

INHERITANCE AND ENLIGHTENMENT OF SUSTAINABLE HUMAN SETTLEMENTS UNDER THE TAOIST HOLISTIC VIEW

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Abstract: Taoism and the sustainable development of human settlements have many things in common. This article first explains the thinking characteristics under the Taoist holistic view from two perspectives: i. individuals and countries, and ii. nature and society. And then, it expounds on the unique values formed under the Taoist holistic view through the ontology, methodology, and values of Taoism. Next, it elaborates on the relation of Taoism and the sustainable development of contemporary human settlements to show the transcendence and forward-looking nature of Chinese Taoist thinking. Finally, it analyses the intrinsic holistic value and China's 'community of life' theory to show the inheritance and development of Taoism in contemporary times.

Keywords: Cheng Fu, Contemporary China, Holistic Thinking, Shared Community of Life, Urban Civilisation.

1. Introduction

The contemporary urban civilisation was mainly built based on anthropocentric values after the Western Renaissance. Both scientific technology and the market economy with currency at the core have contributed to today's modern society dominated by consumer culture. However, in the absence of the concept and practice of sustainable development, there will be worldwide problems such as chemical pollution and biological

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extinction that endanger human survival. Western culture is rooted in nomadic and marine culture (Weber 13) and lacks the cultural heritage of harmony between humans and land, which makes it difficult to implement sustainable development goals. The cultural advantage formed by China's long-term agricultural civilisation is more adapted to promoting sustainable development. In 2020, China proposed the Carbon Peak and Carbon Neutral plans at the 75th United Nations General Assembly to achieve peak carbon dioxide emissions by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060. This is a concrete step China has taken toward the goal of sustainable development.

Taoism is regarded by the famous ecologist Groy as the only hope for saving the world for the East (Raymond 1333) and by the historian Fairbank as the greatest thought in the global traditional culture (5). James Miller considers it a "green religion," which can solve the current ecological crisis and sustainable construction problems (12). Under the holistic thinking of Taoism, Chinese culture has always adhered to the concept of balanced development. However, as modern ships and guns from the West opened up China's nearly 400-year-old closed-door situation, this balanced thinking was greatly impacted. Since China's Reform and Opening Up (from the 1980s to the present), China has neglected the importance of sustainable development while accelerating its pursuit of the Western economic civilisation. Environmental damage and biological imbalances are becoming more and more serious.

At the 15th Global Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity held in Kunming on 21 October 2021, China put forward the theme of building "a Shared Future for All Life on Earth" and promoted the formulation of the "Post-2020 Global Biodiversity." It is an initiative and appeal put forward to countries all over the world in the face of ecological problems. It is also a reflection on the construction of modern civilisation from the traditional Chinese cultural view. The author believes that the institutional framework is an external action-binding force. To achieve the sustainable development goals, it is necessary to explore the inner relation between people

and the planet by the fundamental methodology and values. This article will start with the relation between traditional Taoist thought and the goal of sustainable development of human settlements, to discover the brilliant wisdom rooted in this ancient oriental thought in contemporary China and the world, and further explore the connotation and value of the shared community philosophy.

2. The Speculative Features of the Taoist Holistic View

Some scholars believe that Taoism is centred on nature (Liang 16) and compare the "unity of nature and man" of Taoism with Western anthropocentrism. They argue that under the mainstream analytical thinking paradigm in the West, humans are the measure of all things. Taoism does not emphasise any one side but offers a holistic perspective, balancing all aspects of an interdependent relationship. Taoism believes that all creatures are equal, and human beings and nature are interdependent. It is difficult for humans to obtain happiness when they are separated from nature. Taoism focuses on the integrity, interrelation, and inclusiveness of all creatures. Taoism is a logical thinking from the whole to the individual. It pays more attention to the dialectical unity of the organic whole between people and nature, showing wisdom beyond personal cognition. "The two Qi (substances), Yin and Yang, conflict and intermingle with each other to form a uniform and harmonious state, thus forming a new unity (Lao 17)." Taoism has derived a survival mode of pursuing balance under holistic thinking.

2.1. The Integration of Individuals and Countries

Taoism advocates co-constructing the body and the state in terms of personal self-cultivation and state governance. It pursues "If you love the people and govern the country, can you be ignorant?" and "The sage has no fixed will, and takes the will of the people of the world as his own will" (Lao 18). Taoism not only pays attention to internal self-cultivation and longevity but to loving the people and governing the country externally. "One person's body is the image of a country," and the goal of self-cultivation and national governance is a win-win "co-

construction of body and state. ... In terms of self-cultivation and governance of the country, first to put strict requirements on yourself; cultivate one's moral qualities and treat people in virtue in order to strengthen one's foundation in the world" (Guang and Du 22). This emphasises self-cultivation, starting from cultivating one's own mind and influencing others to change so as to achieve the purpose of harmonious governance of the country. It demonstrates that Taoism theory of a learning both sound in theory and practice, which regards individuals and the country as an organic unity.

2.2 The Integration of Nature and Society

Taoism believes that "The nature and the earth rely on human beings to keep a foothold, and humans would haven't been born without the nature and the earth. ... Therefore, nature, earth, and humans are the three virtues and they are the ancestors of all creatures" (Zhang 23). It explains that though humans are the teacher of all things, nothing is superior or inferior; all creatures are equal. There is no subject-object relationship between nature, earth, and human beings. In fact, complying with nature is the basic view of Taoism regarding the ecological environment. The Taoist philosophies of 'unity of nature and man' and 'following the nature's course' mean that human beings should conform to and obey nature's laws rather than change them. "The existence and development of everything in nature has its own inherent regularity, and all of them obey certain natural laws, which shows that the way of nature cannot be violated" (Wang 16). "People interfering with nature with good yet wrong intentions will eventually lead to the demise of nature" (Zhuang 11).

Following the nature does not mean doing anything, but doing things according to the laws of nature instead of interfering with the natural laws. When people take materials to nourish their bodies, they must take them in appropriate ways. "Nature, earth, and man all need to act in accordance with the laws of nature so that they can be in harmony with nature" (Lao 18). It talks about the use of nature-based on the premise of following nature, which is in sharp contrast to the

transformation of nature in Western culture. In dealing with the ecological environment, Taoism advocates observing nature from the perspective of Tao, not from the perspective of individuals. "Living in the world, human must understand and master the laws of nature, live in harmony with nature, so that the planet we live on can achieve peaceful and sound development and that human can live a happy life for a long time" (Yu 22). Human beings should relate to nature from a macro-social perspective than from a micro individual perspective. Fools change the world, while the wise conform to nature to realise the realm of obeying nature and the unity of nature and society.

3. Sustainable Development and the Holistic View of Taoism

The holistic view of Taoism that regards nature, earth, and all things as a dialectical unity takes the 'Tao' that runs through the whole world as a perspective and includes all things in the universe and time in it in a magnificent way. The ontology, methodology, and social values transcend across time and nationalities.

3.1 The Ontology of Self-Transcendence in Human Nature

Lao Tzu called the law of operation that transcends the material world 'Tao.' He said,

There is a kind of object that is chaotic, boundless, without image, without sound. It existed long before the creation of the world. Unique, unparalleled and unmatched, it follows its own laws and will never change. And it runs in cycles that will never stop. I can't describe it exactly as it really is, so I can only use Tao to call it in general terms and barely describe it as 'The Great' (Lao 23).

Taoism respects nature and believes that "The nature and earth treat all things equally being kind to all things on one aspect while being indifferent to all things on the other aspect" (Lao 19). If human beings do not conform to the laws of nature, they will be punished by nature inevitably. Therefore, Taoism pursues a harmonious unity of nature and human.

3.2 Methodology of Being Inert and Keeping Fewer Desires

In terms of methodology, Taoism says, “If I do nothing, the people will cultivate themselves; if I am quiet, my people will naturally follow the right path; if I do not guide them, my people will be self-supportive; if I have no desires, my people will become simple” (Lao 25). Being inert and keeping fewer desires is a methodology (Qiao 138-141), which is a summary of the dialectical thinking that fewer desires lead to better development. “Human activities follow the law of earth; the movement of the earth follows the law of nature; the operation of nature follows the principles of Tao” (Lao 32), and the operation of “Tao adheres to its own law.” People shall follow the law of Tao because Tao has the characteristics of inertia (i.e., inaction), which reflects the harmony of the order of the universe. Tao is the driving force and the law of the development of all things. Nature is the foundation of Tao that surpasses personal desires. “Keeping fewer desires” is a restriction on human desires, which not only balances human physical and mental development but also help maintain a happy life while being humble to nature.

3.3 Values Across Time and Space

Taoism recognises the law of causal circulation in human society and calls it ‘Cheng Fu,’ which is similar to the meaning of ‘karma and retribution’ in Buddhism. “People today have to bear the consequences of the good and bad actions of their ancestors, which is called Cheng. Similarly, the good and bad actions of today’s people will also have an impact on future generations, which is called Fu” (Yu 34). This is a causal relationship between predecessors and later generations. Once the predecessors do not bear the burden, the future generations will inevitably suffer from the disaster. *Tai Ping Scripture* mentions that individuals must “take on” the responsibilities of five generations before and after, which is called the bearing cycle. It makes people more cautious and does not escape punishment by chance. Therefore, it is necessary to “plant trees by predecessors, and enjoy the shade of future generations” (Yu 78). It does not care about hard work but cares about future generations and pursues

intergenerational efforts. In terms of social development, it reflects that Taoism considers the development of one generation and pursues the inheritance and sustainable development between the previous and later eras from the perspective of intergenerational fairness and harmony of time and space (Yu 56).

4. Holism and Harmony: Taoistic View

Under the goal of holism and harmony, Taoism forms a perfect fit with the contemporary sustainable development goals regarding human settlements. The living environment is the basic living condition of human beings. It is different from the indulgent personal hedonic lifestyle that pursues sensuality, regardless of environmental pollution and biological extinction in the current consumer civilisation. Taoism pursues an environment where people, animals, and nature live in harmony, away from the hustle and bustle. Taoism proposes that "you must not burn wild mountains and forests, cut down trees, pick grass and flowers indiscriminately, throw poison into deep pools and rivers and seas, drain the water, fish, hunt, hurt and kill sentient beings" (Lao 47). Taoism attaches great importance to every plant and tree in nature. It aims to achieve harmony with a sincere attitude and build a living environment in which nature, earth, and humans are integrated and blended. In Taoist thought, the ideal paradise of peace and happiness on earth is a 'blessed land' far away from the hustle and bustle and with a beautiful environment such as the three sacred mountains of Penglai, Abbot, and Yingzhou, recorded in *Historical Records: Book of Fengchan*. All of them are immortal places with wonderful mountains, beautiful waters, and many animals and plants. It can be seen that Taoism pursues a harmonious living environment where "Nature and the earth coexist with me, and all things and I are unified as one" (San 43)

4.1. Promote Social Justice and Pursue Zero Hunger

Taoism pursues "helping people in need or poverty" and "the connection of wealth," eradicating poverty and realising social justice. Solving the problem of hunger is the basic guarantee for

sustainable development. The uneven distribution of resources among countries leads to uneven distribution of wealth, which seriously affects the protection of the basic rights of people to live. The Taoist *Tai Ping Scripture* states that “Wealth is in possession of nature and earth, and it is used to support people ... it is not for one person”, “or if you own wealth in the hundreds of millions but refuse to save the poor, you will die of hunger and cold, and the sin will not be eliminated” (Yu 49). Taoism thinks that property is mere worldly possessions that are not physically connected with oneself and that it is not necessary to be obsessed with property. People with wealth should follow the principle of nature “to give out the excessive possessions” (Lao 59) to help the poor and to achieve “the commonwealth of the big family and the relatives, and the hungry neighbors and friends” (Wen 81). It is to finally reach a harmonious social interpersonal relationship, reducing the rich and poor gap caused by social competition and realising the basic living security and life fairness.

4.2 Advocacy for Good Health and Well-Being

Taoism advocates good deeds to ensure good health and harmonious life. “The villain sacrifices his body for profit, and the scholar sacrifices his name for his body.” Chuang Tzu took an example in Pianmu:

Since the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, people all over the world have lost their nature because of worldly possessions. Villains die for their own interests, gentlemen for their reputation, literati for their family, while sages for the world. Although these people have different undertakings, they all would die for their sake (Zhuang 106).

Fame and fortune are worldly possessions; dying for them is against the original intention of human existence. In terms of health preservation, Taoism believes that human life is composed of vitality, and the confluence of vitality produces life, and the dissipation leads to death (Zhuang 102). One can promote self-cultivation by understanding nature’s laws, returning to nature, and following nature. Being content and

always being happy and giving up distracting thoughts and opposing indulgence can make people return to natural humanity and achieve the goal of maintaining a long life and improving their quality of life.

Taoism advocates the principles of staying simple, having fewer desires, reducing waste, abstinence, contentment and constant happiness and strongly opposes the possessiveness of material things and competitions. *Tao Te Ching* states, "I have three treasures, which I hold and treasure, the first is kindness, the second is frugality, and the third is that I dare not be the first in the world" (Lao 99). According to *Wei Dao Chapter*, desire is poison and the root of murder. Those who have no desire will have nature and earth. A quiet life and spiritual enjoyment of supreme freedom is a truly rich life, which is in stark contrast to the current quest for material enjoyment and neglect of spiritual tranquillity.

4.3 Emphasis on Teaching by Practices

Taoist education attaches importance to learning from nature, and understanding the laws of nature. It emphasises 'nature's course' and adhering to the learning principles. *Tao Te Ching* states that the sages uphold the 'Tao' as the rule of the world, which could be applied to education, i.e., the emphasis on enlightenment by practices. Taoism emphasises "teaching by practices," according to which human talents need to be discovered, stimulated, and guided naturally. Taoism advocates the principle of teachers' setting themselves as examples. This immersive teaching or education not only educates students from a rational perspective but also encourages students to follow teachers' practices so as to achieve the teaching goal of "integration of physical and moral education" (Zhuang 78), which is also the pedagogical approach applied and advocated by the contemporary education.

4.4 Promote Gender Equality

Patriarchy originated from the social and material life and production methods of primitive tribes. With the development of farming civilisation and private ownership, patriarchy also

came into being. In Zhou dynasty, Zhou Tianzi established a patriarchal system linked by a blood relationship, and men were given the mission of carrying on the family line, which laid the foundation for the unequal economic status of men and women. In the external environment, where the world generally recognises that men are superior to women, Taoism has always insisted on equality between men and women. The Taoist saying that "Nature is Father, and Earth is Mother" is a manifestation of the personification of nature and earth. It is said in the *Tai Ping Jing Collected and Proofed* that "men and women are the foundation of Yin and Yang. The nature and earth are half Yin and half Yang, and both men and women are indispensable" (Wang 45). From this, we can realise the equality of men and women in Taoism; A similar idea was also expressed in the *Tao Te Ching*. The Valley Spirit never dies. It is named the Mysterious Female. And the Doorway of the Mysterious Female is the base from which Nature and Earth sprang. In the *Tao Te Ching*, the female is elevated to the level of "the foundation of nature and earth" (Lao 78). In addition, Taoist mythology has always attached great importance to female gods, like Mazu (in Taiwanese Fairytale) and Wangmu Niangniang (the Queen Mother in Chinese Fairytale) occupy important positions in the traditional Chinese mythology system. It also can be manifested in the story of Zhang Daoling (the founder of the Tianshidao) and his wife; their ascending to nature also showed the concept of equality between men and women from a mythological perspective (Zhuang 88).

5. Conclusion

The community theory proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping did not happen overnight. As early as 1982, when Xi Jinping took office in Zhengding county, Hebei province, he realised the importance of harmonious coexistence between human beings and the natural environment. In 1985, during his tenure in Fujian, Xi Jinping proposed the strategic ecological concept of "Ecological Fujian" (Xi 5). And in 2005, he proposed the view that "Lucid water and lush mountains are invaluable

assets." In 2008, President Xi formally proposed the concept of "Shared Community of All Life" when he took office in the central government (Xi 4). By 2012, the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed to build a socialist ecological civilisation and further advocated the awareness of "a community with a shared future for mankind" (Xi 8). In 2013, Xi Jinping advocated the construction of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and proposed to build "a community of shared future" for the Belt and Road Initiative (Xi 6). In 2017, President Xi proposed "building a community with a shared future for mankind and achieving win-win sharing" at the UN headquarters in Geneva (Xi 9). In April 2021, at the invitation of President Biden, President Xi attended the leaders' Climate Summit on the occasion of "Earth Day" and put forward the concept of "a shared community of life between man and nature" at the meeting. From 1982 to 2021, the Shared Community theory has undergone more than 40 years of precipitation and improvement.

The Shared Community theory advocates win-win cooperation, abandons zero-sum games, and shows overall values that transcend local and national interests. The law of the jungle should not constrain the development of intelligent human beings. Human beings should pursue the values of collaboration, mutual assistance, equality, and mutual benefit guided by even greater human goals. It is even more necessary to stand on nature's perspective instead of human perspectives, paying attention to the living environment of animals and plants and making a better future and harmonious environment for all living beings. Humans should let go of short-sighted political prejudices, jointly face climate change, marine pollution, and other planetary issues, and promote the healthy development of the people and planet. The Community theory shows the importance of environmental justice and social justice. "Ecological prosperity leads to the prosperity of civilisation, and ecological decline leads to the decline of civilisation" (Xi 29). President Xi Jinping emphasised that people and the planet are a unity. While enjoying the material development, people should

protect the ecological civilisation. Only through sustainable development, a livable environment, and healthy development of ecological industries can human beings obtain sustainable happiness.

President Xi's concept is highly consistent with Taoism's philosophy of conforming to the laws of nature and guiding human activities in proper ways. It combines conforming to nature and transforming nature. The Doctrine of the Mean says, "by fully developing the nature of things, we can help the nature and earth evolve and nurture all things" (Kong 23), which is the best state of the harmony between Tao, nature, and humans.

In today's world, the global economy, energy, environment, and humanities are all facing key transitions in sustainable development. In order to achieve the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, human beings shall break the barriers of countries, regions, religions, and cultures and let go of short-sighted thinking and behaviour. Community theory summarises the essence of Taoism and represents the inheritance and development of Taoism in modern times. The theory also provides a valuable reference for contemporary society to deal with the relation between humans and nature and promote the realisation of sustainable development goals.

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