

# The Ecological Ideology in Traditional Chinese Culture

## L'IDIOLOGIE ECOLOGIQUE DANS LA CULTURE TRADITIONNELLE CHINOISE

Liu Jingwei<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Traditional Chinese Culture includes many ecological ideas. This paper studies about some characteristics of them in three aspects. First, the feature that man is an integral part of nature in Traditional Chinese Culture provides potential foundation for harmonic coexistence of man and nature. Second, the concept of “the axes and bills enter the hills and forests only at the proper time” in Traditional Chinese Culture provides a rational basis for harmonic coexistence of man and nature. Third, the orientation of “taking the greatest law so you can live” in Traditional Chinese Culture provides emotional foundation for harmonic coexistence of man and nature

Key words: Traditional Chinese Culture, Ecology, Ideology

**Résumé:** La culture traditionnelle chinoise comprend pas mal des idées écologiques. Cette thèse présente fait une recherche sur ses caractéristiques en trois aspects : Premièrement, la nature que l'homme est une part intégrale de la nature dans la culture traditionnelle chinoise provient de la fondation potentielle pour la coexistence harmonieuse de l'homme et de la nature. Deuxièmement, le concept de « les axes et l'annonce n'entrent dans les montagnes et des forêts qu'à un moment juste » dans la culture traditionnelle chinoise fournit une base rationnelle pour la coexistence harmonieuse de l'homme et de la nature ; Troisièmement, l'orientation de « respecter la plus grade loi et tu peux vivre » dans la culture traditionnelle chinoise fournit une fondation émotionnelle pour la coexistence harmonieuse de l'homme et de la nature.

**Mots-clés:** a culture traditionnelle chinois ; l'écologie, idéologie

Today, the ecological problem has already become the focus of the world concern. It has been an important cultural theme that nature returns in 21st century .The concept of harmonic coexistence of man and nature advocated by Traditional Chinese Culture is just the reasonable content that an advantaging ecological theory should be seriously considered. Therefore, to study and explore on the ecological ideology in Traditional Chinese Culture and to absorb its reasonable portion have very important and realistic significances.

### 1. THE FEATURE THAT MAN IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF NATURE IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE CULTURE PROVIDES POTENTIAL FOUNDATION FOR HARMONIC COEXISTENCE OF MAN AND NATURE

In Traditional Chinese Culture, the ideology that “man is an integral part of nature” and that “man and nature are an integral body” has been the domain ideology for a long time.

It is described in the Book of Changes that “To heaven belongs to (the number) 1; to earth, 2; to heaven, 3; to earth, 4; to heaven, 5; to earth, 6; to heaven, 7; to earth, 8; to heaven, 9; to earth, 10. The numbers belonging to heaven are five, and those belonging to earth are (also) five. The numbers of these two series correspond to each other (in their fixed positions), and each one has another that may be considered its mate. The heavenly numbers amount to 25 and the earthly to 30. The numbers of heaven and earth together amount to 55. It is by these that changes and transformations are effected, and the spirit-like agencies kept in movement.” “The Book of Changes is a book of wide comprehension and great scope, embracing everything. There are in it the way of heaven, the way of man, and the way of earth. It then takes (the lines representing) those three powers,

<sup>1</sup> Northeast Forestry University, China

\*Received 15 January 2006 ; accepted 4 March 2006

and doubles them till they amount to six. What these six lines show is simply this, --the way of the three powers.”(The Book of Changes)

From the above, we can see that the ancient people have referred the embryonic form the theory that man is an integral part of nature.

Until the times of Mencius, this theory isn't promoted. It is said that “He who has exhausted all his mental constitution knows his nature. Knowing his nature, he knows heaven.” (JinXin by Mencius). This theory is developed by Cheng brothers lately, which tells “the man is described by natures, and the sky is nothing different.” (Posthumous Papers from the Completed Works of Cheng Brothers), so man and nature are integrated in spirit.

Down to Han Dynasty, Dong Zhongshu incorporated the theory of YingYang and the theory of five fundamental elements into Gongyang Commentary. The theory that man is an integral part of nature was set up in system. Dong Zhongshu said: “Human body is made from sky's numbers. Man's kind blood is made from sky's will. Human lofty virtue is made from sky and land. A man, good or not, is decided by warm or clear sky. Human's pleasure or anger is related to hot or cold sky. Human's destination is made from the four seasons. (Human is made from sky, the Prosperity of the Spring and Autumn)” “The Sky also has expression of pleasure and anger, just like human beings. To classify by category, nature and man exist in an integral party.” (On Yin and Yang, the Prosperity of the Spring and Autumn)

Down to the Song Dynasty, Cheng brothers, great Confucian idealist philosophers, gave further description for the idea of integrated nature and man as “Man, sky and land are the same thing in the significant. The only difference is that man is the smallest.” “The sky and man have no differences in nature. There is no need to mention their integration.” (Ershang, Quotation from Cheng Brothers). They suggested not using the word of integration since this word might remind separation of man from the sky.”

ZhangZai also said: “Qian is the father, and Kun is the mother, man is hid and unified between the sky and the land. The fortification of the sky and the land is our body. Our nature is the main lead of the land and the sky. We are compatriot and without any differences.” (Zhengmeng)

There is no doubt that the theory of integrated man and nature is influenced by the same theory of Taoists during its formation and development. In the works of LaoZi and ZhuangZi, the founders of Taoism, they described Taoists' understanding on the concept of an integrated man and nature.

Lao Zi said: “Man abides by the law of the land which complies with the law of the sky. And the sky abides by the law of Taoism which adheres to the law for nature.” (LaoZi, Chapter 25)

Zhuang Zi said: “The sky stays inside. Man stays outside. Human virtue is in conformity to sky. If we obey sky's law, we will be successful.” (QiuShui, ZhuangZi)

The so-called law of man and nature and the inside sky and outside man, all of which means that virtue of sky depends on man himself. It is exactly an alternative definition of the integrated virtue of man and nature.

In conclusion, from “double the three systems” expressed in the Book of Changes to “the heart of kind man and all things of nature are integrated party” described by Wang Yangming, the theory of integrated man and nature in ancient Chinese culture calls for harmonic coexistence of man and nature. The theory of the integrated man and sky makes man and nature an integrated party in the inside of man's heart rather than to conquer and reform nature which is regarded as an inactive and incapable object, but a deep brand made on the potential consciousness layer for harmonic coexistence of man and nature. This concept requires that man does not only have to constrain his morality in the coexistence of man and nature, but also to strengthen his intrinsic good knowledge for his fusion in to nature. This is a concept that regards all things as one integrated body, but not a norm of morality that separates things into two subjective and objective parts. It is an organic theory on basis of harmonic development of integrated body that contains wide ecological meaning.

## **2. THE CONCEPT OF “THE AXES AND BILLS ENTER THE HILLS AND FORESTS ONLY AT THE PROPER TIME” IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE CULTURE PROVIDES A RATIONAL BASIS FOR HARMONIC COEXISTENCE OF MAN AND NATURE**

China entered a well-developed civilized agricultural society and a rational thinking system was formed long ago, when man had to exploit natural resources, paid attention to protect the ecological system. The Book of Rites says: “We can only enter forest after the forest becomes withered.” (Laws of King, the Book of Rites) Mencius said: “if the axes and bills enter the hills and forests only at the proper time, the wood will be more than can be used.” (King Hui of

Liang, Mencius) The thought for control of utilization of natural resources by constraining on felling times has far-reaching significance. Forest, birds, beats, and all living things are organic parts of the whole ecological system. In this system, excessive damages to any links will lead to serious damages to the whole system, and will bring disaster to human at last. Xunzi said: "Forest is the habitat for birds and beats." "Birds and beats will abandon withered forest." (Letter by Xunzi). Therefore, to protect ecological system, we have to carry out effective control on the development of resources, i.e. "Mountains, forests, rivers, and lakes must be restricted for cutting down and exploiting in certain periods." "When weeds and trees grow well, we shall not enter the forest to cut them. We shall let them keep growing." (Laws of King, Xunzi) "When we go fishing, we shall ban net with smaller holes in order not to catch small fish. When we go hunting, we shall not disturb all birds and beats." (Shu, The Confucius Analects). How advanced this philosophic thought was at that time? We admire the wisdom of our ancestors very much.

China is the first country to study the negative case in damaging ecological system. Mencius said: "The trees of Niu Mountain were very beautiful. Before being situated, however, in the borders of a large state, they were hewn down with axes and bills, and could they retain their beauty? Still through the activity of the vegetative life day and night, and the nourishing influence of rain and dew, they were not without buds and sprout springing forth, but then came the cattle and goats and browsed upon them. To these things is owing the bare and stripped appearance of the mountain, which when people see, they think it was never finely wooded. But is this the nature of the mountain? Therefore, if it receives its proper nourishment, there is nothing which will not grow. If it loses its proper nourishment, there is nothing which will not decay away." (Gao Zi, Part I, the Works of Mencius). The ecological thoughts with high philosophy in ancient Chinese culture glitter with wisdom sparks even today. Doesn't what we should learn today for the relationship between man and nature?

### **3. THE ORIENTATION OF "THE GREAT ATTRIBUTE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH IS GIVING AND MAINTAINING LIFE" IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE CULTURE PROVIDES EMOTIONAL FOUNDATION FOR HARMONIC COEXISTENCE OF MAN AND NATURE**

It is recorded in the Past Buddhist Stories that "A monk read FaHua sutra. All laws came from the basic place. The form of laws usually seemed to be prosaic and pedestrian which he thought over and over but still did not understand. Suddenly he heard nightingale's song, and realized, "All laws came from the basic place. The form of laws seemed to be prosaic and pedestrian. It was indeed that all flowers were blooming in spring. The nightingale was singing on willow tree. (Wudeng Huiwu, Vol. 6) We can compare this poem with Monk Lingyun Zhiqin's poem, which said: "Seeking the essence foundation for thirty years, leaves fall and grow again a few times, since I saw peach blossom, I had understood that the foundation was life." Such sudden realization considered that heaven and earth were full of vigor. That is the part of the essence of Chinese culture, in other words, the great attribute of heaven and earth is the giving and maintaining life. (Book of Changes)

It was said in the Book of Changes that "Vast is the 'great and originating (power)'" indicated by Qian! All things owe to it their beginning:--it contains all the meaning belonging to (the name) heaven. The clouds move and rain is distributed; the various things appear in their developed forms. The brightly sun revolves from the end to the beginning repeatedly, and how (the indications of) the six lines are accomplished, (each) in its season." "Complete is the "great and originating (capacity)" indicated by Kun! All things owe to it their birth:--it receives obediently the influences of heaven. Kun, in its largeness, supports and contains all things. Its excellent capacity matches the unlimited power (of Qian). Its comprehension is wide and its brightness great. The various things obtain (by it) their full development." The Book of Changes regards sky as the primary motive force of lives and considers life to be vigorous and restless. So, nature is an organic entity full of vigor. The true beauty and loveliness of nature lie on lives. Zhuang Zi said: "The land and sky are so beautiful that we cannot utter and explain it exactly. Four seasons have their own regulations which cannot be transferred by people's motivation. Universals move in a certain pattern and most of them people can't announce." (Tour to the North, Zhuangzi) In Traditional Chinese Culture, we do not put man in an opposite position against all other things, but put man's life and all lives together in an eternal life. So, the Book of Changes says that all things appear on the basis of sky and land. Between land and sky are full of all things. Zhuangzi said: "All things grow according to their own state. Their growth or death are decided by the change of laws. (The Law of Sky, Zhuang Zi) He just regarded the lives in the universe as the most valuable things. So the Chinese culture is a culture that

treasures lives. The lives here are not only people's lives, but also lives of all things in the universe. So ecological concepts are connected with the essence of Chinese culture. The expression of such connection indicates people's lives with the life of nature. The Book of Song says: "The crane is singing in the heaven; the songs can be heard on the vast land; fishing is swimming in lake or river. That is their happy homeland. Here, the flying crane, swimming fish are organic part of man's happy life. We can only understand love if we enjoy happiness. In harmony of man and nature, who would like to harm the lives that are not the objects to be reformed or conquered by man. If explained by Tradition Chinese Culture, it may be the result of god and things with their movement. The poem by Tao Yuanming says: "Within the world of men I make my home, yet din of horse and carriage there is none; you ask me how this quiet is achieved:--With thoughts remote the place appears alone. While picking asters "beneath the eastern fence my gaze upon the southern mountain rears; the mountain views are good by day or night,

the birds come flying homeward to their nests. A truth in this reflection lies concealed, but I forget how it may be revealed." (Moving, Tao Yuanming's Works) This is the spiritual combination of man and nature, but not giving in charity of love intentionally, and this indicates awareness and true love to beautiful lives. The intimate emotion to nature in ancient Chinese culture is not only based on people themselves, but on all things. Sympathy is not only paid to the destiny of people, but all living things in the world. It is not a dialogue between separated understanding people and those living things to be conquered. This is a spiritual indication in Chinese culture that the greatest law of sky and land is life. Human's love to lives decides harmonic coexistence of man and nature in term of emotion. Man's life and lives of all things are connected with each other. The explanation to ecological theory in term of emotion in traditional Chinese culture is just what modern ecological theory should pay attention to. It is of great meaning for us to study and it will benefit us all.

#### **THE AUTHOR**

**Liu Jingwei**, Associate professor at Northeast Forestry University; His academic interest is the ecoculture and ecosafety. Contact: College of Humanity, Northeast Forestry University, Harbin, Heilongjiang, 150040, P. R. China.

E-mail : dlliujingwei@yahoo.com.cn