

COMMENT ON "THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHY TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF CONTEMPORARY ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION"

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COMMENT ON “THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHY TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF CONTEMPORARY ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION”

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The relationship between humans and nature is an enduring theme in the development of human society. Throughout history and in the present day, it has sparked profound reflection and inquiry into this connection, challenging people to move beyond the confines of narrow anthropocentrism. This calls for a broader, more holistic perspective to assess both the world and humanity’s place within the greater community of life.

The reflection of Chinese scholars on the relationship between man and nature has a long and rich history. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, Confucianism, with “benevolence” and “ritual” at its core, advocated for the restoration of the Zhou dynasty’s system of rites to rebuild social order. It also emphasizes the importance of benevolent governance in ruling the country. This ideological system reflects the values and political ideals of the old aristocratic class. Confucianism embraces a “people-oriented” view, highlighting the central role of humans in the universe and their relationship to all things. This perspective outlines a social structure with a clear hierarchy of respect and status, as well as a natural order where man and nature coexist according to the laws of nature. In ecological terms, Confucianism has two key characteristics. First, it regards human survival standards as a benchmark for determining how to gather resources from nature—such as trees, fruits, vegetables, and hunting wild animals. Second, it advocates for the development and utilization

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of natural resources in tandem with their protection, ensuring that humans have enough to meet their basic needs while promoting the harmonious coexistence of man and nature. This reflects how Confucianism strives to protect the natural environment in practice.

Taoism also embraces a people-oriented view, but with the goal of returning to nature and aligning society with the “Tao” they advocate – the natural law inherent in their hearts. By implementing the concept of “Tao,” the social structure is envisioned to revert to the clan-based life of small states with few people. In *Knowledge Rambling in the North*, Zhuangzi states, “The operations of Heaven and Earth proceed in the most admirable way, but they say nothing about them,” which directly reflects Taoism’s unique aesthetic perspective on nature (Hu, 2016, p.75). The sages know how to appreciate the profound beauty of heaven and earth, so they follow the natural order and act without haste. However, in reality, humans are often nurtured by nature without fully recognizing it. When humans truly learn from heaven and earth, they should understand that nature is not for conquest. Zhuangzi rejects anthropocentrism, emphasizing that there is no hierarchy of value between humans and all things. Humans are not the masters of the universe. Only by harmonizing with heaven and earth can they enter a realm of freedom. This state of unity with nature is also the state of “forgetting both the self and the world,” as advocated by Taoism. The cultivation of great virtue is achieved through living harmoniously with birds and beasts and gathering with all things.

Legalism emerged at the end of the Warring States Period, when the competition for power among the princes reached its peak. It had two main characteristics. First, Legalists were adept at absorbing and adapting ideas that aligned with their interests from other schools of thought. Second, their philosophy retained a strong utilitarian focus. Overall, the ecological perspective developed by the Legalists shares certain similarities with Taoism. Taoist political thought has long advocated following the way of heaven, believing that people should be kept ignorant and unaware in order to restore the desire-free state of primitive society. However, when the Legalists absorbed these ideas, they did not accept them wholesale; instead, they modified them in accordance with their own class interests. In Legalist political discourse, the idea that humans should respect the laws of nature is emphasized. Han Fei, building on the Legalist respect for nature’s laws, advocated for transforming these natural laws into an ecological framework that is suitable for human survival, thus creating the ecological principle of “understanding the laws and transforming nature.”

Mohism, emerging from the civilian class during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, centers on practical application and represents the interests of the common people. Its core principle, “universal love,” is supported by ideas like “non-aggression” and “respect for the virtuous,” addressing the needs of society. Though Mohism faded after the Warring States period, its ideals of social equality, fairness, and justice continue to influence contemporary Chinese thought. Mohist ecological views stem from the simple,

everyday ecological understanding of the people, contrasting sharply with other schools and introducing some superstitious elements. In Mohism, ghosts and gods are seen as forces that reward virtue and punish wrongdoing, acting as both a moral guide and a check on rulers. Unlike the all-powerful gods of Abrahamic religions, these supernatural beings reflect the people's consciousness, embodying their pursuit of justice and social fairness.

Compared to Taoism, the uniqueness of Mohist ecological philosophy lies in its focus on concrete actions rather than a macro perspective on the harmonious coexistence of man and nature. While Taoism emphasizes a broader view of harmony, Mohism concentrates on specific practices, such as “frugality,” that govern the relationship between humans and nature. Mohism does not delve deeply into the macro ecological harmony but rather focuses on tangible methods. In response to extravagance and waste, Mohism introduces the idea of “minggui” (clear spirits), emphasizing the presence of supernatural beings that can oversee such behavior. This belief forms the ecological concept of “frugality in use and burial” in Mohist thought. Mohzi combines these views with the simple emotional connection that ordinary people have with nature, constructing the ecological thought of “universal love and frugality” in his political discourse.

In general, Confucianism, Taoism, Legalism, and Mohism each emphasize different aspects of ecological thought. Confucianism advocates “benevolent love for all things,” calls for appropriate use of resources, and opposes excessive exploitation of nature, reflecting a focus on ecological ethics. Taoism, based on the principle of “the Way follows nature,” promotes alignment with natural laws and the harmonious unity of man and nature, emphasizing the importance of following the natural processes and their laws. While Legalism does not emphasize ecology as strongly as Confucianism and Taoism, its focus on law and order indirectly supports the maintenance of ecological balance by regulating human behavior to reduce environmental harm. Mohism centers its ecological philosophy around “universal love, non-aggression,” and “frugality in use and burial,” advocating for simplicity, opposing wastefulness, and promoting the efficient use of resources. The combined philosophies of these four schools form the foundation of traditional Chinese ecological thought, offering valuable insights for addressing the issues of sustainable development and the relationship between man and nature in contemporary society. This our comment about Zhang and Xu (2024)

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