

Interpretation of the Thought of "Harmony between Man and Nature (HBMN)" in the Context of Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The idea of "harmony between man and nature (HBMN)" has had rich cultural connotations since ancient times, and its specific meaning has also changed with the development of the times. The idea of heaven and man first originated in the pre-Qin period, and it was only after the outbreak of the global ecological crisis that foreign countries noticed this idea. However, some Western ecologists' interpretation of HBMN does not understand the true meaning of his thought but instead has a narrow utilitarian interpretation. Through literature discussion, this article interprets the ideological connotations of domestic and foreign scholars. Generally speaking, it is believed that the idea of HBMN is inextricably linked to the concept of sustainable development (SD). We should combine the strengths of both parties and complement each other's shortcomings so that traditional concepts can be reborn in today's era.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of HBMN holds a high position in the Chinese philosophical community and has been revered by countless scholars for thousands of years. It reflects the Chinese people's attention to nature for thousands of years and carries the Chinese people's good wish to live in harmony with nature. The main issue to be explored in this article is how to make the concept of HBMN a mainstream idea that is in line with the current era.

In recent years, with the increasing influence of traditional Chinese culture, the concept of HBMN has also entered the attention of more

scholars. With the increasingly serious ecological and environmental problems such as global climate change, ozone layer depletion, water resource pollution, and sharp decline in biodiversity, the concept of sustainable development has also become the mainstream universal value worldwide. People gradually realize that the adverse consequences of excessive environmental development will eventually return to them. In the context of this era, many foreign scholars also believe that the idea of HBMN may provide a feasible path for humanity to seek survival. In this context, this article uses the method of literature review to

analyze the connotation of Chinese scholars' ideas on the HBMN, as well as the value and significance of this idea in the current situation, and to dialectically analyze the differences in foreign scholars' views on the HBMN. Based on this, the overall thinking conclusion is summarized, and correct cognition is proposed.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL EXPLORATION

Since ancient times, Chinese philosophers have been filled with reverence for the existence of "heaven." Whether they believe in the "correspondence between heaven and man" or believe in the "mandate of nature," people hope to connect themselves with "heaven." Mr. Zhang Dainian (1985) believes that the earliest concept of heaven and man in China originated from pre-Qin philosophy [1]. However, some scholars in the past have misinterpreted this thinking, believing that the concept of heaven and man is not absolutely sacred. For example, Mr. Feng Youlan (2011) believes that the idea of "heaven" and even "emperor" is just a theory of ghosts and gods [2]. Mr. Hou Wailu (2011) believes that HBMN is a "noble ideology" used to fulfill the religious functions of rulers [3]. Mr. Yang Rongguo (1973) directly expressed his dissatisfaction with the idea of HBMN [4], interpreting it as a "theological worldview" and a "tool of thought" for the ruling class. On the contrary, Mr. Qian Mu (1991) highly praised the idea of HBMN in his later article "Possible Contributions of Chinese Culture to the Future of Humanity." [5].

Mr. Ji Xianlin (1993) emphasized that the harmony between "heaven" and "human" is the main tone of ancient Chinese philosophy [6]. Unlike Western philosophy's habit of discussing the "material world" and "spiritual world" separately, Chinese philosophy tends to lean towards the idea of "harmony.". In addition, Western anthropocentrism has made them more inclined to encourage humans to conquer nature,

and this "conquest" rather than "symbiosis" relationship has caused humans to suffer from ecological crises today. In this context, Norwegian philosopher and ecologist Arne Naess (1999) proposed a school of ecological philosophy [7], which he named Deep Ecology. Naess advocates an ecological holism that requires people to treat the natural world with a tolerant attitude, so as to promote the sustainable development of all things in the natural world. He believes that it is the inherent anthropocentrism and subject-object dichotomy of Western natural and scientific thinking that has led to environmental problems and ecological crises in today's world, and therefore the idea of HBMN has attracted their attention. They see it as an Eastern culture imbued with ecological wisdom and refer to it as the 'traditional deep ecology of East Asia(1994).

Mr. Chen Guoqian (1994) shared Naess's view on the disagreement between China and the West regarding the "relationship between heaven and man," believing that Western culture tends to lean towards the idea of "malignant dichotomy" between heaven and man [9]. In contrast, Chinese culture tends to be more inclined towards the idea of "unity of heaven and man without distinction.". Therefore, this has led to the West placing more emphasis on the development of science but neglecting the impact of overdevelopment on the environment, resulting in a series of environmental crises. However, China lacks the "practical initiative" of human beings to transform nature, thus neglecting scientific development. Mr. Rob (1994) raised objections to this summary [10], opposing the use of "main harmony" and "main division" to summarize the characteristics of the "relationship between heaven and man" in Chinese and Western philosophy. But Mr. Gao Chenyang (1995) believes that although there have been philosophers in the West who hold a "harmonious" attitude towards the "relationship between heaven and man," and in the history of

Chinese philosophy [11], there have also been philosophers who hold a "separate" attitude towards the "relationship between heaven and man," this precisely proves that the mainstream ideology of their culture is still consistent with what Mr. Chen Guoqian has expounded. And such accidental phenomena cannot be demonstrated as typical examples. At the same time, Mr. Gao Chenyang stated that although the causes of the ecological crisis are complex, the guiding role of cultural concepts on people should not be ignored. Mr. Fang Keli (2003) believes that the two major challenges currently plaguing humanity, namely ecological destruction and cultural conflict, must be solved using the concept of HBMN [12]. Mr. Tang Yijie (2005) also pointed out that the reason why the concept of HBMN is highly valued in contemporary times is closely related to the ecological crisis that is currently occurring [13]. Because the excessive exploitation of nature by humans has already seriously threatened the conditions for human survival, if measures are not taken, humans will eventually perish on their own.

III. THE BASIC CONNOTATION OF THE IDEA OF HBMN

Mr. Ji Xianlin (1993) used the "Dictionary of Chinese Thought" as an example to argue that it advocates the idea of HBMN and emphasizes that the harmony and consistency between heaven and man is the main tone of ancient Chinese philosophy [6]. He pointed out that as early as in the Book of Changes, Qian Gua, and Classical Chinese, the idea of HBMN was mentioned, and Confucian scholars also defined it as the highest ideal state of life. According to scholar Zhang Dainian (1985) [1], although the idea of HBMN originated in the pre-Qin period, the term appeared even later. Many scholars in the Han and Song dynasties have mentioned the relationship between "heaven" and "man," but it was Zhang Zai who truly proposed the concept of

HBMN. Zhang Zai believed that the relationship between "heaven" and "human" needs to reach the realm of "inner and outer unity," but Cheng Hao's view is completely different. He believes that "heaven and human are inseparable.". If the distinction between "inner and outer" is to separate the two, it is tantamount to going in the opposite direction. Although the two have different opinions on this, Mr. Ji Xianlin (1993) stated that "their ideas on the relationship between heaven and man are basically consistent," [6] and their essence still focuses on enabling people to "harmonize" with "heaven" through their own cultivation.

Mr. Meng Peiyuan (1998) pointed out that the meaning of the "relationship between heaven and man" is to recognize that the natural world has its own meaning of life and inherent value [14]. This viewpoint affirms the inherent value of the natural world and rejects the notion that humans view the natural world as a vassal of human society. Instead, the natural world should be viewed as an independent entity. He said, 'Nature is not only the source of human life and all life, but also the source of human value.' He pointed out that philosophers in the pre Qin period also had different opinions due to their different views on the concept of HBMN. Just like Xunzi and Confucius, Xunzi was the philosopher who actively advocated for the transformation of nature, compared to Confucius' attitude of "respecting ghosts and gods while keeping a distance.". Because Xunzi's teachings are full of humanistic spirit, he advocates for human subjectivity even more. Although Xunzi also advocated for the development and utilization of the natural world, he believed that moderation should be exercised.

The development of human society itself is based on nature, but we cannot be blindly arrogant, elevate ourselves above nature, and proclaim that sociality is higher than naturalness. If one only sees the biological nature of nature, it is a blind act of forgetting

one's roots. Because humans themselves have the responsibility to achieve the "way of life" of the natural world, and developing the natural world and protecting and respecting it are not a zero-sum game. The two can be reconciled, but to achieve this goal, humans need to fully utilize their wisdom.

Mr. Liu Lifu (2007) believes that the concept of HBMN can be understood as "syncretism" or "harmony," [15] but simply understanding it as "harmonious development between humans and nature" is not convincing enough. In ancient times, when discussing the relationship between heaven and man, Dong Zhongshu was a representative who believed that "human" was created by "heaven" according to its own image, just like the legend of Nü-wa creating humans. There are also representatives such as the Doctrine of the Mean, which believes that human "nature" comes from heaven, and this statement is highly praised by Confucian scholars. Based on this statement, Neo Confucian scholars during the Song and Ming dynasties were able to propose the theory of the relationship between heaven and man in the realm theory.

But the reason why Mr. Liu Lifu opposes simply equating the idea of HBMN with "harmonious coexistence between man and nature" is also because in recent years, the research on the idea of HBMN in China has been greatly influenced by the ecological concepts of Western ecologists and has even unconsciously become the inheritance of opposing ideological concepts. From this perspective, the concept of HBMN originally originated in China and has unexpectedly become a foreign term from the West, and the meaning of the ecological ethics viewpoint it represents today is far from its original meaning. Therefore, if we only understand HBMN as "the harmonious coexistence between man and nature," it is actually a lack of understanding of the idea of HBMN, because its original meaning is much deeper and more profound than its ecological

significance.

From this, it can be seen that the significance of the idea of **HBMN** is not a single religious concept, nor can it be simply summarized as ecological harmony. Its meaning is rich and covers various aspects. In political terms, the concept of **HBMN** has been used by scholars to prove the legitimacy of monarchical rule, as well as to constrain monarchic power and advise rulers; On the ideological level, the idea of **HBMN** implies that people should cultivate themselves morally in order to achieve their own moral perfection; In ecological terms, the concept of **HBMN** also implies a harmonious symbiotic.

IV. CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION OF THE CHINESE CULTURE'S CONCEPT OF HBMN

4.1 Reasonable factors of the concept of HBMN

With the increasingly severe environmental problems in the world and the deepening of the concept of "sustainable development," the idea of HBMN seems to have become increasingly important in today's society. From an ecological perspective, the idea of HBMN provides new ideas for the ecological problems facing the world today. From a social perspective, the concept of HBMN can be used to assist in building harmonious social relationships. From the perspective of personal cultivation, the idea of HBMN can provide ideological guidance for one's own moral cultivation and spiritual realm.

Although there have been many discussions on the concept of HBMN in ancient times, its foundation still lies in "human beings.". From the pre-Qin period to the Song and Ming dynasties, philosophers mostly mentioned the concept of HBMN for its educational significance to the people, emphasizing the need for humans to cultivate their own morality. However, in his later years, Mr. Qian Mu chose another perspective—from the perspective of "destiny"—to distinguish the different attitudes

of Western philosophy and Chinese philosophy towards "heaven" (i.e., nature). He believes that in the concept of HBMN, "heaven" refers to "destiny," while "man" refers to "life.". This ideological concept is different from the common belief in the current academic community that the focus of the HBMN ideology is "harmonious development between man and nature.". Mr. Qian Mu's statement is more profound and has a more obvious philosophical and speculative meaning. After he put forward a viewpoint that seemed to be inconsistent with his predecessors, later scholars were influenced by this and began to change their way of viewing this issue, gradually shifting their focus from "people" to "heaven.". However, the focus of contemporary scholars is still on the relationship between "heaven" as the "natural heaven" and "human beings" as the masses.

However different the focus may be, the close connection between "heaven" and "man" cannot be severed. After all, based on the idea of HBMN, we cannot first regard "human" and "heaven" as opposites. Mr. Tang Yijie (2005) believes that protecting "heaven" should already be the responsibility of "people" [13]; secondly, the relationship between "heaven" and "man" cannot be regarded as an external relationship because "heaven" and "man" cannot exist independently of each other. If these two points are abandoned, humans will believe that "heaven" has nothing to do with them, lose their reverence, and demand from heaven without restraint.

4.2 Historical limitations of the Chinese cultural concept of HBMN

Despite its long history, the concept of HBMN still inevitably has its limitations. From the perspective of its development, Mr. Zhang Shiyong (1995) seems to believe that the development of the concept of HBMN should follow such a law [16]: from the chaotic state of no distinction between subject and object, to the clear state of no distinction between subject and object, and then to the state of high-level

integration of subject and object. He believes that the current understanding of the HBMN in the Chinese academic community is still in the primary stage of not distinguishing between subject and object, which is also the reason for the underdevelopment of Chinese science and material civilization. Perhaps out of reverence for "heaven," the traditional view of HBMN places excessive emphasis on human ethics and morality while neglecting the understanding of nature. The attitude of humans respecting nature inevitably leads to a fear of nature. Unlike the Western attempts to conquer nature, Chinese philosophers seem too gentle. Compared to 'conquest,' they are more inclined to 'listen' and 'obey.'. Mencius also mentioned that 'if you do not violate the farming season, then fish and turtles cannot be eaten.'. This is certainly due to considerations for agricultural development, but it also inevitably leads to people's tendency towards obedience over conquest towards "heaven.". And for some behaviors, such as natural disasters, they are also attributed to their deified 'God of Dominance.'. During the Han Dynasty, Dong Zhongshu's promotion of the concept of "the number of days between man and man" in the book (especially the core idea of "the correspondence between heaven and man") inevitably mixed superstitious elements into people's understanding of heaven. Philosophers are more willing to deify natural disasters and anomalies as signs and punishments from heaven rather than understanding their causes, which is also a major reason for the rise of "divination" in the Han Dynasty. In fact, there were many excellent inventions in ancient China, and there have been excellent astronomers since ancient times. However, it was not until the establishment of the highest level of truth in "heaven" by the Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties that "human desires" were seen as a part that needed to be expelled and suppressed, which also led to the suppression of individual personality development. Science that

could maximize human creativity was also seen as a sideline.

Mr. Zhang Dainian (1985) also stated that HBMN should be based on affirming the differences between heaven and man and then affirming the unity of heaven and man [1]. Both of these ideas indicate that in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the concept of HBMN, it is necessary to distinguish between the subject-object relationship of "heaven" and "human.". Indulging solely in "harmony" will only hinder people's understanding of the essence of the "relationship between heaven and man," which is not conducive to further improvement at the ideological level, nor is it conducive to the progress of society and science. Only by clearly distinguishing the differences between the two can true "harmony" be achieved.

At the same time, the proposal of the "Heaven of Righteousness and Reason" overly emphasizes the universality of humanity as a whole, ignoring human individuality, thus hindering the development of science and democratic spirit. Therefore, the expectation of changing society cannot be blindly placed on the development of ideas, and it needs to be combined with the development of modern technology.

The concept of HBMN in China has existed since ancient times, as can be seen from the ideas, theories, and institutional regulations used in ancient literature to protect the natural ecological environment. But this does not mean that China is an ecologically pure land. In fact, the problem of ecological destruction in China has existed since ancient times. Mr. Meng Peiyuan (1998) stated that this fact seems to prove that relying solely on ideological concepts cannot change the current state of the ecological environment and that "relying on this philosophy to solve modernization problems seems like a pipe dream." [14]. But he did not completely reject this idea; instead, he believed that this idea has always played a positive role in promoting the role of humanity.

V. THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE THOUGHT OF HBMN ON THE SINICIZATION OF MARXIST PHILOSOPHY

5.1 From the perspective of values between humans and nature

One of the core ideas of HBMN embodies the complete values of humans and nature. Firstly, from the perspective of ecological civilization construction, the concept of HBMN symbolizes the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, advocating for humans to maintain balance at all times in their interactions with nature. Neither excessive cultivation and destruction of the environment nor loss of subjective initiative due to conservatism. Scholar Fang Keli (2003) believes that the most valuable intellectual achievement of the ancient Chinese theory of HBMN is the "harmony between heaven and man" theory [12], which combines the transformation of nature with adherence to natural laws. Therefore, in the process of economic construction, we should also promote the construction of ecological civilization, pay attention to environmental protection and ecological balance, and coordinate

Secondly, the concept of HBMN is intricately linked to the idea of sustainable development. The concept of HBMN emphasizes respect for natural laws and advocates for the rational use of natural resources by people. In the Records of the Grand Historian, it is mentioned that Shang Tang dismantled the heavenly net used to catch birds, leaving only one net. In the book "Mencius," it is also mentioned that nets with too small holes should not be used for fishing in order to provide space for organisms to reproduce. These examples are precisely manifestations of the concept of sustainable development. The concept of HBMN advocates for the idea of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Therefore, integrating it into the practice of sustainable development is

beneficial for promoting the healthy development of the economy and society.

Finally, from the perspective of social harmony, the idea of HBMN emphasizes the enhancement of one's own moral cultivation. Since the nature of "human" originates from "heaven," "humans" should make their actions closer to the moral origin of "heaven.". Therefore, emphasizing the concept of HBMN can help improve the moral level of society, which coincides with the socialist values with Chinese characteristics. Therefore, the concept of HBMN should shoulder the responsibility of advocating social harmony and promoting harmonious relationships between people and between people and nature in today's era.

The essence of the "relationship between heaven and man" lies in recognizing that the natural world has its own meaning and intrinsic value. Meng Peiyuan, a scholar, stated that "because the natural world is not only the source of human life and all life, but also the source of human value." Merely viewing the natural world as a vassal of human society will only put humanity on a cliff of arrogance, and the disasters caused by excessive development will eventually be repaid to humanity itself.

5.2 From a social and historical perspective

The concept of **HBMN** is essentially a product of agricultural civilization. Unlike the Western principle of "separation of subject and object" and the alienation between humans and nature caused by industrial and technological civilization, the concept of **HBMN** naturally reflects human affinity for nature. Since ancient times, the Chinese people's farming has needed to conform to the weather, and the people also regard "offering sacrifices to heaven" as an important matter. In the era of agricultural civilization, the problem of developing social productive forces is bound to arise, which has led to the emergence of positive ideas for transforming nature. But overall, the people have more reverence for 'heaven' than conquest.

This overly 'docile' attitude ultimately leads to the stagnation of scientific development. The concept of **HBMN** also opposes excessive exploitation of nature. This enlightens us that in the process of transforming nature, we should pay attention to the coordinated development of productive forces and production relations and not blindly advance or completely give up human subjective initiative.

The concept of **HBMN** also emphasizes respect for objective laws, and historical development follows laws, making the development of human society inevitable. The idea of **HBMN** is also updating its core with the continuous development of social history. Therefore, only by constantly adjusting and improving can this idea become a leading idea that conforms to the trend of the times and even leads the trend of the times.

In short, from the perspective of social history, the idea of **HBMN** provides valuable insights for the sinicization of Marxism. These insights start from the coordination between productive forces and production relations, the importance of human value, and respect for objective laws. They are of great significance for us to achieve comprehensive economic, social, and political development in the process of building a socialist modernized country.

VI. CONCLUSION

The concept of HBMN has its contemporary value, both in ancient times and in contemporary times. In ancient times, it could serve as a tool for monarchs to consolidate their rule, a means to promote social harmony, and a beacon of human moral thought. In modern times, the concept of "unity of heaven and man" is regarded as the last straw to solve the ecological crisis. Because their core is consistent with the Marxist ecological view, they essentially emphasize the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. The value system of HBMN advocates harmonious coexistence between humans and

nature because the value system of HBMN was born in agricultural civilization. The reverence for nature makes people believe that they need to conform to nature, and at a higher level, they need to regard themselves and all things as one. The Marxist ecological view emphasizes that humans should respect and protect nature. But it also indicates that humans have subjective initiative and should obtain necessary resources and conditions from the natural environment to achieve coordinated development with nature. Both elevate nature to an important position, believing that 'the natural environment is the foundation of human survival and development.

The difference between the two lies in the fact that the foundation of the "relationship between heaven and man" lies in "harmony," emphasizing the symbiotic relationship. The Marxist ecological view emphasizes the interaction between human society and the natural environment. In terms of attitude towards nature, the ultimate goal of HBMN is to make "people" pay more attention to the holistic thinking of nature and improve their own moral cultivation. The Marxist ecological view places greater emphasis on the impact of human society's economy, politics, culture, and other aspects on the natural environment, with the aim of achieving long-term development of human society.

The author believes that completely immersing oneself in obedience to nature will inevitably lead to superstition towards nature, resulting in the loss of human agency and thus inhibiting the development of science. But setting aside respect, talking only about transformation and conquest will put humanity in a completely opposite position to nature. Only by combining the strengths of both parties and complementing each other's shortcomings can traditional concepts be revitalized in today's era.

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