

# The Construction of Chinese Ecological Civilization from the Perspective of the Thought of “The Unity of Heaven and Mankind”

Haozhe Yang

School of Marxism, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua Zhejiang, China

## Abstract

The thought “The unity of heaven and mankind”, emphasizes the harmony of man and nature, and pays attention to the unity of heaven and humanity, which contains the moral realm of “the holy man and the heaven and earth combine their virtue”, so that it can help people to ease the confrontation relationship between man and nature, and break the interpersonal tension and the embarrassing situation between society and people. It is worthy of our earnest excavation, summary, reflection, and reference to give people a new perspective as well as a new way of thinking to resolve the present environmental and social problem. To address current realistic problems and dilemmas between man and nature, man and environment, man and society, and man and man, the contemporary ecological civilization of China needs to constantly absorb the wisdoms of ecological ethics from the Confucian thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind”.

## Keywords

The Unity of Heaven and Mankind; Ecological Civilization; The Perspective of Ecological Ethics.

## 1. Introduction

The thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind” which contains rich ethical wisdom and moral significance, plays an important guiding role in the construction of ecological civilization in contemporary China. Therefore, under the call of public opinion and the national policy, the needs of China's sustainable development and progress of the times, the topic of the construction of ecological civilization in contemporary China under the vision of “The unity of heaven and mankind” is put forward. In response to the call of the public and the times, the Communist Party of China has included ecological progress in its five-sphere integrated plan, which gained a deeper understanding of the value of nature with a clearer definition of ecological progress.

The ecological civilization understood and planned in contemporary China not only exists in the internal spirit of human beings but also the behaviors in the external natural environment. Through the moral responsibility of human beings to nature, the natural environment is imprinted with the mark of civilization. As the carrier of human civilization, nature requires a leap in the way of transformation between man and nature, which is no longer the way of material exchange in the past, but the realization of comprehensive freedom between man and nature. The full freedom of nature and the full realization of its intrinsic value are based on civilized consciousness, supported by social means, and guided by civilized behavior.

## 2. The Combinations of the Thought of “The Unity of Heaven and Mankind” with the Thought of Ecological Civilization

The construction of ecological civilization in contemporary China is different from the pollution control and ecological restoration in the traditional sense, but it is a reflection of

human virtue and active exploration of human ecological existence. The thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind” affirms the idea that man is the product of nature. The ecological consciousness of respecting the value of life, advocating love for all things, and the ideal pursuit of “matching nature with virtue”, has multiple origins and correspondence with the construction of ecological civilization in contemporary China.

### **2.1. Harmony between Man and Nature: The Common Core Value**

Harmony between man and nature is the core value of both the Confucian thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind” and the construction of contemporary ecological civilization. “It is a call for the cultural and social transformation to overcome this way of thinking, which is now embodied in and reproduced by our dominant institutions.”[1][1] The harmony proposed by the Confucian thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind” does not mean that people give up the cognitive activities of understanding nature, but advocates a new perspective and a new way to understand and treat nature. The change of cognition is achieved through the cultivation of human virtue, and it is necessary to raise people’s understanding of their existence to a deeper level, which is consistent with the construction of contemporary ecological civilization in China, which attaches great importance to the all-round development of people and advocates a lifestyle of high quality, and high standard. The harmony pursued by the construction of ecological civilization in contemporary China is not to return to the free unity of man and nature in the natural economy era, but to establish a new relationship between man and nature by affirming man’s dependence on nature, which is a harmonious state. In this harmonious state, man and nature coexist in harmony, and natural resources will be put to the best use. There will be no waste of resources, environmental damage, excessive cutting, excessive exploitation, and other damages to the ecological environment. In this state of harmony, the natural environment will be improved, the intellectual, moral, scientific, cultural, and health standards of the people will be improved, and further to form good morality and interpersonal relationship, the gap between urban and rural areas and the gap between rich and poor lines will be narrowed, socialist democracy legal system will be improved.

### **2.2. Respect for Nature: A Consistent Practice Code of Conduct**

The construction of ecological civilization in contemporary China from the perspective of “The unity of heaven and mankind” is a process of sinicization of Marx’s ecological thought and the practice of transforming, beautifying, and shaping nature. In this practice, we, as human beings, must respect nature, follow its ways, and protect it. To respect nature is to respect the value of nature which can be recognized from two aspects. On the one hand, it refers to the effect of nature on human beings, which can be referred to as the external value or use value of nature. On the other hand, it refers to the self-expression of nature or the ecosystem, which can be referred to as the intrinsic value of nature. It is the ecological balance effect caused by the interlocking interconnection between all things in nature. The intrinsic value of nature exists objectively and is not dependent on human cognition. Human is not the only measure of natural value cognition. The construction of ecological civilization in contemporary China must be based on respect for nature and be consistent with the goal of natural value. The Confucian thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind” advocates the ecological consciousness of respecting the value of life, which is the embodiment of restoring the genuine face of nature. The relationship between man and nature is not the relationship between who acts on whom, but either side is the premise and basis for the existence and development of the other side. A good natural environment is the beginning of creating a good social environment. The progress of human civilization requires respect for nature firstly. Only by observing the laws of nature can human civilization endure and continue. As Kant put it, “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more

frequently and persistently one's meditation deals with them: the starry sky above me and the moral law within me.”[2] Kant admired the charm of nature and the moral law in his heart, respected nature, and held a reverence for nature. The conformity to nature advocated by contemporary Chinese ecological civilization under the Confucian perspective of “The unity of heaven and mankind” is not simply dependent on nature. Conformity to nature, means a submissive adaptation, the process by which an individual or group adjusts its behavior to suit others or the environment. In the process of transforming or beautifying nature, people should adjust their behavior to unify it with the inherent law of nature and ecology. Submissive adaptation is by no means a passive blind adaptation to nature, or a follow by nature, but a proactive understanding of nature, adaptation to the laws of nature, and shaping a more beautiful nature based on the discovery of the beauty of nature, to optimize the relationship between human and nature. It means that in front of nature, human beings should adjust the traditional human-centered behavior, consciously control their activities within the range that can guarantee the support of their ecological system, give full play to their subjective initiative, to understand, transform and beautify nature based on respecting the interests of nature. Only in this way can it reach the desired standard of ecological civilization construction in contemporary China, which is harmonious and unified between man and nature. “Heaven law matters” in the thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind” is by no means passive, blind obedience to nature. In Xunzi’s A Discussion of Heaven, he said, “Heaven has its seasons; earth has its riches; man has his government. Hence man may form a triad with the other two. But if he sets aside that which allows him to form a triad with the other two and longs for what they have, then he is deluded.”[3] It means that the heaven has laws of changing seasons, the earth is rich in natural resources, and people have ways to govern nature. People should act in accordance with the laws of nature based on giving full play to their subjective initiative, and should not blindly follow nature. They should combine the favorable conditions of ecological conditions, geographical conditions, “man has his government”. This means that heaven, the earth, and human beings should do their respective duties and live in harmony with each other. If we do not respect the laws of nature, adapt to nature, and actively transform nature, the construction of ecological civilization in contemporary China can't achieve real success, and the natural environment dilemma, survival crisis, and other phenomena in the current ecosystem will continue to exist, threatening the long-term development of human society.

### **3. Enlightenments from the Thought of “The Unity of Heaven and Mankind” to the Construction of Ecological Civilization**

Human beings are a part of nature. They exist in nature, but they need to make use of and transform nature to achieve the purpose of development. Therefore, humans must live in harmony with the nature, and at the same time they must transform nature based on abiding by the laws of nature. The relationship between man and nature is a basic problem in history, and the thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind” provides a basic principle for solving this problem. Under the guidance of this principle, Chinese philosophers put forward a lot of naive points of the protection of natural resources, the rational utilization of resources, and the sustainable development, some of which are still practical and worth learning from today. In recent years, China has attached great importance to the construction of ecological civilization. The 17th CPC National Congress first proposed the requirements for the construction of ecological civilization, the 18th CPC National Congress first proposed the construction concept of “the Beautiful China initiative”, and the 19th CPC National Congress report pointed out that “We should have a strong commitment to socialist ecological civilization”. China's efforts to promote the construction of ecological civilization need to learn

from many viewpoints of the thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind”, but at the same time, we also need to combine the thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind” with the times and carry out creative transformation and innovative development, to make practical contributions to the solution of ecological and environmental problems. In the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind” has positive implications for the construction of ecological civilization, which can be summarized as follows.

### **3.1. Ensuring Harmony between Man and Nature**

Various problems of ecological civilization are becoming increasingly prominent. We need to give a new meaning and a new mission to the relationship between man and nature for the new era, which requires us to take comprehensive steps to deepen reform, ensure coordinated implementation of the five-sphere integrated plan and the four-pronged comprehensive strategy, protect natural ecosystems, and accomplish the arduous task of building a socialist ecological civilization with Chinese characteristics in the new era. The thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind” helps us to re-examine the relationship between man and nature, which tells people that the relationship between humans and nature is not opposite but equal, so people need to respect the right to the existence of all creatures in the world. Human beings and other life together constitute a living community, interrelated with each other. The thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind” can help us realize the importance of all things in nature and remind us that we should not treat nature with the attitude of conquest, but with the attitude of “love” and “equality”, to achieve the harmony between human and nature. For a while, we sacrificed the ecological environment for temporary economic development, which made China’s economic construction has made historic achievements, but the ecological environment has been seriously damaged, leaving behind a large number of environmental problems. In the new era, we need to promote ecological progress, not only to solve these ecological problems left over from history but also to avoid creating new environmental problems in the course of future development. So we must realize that lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets and act on this understanding, need to cherish the environment as we cherish our own lives, work to develop a new model of modernization with humans developing in harmony with nature.

### **3.2. Rational Coordination of the Development and Protection of Nature**

Human survival needs to obtain living materials from nature, and how to coordinate the exploitation and protection of nature, the thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind” can also bring us enlightenment. People treat nature carefully, but it does not mean people cannot do anything. We can see that the thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind” emphasizes the importance of nature and human’s love for nature, but it does not prohibit people from developing nature. Instead, it reminds people that they should comply with nature, reduce the damage to nature. Engels once said, “Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us.”[4] Human beings and nature are interdependent and interrelated. The destruction of the natural environment by human beings will inevitably threaten the survival of human beings in the end. According to China’s history records, the Loess Plateau, where deserts are expanding, were once covered with lush mountains and lucid waters, suitable for farming and livestock. However, due to indiscriminate felling, deforestation, and reclamation, the ecological environment in many places has been seriously damaged. Therefore, in the new era, we must pursue with firmness of purpose the vision of innovative, coordinated, green, and develop spatial layouts, industrial structures, and ways of work and life that help conserve resources and protect the environment, to make people’s development and protection of nature more

reasonable. As Xi Jinping's report of the 19th CPC National Congress put it, "Only by observing the laws of nature can mankind avoid costly blunders in its exploitation."

### **3.3. Strengthen Confidence in Ecological Culture**

Man has shouldered a kind of ecological moral responsibility in front of nature. The construction of ecological civilization is a green development, containing philosophical wisdom that man can rationally treat the relationship between human beings and nature to achieve sustainable development, which embodies a spiritual realm that is highly responsible for everything in the world. It is a state of existence and development between man and nature, which means that human beings acquire various resources and material subsistence to meet the needs of survival through the development and utilization of nature. The continuous evolution of ecological civilization is an important aspect of social civilization. It has realized the transcendence of traditional civilization, agricultural civilization, and industrial civilization, and embodies the progress of human civilization form, civilization consciousness, and civilization behavior. In essence, it is a new civilization realm. The ecological civilization is the treasure of Chinese traditional culture that has both historical values and contemporary spirits. Fundamentally speaking, traditional culture has always had a profound impact on the development of various undertakings of a country, but the degree is different. In the face of the impact of the occidental thought pattern and the penetration of the ideological field, we cannot reconstruct China's ecological theory by copying the western model, and cannot lose the inheritance of the traditional cultural spirit by being completely westernized. We should build stronger cultural confidence, strengthen our nation's historical and cultural identity, clarify the historical development of the ecological thought traditional culture context and logic, based on consciously follow the inner clues of the development of the times. From the methodology system of Chinese ancient sages enhanced their development intrinsic logical support and theoretical motivation, we can explore contemporary carrier of the traditional culture in the development. To build stronger ecological culture confidence, We should better build an ecological philosophy and ecological civilization system of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era, so that it can take its rightful place in the scope of the development of ecological civilization in the world, and at the same time provide China with reference for other countries to better resolve the ecological crisis.

### **3.4. Applying Philosophical Thinking to Promote Ecological Progress**

The progress of the society benefits from science and its development, so the construction of ecological civilization also needs the development of science and technology. The continuous development of new technology makes it more effective for people to control environmental pollution and improve the quality of the ecological environment. However, we cannot promote ecological civilization with scientific and technological thinking, since in many cases, technology is a double-edged sword. The development of technology not only provides us with new methods to resolve environmental problems but also greatly enhances the power of human beings to transform nature. If we do not use it properly, it will also lead to ecological damage, environmental pollution, resource depletion, and other problems. "If the civilization of the future is to be an ecological civilization, this will be because its cosmology will be based on ecological thinking." [5] Nowadays, an increasing number of people tend to take philosophical thinking into the construction of ecological civilization. The innovative development of the life community thought of the relationship between man and nature formed in ancient China and the reflection of reality by comparing the ecological harmony thought and ecological ethics of the ancient people under specific historical conditions can provide a relatively direct driving force for the construction of ecological civilization of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era. It can provide useful ideas for the

modernization of harmonious coexistence between man and nature. With philosophy thinking, we know clearly that we need to promote the construction of ecological civilization, not only guided by the thought of “The unity of heaven and mankind”, correctly understanding the relationship between human and nature, coordinating the protection and development of the natural, at the same time, we should also rely on the progress of science and technology, legal protection, institutional innovation and institutional implementation, etc. “When we measure the progress of a society by its growth in freedom, we measure it by the increasing development and exercise on the whole of those powers of contributing to social good with which we believe the members of the society to be endowed; in short, by the greater power on the part of the citizens as a body to make the most and best of themselves.”[6] Only by considering ecological civilization in an all-round way can the construction of ecological civilization be realized at an early date.

#### 4. Conclusion

The construction of ecological civilization is to enhance sustainable development to the level of green development, to leave space for future generations to develop, and leave more ecological assets. Ecological progress is an important part of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics. It bears on the well-being of the people, the future of the Chinese nation, the Two Centenary Goals, and the realization of the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation. The Central CPC attaches great importance to ecological progress, and has issued a series of major decisions and plans to promote ecological progress so that major progress and positive results have been achieved. The guiding principle of the new era of ecological civilization construction is the specific guidance general requirements for the construction of ecological civilization in our country, which is put forward closely combined with the new era of the construction and development of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Through combing and analyzing, it is the inheritance, innovation, and development of traditional Confucian philosophy, which originated from traditional Confucian philosophy.

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