



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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The destruction of cultural landscapes, an unfortunate byproduct of human development and industrialization, has led to reevaluating how we approach the relationship between humans and nature. Integrating environmental philosophy into cultural landscape protection offers a promising avenue for achieving a balance between development and conservation. Xu (2024) explores the insights provided by ancient Chinese philosophies, particularly Taoism, and their application in contemporary landscape conservation efforts. It also critiques certain aspects of these philosophies and suggests additional concepts that could enhance our understanding and practice of cultural landscape conservation.

Cultural landscapes are integral to human societies’ survival, development, and value systems. These landscapes represent the symbiotic relationship between natural environments and human activities, reflecting historical, cultural, and social processes. Nevertheless, contemporary progress, distinguished by swift industrialization and urbanization, sometimes disregards the inherent worth of these landscapes. The consequence has been the degradation of both natural and cultural heritage, underscoring the need for a more holistic and ethical approach to landscape conservation (Antrop, 2005).

The concept of cultural landscapes in Chinese civilization encompasses many elements, including historical sites, agricultural practices, and religious sanctuaries. These elements are imbued with cultural and historical significance that warrants preservation. The Honghe Hani Rice Terraces, for example, are not just agricultural fields; they embody

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the cultural and ecological wisdom of the Hani people, illustrating how human ingenuity can harmonize with natural landscapes (Unesco, 2013). Nevertheless, the demands of industrialization and tourism have resulted in clashes between the preservation of natural resources and the pursuit of commercial gain, underscoring the importance of implementing sustainable management approaches that uphold cultural heritage and address present-day requirements.

Environmental philosophy, particularly as developed in ancient Chinese thought, offers a robust framework for addressing the challenges of cultural landscape conservation. Traditional Chinese philosophies, such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, emphasize a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. These philosophies advocate for living by natural laws and highlight the interdependence of all living beings. This stands in stark contrast to the anthropocentric views that have dominated Western thought, where nature is often seen as a resource to be exploited for human benefit (Callicott, 1994).

Taoist philosophy, in particular, provides profound insights into the relationship between humans and nature. The Taoist principle of “*Dao follows nature*” suggests that humans should align their actions with the natural world, promoting balance and sustainability. Laozi’s concept of “*inaction*” (*wu wei*) does not imply passivity but rather a proactive engagement with natural processes, avoiding actions that disrupt ecological balance (Ivanhoe, 2002). This idea can be used in landscape conservation by advocating for measures that maintain biological systems and biodiversity, while also honoring cultural traditions.

The integration of Taoist principles into environmental philosophy requires further exploration. For instance, the principle of “*inaction*” can be interpreted in multiple ways, some of which might not align with the proactive measures needed for contemporary environmental management. In addition, although Taoism places great importance on achieving harmony and balance, it sometimes lacks a systematic strategy for addressing contemporary environmental challenges that necessitate precise legislative and technological measures.

Moreover, traditional Chinese thought’s focus on harmony can sometimes lead to an oversimplification of complex ecological interactions. Modern ecological science has shown that ecosystems are dynamic and often characterized by disturbances and nonlinear processes (Gunderson; Holling, 2002). Therefore, while the ideal of harmony is valuable, it needs to be complemented by an understanding of ecological resilience and adaptability.

Another area for expansion is the inclusion of concepts from other environmental philosophies. Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, which highlights the community’s duty to care for the land, provides a parallel viewpoint to the Taoist worldview. Leopold’s idea that humans are members of an ecological community and have a duty to protect their health can enhance the ethical dimensions of cultural landscape conservation (Leopold, 1949).

The evolution of cultural landscape protection can be divided into several stages, reflecting different approaches to the relationship between humans and nature:

1. **Wilderness Protection:** Initially, environmental movements focused on preserving wilderness areas, emphasizing the intrinsic value of nature. This approach often led to the exclusion of humans from these areas, creating a dichotomy between nature and culture (Cronon, 1996, p. 7-28).

2. **Cultural Integration:** As the limitations of strict wilderness protection became apparent, the focus shifted towards integrating cultural values into conservation efforts. This stage recognized the role of indigenous and local communities in shaping and maintaining cultural landscapes (Berkes, 2012).

3. **Sustainable Development:** The current stage emphasizes global responsibility and sustainable development, integrating environmental and cultural considerations into a holistic approach. This stage advocates for international cooperation and shared responsibility in protecting cultural landscapes (Unesco, 2013).

Despite the clear benefits of integrating environmental philosophy into landscape protection, several challenges remain. One significant challenge is the conflict between economic development and conservation goals. Rapid urbanization and industrialization often prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term environmental sustainability. To tackle this difficulty, it is necessary to change society’s attitudes so that they acknowledge and appreciate the inherent and practical worth of cultural landscapes.

Another challenge is the lack of comprehensive data on the state of cultural landscapes and the impacts of various conservation strategies. Robust monitoring and evaluation systems are needed to assess the effectiveness of conservation efforts and inform adaptive management practices.

However, these challenges also present opportunities for innovation and collaboration. Advancements in technology, such as remote sensing and geographic information systems (GIS), can enhance the monitoring and management of cultural landscapes. Additionally, international cooperation and knowledge exchange can facilitate the sharing of best practices and the development of global standards for landscape conservation.

The intersection of environmental philosophy and cultural landscape protection offers a holistic framework for addressing the complex challenges facing China’s cultural heritage. By incorporating Taoist principles into modern environmental ethics, it is feasible to create sustainable approaches that respect cultural and ecological values. Protecting cultural landscapes is not merely an act of preserving history; it is a commitment to fostering a sustainable and harmonious future where humans and nature coexist in balance.

In this context, the principles of harmony, natural inaction, and the unity of heaven and man provide valuable guidance. These principles encourage a shift from exploitative practices to ones that respect and sustain the intricate relationships between cultural and natural systems. China can take the lead in demonstrating the application of old wisdom to modern methods in cultural landscape protection and sustainable development by embracing these philosophical principles. The future of cultural landscape conservation depends on our ability to integrate these diverse perspectives and develop innovative solutions that respect both our cultural heritage and the natural environment.

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