

## On Environmental Ethics in China

By Jian-xia Cui

Since the implementation of the reform-and-open policy in 1978, the last thirty years has witnessed the development among Chinese scholars of a widespread discussion and deep research on such problems as the existence of ethical relations between humankind and nature, anthropocentrism and its value, the intrinsic value and rights of nature. As a result, they have formed a particular theoretical viewpoint, discipline model and questioned the consciousness of Chinese environmental ethics. China has made significant progress in theoretical studies of environmental ethics, and has especially gained remarkable achievements in absorbing, learning from and being compatible with advanced foreign cultures, grasping the history of the development of Western ethics, and keeping up with the pace of western academic study. As a result it could be said that China has played a positive role in promoting the development of its environmental ethics. However, although paying close attention to the theoretical developments of environmental ethics abroad (something which has nearly become the academic trend of China's environmental ethics), Chinese environmental ethics has been short of its **own** say, its systematic theory construction and its Chinese cultural characteristics. Hence, it still does not have a say in the world circle of the environmental ethics field.

Chinese environmental ethics has experienced several stages as follows: it germinated in the late 1970s, started in the 80s, and developed in the 90s. The reform and open policy in 1978 led to an unprecedented liberation in thinking for Chinese people. Therefore it has become an urgent need of the academic circle to learn from the research results of Western environmental ethics, broaden people's academic minds, and catch up with the world academic front in order to solve China's serious local environmental problems. Into the 90's, in particular, excited by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and the spirit of its important document "Agenda 21" the Chinese government made a positive response by developing "China's Agenda 21" in July the same year and putting it into effect in March 1994. This brought a huge boost to research into environmental ethics. In 1994 the Chinese Environment Ethics Academic society set up and held its first annual meeting, which was a symbol of China's environmental ethics research stepping into a formal and comprehensive stage of development. Since the 90's, the study of environmental ethics has been fruitful with treatises, translations, essays and conferences springing up in an endless stream. According to incomplete statistics, the Chinese academic circle introduced 2 western environmental ethics works in the 1970s, 8 in the 80s, 21 in the 90s, and more than 10 in recent years. The Chinese academic circle has published

nearly a total of 40 monographs about environmental ethics in these thirty years. This paper tracks down the four main problems and disputes which have emerged in China's environmental ethics studies, and makes some comments on such problems.

### **I. Do ethics relations exist between humankind and nature?**

This question is directly related to the object of environmental ethics. There are two opposite opinions.

(1) There is **no** ethical relation between humankind and nature. The relation between human and nature is actually the relation between humans because nature has no consciousness and will, so it is very difficult to rise to a subject status. "Ethics relations" is a social relation category. Except for humans, who have consciousness and will, no other things are qualified to be ethic subjects or objects. Thus they cannot form ethic relations with humankind. In the ecological environment, the fact that some people's destructive behaviors have harmed some other people's benefits is actually a reflection of relations between humans. Environmental ethics refers to the value subject of the relations between human and nature, that is the ethic between humans. Correspondently, in this view, the research object of environmental ethics is the ethical relationship between human beings in human society through the intermediary of the natural environment.

(2) There **is** an ethical relation between humankind and nature. Humans have a moral duty to nature. Only when they expand this moral duty to the entire natural community, will their morality become complete. Humans should be at the standpoint of nature, and consider in a bigger range the way of human behavior in the natural ecosystem. Related with this, environmental ethics is a discipline studying the ethical relations between humans and nature. Liu Xiangrong said that the view of ecological ethics research is the moral relations between humans and nature, instead of the moral relations between humans inside human society. He thus expands ethics from interpersonal morality to natural morality in his book "Ecological Ethics" (this is the first monograph of environmental ethics in China) published in 1992. There are some similar views like "Eco-ethics is an interdisciplinary subject which studies relations between humans and nature from a moral point of view. Based on the regularity of interaction of nature and humans as revealed by ecology, it coordinates the overall relationship between humans and the natural environment by the means of morality."<sup>1</sup> "Ecological ethics takes the ethical relationship between human beings and their moral behaviors, or rather, the relationship between human and nature and their moral behaviors in the ecology field as its studies objects. Moral behavior in ecological ethics refers to people's concrete manifestation of their moral relationship in the ecology field, and includes activity phenomenon, consciousness phenomenon and the standard phenomenon of ecological

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<sup>1</sup> Li Chunqiu and Chen Chunhua, *Ecological Ethics* (Beijing: Science Press, 1993), 1.

morality.”<sup>2</sup> Eco-ethics “takes the ecological and moral relations between humans and nature as a research object. It is a theory about the ecological ethical aspects of the relations between human and nature, and also the theoretical sublimation and certification of the moral life of humans and nature.” Studies in this subject include people’s ecological and moral obligations and responsibilities to other people, living lives, and the planet’s ecosystem. “Ecological ethics studies the moral attitudes and behavior norms of how people treat animals, plants, microorganisms, ecosystems and other things in nature on this planet. This definition shows that ecological ethics takes ecological morality as a research object. First of all, this is the expansion of the ethical knowledge field in that human morality to nature is regarded as a part of ethical knowledge. Second, it proposes dealing with the problems of people’s moral attitudes towards treating living creatures and the natural world. Third, it has developed basic principles and norms of ecological morality in human behavior.”<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, scholars presuming the existence of an ethical relationship between human and nature believe that the social relationship between humans in traditional ethics should be extended to that ecological relationship between humans and nature. Besides, the scope of moral objects should be extended from the human community to the community of both humans and nature. Also, in order to achieve harmony between humans and nature, we need to develop basic ethical principles and norms of ecological ethics to constrain human behavior. In other words, these scholars have observed signs of ethics implied in the relationship between humans and nature, and have revealed the fundamental features distinguishing environmental ethics from traditional ethics, and therefore have extended research and the observation scope of ethics.

I think the research object of environmental ethics is the ethical relationship between humans and nature, which includes the relationship between human beings. Since human interest is the starting point and ultimate goal in the relationship between humans and nature, denying this point is to explore the relationship between humans and nature from a pure-naturalism perspective, and neglects the key point that the relationship between humans and nature is inevitably influenced by the relationship between humans and society.

## **II. What is anthropocentrism?**

(1) Anthropocentrism is a kind of value.<sup>4</sup> In the relationship between humankind and nature, anthropocentrism puts humankind at the center, advocating that the overall and long-term interests of human beings are the fundamental starting point and ultimate goal of

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<sup>2</sup> Li and Chen, *Ecological Ethics*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Yu Mouchang, *Awakening in Punishment: Moving toward Ecological Ethics* (Guangdong Education Publishing House, 1995), 77-78.

<sup>4</sup> Fu Hua, *Research on Ecological Ethics* (Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 2002), 57-58.

humans in dealing with the relationship between human and nature and carrying out practical activities. Human concern is the ultimate measure of value for human behavior, so humans have direct moral obligations to humans, but only indirect obligations to nature and environment. However, humans cannot overlook the natural law or do whatever they want to nature.

(2) Anthropocentrism is a kind of world outlook or outlook on nature. Humans are at the center of the universe and the highest level of biological evolution. Hence they are unquestionably living as the center of the natural species. Humans can do things for their own interests, but at the expense of destroying the ecological balance.

(3) There are two forms of anthropocentrism, strong anthropocentrism (traditional anthropocentrism, absolute anthropocentrism) and weak anthropocentrism (the modern anthropocentrism, the relative anthropocentrism). Based upon sentimental aspiration rather than a rational reflection, strong anthropocentrism takes the natural world as a tool to meet all the needs of humankind, making the natural world a warehouse to satisfy human interests. Weak anthropocentrism starts from human rationality, adheres to the fundamental interests of humankind, and at the same time advocates protecting the ecological environment through the perspective of protecting human interests. It also demands respect for laws and the intrinsic values of nature as a basis for regulating human behavior.

(4) Anthropocentrism has four historical shapes:<sup>5</sup> The first one is universe anthropocentrism (also called ancient anthropocentrism). “The geocentric theory” from ancient Rome said that earth was at the center of the universe, so people took it for granted that humans and myriad things were at the center of the universe. This was just a kind of anthropocentrism in a geographical sense without involving the relations between humans and nature. The second one is theological anthropocentrism. It originates from the European middle ages Christian world outlook and thought that humans exist for God, myriad things exist for humans, and humankind and nature achieve harmony and unification under God’s will. The third one is modern anthropocentrism. The great development of modern science and technology has improved human ability of knowing and transforming nature. People’s subjectivity has been enhanced, and the consciousness of ruling nature has become stronger and stronger. The fourth one is ecology anthropocentrism. It appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, and was a new thought which emerged as a result of the aggravation of the ecological crisis. The core of this thought is that humans have to protect the natural environment and stay in harmony with nature in order to solve the ecological crisis which we are facing.

(5) Anthropocentrism has three levels: first, ontological anthropocentrism. It believes

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<sup>5</sup> Zeng Jianping, “Twenty Years’ Study of Chinese Environment Ethics,” *Journal of Central South University of Forestry and Technology* vol. 1(2007).

that humans are at the center of the universe, and humans and myriad things are at the center and edge respectively and are involved in the relationship of mastering and being mastered. The second one is epistemological anthropocentrism. Human beings get to know myriad things from their own perspectives. They use methods in accordance with their own needs and with their intrinsic measures. The third one is value theory anthropocentrism. It advocates that entire human activities be based upon human interests, serving the interests of humans, and meeting human purposes and needs.

(6) Anthropocentrism has three dimensions.<sup>6</sup> First, it serves as a value standpoint and orientation. In environmental life, it is impossible for humans not to insist on their own value and interests nor to take themselves as the center. Human's subjectivity (people's need, interests, potential and so on) is the measure of the value and goal of environmental ethics. Second, it serves as a viewpoint or premise of methodology. We can only discuss environmental ethics and the value of nature from a human standpoint. So long as you "speak", you are speaking a "human language", and the human standpoint is there. Third, anthropocentrism serves as a way of thinking. To discuss the value of environment, we need the thought of value. This kind of thought is continually producing, developing and completing subjectivity like an axle center to construct the value fact. It does not focus on the self-sufficient and decided quality, but focuses on the relations (treatment), the production and the process. Besides, the description and explanation of subjects are part of the essential parameters for the emergence of value facts.

### **III. The value of anthropocentrism**

(1) The "going out" theory. In 1994, Yu Mouchang published a paper on "going out of anthropocentrism", which presented the non-anthropocentrism ethical viewpoint, and immediately led to a great discussion on the foundation of environmental ethics. The "going out" theory represented by Yu Mouchang and Ye Ping believes that we should go out of, or go beyond, anthropocentrism. Because anthropocentrism only acknowledges nature's value for humans and does not acknowledge the intrinsic value of nature itself, it only acknowledges human's rights to make use of nature, and ignores the stability and harmony of nature. So since anthropocentrism is the direct cause of environmental degradation, we should go out of or go beyond these mistaken ideas.

(2) The "going into" theory. The "going into" theory represented by Liu Fusen and Zhang Jiangang believes that the non-anthropocentric theory has logical weaknesses and shortcomings. It thinks that as epistemology and values, anthropocentrism can not be

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<sup>6</sup> Sun Meitang, "Three Layers of Environmental Ethics," *Studies in Dialectics of Nature*, vol. 6 (2007): 10.

transcended. It came into being when the subject consciousness of humans developed to a certain stage. It is the practical nature of human society, the internal driving force of social development, the eternal fulcrum of human existence, and the driving force for the development of human society. By anthropocentrism human beings present their own values. As a result, anthropocentrism can not be transcended, but should be entered.

(3) The “going into” theory with conditions. The third party represented by Yang Tongjin believes that both anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism have their own rationality and flaws, so they propose the thought of “surmounting and conforming” both of them. They think humans should get rid of anthropocentrism which advocates conquering nature, and should insist on modern anthropocentrism which advocates harmony between humans and nature. The similar viewpoints include the theory of all living things in harmony, which is formed on both the human standpoint and the transcendental human standpoint.<sup>7</sup> It considers that the biggest feature of non-anthropocentric theory is selflessness. It supposes itself to surpass the human standpoint absolutely, jumps out of humans themselves, observes problems from the angle of the universe itself, and looks into the world with “pure objectivity.” In fact, such a presupposition is untenable. Humans can not truly get rid of the human standpoint. The value of nature and environmental ethics is inevitably interwoven with human norms and criteria. They demonstrate a human world view and values. There are no ethics that can go beyond humankind’s range. Once human interests are threatened by other species, humans will certainly treat other lives from their own value standpoint. Even if humans appreciate a natural beautiful scene without utility, this kind of value is also nature’s esthetic value for humans.

However, anthropocentrism has only a human standpoint, not a transcendental human standpoint, which means that humans are reduced to the level of an ordinary object. Humans and other living things have no essential difference, and are all ignorant classes surviving and reproducing based on natural instinct, and as the only species with freedom and self-awareness and ability in the world, human particularity can not be reflected. This particularity should make humans not only insist on their own standpoint, but also go beyond the standpoint, to respect other lives just as they respect humans, to care about other lives the way they care about human lives, and help other lives as they help human’s. In some sense, humans are the guardian of myriad things, so people should maintain an overall ecological balance, harmony, health and prosperity of the whole life circle. Therefore, we should stick to the everything-in-harmony theory that combines the human standpoint and transcendental human standpoint. Its greatest feature is that it does not lose and also it is not constrained to the human standpoint. It does not have the unrealistic aspect of non-anthropocentrism, and

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<sup>7</sup> Sun Meitang, “Three Layers of Environmental Ethics,” 11-12.

also breaks free out of the narrow and original aspects of self-anthropocentric theory.

#### IV. The intrinsic values and rights of nature

The so-called intrinsic value refers to nature taking itself as the end. It does not need human evaluation to exist, and nature itself is the evaluator and actor, rather than a means of achieving goals for humans.

(1) Nature **has intrinsic value**. Yu Mouchang and other scholars discussed intrinsic value from the following aspects earlier, such as purposiveness, subjectivity, initiative, “value capabilities”, as well as the wisdom of life and nature. Except for the value as a means (tool) of humans, nature also has intrinsic value. So humans should not evaluate nature just from the perspective of human measures. A further view says that the phenomenon and state of ecological prosperity and harmony in myriad things are not just valuable to any “experiencer”, but are good and valuable in themselves.

(2) Nature **has only instrumental value**, and no intrinsic value.<sup>8</sup> Nature’s value is measured by human subjectivity, and is judged by what nature brings to human survival and development and its usefulness for humans. For humans, nature is just a means and tool. Hence its value is just an instrumental value. It is not necessary to apply the concept of human values to non-human nature. “No subject intrinsic value theory” contains two errors: First, it confuses fact and value. Facts (properties, state) may be self-sufficient, but value is always about to whom/what something is valuable. If there are neither subjects nor standpoints of value at all, then there will not be any problem concerning value. Once we make value judgments, we then have a value standpoint, and this also indicates that there is a value subject. Once people make judgments of a particular tendency, they secretly take human subjectivity as the value standard. Second, it mistakes the non-utilitarian aesthetic value as a non-subject value. A subject does not exist for certain utility, but appreciates nature and experiences natural beauty with a free and unbiased mentality. This subject stays in the detached mentality.

The debate focused on three aspects: (1) whether only the human has intrinsic value. (2) Whether having the intrinsic value or not can become the only standard for acceptance of ethical concern. (3) Whether having intrinsic value means equal moral status.

Associated with the intrinsic value of nature, issues about the rights of nature enter the research field. What are these rights? Some scholars believe they refer to the living rights of life and the natural world, and are the integration of interests and power of the natural world. Some other scholars believe that the ecological rights of the non-human are apparent mainly

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<sup>8</sup> Sun Meitang, “Three Layers of Environmental Ethics,” 9.

in three aspects:<sup>9</sup> (1) Living creatures' rights to live. All living creatures have aspirations to live, and cherish their own lives. (2) Living creatures' rights to be independent. All living creatures have rights to pursue freedom according to the ecological activity patterns of their populations. However, the realization of the rights must adapt to the natural selection mechanism which refers to that the ecosystem which dominates as a whole and determines its parts. Otherwise, there would be no living creatures' rights to be independent. (3) Living creatures' rights to be ecologically secure. People should insist on not interfering and destroying the ecological limits. In a natural wilderness, humans should go with nature's development and evolution. In the areas of interaction between humans and nature, humans should take their responsibilities and obligations to carefully transform and manage nature, in order to promote the ecological security of living creatures as well as the economic development of human society.

Although the above-mentioned views vary, most scholars tend to agree on the following points: (1) living creatures in the natural world have rights and aspirations to live, so we should emphasize the importance of the rights of nature, and should not deny the living rights of animals and other living things because of their lack of moral self-discipline. (2) However, we should not treat the rights of living creatures and humans equally with no difference. (3) The rights of humans and the rights of nature have differences or even contradictions. Although we emphasize the equality of rights of nature, we also stress the differences of rights of nature, or rather the differences between human's rights and the rights of nature.

Conclusion: After thirty years' development, China has made great progress in environmental ethics. However, generally speaking, China's environmental ethics is still in the primary stage of exploration, and a mature environmental ethics with characteristics of Chinese culture has not yet been developed. In its future development, China's environmental ethics needs to be improved in the following aspects.

Firstly, remarkable achievements have been made in introducing and clarifying western ethics thoughts, but these attempts are insufficient for obtaining our own unique and proper decision-making system, theoretical framework and the construction of environmental ethics with the characteristics of Chinese culture. The world environmental ethics field demonstrates a lack of Chinese voice. As a matter of fact, there are abundant resources of environmental ethics thoughts in traditional Chinese culture, which interest many western ethicists. Ancient Chinese thinkers, Confucians and Taoists for particular, have very profound insights regarding humans and nature, and the obligations and responsibilities human beings have towards creatures. Confucianism appreciates the concepts of "integration of heaven and

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<sup>9</sup> Ye Ping, "Ecological Rights of Non-human," *Morals and Civilization*, vol. 1 (2000): 13-15.



human”, or rather the concept of harmony between human and nature. It does not view human and nature as contradictory, instead, it views the human as a part of the harmonious whole of nature. There is an intrinsic relationship between “human” and “nature”. Hence, the relationship between the two should be considered as the two sides of a coin. We cannot solely consider one side only and neglect the other. Another example of Chinese environmental ethics thoughts is the famous saying of the Taoist Laozi: “The person reflects the earth; The earth reflects heaven; Heaven reflects the Way; And the Way reflects its own nature.” “The person reflects the earth” means the human should take earth as the law and pay close attention to the earth on which they depend. “The earth reflects heaven” refers to earth taking heaven as the law and respecting the changes of heaven. “Heaven reflects the Way” indicates that heaven should take the Way as the principle and comply with objective laws. “The Way reflects its own nature” reveals that the Way takes nature as the rule. We should keep the naturalness of the process of the universe’s development and changes, rather than intervene and destroy the original process by force. Such is the principle of Confucianism, to let things take their own course. If human beings imitate and adjust to the development of the nature and let things take their own course, then all things in the universe will simultaneously come to their best state of living and development. Environmental values such as “show love to everything in the world”, “respect morality” and “coherent with Heaven and Earth” also have significant meanings for the theoretical construction and breakthrough of environmental ethics. Therefore, China’s environmental ethicists ought to absorb nutrition from traditional Chinese culture, turn it into the foundation of the research and development of China’s environmental ethics, and establish environmental ethics with the characteristics of Chinese culture. As a famous saying goes, only when the root is deep into the earth will the leaves thrive. Only when establishing a Chinese-style discourse and theoretical system based upon our own cultural traditions, social psychology and economic situation, instead of blindly following others, will China environmental ethics play a positive role in the world, and Chinese scholars have their own voice. Carrying characters of Chinese culture and holding a global vision is the only way of China’s environmental ethics.

Secondly, China’s environmental ethics has placed great emphasis on theoretical research into environmental ethics, showing broad and lasting doctrinal disputes, but it has shown little concern for the social reality in China. As a result, the theory cannot offer any solutions to some realistic environmental problems, and has become a theoretical “Utopia” that few people support. China is still a developing country. Though it has the advantage of a vast territory and biodiversity, it has a large population that exerts great stress on the ecological environment. The ecological environment is fairly fragile and there are a lot of natural disasters. The extraordinarily serious floods in 1998 and the plague of SARS in 2003

caused nationwide panic, and also sounded the alarm to people by raising the questions of how to deal with the relationship between human and nature. Considering such problems, Chinese scholars should no longer stay in universities concentrating on their research. They should pay attention to and solve the specific environmental problems which have emerged in the development process of Chinese society and economy, and avoid disconnection between theory and practice. On the macro-level, it should be made sure that theoretical principles and environmental moral standards influence and affect government policies and regulations. On the micro-level, attention should be paid to the improvement of citizens' environmental awareness and construction of projects, and also to attaching some practical quality to the theory so that it adapts to the domestic conditions and serves reality.

Thirdly, China's environmental ethics have been greeted with a lack of enthusiasm for the environmental education which disseminates environmental ethics. Some people think that environmental education is "negligible", shallow-level speculation, and does not have the macroscopic and profound aspects of theoretical study, so they have no interest in participating. Some of the environmental science scholars tend to believe that "technology is the most perfect thing," and that environmental education does not have the practicality of environmental science, so therefore they also dismiss it. From the quantity and content of publicly published academic literature, we can see that Chinese scholars have only written around 10 monographs about environmental education, and there are only a few articles about environmental education any of the important domestic comprehensive journals, so that the literature and information that can be provided to researchers is limited. Even in the research results achieved, the research on some major issues of environmental education still has not gone far enough. Research projects in the future should be mainly contributing to the following issues: research about universality of international environmental education and the individuality of Chinese environmental education; targeted methods for research of environmental education in different regions according to their local characteristics; innovative research on the way and method for environmental protection laws and regulations to take effect in different groups; the specific standard of environment morality that helps to carry out environment education; how the environmental awareness of Chinese citizens is influenced by traditional Chinese culture and customs, regardless of the influence of economics and education development level, national environment protection policies and laws, etc.

Thirty years is far from enough for the development of a new discipline. However, the existence of these issues promises infinite vitality. Moreover, after the reform and opening policy, the government has paid great attention to environmental problems, and its extended effect has become the driving force for the harmonious development of the environment

ethics theory.

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