

The Insights of Traditional Chinese Philosophical Thought on Contemporary Ecological Civilization Construction

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Abstract: Chinese traditional philosophy contains rich ecological cultural thoughts, including Confucianism's idea of "unity of heaven and humanity", Daoism's idea of "following the Dao", and Buddhism's idea of "equality of all living beings." These thoughts provide theoretical references for the construction of ecological civilization, offer insights for transforming production and lifestyle patterns, and hold significant importance for educating the entire society about ecological civilization awareness.

Keywords: Chinese traditional philosophical thought; Ecological civilization construction; Inspiration

Since the reform and opening up, China's economic development has been evident to the world. However, alongside this rapid economic growth, it has also brought about an ecological crisis characterized by the depletion of resources and the deterioration of the environment. Therefore, building an ecological civilization has become an urgent matter, and the construction of ecological civilization in contemporary China has also become a topic of great practical significance.

1. The Concept of Ecological Civilization in Traditional Chinese Philosophy

China's traditional philosophy is represented by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, each having its own views and concepts regarding ecological civilization. We need to reasonably and comprehensively evaluate the ecological civilization thoughts within Chinese traditional philosophy, extracting the essence and discarding the dross, modernizing and transforming these theories to guide China's ecological civilization construction.

1.1 The Confucian Thought of "Unity of Heaven and Humanity"

The concept of "the unity of heaven and humanity" has a long history. For a significant period in history, Chinese society was predominantly agrarian, with people having limited power and a strong dependence on nature. This led to a keen interest in natural phenomena such as the growth of all living things and the changes in life. Confucianism, from its own perspective, understood and explained the relationship between humans and nature, attempting to grasp the laws of nature and make them serve humanity.

Confucianism places great importance on the relationship between humans and nature. They advocate the ecological philosophy of "endless life," attempting to explore ways for the continuation of human life while ensuring that all things thrive endlessly and infinitely. Through studying Confucian texts, one can find many instances that reflect the idea of "unity between heaven and humanity." For example, the Analects records Confucius saying, "What does Heaven say? The four seasons operate, and all things grow. What does Heaven say?" Here, Confucius uses the phrase "What does Heaven say?" twice to emphasize that the natural laws of the universe are unchangeable and represent an irresistible mysterious force. The alternation of the seasons and the growth of all things must follow the principles of the Way of Heaven. Humans are just a tiny part of this vast universe, and humanity must follow the way of heaven to sustain life and thus achieve endless continuity.

In "The Analects: Shu Er," there is the idea of "fishing without a net, hunting without shooting at roosting birds"; in "Mencius: King Hui of Liang, Part I," there is "Chopping wood with an axe at the right time in the mountains, timber cannot be exhausted," which calls for following the growth patterns of living beings and fully utilizing natural resources in life and production. It can be said that Confucianism proposes the idea of "the unity of heaven and humanity," emphasizing that people should follow the developmental laws of nature and pursue a fundamental consistency between humanity and nature. Confucianism advocates that to truly achieve "the unity of heaven and humanity," one must maintain benevolence, righteousness, and moral conduct, respect nature, and cherish life.

1.2 The Daoist thought of "Dao follows nature"

"Dao follows nature" originates from the philosophical thought of the "Tao Te Ching." Its original meaning is that the principles reflect-

ed by the “Dao” are “natural.” Daoism believes that all things, like humans, are transformed and born by the Dao and are equal. Therefore, they possess the same value and dignity as humans, with no distinction between high and low, noble and humble. Laozi proposed that “all things carry yin and embrace yang, and through the interplay of qi, achieve harmony.” This means that although the natural world is vast and complex, it is formed by the mutual interaction, agitation, and harmonization of yin and yang, thereby balancing into a harmonious state. Yin and yang are the two unified aspects within things, which, when combined, become a unified harmonious entity. The same goes for ecosystems; if any species undergoes a change, it will trigger a chain reaction of domino effects, thereby endangering ecological balance. Therefore, Laozi proposed the idea of “Dao follows nature,” advocating that people respect the laws and principles of nature according to the principles of “Dao” and practice non-action governance.

Overall, Daoist thought emphasizes that the Dao generates all things, and humans naturally follow the Dao. Although the Dao is omnipresent, it is also natural and spontaneous. Under the concept of the Dao, everything exists because of the Dao, so people must respect the original state of all things and not impose interference.

1.3 The Buddhist concept of “equality of all beings”

“All beings are equal” reflects the Buddhist understanding of ecological issues. Buddhism views the concept of “dependent origination and emptiness” as its perspective on the origin of the universe and the world. Since all things in the world arise due to conditions, they inevitably go through the process of “when conditions are sufficient, they arise; when conditions are exhausted, they cease.” Therefore, in essence, the “birth and death” of all things in the world are the same, with no distinction between high and low. And things themselves have causal relationships, mutually dependent on each other, forming the “one realm of Dharma”^[2]. To illustrate this point, Buddhism has proposed many well-known phrases, including “universal salvation of all beings” and “benefiting all living things.” These phrases view the human responsibility to maintain the survival of all things as a duty bestowed by heaven, which should be actively embraced and regarded as a conscious behavior. In the “Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya,” the Buddha affirmed the merit of planting flowers, grasses, and trees, stating that the pruning of plants should align with their growth. New shoots of plants should not be harmed; instead, one should wait until the shoots grow lush and full before making appropriate cuts. Humans should not engage in actions that harm the forests. As can be seen, Buddhism believes that flowers, plants, and trees, like humans, possess Buddha nature. Therefore, when tending to flowers, plants, and trees, one should respect their growth patterns and not arbitrarily destroy them.

2. The Contemporary Value of Ancient Chinese Ecological Thought

2.1 Provided theoretical references for the construction of ecological civilization

Ecological civilization construction is a key aspect of our country’s current social development. Achieving “harmony between humans and nature” is a principle followed in contemporary ecological civilization construction. In ancient Chinese thought, there are many ideas that reflect “harmony between humans and nature.” These ideas hold reference value for the current ecological civilization construction. Taking the concept of “unity of heaven and humanity” as an example, the ecological holistic view of this concept holds that: humans are a part of nature, and they should not blindly destroy the environment but instead strive to protect it, as this is how the “way of heaven” is manifested. Whether it is the Buddhist concept of “equality of all beings” or the ideas of “Tao follows nature” and “unity of heaven and humanity,” none of these place humans above nature. This provides a correct and reasonable perspective for the construction of contemporary ecological civilization. In the construction of an ecological civilization, we must establish a holistic ecological perspective, fully respect and revere nature, follow the natural laws of growth and change, and seek new paths for coexistence between humans and nature from the standpoint of their wholeness.

2.2 Provides a reference for transforming production and lifestyle patterns

Ancient thought contains a wealth of ecological civilization ideas, which are closely related to modern life. Some of these ideas coincide with the research findings of modern civilized society, showcasing the profound wisdom of ancient sages. In ancient Chinese society, agrarian civilization was predominant, and natural conditions often played a crucial role in determining agricultural productivity. To achieve greater yields in the harsh natural environment, ancient sages hoped to create a new society where humans and nature coexisted harmoniously and equally through ideas like “unity of heaven and humanity.” This shift aimed to correct the erroneous behavior of excessively exploiting nature, ultimately ensuring the long-term development of society. Just like the Daoist concept of “Dao follows nature,” which deeply reveals the laws of growth for all things, people should cherish natural resources while enjoying material pleasures. By centering on the natural laws of growth, we should strive to protect the natural environment through various methods, achieve rational and orderly development, and avoid the rampant deforestation and over exploitation present in today’s society. Only then can we achieve the sustainable use of natural resources.

2.3 It is of great significance for the education of ecological civilization awareness in the entire society

Ancient Chinese thought focused on the relationship between humans and nature, and “respect for life” is an important component of

ancient ecological wisdom. The idea of treating all things with “benevolence” has become well-known among the public, such as the Buddhist concept of “saving all beings from suffering” and the Confucian idea of “harmony between heaven and humanity.” In the context of educating the entire society about ecological civilization awareness, leveraging ancient ecological wisdom can achieve good educational results. Therefore, in the process of contemporary ecological civilization construction, we should permeate the ecological theory of “benevolence towards all things” to the general public, combining ecological ethical concepts with traditional ecological ethical concepts, and respecting life. First of all, in the education of ecological civilization awareness throughout society, it is necessary to extend moral care from humans to the natural world, striving to build a moral community of all beings with nature. The origin of this moral community is the unity between humans and nature. New norms for adjusting the relationship between humans and nature should be established, and this ecological ethical thought should be put into practice, fostering the idea of respecting and caring for nature, and reflecting the idea of “equality of all beings” and “harmony between heaven and humanity.” Secondly, it is necessary to practice the value of equality among all things. Through the previous study of ancient ecological civilization, it was found that there is a significant amount of content in our traditional thoughts that highlights the idea of “equality among all things.” Although there are differences in “categories” between humans and all things, the relationship between the two is equal. Just as the idea of “equality of all beings” emphasizes that humans should respect the natural laws of development and pay attention to the value of each life form, it calls for humans to protect and respect life, highlighting the unique value of each life form.

3. Conclusion

In contemporary society, the issue of ecological crises has garnered widespread attention. The rich ecological wisdom embedded in our ancient ecological thoughts provides valuable experience for the current construction of ecological civilization in our country. In the ongoing process of building an ecological civilization, we need to deeply understand the concepts of “unity of heaven and humanity,” “following the natural way,” and “universal salvation,” relying on the excellent traditional culture of ancient times to create a new environment of harmonious development between humans and nature, thereby achieving fresh air, flowing green waters, and perpetual blue skies.

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