede and Bond 1988, p. 8). Second—and this is their preferred approach—they suggest that one can ask people a variety of questions about which values they as individuals hold dear and then aggregate the responses (Hofstede and Bond 1988, p. 9).

I rely on both of these methods, but do not rest content with them and use two additional approaches. For one, I also consider influential linguistic and other symbolic artifacts to be potentially revealing of values that have been held over a long time and a wide space. For example, if a certain written text about ethics has often been reprinted and widely read for several centuries in a certain country, it should provide a clue as to what people in that country tend to prize. Appealing to works that convey the thoughts of a single individual is more likely to reveal both unity among values and philosophical basics than, say, a questionnaire that asks people to rank a grab-bag of different values.

In another approach, if a person intimately familiar with a culture reports on what she takes to be its salient values, then that kind of information is relevant. This approach differs from the self-reporting that Hofstede, Bond, and many other social scientists use, in that the person providing data is not expressing her own values, but rather is indicating what she believes to be the values that are prominent in the culture in which she has lived. She might explain what certain proverbs and stories mean, or point to certain underlying moral principles that make sense of a variety of practices, or articulate a rich philosophy of how to live that she and her peers have been taught.

There is one last important methodological issue to address, namely how to use the sources. Which ones are to be trusted most? How should one deal with conflicting evidence? It is not easy to specify the key values of Chinese and African cultures in an uncontroversial way, even when aiming to focus discussion on Confucianism and *ubuntu*. Both traditions are diverse, which means that it is safest to seek as much common ground as possible among sources.

In the case of sub-Saharan ethics, it is a largely oral tradition that only in the postwar era has been discussed in written form by academics, or at least by those who are sympathetic and informed. European colonialists ignored and even denigrated indigenous African cultures for hundreds of years, and it has literally been only in the last fifty or so that Africans themselves have had the substantial opportunities to become scholars who write about their traditional societies. Their works form the core sources for what is presented here as African norms, supplemented by one of the very few self-reporting studies from people below the Sahara (Noorderhaven and Tidjani 2001). The relative novelty of the academic study of *ubuntu,* combined with the fact that there are at least several hundred different indigenous peoples and languages below the Sahara, makes it reasonable to focus on those values that have been recurrently mentioned by contemporary literate interpreters there.

In the case of Confucianism, this is of course a written tradition dating back some three millennia that has been interpreted differently in various eras and in occasionally conflicting ways with other value systems common in China such as Daoism, Buddhism, and Communism. The minute one begins to specify an ostensibly Confucian value, a historically informed interpreter of the massive Confucian corpus can find a counterexample. Since it is common cause among scholars of China that

Confucianism is the most influential indigenous value system there, I focus discussion on Confucian values and then those values that have been endorsed by most contemporary academic adherents.

African Values, with a Focus on Ubuntu

As is well known by African scholars, indigenous norms below the Sahara are often captured by the maxim "A person is a person through other persons," or sometimes "I am because we are" (e.g., see Mbiti 1990, pp. 106, 113; Mandela 2013, p. 227). Explaining what these expressions mean for most sub-Saharans will be a useful way to lay out relatively uncontested facets of *ubuntu* and related values. In particular, I try to show that harmony is one value that unites many others associated with *ubuntu.*

These two maxims have both descriptive and prescriptive elements that are intertwined in traditional African thinking. When it comes to describing the way the world is, the claim that a person is a person through other persons (or I am because we are) is meant to indicate that one's existence and identity as an individual necessarily depend on others.[3] In this article, however, I focus strictly on evaluative and normative connotations, of which the central one is that an individual's foremost aim in life should be to become a *real* person. Personhood is often thought to come in degrees, where the more of a person one is, the better. For example, among Nguni speakers such as Zulus, Ndebeles, and Xhosas in southern Africa, one's highest-order goal should be to exhibit *ubuntu,* literally humanness, that is, to become a true human being or to live a genuinely human way of life. Such a perspective, in fact, is characteristic of indigenous sub-Saharans, as per Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha's survey of African conceptions of humanness:

> In Africa, to be a human being is a project to be fulfilled by each individual. Being a human being is an ongoing process. Birth alone does not define humanity. One has to "become" a real *Muntu.* One becomes more fully human through one's "way of life," by behaving more ethically. (Nkulu-N'Sengha 2009, p. 144)

If an individual failed to live morally, then Africans would typically say of him that he is a "zero-person" (Nkulu-N'Sengha 2009, p. 144) or that he is "not a person," in the way one might say that a jalopy is not a "not a *real* car" (Gaie 2007, p. 33). And in more extreme cases of wrongdoing or wickedness they would say that "he is an animal" (Letseka 2000, p. 186).

Such labels are not meant literally, to the effect that an individual is no longer a human being in the biological sense and so lacking a full moral status. Instead, the terms are meant to indicate that the individual has failed to develop the valuable facets of his human nature, that is, as one capable of moral excellence, and is instead living in a base manner, akin to a lower order of the world such as the animal kingdom (Ramose 1999, p. 53; Gyekye 2010).

Now, one is to become a real person "through other persons." In the first instance, this means that one exhibits other-regarding virtues such as "'he is generous,'

'he is peaceful,' 'he is humble,' 'he has respect for others'" (Gyekye 2010) and he is "generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate" (Tutu 1999, p. 34). However, one prominent suggestion about what these virtues have in common is that they are ways of communing with other persons or participating in harmonious relationships with them. To begin to understand what communion or harmony fundamentally amounts to, consider the following remarks from some African theorists.

The Nigerian philosopher Segun Gbadegesin says that in traditional Yoruba morality, "Every member is expected to consider him/herself an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all" (1991, p. 65).

Probably the most influential African political philosopher in the past twenty years, the Ghanaian Kwame Gyekye, says: "A harmonious cooperative social life requires that individuals demonstrate sensitivity to the needs and interests of others. . . . Communitarian moral theory . . . advocates a life lived in harmony and cooperation with others, a life of mutual consideration and aid and of interdependence, a life in which one shares in the fate of the other" (1997, pp. 72, 76).

Former South African Constitutional Court Justice Yvonne Mokgoro remarks of an *ubuntu* ethic, "Harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group" (1998, p. 17).

And then South African academic psychologist Nhlanhla Mkhize says, "A sense of community exists if people are mutually responsive to one another's needs. . . . [O]ne attains the complements associated with full or mature selfhood through participation in a community of similarly constituted selves. . . . To be is to belong and to participate" (2008, pp. 39, 40).

These and construals from many other parts of Africa about what it is to live harmoniously or to commune with others suggest two recurrent themes (initially analyzed in Metz 2007). On the one hand, there is a relationship of *identity,* a matter of considering oneself part of the whole, sharing in the fate of others, being close, belonging, and participating. On the other hand, there is reference to a relationship of *solidarity,* namely being committed to the good of others, being sensitive to others' interests, being sympathetic, and responding to others' needs.

The combination of the relationships of identity and solidarity, or, equivalently, of sharing a way of life with others and caring for their quality of life, is basically what English speakers mean by "friendliness" or even "love" in a broad sense. Hence, one can sum up one major swath of traditional African thought about how to live by saying that one's basic aim should be to become a real person, which one can do (only or mainly) by prizing harmonious or friendly relationships. This analysis of ideas recurrently associated with *ubuntu* makes sense of Desmond Tutu's terse remarks about sub-Saharan values:

> We say, "a person is a person through other people." It is not "I think therefore I am." It says rather: "I am human because I belong." I participate, I share. . . . Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*—the greatest good. (1999, p. 35)

The ideas above are fairly uncontroversial when it comes to *ubuntu* and African ethics more generally. Living harmoniously is central to exhibiting human excellence (although I make no claim here that it is the sole ground of all moral judgments in the African tradition).

However, there are contestations to note. For example, Africans differ when it comes to the question of precisely with whom one is to harmonize or commune. Traditionally speaking, in order to develop personhood, it is clear that one must first and foremost commune with family members (e.g., see Appiah 1998), where that is often considered in an extended sense, to include ancestors living in an invisible realm on earth (e.g., see Setiloane 1976; Magesa 1997; Ramose 1999; Murove 2007). Some more secularly inclined people these days maintain that prizing harmonious relationships with other human beings, and perhaps with animals and other parts of nature, would be sufficient to live well.

Furthermore, there is disagreement among sub-Saharans about the ultimate reason to enter into communion with others. Above, Tutu implies that doing so is a non-derivative and unsurpassable good. Similarly, the South African philosopher Augustine Shutte points out that in *ubuntu* "the family is something that is valued for its own sake" (2001, p. 29), and the Uganda-based scholar of African religions, Peter Kasenene, suggests that "in African societies, immorality is the word or deed which undermines fellowship" (1998, p. 21). However, others maintain that the value of harmony, even if quintessentially African, is merely instrumental, to be sought solely as a means either to enhancing the vitality of one's society (Magesa 1997; Bujo 2001) or to improving the common good (Gyekye 1997, 2010).

Chinese Values, with a Focus on Confucianism

My aim in this section is to articulate some of the indigenous values that remain salient in China, despite substantial exogenous influences there, and scholars agree that they are largely ones associated with Confucianism. Although, as one scholar has put it, "Confucianism spent most of the twentieth century on life-support" (Angle 2012, p. 2), particularly during the time of Mao, it did not die out. Furthermore, there has recently been a significant resurgence of interest in, and explicit appeal to, Confucian ideals in Chinese academe, society, and even politics. Talk of a "renaissance" or "revival" is common (e.g., see Little and Reed 1989; Peng 2010; Ruiping Fan 2011). Here, I seek to capture those Confucian values that have had a large influence on Chinese thought and practice, or at least have continued to since the decline of Mao.

Despite the influence of ideas such as an impersonal Heaven (emphasized in Yao 2000) and ancestral deities (emphasized in Qingxin Wang 2011), what is salient not only in the work of Confucian moral philosophers and ethicists writing in the twenty-first century (e.g., Shun and Wong 2004; Bell 2006; Angle 2012; Bai 2013; Li 2013; Chan 2014), but also in the lives of everyday people, are more secular considerations about how morally to relate to other human beings. On this score, consider the influential work of the Chinese Cultural Connection (1987), a large group of social scien-

tists who developed a values survey specifically for Chinese people informed by values deemed characteristic of them. The group eventually settled on a list of forty key values derived from Chinese society, none of which is explicitly spiritual (1987, pp. 147–148). In addition, where there has been an inclination to add to this list, the values that have had some kind of dimension beyond social life have not included mention of Heaven or ancestors and have instead been more "this-worldly" (e.g., see Ying Fan 2000; Liu et al. 2013).

To begin to unpack the values at the core of contemporary Confucianism, consider the following quotations:

> [The] focus [is] on closing the distance between the human and the non-human. . . . [T]he potentiality within individuals that enables them to be finally differentiated from birds and beasts is yet to be developed and cultivated as actual qualities of their character. . . . [It] is to fully develop original moral senses, . . . [T]o become fully human, while to abandon or neglect it is to have a deficient character which is not far from that of an animal. (Yao 2000, p. 154)

> If there is only one person, there are no persons. (Ames 2010, p. 143)

> Relationships . . . make people human. . . . [I]f one can develop his or her distinctively human nature (compassion and wisdom that helps to apply his or her compassion to all) more fully than others, he or she is more human, or a greater human being than others. (Bai 2013, pp. 13, 16)

These remarks are from contemporary scholars of Confucianism about its ethical heart, but the similarities with *ubuntu* are palpable and fascinating.

For the mainstream variants of both *ubuntu* and Confucianism, one's basic aim in life should be to develop oneself, that is, to realize the valuable parts of one's human nature. In addition, for both traditions, the central way by which to develop one's human excellence is by relating positively with other persons, so that in the absence of others one cannot live a genuinely human way of life. And, still more, the relevant relationships for both are ones that include compassion, generosity, tolerance, respect, and related dispositions. Hence, those few philosophers who have begun to compare characteristically African and Chinese values have described both approaches as "communitarian" (Bell and Metz 2011) or as focused on "mutuality" (Unah 2014).[4]

Above, I summarized the relevant sorts of relationships for *ubuntu* in terms of harmony, specifically relations of identity and solidarity, and it would be of interest if similarly encapsulating statements were available for the Confucian tradition. In fact, Confucian values, or at least the most important ones, also tend to be summed up in terms of "harmony,"[5] variously labeled as "the highest virtue" for Confucians (Yao 2000, p. 172), the "ultimate goal" for them (Li 2006, p. 593), the "cardinal cultural value in Chinese society" (Wei and Li 2013, pp. 60, 61), the "mother of all values" (Bell and Mo 2014), and the Confucian "grand ideal" (Chan 2014, p. 2).

Aesthetic analogies with music, food, and dance are frequently invoked in the Confucian literature to explain what harmony is. Basically, it is a matter of different

elements coming together, where differences are not merely respected, but also integrated in such a way that the best of them is brought out and something new is created (Yao 2000, pp. 170–173; Ihara 2004; Li 2006, 2013).

Social scientists in a wide array of fields maintain that the Chinese characteristically strive for harmony, so construed, in their everyday lives, at least to a much greater degree than average Euro-American-Australasians.[6] For one example, a scholar of Chinese communication maintains that "harmony is the ultimate goal Chinese people pursue in the process of human interaction. It is also the main criterion used to assess communication competence in the Chinese society" (Guo-Ming Chen 2008, p. 8). For another example, two Chinese theorists of culture maintain that when it comes to conflict resolution,

> Through the analysis of the core spirit of the Confucian harmony, we can conclude that in social interaction, it puts tremendous weight on "harmony but not sameness." . . . Such philosophical value provides Chinese people with a fundamental attitude . . . of determination that they must resolve conflicts by harmonization. Under its influence, Chinese people are more willing to engage in negotiation, more willing to compromise, and less willing to resort to confrontation and conquest. . . . (Wei and Li 2013, p. 66; see also Anedo 2012)

Finally, for now, recall the Chinese Culture Connection's list of forty characteristically Chinese values; it places harmony fourth and the closely related value of tolerance third (1987, p. 147). That is, surveys asking a wide array of people to rank the importance of values to them personally on a scale of one to nine have delivered the result that people on average find harmony and tolerance to be among the top ten percent.

To illustrate the Confucian conception of harmony in more detail, consider the "Three Bonds," the human relationships in which, and by which, one is particularly expected to realize harmony: "Minister serving ruler, son serving father, wife serving husband, if these three relationships run in harmony, All-under-Heaven will have order; if these three relationships run in discord, All-under-Heaven will have disorder"—a statement found in the works of the famous "Legalist" thinker Han Fei Zi, but revealing of Confucianism (quoted by Hsü 1970/1971, pp. 29–30; see also Tu 1998 and Qingxin Wang 2011). It is commonly thought that the "cardinal spirit of Confucianism is that everyone should play one's essential role and function" (Tangjia Wang 2011, p. 98), with the Three Bonds being central and with other relationships to be modeled on them.

The hierarchical nature of the Three Bonds is evident; essential to them is the idea of higher and lower positions, with citizens, the young, and females occupying the latter.[7] Sometimes the thought is that hierarchical relationships are most likely to *produce* harmony separately and in the long run, while at other times it is that harmony is to be realized *within* them. Although there have been strains of Confucianism interpreting the hierarchy in terms of unconditional obedience on the part of inferiors, these days most instead stress the idea that it should exhibit harmony, that is, involve reciprocity, a relationship in the interests of both parties. Hence, those in

a superior position, while having more responsibility, are obligated to act for the sake of those in a lower one, while inferiors are expected to show respect for superiors, which need not mean unquestioning deference (Bell 2006, pp. 244–245; Tangjia Wang 2011, pp. 99–100).

Although this perspective prescribes parentalism on the part of government and paternalism in the family, it does not license exploitation or arbitrariness. Superiors are not deemed permitted to use inferiors for their (the superiors') sake, but are instead supposed to act in ways that are good for them (the inferiors). Parents are supposed to socialize and care for their children in ways expected to help them flourish, and rulers are to be chosen on the basis of their education and virtue, which they are to put to use in order to benefit the ruled. So, contemporary Confucianism does not justify absolute monarchy or patriarchal whim, although it does prescribe a division of labor, with managerial functions going to qualified rulers and male heads of households.

It is often pointed out that two of the Three Bonds concern the family, and one influential scholar has said this of the Confucian tradition: "The family was not seen as a necessary *condition* for the good life[;] it *was* the good life" (Bell 2006, p. 145; emphasis added). Such a perspective continues to influence Chinese society; "for the Chinese public, the family is the center of their lives. It is the locus of their emotions and is inseparable from their purpose in life" (Tangjia Wang 2011, p. 96; see also Lee 2002).

That is not to say that Confucianism rejects impartiality and concern for strangers; Mencius' parable of the young child at risk of falling into a well, revealing that people are naturally inclined to rescue those unrelated to themselves, has been enormously influential in the Confucian tradition. It is rather to say that the central part of a desirable existence is understood to consist of partial relationships, and that they are to serve as models of, and springboards for, other relationships in one's life.

As is well known, the most important manifestation of a harmonious relationship, both in itself and as a means to the realization of other excellences, is that between a father and son, or between parents and their children more generally. The phrase "filial piety" is used to sum up the virtue of relating to one's parents, with one scholar remarking, "Filial piety is considered the root of all virtue" in the Confucian tradition (Qin 2013, p. 147). The parent/child relationship is expected to be particularly intense, and to serve as a sort of training ground for relating to human beings in general, so that one develops benevolent inclinations toward humanity, even if they are less strong. Children owe their parents not merely resources such as money and material comfort, but also compassionate attitudes, a general willingness to sacrifice their interests, and a respectful disposition (Bell 2006, pp. 244–245; Tangjia Wang 2011, p. 97). In addition, filial piety is thought to include obligations to continue the family line, and, although less often these days (Lee 2002), to pay obeisance to ancestors.

In terms of how the Confucian prizing of filial piety affects everyday life in China, it is striking that the Chinese Culture Connection's list of forty Chinese values places filial piety at the very top (1987, p. 147). Such an ethical orientation has made its way

into the legal system, with China and some other East Asian governments such as Taiwan and Singapore by law requiring children to provide financial support for their elderly parents (Bell 2006, p. 77).

In sum, as with *ubuntu,* harmony is clearly salient in Confucian thought. However, also like *ubuntu,* disagreement among Confucians exists about whether it is foundational or derivative, let alone about whether it is the sole basic good. For both traditions, I treat harmony as a *central* value, one that captures a wide array of (I do not claim all) other moral judgments in them.

Comparing Harmony in the Ubuntu and Confucian Traditions

In terms of similarities, by "harmony" both traditions mainly have in mind certain ways in which people should relate to one another, while also tending to include those ways in which people should relate to nature.[8] In addition, both maintain that peace is an essential element of harmonious relationships. And yet they also deny that peaceful co-existence exhausts harmony, which, for both, requires something much more integrative among people.

More specifically, both traditions reject the notion that harmony is merely a matter of everyone having the same views or living in the same way, about which Confucians are particularly emphatic, often quoting from the *Analects:* "The gentlemen seeks harmony not sameness, the petty person seeks sameness not harmony" (Chan 2014, p. 91). Chenyang Li, probably the living scholar who has most studied harmony in the Chinese tradition, remarks that "harmony is sustained by energy generated through the interaction of different elements in creative tension" (2006, p. 589; see also Li 2013). And on the African side, one need merely remember that a harmonious relationship is roughly a friendly or loving one and that for people to be friendly with one another is not essentially a matter of seeking to become the same; indeed, to befriend or to love another frequently means helping her to realize aspects in which she is different or even unique.

Still more, for both traditions a harmonious relationship is understood to be one that includes reciprocation, mutual aid, and similar behaviors that tend to make its participants better off. Although harmony is a relational good, not reducible to the properties intrinsic to individuals, it nonetheless is a condition that includes the expectation that individuals will live better lives for being a part of it.

For a last major similarity between Confucianism and *ubuntu,* consider that both accept "Family first," "Charity begins at home," and related maxims. Although both ascribe a moral status to at least all human persons, family members have a principled moral priority when it comes to the allocation of one's financial and other resources.

Despite these similarities, the kind of harmony prominent in the Confucian worldview is not identical to what is typically found in the *ubuntu* tradition. Although that will become most clear in the following section, in which the two value systems are compared in a variety of practical contexts, some general considerations can be noted here.

First, although "Confucianism puts tremendous weight on interpersonal harmony . . . [it] does not exclude intrapersonal harmony" (Li 2006, p. 588)—unlike African ethics, which is typically understood to be strictly focused on relationality between persons. The African ideals of sharing a way of life with others and caring for others' quality of life are exclusively other-regarding, at least as a familiar philosophical package, whereas the Confucian notion of harmony can be self-regarding, for example applicable insofar as a single person's mental states form something like what Westerners would call an "organic unity."

Second, while the African understanding of harmony is well understood in terms of friendly relationships, "Confucians see a harmony (not necessarily friendliness) coming out of this continuous interplay of opposing forces" (Li 2006, p. 594). So, for example, whereas indigenous sub-Saharans would want people ideally to share a sense of togetherness, say, by thinking of themselves as "we" and taking pride in one another's accomplishments, this is apparently not essential for Chinese harmony, which could be fostered if two parties with somewhat antagonistic attitudes were organized appropriately, namely so that the tension between them turned out to produce something creative and to be good for both sides.

Third, sub-Saharan notions of harmonious relationships tend toward egalitarianism with respect to decision-making, whereas Chinese ones do not. It is true that traditional societies below the Sahara usually had chiefs and elders, to whom others were expected to express respect, and that power within families tended to be patriarchal. Even so, when making a decision it was common for chiefs to defer to consensus among either elders who had been popularly elected or all affected adults. In addition, the idea of human dignity has been salient in the African tradition, where a harmonious relationship includes the idea of treating others with respect in the form of seeking their cooperation or consulting with them. In contrast, dignity, at least of a sort thought to ground human rights to political participation, is not a central feature of Confucian moral thought (e.g., see Ihara 2004). And it has been characteristic of Confucian, and more generally Chinese, thought to believe "in the naturalness, necessity and inevitability of hierarchy. It is self-evident to Chinese that all men are born unequal" (Bond 1991, p. 118; see also Tu 1998, pp. 128, 130), where this is understood to apply to governance and status (and not, say, the distribution of wealth).[9]

Contemporary Manifestations of Traditional African and Chinese Harmony

So far, I have analyzed large swaths of traditional thought about values in Africa and in China, and brought out how much of them are captured by ideals of harmonious relationship. In the rest of this article, I consider the ways that African and Chinese values of harmony have plausibly continued to influence three major aspects of contemporary life, specifically politics, economics, and society. In each case, I explore notable similarities and differences between Chinese and African orientations that appear traceable to the respective ways that they construe and prize harmony.

Politics

In this section I argue that the ways that China and African societies have tended to value harmony have influenced philosophy and theory in them as well as actual governance systems. I focus in particular on perceptions of what the proper aim of the state should be and of who should have political power.

At a broad level, both the African and Chinese traditions are what political philosophers call "perfectionist," meaning that they maintain that the point of government should be to improve people's quality of life and, especially, to foster their self-realization as ethical beings (for representative examples, see Nkondo 2007; Bai 2013; Chan 2014). Whereas many Westerners, or at least theorists from the Western tradition, these days maintain that a state should merely enforce people's individual rights to live as they see fit, and others in the past held that it should serve the interests or whims of a king, neither view has been salient in the *ubuntu* and Confucian worldviews. The latter instead highlight the idea that the state's aim should be to help its citizens lead lives that are objectively desirable for them. This means not merely meeting the biological needs of citizens and making them well off as individuals, but also promoting their moral good or relational human excellence.

Perfectionism is a clear implication of ethical systems that deem harmony to be a central value. For *ubuntu,* recall that prizing harmony includes exhibiting solidarity, that is, acting in ways that are expected to improve others' quality of life and for their sake. Similarly, for Confucianism, harmony in the abstract is a matter of bringing differences, often hierarchical, together in ways that are beneficial for all, which, applied to politics, consists of rulers doing what they expect will be best for subordinates.

Although a common focus on harmony has led to perfectionism being dominant in both African and Chinese thought and practice when it comes to the point of a government, differential conceptions of harmony have probably underwritten competing views of who should be in control of it. In catchwords, the harmony of *ubuntu* prescribes consensual democracy, while Confucian harmony inclines heavily toward meritocracy.

As was mentioned above, a prizing of harmonious relationships, roughly understood by many Africans as the combination of sharing a way of life and caring for others' quality of life, has tended to support a consensus-oriented approach to decision making among precolonial sub-Saharan societies. In fact, often appealing to the value of harmony, most prominent African political philosophers recommend a richer kind of democratic polity for contemporary states than a multi-party competitive system, namely one in which Parliamentarians seek unanimous agreement among themselves about how to do what is best for the public as a whole (e.g., see Wiredu 1996, pp. 172–190; Bujo 1997, pp. 157–180; Gyekye 1997, pp. 121–140; Ramose 1999, pp. 135–152).

Although no contemporary African state has taken such a consensual system on board in the post-independence era, the trend has clearly been toward democracy of some kind. The sub-Saharan region is well known for having signed onto the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, or Banjul Charter* (Organization of African

Unity 1981), which places human dignity at the core of African values and commits governments to upholding a wide array of individual rights, many of which, relating to freedom of expression and political association, are observed in day-to-day practice. And beyond the Banjul Charter, including the "right to participate freely in the government of his country, either directly or through freely chosen representatives" (Article 13), members of the African Union are bound by its *Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance* (African Union 2003), and many sub-Saharan states have in fact introduced multi-party electoral systems over the past thirty years.

The contrast with China is patent. The Confucian conception of harmony as a mutually beneficial unity in diversity, and as something to be promoted by, and realized within, hierarchical relationships, has probably led the Chinese people to accept the lack of a democratic system, not only in the past but also today. It is well known that prior to Communism, a characteristically Confucian approach to politics, in terms of seeking rulers qualified by virtue of their literate education and moral character, supported a highly skilled public service for literally thousands of years. Confucianism is often credited with downplaying a "nobility of blood" and upholding a "nobility of virtue."

More recently, the Communist Party of course forbids any contestation of its political power, ostensibly for the sake of steering society toward a desirable state. And one scholar contends that the Party has increasingly been using meritocratic criteria to determine which individuals become political leaders (Bell 2015). There remains no shortage of twenty-first-century Confucian intellectuals who, while perhaps not thrilled with the Communist Party, nonetheless endorse a substantially meritocratic system over one in which the populace has the final and equal authority to determine policy (see, e.g., Zhang 2012; Bai 2013; Bell and Li 2013; Bell 2015).

It is plausible to suggest that the differences between *ubuntu* and Confucian conceptions of harmony have helped lead to these divergent systems of political power. Yet, underlying these differences I note another similarity that is naturally ascribed to a concern for harmony; it has probably grounded *non-competitive* and *non-majoritarian* models of decision-making that are quite distinct from modern Western forms of political power.[10] In the traditional African case, unanimous agreement is thought to be ideal, whereas, in the traditional Chinese case, rule by the most qualified is considered best.

Economics

With respect to the economy, I focus first on how differential conceptions of harmony seem to have grounded divergent approaches to production and consumption, both in theory and in practice. Chinese inclinations to develop self-discipline, to put in long hours, to confront challenges head-on, to persevere in the face of setbacks, to be frugal, and to save have been at the forefront of discussion about the renowned extent to which poverty has recently been reduced in China and in East Asian countries more generally. The hypothesis has often been made that these cultural dispositions, in combination with certain structural reforms,[11] have been largely responsible for the high rates of productivity and growth in China and neighboring countries

since the 1970s (e.g., see Hofstede and Bond 1988; Milner 1999; Noorderhaven and Tidjani 2001; Wah 2001; Hofstede et al. 2010, pp. 235–276).

Social scientists have often brought these traits together under the headings of "Confucian Dynamism" (Chinese Cultural Connection 1987) or "Long-Term Orientation" (Hofstede et al. 2010), and have emphasized their "forward-looking" dimension. That is, formal training, hard work, persistence, thriftiness, and saving all indicate a willingness to delay gratification, to give up leisure time, and to adjust in the face of tradition for the sake of future, larger gain. By "Long-Term Orientation" these theorists do not mean to suggest that, say, the Chinese government or society as a whole is acting decisively for the sake of future generations, although they would suggest that a given Chinese person is substantially concerned about harmony with, and hence the well-being of, his family, including his descendants. Consider that alongside the values of filial piety, harmony, and tolerance that I have mentioned so far, the Chinese Cultural Connection's study found industriousness to rank as the second highest value among Chinese people (1987), the thought being that these values all form a Confucian cluster.

This scholarly group has also contended that China ranks first among all nations in the world when it comes to Confucian Dynamism (reported in Hofstede et al. 2010, pp. 239–240). In contrast, sub-Saharan African is said to have a "Short-Term Orientation" (Hofstede et al. 2010, pp. 271–274), meaning not only that African peoples on average have not exhibited the Confucian Dynamism traits as much, but also that they have been more inclined to the following: they exhibit (national or ethnic) pride, not freely admitting that they need to learn from others; they appeal to folk wisdom and tradition instead of scientific evidence; and they attribute success or failure to destiny, luck, and circumstance, as opposed to effort or the absence of effort. Or so suggest the results of the World Values Survey, summarized by Hofstede and his team (2010, pp. 252–259, 273–275). Of further interest are the similar results from the African Values Survey, which was developed to cover a wide variety of sub-Saharan countries and to be informed by indigenous sub-Saharan perspectives (Noorderhaven and Tidjani 2001, esp. pp. 37–40; cf. Hofstede et al. 2010, pp. 273–275).

In addition, scholars of Africa have noted the ways in which the sort of harmony or communalism associated with *ubuntu* has tended to militate against elements of Confucian Dynamism. For example, one Zimbabwean expert on sub-Saharan values remarks:

> The Weberian economic qualities of thrift and frugality central to capitalism are not qualities of African economic behaviour. . . . African ethics emphasises sharing and so negates frugality. . . . Instead of frugality, traditional African economic behaviour puts emphasis on celebration, sometimes ostentatious, as a way of expressing communal solidarity. (Murove 2005, pp. 231–232; see also Busia 1962, p. 131; Silberbauer 1991, p. 20; Kasenene 1994, p. 142)

Rather than being thrifty and inclined to save, which would enable them to build up capital in the long term, traditional Africans have tended to interpret a requirement

to prize harmonious or communal relationships as expecting, or at least encouraging, them to spend in the short term, particularly on their extended family and society. The point of work and success should not be to amass wealth for its own sake à la Warren Buffett or for one's own sake, but rather to share with others, including people far beyond the nuclear family.

As should be clear, Confucians hardly prize self-interest above all else; instead, harmony for them means that one is to moderate one's desires and temper the satisfaction of one's interests, so as to be able to help others. However, Confucians and the Chinese more generally do prize harmony with their own families above all, and quite often think of business, and especially savings for and investment in it, as a way to provide for descendants (Wah 2001).

Up to now I have focused on what many theorists take to be a major difference between Confucian and *ubuntu* conceptions of harmony as they have influenced the economic sphere. I now address an interesting similarity, at least in comparison to Euro-America. Despite the spread of finance capitalism, partialist and relational values in both sub-Saharan and Chinese societies continue to have some bearing on the economy.

Beginning with China, researchers have noted a tendency for business engagements not to be based strictly on the letter of a written agreement. Whereas Westerners tend to want to resolve disputes based on a black-and-white reading of a contract, Chinese are not so much inclined to do this. Instead, the latter often appeal to the expectation of a harmonious relationship, one in which both parties benefit from creative synergy, to determine what should transpire between them (Pitta et al. 1999, pp. 247–255; Kwock et al. 2013). If an unforeseeable shortage of stock were to occur, Chinese managers would be more disposed to renegotiate the terms of the contract than would, say, Americans.

This approach is sometimes summed up by "rule by men" (namely, virtuous people) as opposed to "rule by law" (Little and Reed 1989, p. 5; Pitta et al. 1999, pp. 247, 251; Barmé 2013, p. 373). For those influenced by Confucianism, the persons in charge are in a superior position because of their training and wisdom, and should use it to foster relationships of mutual benefit. A written agreement is a symbol of a desire to enter into, or a formalization of, a harmonious relationship, so that a firm's leaders may revise its content as judged necessary to obtain that desired end.

The idea of "rule by men" has additional implications for the way business tends to be conducted in China, namely through the well-known strategy of *guanxi.* This is the term for harmonious relationships or "networks" that the Chinese seek to create, sustain, and enrich. Although they can be found in schools, religious organizations, clubs, and the like, they are most widely discussed in the context of the economy, where businesspeople seek to develop informal bonds of mutual aid (e.g., see Chang and Holt 1991; Chen and Chen 2004). Although *guanxi* bonds are outside the family, they are, as a reflection of Confucianism, family-like, in that they are meant to be long-lasting and dependable, and not to be broken easily. In short, members of *guanxi* are part of one's "in-group." The use of these connections to get ahead is integral to contemporary Chinese business, and this is often viewed as corrupt by

Westerners because of the partiality involved and lack of formal procedures used to allocate resources (Matthews 2000, p. 118).

Although there is certainly some tendency among sub-Saharans to do business with those from a similar ethnic and linguistic background, there is nothing approaching the extent to which particularistic networks influence Chinese business. That said, there are other partialist and relational elements that do notably influence the economy in Africa. For example, it is customary in traditional African societies to reciprocate and to show gratitude to someone when she confers a benefit on you. As a result, some African corporate leaders send gifts to those who have given them business, sometimes even to government officials, a practice that those from a Western background tend to find corrupt. In addition, the "family first" orientation has not infrequently been invoked as a justification for nepotism (for discussion, see Gyekye 1997, pp. 196, 252–257; Ramose 2003, pp. 385–386).

Another example in which a concern for harmony, as construed in sub-Saharan terms, continues to affect business is the manner in which time is regarded. Anyone who has lived below the Sahara, or is otherwise familiar with the region, knows of "African time." Although this is sometimes meant as a derogatory expression, and should not be used to stereotype people, it denotes a real phenomenon, namely the tendency for sub-Saharans to see punctuality as less important than the need to attend to the relationships involved in a transaction, where an interest in harmony prescribes paying extra attention to the people immediately before oneself. If one is already engaging with someone in conversation, and it requires more time than had been planned, many Africans would stay with that engagement, even at the cost of not showing up on time for the next meeting. As one African scholar has put it, "The time is first related to the social obligations and . . . professionalism [comes later]" (Matondo 2012, p. 42).

In addition, the flow of time in traditional sub-Saharan societies has not been regimented anywhere near to the degree that it is under capitalism (Busia 1962, p. 130), where personal inclination is utterly disregarded in favor of the firm's interest in maximizing outputs and minimizing inputs. A desire to socialize, for example, would be a sufficient reason to take a break from work in the precolonial era in Africa. Moreover, the African inclination toward consensus-based decision-making means that sub-Saharan workers would like there to be substantial consultation on the part of management, a practice frequently recommended by African business ethicists (e.g., see Khoza 2006) despite the time it would take in order to find a way forward that suits all parties. In contrast, the Chinese idea of harmony, according to which inferiors conform to the dictates of superiors keen to direct in ways that are best for the group, more easily coheres with capitalist norms regarding punctuality, efficiency, and hierarchy in the workplace.

Society
What is particularly noticeable about sub-Saharan and Chinese social interaction, at least in comparison to Euro-America, is the way in which people think of themselves relationally. Relationship informs not just who one ought to become in Africa and

China, but also who one is considered to be. In the West it is typical for an individual to define herself by appeal to the intrinsic properties of her person, such as her particular likes or values, properties that do not immediately change depending on the people with whom one is engaging on a given occasion. In contrast, individuals in these two non-Western cultures tend to appeal to extrinsic properties to define themselves. That is, who they think of themselves as being is conceived in terms of the people with whom they have related and are relating. For such cultures, in order to answer the question of who one is, people primarily appeal to roles such as being members of a certain clan, a teacher, a church member, and the like; and who they deem themselves to be at a given time is often a function of which role they are performing (for discussion, see Ames 1994; Shutte 2001, pp. 21–25; and Hofstede et al. 2010 on 'collectivism'). On this score, one influential scholar speaks of "the Eastern conviction that one is a different person when interacting with different people" (Nisbett 2003, p. 53, and see generally pp. 47–77).

Returning to more resolutely evaluative considerations, another striking similarity between the sub-Saharan and Chinese social interaction that is a product of their emphasis on harmonious relationships concerns their approach to family. In the contemporary West, it is rare for people to think that there is a moral obligation to wed and to procreate. Marriage and children are typically deemed part of a good life, but it is uncommon for Euro-Americans, or at least Western moral philosophers and professional ethicists, to contend that one would be violating some duty about which one should feel guilt or shame if one elected to remain single or childless. In contrast, the recurrent concern for harmony, particularly as manifested in the family, has meant that those in Africa and China influenced by indigenous values have tended to think that one would be doing wrong not to marry and to continue the family line, with contemporary theorists inspired by them continuing to find such judgment plausible (e.g., see Magesa 1997, pp. 63, 89, 120–135; Kasenene 1998, pp. 71–72, 77–78, 79–80; Bujo 2001, pp. 6–7, 34–54; Qingxin Wang 2011, pp. 76–77, 81, 88; Tangjia Wang 2011, pp. 96). For both traditions, family is the most important expression of harmonious relationship, and is the one above all to realize during one's life.

Consider, now, some differences in social relationships between sub-Saharans and Chinese, and how they appear to have followed in the wake of their differing conceptions of harmony. Although both Africans and Chinese believe that moral priority goes to one's family when deciding how to allocate one's money, attention, time, and other resources, it is more typical of discussions of indigenous sub-Saharan values to find scholars saying things like "Great value is put on hospitality in African society" (Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2009, p. 77) and "Hospitality is one of the main African values, which is still alive among Africans" (Matondo 2012, p. 41). When strangers visited a village in the precolonial era, they were typically treated with warmth and generosity, to the point that the best food would often be taken from family members and given to the visitors. And nearly all contemporary African thinkers take hospitality to be a quintessential expression of *ubuntu* as an ethic (e.g., see Mandela 2006; Gathogo 2008).

In contrast, such an orientation "is difficult to justify from a conventional Confucian standpoint" (according to Daniel A. Bell, in Bell and Metz 2011, p. 89). Whereas Africans are inclined to think of everyone as having dignity and as being a potential site of communion (while also being inclined to think that actual relationships of communion matter most), the Chinese on average do not. Being welcoming of strangers is not a salient theme in the literature on Chinese society, and, if anything, one finds the suggestion that Chinese people are wary of those considered part of an "out-group" until they are brought into their *guanxi* (e.g., see Matthews 2000, p. 123; Matondo 2012, p. 41).

Finally, another interesting difference between African and Chinese societies concerns the nature of communication and how it appears to be influenced by different understandings of harmony. To illustrate this point, consider a study recounted by Augustine Shutte in one of the first books devoted to *ubuntu* as an ethic (2001, pp. 27–28). He notes a survey that was taken of two groups of nuns at a convent. After the obligatory chores and praying were done, the study found that the German nuns often continued to work by knitting or sewing, while the African nuns did not and instead spent time in conversation. The study noted that each group of sisters deemed the other morally lacking; the Germans judged the Africans insufficiently diligent, while the Africans objectionably considered the Germans to care more about practical matters than about people. In addition, in Steve Biko's analysis of sub-Saharan culture, he notes Westerners finding it odd that Africans tend to engage in conversation for its own sake, and not to reach any conclusion or to achieve a goal (1971, pp. 45–47).

Generally speaking, the sub-Saharan interest in cultivating harmony, understood as identity and solidarity, has led to a focus on relationship at some cost to task-fulfillment. To use sociological jargon, communicative or affective action has held a greater place over strategic or instrumental action, at least in comparison to the West, where African culture prizes the former for its own sake as an instance of harmonious relationship. Although scholars have made a similar point about communication among Chinese, to the effect that goal attainment is regularly tempered by an interest in harmony (e.g., see Bond 1991, pp. 54–55; Guo-Ming Chen 2008, p. 9), it appears that Chinese tend to talk less and are comfortable with silence in a way that Westerners and Africans on average probably would not be (Bond 1991, pp. 52–53; Pitta et al. 1999, pp. 248–249; Matondo 2012, pp. 40, 43). Crudely stated, it appears that Africans seek to promote harmony by talking, whereas Chinese seek to avoid conflict by not talking.

Conclusion

My central aims in this article have been to analyze salient indigenous values in Africa and China, to bring out the fact that harmony is a concept that unites much thought about them in both traditions, to highlight similarities and differences between their conceptions of harmony, and to suggest plausibly how these respective conceptions continue to influence contemporary thought and behavior. More specif-

ically, I have focused on the sub-Saharan ethic of *ubuntu* and Chinese Confucianism, argued that certain conceptions of harmonious relationship—roughly, of identity and solidarity for the former, and of mutual benefit from hierarchical difference for the latter—are central to both moral systems, and that these traditional conceptions of harmony explain both important similarities and important differences between recent African and Chinese political, economic, and social interaction.

I naturally have not sought to capture all indigenous values in these contexts, both of which are massive in terms of age, geographical space, and diversity, and I also have not tried to document all the various ways in which these major strands of traditional thought are still influential. Rather, I have sought to compare two different conceptions of harmony that have been salient in both societies by examining how they affect some contemporary beliefs and practices. If the project begun here is revealing with regard to China and Africa—and even the West in relation to them—then it would be worth extending in a variety of ways, say, by considering what additional manifestations of harmony there might be, whether harmony is a better candidate for a basic moral value than, say, utility or autonomy, and whether the Chinese or African (or some other) conception of it is to be preferred on systematic philosophical grounds.

Notes

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1 – Though a few have begun to make other, broader, comparisons. See Bell and Metz 2011; Unah 2014.

2 – By "Chinese" values I do not mean essentially to connote what are called "Asian values" in debates about the scope of human rights (on which see, e.g., Sen 1997; Milner 1999).

3 – For salient facets of African metaphysics, see Setiloane 1976; Mbiti 1990; Magesa 1997; and Murove 2007, and for some brief comparisons of them with Chinese metaphysics, see Unah 2014 and Metz 2017.

4 – Cf. talk of "collectivism" by social scientists such as Hofstede et al. 2010 and Matondo 2012.

5 – Anedo 2012 notes that African and Chinese values tend to prize harmony, but does not reflect on the ways it is understood.

6 – In addition to the following references, see Bond and Zhang 1998; Nisbett 2003; and Liu et al. 2013, as well as China ranking highly in terms of "collectivism" à la Nisbett 2003 and Hofstede et al. 2010.

7 – Cf. discussion of what Hofstede et al. (2010, pp. 53–88) call "power distance."

8 – Although not solely these conditions; sometimes types of cosmic harmony are also referred to. For discussion in the African tradition see Mkhize 2008, and in the Chinese see Li 2013, pp. 148–165.

9 – For some additional comparisons and contrasts between the two conceptions of harmony, see Metz 2016.

10 – I first made this point in Metz 2014.

11 – Neatly summarized in the first section of Sen 1997.

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