The Eco-consciousness in Chinese Traditional Culture

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In today’s world, the international society cherishes a lofty ideal of promoting civilized harmony and co-prosperity, in a bid to build a harmonious and beautiful world. Promotion of civilized harmony and co-prosperity confronts a problem of cultural pluralism caused by different civilizations. No matter in the human history or in today’s world, there has always been a diversity of civilizations, rather than a single culture. The diversity of civilizations surely causes cultural differences. On the one hand, the cultures differ from region to region, people to people and religion to religion. On the other hand, the traditional culture also differs from the modern culture. These two kinds of differences often entangle each other, seem to be extraordinarily complicated. The cultural difference is also influenced by politics and economy, and then arouses regional conflicts and collisions, therefore creates turbulence in international situation.

To solve the problem of cultural differences caused by many different civilizations, the international community should make their efforts from many different perspectives.

On the one hand, civilization and culture in one region or one country has its uniqueness from other regions and countries, with its special values and thinking system originated from its long-term history development. Hence, we should respect the diversity of civilizations and cultures; advocate the openness and tolerance of culture and civilization. For the civilizations and cultures in other regions and nationalities, we should take the respectful attitude; respect and understand others, even appreciate and learn from others, so we can upgrade ourselves. Just as Mr. Xiaotong Fei’s saying: show your beauty, and learn from other’s beauty to improve yours.

This is often discussed by us these years.

Yet I think there is another important point worth attention. That is besides its uniqueness, the culture and civilization of one region and one nations also shares intercommunity (usually very important aspects)—something we are similar with each other. That means there are some contents embodying human’s general values among the civilizations and cultures in different regions and nations. The contents are ignored or concealed because of the various conflicts of practical interests in the international community. If they were emphasized by the international community; and spread and communicated in the world wide, the mutual communication and identification of the cultures and civilizations in different regions and nations would certainly be stimulated. This would promote the harmonious and mutual prosperity of diversified culture; and would have profound influence on the human’s beautiful ideal (Xiaotong Fei summarized it as showing your beauty, and learning from other’s beauty to improve yours.)

As for our Chinese culture, it has its own uniqueness, which embodies in the forms of philosophy, religion, politics, morality, literature, art, lifestyle, and aesthetics and so on. On the other hand, we also have the contents that can embody the human’s general values, which also embodies in the forms of philosophy, religion, politics, morality, literature, art, lifestyle, and aesthetics and so on. Among them, eco-consciousness is an outstanding form.

Nowadays the whole world all pays attention to the protection of environment. Today, human and nature split further and further. Human extracts the nature without any bound through high-tech for his own utility goal and material comfort, fling caution to the winds and not considering the consequences. A great deal of natural resource
The vitality of the world. "Benevolence is the foundation of life." "We can only identify benevolence through life." So kindness.

Life is the growth of vegetation; is the creation of life. According to the Chinese ancient consciousness, which is the same as nowadays' eco-ethnics and eco-philosophy. Ethnics and eco-philosophy have become the general values for humanity.

Mencius said: "To love your family, then love the people, and then love the creatures."i Zai Zhang said: "People are companions.) ii Yi Cheng said: "People, sky and earth are integrity." And then: "The benevolent and all creatures are integrity." "The benevolent has the same body as all the creatures."iii So what the Confucius advocates "benevolence" is not only to love your family and people, but also to spread your love to every creature of the world. Since humans and all other creatures are integrity, all belong to the world. Mencius said: "To love your family, then love the people, and then love the creatures."iv Zai Zhang said: "People are my compatriots, things as well." (All the people in the world are my brothers; all the creatures in the world are my companions.) Yi Cheng said: "People, sky and earth are integrity."v And then: "The benevolent and all creatures are integrity." "The benevolent has the same body as all the creatures."vi So the Confucius advocates "benevolence" is not only to love your family and people, but also to spread your love to every creature of the world. Since humans and all other creatures are integrity, all belong to the world.

Related to the consciousness of eco-ethnics and eco-philosophy, there is also eco-aesthetics consciousness in the traditional culture.

Chinese ancient ideologist thought the nature (including human) is a life world. Everything in the world contains life and vivacity, which is worth appreciation. During the appreciation, human experiences the ambition of human creature integrity and gets immense joviality. Hao Cheng said; "Life is the most enjoyable thing in the world."vi Scholars of Song and Ming dynasties all enjoyed appreciating the liveliness of life. Dunyi Zhou liked all green in front of his window, not removing the grass. The others asked him why not remove the grass. He said: “The grass is same with me.” In addition, he said, “look at the liveliness of life in the nature.” He experienced the “liveliness” of nature from the growth of grass in front of his window, which is shared by me and everything in the world. The experience gave him happiness. Hao Cheng kept fish, and always looked at it, saying; “To watch everything is kind of joy.” He had expressed his joy through poem “Look at everything quietly and absorbed in it, the growth of life in four seasons is same with human.” “Light cloud, soft wind, approaching the noon, I cross the river accompanied by flowers and willows.” He experienced the “liveliness” of human and everything, the harmony of human and nature. “Sharing the same body with everything” is happiness, which is the happiness of the benevolent.

The great artist Banqiao Zheng in Qing Dynasty expresses the Chinese traditional eco-consciousness in his letter to family. He said: every creature in the nature, like ant and pest, is all loved by us and the god. Human should “have the heart of the god.” So he said he was against “keeping birds in the cage.” “I get the joy, while you are in the prison, where is the morality if I submit the nature of animal to please myself?” Human has no rights to kill any animal, even jackals and tigers. Human and creatures share the same body, so they are equal and human cannot consider himself as the king of nature. This is the great love of Confucius. The benevolence is not only love for people, but also love for everything. According to Mencius, that is “to love my family, and then people, and then everything.” Banqiao Zheng then continued: if you truly love birds, you should grow more trees, which will become his home and nation of birds. When you get up in the morning, you can hear the singing of birds. The birds are happy, and so are you. That is “fit its nature”, which means everything can survive according to its nature.
Thus, as the congener of everything, human can get real happiness, real beauty ("great happiness"). That is the “great happiness harmonious with sky and earth” in Happiness.

We can say Zheng’s letter consists of not only eco-ethnics, but also eco-aesthetics.

The eco-consciousness of the “loving heart” and the liveliness of everything are vividly embodied in the Chinese ancient works of art.

Chinese ancient artists mostly stressed to embody the liveliness of the creatures. The artist Qichang Dong of Ming Dynasty stated that most artists lived longest, because they saw the liveliness in front of them. "You Dong of Song Dynasty stressed in Postscript of Guangchuan Drawing that the drawings must be from nature and liveliness. Yunming Zhu in Ming Dynasty said: “The grass and wood don’t have emotion, but do they have liveliness? It’s not known that everything in the world has liveliness. The creator of the world is so wonderful that we cannot describe it.” So Gai Wang of Qing Dynasty said in his The secret to Drawing Fish: “To draw fish is to draw its liveliness, just like it is swimming.” “Leisurely envy its happiness, same as the human.” Chinese artists never draw dead fish or dead birds. The flowers, birds, insects, and fish under the pen of Chinese artists are all vivid, filled with liveliness.

The image world of flowers, birds, insects and fish, drawn by Chinese artists is a world of life, containing human and everything, and so embodies Chinese eco-consciousness.

So is Chinese ancient literature. Strange stories for chatting of the priest of literature, Songling Pu in Qing Dynasty is a great work through which the consciousness of human-nature integrity runs. The beauty of Strange stories for chatting is the beauty of human-nature integrity. The poetry of Strange stories for chatting is the poetry of human-nature integrity. In this literature work, flowers, grass, woods, birds, beasts, insects, and fish can transform into beautiful maids, and fall in love with human beings. Take the two girls in Xiangyu for example. They are peony and common camellia of the Qing Palace under the foot of Lao Mountain. One called Xiangyu, the other is Jiangxue. They become the lover and friend of Huangsheng respectively, who is an intellectual in lower Qing palace. Peony and common camellia suffered disaster respectively, and were helped by Huang. After Huang’s death, there grew a bud with five leaves by the white peony, several meters high, without flower. This is the reincarnation of Huang.

Then the old Taoist died. His disciple didn’t cherish it and chopped because it came out no flower. Then the white peony and the common camellia both died of haggardness.

The image world created by Songling Pu is full of the love for everything in the world and shows creatures and human beings belong to a vast life world; human and everything are an integrity, living and dying together, closely related to one another. That is the eco-beauty said by modern people, and that is the beauty of human-nature integrity.

Now, I want to summarize the above briefly.

First, Chinese ancient thinker believed that “life” (creating life) in the basic role of universe. So, life is benevolence, life in kindness.

Second, Chinese ancient thinker believed that human and everything are an integrity, belonging to a big life world. So human beings are of the same breed with creatures. They are equal. Human has no rights to consider himself as the dominator of the world. We shouldn’t “sacrifice the nature of creatures to fit the nature of us”, while we should love every creature in the world, make them live and develop according to their own nature, that is “fit each nature”.

Third, Chinese ancient thinker believed that every creature (including human) contains vivid life and liveliness, which deserves appreciating the most. During the appreciation, human beings feel the ambit of human-creature integrity, get the most spirit enjoyment. That is the “happiness” of “the benevolent”.

Fourth, Chinese ancient works of art and literature are full of the love for everything in the world, embody that human and everything belong to a great life world, sharing death and survival, closely related to each other, that is the “eco-beauty”, the beauty of “human-creature integrity”.

These four points sum up the eco-consciousness in Chinese traditional culture, which includes the contents of eco-philosophy, eco-ethics and eco-aesthetics. These points in Chinese traditional culture embody the modern general values of human beings, abundant in modern artistic conception. They belong to our nation, as well as human beings; they are traditional and modern. These points in Chinese traditional culture can also be found in other cultures. Just as I have said in the beginning of the article, we should pay great attention to these points, disinter them, give them new explanation and put them in outstanding places, so that they can spread and communicate in the world wide. This will stimulate the mutual cultural communication and identification of
different regions and nations. In addition, this will redound to building harmonious and common prosperity of multiple civilizations, and will surely profoundly influence the realization of the rosy ideal—the Great Harmony of the world.

References

2 Will of Cheng in Henan issue18.
3 Zhu’s sayings page 103-109.
4 Mencius, On the heart.
5 Zhengmeng, Quinchen.
6 Will of Cheng in Henan issue11.
7 Will of Cheng in Henan issue2.1.
8 Xi Zhu, Explanation of Four lines, middlebrow.
9 Lack of note.