

Original Paper

The Ideological Narrative Structure of Natural Ecological Environment in the Pre-Qin Period of China

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Abstract

The deterioration of environment is one of the major issues posed to modern human society. Some put their hopes on scientific and technological advancement and advocate the idea of sustainable development of ecological conservation; others hold that human beings have been trapped by the paradox between environment and development. In a word, the thinking and discussion about ecological environment has become a hot topic. By narrating and comparing the ideologies on natural ecological environment from ancient times to pre-Qin period, this paper reflects on the attitude toward natural ecological environment in modern society. Based on its study of a long time-span, this paper puts forward the ideological narrative structure of self, society and all things of natural ecological environment. The ideology centered on individuals and society should be transformed into natural thinking, which includes individuals, society and all things. The modern society should set the basis of solving environmental problems on clarifying the thinking schema of the modern times and the historical context of the evolution of natural ecological environment. The ideological narrative structure of self, society and all things enlighten the contemporary society that the relationship between human society and nature should not be considered from one dimension only.

Keywords

ideology, nature, ecology, environment, narration, pre-Qin period

1. Introduction

The idea that we can have a rational reflection on human nature, human relations, human relations to various spiritual forces, and on the social systems they created and lived in is as old as recorded history (Wallerstein, 1996). For nearly half a century, the protection of environment has received unprecedented attention. National laws and regulations and international proposals concerning

environmental protection have been gradually improved, and the ideology and spirit system of environmental protection has been recognized by most countries in the world. In terms of the level of concern for the natural environment alone, the awareness of protection has penetrated the minds of individuals in different societies and might become part of their thinking and action.

Why is there an unprecedented increase in the awareness of protection of natural ecological environment in a short period of time in the history of human society? Ever since human society entered the industrial era, the development of industry is bound to have a huge impact on the natural ecological environment. On the one hand, the development of industry needs to extract a large amount of energy from the natural ecological environment as the source of power. On the other hand, the development of industry has greatly improved the productivity of human society, enhanced humans' ability to affect the natural ecological environment, and been making the worship and fear of the natural ecological environment gradually disappear in the development of productivity of human society.

While industrialization drives the rapid development of human society, the natural ecological environment presents a variety of environmental problems to human beings. These environmental problems burst out almost at the same time, but they cannot be effectively solved due to the limited development of human productivity at the present stage. One way or another, human society will reflect on whether blind development has caused the deterioration of environment, yet the result of the deterioration will become punishment of the natural ecological environment on human beings. This punishment affects every individual living in the same natural ecological environment, making them realize simultaneously that the natural ecological environment is closely related to their own life. The rise of the postmodernism is also closely related to the helplessness of human society towards the natural ecological environment. The author of *After Modern* points out that Nietzsche realized that he lived in an age without immortals, while Foucault held that people living in modern age were soulless mortals (Yao, 2000). Thus, it is almost inevitable to reflect on the ideologies of natural ecological environment.

Although introspection in the diachronic ideologies of natural ecological environment in a long period of time cannot provide concrete solutions to the environmental problems that human society is facing at present, we can understand the thinking pattern of ancient people in their response to the changes of natural ecological environment by comparing the ideologies of natural ecological environment appeared in different periods. As an ancient civilization, China has a long history and bred a variety of ideologies of natural ecological environment in its development. The development of Chinese civilization is closely related with the ideologies of natural ecological environment. In modern China, studies of natural ecological environment always feature a comparison between the "order" of the ancient Chinese people and the natural ecological environment and the "disorder" of modern to

highlight the rationality of the former ideologies. In light of advocating the protection of natural ecological environment, people usually attach great importance to the ideologies behind this “order”, and even regard it as a prospect to solve the environmental problems encountered by human society.

But will this “order” return? Can the ideologies of ancient Chinese on natural ecological environment be described with the term “order” in its modern sense? Humans are constantly looking for ways to deal with the relationship with the natural ecological environment. The process of searching features constant understanding and grasp of the changes of natural ecological environment. It helps improve the understanding of dealing with the relationship with the natural ecological environment, thus forms a thinking schema of the ideologies of a certain period. Therefore, the essential way for humans to deal with the relationship with the natural ecological environment is not to copy the “order” of the ancients in accordance with modern standards, but to explore the thinking of human society evolved in the change of natural ecological environment.

2. View of Nature in Ancient China

According to archaeological discoveries, the Yuanmou people, appeared 1.7 million years ago, were the earliest humans living on the vast land of China. Later, earlier ancient human activities were discovered in different places in China at different stages. Most of the unearthed cultural relics convey humans’ depictions of the relationship between their own life and nature. Since there were human activities on the land of China, there appeared the earliest thinking about exploring self, organizing groups and explaining everything. Ancient humans were always concerned about such questions as where they came from, why they lived together, and how everything existed, etc. In the daily life of constant contact with nature, ancient humans gradually had their own interpretations of questions. These explanations constitute the original thinking of ancient humans about the natural ecological environment.

There are many legends about the origin of human beings and all things in the history of Chinese society. For example, Pangu separated heaven and earth, Goddess Nuwa created human. The earliest explanation of ancient Chinese about themselves and everything lies in these myths and legends. The continuous transmission of the legends indicates their importance in supporting the thinking system of Chinese. Such an explanation is as universal as the biblical explanation of the origin of man and all things given by human who lives on the other side of the earth. That is to say, the interpretation of human and all things is necessary for man to live in nature, although it may be expressed in different ways at different times in history. These interpretive manifestations or modes of thought are associated with authority, whether they are explained in a worshipful way or in a theological way or in a philosophical way. It is through the authority of interpretation that human beings are organized and live together.

China's archaeological discoveries have shown numerous ancient civilization sites to people, such as the Hongshan culture appeared 8500-8000 years ago, the Pre-Yangshao culture appeared 8000-7400 years ago, and numerous sites of ancient human activities in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River and the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River simultaneously and continuously appeared in the later period (Fei, 1989). The ruins of ancient civilizations, in different ways, reflect the understanding of the relationships between themselves and nature of ancient humans in different periods. For instance, the worship of the goddess in the Red Mountain Culture shows that women play an important role in the development of human beings. Archaeological discovery at the Niuhehang site of Hongshan culture suggested that the layout and selection of the site showed that the ancient people's understanding and scientific practice of geographical location, terrain and lithology have reached a high level (Yang et al.). Studies at the Puyang Xishuipo site of the Yangshao culture showed that the ancient Chinese had a profound understanding of astronomical and natural phenomena (Feng, 1990), and applied this knowledge to organize human beings, social groups and natural things in human production and life, that is, to form a certain thinking mode.

In the early Chinese civilization, ancient humans' understanding of nature was closely linked with that of themselves. In their contact with nature, human beings constantly gained effective explanations of their adaptation to nature, which can be regarded as the spontaneous adaptation process of human beings to the changes of natural ecological environment. The reason is not that the ancient humans realized their dependence on nature. On the contrary, it is the process of overcoming and conquering nature with effective adaptation, not in a modern sense. One of the main reasons for the ancient humans to consciously adapt to nature is the fear of nature and the worship generated by fear. With the help of worship, they organized social life and dealt with their relationship with the natural ecological environment. In the Civilizing Process, Elias suggested that the psychological origin of human civilization is the process of humans gradually controlling self-emotions, with the control of fear being one of the important aspects. The social origin of the human civilization gradually transferred from the control of emotion to national matters, prompting the formation of the nation state (Elias, 2000). This indicates that the process of human civilization and humans' emotional control are closely linked, which further suggests that humans' emotional control is an integral part of the original human mind. Therefore, in the thinking structure of ancient Chinese, humans themselves and the groups they organized realized the control of fear and adapted to the natural ecological environment through the form of worship, and there were various forms of worship in ancient times. Due to the various natural ecological environments faced by human beings in different regions, there are also different classifications of worship, such as nature worship, totem worship, ancestor worship and fertility worship, etc., with more detailed classifications under each one (Shi & Hu, 1994). The classification study of totem reminds people of the discussion of *The Savage Mind*. Lévi-Strauss thought that the

savage mind explained the physical world from the two opposite aspects of highly concrete and highly abstract, and deepening one's knowledge with the help of the world of images. It improves the understanding of the world by establishing mental systems that resemble the world. In this sense the savage mind is a kind of analogique thinking (Lévi-Strauss, 1966).

3. Ideologies on Natural Ecological Environment in China's Pre-Qin Period

There are a lot of descriptions about the natural ecological environment in the books written in the pre-Qin period. The ideas described in these books are to a large extent a further reflection on the relationship between human beings and the natural ecological environment, but not merely an adaptation to nature, focusing more on coordinating relations or adapting to nature through effective changes. Of course, the social and natural ecological environment in the pre-Qin period had undergone great changes compared with the previous times. At that time, people living in China had developed relatively sound social organizations, such as feudal state and vassal states. While the natural ecological environment had changed under the influence of natural forces and early human beings. Although there were still fears and doubts about nature at that time, people's capability of employing the natural ecological environment had been greatly improved. This promoted the change of the original thinking system. In the pre-Qin period, human beings developed a new understanding of themselves, of society and of everything, thus developing a new thinking structure based on the original thinking system. The change of thinking structure in the pre-Qin period is the result of the interaction between human society and the change of natural ecological environment.

The earliest books recording natural ecological environment were the Classic of Mountains and Seas, Huai Nan Zi, the Book of Documents, etc. Take the Classic of Mountains and Seas for example, it recorded such descriptions of mountains, rivers, lakes and other water systems as the Kunlun Range is in the northwest, and the yellow river comes from the northeastern corner of it (Birrell, 2000). Since the release of the Book of Changes, there have been more detailed descriptions of the thoughts on natural ecological environment (Wilhelm et al., 1967). As the earliest written work which indicates a relatively systematic grasp of the laws of nature by Chinese people, the book of Changes is the theory that applies the transition from the eight hexagrams to sixty-four hexagrams to reflect the laws of the movement and change of all things. The records of the laws of all things in the Book of Changes reflect that people at that time mastered the infinite changes of nature in a regular way to guide their production and life. For example, the first hexagram statement of the Book of Changes comments that it's recorded in Tuan that great is the primacy of Qian (universe), giving origin to all the myriad things, and pervading heaven. As clouds move on and rain showers, all things flow together and varied. Everything under the earth can be reborn continuously, and all countries can be beautiful and peaceful (Wilhelm et al., 1967). The second hexagram statement of the Book of Changes comments that the

utmost is the primacy of Kun (earth), giving birth to all the myriad things, and obeying heaven. As Kun is rich and bearers all things, its power for union knows no bound. It nurtures everything to make it flourish, and all things are prosperous and nourished. It is like a Mare, galloping on the boundless earth, yet gentle and docile, maintaining integrity and regularity (Wilhelm et al., 1967). It can be seen from the Book of Changes that in the early stage of the Pre-Qin period, Chinese people began to systematically associate themselves with society and the changes of all things, and formed the initial ideology of exploring the operation rules of all things, and practiced under the influence of these thoughts. The images of hexagram reflect what humans had achieved in their daily life over a long period; thereby the thinking system formed by them matched the social and natural ecological environment at that time. Another example from the chapter explaining the universe in the book Yizhoushu says that Emperor Yu's prohibition, during the three months of spring, no axes should be used in the mountains and forests to help the growth of vegetation, and during the three months of summer, no fishing should be allowed in the rivers, lakes, and seas to protect the growth of fish and turtles (Huang et al., 2018).

The practice of natural ecological environment is recorded in the book Zhouli that in Zhou Dynasty officials specializing in the management of mountains, trees, land, rivers and water sources had been set up. It is recorded that Shanyu (commissioner) takes orders related to mountains and forests, and set boundaries among various types of creatures. The ancients then consciously restrict the exploitation of natural ecological resources to ensure the sustainable utilization of species (Wu, 2013).

During the Spring and Autumn period (770 BC-453 BC) and the Warring States Period (452 BC-221 BC), many thoughts appeared in China. These thoughts became the basic norms for the vassal states of the Zhou Dynasty to deal with both domestic and foreign affairs, and had an immeasurable influence on the state policies and the development and practice of people's ideologies in later dynasties. The ideas of this period can be summarized as the contention of a hundred schools of thought. In some sense, it reflects the diversification of human's understanding of natural ecological environment. However, there is still a common mode of thinking in many theories and relevant works, which is to interpret self, society and natural ecological environment while connecting them and to take the relationship between human and nature as the destination. For instance, the ideology of harmony of human and nature suggested that harmony with the people and obedience to nature is the end of human thought.

Among the hundred schools of thought, Confucianism, Taoism, and the Eclectics are the most influential, as they had constantly reflected the ideas and thoughts on the natural world. For instance, such comments were recorded in the works of Confucianism that the Master fished with a line but not with a net; when fowling he did not aim at a roosting bird (Lau, 1998). If the seasons of husbandry be not interfered with, the grain will be more than can be eaten. If close nets are not allowed to enter the pools and ponds, the fishes and turtles will be more than can be consumed. If the axes and bills enter

the hills and forests only at the proper time, the wood will be more than can be used (Ivanhoe, 2011). Let it be seen to that the people use their resources of food seasonably, and expend their wealth only on the prescribed ceremonies (Ivanhoe, 2011). A further description that human and the natural ecological environment can complement each other can be seen in that able to give his full development to the natures of creatures and things, one can assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth, and able to assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth, human may with Heaven and Earth form a cooperation (Legge, 1983). In the works of Taoism, the ideology that all things coexist without contradiction is emphasized, and that the life style of human beings should conform to nature and return to nature. For example, in Tao Te Ching, it is recorded that Tao gives birth to one, one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three, and three gives birth to all things. Human follows the earth, earth follows the universe, the universe follows the Tao, and finally, Tao follows only itself. Tao nourishes by not forcing, and masters' way of life is to do without fighting (Goddard, 2019). These reflect that Taoism embraces all things without domination and let nature take its course. Similar ideas can be found in other Taoist works, such as that the heaven and the earth and human came into existence at the same time; all things in the world and human are one uniformity (Ziporyn, 2020). Human's life is the combination of heaven which gives them spirits and earth which gives them bodies. Harmony is born, disharmony is not born (Rickett, 1998). It expresses that human and all living things are dependent on each other, and that natural ecological resources should be rationally exploited. The works of the Eclectics pay more attention to the consequences of human's improper handling of its relationship with the natural ecological environment. Burning the woods for hunting, smashing the nest and destroy the eggs, then the phoenix will not come back. Eating the embryo of the animal, then the kylin will not come again. Drying the pond to fish, then the turtle will not go there again. Similar reasoning is universal, and it's innumerable to record (Di, 2005).

In general, in the pre-Qin period, especially the spring and autumn period and the warring states period, the once primitive understanding of ancient Chinese on natural ecological environment had become relatively rational. Although humans had diversified their learning about themselves, social organizations and all things in the world, it can be seen in the existing works of ideologies that how to deal with the relationship between human and nature had been highlighted. Thus, it can be summarized that people had formed the ideological narrative structure about the relationship between heaven and human based on their original thinking. This structure features ancient Chinese people's exploration of their emotional and ethical relationship, it further extends to the conception of social organization or political governance, and then to the thinking and practice of coexisting with all things. In this process, the three aspects got even closer. The relationship between nature and human is also in constant change, the ancients gradually passed the self-control of emotion to the control of social organizations, which used all kinds of ideologies to improve their exploitation of the natural ecological environment,

strengthening their influence on the natural ecological environment. However, the natural ecological environment still exists independently in the understanding of the ancients. As the saying goes, the movement and change of nature follow certain laws, but not disturbed by the existence of Emperor Yao or the demise of Emperor Jie. It is auspicious to adapt to nature with correct social and political measures, but it is disastrous to violate it with wrong social and political measures (Hutton, 2016).

4. Conclusion

After narrating the ideologies about the natural ecological environment from ancient times to the pre-Qin period, it can be seen that human beings have gradually deepened their knowledge and understanding in constant contact with the natural ecological environment, and then formed the ideological structure about it. The original thinking had been transformed into the relatively rational ideologies through adaptation and re-understanding, and this process also witnessed the change of thinking about natural ecological environment. The reason for the change of the ideological structure of the natural ecological environment lies in the interaction between the ancient people's deepened understanding of themselves, the improvement of social organizations and the change of the natural ecological environment, and the most fundamental reason is the constantly changing natural ecological environment under the action of natural forces and human activities. On the one hand, even if human beings have an impact on the natural ecological environment, it has its own path of change. And just as it is inevitable for the natural ecological environment to change in the west and northwest regions in ancient China, it is also natural for the civilization in this region to disappear or change due to the change of the natural ecological environment. On the other hand, the improvement of human's ability to exploit and transform the natural ecological environment will definitely affect the change of the natural ecological environment. The dependence and influence of modern society on natural ecological resources is unprecedented, as it is a continuous process of deepening and accelerating.

In his book *Culture and Practical Reason*, Marshall Sahlins explained that in different periods and types of human society, there will always be the same or similar cultural expression structure, such as the symbolic meaning of symbols (Sahlins, 1978). Same or similar ideological narrative structure of self, society and all things also appeared in the change of natural ecological environment. The emphasis on the ideological structure of natural ecological environment is helpful for people to understand the historical context of the change of natural ecological environment, so as to adopt appropriate viewpoints and practices toward natural ecological environment in different periods of human society. As Fei said that an old farmer sees ants moving, he would make ditches in the field, because he knew what would follow (Fei, 1999).

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