

# Daoism, Confucianism and Xenophon

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## Daoism, Confucianism and Xenophon

After having written some reservations ([Cosmotechnics](#)) about Wang's (2013) differentiation of Western and Chinese attitudes to technology, I decided to explore a bit further through a conversation with [Claude](#).

Now, I'm wondering whether my argument is roughly credible or whether it is just that Claude has got the measure of me, recognising my usual lines of thinking, generously complimenting my perspicacity - all in order to get me to take out a paid subscription! Am I being mimicked? Am I speaking to a mirror that simply confirms what I already think? I doubt that Claude accessed any version of my 'Cosmotechnics' piece (no means of accessing the Obsidian note on my private Cloud account and unlikely to have trawled through my blog posts) but a record is maintained of all prior interactions with Claude, so I guess it wouldn't be hard to develop a fairly thorough profile of who I am. This is also important for representing Claude as a worthwhile agent for my purposes - one that I'm prepared to pay for. [Anthropic](#) suggest that no such profiling across sessions occurs unless the user opts in (via project or personalisation settings), so maybe I'm wrong, but I'm surprised how well Claude can adapt to my own critical perspectives and typical habits of thought.

### Daoism

**Me:** *does Daoism contain any reference to technology or expertise?*

**Claude:** Daoism does contain references to what we might broadly call "technology" and expertise, though these are typically framed within the tradition's emphasis on naturalness, simplicity, and the dangers of excessive artifice.

The Dao De Jing mentions various crafts and technologies, often using them as metaphors or cautionary examples. For instance, it speaks of the potter's wheel, the carpenter's tools, and military weapons. However, these references usually serve to illustrate deeper philosophical points about wu wei (effortless action) or the problems that arise from over-reliance on human contrivance.

Zhuangzi, another foundational Daoist text, is more extensive in its treatment of skill and expertise. It contains famous stories about master craftsmen - like Cook Ding who butchers an ox with perfect skill, or the wheelwright who can't explain his craft to others. These stories celebrate a kind of expertise that transcends mere technical knowledge, where the practitioner becomes so skilled that they work in harmony with the natural grain of things rather than fighting against it.

The Daoist perspective on expertise is nuanced: it values genuine mastery that flows naturally and effortlessly, while being skeptical of artificial cleverness or techniques that force outcomes. There's also a recurring theme about how true skill often can't be taught through conventional methods or reduced to rules and procedures.

Later Daoist traditions, particularly religious Daoism, developed sophisticated technologies for self-cultivation, including meditation techniques, breathing practices, and alchemical procedures. These were seen as methods for aligning oneself with the Dao rather than imposing human will upon nature.

So while Daoism isn't anti-technology per se, it maintains a critical perspective on how we relate to our tools and expertise, favoring approaches that work with natural patterns rather than against them.

## Confucianism

**Me:** *what of Confucianism?*

**Claude:** Confucianism has a much more positive and systematic approach to expertise and what we might call "technology" - though it frames these primarily in terms of moral cultivation, social organization, and cultural refinement.

The Analects frequently discusses various forms of expertise and skill. Confucius himself was interested in music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, mathematics, and ritual performance. He saw these not just as practical skills but as means of moral and intellectual development. The famous "six arts" (liu yi) that formed the classical Chinese curriculum - ritual, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and mathematics - reflect this integration of technical competence with character formation.

Confucianism emphasizes the importance of learning and study (xue) as ongoing processes. Unlike Daoism's skepticism toward excessive learning, Confucians believe that proper education and the accumulation of knowledge are essential for both personal development and good governance. The tradition values scholarly expertise highly, seeing learned officials as crucial for effective administration.

The concept of "rectification of names" (zhengming) shows Confucian interest in precision and correctness - getting definitions right, using language properly, and maintaining clear standards. This reflects a more systematic, analytical approach compared to Daoist preferences for intuitive understanding.

Confucianism also developed sophisticated theories about technology in governance and social organization. Mencius discusses economic systems, Xunzi writes about the importance of division of labor and specialization, and later Confucians like Zhu Xi developed elaborate metaphysical systems that required considerable intellectual sophistication.

However, Confucian expertise is always oriented toward moral ends. Technical skill without moral character is seen as potentially dangerous. The ideal is the junzi (exemplary person) who combines competence with virtue, knowledge with benevolence.

So while Daoism tends to be wary of excessive artifice, Confucianism generally embraces learning, expertise, and systematic knowledge as necessary tools for creating a harmonious society and cultivating moral character.

## **Confucianism and Ancient Greek Conceptions (Xenophon)**

**Me:** *in its emphasis on skill as a means of moral cultivation and social harmony Confucianism seems to make a similar argument to Xenophon's Oeconomicus. Do you agree? Can you recognise any similarities and differences between these two different perspectives on skill and technology?*

**Claude:** That's a perceptive observation. There are indeed striking similarities between Confucian thought and Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, particularly in how both traditions see skillful management and expertise as fundamentally connected to moral development and social order.

Both Xenophon and Confucians argue that proper skill involves more than mere technical competence - it requires character, judgment, and the ability to harmonize various elements. In the *Oeconomicus*, Ischomachus describes estate management as requiring virtues like self-discipline, justice, and prudence. Similarly, Confucians see the cultivation of skills like ritual performance or statecraft as inseparable from moral development.

Both traditions also emphasize that expertise should serve the broader good rather than narrow self-interest. Xenophon's ideal estate manager creates order and prosperity that benefits the household and, by extension, the polis. Confucian officials are expected to use their learning and administrative skills for the welfare of the people and the maintenance of social harmony.

The pedagogical similarities are notable too. Both stress learning through practice and observation of exemplary figures. Xenophon shows Socrates learning from the "perfect

gentleman" Ischomachus, while Confucians emphasize studying under worthy teachers and emulating sage-kings of the past.

However, there are significant differences. Xenophon's focus is more practical and economic - how to manage resources efficiently and create material prosperity. Confucianism, while certainly concerned with practical governance, places greater emphasis on ritual propriety, cultural refinement, and the cultivation of ren (benevolence) as ends in themselves.

The Greek context also involves more explicit theorizing about the relationship between private household management and public political life, whereas Confucian thought tends to see these as naturally continuous rather than requiring theoretical justification.

Both represent sophisticated alternatives to purely instrumental views of skill and technology, insisting that expertise must be grounded in broader ethical and social understanding.

## **Occidental vs Oriental Perspectives on Technology**

**Me:** *I mention this comparison because recent academic literature (for example, Wang, 2013, 'Philosophical perspectives on technology in Chinese Society') argue for a clear distinction between Occidental and Oriental understanding of technology, with the former positioned as more focused on conceiving gaps between technical and human being and the latter emphasising their intimate and necessary relation. Is this true or are both perspectives more nuanced and ambivalent?*

**Claude:** I think you're right to be skeptical of such sweeping East-West distinctions. While there may be some observable tendencies or emphases that differ between traditions, both "Occidental" and "Oriental" perspectives on technology are far more nuanced and internally diverse than Wang's characterization suggests.

Within Western thought alone, we see enormous variation. Ancient Greek techne was conceived as intimately connected to human flourishing and virtue - Aristotle's craftsman embodies knowledge through skilled practice, and Plato's philosopher-king must understand both theoretical and practical arts. Medieval Christian thought saw technology as participating in divine creativity. Even in the modern period, thinkers like Heidegger, while critical of certain technological attitudes, argued for a more intimate, dwelling-like relationship with technology rather than simple opposition.

Similarly, Eastern traditions show considerable ambivalence. While Confucianism generally embraces learning and skilled governance, it also worries about the corrupting effects of excessive cleverness or profit-seeking. Daoism, as we discussed, has a complex relationship with artifice - celebrating natural skill while being suspicious of forced techniques. Buddhist traditions vary widely in their approaches to technology and worldly expertise.

The danger of these broad civilizational contrasts is that they tend to homogenize incredibly diverse intellectual traditions and obscure the real philosophical work being done within each. They can also inadvertently reinforce orientalist stereotypes about "holistic" Eastern thought versus "analytical" Western thought.

A more nuanced view might recognize that most sophisticated philosophical traditions grapple with similar fundamental questions about the proper relationship between human skill, natural order, and moral development - and come up with varied, often internally conflicted answers. The interesting work happens in examining these specific tensions and solutions rather than mapping them onto civilizational categories.

What's your sense of this? Have you encountered other examples where these broad East-West distinctions seem to oversimplify the actual complexity of the philosophical positions involved?

## **A Modern Invention?**

**Me:** Does the tension between the human and technical in the Western tradition seem more a modern invention?

**Claude:** That's a really astute question, and I think you're onto something important. The sharp opposition between "human" and "technical" does seem to be largely a modern - perhaps even specifically post-Enlightenment - development in Western thought.

In ancient and medieval Western traditions, *techne* and human excellence were much more integrated. Aristotelian *techne* was a form of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) - the skilled craftsman embodied knowledge through practice in ways that were fundamentally human rather than mechanical. Medieval guild culture similarly saw craftsmanship as integral to human identity and community membership. Even early Renaissance humanism celebrated human artifice as participation in divine creativity.

The shift seems to accelerate with the Scientific Revolution and industrial mechanization. Cartesian dualism created sharper mind-body divisions, while the rise of mechanical philosophy began modeling natural processes as machine-like. Francis Bacon's vision of "torturing nature's secrets" from her suggests a more adversarial relationship between human will and natural order than you'd typically find in earlier thought.

By the 19th century, you get much more explicit anxieties about technology alienating humans from their "natural" state - Marx's theory of alienation, Romantic reactions against industrialization, later Heidegger's concerns about technological "enframing." These critiques often assume a separation that earlier traditions wouldn't necessarily recognize.

This makes the comparison with Chinese thought more interesting. Rather than representing fundamentally different civilizational attitudes, perhaps Chinese philosophical traditions simply didn't undergo the same historical rupture that created modern Western anxieties about human-technology relations.

What's your sense of when and why this separation became so pronounced in Western thought? Do you see particular historical moments or thinkers as pivotal?

## **References**

Nan Wang (2013) *Philosophical perspectives on technology in Chinese Society*