

# **A Relational Orientation to Communication: Origins, Foundations, and Theorists**

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## **Abstract**

This paper proposes that the relational orientation is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. This orientation is most influenced by Confucius and Lao Tzu. Confucius is known for his humanistic perspective and Lao Tzu is known for his naturalistic perspective. These two perspectives serve as the basic foundation for the relational orientation. This study extracts five principles from the Analects of Confucius and five principles from the *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu. These principles are used to develop a relational orientation framework for a better understanding of the Eastern way of communication.

## **Introduction**

There are two different perspectives in communication: one is the Western communication tradition and the other is the Eastern communication tradition. The Western communication tradition is known as the rhetorical orientation (Shepherd, 1992) and is deeply rooted in Western (individualistic) culture. This orientation emphasizes individualistic values such as freedom, innovation, and competitiveness. It stresses that self is independence-based and promotes self-governance, self-reliance, and self-efficacy (Goodnight, 1990). This orientation is also known for its low-context communication style through which Western individuals convey direct messages whose meanings can be easily processed through reading the messages themselves (Hall, 1976).

The rhetorical orientation is deeply rooted in classical Greece where argumentation was developed. This orientation has influenced the development of Western culture for centuries (Goodnight, 1990). Aristotle is viewed as the leading theorist in the rhetorical orientation (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996) and his contribution to the cumulative body of knowledge in persuasion and rhetoric is measureless. The rhetorical orientation is highly rooted in Western culture. One of the most noticeable phenomena is the Western legislative and judicial system. This system encourages people to argue and articulate their points of views. Aristotle's concepts of evidence, source credibility, and audience emotion are highly emphasized within the system. In the West, argument is critical.

The Eastern communication tradition is known as the relational orientation (Shepherd, 1992). It focuses on the relationship between communicators and emphasizes collective values such as social harmony, social respect, and cooperation (Chen & Starosta, 2003). This orientation stresses that self is interdependence-based, and it promotes self-connectedness, the institutional self, and self-worth. This Eastern tradition is known for high-

context communication through which Eastern individuals convey indirect messages whose meanings are embedded both in messages and cultural contexts (Hall, 1976). Although the relational orientation is well-defined, its theoretical foundations as well as its theoretical origins have not been widely investigated. The purpose of this study is to examine the origins, foundations, and theorists of the relational orientation to communication. It will focus on two leading theorists and their contributions to shaping the relational perspective.

## **Lao Tzu**

Lao Tzu is a legendary figure in Chinese history. He wrote a great book called the *Tao Te Ching*. For more than two thousand and six hundred years, people across the world have been inspired by this great book. This ancient classic of 81 lyric poems reflects Eastern culture and shapes the way Chinese people communicate. In Chinese, Tao can be translated as “road.” The Chinese character for *Tao* shows a head of a person walking along a road. The connotation of this Chinese word is that people walking along the road follow the natural law. *Te* means virtue and goodness, referring to the inner side of individuals. *Ching* means a classical text. The book has 81 chapters with two main sections. The first part focuses on *Tao* or the way and the second part is about *Te* or virtue. This small classic book of 5,000 words reflects a unique Chinese perspective on life.

Oliver (1971) observed that Taoism encourages insight and discourages bookishness. As opposed to Confucianism, which calls on human behaviors to meet the social norms, Taoism promotes the idea of seeking harmony and acceptance and avoiding confrontation and conflicts (Chen & Holt, 2002). Chan (1963) noted that Confucianism stresses social order, social norms, and active social interaction, while Taoism focuses on individual freedom, creativity, and a natural way of life. According to Taoism, individuals, groups, organizations, and societies should follow *Tao* and use Taoism to guide their behaviors. Taoism promotes a simple and quiet life and lets nature take its course. However, this does not mean that Taoism calls for withdrawal and no progress or social advancement. In fact, Taoism directs individuals to follow nature actively. Failure to act in accordance with the Tao will limit an individual’s social advancement.

Taoism goes further to explain this way of life, questioning many conventional understandings of individuals and societies. It takes a dialectical approach in looking at social phenomenon. There are five main principles we would like to extract from Lao Tzu and the *Tao Te Ching*. The five principles are: Nature, Non-action, Balance, Reciprocity and Selfless. The principle of Nature is the core principle of Taoism. This principle calls on the law of nature to be the guide for our human action. Everything is great, but nature is the greatest. Only when we can follow the law of nature, can we solve problems and advance. This principle is explained in Chapter 25 of Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*:

Therefore Tao is great.  
Heaven is great.  
Earth is great.  
And the king (man) is also great.  
There are four great things in the universe,  
the king is one of them.  
Man models himself after earth.

Earth models itself after Heaven.  
Heaven models itself after Tao.  
And Tao models itself after Nature. (Chan, 1963, pp. 152-153)

The emphasis on nature is the focal point of Taoism. Chan (1963) pointed out that this law of nature contributed to the development of the common Chinese cyclical concept with an emphasis on process. Lao Tzu emphasized that nature is the determining factor for human behaviors. Nature is the best way to describe and explain Taoism. According to Lao Tzu, *Tao* is highly related to nature, and nature is the main characteristic of Taoism. The naturalistic approach is the core of Lao Tze's thought. This approach suggests that people should follow the flow and let nature take its course. People should use more non-negation of the flow of nature rather than intervention. People should follow the law of nature rather than the law of individuals.

The second principle is called *Wu-Wei* or Taking-no-action. Taking-no-action is one of the critical concepts in Taoism. The principle calls on a natural approach or indirect way of problem solving. In Chapter 43 of the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu wrote: "The softest things in the world overcome the hardest things in the world. Non-being penetrates that in which there is no space. Through this I know the advantage of taking no action. Few in the world can understand teaching without words and the advantage of taking no action" (Chan, 1963, p. 161). Lao Tzu praised non-action as the most effective way of dealing with problems. It is not an easy job to learn non-action skills. Non-action can be explained as an ability to act without competition with others. For example, water can be the softest thing in the world, but it can wear down a rock, even the hardest one in the world. This non-action approach is very powerful in problem solving.

The third principle is Balance. Lao Tzu took a very dialectic perspective on human behaviors and social development. He suggested that things are balanced and human behaviors should be developed in balance. He encouraged people to apply comprehensive considerations when making decisions. In Chapter 2, Lao Tzu wrote:

When the people of the world all know beauty as beauty,  
There arises the recognition of ugliness.  
When they all know the good as good,  
There arises the recognition of evil.  
Therefore: Being and non-being produce each other;  
Difficult and easy complete each other;  
Long and short contrast each other;  
High and low distinguish each other;  
Sound and voice harmonize with each other;  
Front and back follow each other. (Chan, 1963, p. 140)

Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* is a book of philosophy, and the principle of Balance clearly suggests that when individuals look at things they need a comprehensive and balanced approach. This is because nature has the characteristics of relativity or balance. If individuals take an unbalanced approach to things, they may become biased and fail to get things done. Lao Tzu's Balance principle states that a leader should first have a better understanding of the polarities of social phenomenon. Two opposites or two polarities are against each other and

complement each other. This dialectic vision is very critical to the basic theoretical foundation of Lao Tzu's school of thought.

The fourth principle is Reciprocity. People depend on each other and help each other. This dependence helps people survive and succeed. Lao Tzu encouraged leaders to pay attention to the needs of followers. He believed that when the needs of followers are met, the needs of leaders will be met too. In Chapter 61, Lao Tzu wrote: "The relationship is reciprocal. It is the job of the leader to be aware of the group member's process; It is the need of the group member to be received and paid attention to. Both get what they need, if the leader has the wisdom to serve and follow, to be open and below" (cited in Heider, 1997, p. 121)

The fifth principle is Selflessness. This principle directs leaders to pay more attention to others, not themselves. It is the hallmark of collectivist culture with a focus on an interdependent self rather than an independent self. The principle suggests that the group is more important than self or individuals. The leader may have to back away from his/her agenda for the group if it is not conducive to effective group functioning. In Chapter 7, Lao Tzu said: "The wise leader, knowing this, keeps egocentricity in check and by doing so becomes even more effective. Enlightened leadership is service, not selfishness. The leader grows more and lasts longer by placing the well-being of all above the well-being of self alone. Paradox: By being selfless, the leader enhances self" (cited in Heider, 1997, p. 13). Selflessness does not weaken self, instead, it enhances self. It enhances self in a long-term rather than in a short-term. Self becomes strong and powerful through this process. This principle of selflessness reflects the Eastern way of doing things: emphasizing others' concerns, promoting compromise and collaboration, and de-emphasizing concerns of the self and avoiding competition.

In short, the principles of Nature, Non-action, Balance, Reciprocity and Selflessness provide a unique theoretical perspective for Taoism. This perspective focuses on the natural way of doing things. It emphasizes balance, reciprocity and an interdependent self or selflessness. This perspective lays a strong theoretical foundation for collective culture and a relational orientation to communication. (A further analysis and integration will be provided later).

## Confucius

Confucius (551-479 B.C.) was a famous Chinese thinker, educator, and statesman, who greatly influenced Chinese society and civilization (Chan, 1963). Confucianism has shaped the mainstream of Chinese cultural values such as respect, benevolence, and harmony for 2,500 years. His thoughts about human behavior reflect his sharp vision and analysis of the social and psychological processes of human behavior and human development.

Major theoretical principles of Confucius can be found in *Lun Yu* (The Discourse or Analects of Confucius). In *Lun Yu*, Confucius said that "To know it (learning or *zhi zhi*) is not as good as to love it (*hao zhi*), and to love it is not as good as to take delight in it (*le zhi*)" (Chan, 1963, p.30). According to Confucius, the goal of learning is not just an understanding. Understanding is the first step in learning. The second step in learning is to love it or like it. Without the strong feelings toward the learning subject, the learning is not complete. The third or last step in learning is to find pleasure in it. To interpret this last step, Confucius suggested that the goal for learning is "just do it." It suggests that only until you do it, can you find pleasure through the learning process.

Many principles of Confucianism have significant implications for theorizing the Eastern way of communication. Here we would like to focus on five main principles: *Jen* (benevolence and humanity), *Li* (propriety, rites and structure), *Yi* (faithfulness, righteousness, and justice), *Zhongyong* (the mean or the opposite of extremism), and *He Xie* (harmony).

The principle of *Jen* is the core principle of Confucianism. *Jen* refers to the virtue of kindness, gentility, or goodness. The ultimate goal for self-improvement is to be *Jen* (Oliver, 1971). According to Confucius, “the man of *Jen* is a perfect man, a man of the golden rule, for wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, he also helps others be prominent” (Chan, 1963, p. 16). Confucius said that individuals should restrain themselves, directing their behaviors to meet the needs of the social norm and social structure. The concept of *Jen* is the core value in Chinese philosophy. The concept is also similar to Aristotelian *ethos* with a focus on sincerity and benevolence (Oliver, 1971). *Jen* suggests the unity of man and nature. Confucius said in his *Analects*: “Zi Gong asked, ‘Is there a single word that a man can follow as his life guide?’ Confucius said, ‘Yes. It is, perhaps, the word forbearance.’ Do not impose upon others what you do not desire yourself” (*Analects* 15.24). *Jen* is the fundamental principle of Confucianism. It shows the dimension of humanism. It suggests that human beings are unique and have feelings toward each other, calling for love for each other, and kindness toward each other. Confucius suggested that human beings should share harmonious relationships with each other. This humanism represents the core values in Confucius’ school of thought.

The second principle of Confucianism discussed here is *Li* (propriety, rites and structure). Confucius stressed the social structure, which is based on a hierarchical order. According to Confucianism, personal relationships are all in hierarchical pairs including ruler and minister; father and son; husband and wife; elder brother and younger; and friend and friend. Those who are in the subordinate positions should serve and obey those in superior positions. Oliver (1971) noted that many related behavioral guidelines were elaborated in detail for several thousands of explicit patterns of behavior in the *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonies*. People are supposed to memorize and adhere to these guidelines in appropriate situations. In the *Analects*, Confucius’ explanation of benevolence clearly shows the importance of rites or propriety (*Li*) in society:

Do not look at things that do not accord with the rites;  
Do not listen to things that do not accord with the rites;  
Do not say anything that does not accord with the rites;  
And do not do anything that does not accord with the rites. (*Analects*, 12.1)

*Li* also referred to a set of social norms which guide people’s cognition, affect, and behaviors. People are socialized into the social norm, picking up values, ideals, attitudes, and behaviors to become a standard member of the society or *Li*. People’s behaviors are the socialization outcomes under the social structure. In other words, *Li* can also work as an invisible social control to help social beings to follow order and develop themselves.

*Li* and *Jen* are interconnected. *Jen* determines that one should behave according to a high standard with a focus on kindness, sincerity, and insight. *Li*, on the other hand, specifies what these high standards are and how individuals should observe them. Chen and Chung (1994) proposed that *Li* is the external form of *Jen*, suggesting that the two principles are interdependent. *Jen* reflects people’s inner world through kindness, self-restraint, and self

improvement, while *Li* reflects people's outside world through guiding people to meet the social norms and social standards. All social units require a balance of *Jen* and *Li*. When there is *Jen* without *Li* in a social group, individuals tend to lack motivation to show their kindness and love for others. People tend to do things according to their personal interests, desires, and goals. Within vague social relationships, a chaotic situation may dominate (Pan, 1996).

On the other hand, when there is *Li* without *Jen* in a social group, individuals in the group tend to develop a tension between each other. There will be more control and more crises due to the lack of social structure and social norms (Pan, 1996). Therefore, a good balance of *Li* and *Jen* will help the social group tremendously, avoiding costs and punishments, and producing benefits and rewards.

The third principle is *Yi*, which refers to righteousness, faithfulness, and justice. Chen and Chung (1994) noted that "*Yi* is the binding force of social interaction" (p. 97). Here *Yi* explains why individuals are motivated to interact with other people. If they are motivated by *Yi* (justice, trust, and righteousness), they tend to receive rewards through social interaction; if they are motivated not by *Yi* but personal gains, they tend to receive punishments. *Yi* can also be referred to as morality. Confucius heavily emphasized the importance of morality: "A gentleman regards morality as the supreme virtue. Possessed with bravery but devoid of morality, a gentleman will stage a revolt while a petty man will become a bandit" (Analects, 17.23). Yum (1988) observes that *Yi* is a difficult concept to translate. Instead, he proposed a better way to understand the concept by showing the antithesis of the concept, which is personal gains and profits. Yum suggested that *Yi* directs individuals to look beyond personal gains and seek justice through social interaction.

Confucius always taught that *Jun Tzu* or gentlemen should put *Yi* above other principles in guiding their behaviors. According to Confucius, *Yi* should motivate people to do good things for people. However, Confucius did not rule out personal profits completely (Pan, 1996), but suggested that profits should follow the accomplishment of being *Yi*.

The fourth principle is *Zhongyung* (the Mean). This principle also reflects the uniqueness of Chinese culture and the characteristic of collectivism. *Zhongyung* refers to the Mean or avoiding two extremes. *Zhongyung* is made up of two words. The first word, *Zhong*, refers to the middle or center. It suggests that people should not act too quickly or too slowly. The second word, *Yung*, refers to the common or ordinary. Therefore, *Zhongyung* refers taking the middle road or being in the center. *Zhongyung* is in strong contrast to the Western concept of individualism. Individualism promotes self enhancement, and "being the best" is the key motivation for self enhancement. But *Zhongyung* de-emphasizes the extremes, suggesting extreme behaviors lead to competition and chaos. Confucius promoted *Zhongyung* as the highest virtue: "The Mean is the supreme virtue! However, it has been rare among the people for a long time now" (Analects, 6.29). Ding (1997) noted that Confucius often taught his students to behave according to the principle of *Zhongyung*. Confucius often told his students not to go too far or fail to go far enough. He said that the fact is that going too far and not going far enough are equally bad.

Chinese culture has been to a great extent influenced by the concept of *Zhongyung*. The Chinese people tend not to argue with people and prefer to compromise with others. According to Confucius, *Zhongyung* is the best way to interact with others and develop a good relationship with others.

The fifth principle is *He Xie* (Harmony). This principle promotes a warm and quiet conversational environment between two communicators, a polite and mutually respected

social interaction, and a good and mutually enhanced relationship between people. *He Xie* does not refer to less arguments, but more agreements. This principle guides Chinese people to pay more attention to the impact of communication on others (receiver orientation) rather than how they may release their feelings through communication. Confucius believed that harmony is the key to the development of society, the community, and individuals, but he said that harmony is built on the principle that:

A gentleman unites with people of principle and never follows others blindly. A petty man follows others blindly without regard to principle. (Analects, 13, 23)

Ding (1997) pointed out that harmony is a fundamental principle of society and nature. Harmony maintains stability of the society, helps people enjoy their lives with happiness.

Based on the above discussion of the five principles, *Jen*, *Li*, *Yi*, *Zhongyung*, and *He Xie*, we can clearly see that they share a common theme, which is humanistic in nature. These principles are all interdependent on each other, and they all influence one another. *Li* addresses the external structure such as social norms and social standards, while *Jen* focuses on the internal qualities of human beings such as kindness and goodness and sharing harmonious relationship with others. *Yi* is righteousness and justice, which carry motivational properties. If individuals are motivated by righteousness and justice, they tend to fit into *Li* or social structure and tend to become *Jen*; but if they are motivated by personal gains, they tend to misfit the *Li* and fail to accomplish their goals. In the meantime, individuals are also motivated by *Zhongyung*, or the middle of the road, to become ordinary individuals in order to have harmony with others.

In summary, Lao Tzu created a naturalistic perspective. He advocated a life of simplicity and naturalness. Taoism promotes seeking harmony through a natural way without conflict. Taoism suggests that people should follow the law of nature, suggesting the nature take its course without intervention. Confucius developed a humanistic perspective. He emphasized that individuals should be benevolent, following the social norms and doing the right thing. Individuals should avoid extremes and through harmony bring stability to the society. The two great perspectives shape the relational orientation. (Table 1 shows a summary of the key principles of the two great thinkers).

**Table 1**  
**Chinese Theorists and Their Principles**

Two Theorists	Principles & Their Relational Orientation
Lao Tzu (604 B.C-unknown)	
Nature	It is the core of Taoism. Nature is the key to human behavior, development, and social advancement.
Non-action	It is a very philosophical term. Non-action means action without an act. Many connotative meanings can derive from it such as

	Modeling. Non-action means an indirect action, an action which takes place at a subconscious level, for example, winning without fighting.
Balance	It is a dialectic look at social phenomenon and human behaviors.
Reciprocity	People's relationships are reciprocal. People depend on each other and help each other survive and succeed.
Selflessness	In order to enhance self, individuals should forget self first. Selflessness does not weaken self but enhances self in the process. A true leader is a person with an emphasis more on others not him/herself.
Confucius	(551-479 B.C.)
<i>Jen</i>	The virtues of kindness, goodness, and gentility. Humanism and harmonious relationships between people. The ultimate goal for self-improvement is to be Jen.
<i>Li</i>	Social structure, social norm, propriety, and rites. People are supposed to be guided by social norms and social structure.
<i>Yi</i>	Justice, righteousness, and loyalty. Justice carries motivational properties. The opposite meaning of Yi is personal gains or personal interests.
<i>Zhongyung</i>	Taking the middle of road without offending people on either side. Zhongyung makes people avoid conflicts and seek compromise and collaboration.
Harmony	Harmony is a fundamental principle of human society and nature. Harmony maintains stability of the society and helps people enjoy their lives with happiness.

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### **A Framework of Relational Orientation to Communication**

Based on the summary of the key principles of the two great Chinese theorists and their great ideas, we are attempting to develop a relational orientation framework. The five principles of Confucianism are *Jen*, *Li*, *Yi*, *Zhongyung*, and *He Xie*. All of these five principles are interconnected and interdependent on each other. The main theme of Confucian principles is humanism. This humanistic perspective makes a unique contribution to the relational orientation to communication. The perspective focuses on the virtues of kindness, harmony, and goodness. It promotes harmonious relationships among people. According to this perspective, people are motivated by justice (*Yi*) to communicate with others in order to

comply with social norms (*Li*) and create harmony between people. Similarly, people can be motivated by benevolence and goodness to fit the social norms (*Li*). In the meantime, people follow the middle of the road (*Zhongyung*) to avoid extremes. This middle-of-the-road approach brings people harmony (*He Xie*) and unites people. This humanistic perspective lays a solid foundation for a relational orientation which focuses on the relationship between communicators and emphasizes collective values such as social harmony, social respect, and cooperation.

The humanistic perspective shapes many key characteristics of the Eastern way of communication. With a focus on harmony and benevolence, people in the East tend to depend on each other in order to survive and succeed. This dependence leads to a theoretical interdependent-self orientation, which means one's self depends on a group of others. In other words, an individual's self depends on a group of others such as family members, close friends, and significant others. This interdependent self leads people in the East to develop a culture of shame: one person's issue becomes the group members' issue and one person's achievement becomes the group members' honor. Therefore, a person's self heavily depends on others. This shame culture can be traced back to Confucian humanism. For example, people in the East tend to pay respect to others and are afraid of putting people in an awkward position. As a result, people place more emphasis on context, surroundings, and environment to make sure that their message will not cause others to lose respect or face. This way of communication is viewed as a high context culture by Edward Hall (1976).

The five principles of Lao Tzu are Nature, Non-action, Balance, Reciprocity, and Selflessness. These principles share the common theme of letting nature take its course without confrontation. The core of Taoism can be interpreted as the naturalistic perspective. This perspective suggests that man is great, and nature is the determining factor for human development and social advancement. Taoism promotes an idea of non-action or *Wu Wei*, which means that individuals can get problems solved without confrontation or winning without fighting. Lao Tzu suggested that individuals can solve problems and manage conflicts in a natural way without hurting the people involved and without direct confrontation and intervention. Lao Tzu used the water metaphor to illustrate his point, suggesting that soft water can wear down a hard rock. Water is something hard to observe in motion, particularly from a far away position. But gradually water can erode the hardest rock. The results are achieved through a "non-action" process.

According to the naturalist perspective, people in the East emphasize reciprocity and selflessness. As a result, people tend to use a natural way of communicating. They emphasize balance, reciprocity, context, surroundings, and environment to make sure that people's messages will not cause others to lose respect or face. This way of communication tends to be indirect, implicit, and nonlinear, which is classified as a high context culture by Edward Hall (1976).

The two perspectives (the humanistic and naturalistic) together form a framework for a relational orientation to communication. The framework reflects Eastern cultural values such as harmony, low self and high others, high context, balance, reciprocity, *Zhongyung*, and others. The framework also helps us better understand the key characteristics of the Eastern way of communication such as limiting argumentation and using indirect and implicit forms of communication. Chen and Starosta (2003) suggested that building a harmonic relationship is the ultimate goal of Asian communication. They pointed out that Asian philosophical assumptions lead most Asian cultures to emphasize core Asian communication styles such as

mutuality, respect and honesty. These Asian styles reflect the key characteristics of the relational orientation to communication.

In summary, the relational orientation is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. This orientation is led by Confucius and Lao Tzu (Chan, 1963; Dong & Day, 1998). The humanistic perspective of Confucius and the naturalistic perspective of Lao Tzu lay the foundation of this orientation. The two theorists developed this orientation by focusing on collective values such as respect, reciprocity, harmony and selflessness. These core values later become the fundamental principles of this relational orientation. Due to the dominant influence of Confucianism and Taoism on the people in the East, many people in the Eastern countries share this relational orientation to communication.

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