

## REALIZING HUMAN-NATURE HARMONIOUS COEXISTENCE MODERNIZATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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### ABSTRACT

The modernization of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature serves as an action guide for China's ecological civilization construction and an inherent requirement for building a comprehensive socialist modernized nation. However, the relationship between humans and nature has become a "social" issue. Exploring the connotation of human-nature "harmonious coexistence" modernization from the dimension of environmental ethics, and truly achieving the due "good" towards nature in terms of ideological concepts, practical actions, and legal systems will contribute to the healthy development of China's socialist ecological civilization and the realization of Chinese-style modernization.

**Keywords:** Human and Nature, Harmonious Coexistence, Modernization, Environmental Ethics.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between humans and nature has become a "social" issue. How to achieve "harmonious coexistence" between humans and nature, and how to protect Earth - humanity's only home? These questions confront everyone. The human-nature relationship runs throughout human development history, from "reverence" to "conquest", and to the currently advocated "protection" and "coexistence", constituting the evolution of human-nature relations. It is highly meaningful to clarify the essential relationship between humans and nature from the environmental ethics dimension and explore the proper principles of human-nature "harmonious coexistence". From the perspective of environmental ethics, examining human-nature relationships helps people understand Xi Jinping's important thoughts on "harmonious coexistence between humans and nature" and implement the concept through ideological concepts, practical behaviors, and institutional norms.

### 2. THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP

Throughout human development history, we can easily find that humans have always depended on nature. From ancient times to the agricultural period, due to low productivity levels, humans could only obtain survival materials from nature using simple tools, with limited activity ranges, direct dependence on nature, and weak ability to intervene in nature. Meanwhile, due to cognitive limitations, nature remained mysterious to humans. When facing food obtained from nature, humans would thank "heaven" for its "gifts"; when facing disasters, humans would pray for "heaven's" "protection", even giving nature titles like "God" and "divine spirit". Although humans had certain initiative towards nature, they could not break away from direct dependence on nature and were full of awe and worship. Ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts such as "heaven's mandate cannot be violated", "the way follows nature", "unity of heaven and man", and "equality of all beings" all contained primitive harmonious relationships between humans and nature,

showing humanity's "goodness" towards nature.

However, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, contradictions between humans and nature gradually emerged and even became filled with conflicts. The great efficiency of the scientific and technological revolution accelerated humanity's process of conquering nature. Driven by interests and capital, human reverence and worship for nature gradually disappeared, continuously satisfying their expanding private desires and brewing desires to break free from natural constraints. Ideas like "man can conquer nature", "conquering nature", and "transforming nature" prevailed for a time, with "economic growth over environmental protection" becoming a true portrait of industrial society (Shen, 2020). Human hands reached almost every corner of nature, strengthening humanity's belief in invincibility and omnipotence over nature, with humans seemingly becoming the masters of all natural things. Nature was no longer an unknowable thing-in-itself dwelling in the transcendent world but became an object at humanity's disposal (Luo & Zheng, 2019).

Over a hundred years ago, Engels warned about ecological damage: we should not be too intoxicated with human victories over nature; for each such victory, nature will take revenge on us (Engels, 1984, p. 304). Xi Jinping once reflected: in periods of backward productivity, human society continued for thousands of years due to minimal ecological damage; yet in just over 300 years since industrial civilization began, Western-style modernization created by humans in developed countries has threatened human survival and the continuation of Earth's organisms (Xi, 2013, p. 119). Until the mid-last century, with the emergence of problems like population explosion, resource depletion, environmental pollution, species extinction, and declining ecological carrying capacity, humans suddenly realized: the human-nature relationship had become a "social" issue, seriously harming human health and hindering economic and social development.

In September 2020, Xi Jinping announced at the 75th UN General Assembly: China will achieve carbon peak before 2030 and carbon neutrality before 2060 (Xi, 2022, pp. 458, 355). Xi Jinping pointed out in the 19th National Congress report that humans and nature form a community of life, and humanity must respect, conform to, and protect nature; the modernization we want to build is one of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. The 20th National Congress further emphasized that modernization of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature is an important content of Chinese-style modernization. The thought of "harmonious coexistence between humans and nature" was proposed by the Communist Party of China against the background of ecological civilization construction and represents the latest form of human-nature relationship development.

### **3. THE CONNOTATION OF HUMAN-NATURE HARMONIOUS COEXISTENCE FROM THE ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS PERSPECTIVE**

#### **3.1 Environmental Ethics**

The term "ethics" originates from the Greek word "ethos", meaning "custom", referring to general beliefs, attitudes, or standards guiding customary behavior (Des Jardins, 2002, p. 19). Environmental ethics weighs human interests and the protection of natural rights from the perspective of human-nature relationships. Environmental ethics relies on beliefs and public opinion, using ethical principles to regulate the relationship between human interests and nature, seeking harmonious coexistence between humans and nature to achieve coordinated development (Li, 2014). Although environmental ethics schools have certain differences, they share consistent

rational principles in understanding and handling human-nature relationships.

Environmental ethics holds that when human self-interest conflicts with nature, considering only the instrumental value of natural things while ignoring their intrinsic and inherent values shows a lack of "respect". Indeed, we can correct ecological problems by promulgating new ethical guidelines that need not consider interests behind value concepts (Hughes, 2011, p. 24). Incorporating human-nature relationships into the ethical realm, recognizing nature's intrinsic value, forming ethical consciousness, and treating nature with civilized production methods, lifestyles, and consumption patterns are important markers distinguishing ecological civilization from ecological barbarism. Ecological civilization characterizes the cultural and ethical pattern of human production, lifestyle, and value concept transformation, with the core issue being properly handling human-nature relationships.

### **3.2 The Connotation of Human-Nature Harmonious Coexistence**

"Coexistence" means "living together" or "existing together", referring to the mutually beneficial relationship where humans and natural beings live and develop together (Li, 2014). Marx's view of nature held that nature, insofar as it is not the human body itself, is humanity's inorganic body, and humans must live by nature (Marx & Engels, 1979, p. 95). Engels also pointed out that our dominion over nature is not like a conqueror over foreign peoples; rather, we belong to nature with our flesh, blood, and brain and exist within it (Engels, 1984, p. 305). Nature has "priority" over humanity; nature is an objective existence independent of human will, and humans are products of nature's development to a certain stage. Xi Jinping, in his series of discussions on human-nature relationships, pointed out that humans are born from nature, and humans and nature have a mutually beneficial coexistence relationship. In the new era context, the connotation of "coexistence" has been further enriched, referring to humans autonomously conducting production and life activities for their survival, impacting nature in various ways, thereby requiring humans and nature to adapt to constant changes while existing and developing together.

"Harmony" is an important concept and behavioral norm in Chinese traditional culture and represents a new orientation of human-nature coexistence. The *Modern Chinese Dictionary* defines "harmony" as proper coordination and peaceful agreement (Institute of Linguistics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2016, p. 527). The human-nature harmony view draws from the ancient context of "unity of heaven and man", seeing humans and nature as a closely connected, mutually constraining whole. "Harmonious coexistence" is not merely externally "peaceful coexistence" but internally encompasses extremely high requirements for human needs, social relations, social environment, and social development (Pi & Deng, 2020). Only on the basis of human development and social progress, while humans learn to respect and treat nature well while reasonably developing and utilizing natural resources, can human-nature subject-object unity harmonious coexistence be achieved.

The 19th National Congress report's proposal of "harmonious coexistence between humans and nature" represents a new form of social development and ecological civilization construction, expressing the Chinese adaptation of Marxist views of nature. "Harmonious coexistence" represents a state of social civilization where humans and nature, humans and society, and humans with each other depend on each other, maintain positive cycles, and achieve sustained prosperity - the practical destination of ecological civilization. People focus only on natural resources' instrumental value while overlooking their intrinsic and inherent values (Luan, 1986, p. 217). The bias of instrumental rational value inevitably leads people to neglect nature's rights, while the private desires and self-interest pursuing profits tend to break through all limits for maximum value

(Han, 2021, pp. 190, 189). Individualism, egoism, and utilitarianism often make people see only economic benefits while ignoring ecological benefits. Concepts of controlling, transforming, and conquering nature ignore the intrinsic unity between humans and nature, emphasizing human-nature dualistic opposition, retaining traces of "anthropocentrism" (Xie & Du, 2019).

To move beyond the misconception of human-nature opposition, highlight "goodness" toward nature, suppress humanity's "evil", pursue coordinated development of economy, society and environment with the civilized concept of "harmonious coexistence", and create green and healthy low-carbon consumption patterns that both meet human needs and protect natural ecology - these represent the reasonable connection between natural ecological balance and human ecological health, as well as the true establishment of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

Human-nature harmonious coexistence represents our party's reshaping of human-nature relationships in exploring socialist modernization. Promoting green and low-carbon development, building a beautiful China, and forging a path of civilized development with productive development, affluent life, and good ecology are inherent requirements of China's socialist ecological civilization construction. Xi Jinping emphasizes that humanity must respect, conform to, and protect nature (Xi, 2022, pp. 458, 355). With increasing social civilization, people have been forced to reflect more deeply on their path forward: how to seek harmonious unity in human-nature relationships? Resolving contradictions between humans and nature requires both eliminating tensions between humans and nature and transforming unreasonable social relations (Wang, 2023). Ecological civilization represents a higher-level social ethical form in human moral evolution history. Only by enhancing public ecological civilization consciousness can society-wide ecological civilization practices move from spontaneity to consciousness (Niu, 2022). Only when humans view "goodness" toward nature as the highest value pursuit and firmly suppress "evil" toward nature under the sense of duty to revere life can human-nature "harmonious coexistence" finally be achieved.

#### **4. PRACTICAL PATHS OF HUMAN-NATURE HARMONIOUS COEXISTENCE MODERNIZATION FROM THE ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS DIMENSION**

##### **4.1 Respect Nature, Awaken the Public's "Conscience" of Treating Nature Well**

Nature, as an objective existence closely related to us, is not a cold, lifeless existence, but contains the life states and change rules of natural beings (Wang, 2021). Every object has its intrinsic value. People should maintain reverence for all natural beings, generate moral obligations and responsibilities toward nature like interpersonal ethical care from their hearts, eliminate instrumentalist thinking, remove the notion that humans habitually treat nature as an object satisfying all human needs, perceive nature's indispensable benevolence toward humanity, and develop "ecological conscience" toward nature to truly achieve reverence and respect for nature.

With rapid social-economic development and significantly improved material living standards, people's consumption demands have been met in diverse ways. However, Chinese public ecological consciousness remains weak, with some people maintaining consumption concepts of "comparison", "showing off", and "greed". "Non-essential" consumption drives human extraction of natural resources, invisibly intensifying the opposition between humans and nature. Guiding the public to respect nature and awakening their "conscience" toward nature helps internalize their respect for nature into an attitude and character, forming a sense of responsibility and mission to protect nature. Through publicity and education, guide the public's pursuit of a better life beyond material wealth, advocating simple, moderate, frugal, low-carbon, and environmentally friendly

green lifestyles.

#### **4.2 Conform to Nature, Practice "Unity of Objects and Self" Ecological Wisdom**

According to Mencius's view, all human needs can be satisfied. However, satisfaction through irrational means is immoral, while satisfaction through rational means is moral. When humans obtain various resources from nature to meet their various needs, they should adhere to the principle of "conforming" to nature: escaping from narrow utilitarianism and reducing excessive "private desires". Overcome humanity's malignant conquest and plundering behavior toward nature, use balanced "unity of heaven and man" as a practical method, shape "unity of objects and self" ecological wisdom, thereby practicing the ecological ethical spirit of "not doing evil to all things" (Han, 2021, pp. 190, 189).

During China's rapid industrialization process, although great economic achievements have been made, resources and environment have paid a painful price, leading to problems like greenhouse effects, environmental pollution, and energy shortages remaining unresolved. Humans have conducted deeper rational thinking in their interaction with nature: neither being afraid to act nor acting recklessly toward nature is appropriate; reflecting on and criticizing past irrationality can make human civilization increasingly reasonable and perfect (Cao & Jiang, 2019). "Carbon peak and carbon neutrality" are concrete actions implementing the concept of "harmonious coexistence between humans and nature" and internal requirements for promoting China's high-quality green economic development. To achieve "carbon peak and carbon neutrality" goals, we must comprehensively transform economic development models, adhere to the principle of "low-carbon environmental protection priority over economic development", and avoid taking the old path of "pollute first, treat later" or "destroy first, restore later".

#### **4.3 Protect Nature, Leverage Legal Systems' "Protection and Supervision" Role**

The modernization of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature represents modernization that has achieved tremendous success in aspects like a strong China, civilized China, harmonious China, beautiful China, healthy China, and safe China, and has entered a stage closely combining nature with humanity, economic rationality with ecological rationality, and current development with sustainable development (Fang, 2023). Building Chinese-style modernization featuring harmonious coexistence between humans and nature in our developing country with over 1.4 billion people requires the state to "protect" nature through legal systems. In the process of formulating laws and systems related to nature protection, proceed from the natural view of protecting and maintaining ecological balance, adhere to low-carbon and low-energy consumption principles, actively research and develop non-toxic, recyclable, degradable, low-energy-consuming, low-emission, clean, and efficient technological products, alleviate people's urgent demands for natural resources, and effectively leverage laws and systems' "protection" effectiveness for nature.

Through formulating relevant laws and policies, regulate enterprise production behaviors and guide the public to establish environmental protection awareness. For example, China has issued *China's National Plan on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, enacted the *Environmental Protection Law of the People's Republic of China*, *Ecological Protection Red Line Environmental Supervision Measures*, *National Climate Change Response Planning*, and others. Additionally, leverage the leadership and execution capabilities of administrative law enforcement departments at all levels, improve the green low-carbon policy

system, perfect specific "dual carbon" standards, standardize enterprise supervision mechanisms, and actively address specific issues in environmental governance and ecological protection. Furthermore, strengthen publicity about China's environmental conditions, fully utilize network platforms, popular science videos, and other forms to actively promote environmental protection concepts and policy regulations, such as *Warning Records of Western China's Ecological Environment*, *China's Environmental Protection Path*, *Common Homeland* and other documentaries. Take opportunities like World Environment Day and World Earth Day to conduct environmental ecology-themed publicity and education activities, guiding people to establish nature protection awareness. Using schools, social organizations, and civil organizations as carriers, cultivate "ecological humans" with ecological rationality.

## 5. CONCLUSION

"Harmonious coexistence" as a new form of human-nature relationship has opened a new era of ecological civilization construction in China. The concept of "harmonious coexistence between humans and nature" originates from China and will benefit the world, pointing the direction for sustainable development of human civilization. By truly achieving: "respecting nature" in consciousness, "conforming to nature" in practice, and "protecting nature" at the institutional level, Chinese-style modernization will certainly be full of vitality and energy on China's land due to the friendly, win-win "harmonious coexistence" relationship established between humans and nature.

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