

# TAOIST ECOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GLOBAL CLIMATE CRISIS

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## Abstract

The major principles of Taoism are a reverence for life and conforming to the laws of nature. These are also principles of the ecological movement. They come from Laozi's non-human centered theory. This paper contends that Taoism has an important contribution to environmental ethics. Today Taoists actively devote themselves to protecting the environment and are respected by international organizations including the United Nations.

## บทคัดย่อ

หลักการที่สำคัญของลัทธิเต๋า ก็คือการให้ความเคารพต่อชีวิตและการดำเนินชีวิตตามกฎแห่งธรรมชาติ กฎเกณฑ์เหล่านี้ก็คือหลักการของกระบวนการนิเวศวิทยา ความคิดดังกล่าวนี้มาจากทฤษฎีของเหลาจื้อ ซึ่งไม่ถือว่ามนุษย์เป็นศูนย์กลางของโลก บทความนี้จะชี้ให้เห็นว่าลัทธิเต๋ามีส่วนสำคัญที่ส่งเสริมจริยศาสตร์สิ่งแวดล้อม ทุกวันนี้ผู้ที่นับถือลัทธิเต๋ายกย่องตัวเองอย่างแข็งขันเพื่อปกป้องสิ่งแวดล้อม และพวกเขาได้รับการนับถือจากองค์กรระหว่างประเทศรวมทั้งองค์การสหประชาชาติด้วย

The reverence for life is a fundamental character of religions in general. But there are some differences in approach. For instance, while many religions take human life as fundamental, Taoism cherishes life in the whole of the ecological system. This is also the beginning and the end of Taoism. Its ecological thought and concern for health, makes Taoism

distinctive among the other religions in the world.

### **A Green Peace 2500 Years Ago**

In environmental ethics there are basically two different approaches: one is human centered theory (anthropocentric), another is non-human centered theory (non-anthropocentric). It can be argued that the originator of this non-human centered theory was Laozi. As early as 2500 years ago, he advanced this theory in the *Dao De Jing*. In this work, Laozi discussed the relation between Dao and life. The Dao was the source and identity of the universe, while life comes from the Dao and also returns back to the Dao. All human behavior must be subordinated to the rule of the Dao. In a famous phrase from chapter 25 he writes that Man takes his law from the Earth, the Earth takes its law from Heaven, and the Heaven takes its law from the Dao. The law of the Dao is its *being what it is*. Hence human behavior should be in conformity with the law of nature. But how do we conform to nature, Laozi also gave some basic guidelines: humans should revere nature, they should not act recklessly, not wage war, and so on. Most importantly, human should hold on to Sanbao, The first is gentleness, the second is frugality, and the third is avoiding competition with others. The Sambao has three aspects, First, there must be love: he advises us to love ourselves, love other people, and love nature. Second, there must be frugality: do not abuse human and material resources, make use of resources efficiently; Third, do not compete with man for profit, not seek profit by exploiting other organisms. In order to curb human greed and the damage of resources, Laozi repeatedly encouraged man to practice abstinence, be satisfied with little, and not to wantonly plunder limited resources for satisfying human appetites. Taoism as a religion endeavors to revere and extend these ideas of Laozi's ecology.

As the principles of Taoism in the *Tai Ping Ting* indicate, the heavens support human life and the earth supports the human form and warns against destruction, or "cruel harm". This so-called cruel harm is the damage we commit against the environment. It believes the Heaven is man's Father, and the Earth is man's Mother, and warns against burning moun-

tains, breaking stones and destroying trees, If we destroy nature, the Mother of the Earth will be angry and denounce men to the Heavens, and in turn, Heaven will punish men and sacrifice human life. Since people need to exploit vegetation for fuel, it advises using only dead branches and leaves, and to refrain from cutting down live trees, It also warns against digging roots as this cuts off the vigor of vegetation. In order to emphasize the importance of ecological protection, the *Tai Ping Ting* develops a measure of biodiversity. It holds that the number of species on earth can be used as a criterion for evaluating richness and poverty. In a so-called *rich* period, for instance in Shanghuang times, there were more than twelve thousand species, nature was self-sufficient leading to long life, species never died out. In Zhonghuang times, called *slightly impoverished*, species reduced significantly, Since that time, species have been reduced to less than ten thousand, and our times are now considered *extremely impoverished*. If Heaven and Earth are the people's parents, and the parents are in extreme poverty, it follows that the children of Heaven and Earth will fall into poverty. Another classic called *Huang Di Yin Fu Ting*, describes the interdependence of Heaven, Earth and man. This is the famous theory of San Cai Xiang Dao, that is: a biological web which is both promoting and mutually limiting. In accordance with the great Tao, man's actions must be appropriate and suitable in order to maintain *San Cai* peace, and eliminating the scourge of the world.<sup>1</sup>

*Wu Neng Zi* in one *Tao Ting* written in the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD, classified all the fishes, birds, mammals and insects on the planet. He distinguished them by the categories of scales, feathers, fur, carapace, and so on. One category is referred to as worms, and within this there is a special category named "naked worms", which includes all furless animals. Human Beings are included in this category. According to his classification, there is no fundamental difference between people and animals. Humans consider themselves special because they have thoughts and language, but other animals have this as well. There is an article entitled, *Quan Shi Gui Zhen*, which describes wild animals, birds, crabs and turtles, not competing with humans for drink, not fighting with people for food, not competing with them for home. Since the survival of wild animals does not require conflict with humans, why then do humans hurt animals?

## Requirements for Maintaining Harmony with Nature

Tao of the immortal cherish life, relieving immeasurable men,<sup>2</sup>

This is the basis of the ethics and religious discipline of Taoism. This so-called discipline, which is also the basis of Buddhism is to control the matters of conduct. The Taoist teachings place great emphasis on the protection of nature. Originally, these teachings emphasized harmony with nature, and not the protection of human existence. But it is difficult to do in practice. For human communities to survive, it is not always possible to be in harmony with nature. Our utilization of natural resources which supply us with the necessities of life, is bound to influence the original face of nature to a certain extent. Yet we must be mindful of this harmony. The Taoist classics explicitly require that people love insects, vegetation, birds, animals, and love the mountains and rivers, do not harm any life. They direct us not to kill or damage any life, do not burn wild fields and forests, do not cut trees needlessly, do not pick flowers rashly, do not cast poison into rivers and sea, do not carve and destroy mountains rashly, do not drain rivers, do not raise swine and sheep, do not place one's feet on domestic animals, do not watch domestic animals copulate, do not fish and hunt living beings needlessly, do not disturb hibernation dens in winter, do not climb up the tree to search for bird's nests and damage eggs, do not cage birds, do not light fires in the ground, do not take the lives of the domestic animals and other living beings. There are warnings in Taoist classic *Tai Shang Gan Ying Pian*, about shooting birds, chasing after animals, digging holes for animals disturbing their habitats, filling animal burrows, destroying nests, hurting embryos, breaking eggs, destroying a food supply, wasting grain, killing trees with poisons, hunting animals in the spring moon night, killing turtles and killing snakes, etc., and warning that, these crimes bring retribution, even through bad luck to one's children and grandchildren.<sup>3</sup>

Not only do humans have a responsibility to protect nature, but also they have a responsibility for the sustainable development of human beings. So the commandments of Taoism also state, do not pollute drinking wells, do not seal pools and wells, do not drain lakes unnecessarily, and so on. These are measures for protecting the human environment.

In Taoist temples, not only do monks follow these principles, but

they also pay particular attention to practicing frugality. In *Chang Chun Zhen Ren List*, Man live in the temple, quietly, in solitude, comprehending the nature of the body and of life, weakness is inevitable, humility is a virtue, compassion is a fundamental, convenience is the door. All men should do things in accordance with their abilities, and never in excess. We should make use of clothing and consume food reasonably.<sup>4</sup> Some legendary Taoists and immortals lived in caves and ate pine nuts, grasses and flowers as in *Lie Xian Zhuan*, *Xu Xian Zhuan*, *Li Shi Zhen Xian Ti Tao Tong Jian*, and other examples of Taoist literature. The intention of these records is to lead to the goal of immortality by eating little or nothing, and this had guided the lives of many hermits. The aim is to reduce the impact of the consumption of natural resources. The Taoist temples followed strict conservation measures, and the impact on surrounding environment was reduced to a minimum.

### **A Living Environment In Harmony with Nature and God**

One of the emphases in Taoism is immortality. The life-long goal of Taoist is to become immortal. The Taoist should communicate with the immortals, there are places for honoring the immortals, i.e. temples and Dong Fu. The temple environments are designed for the residence of these immortals and provide a place conducive to the people to accept their teachings, and express their will to these gods. The temples and Dong Fu are the intermediate places. The setting and architectural style of these temples as well as their functions, are different from secular places and have changed over time. The early mountain ascetics dwelled in the deep mountains, and used slightly modified natural caves, or built a simple hut. Later, when the number of the missions was increasing, and the power of economy strengthening, devotees began to build larger temples to accommodate these new communities. They were built according to the Taoist practice of harmony with the surrounding environment, in order not to destroy the landscape and surface features. When Zhang Ling created the twenty-four rules, he also emphasized the natural environment of the temples. The most common places were mountains and springs, caves and stone chambers.

The temple grounds also involved accommodations and gardens. Worshipers were able to enjoy a quiet and comfortable natural environment, and also gather natural resources conveniently.<sup>5</sup> They usually made use of mountains and springs in the surrounding to create natural or artificial gardens, and the use of an official's executive power, in conjunction with the authority of the gods, to designate these gardens as a *nature reserve area*. The *Xi Yue Hua Shan Zhi*, describes these areas, how they were situated on mountain tops, or within valleys. There were *trees of life and death*, and *God forests* where logging was banned. If someone desecrated these forests, they would incur disaster. One account describes a forest on the southwest slopes of a mountain, where there were many tall, old pines and cypresses. It was a holy place where the gods of the mountain visited. But loggers collecting firewood damaged this forest, and as a result the people in the surrounding area were plagued by fires and tigers attacks.<sup>6</sup> As a result emperors and governments of every dynasty took the order of protecting Taoist mountains, prohibiting logging, hunting and fishing. Such as Taoist Temple garden in Mao Mountain and Wudang Mountain, they are strictly protected.<sup>7</sup> On Zi Bo Mountain in the Liu Ba Shaanxi province, there is the Zhang Liang Temple where thousands of acres of dense forests existed originally, but in the mid-Qing Dynasty they were severely damaged by logging. After the president governor of Han Zhong discovered this, he issued a ban on the logging of trees in Zi Bo Mountain, and created a monument of warning. Since then, Zi Bo Mountain and Zhang Liang Temple were strictly protected together. Every year they planted a large number of trees, so the dense forests of Zi Bo Mountain have recovered up to the present day.

## **New Interpretations of an Ancient Doctrine**

Confronting the ecological crisis which is brought by global climate change, the Taoists of China are actively involved in the global ecological protection action. So we must discuss the modern interpretation of the ancient Taoist ecological thought.

In 1993, the Association of Chinese Taoism held a national Taoist awards ceremony, and commended a number of Taoists who had made

outstanding contributions to famous mountains and temple protection, tree planting activities, and reforestation. Since then, the Taoist community actively participated in international environmental activities and strengthened communication and cooperation with environment protection organizations around the world. In 1995, the Association of Chinese Taoism was invited by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to send a delegation to attend the World Religions and Environmental Protection conference in Japan and Britain. Zhang Jiyu, vice president of the Association of China Taoist in the UK on behalf of the Chinese Taoists issued the Chinese Taoism Declaration on Ecology and Environmental Protection. (Later published in its internal magazine with the title “Carrying Forward the Spirit of Taoism, Protecting the Ecological Environment and Benefiting Humanity: Taoist Ideas of the World Environmental Protection”). In August 1996, the Association of Chinese Taoist and the Alliance of World Religions and Environmental Protection (ARC) together created a study group, and visited famous Taoist mountains including Hua Mountain of Shaanxi and Qingcheng Mountain in Sichuan, and studied the effects of environment protection on these mountains. In 1998, Zhang Jiyu, vice president of the Association of Chinese Taoism, published the work “Tao Imitating Nature and Environment Protection”. In August 2000, Min Zhiting, president of the Association of China Taoist, as a member of Chinese religious delegation, attended the World Peace Millennium of World Leaders of Religions at the United Nations, gave an address “The Love of Nature and Respect for Life” on behalf of Chinese Taoism.

The Chinese Taoism Declaration on ecology and environment protection states as follow:

One, we should actively propagate the Taoist teachings of ecology environmental protection, to guide people to follow the Taoist teachings and not to kill beings for amusement. We should maintain the harmony of nature, and strive to create a paradise on earth, which is the pursuit of our faith.

Two, we should continue to carry forward the tradition of Taoism about reforestation, and maintenance of the ecological environment. The Taoists of temples should

organize to carry out the work of reforestation and the creation of a beautiful environment, and make temples a model of a real paradise.

Three, we should develop engineering approaches to maintain the ecological integrity of the famous Taoist mountains.

In November 2009, the delegation of Chinese Taoism attended the Ceremony of Wen Sha in London, and issued an eight-year plan (2010 - 2017) for environmental protection. It involved:

First, promoting environmental education to advance environmental consciousness.

Second, achieving maximum efficiency in the use of ecological resources.

Third, promoting the ancient Taoist wisdom and traditions of ecological preservation.

Fourth, applying environmental consciousness to daily life.

Fifth, collaborating with environment protection departments, and making Taoist ecological ideas more visible on the internet.

Sixth, making use of the many way propagating environment protection, and integrating the annual campaign of World Environment Day with the Taoist temple's work plans.

### **Activities and aspects of the new Eco-Taoist Temples**

Since 2002, there has been a developing movement of Ecological Taoist Temples. This began among Taoist Temples in Shaanxi Province, and later gradually extended throughout the country. In 2008, the Third Taoist Temples Ecological education Forum was held in Mao Shan of Jiangsu Province. The State Bureau of Religious Affairs attached great importance to this activity, and the activity caught the attention of the



World's Religious and Environmental Organizations and the United Nations Development Program. Dr. Keyevin in Mao Shan Forum gave a speech where he highly valued Taoist ecological ideas. He argued that 60-year-old United Nations must study the two thousand year old ecological wisdom of Taoism, and took the Chinese Taoist temples ecological protection activities into the perspective of the global ecological protection. The key members of Initiators and organizers of Ecological Taoist Temples Activities were invited to take part in Windsor Ceremony activities which was held in London. In order to celebrate the United Nations climate summit in Copenhagen, the ceremony was held by United Nations Development Program and the World Religions and the Environmental Defense Fund which were supported by the British Prince Phillip.

The Mao Shan Declaration was adopted in Maoshan Forum developed a working plan for the next 10 years. We can see the basic contents of eco-Taoist Temples activities.

1) strengthening the training of the Taoists, promoting ecological awareness, establishing environmental protection responsibilities of Taoism.

2) advocating a frugal way of life to save energy.

3) participating in activities of social environmental protection, promoting the establishment of healthy global ecosystem.

4) strengthening cooperation with the media to expand the eco-Taoist ideas in the whole society.

5) building new eco-Taoist Temples, taking the activities into the whole social environmental programs, allowing for increased interaction between Taoism and society.

6) promoting ecological concepts through the religious activities of the Taoism, realizing maximization of the ecological benefits of resource use.

7) establishing an information network between ecological temples, to enhance cooperation and exchanges among temples.

The reporters of China Environment Paper interviewed Ren Fa Rong, director of Chinese Taoist Association, and asked, what is the positive impact of carrying out ecological Taoist activities? Ren Fa Rong re-

plied, that there were five aspects. One, it can promote the building of temples to the direction of standardization and modernization. Two, it can propagate the excellent ecological thinking in ancient China to all sectors of society through the temples. Three, it can promote community and rural environment construction in the local areas. Four, it can enhance tourism. Five, it can lead to the further protection and better utilization of cultural resources.

In recent years, there are basically two main points in Eco-Taoist Temples activities.

First are environment-friendly activities. This involves two relationships. One is the relationship between man and nature, (nature including mountains, trees, flowers, water, wildlife, birds, etc.) Another relationship is between Taoist temples and the surrounding human population, this involves the God-Man relationship, more than the Man-Man relationship. Through these considerations the role of the Eco-Taoist Temples is determined.

We should respect the Tao and cherish the virtues of Taoism. We should respect Laozi as the God of ecological protection. We should rationally use land, water, vegetation and other resources, maintaining both the internal and external landscape of Taoist Temples. We should rationally allocate facilities for water conservation and pollution control. We should establish and improve the rules and regulations of the ecological protection and promotion of education. We should greatly enhance the consciousness of the ecological protection. We should maximize the use of energy-saving technologies and materials. We should form harmonious and healthy ecosystem with the surrounding natural environment and community groups.

Second is the attempt to lead a *low-carbon life*. In order to achieve the goal of longevity, Taoism promotes a variety of health and fitness methods. In accordance with ecological Taoist temples activities, we should comply with San Bao in Lao Zi's *Tao De Ting*, which involve three kinds of abstinence applied to modern behavior. One is abstinence in order to maintain a calm state of mind. Two involves diet. Essentially human survival needs grains, fruits, vegetables and meats. If you eat too much meat or wine, it leads to disease. Three is thrift, not only in terms of material consumption, but also in physical exertion, which takes the form of ex-

cessive entertainment, mental stress, inefficient work, and fatigue, all of which are contrary to the Taoist health philosophy.

These directives lead to the low carbon life in the society. There is a connection between promoting health in Taoist philosophy and technology of carbon conservation in society.

First is to reduce the grain, meat, vegetables, oils and other food consumption. We can even learn from the ancient monks practice of *eating-air-health*. This involves the ancient monks rest system, of not eating after noon. These monk's consumption of food was less than one-third that of an ordinary person.

Second is to reduce food production, storage, transportation and carbon emission in processing. The full cycle of food production and storage directly or indirectly releases carbon dioxide. The greenhouse gases are produced in every step of food production, beginning with planting, fertilizing, spraying pesticides and harvesting, but also extending through transporting, power washing, processing and packaging, and finally involving all the steps at the retail end. If consumption can decrease, the carbon emissions will be reduced in all aspects.

Third is to reduce water, electricity, gas and other energy, in the home food processing, meanwhile reducing exhaust and noise emission, and the reduction waste output.

Fourth, in addition to all of the above, there is a direct way of energy saving effects, which is compatible with the whole lifestyle of eating-air-health. Thus we can have the habit of thrift. It will save a lot of water, electricity and gas, thereby reducing carbon emission to a minimum.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Reference Li Yuanguo's *Discussion of the ecology ideas in Taoism--inspiration of modern*. See Liu Maocai compiled *harmony, conflict and communication*. sichuanpeople press.1999. p40-72.

<sup>2</sup>《太上洞玄灵宝无量度人上品妙》。《道藏》洞真部本文。

<sup>3</sup>《太上感应篇》卷 12, 15, 17, 19, 29。《道藏》太清部。

<sup>4</sup>《全真清》。《道藏》正一部。

<sup>5</sup>《云笈七》卷二十八《二十八治·二十四治》。

<sup>7</sup>See Yang Lizhi's *Layout and Taoist doctrine of famous mountains and Taoist Temples*. Taoist culture study institute of China Taoism Association, Shanghai Taoism Association, Shanghai Cheng Hung Temple, compiled together, *modern illustration of Taoist doctrine*. Religion Culture Press. 2003. p181.

《道藏》洞真部 〇 〇