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Daoism, Confucianism, and the Rights of Nature: Transformative Relations in Ecological Governance

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ABSTRACT: Confronting a global ecological crisis, this paper argues that conventional anthropocentric governance models, rooted in instrumental rationality, are inadequate. Drawing on Edoardo Ongaro's concept of an integrative approach to an ontological and political philosophical understanding of public governance and administration, it proposes a relational framework for ecological governance by integrating the Rights of Nature (RoN) movement with classical Chinese philosophical traditions. The study emphasizes the complementary foundations offered by Daoism, specifically its concepts of *ziran* (natural spontaneity) and *wuwei* (non-coercive action) which support decentralized governance aligned with ecological self-organization, and Confucianism, particularly *tian ren he yi* (unity of heaven and humanity), which embeds ecological stewardship within moral self-cultivation (*ren*) and social duty (*li*). Comparative case studies highlight cultural complexities in implementing such relational governance. This paper outlines a tripartite pathway for building transformative capacities within this relational framework and discusses policy implications.

Keywords: Rights of nature; Relational governance; Ecological governance; Daoism; Confucianism



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1. Introduction

The escalating global ecological crisis, marked by alarming trends such as accelerating deforestation and persistent biodiversity loss, underscores a profound inadequacy in prevailing anthropocentric governance paradigms. For instance, the tropics lost 3.7 million hectares of primary rainforest in 2023 alone, an area equivalent to losing 10 football fields per minute [1] (World Resources Institute, 2024). Furthermore, the cumulative impact on biodiversity is stark: monitored wildlife populations have seen a catastrophic average decline of 73% between 1970 and 2020, according to the latest Living Planet Report [2] (WWF, 2024). Foundational agreements like the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), established over three decades ago, have also failed to reverse species extinction rates or adequately protect ecosystems, often prioritizing short-term economic growth over long-term ecological integrity. Criticisms point to the CBD's reliance on non-binding "soft" commitments, ineffective implementation mechanisms, and the failure to hold corporate actors accountable for biodiversity loss [3,4]. This systemic failure stems from deeply embedded ontological assumptions, inherited mainly from Enlightenment thought, that position humanity as separate from and superior to nature, legitimizing its instrumentalization as a resource for human exploitation.

Emerging as a powerful counter-narrative, the Rights of Nature (RoN) movement seeks to dismantle this anthropocentric legal and ethical architecture by recognizing natural entities as subjects possessing inherent rights to exist, persist, and regenerate. Deeply rooted in Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK) systems, RoN fundamentally re-envision the human-nature relationship, challenging anthropocentrism by legally reconstituting nature as a rights-bearing subject [5]. This paradigm shift finds compelling resonance within classical Chinese philosophy, particularly Daoism and Confucianism. (To many observers outside China, Confucianism and Daoism may appear closer to religions, but they are better understood as philosophies. While Western religions often center on a supernatural God and an afterlife, these traditions focus on practical ethics for living a good life in the here and now. This common confusion stems from the English "-ism" suffix and the misinterpretation of rituals like ancestor veneration, which are

expressions of respect, not worship for salvation. It is also crucial to distinguish philosophical Daoism (道家, dào jiā) from the later, institutionalized religion of the same name (道教, dào jiào), which this article does not focus on. A more accurate Western parallel is not a religion like Christianity or Islam, but a practical philosophy like Stoicism or secular humanism. Both offer moral guidance through self-reflection and ethical living, rather than prayer or divine intervention. For these reasons, this article will refer to them as philosophies. These traditions offer sophisticated relational ethics, cultivated over millennia, that emphasize cosmic harmony, ethical reciprocity, and the deep interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world. Daoism's emphasis on *ziran* (自然, natural spontaneity) and *wuwei* (无为, non-coercive action), alongside Confucianism's focus on *tian ren he yi* (天人合一, unity of heaven and humanity), *ren* (仁, moral self-cultivation), and *li* (礼, social duty), provide rich conceptual resources for designing governance systems attuned to ecological realities.

This article posits that integrating these Eastern philosophical ethics with contemporary RoN jurisprudence, critically informed by Edoardo Ongaro's theories on the philosophical grounding and ethical pluralism required in public administration (PA) [6], can foster genuinely transformative approaches to ecological governance. By systematically reimagining self-relations (individual ethics), social-relations (institutional design), and nature-relations (legal/ethical status of nature), a new synthesis developed by this article offers pathways beyond instrumentalism towards governance rooted in relationality and ecological integrity.

The paper is structured as follows: the following section delves into the theoretical foundations of a relational framework (or approach) of ecological governance, examining RoN's critique of Western legal frameworks, exploring the core tenets of Daoism and Confucianism relevant to ecological governance, and introducing Ongaro's PA framework as a bridge between philosophy and practice. Section 3 presents comparative case studies, analyzing RoN implementation in Latin America and New Zealand, dissecting China's Ecological Civilization initiative, and drawing cross-cultural lessons in relational ecological governance. Section 4 explores the transformative capacities required for relational governance, focusing on cultivating ecological virtue (self-relations), balancing hierarchy and decentralization (social-relations), and moving beyond legal rights to cosmic ethics (nature-relations). Section 5 translates these insights into concrete policy recommendations for relational legal frameworks, adaptive institutions, and cultivating virtue in public administration. Section 6 concludes.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Rights of Nature (RoN): Beyond or within Western Legal Frameworks?

The Rights of Nature (RoN) movement represents a radical departure from conventional environmental law, which treats nature primarily as human property or a manageable resource. Instead, RoN asserts that natural entities—rivers, forests, ecosystems—possess inherent rights independent of human valuation [7]. Ecuador's 2008 Constitution famously recognized the rights of Pachamama “to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles”, embedding an Indigenous cosmology within national law. Likewise, New Zealand's Te Awa Tupua Act (2017) conferred legal personhood upon the Whanganui River, reflecting the Māori understanding of the river as an indivisible, living ancestor [8]. Such initiatives aim to elevate nature's legal status from object to subject, empowering legal action on its behalf and resonating with scholarly calls for an “Earth jurisprudence” grounded in ecological interconnectedness [9,10].

Despite these landmark achievements, translating RoN principles into effective practice faces considerable hurdles, particularly when integrating non-Western, relational worldviews into legal systems founded on Western individualism and property concepts. Concerns about “green colonialism” [11] arise when Indigenous philosophies are adopted superficially without fundamentally altering power dynamics or challenging dominant extractive economies. Bolivia's legal framework for Mother Earth, for instance, while symbolically potent, struggled to prevent continued state-driven resource extraction, highlighting this potential conflict [12]. Converting holistic understandings, like the Andean concept of Pachamama or the Māori relationship with their ancestral river, into specific, enforceable rights within adversarial legal systems remains a persistent challenge.

Moreover, the language of “rights”, deeply embedded in Western liberalism, may not fully encompass the ethics of reciprocal care, kinship, and responsibility central to many Indigenous traditions [13]. These limitations suggest that purely legalistic RoN approaches may be insufficient, pointing toward the value of complementary ethical systems, such as those found in Eastern philosophies, to cultivate the deeper shifts in human values and relationships necessary for ecological transformation.

2.2. Daoism: Harmony, Humility, and Decentralized Governance

Daoism offers a unique ecological sensibility grounded in its understanding of the Dao (道)—the ultimate, ineffable, generative reality permeating all existence. Within this view, the natural world is seen not as a separate object but as the dynamic, self-generating expression of the Dao itself, unfolding according to ziran (自然), a concept signifies intrinsic naturalness or “self-so-ness”, the inherent tendency of things to follow their course without external compulsion, implying an intrinsic value in their spontaneous existence [14]. Such a perspective inherently decenters the human, positioning people not as masters of nature but as participants within a vast, interconnected cosmic flow. The core ethical principle guiding this participation is wuwei (无为), often translated as “non-coercive” or “effortless action”. Far from prescribing passivity, wuwei involves a skillful responsiveness, acting in alignment with the natural grain and tendencies of situations, eschewing forceful intervention and excessive control [15]. It cultivates humility, patience, and a deep sensitivity to the rhythms and limits of natural systems. The Zhuangzi’s parable of *Hundun* (混沌, Chaos) vividly illustrates this critique of control: the well-intentioned emperors’ attempts to impose order (giving *Hundun* sensory organs) ultimately killed him, symbolizing how forced interventions disrupt natural spontaneity.

Regarding governance, Daoist thought characteristically favors approaches that mirror nature’s apparent spontaneity and self-organizing capacity—often implying decentralized, minimal, and adaptive systems^[14]. The ideal leader, governing through wuwei, acts more like a midwife or facilitator to natural and social processes, rather than an imposing commander, allowing complex systems to find their own equilibrium and flourish. This philosophy inherently critiques the assumptions underlying many centralized, bureaucratic models that seek to manage complexity through rigid planning and intervention, often proving counterproductive or causing unforeseen negative consequences when applied to dynamic ecological systems [16]. Daoist sensibilities encourage environmental stewardship based on keen observation, flexibility, respect for local specificities, and trust in the inherent wisdom embedded within ecological processes. This aligns well with contemporary ecological concepts like adaptive management and socio-ecological resilience, offering a potent philosophical critique of instrumental rationality and proposing instead an ethics of attunement, non-domination, and profound respect for the autonomy of the natural world [17,18].

2.3. Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism: Cosmic Unity and Ethical Stewardship

While deeply concerned with harmony, Confucianism approaches ecological ethics through the interconnected lenses of moral responsibility, rigorous self-cultivation, and the maintenance of well-ordered social relationships that resonate with the broader cosmic framework. As revised by Dong Zhongshu in the Han Dynasty and Neo-Confucianism from the Song Dynasty, Confucianism has gradually integrated several elements stemming from Daoism and even from Buddhism. Thus, the traditional Confucianism then became far from an anthropocentric paradigm.

When talking about the relationship between the human being and the natural environment, the Confucian foundational concept is tian ren he yi (天人合一), often translated as the “unity of Heaven and humanity”. This signifies an intrinsic, dynamic bond between the human world and the overarching cosmic order (tian), encompassing natural processes and inherent moral principles [19]. This newly established anthropo-cosmic perspective implies that human flourishing is inseparable from cosmic flourishing, imposing a profound moral duty on humanity to act in ways that maintain this harmonious alignment, necessarily including responsible coexistence with the natural world. Nature is thus perceived not as mere scenery or resource-pool, but as possessing inherent value and embodying normative patterns—such as the ceaseless process of generation and transformation (sheng sheng)—that provide a basis for both ecological integrity and virtuous human conduct [20].

Achieving this harmony requires dedicated ethical self-cultivation, focusing particularly on developing ren (仁)—a complex virtue encompassing benevolence, humaneness, compassion, and authoritative conduct rooted in relationality [21]. Ren involves cultivating an empathetic understanding of one’s profound interconnectedness with others, a web of concern that organically extends to encompass the non-human world, fostering ecological responsibility from within [22,23]. The path to becoming a fully authentic or sincere person (诚, cheng) is thus a lifelong journey of moral learning that integrates ecological awareness. Furthermore, Confucian ethics are enacted through li (礼)—ritual propriety—which provides the normative structure for social interactions, defining roles, responsibilities, and reciprocal obligations within a fundamentally hierarchical, ideally harmonious, social order.

This framework naturally embeds environmental stewardship within specific social duties: rulers, for instance, hold a moral responsibility derived from the Mandate of Heaven to ensure the well-being of both the populace and the land that sustains them, while individuals have correlative responsibilities within their families and local communities including their lands [19,24]. Confucianism offers a compelling model of duty-based environmental ethics where

ecological care is understood as integral to personal virtue, social harmony, and cosmic resonance. A comparison of Western anthropocentrism, Rights of Nature, Daoism, and Confucianism is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Key Theories.

Concept	Western Anthropocentrism (for Contrast)	Rights of Nature (Contemporary)	Daoism	Confucianism
View of Nature	Separate from humans, primarily a resource for human use and control.	Nature as a rights-bearing subject with intrinsic value.	Autonomous, self-generating whole (Dao, ziran). Interconnected.	Intimately connected with human/cosmic order (tian ren he yi). Inherently valuable and moral.
Role of Humans	Masters or stewards with dominion over nature. Exploit and manage for human benefit.	Custodians, guardians, and advocates for nature's rights and well-being.	Embedded participants. Act in harmony with natural flow (wuwei). Avoid forceful intervention.	Active participants with a moral duty to align with cosmic order. Stewards.
Ethical Foundation	Human reason, rights, and utility. Often based on human welfare.	Intrinsic value of nature, inherent rights of ecosystems and species.	Attunement to Dao and ziran. Humility. Non-coercive action (wuwei).	Cultivation of virtue (ren, li). Moral duty (yi). Heavenly-human unity.
Governance Ideal	Centralized, bureaucratic, focused on efficiency and control.	Legal recognition of nature's rights. Varied models (co-governance, legal guardianship).	Minimal, decentralized, adaptive. Aligned with natural spontaneity.	Hierarchical yet reciprocal. Rulers model virtue. Order through li.
Concept of Self	Individualistic, rational agent, separate from nature.	Self-in-relation with the more-than-human world. Recognition of embeddedness.	Fluid, interconnected with the cosmos. Cultivate spontaneity and humility.	Relational self, defined by social roles and moral cultivation (ren).
Relationship with Others (Human/Non-human)	Primarily instrumental relationships with non-humans. Social contract among humans.	Recognition of non-humans as subjects with inherent rights. Reciprocal relationship with nature.	Interconnected, mutualistic. Respect for autonomy.	Reciprocal duties and obligations within social hierarchies (li), extended to nature.

2.4. Ongaro's Approach to Bridge Philosophy and Practice

Edoardo Ongaro's work [6,25] provides a potential to bridge these rich philosophical traditions (RoN, Daoism, Confucianism) with the practical realities of public governance and administration (PA). His critique of value-neutral, purely technical approaches to PA aligns with Daoist warnings against excessive intervention and Confucian emphasis on virtue. Ongaro argues that PA systems are not neutral but are value-laden social systems reflecting underlying worldviews. Therefore, transforming governance requires explicitly engaging with these foundational values (axiological grounding) and considering the ideational bases of PA.

His advocacy for an integrative approach to an ontological and political philosophical understanding of public governance and administration is also crucial, suggesting PA must develop the capacity to integrate diverse value systems—such as the rights-based logic of RoN, the spontaneity of Daoism, and the duty-based ethics of Confucianism—rather than imposing a single model. Ongaro's framework thus enables the conscious design of hybrid governance models that are philosophically coherent and culturally sensitive [26]. For instance, Daoist principles like wuwei can inform adaptive, decentralized administrative practices, while Confucian ren can ground ethical training for public officials. RoN principles can be integrated not just as legal rules, but as reflections of a deeper ontological commitment facilitated by this pluralistic approach.

Despite the potential synergies, significant literature gaps remain. While scholarship exists on RoN [8,10], Daoism/Confucianism and ecology [14,17,19], and Ongaro's philosophy of PA [6,26,27], systematic attempts to integrate all three are scarce. Research often explores RoN primarily through Western legal or ILK lenses, neglecting potential contributions from established Eastern philosophies. Conversely, studies on Eastern environmental ethics have rarely engaged deeply with contemporary governance mechanisms like RoN. Furthermore, the practical challenges of institutionalizing fundamentally different ontologies (e.g., relational vs. individualistic) within existing administrative structures, as highlighted by Ongaro and Ho [27], require more empirical investigation, particularly in diverse cultural and ideational contexts.

Therefore, this paper suggests that a relational governance framework consciously integrating RoN's legal innovations with the ethical principles of Daoism and Confucianism, operationalized through Ongaro's principles of axiological grounding and ethical pluralism in PA, can lead to more ecologically effective, ethically robust, and culturally resonant environmental governance than approaches relying on any single paradigm alone. Building on these theoretical foundations and the identified gaps, the following section examines concrete case studies to explore the practical application and challenges of integrating relational worldviews into governance.

3. Case Studies of Relational Ecological Governance

3.1. Latin America: Rights of Nature in Practice

Latin America stands as a crucial testing ground for the Rights of Nature, offering pioneering examples and complex lessons. Ecuador's constitutional inclusion of the rights of Pachamama in 2008 marked a globally significant moment, directly translating Indigenous Andean cosmologies of reciprocal care (*sumak kawsay*) and the Earth as a living entity into the highest law of the land. This legal innovation provided a basis for citizens to sue on behalf of nature, leading to landmark court victories, such as the Vilcabamba River case and rulings against mining concessions in sensitive ecosystems, demonstrating the potential for legal empowerment. Similarly, Bolivia's Law of the Rights of Mother Earth (2010) and subsequent framework law (2012) articulated a state commitment to living well (*vivir bien*) in harmony with nature, defining Mother Earth as a collective subject of public interest. These initiatives represent bold attempts to decolonize environmental law and embed biocentric principles within state governance [27].

However, the path from legal recognition to effective implementation has been challenging. In both Ecuador and Bolivia, the powerful rhetoric of RoN often clashed with the persistent pressures of resource extraction and development priorities driven by state agendas [28]. Critics have argued that state-led interpretations sometimes instrumentalize Indigenous concepts for political legitimacy while failing to fundamentally alter extractive models or fully empower local and Indigenous communities, who are the traditional custodians of these territories. The translation of holistic, relational worldviews into the specific articles and procedures of Western-influenced legal systems proved difficult, raising questions about whether "rights" are the most culturally appropriate or effective framework for capturing Indigenous ethics of care and reciprocity. These experiences underscore the critical gap between formal legal change and the deeper socio-political and cultural transformations required for genuinely relational governance, highlighting the need for approaches that address underlying power dynamics and integrate diverse knowledge systems more authentically. New Zealand's Te Awa Tupua model, establishing co-governance for the Whanganui River, offers an alternative pathway but also faces ongoing struggles in balancing Crown authority and Māori *tinio rangatiratanga* (sovereignty) [8].

3.2. China's Ecological Civilization: Rhetoric vs. Reality

China's "Ecological Civilization" (生态文明, *shengtai wenming*) initiative presents a unique and complex case study, representing a state-led effort to synthesize environmental governance with elements of traditional Chinese philosophy. Launched in the early 2000s and elevated to a core national strategy under Xi Jinping, enshrined in the constitution in 2018, *shengtai wenming* explicitly invokes concepts like Confucian unity of heaven and humanity) and the Daoist pursuit of harmony with nature. Official policy documents and rhetoric frame environmental protection not just as a technical challenge but as a moral and civilizational imperative rooted in China's cultural heritage, promoting values like frugality, respect for nature, and achieving a "Beautiful China". The initiative encompasses a vast array of policies, including ambitious targets for renewable energy deployment, afforestation programs, stricter pollution controls, the establishment of national parks, and the development of ecological "red lines" to protect critical ecosystems [28,29]. Some well-known measurable environmental improvements, particularly in urban air quality in major cities, have been attributed to the strong state interventions [30,31].

Despite this high-level political commitment and demonstrable progress in certain areas, a significant gap persists between the aspirational rhetoric of ecological harmony and the often-contradictory realities of implementation. The governance model remains predominantly top-down and state-centric, relying on centralized planning, bureaucratic targets, and campaign-style enforcement [32,33]. While capable of mobilizing resources rapidly, this approach often clashes with the relational, decentralized, and virtue-based ethics embedded in Daoism and Confucianism. Bureaucratic instrumentalism, focused on achieving quantifiable targets (e.g., GDP growth, specific pollution reductions), can overshadow holistic ecological considerations [34]. Local governments, facing conflicting mandates for economic development and environmental protection, may prioritize the former or engage in superficial compliance—the old saying "Heaven is high, and the emperor is far away" remains relevant [35,36].

Weak enforcement in some areas, lack of genuine public participation, insufficient institutional capacity, and the sheer scale of industrial activity continue to generate severe environmental problems, including soil and water contamination, habitat loss, and globally significant greenhouse gas emissions [31]. The emphasis on large-scale engineering solutions and technological fixes sometimes reflects a continued “controlling nature” mindset rather than Daoist wuwei or Confucian reverence. While *shengtai wenming* signifies a crucial shift in discourse and incorporates traditional symbols, its practical manifestation often struggles to escape the logics of centralized control and economic imperatives, highlighting the immense challenge of embedding deep philosophical reorientations within a powerful, modernizing state apparatus. This illustrates the difficulty Ongaro highlights in achieving genuine philosophical coherence when state structures may undermine relational principles.

3.3. Cross-Cultural Lessons: ILK vs. Eastern Philosophy

Comparing the philosophical underpinnings and practical manifestations of RoN in Latin America (often ILK-driven) with China’s Ecological Civilization (invoking Daoism/Confucianism) reveals both convergence and divergence, offering valuable cross-cultural lessons.

A key convergence lies in the shared rejection of purely instrumental views of nature and the affirmation of deep human-nature interconnectedness. Andean concepts like *Pachamama/sumak kawsay* and Chinese notions like *tian ren he yi* embody relational ontologies where human well-being is inseparable from ecological health. Both traditions emphasize responsibility and stewardship, albeit through different frameworks—communal reciprocity and kinship in Andean ILK versus moral self-cultivation (*ren*) and fulfilling one’s role within a cosmic order (*li*, Mandate of Heaven) in Confucianism [19].

However, significant divergences exist in emphasis and potential governance implications. ILK-driven RoN movements often prioritize community-level autonomy, direct spiritual connection to sacred lands/entities, and legal strategies focused on securing rights and resisting external encroachment, often by the state or corporations [37]. Governance frequently emerges from localized, consensus-based, or traditional decision-making structures.

In China’s case, complexity also remains. On the one hand, Daoism, while valuing local context and decentralization (*wuwei*, *ziran*), offers a broader philosophical critique of purposeful action and control itself, suggesting governance through minimal intervention and alignment with natural processes [14]. Confucianism, on the other hand, provides a rationale for ethically grounded, hierarchical governance where state actors hold a distinct moral responsibility for maintaining harmony, linking individual virtue directly to cosmic and social order. Its emphasis on self-cultivation as the foundation for ethical action offers a distinct contribution compared to frameworks focusing primarily on external rights or communal norms. China’s *shengtai wenming*, while rhetorically drawing on Confucian/Daoist ideals, primarily operationalizes them through a centralized state apparatus, contrasting sharply with the community-led or decentralized visions often associated with ILK or fundamentalist Daoism.

These comparisons highlight that “relationality” is not monolithic; different traditions offer diverse pathways and institutional logics for achieving human-nature harmony. In this vein, Ongaro’s call for ethical pluralism becomes essential here, suggesting that effective governance may require contextually blending elements—perhaps RoN’s legal standing, ILK’s community focus, Daoism’s adaptability, and Confucianism’s emphasis on duty and virtue—rather than seeking a single universal model [26].

These diverse global experiments reveal both the potential and the profound challenges of implementing relational governance. The following section will synthesize these lessons to explore the specific transformative capacities needed at the individual, social, and human-nature interface.

4. Building Transformative Capacities in the Relational Framework of Ecological Governance

Shifting towards genuinely ecological governance demands that specific transformative capacities be built within communities, institutions, and in how human beings relate to the broader natural world. This isn’t about applying single solutions but about weaving together the strengths of different perspectives discussed above: the legal recognition offered by RoN, the process-oriented wisdom of Daoism, and the virtue ethics and responsibility found in Confucianism. Understanding how these diverse values shape administrative action is the key to making such kind of relational framework practical [26]. Three aspects can be highlighted.

First, an ethical administration should be built based on ecological virtue. Effective ecological governance depends significantly on the character of those involved. Confucianism’s focus on *ren* offers a path to cultivate empathy and broaden our sense of moral responsibility to include the non-human world. This aligns with calls to nurture an

“ecological self”, where environmental connection is integral to a flourishing life [38]. Daoism adds crucial dimensions of humility and respect for natural processes (*ziran*), challenging purely managerial mindsets through the practice of *wuwei* (non-coercive action) [39]. It also lays the basis for reducing people’s desire for short-term gains stemming from exploiting nature. This goes beyond simple awareness to foster ecological virtue ethics within public administration. Administrators must engage in continuous moral development, understanding that their ethical conduct underpins public trust. Cultivating virtues like justice, courage, and truthfulness becomes essential for resisting institutional pressures that might favor short-term gains over long-term ecological health. Ultimately, sustainable actions flow from these internal qualities and virtues.

Second, hybrid, adaptive governance structures should be designed. Institutions must embody relational principles. This involves navigating the interplay between different philosophical orientations. While Confucianism’s emphasis on social roles and duties might provide structure, it needs to balance with the Daoist preference for adaptive, decentralized systems sensitive to local context, as well as community autonomy, which is often central to RoN movements rooted in Indigenous knowledge. Rather than choosing one approach, the most promising path involves creating hybrid governance structures. Such structures could blend centralized ethical oversight and standard-setting with significant local implementation, community co-management, and flexible practices informed by Daoist adaptability. This institutional pluralism, capable of integrating diverse knowledge and responding to change, is far better suited to the inherent complexity of socio-ecological systems than rigid, uniform models [40].

Third, embrace cosmic responsibility beyond legal rights. Arguably, reshaping the human-nature relationship requires looking beyond purely human-centered views and even expanding beyond legal rights alone. Recognizing nature as a legal subject through RoN is a crucial step away from viewing it as mere property. Daoism deepens this by highlighting reality as an interconnected, dynamic flow (*Dao*), encouraging attunement to processes over static entities [14]. Confucianism provides a powerful cosmological grounding with *tian ren he yi* (unity of heaven and humanity), framing the human-nature relationship as part of a larger cosmic and moral order where nature holds inherent value [19]. Synthesizing these perspectives supports a move towards Earth Jurisprudence—frameworks acknowledging our dependence on the health of the entire Earth community [41]. This viewpoint sees nature not just as possessing rights, but as the primary source of the underlying “laws” governing life, urging us to align our human systems—legal, economic, social—with ecological realities. It fosters a sense of kinship and reciprocal duty that enriches the legal recognition of rights, moving towards governance rooted in profound respect for the entire community of life [8].

5. Policy Implications

Operationalizing a governance model informed by RoN, Daoism, and Confucianism requires deliberate policy interventions to embed relational ethics into legal frameworks, institutional structures, and administrative practices. This moves beyond superficial adoption of concepts towards systemic reform grounded in philosophical coherence.

First, relational legal frameworks that integrate rights with responsibilities need to be developed. While RoN establishes nature’s rights, Confucian ethics emphasize the correlative duties of humans. Policies could include hybrid statutes explicitly linking recognized ecological rights (e.g., a forest’s right to integrity) with legally defined duties of care for state agencies, corporations, and citizens, grounded in principles like *ren* or *tian ren he yi*. Constitutional preambles or environmental laws could articulate these underlying ethical principles of interconnectedness and stewardship. Furthermore, guardianship or trusteeship models, like Te Awa Tupua, where designated representatives hold fiduciary duties towards nature, provide a concrete mechanism for operationalizing rights and responsibilities [42], ensuring accountability grounded in legal standing and ethical commitment.

Second, adaptive institutions and community governance are crucial for reflecting Daoist principles of decentralization, flexibility, and attunement (*wuwei*, *ziran*). Policy should actively empower local communities through devolved authority and resources for environmental management, establishing multi-stakeholder ecological councils with genuine decision-making power [32,43]. Recognizing and supporting traditional and community-based conservation initiatives (e.g., sacred groves, Indigenous Protected Areas) acknowledges their effectiveness and integrates local knowledge. By harnessing the traditional communities, for instance, community members’ short-term and excessive material desires would be gradually reduced through a more gentle persuasion approach. Environmental regulations should incorporate adaptive management principles, allowing flexibility, learning, and responsiveness to changing ecological conditions and local feedback, rather than relying solely on rigid, top-down commands. This institutional pluralism can better accommodate the complexity and dynamism of socio-ecological systems.

Third, cultivating virtue in public administration is essential for ensuring that policies are implemented with the appropriate ethical orientation, aligning with Ongaro's call for axiological grounding. This requires moving beyond purely technical training for policymakers and administrators to include robust ethics education focused on relational worldviews, ecological literacy, and the cultivation of virtues like humility, empathy, patience, and responsibility. Performance metrics for public officials should be reformed to incorporate ecological health and sustainability outcomes, balancing or replacing purely economic indicators. Creating institutional spaces for intercultural dialogue, bringing together diverse knowledge holders (scientists, Indigenous elders, community leaders, philosophers, *etc.*) with policymakers, can foster mutual understanding and support integrating pluralistic values into decision-making processes, enhancing governance's legitimacy and effectiveness.

6. Conclusions

This study has constructed and suggested a “relational ecological governance framework” in confronting the contemporary context of escalating global ecological crises. Developed through rigorous cross-cultural philosophical dialogue and a critical analysis of diverse governance practices, this framework distinctively integrates the legal innovations of the Western Rights of Nature (RoN) movement with the profound ethical insights of Eastern Daoist and Confucian philosophies. This integration is facilitated and grounded by Edoardo Ongaro's perspectives on the necessity of ethical pluralism within public administration. The findings compellingly demonstrate that this synthesized theoretical paradigm possesses the capacity not only to transcend the inherent cognitive constraints and limitations of conventional Western anthropocentric governance models but also to furnish a philosophically coherent and practically viable pathway towards the essential transformation of global ecological governance.

The theoretical innovation of this framework manifests significantly in three core dialectical syntheses. Firstly, it achieves a crucial paradigm shift concerning “natural subjectivity” by synergizing the legal empowerment inherent in RoN with the deep ontological reflections embedded within Eastern philosophies, moving nature's status from a mere legal object to a relational agent. The generative ontology found in Daoist *ziran* (natural spontaneity) effectively deconstructs anthropocentric logics of control, while the expansive Confucian cosmological vision of *tian ren he yi* (unity of heaven and humanity) infuses the concept of natural rights with a necessary dimension of ethical responsibility. Secondly, leveraging Ongaro's theory of ethical pluralism, the framework transforms seemingly disparate philosophical traditions into operational governance principles. Daoist *wuwei* (non-coercive action) informs adaptive governance strategies, while Confucian *li* (ritual propriety) guides virtue cultivation, establishing a dynamic equilibrium between administrative decentralization and necessary ethical discipline. Thirdly, the framework reconstructs the triadic “self-society-nature” relationship, proposing synergistic transformation pathways encompassing ecological virtue cultivation, resilient institutional design, and a broadened cognition of cosmic responsibility, thus moving decisively beyond limited, unidimensional governance reforms.

Practically, the analysis of cross-continental case studies reveals the inherent complexity and context-dependency of implementing relational governance. Latin American RoN practices, while pioneering, demonstrate the potential risks of ontological dilution and superficial adoption when translating rich Indigenous cosmologies into established modern legal systems, serving as a caution against inadvertent “green colonialism”. Conversely, New Zealand's co-governance model for the Whanganui River, grounded in the Treaty of Waitangi, exemplifies the creative potential for integrating traditional ecological knowledge and modern jurisprudence effectively. China's ambitious Ecological Civilization initiative presents a paradox, juxtaposing traditional philosophical symbolism with path-dependent, often centralized governance logic, highlighting the profound tension between the institutionalization of philosophy and the philosophizing of institutions. These diverse experiences collectively affirm that the successful implementation of relational governance necessitates legal innovation and a fundamental value awakening among administrative actors, the adaptive restructuring of governance architectures, and deep-seated cultural-cognitive paradigm shifts.

Nevertheless, significant challenges persist for future studies. The inherent tension between Confucian hierarchical ethics and Daoist preferences for decentralization remains largely unresolved within practical governance models. Furthermore, the virtue-based ethical demands of relational governance often conflict sharply with entrenched bureaucratic imperatives focused on measurable efficiency. The ever-present risk of discursive appropriation, particularly within existing North-South power asymmetries, also requires continuous vigilance. Addressing these complex issues demands sustained, deeper interdisciplinary dialogue and ongoing praxis-oriented experimentation. As ecological governance undertakes the critical transition from mere technical adjustments towards a more fundamental reconstruction of civilizational values, this relational framework serves dually: as a distinctive Eastern response to

Western eco-critical theories and as a vital channel for Chinese wisdom to engage meaningfully in global governance discourse. Ultimately, when the ancient vision of tian ren he yi meaningfully converges with modern RoN jurisprudence within governance praxis, guided by pluralistic principles, we may witness the gradual emergence of a more inclusive, just, and resilient ecological civilization paradigm, where legal rigor and ethical cultivation jointly orchestrate humanity's essential reharmonization with the vital cosmic rhythm of ziran.

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Author Contributions

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Not applicable.

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Not applicable.

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

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