

# COMMENT ON “CHINESE CULTURAL LANDSCAPES: FROM THE IDEAL OF A BALANCED BOND BETWEEN HUMANS AND NATURE TO ECOLOGICAL FORMS OF LIFE”

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## COMMENT ON “CHINESE CULTURAL LANDSCAPES: FROM THE IDEAL OF A BALANCED BOND BETWEEN HUMANS AND NATURE TO ECOLOGICAL FORMS OF LIFE”

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Throughout human development, the progress achieved in industrial civilization has come at the expense of the destruction of cultural landscapes. While industrialization has brought happiness and convenience, it has also presented various challenges related to cultural landscapes. Environmental philosophy, a contemporary philosophy that focuses on the relationship between humans and nature, has emerged with a strong emphasis on the preservation of cultural landscapes.

Ancient Chinese environmental philosophy reveals that ancient thinkers deeply cared about the interconnectedness of everything in heaven and earth, including the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. This philosophy offers a unique perspective on the preservation of Chinese cultural landscapes. Using Taoist environmental philosophy as an example, this article provides an initial analysis of the definition of cultural landscapes, the development of environmental philosophy and, specifically, Taoist environmental philosophy (Jane; Katie, 2020, p. 265).

Building upon this foundation, the article explores the role of environmental philosophies, such as the “unity of heaven and man” in the construction of ecological

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civilization. It presents new ideas and fresh perspectives for the protection and conservation of cultural landscapes. By integrating ancient Chinese environmental wisdom with modern environmental philosophy, it offers valuable insights for the preservation of cultural landscapes and the promotion of ecological civilization.

## 1 CULTURAL LANDSCAPE PROTECTION

The protection of cultural landscapes has gained increasing prominence in contemporary times, with environmental philosophy taking a central role in addressing this issue. The development of environmental philosophy and its connection to cultural landscape protection can be analyzed through four stages: wilderness protection, the struggle between culture and the wilderness, the decline of wilderness and the rise of cultural landscapes, and global shared responsibility and sustainable development.

Environmental philosophy emphasizes the relationship between humans and nature, drawing from both traditional Chinese philosophy and Western environmental philosophy. It aims to establish a global environmental philosophy system that is oriented towards the new era. The protection of cultural landscapes plays a significant role in inheriting culture and enhancing national identity. It preserves the historical memory and cultural heritage of a region while promoting new cultural elements and fostering a sense of pride and identification among local residents.

Furthermore, the protection and utilization of cultural landscapes contribute to the local economy by developing tourism resources and promoting the tourism industry. Cultural landscapes serve as cultural symbols that attract tourists, generating economic benefits, improving living standards and enhancing regional tourism competitiveness (Shi, 2019, p. 81). Additionally, the preservation of cultural landscapes promotes social harmony by creating a unique cultural atmosphere, nurturing cultural imagination and contributing to the society's overall harmonious development.

The concept of heaven and humanity's unity, rooted in Taoist environmental philosophy, emphasizes the harmony between humans and nature and the equal value of all components in the natural world. It encourages people to conform to the nature's laws, coordinate with nature, and pursue balance and harmony. By living in harmony with nature and treating it with equal respect, individuals can achieve physical and mental balance, social stability and sustainable environmental development.

In conclusion, the protection of cultural landscapes is of great significance for the inheritance of culture, economic development, social harmony and the society's overall well-being. Environmental philosophy, with its emphasis on the relationship between humans and

nature, provides theoretical guidance for the practice of cultural landscape protection and promotes a holistic and sustainable approach to environmental conservation.

## **2 ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURAL LANDSCAPE PROTECTION**

Taoist environmental philosophy, rooted in the concept of the “Way of Heaven,” emphasizes balance, harmony and the relationship between humans and nature. It promotes the idea of “no-action” as a form of acting that aligns with natural laws (Zhang; Liu, 2018, p. 109). Taoism highlights the principles of “inaction” and “the Way of Neutrality” to guide human behavior and ensure a harmonious coexistence with nature. The significance of Taoist environmental philosophy, in landscape protection, can be summarized as follows:

(1) Valuable insights: Taoism provides valuable perspectives on the integration of the heaven and man’s unity, offering a new understanding of the relationship between humans and nature. It challenges the idea of human omnipotence and encourages a reverential attitude towards nature. The notion of “harmony in the middle” requires individuals to obey natural laws, promote all living things and not rely solely on their individual capabilities to seek rewards. Successes are acknowledged, but individuals do not falsely claim credit. When preserving cultural landscapes, it is vital to understand the interdependent relationship between human beings and nature. Although the wilderness-protected mode may emphasize the importance of nature protection, it does not necessarily change Western philosophy from the extreme of human supremacy to the extreme of nature one. In fact, this protected mode is usually used to protect the natural environment from excessive interference of human activities to achieve nature’s balance and sustainable development. It emphasizes the coordinated development between humans and nature, rather than the conflict between humans and nature. A natural system is a composite whole consisting of various organic entities, which follow particular structural sequences and rules, and intersect with one another. They function as living and developmental spaces for all components within the system. Human beings are merely a subsystem of nature’s ecological system. In essence, nature created human beings, endowing them with advanced cognitive abilities and subjective consciousness, offering inimitable resources for survival and growth. Therefore, in the nature’s context, human beings must ensure their comprehensive, consistent and harmonious coexistence with the integrality and stability of the natural system to thrive. It is crucial to transform our prior outlook on rights, adopting an emphasis on obligations, and assume responsibility as humankind in the nature’s community. This approach will enable us to achieve harmonious coexistence with nature, demonstrating genuine regard for nature and the imperative to return to a mode of existence that concedes to nature’s requirements. Cultural landscapes are unique symbols that not only represent a nation’s spiritual pursuit and identification, but also have important significance for the economic development of the region.

(2) Environmental consciousness: Taoism promotes reverence for nature and serves as a “sobering agent” for those who believe they can control or dominate nature. It helps reshape individuals’ ecological attitudes and lifestyles, fostering a stronger connection with cultural landscapes. The environmental philosophy of Taoism provides valuable insights for addressing the relationship between humans and nature and cultural landscape conservation. Taoist principles, such as “letting nature take its own course” and “Dao follows nature,” emphasize harmony with nature and reject notions of human dominance over it. The negation of human omnipotence by Taoism serves as a sobering reminder of our place in the natural world.

In contrast to Confucianism, which advocates for human control over nature, Taoism emphasizes the humans and universe’s interconnectedness. It encourages embracing natural inaction and elevating the human spiritual realm. These principles offer guidance in dealing with the conflict between cultural landscapes and human ambitions.

By exploring and incorporating Taoist environmental tenets, we can establish a conscientious approach to cultural landscape conservation that respects and harmonizes with nature. This understanding of the “unity of heaven and man” helps shape sustainable lifestyles and ecological perspectives, promoting a balanced coexistence between humans and the natural world.

(3) Harmonious balance: Taoism, along with Confucianism, values the heaven and man’s unity, emphasizing the harmony between humans and nature. This perspective contributes to the ecological value of cultural landscapes and highlights the need for balance and coexistence between humans and their environment. The concept of the “unity of heaven and man” in ancient Chinese philosophy emphasizes the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, recognizing nature as the genesis of all things and humans as a nature’s integral part. This idea was embraced by Confucianism and Taoism, among other philosophical schools. It highlights the ecological value of maintaining balance between humans and nature and the significance of cultural landscapes in environmental preservation.

Confucianism emphasizes etiquette, morality and social order, seeking harmonious development through individual character cultivation and proper governance. Taoism focuses on natural inaction and the humans and nature’s homogeneity, with “Dao follows nature” as a guiding principle. Mohism promotes fairness, universal love and nonviolence, advocating for world peace and the humanity’s well-being. Dong Zhongshu’s philosophy emphasized the connection between human actions and the heaven and earth’s balance, stressing the need to observe the nature’s principles and maintain ecological and environmental preservation. In modern society, the concept of the “unity of heaven and man” can still inspire ecological consciousness and sustainable practices in safeguarding cultural landscapes and maintaining a balanced relationship between humans and nature.

### **3 PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON THE HEAVEN AND MAN’S UNITY IN LANDSCAPE PROTECTION**

The harmony spirit of the “unity of heaven and man” emphasizes the humans and nature’s coexistence, avoiding a binary opposition between the two. This concept can be viewed from three dimensions. Firstly, it emphasizes the harmony within nature itself. “The Book of Changes” and the Qian Gua highlight that all things have their own essence and laws, allowing them to coexist harmoniously when following their natural course. Secondly, it underscores the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Dong Zhongshu stressed that humans are born from and nurtured by the earth, emphasizing the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. Thirdly, it addresses harmony among people. Mencius asserted that harmony is essential for a complete life and eternal endurance of all things. These dimensions together create a genuine “unity of heaven and man” by promoting harmony within nature, between humans and nature, and among humans. This spirit urges individuals to focus on achieving harmony in these aspects.

In the face of contemporary landscape challenges, achieving harmony with nature itself is fundamental. Nature operates as a unified organic system, with laws governing the seasons and the existence of all things. By respecting these laws, humans can preserve the nature’s harmony. Disruptions to nature’s harmony can lead to catastrophic consequences for humanity. Furthermore, striving for coordinated development between humans and nature is crucial in addressing ecological issues. Emphasizing harmony between humans and nature involves caring for both and promoting collaboration and progress between living and non-living elements. Additionally, harmony among humans is vital. Conflicts, such as war, are a visible manifestation of human contradictions. By prioritizing harmony and unity, humans can avoid the destructive consequences of conflicts.

The concept of the “unity of heaven and man” upholds equal value between humans and nature. Nature possesses intrinsic value beyond meeting human material needs. It holds moral and aesthetic values, with natural scenery serving as a metaphor for human morality and spiritual growth. However, in modern society, economic value often overshadows other aspects of nature’s value. The principle of equal value is also reflected in the idea of an equal relationship between humans and nature. Humans, heaven and earth coexist, interdependently, and possess equal value. While humans hold a dominant position, equal value connections between ecosystems and humans must be respected. This concept requires courage and self-awareness to recognize both humans and nature’s rights to exist and develop in harmony. As the more advanced species, humans play a proactive role in maintaining equality, as nature’s well-being often depends on human actions. By upholding equality and harmony, humans can ensure a balanced and sustainable relationship with nature.

## CONCLUSIONS

The philosophy of “unity of heaven and man” in Taoism reflects the ancient Chinese understanding of the relationship between humans and nature. It provides a foundation for the pursuit of harmony and balance in environmental philosophy. Confucianism and Mohism also share similar values in promoting social harmony, fairness and the humanity’s well-being. Dong Zhongshu’s teachings further emphasize the importance of aligning human actions with the heaven and earth’s laws. His ideas highlight the interconnectedness among human society, ecological balance and the prosperity of cultural landscapes. Taoist environmental philosophy offers valuable insights and perspectives on landscape protection, promoting reverence for nature, and advocating for a harmonious balance between humans and their environment. It complements other philosophical traditions in emphasizing the heaven and man’s unity and has significant implications for the sustainable development and conservation of cultural landscapes.

In summary, this paper explores environmental philosophy and discusses its significance in protecting Chinese cultural landscapes. Environmental philosophical concepts, such as Taoism, following nature, and the heaven and man’s unity provide valuable perspectives for the preservation of cultural landscapes in modern society. When safeguarding these landscapes, it is important to embrace Taoist environmental philosophy, cultivate harmony between humans and nature, and follow the laws of the “Dao.” “No-action” does not mean doing nothing, but rather acting in accordance with the natural laws. The environmental philosophy of Taoism offers valuable guidance for the protection of Chinese cultural landscapes. It is essential to approach environmental philosophy with a dialectical perspective in order to fully realize its value in preserving Chinese cultural heritage. This is our comments about Xu (2024).

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