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Comparative Study: Chinese and Western Theoretical Sources for Sustainable Development Theory

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Abstract

Countries around the world are now plagued by deteriorating environmental problems (including global warming, desertification, reduction of biodiversity, and possible sources of unknown viruses such as COVID-19). Besides cooperation at the international level, countries, especially the East and West, have adopted different approaches. Philosophy can guide our actions, and exploring the theories of each period could help us understand what people know about and how they behave. The Chinese “San cai” and “Sheng Wang Zhi Zhi” theories and the “Anthropocentrism” and “Resource are limited” of the West countries have their on the relationship between human beings and environment, which play important roles in their traditional philosophies before the largely accepted definition of Sustainable Development (SD).

Keywords: Sustainable Development Theory, Theoretical Sources, Chinese Theory, Xun Zi

Science shows us the facts about our changing environment. The economics inform us of the cost of human’s action, and other disciplines have further contributions to make. But more ideas are needed if come to humane conclusions about the world and one-selves. The humanities, and with no doubt philosophy, can make a real contribution to reflection on environmentally responsible action (J. Garvey, 2011). Philosophy can guide our actions, and exploring the theories of each period could help us understand what people know about and how they behave. Both eastern countries and particularly China and western countries have their theories on the relationship between human beings and environment, which play important roles in their traditional philosophies before the largely accepted definition of Sustainable Development (SD) (in the report of *Our Common Future*, April 1987) widely used in an international range. The philosophy of human’s role in environment is constantly changing, along within different social and historical contexts. With the development of some relative ideas of the relationships between humans and environment, theories are expanding at the same time through both the private and public spheres to support SD theory. No one can give a history of SD with a fixed range. Thus I strive to start from some dominant environment philosophies of Chinese and Western countries’. From them, it would help us better understand the philosophical significance of sustainable development in Chinese and Western societies.

Chinese “San Cai” theory and Chinese “Sheng Wang Zhi Zhi” theory is chosen, as they are the earliest Chinese theories about the relationship between human and nature. Both of them are from Chinese Zhou Dynasty’s (1046 B.C- 256 B.C)¹ documents.

“San Cai” theory posited that each person plays a role in a group; it can transform a single “force” into an influential role. It indicates that in the formation of “people” concept, “people” are treated as a group, also an individual as well. It is considering not only the natural resistance of individuals, but also their social environment. In San Cai theory Chinese people know how to adjust their social relations to increase the strength of their power.

1. CHINESE “SAN CAI” THEORY

Chinese “San Cai” theory (translated into English as “with God” or “three powers”) came from the overall nature of Confucian harmony. “San Cai” refers to the “three basic elements in nature,” that is, the sky (temperature, meteorology, sunshine, etc.), the earth (land and soil), and the human beings. “San Cai” theory comes from the book “Yi Jing” (wrote during the Chinese Western Zhou Dynasty, 1046 B.C- 771 B.C). “San Cai” dominates the world because such basic elements are the roots of consciousness, feelings and spirit of the world.

Since the Chinese Western Zhou Dynasty, intensive agricultural techniques have been developed. "Intensive agriculture" refers to the initiative of people to overcome the negative aspects of the natural environment, and to farming with the manpower inputting or the technology advantage to achieve maximum output. During the Chinese Western Zhou Dynasty, the technology of field farming and field drainage was further developed. Therefore, as an element of agriculture, people developed much careful thought and valiant efforts to respect others. The farming affairs were no longer only dependent on nature weather. From that time, humans were no longer being a servant of God or nature. The "San Cai" asserts that only on the basis of respecting the others, can a "human" be formed side by side with the god and nature.

The most frequently mentioned in “San Cai” theory is the sky, the earth and human are parallel moving and developing. This parallelism reflects an awareness of people's status, and people’s role in "San Cai." There is also an organic link between man and man. Agricultural production is inseparable from the ability of people. Nevertheless, agricultural production is not made by an isolated individual, but rather is raised by a clan. It’s a result of the behavior of social groups. Therefore, “San Cai” theory not only refers to the natural environment but also applied to the social environment. It shows the ancient Chinese people have begun to pay attention to the sustainable development of society.

“San Cai” guides many agricultural theories, which influence continues today. And its first apply to agriculture was recorded in the essays of Mr. Lv (“Lv Shi Chun Qiu,” wrote during the Qin Dynasty, 221 B.C- 206 B.C) titled Spring and Autumn Annals-Superiority of Agriculture. The essay summarized the representatives of the pre-Qin books on agriculture and was the earliest book on agronomy practices. In the book Superiority of Agriculture, the importance of agriculture is also emphasized. Another chapter of Spring and Autumn Annals—Farming According to Land proposed ten issues of soil tillage and stipulated the general principles of farming technology.

2. CHINESE “SHENG WANG ZHI ZHI” THEORY

The book “Xun Zi” (published during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (environ 250 B.C.), which is ancient Chinese Realist Confucian collection of philosophical writings, was written by philosopher Xun Zi (313 B.C- 238 B.C) and his students. Xun Zi represents the Chinese Realist Confucian philosopher. In the chapter of this book Wang Zhi, which the main philosophy is about the republic, he wrote “Sheng Wang Zhi Zhi ”that signifies “the holy spirit of an imperial politic system.”

¹ Chinese Zhou Dynasty divided into two periods: Chinese Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 B.C- 771 B.C) and Chinese Eastern Zhou Dynasty (771 B.C-256 B.C)

The Confucian advocated respect to the rhythm of nature and life, and “prohibition” of some people’s actions. The ancient orient environmental ethics and ecological wisdom are from the analysis of the natural world. “Xun Zi” claimed that the Holy Spirit should prohibit by law the acts as follows:

- *When the flowering vegetation is blossoming, a felling axe is forbidden in the forest to assure that the growing vegetation is not disturbed;*
- *When the sea animals are in gestation, pets and poisons are restricted to put into swamps to guarantee that the animals will not be killed but will continuously grow;*
- *The tillage in spring, the weeding in summer, the harvesting in autumn and the storage in winter should always be accomplished on schedule so that the grain can continual to increase, and food can be harvested and gathered abundantly;*
- *Fishing is strictly prohibited within a specified date in ponds, pools, rivers, and lakes;*
- *Following the regulations in the fishery, people have additional resources, e.g., fishes and turtles; seeding, cultivating and proper conservation of trees in the season are essential, so that the forest will not be bare, and excess wood accumulated.*²

Xun Zi’s theory concerned about the maintenance of human society and the universal survival of humankind underlying that human cannot live alone beside the natural environment. The ancient Confucian doctrine did not provide universal bans or critics for killing but stressed the fact that the people could do these things at sometimes, and that sometimes it was impossible to do so. The purpose is not to promote total abstinence, but to control human desires. This Chinese doctrine promotes the joint development of man and nature. Xun Zi advocated eliminating people's superstition and ignorance, reducing people's negative self-esteem at the same time, and establishing self-confidence, restoring the status and dignity of the people in the universe, getting harmony between heaven and human unity at a higher level.

This traditional oriental culture recognizes that the cognitive ability of people is powerful. It advocates intuition, insight, and other non-rational cognitive abilities. This culture, thus, avoids the monotony of thinking and rigidity. The Chinese ancient environmental ethics were not only remaining in the field of ethics but also extended to the field of political and ideological spheres and the rule of law. The formation of political thinking and the legal awareness of environment are the bases of the environmental standards on the future social life and economy development. Since the Zhou Dynasty (1111 B.C), almost every Chinese dynasty has enacted specific institutions and decrees to protect the natural resources. The environmental ethics in ancient China was always considered. The environmental ethics continuously affected political philosophies, environmental laws, and regulations transformation. The social protection of the natural environment is required to produce considerable robust binding and mandatory so that this protection can completely integrate the national environment, ethical culture, and spiritual transformation.

3. WESTERN ANTHROPOCENTRISM THEORY

Western Anthropocentrism Theory was a controversial and an influential deep thinking on SD, explored from 1970s. Webster’s New World Dictionary defines anthropocentrism as:

- *“Considering man to be the central or most significant fact of the universe;*
- *Assuming man to be the measure of all things;*
- *Interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values and experience.”*

² Xun, Z., (Zhou dynasty). Wang Zhi. (n.d.). *Xun Zi*.

Origin words in Chinese :

草木荣华滋硕之时则斧斤不入山林，不夭其生，不绝其长也；鼃鼃、鱼鳖、鳅鳍孕别之时，罔罟、毒药不入泽，不夭其生，不绝其长也。

From a long time, anthropocentrism had been seen as anti-environment, which considers human beings in priority place rather than nature. Illustrated by Goodpaster (1978); Rolston (1983) and Taylor (1983), anthropocentrism considers that human is the center of the universe. The anthropocentrism judge value from human's view, everything needs to serve human interests, and humans dominate the nature. It may cause the environment crisis. Anthropocentric view is a specific performance of ancient philosophy. Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889-1975), a British historian, stated that the belief of Jewish - Christians and the religion rules about human nature over the doctrine are the ideological roots of humanity against the natural environment, but this informal idea was implemented from the 17th century.

However, in fact, people live in the environment. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the temperature we feel, the view we see are the natural environment around. Admitting the value of the environment is to protect human beings' benefit. The environmental sustainability development corresponds with the long-term development of humans' will and requirements. Therefore, anthropocentrism leads to focus on what are human beings' rights and responsibilities towards the around environment.

4. THE EXPRESSIONS THAT STRESS THAT WESTERN RESOURCE IS LIMITED

Development is never simple when it occurs. Such a phenomenon affects the role of other factors integrated into a complex system. In western countries, some ecologists have indicated that the development issue is only the matter of needs and limits. In 1968, biologist Paul Ehrlich introduced "population explosion" in his *Book of The Population Bomb* in a terrible manner with the over-population problem into the public eye. He predicted that in the near future, the excessive population growth would inevitably lead to wide famine and epidemic diseases.

In 1972, the economists in the Club of Rome published a report entitled *The Limits to Growth*, which explores the global economy and the environment by computer simulation analysis. The conclusion was the following: given that the sustainable economic growth and the abundance of the resources in the world are being depleted, the available time is running out. In the same year, a journal of Britain *Ecologists* published a special issue on the "Survival of the Blueprint." The magazine warned that: "If the current trends continue to allow social collapse and the life-support systems on Earth will not be reversed towards it, the collapse will possibly occur at the end of the century, and will undoubtedly happen in the middle days of our children." Correspondingly, ecologists called for the establishment of an eco-society to replace a failed industrial society. Many people believe that this sensitive issue is tantamount to a declaration of Armageddon. The apocalypse in the 1970s continuously occurs and leads to an environmental crisis thereby providing realistic evidence. The case studies of South Africa showed that the environmental scarcity emerges within a political, social, economic, and ecological context. Furthermore, the environmental scarcity interacted with many of these contextual factors to contribute to a great social violence. The system of nature has certain limits that produce an ensemble of interacting constraints on the human action where these limitations have to be accepted.

To conclude, these two Chinese theories show the Chinese people's unified nature-society view of the world, the earth, animals, and human beings. Also reflects the resource utilization and management thought of resource utilization and management in a modest way. However, the two western theories trait nature as the resource for people's development. Two different views of nature enable Westerners to manage environmental issues more rationally and objectively. However, the Chinese people's fusion thinking needs to start with people first, and improve people's thoughts and behaviors in order to affect the changes in the environment.

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