

East Asian Cultural Perspective of Contemporary Environmental Ethics

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In the study of contemporary environmental ethics, some new trends of thought in East Asian cultural perspectives have emerged, which are of great value for further coordinating the relationship between human and nature. Although the Western non-anthropocentrism environmental ethics has played a positive role in environmental protection, it also has various shortcomings in theory and practice. It needs to supplement and improve with the new environmental ethics of East Asian culture. These environmental ethics thoughts based on the traditional view draw on the perspectives of Western phenomenology and cognitive philosophy, and propose new ideas with East Asian cultural characteristics from the aspects of practice subject, realization way, and value judgment criteria, which help to reveal deep connection between ethics and native culture, and makes environmental ethics play a more effective role in protecting the ecological environment and promoting the development of human society.

Keywords: environmental ethics, East Asian culture, native, value

Introduction

In the study of contemporary environmental ethics, some new trends of thought in East Asian cultural perspectives have emerged in recent years, which have important implications for solving the problems encountered in the development of Western environmental ethics. Western environmental ethics is influenced by the view of the opposition between the subject and the object, assuming the existence of the objective natural value of “independent from human” and requiring people to protect it. However, it has encountered various problems in both theory and practice. In contrast, the new environmental ethics in East Asian cultural perspective is based on the traditional view of nature, epistemology, and practice in East Asia. From the very beginning, people and the environment are regarded as an organism in which one shapes each other. So, the value of this organism is understood as open, relational, and generative. In particular, a new generation of environmental ethics scholars in Japan put forward some environmental ethics systems based on local practice and local history and culture, highlighting a series of advantages of native life as the carrier of environmental value, which is physical empirical, relational, integral, and dynamic. These new systems made the view of East Asian traditional culture gain contemporary expression in environmental protection practice. The significance of these thoughts is worthy of further discussion. The most important feature of the environmental ethics trend from the perspective of East Asian culture is the ability to revisit the true value appeal by participants in past environmental protection practices. This is not only helpful in overcoming the theoretical and practical difficulties in current environmental protection activities, but also in promoting the philosophy of value, an

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in-depth discussion of development and the meaning of human existence.

Limitations of Western Environmental Ethics

In the 1970s, the study of Western Environmental Ethics in Europe and the United States was a series of theoretical discussions and environmental protection practices aimed at “environmental protection” in the context of ecological destruction and environmental degradation in modern times, in which non-anthropocentrism plays a leading role. Despite the various theoretical systems, Western environmental ethics is characterized by the separation of human from the environment, and takes the “pure natural” values as the theoretical basis of environmental ethics. At first glance, the value horizons of non-anthropocentrism do show significant “progress” compared with the previous interpersonal ethics, but whether this “progress” really exceeds the framework of traditional Western traditional thinking patterns remains to be discussed. The non-anthropocentrism tendency of Western environmental ethics first separates the human being from the environment, tries to transcend the position of “human”, and “objectively” recognizes the “environment” and the “intrinsic value” of the “nature” in which people living in. This kind of thinking means pursuing objectivity, isolation, and staticness. Non-anthropocentrism environmental ethics is based on the progress of naturalistic knowledge, such as “higher animals”, “rare species”, “ecosystem”, “wilderness”, etc.; the living ecological environment is abstracted into some isolated concepts that is independent of each other, and then they explore the value of environmental elements around these concepts. This mode of thinking does not go beyond the traditional thinking framework of the West, but just inherits it. However, such approach has shown great limitations.

First, the “intrinsic” value of environmental factors in isolation will inevitably lead to inconsistencies in the identification of value subjects, which in turn leads to practical difficulties. Different researchers will identify different value subjects according to their own knowledge, and conflict with other researchers. For example, Singer only affirms the intrinsic value of higher “emotional” animals, while Taylor also affirms the intrinsic value of lower animals and plants (and even microbes). Ecocentrist advocates the use of ecosystems as the subject of value, which is bound to contradict the Biocentrist in protection policies. In practice, the value opposition of different value subjects creates a dilemma in the coordination of contradictions. If it is recognized that non-human species have the same level of rights as human beings, the interests between human and non-human species will fall into a “zero-sum” trap that is difficult to reconcile. Many environmental protection strategies require human beings to give up space for “non-human species”, making confliction between people and animals or plants. In the case of non-human species, when there is a possible conflict between alien species and native species, protectors often resolutely remove alien species. When the ridiculous problem of “taking antibiotics to kill microbes in the body violates the principle of biological equality” was raised, theorists have to hurry to remedy it with additional principles (Wenz, 2007, pp. 362-364).

Second, certain environmental protection strategies are often not conducive to the implementation of environmental justice principles. The principle of justice requires that everyone in the society, every ethnic group in the world, can live according to their own suitable way of living; without hampering the life of other ethnic groups, each ethnic group has the right to live according to its own unique way which they like. But the “universalism” of Western environmental ethics abstracts the concepts of “species” and “wilderness” in a universal name, and imposes the value principles on the specific life of the local residents. In the practice of environmental protection, some often do not consider the uniqueness in different regions. Expelling Aboriginal

people for the purpose of nature reserve, or prohibiting them from living in the traditional way in the name of species protection, not only brings injustice to the aborigines, but may also have a counterproductive effect on the environment. In the middle of the 19th century, the eucalyptus forest in Geelong region of Australia was severely damaged. The reason was not the excessive use of eucalyptus resources, but the “affirmation” of the value of phalanger by White man. They demanded that local indigenous people change their dietary habit, resulting in over-breeding of phalanger and that the eucalyptus forest was severely damaged (Bolton, 2012, p. 53).

Third, the perspective of Western environmental ethics may obscure the true value appeal which environmental practice may pursue, making it difficult to recognize the true impetus of environmental practice. For example, when the value of natural things is of “objective”, people tend to habitually resort to the opinions of “experts” in environmental assessment. The opinions of external “experts” may be justified from the perspective of ecological science and can be used as a reference. But the “objectivism” often ignore that the “experts” are the people who have their specific social, political, economic, cultural, regional, and other backgrounds. The claim of environmental value is likely to derive from their life background. Professor Kitou pointed out that the emphasis on “wilderness” actually originated from the American romantics and travelers since the 19th century, because of the nostalgia for the past adventure life and the fear of losing the space for exploration (Kitou, 1996, pp. 108-109).

Generally, these defects of Western environmental ethics stem from a static perspective of essentialism. Essentialism pursues the law of eternal certainty under the dualism world view. Because of its rigidity on the ontological level, the discussion of value of things will inevitably fall into isolated and static.

East Asia's View of Nature

Value itself is not only a relationship, a holistic existence, but also a historical, generative, and dynamic existence. Losing dynamic and generation, value becomes dead and meaningless. To overcome the limitations of Western Environmental Ethics, the key lies in breaking the “essentialism” in ontology and looking at environmental factors and their values from the perspective of organic, dynamic, generated, and relational. This point is fully reflected in the traditional environmental thinking of East Asia. Of course, emphasizing East Asia environmental thinking is holistic, not that Western environmental thinking is not holistic. For example, Rolston's Theory of “Values in the Natural World”, Leopold's Land Ethic, and Naess' Deep Ecology are also holistic. However, the holism of the West is based on the value of the individual, through the bottom-up “compromise and balance”, from individuals to the whole. “Environment” is rarely seen as a dynamic process of mutual shaping and co-evolution with survivors in the environment, but becomes an “external thing” independent of the survivors.

In contrast to the East, the “environment” was not a constant existence. “Environment” is not so much a thing, but rather a “capability” of generating things. The traditional Chinese classic *Zhou Yi* puts forward that “Production and reproduction is what is called YI”; *The Great Appendix* also said: “There is an intermingling of the genial influences of heaven and earth, and transformation in its various forms abundantly proceeds. There is an intercommunication of seed between male and female, and transformation in its living types proceeds”. The core meaning of “Yi” is “change”, which is the process of generation, change, and creation. *Book of Tao and Teh* said: “Out of Tao, One is born, Out of One, Two; Out of Two, Three, Out of Three, the created universe”. Confucius said: “Heaven does not speak. Yet the four seasons, all things grow, heaven does

not speak!" These ontological thinkings regard the "environment" as an organic whole, which is characterized by the value-generating capability as the essence of the "environment". The value of environmental factors is not in their inherent purpose, but in the extent to which they participate in and integrate into the value-generation process of the environment.

Under this view, the relationship between human and the environment is seen as a kind of "participation-intervention" relationship, and also a relationship between "shaping and being shaped". In ancient China, there was a relationship of "interaction between heaven and man", Chuang Tzu also said: "The universe and I came into being together; I and everything therein are One", so pointing out there is human-natural internal consistency. Dong Zhongshu explored the structure of the relationship between man and nature from the ethical perspective in his book. He regards "heaven" as an ethical ontology first, and "heaven" does not exist outside of human beings, but is the capitalized and enlarged "man". "Man" is the spokesperson and practitioner of the ethical ontology of "heaven". When people perform activities, they can perceive through the signs of the environment whether "the vitality of nature" is strengthened or destroyed, and adjust their behavior accordingly. At the same time, this adjustment has further promoted the development of "heaven" (the ethics for generating). Dong Zhongshu's "heaven" is not a natural object, but the generating ability itself, which is contained in all natural objects including human beings.

In the traditional Japanese culture, the sense of natural things has been developed in a unique way. On the basis of long-term study of the book *The Tale of Genji*, Motoori Norinaga advocated the "Mono No Aware" as the core of Japanese culture (Motoori, 2010, pp. 19-23). "Mono No Aware" refers to the natural expression of emotions in the deep and quiet scenery. This emerging true emotion is more basic than moral consciousness, and to some extent is the basis of ethics. This true emotion is gaining some kind of consciousness, and so will be more positive practice to return to the re-engineering of the environment. Tea ceremony, floral arrangement, bonsai, dry garden, as well as Haiku, Tanka, Ukiyo-e, all fully demonstrate that Japanese culture has fully recognized the role of the environment as an ethical carrier in shaping human disposition. What is produced by the touch of the scene is not the knowledge, but the inner intrinsic expression of someone's disposition. This human disposition is derived from the cultivation of the living environment in which he or she lived from a young age. In Japan, the way the environment and people shape each other is more slender and more in-depth.

The traditional view of nature on the Korean Peninsula has similar characteristics. In the long time of thought development, the culture of the Korean Peninsula gradually melted Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism into one. Formed a peninsula ideology featuring "harmony and return to one". The basis for unifying the three religions is based on the just local beliefs of peninsula (Korea Philosophy Society, 1996, p. 132). In the peninsula myth (such as Hroukiliv Dankastle), the world of human and the world of God show a high degree of continuity and interdependence in time and space. God and human are not in two worlds that are isolated from each other. God is not high above, in charge of all power. On the contrary, God exists for the world and has a yearning for the world (Korea Philosophy Society, 1996, p. 133). "God" can be understood as the environment in which the people of the peninsula survive and prosper. The way people communicate with God is "sin ba ram". "Sin ba ram" is not only manifested in the practice activities, such as festival, songs, and dances, but also a "pathway", the spiritual and emotional connection between heaven and human beings. Through "sin ba ram", people reach a state of "meos" (Romantic spirit). By this way, they can melt Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism into one and cultivate everyone.

The "environment" in East Asia is based on the mutual shaping and co-evolution of in the environment,

and will strengthen the overall vitality of the environment. In this sense, heaven and man, man and nature, natural objects and natural objects can achieve a certain sustainable harmony, and make creativity constantly maintained, thus coping with internal and external changes and blows. It should be emphasized that the preservation and development of any good environment in different regions dependent on its unique history, of course, showing great difference from each other. Related to this, the native need to deal with the environment for a long time to understand the history and difference. Therefore, based on East Asian environmental thinking, the environmental ethics needs to establish some new practice ontology that is different from Western environmental ethics.

New Environmental Ethics Based on East Asian Thinking of Nature

From the point of view of modern philosophy, the East Asian Views of Nature emphasizes the generating ability on the ontological level, so equal to emphasizing the important role of embodied cognition, emotion, and personal practice of people in the environment. This actually emphasizes the cultural and historical dimensions of “the value of environment”. So, “the value of environment” should also include “the value of culture”, “the value of history”, and “the value of life”. Japanese scholars have developed new practice ontology from different aspects. More prominent is Professor Kuwako’s Theory of “The Resume of Space” and Professor Kitou’s “Social Link”. In addition, Chinese and Korean Peninsula scholars have also played from different angles.

Kuwako not only examined the historical track about Japan’s unique environmental thinking (focusing on Saigyō the travelling poet Buddhist’ new Tanka). Moreover, using modern phenomenology makes the traditional view of nature in East Asia expressed in a modern form. He pointed out that “self” is not a subject that exists in isolation, but a “historical and spatial subject” rooted in regional culture and regional history. The meaning of the self in the Western phenomenology has been discussed in the dimension “time”, but lack of in “living space”. The history of the region is the history of the local culture. The unique local culture carries the wisdom and courage of the local sustainable harmonious life. Local history in the pure time dimension cannot carry this cultural ontology. Only the living space can be regarded as a complete carrier of the “human self”. This kind of ontology combines the space of time, and Kuwako calls it the “The resume of space” (Kuwako, 1996, pp. 21-33). On this basis, Kuwako proposed to examine the structure of value of the country, explore the relevance between the regional history, culture, and the “self-formation” of the local residents, and then give environmental decisions through the “consensus” of the residents. “Consensus” is not based on democratic negotiations under the Veil of Ignorance by Rawls. It is a value-exploration based on long-term common life, and its feasibility is much better.

Professor Kitou explored another dimension and put forward the Theory of “Social Link”. It means that in the interaction between people and environmental factors, the “material and economical connections” should be linked with the “spiritual and religious connections” to form an organically combined “living relationship (Namami relationship)” (Kitou, 1996, pp. 130-139). Kitou pointed out that the relationship between human beings and natural objects was originally a multi-level and comprehensive life relationship. For example, people who eat beef in the traditional era also raise, use, and sacrifice cattle; they do not just see cattle as food. The relevance also includes a comprehensive, profound, and rich spiritual connection, and these spiritual connections are very fit for the whole material cycle—especially the natural law in this cycle—of the animals or plants. The spiritual and material connections are embedded in each other through long-term life practice

(Kitoh, 1998, pp. 34-35). In contrast, the food in modern urban life is simply sliced meat in the supermarket, and urban people do not establish a spiritual connection that is fit for the material cycle of these animals. The connection between people and food is only a poor economic connection that is used. Then, someone will propose some abstract spiritual connections that are not related to the material economic cycle. Kitou has reinvented the “environmental three issues” proposed by Katou Hisatake. Ask the following questions:

1. How to consider the relationship between human and nature?
2. How to consider the relationship between native and other people who are separated from them in time and space, that is, about the historical existence of human beings?
3. How to consider the relationship between the individual and the whole? (Kitoh, 1998, p. 36).

The environmental philosophy of the Korean Peninsula was also influenced by Western philosophy and Western environmental ethics when it was just beginning. Based on Western philosophy, Professor Han Myeon Hui associates justice theory with environmental issues and extends justice theory beyond human society. Professor Gim Seong Ho discussed Kant’s philosophy in the moral status of animals. Professor Gim Seong Dong has been engaged in the study of Zhuangzhou’s philosophy for a long time, and has referenced Dreyfus’s phenomenological theory, injecting oriental characteristics into Korean environmental philosophy. He pointed out that although Western culture has achieved success in material civilization, it has not been so successful in preserving life. The purpose of Zhuangzhou’s technical concept is to maintain health, that is, to preserve life. In the context of the rapid development of contemporary technology, efforts must be made to achieve the principle of not forcing nature but adapting to nature. Professor Jin Gim Seong Dong’s environmental ethics transcends the level of dealing with the relationship between human and nature, more is to reflect on people’s understanding of their own living conditions, with a typical Eastern style (Jiang, 2001, pp. 25-28).

Contemporary Chinese philosophy also values the role of Eastern thinking in environmental issues. Professor Yu Mouchang pointed out: China’s environmental ethics research cannot always develop in the direction of different school debates, and should establish an open and unified environmental ethics by integrating the views of different schools. Western environmental ethics is mainly nature environmental ethics. China’s environmental ethics should include nature environmental ethics, society environmental ethics, and spirit environmental ethics. Among them, society environmental ethics is especially important because of its practical characteristics (Guo, 2012, pp. 127-132). On the basis of analyzing the modern meaning of the concept of “interaction between heaven and man”, Hu Weixi proposed to establish a modern “Confucian ecology”, overcoming the ethical centralism of traditional Confucianism, absorbing knowledge about human ecology and having a wise “sense” to solve environmental problems, and raising it into an “ecological philosophy” about human life and survival (Lu, 2004, pp. 265-267). China’s contemporary environmental ethics pays more attention to the practical effects of environmental protection concepts and policies, to reflect the principle of “unity of knowledge and practice”, including the supervision of environmental protection effects of enterprises, the rectification of environmental pollution cases, achieving “energy saving and emission reduction goal” and promoting the experience of “green enterprise”

The Contemporary Significance of Environmental Ethics in East Asia

The contemporary significance of environmental ethics based on the perspective of East Asian culture is multifaceted. East Asian environmental ethics can especially help people rediscover, reflect, coordinate, and create value by reviewing life practices.

First of all, the perspective of environmental ethics in East Asia allows us to understand what the environmental movement really wants to protect, and help to rethink and discover the true value appeals of past environmental movements. The Aoaki Forest Road in Aomori Prefecture was originally planned for the transportation and convenience of the Shirakami Sanchi. It was opposed by environmentalists from the very beginning. Environmentalists have put forward a large number of investigation reports, including cultural values, but they have failed to prevent the plan from proceeding. On the contrary, in order to protect the water conservation forests that are vital to local agriculture, the people in the area Azigasawamachi have put forward tens of thousands of formal objections, which really prevented the plan from proceeding. However, after applying to the World Natural Heritage, the part of the local area has been banned from entering. Then, things become such a result—the protest movements that took place to protect the connection between human and nature ended in splitting the connection. But in fact, in history, local residents have long formed a traditional rule of IRIAI (the right of common), which rationally constrains and protects the development and utilization of the forest resource. According to the perspective of East Asian environmental ethics, it is easy to reveal the inconsistency in the value of this environmental event (Kitoh, 1999, p. 23).

Second, reflection on the value of the environment contributes to the reconstruction of the value in individual's spiritual world. Left-wing cultural critic Harvey refuted today's post-modern culture in his book *The Condition of Post-modernity*, arguing that the space-time compression brought about by modernity leads to a high degree of homogenization of time and space, while capitalism is constantly creating new consumer demands (Harvey, 2003, pp. 356-357). The short-lived entertainment fashion is endless and dizzying, and the lack of spiritual depth in modern people leads to any fashion becoming boring and people becoming shallow. This is just the cultural logic and spiritual crisis in the late capitalist era. Kuwako emphasized that the cultural value of "landscape" and "The resume of space" (for the local native) is to face the spiritual poverty of modern people and find a stable foundation of self-consciousness from the space-time environment that build the sense of self. Professor Gim also believes that the fundamental problem of environmental problems is the problem of human lifestyle. It is necessary to build a lifestyle that conforms to nature in order to have the same depth as "nature". This has a similar understanding with Kuwako.

Finally, the environmental ethics of the East Asian cultural perspective pays more attention to the wisdom of traditional life than the previous environmental ethics, and helps to discover the value coordination and value creativity in traditional life. An example is the case of reclamation by drainage in Isahaya Bay. When conflicts between doing (damaging fishermen's interests) and not doing (damaging farmers' interests), you can learn from the traditional methods that the inhabitants of history have explored. For example, before the advent of large-scale drainage projects, a small-scale engineering project called "Tisaki drainage" appeared in history. It creates a small new lagoon in another area close to the coast, or transfers old lagoons water (and their biomes) into tidal mud flats close to the coast, so preventing floods and expanding cultivated land without harming fishermen's Nariwai (livelihood) and local species diversity. It is a flexible solution to protect the value of the environment. It is a pity that this wisdom was forgotten after the invention of a large drainage project.

The environmental ethics in the perspective of East Asian culture lies in the historical and spatial relationship of life. Its goal is to maintain the richness, diversity, and organicity of life relations and regional values. Its significance lies in promoting regional culture and its own style constantly deepening. This practice of environmental ethics not only requires native to actively participate in local development and environmental protection practices, but also requires support through various types of research. The disciplines involved are

not only ecological science and ethics, but also environmental folklore, ecological anthropology, archaeology, mythological research, historical and cultural studies, and so on. In the city, on the one hand, it is necessary to strengthen the construction of urban culture itself. On the other hand, urbanites need to understand the livelihood out of urban and the local history and culture in different regions with an open attitude. If possible, we can participate in and experience the local life outside the city in a more personal way, and establish own specific and unique environmental feelings. Carrying out environmental protection work on this basis may be more effective than ever, and it can better coordinate the relationship between human and nature, the relationship between person and society, and the relationship between people.

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