Article

Discussion and Proposal of Alternatives for the Ecological Environment from a Daoist Perspective

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Abstract: Ecological thought and practice have a longstanding presence in the Daoist tradition, yet these principles are not adequately upheld in contemporary times. This can be attributed to two primary factors: firstly, adverse environmental conditions due to economic reasons have hindered the maintenance of a viable interconnection between humans and nature. Secondly, intense competition has impeded the preservation of human-to-human interconnections. In this regard, it is inappropriate to place the blame for ecological threats solely on the Daoist cultural sphere. Prior research has predominantly focused on Daoist ecological thought, often neglecting the real problems concerning ecological responsibilities and potential solutions. To address this, two theoretical bases were proposed. First, attention was given to the Daoist concept of “connection”, which emphasizes the relationship between humans and nature, and among humans themselves. As “connection” is a universal human concept, it carries significant weight even when discussed from a Daoist perspective. Second, through a critical reflection on “the myth of meritocracy” prevalent in Western discourse and the application of a “social model of disability”, understanding and assistance from developed countries were solicited. These theoretical underpinnings form the basis for advocating improvements within the fragile ecology of the Daoist sphere. Before criticizing the Daoist cultural sphere—often perceived as a global factory—it is crucial to confront the realities faced by both developed and developing countries and the disparities between corporate headquarters and impoverished factories. This study suggests that a portion of excessive profits should be invested in ecological improvement initiatives. This would enable entities within the Daoist cultural sphere to uphold its ecological thoughts and practices independently—an ethos deeply rooted in their long-standing practice of being one with nature. This philosophy is increasingly vital given our interconnected existence on Earth.

Keywords: Daoist cultural sphere; Daoism; ecology; unity of heaven and man; connection; meritocracy; social model of disability; ecological philosophy; climate justice

1. Introduction

Modern environmental devastation is characterized by deteriorating atmospheric conditions, water contamination, depletion of soil resources, and reduced biodiversity. We are experiencing the impacts directly through climatic changes such as hotter summers, torrential rains, strong winds, and severe cold waves. It is increasingly concerning that the possibility of human-made mass human extinction may not be far-fetched. To address these transboundary environmental issues, International Environmental Agreements (IEAs) have been established.

Often, the root of environmental issues can be traced back to human greed. In response to this, this paper explores the Daoist concept of ‘connection’, or ‘interconnectedness’ as a means to control such greed. The idea is that since everything is connected, it
is problematic to focus solely on one’s own interests. We should instead strive for coexistence between humans and nature, and among humans themselves, through connection. Importantly, the concept of connection is not exclusive to Daoism. It is emphasized and addressed in many religions and philosophies, underscoring its universal value to humanity and its potential to solve the problems we face.\(^1\)

However, this concept of interconnectedness is particularly characteristic of Daoism. In relation to this idea, Taylor emphasizes “interdependence of all living things in an organically unified order, whose balance and stability are necessary conditions for the realization of the good of its constituent communities” (Taylor 2003, p. 75). Naess draws attention to the Daoist concept of complex connectivity, which “embraces all life forms on the planet (and elsewhere?) together with their individual selves” (Naess 2003, p. 271). Ames and Hall, using the Daoist notion of “relatedness” and categories like “focus-field” (Ames 2001, p. 265), advocate for the “plurality of interacting ecological systems (daos) that together constitute our evolving pluriverse” (Goodman and Miller 2001, p. 345).

In light of this discussion, this paper will examine the characteristics and practices of the interconnectedness inherent in Daoism, and propose modern practical measures based on this. Daoism inherently promotes nature-friendly thoughts and actions. However, its practice receives mixed evaluations: firstly, Daoism does not take more proactive action towards the ecological environment compared to other religions; secondly, ecological pollution occurring within the Daoist cultural sphere\(^2\) is more serious than elsewhere. These criticisms, based on observed facts to date, coexist with the undeniable truth that Daoism promotes nature-friendly thoughts and actions. These seemingly contradictory points coexist in the current discussion concerning ecological issues in Daoism.

Until now, Daoist ecological studies have presented their arguments within their respective domains, often overlooking such contradictions. For instance, there are studies exploring the nature-friendly thoughts and aspects inherent in Daoism and others criticizing the environmental pollution and destruction occurring within the Daoist cultural sphere. The latter also point out the insufficient proactive responses from the Daoist community to such actions. These criticisms of the Daoist cultural sphere are valid when considered in light of the phenomenologically observed facts so far. However, it is also true that Daoism embodies nature-friendly thoughts and actions. These seemingly contradictory observations coexist in relation to the current ecological issues within Daoism.

Now, we aim to move beyond these previous approaches to examine the structural contexts behind these seemingly opposing assertions and research findings. We intend to investigate the origins of such discrepancies and, most importantly, contemplate how and in which direction ecological preservation practices should be pursued. However, it is important to note that this study is not limited to Daoism. Many existing studies have sought solutions within Daoism, proposing arguments applicable only within that framework. We must question what the most critical issue in the current ecological crisis is. Can it be resolved through the philosophical principles of ancient Daoism? Certainly not.

It is also worth mentioning that countries typically highlighted for ecological environmental issues are concentrated in Asia, with a particular focus on China. China has become a target of developed countries, grappling with many of its own issues. While this paper discusses solutions to ecological problems based on Daoist interconnectivity thought and the Daoist cultural sphere, it does not solely discuss or defend Daoism or China. Given that the ecological problems humanity currently faces are a global issue, solutions should be sought through humanity’s universal understanding of interconnectivity, significant Western theories, participation and support from developed countries, and global cooperation. Ultimately, this paper aims to present arguments and alternatives for the ecological environment from a Daoist standpoint, stepping away from existing perspectives.

For our discussion, we will first examine Daoist eco-philosophy and its problems. Through this examination, we aim to understand what ecology means from the standpoint of areas influenced by Daoist culture; why they cause substantial environmental pollution; and why active actions are not taken against these issues within Daoism. Based on this dis-
discussion, we plan to propose fundamental solutions for practicing Daoist eco-philosophy. In other words, our first aim is to establish a philosophical foundation based on Daoist eco-philosophy. Concurrently, we strive to contribute towards practical steps in areas influenced by Daoist culture for the global ecological environment through meaningful application of these theories.

2. Daoist Eco-Philosophy and Its Problems
2.1. Two Divergent Perspectives

The issues concerning Daoism and ecology have been discussed from two different perspectives. Firstly, within Daoism, there exist significant philosophies and practices related to ecology. Research in this area has primarily been conducted within the sphere of Daoist culture. These studies are extensive and delve relatively deeply into the subject matter, particularly from ideological, ritualistic, disciplinary, and practical standpoints. Given the wealth of prior research on this topic, this paper will only provide a concise summary.

Secondly, unlike other Western religions, Daoism has not paid significant attention to social activities and interests related to ecology. This observation is less a direct critique or research on Daoism itself but more an incidental finding when investigating ecological studies across various religions (particularly Western ones). For example, Catholicism released “Laudato Si’ (2015)”, a document solely addressing environmental issues in 2015; it called for ‘ecological conversion’ while unfolding various activities and studies accordingly. In contrast to such proactive messaging by Western religions, discussions and practices related to ecology are comparatively scarce within Daoism.

The term ‘ecology’ is somewhat unfamiliar within Daoism. However, as Western researchers have shown interest in exploring Daoism and ecological issues, this has extended to the Daoist cultural sphere, which has similarly broadened their interest in ecology based on the nature-friendly principles inherent in Daoism to meet contemporary needs and demands. Particularly since the mid-1990s, Daoist ecology has emerged as a significant concern in China with support from the National Social Science Foundation and the Ministry of Education, as well as through publications of books and articles. Recently, on 20 September 2023, the China Daoist Association held its 13th Conference on Traditional Culture and Ecological Civilization (传统文化与生态文明学术研讨会).

However, this is insufficient. The amount of pollutants or ecological threats emanating from the Daoist cultural sphere has not decreased, and there are limited responses or actions from a Daoist perspective. For example, based on 2014 data on national carbon dioxide emissions, China accounted for 30%, the United States 15%, the European Union 9%, and India 7%. According to World Bank data, as of 2022, China’s cumulative carbon emissions were approximately 11.4 billion tons, accounting for about 28.9% of global emissions.

China, which overwhelmingly emits carbon dioxide, is at the heart of the Daoist cultural sphere where Daoism was born and grew up. Carbon dioxide is emitted in large quantities per unit heat from coal, followed by gasoline and natural gas, respectively; this issue lies not only with industrial structure but also with high coal usage. Among Chinese exports to EU countries, those with high carbon dioxide emissions, such as steel and aluminum make up a significant proportion; ultimately production occurs in China while consumption takes place in Europe—an interconnected structure that should not be overlooked.

Overall, both of the aforementioned criticisms are valid; however, these contradictory points have failed to lead progressive discussions towards solving real-world ecological problems, instead running parallel without convergence. This paper aims to explore the fundamental causes and solutions to these two contradictory points from a perspective distinct from existing discussions, focusing on the concept of ‘interconnectivity’ in Daoist eco-philosophy. Prior to this, we will first examine the eco-philosophy and characteristics of Daoism.
2.2. Eco-Philosophy and Its Aspects

As previously mentioned, Daoism embodies significant philosophies and practices pertaining to ecology. Specifically, Daoism has established a unique domain of Daoist ecology that transcends human- and nature-related issues in ontology, axiology, epistemology, views on nature, and political science, thereby seeking theoretical solutions. Concepts such as Dao (道), De (德), Qi (氣), Non-action (Wuwei 無為), and Spontaneity/ “Self-so-ing” (Ziran 自然) (Hall 2001, p. 256), which are central to texts like Daodejing (道德經), Nanhua-zhenjing (南華眞經), and Taipingjing (太平經), emphasize an eco-philosophy in Daoism (Kim 2004, pp. 68–82). This philosophy is epitomized by the belief that humans and nature are interlinked and, as such, cannot be considered in isolation.

An overview of Daoist ecological research and activities can be summarized as follows: In 1995, the Chinese Association of Daoism issued a ‘Global Ecology Declaration (全球生态宣言)’, thereby establishing environmental protection as a fundamental religious value for national Daoist organizations. Numerous studies have subsequently delved into this topic, exploring the ecological perspectives inherent in Daoist views on physicality and internal alchemy, or examining the architectural relationships between Daoist temples and their environment. Furthermore, Jiang’s book “A Study on Daoist Ecological Ethics” (jiang 2006) systematically addresses Daoist ecological ethical thoughts.

Another noteworthy reference is Roger T. Ames’s “Daoism and Ecology: The Inner Way of the Cosmic Landscape” (Ames 2008). Between 1996 and 1998, the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University organized a conference titled “World Religions and Ecology” that focused on aspects of Daoist ecology. The proceedings were later published by Harvard University Press in their World Religions & Ecology Series. Smaller-scale studies are ongoing; for instance, the German scholar Volker Olles examined ecological aspects within Daoism, classifying them into precepts, religious geography practice, and court life (Olles 2018, pp. 354–64).

Such studies are prevalent within the research on the Daoist cultural sphere. However, the aim of this paper is not merely to introduce the ecological thoughts of Daoism. Instead, it seeks to present arguments and alternatives concerning the ecological environment from a Daoist standpoint. Therefore, we will conclude our overview here. In the following sections, we will delve deeper into the ecological aspect inherent in Daoism, which discourages reckless treatment of nature.

Several dimensions are related to the ecological aspects of Daoism, as follows:

Firstly, ecological thought is embedded throughout Daoism. To be discussed later around the concept of ‘interconnectedness’, the essence of Daoist ecological thought can be summarized as follows: Unlike Western perspectives, Daoism is based on “self-restraint [reducing selfish desires (少私寡欲)], “suppressing luxury and venerating frugality (抑奢崇儉), “becoming one with nature [unity of heaven and man (天人合一)], “compliance with nature (順應自然)”. These principles extend to the “interconnection between humans and nature [recycling and regeneration (循環再生)]” and “communication with all things (融通萬有)”. Moreover, Daoism respects nature within the context of coexistence with ecology (Jung et al. 2011, p. 38). In this regard, Daoism offers ancient wisdom that emphasizes the importance of respecting other beings (Birdwhistell 2001, pp. 27, 32, 40).

Secondly, Daoist ecological thought is revealed in its perception of divinity. Like other Chinese religions, Daoism has deified natural elements or forces, transforming them into tangible natural objects or spirits for worship. Hence, deities associated with rain, land, mountains, thunder, etc., were created, most of which were absorbed into Daoism and became revered gods (Kim 2006, p. 68). This pantheon includes deities such as Tudi Gong (土地神), the guardian of the land; Mazu (媽祖), the ruler of the sea; and immortals (神仙) believed to dwell within mountains and nature itself. By recognizing these entities within nature and venerating them through faith, Daoists found it impossible to regard nature as an object of opposition or conquest. In Daoism, it is stated, “Springs are the blood of Earth; stones, its bones; good soil, its flesh (泉者, 地之血; 石者, 地之骨也; 良土, 地之肉也)” (Wang 1960, p. 200). Daoism sees nature itself as an object of reverence, beyond merely coexist-
ing with humans. Naturally, the destruction of nature and disruption of the ecological environment are unacceptable within Daoist cultural perspectives.

Thirdly, Daoist ecological thought is directly reflected in its disciplines. For example, there are commandments such as the second of Yuanshi Tianzun’s Ten Commandments (<Ten Precepts of the Primordial Being 元始天尊十戒>: “Do not kill or harm living things”, and in Yuanshi Tianzun’s Twenty-Seven Commandments (<Twenty-Seven Precepts of the Primordial Being 元始天尊二十七戒>): “Do not disrespect objects with dignity”, “Do not kill living things”, “Do not burn forests”. These commandments reflect a coexistence between humans and nature that goes beyond anthropocentric perspectives.

Fourthly, Daoist ecological thought manifests in its practices. Traditional Daoism has always respected nature when constructing buildings or conducting ceremonies. The ‘Ten great caves of heaven (Shidadongtian 十大洞天), ‘One of the thirty-six little caves in heaven (Sanshiliuxiaodongtian 三十六小洞天), the ‘Seventy-two Blessed Places (Qishierfudi 七十二福地), which are considered ‘Daoist heavenly paradise (Dongtianfudi 洞天福地), and the palaces and temples of Daoism such as Daogong (道宮) and Daoguan (道觀), are located where nature has been preserved intact.6 When building palaces or temples in Daoism, they adhered to their eco-philosophical principles such as “The Way follows its own Course or naturalness (道法自然), ‘Respect for ‘Self-so-ing’ (崇尚自然), and “Tranquility without action (清靜無爲)”.

Furthermore, Daoist ecological thought is intertwined with the concept of Feng Shui (風水地理), a practice prevalent within the Daoist cultural sphere. Although Feng Shui existed prior to the emergence of Daoism, it further developed after being incorporated into Daoist practices, particularly in relation to construction activities. The practice of Feng Shui is essentially a manifestation of Daoist ecological thought, aiming at fostering coexistence between humans and nature.

This is reflected in the “Huangdi Zhaijing” (黃帝宅經) from the Daozang (道藏), stating, “A house takes form as its body, spring water as its veins, land as its skin and flesh, plants as its hair, dwelling places as clothing, and doors as crowns and belts. If one can achieve this state, it is considered dignified and elegant—thus truly auspicious.”7 This metaphorically describes buildings and their surrounding environment in terms of human anatomy.

Daoist ecological thinking also discusses natural farming methods and environmental consciousness, among other topics (Ge [1991] 1996, pp. 261–310). Focusing on internal and external human cultivation practices aimed at health and longevity, nature was highly valued as a means to achieve these goals. This mindset is directly linked to the Daoist concept of “Yangsheng”. Through an active interpretation of Yangsheng, the aspiration for coexistence between humans and nature was seen as natural (Kim 2022, pp. 61–70). In this regard, Yangsheng cultivators, being part of the entities in nature, “increase their awareness as natural and interactive beings who constantly exchange energy with their environment and sustain life only through harmonious support from the nature around them (Kohn 2001, p. 384)”. Therefore, nature cannot be viewed as an object of damage or conquest.

However, the limitations of such studies are apparent. In addition to theoretical exploration, these works fall short in providing practical and realistic ecological solutions. The reasons for this are twofold: Firstly, they primarily focus on the inherent ecological thought and aspects within Daoism. Secondly, they concentrate on its manifestations in traditional societies, neglecting to address the role of Daoist ecology in a dynamically changing modern society. Ultimately, while Daoist ecology is often found in studies on Daoist thought, it is seldomly manifested in societal practices. This might be because, as Chen (陳) mentioned, Daoism considers the transformation of people’s ideological concepts about environmental issues to be critical—such changes in ideology could lead to behavioral modifications, subsequently causing shifts in production methods, forms of economic development, and lifestyle changes (Chen 2018, p. 281). Nonetheless, the mere alteration of ideological concepts falls short in addressing the pressing ecological issues we face today.
Furthermore, Daoism has limitations in its individualistic interpretations that emphasize a “nonaggressive forms of power, what Lisa Raphals referred to as the “action at a distance” by the sage who practices self-cultivation (Goodman and Miller 2001, p. 346). According to this view, these practices are carried out by mature individuals who maintain a certain distance. Of course, Daoist ecological thought and environmental ethics have substantial value in the dimension of self-cultivation, as they seek ‘the link of human beings to the larger environment of nature and the cosmos’ (Kohn 2001, p. 384) through personal cultivation and health. However, the approach of focusing on individual practices, training, internal attitudes, and creating a harmonious environment under the premise that “change starts small” (Kohn 2001, pp. 373–90) seems to be quite passive or requires a significant amount of time in terms of efforts to improve ecological issues.

As we are well aware, despite the ongoing studies in this area, there has been little improvement in this regard. This is clearly manifested in the aforementioned criticisms of Daoism. In regions with a Daoist cultural influence, particularly in China, which serves as its hub, significant pollution continues to be emitted and Daoism seems unable to play an effective role. In the past, especially in ancient times, the human population was small, and the power and influence humans had over nature were minimal, thus their capacity to destroy nature was limited—a similarity shared by most civilizations. However, they were able to revere and preserve nature. In particular, Daoist thought emphasizes unity with nature, as represented by the concept of “unity of heaven and man (Tianrenheyi).” Therefore, they did not approach nature with the intention of domination or destruction. Instead, in traditional societies of the past, Daoist ecological thought was practical and integrated into daily life.

Now a question arises: In modern times, Daoist ecological thought continues to uphold the unity of nature and man as it did in the past. However, why do we now see environmental destruction and significant emission of pollutants? Further, why does Daoism seem unable to fully execute its inherent ecological function?

In the subsequent sections, we will delve into potential challenges and practical considerations pertaining to these issues.

2.3. Practices and Challenges

As previously discussed, numerous studies have been conducted on Daoist ecological thought and its application in Daoist rituals and disciplines. Based on these studies, it is clear that Daoism emphasizes the importance of ecological preservation. In Daoist thought, humans are not seen as separate from nature, and damaging or destroying it is cautioned against. The modern civilization’s prevalent concept of conquering nature is inconceivable within the Daoist perspective. Essentially, in Daoism, issues related to ecology and coexistence with nature cannot be discussed separately from, or in opposition to, humanity. However, this perspective is only valid within the Daoist framework and cannot be universally advocated to meet the evolving environmental needs and demands of our times.

Currently, many regions including China, where a large population worships and follows Daoism, are struggling with serious environmental destruction. They need to provide realistic and concrete solutions. However, contemporary Daoism falls short in these respects. Let us then soberly consider the causes of this discrepancy between Daoist thought and the reality within the Daoist cultural sphere, as well as the gap between theory and practice. While Daoist thought and traditional culture caution against damaging nature or disrupting ecology, why have they failed to properly realize these principles in modern times?

Daoist ecological practice has encountered obstacles in both ‘human–nature connection’ and ‘human–human connection’ inherent in Daoist ecological philosophy. Amidst human selfish attitudes and behaviors, individuals have failed to develop long-standing traditional thoughts and practices in line with reality. They personally practiced their nature-friendly ideas and naturally adhered to them within their cultural sphere. How-
ever, what problems prevented them from properly practicing Daoist ecological thought? Traditionally, the causes were either overlooked or attributed merely to the discrepancy between religious ideals and practice. However, it is crucial to delve deeper into these causes. Identifying the accurate causes can lead to the discovery of correct methods of practice.

Firstly, Daoism and the Daoist cultural sphere failed to maintain a proper ‘connection between humans and nature’. Externally, they had to survive amid colonial ruins that fell into multinational corporations’ factories or became subject to enormous capital influence. According to a research report utilizing the UN BEC (Broad Economic Categories) Code, “China’s goods exports are primarily driven by final goods, while its goods imports are predominantly led by intermediate goods. This indicates that China is functioning as a global production base, importing intermediate goods and producing and exporting final goods” (Kim 2021). The following table (Table 1) illustrates this (Kim 2021, pp. 24–25):


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Exports</th>
<th>Imports</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2,453,255</td>
<td>2,600,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2,410,200</td>
<td>2,640,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2,390,000</td>
<td>2,650,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
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<td>2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2,400,000</td>
<td>2,660,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2,410,000</td>
<td>2,670,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2,420,000</td>
<td>2,680,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2,430,000</td>
<td>2,690,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2,440,000</td>
<td>2,700,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2,450,000</td>
<td>2,710,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2,460,000</td>
<td>2,720,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2,470,000</td>
<td>2,730,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2,480,000</td>
<td>2,740,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2,490,000</td>
<td>2,750,000</td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td>2,500,000</td>
<td>2,760,000</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2,520,000</td>
<td>2,780,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>2,530,000</td>
<td>2,790,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>2,540,000</td>
<td>2,800,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>2,550,000</td>
<td>2,810,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As demonstrated in the aforementioned table, countries within the Daoist cultural sphere, such as China, were compelled to exploit their natural resources. They established an economic foundation by attracting industries that were expelled from developed Western countries, subsequently suffering damaging impacts on the environment and an increase in pollutant generation. In this unequal structure, influences from globalization, urbanization, industrialization, materialism, and efficiency orientation not only impacted the Daoist cultural sphere but also promoted its development. The natural environment they possessed was their only available resource; hence, they were forced to seek personal gain through environmental degradation.

Secondly, they failed to maintain an appropriate ‘connection between humans’. Changes since the onset of the modern era have been threatening for everyone, but these threats were more severe in impoverished regions. The workers and underdeveloped countries were at the forefront of environmental degradation, while capitalists and developed nations reaped the benefits. Profits generated from global industrial structures flowed into Western developed
countries where corporate headquarters are located, leaving factories in poor conditions and environments. Economically disadvantaged countries lost their ability to influence global industrial structures or control environmental destruction. Simultaneously, the recognition that one must survive first in a harsh environment has expanded. This has overshadowed the traditional communal notion of interconnectedness, making it difficult to practice human-to-human connections.

The Daoist cultural sphere has not yet reached the ranks of developed nations. Many factory workers are situated in harsh environments; thus presenting a clear limit to ecological practices within the sphere. Now, taking these aspects into account, our aim is to discuss fundamental alternatives within the Daoist ecological philosophy. These issues are ones that humanity can collectively empathize with by delving into their root causes.

3. Fundamental Suggestions for Practicing Daoist Ecological Philosophy

3.1. Practical Foundation of Daoist Eco-Philosophy

Upon examining the Daoist ecological thought based on ‘connection’ emphasized so far, the following points can be observed. The core of Daoist thought lies in Laozi and Zhuangzi, which include “The Way follows its own Course (道法自然 Daofaziran),” frequently mentioned in eco-philosophy (Laozi 1994, p. 141). While ‘Daofaziran (道法自然)’ may seem somewhat abstract, ‘connection’ is more realistic and practical. Simply put, since we are connected, your demise cannot ensure my survival (Kim 2003, pp. 28–32). This idea of connection is grounded in Daoism’s principles of ‘Dao (道)’ and ‘Qi (氣).’ The concept of connection, based on Daoism’s ‘Dao’ and ‘Qi’, extends to the logic that our happiness depends on mutual coexistence, as all beings are interconnected. An example of this can be found in Chapter 42 of Laozi, where it is said that ‘The Dao changes and creates all things’ (Laozi 2003, p. 235).

From the substantive standpoint that the Dao is the origin of all things, Daoism focuses on the relationship between humans and nature. It establishes a natural ecological view through the principles of “unity of heaven and man” and “The Way follows its own Course.” Both humans and nature sprang from the Dao, thus establishing relationships of coexistence and symbiosis; all natural beings possess inherent value and the right to exist. Similarly, everything in the universe is interdependent. For instance, according to the Huangting neijing yujingzhu (黃庭內景玉經註),

The Five Elements—water, fire, metal, wood, and earth—promote each other: water gives birth to wood; wood gives birth to fire; fire gives birth to earth; earth gives birth to metal; metal gives birth to water, and water, in turn, gives birth to wood. This is their cycle of promotion… Returning back into one thing—with water esteemed as the leader among elements—this is considered the master of all things.

The cyclic link of the Five Elements demonstrates the connection where the five most basic substances that make up the universe give birth to and create each other. These five were fundamental elements for understanding the universe in ancient times, but now we know that all matter in the universe exists through a combination and dispersion of 118 known elements. This is no different from Zhuangzi’s perception of life and death as Qi (氣)’s dispersion and reunion.

This leads to the concept of Tianrenheyi (天人合一), which in Daoism means ‘heaven and I were born together, and everything and I are one’. The phrases “unity of heaven and man” and “Heaven and mankind as one entity (天人一體)” in Daoism embody a straightforward ecological thought centered on the human-nature connection. The concept of “heaven is the father and earth is the mother (天父地母 Tianfudimu)”, found in Daozang (道藏), frequently appears in the Taipingjing (太平經) as well.

Heaven is father, earth is mother (天父也, 地母也) (Wang 1960, p. 49).

Thus, he who gives birth is the father; she who nurtures is the mother (故生者父也; 養者母也) (Wang 1960, p. 704).
In the Daoist worldview, there is no room for value-based discrimination, such as conflict, high or low status, noble or humble, whether in human-to-human relationships or in the human-to-nature relationship. For instance, Zhuangzi states: “According to Dao, there are no noble or humble things”—this statement can be found in the Qiushui (秋水) chapter of Zhuangzi.

From the perspective of Dao, there is no distinction between the noble and the base among all things. However, when viewed from the standpoint of things themselves, one perceives oneself as noble and everything else as base (以道觀之，物無貴賤, 以物觀之，自貴而相賤)” (Zhuangzi 1990, pp. 420–21).

In this context, Daoism can be described as a system of thought and practice that promotes coexistence within an ecological community. The term ‘ecosystem’ was coined by Arthur Tansley, encapsulating the idea of a network of living organisms interconnected through the flow of matter and energy in the material world. At its most fundamental level, species are interconnected through nutritional interactions such as predator–prey, herbivore–plant, and host–parasite relationships (Oliver [2021] 2022, p. 128). This underlines that the basis of an ecosystem is connection.

Daoist ecological thought and practice revolve around respect for nature and coexistence with it. Bearing this in mind, this study focused on the concept of “connection” as a Daoist ecological thought that can be inherited and applied in tune with current circumstances. The ecological thoughts grounded in Daoist connection are meaningful in two ways; only when such an approach is adopted, can genuine practice be realized.

Firstly, it is crucial to remind ourselves of the connection between humans and nature. The concept of human–nature connection, as advocated in Daoism, leans towards coexistence rather than conflict. It even espouses a humble attitude that humans are simply a part of the grand scheme of nature. For instance, as mentioned earlier, when constructing Daoist temples, consideration for the ecological environment was given, and respect and caution were exhibited by attributing divinity to natural objects. In other words, they perceived nature as part of a community interconnected with humans. This is greatly aligned with the New Materialism recently proposed in the West. In terms of environmental issues, this concept holds considerable relevance and is worth noting in both Eastern and Western contexts.

Secondly, it is crucial that we revisit the concept of the connection between humans. Daoist eco-philosophy emphasizes not only the connection between humans and nature, but also the interconnections among humans themselves. Daoism advocates overcoming adversities through the communal spirit of interconnectedness. By emphasizing the intrinsic value of humans derived from this universal interconnectivity, Daoism seeks solutions to current environmental dilemmas. This is applicable not only to people within the sphere of Daoist culture, but also to individuals coexisting everywhere, from multinational headquarters in developed countries to less developed factories in underdeveloped nations. Now, we must reemphasize the importance of human-to-human connections for a healthy coexistence within our global community.

Drawing from the principle of ‘connection’ in Daoist eco-philosophy, imminent ecological issues should be addressed from a holistic and communal perspective, superseding individual entities. A global approach, transcending denominational and national boundaries, is necessary to provide practical solutions for collective prosperity. Developed and underdeveloped countries, multinational corporations and factories, the abundant capital of the wealthy and the destruction of nature due to harsh conditions—all these dichotomies may appear to oppose each other like Yin and Yang, but they are interrelated. This connection maintains a complementary relationship, akin to the binary opposition of red and blue traffic lights.

Therefore, levying irresponsible criticism at those who desperately need sustenance more than preventing nature’s destruction merely amounts to a careless claim, ignoring the interconnected structure of modern industry and world order. For instance, humanity recently experienced COVID-19. We consumed disposable masks with 1.56 billion dis-
carded into the ocean; the usage of single-use items, plastic, and plastic bags surged due to concerns about infection and hygiene. Measures to prevent the epidemic inadvertently caused additional damage due to their interconnectedness.

Moreover, it is not just ecological issues. Since the 20th century, recurring epidemics like the Spanish flu, H2N2 Asian flu, H3N2 Hong Kong flu, SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), H1N1 influenza (Swine Flu), Ebola virus disease (EVD), MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome), Zika virus disease, and Coronavirus Disease have emerged as inevitable consequences of the intricate interplay between the afflictions nature imposes on humanity and human-to-human transmissions. This is a trend that has occurred in the past and will persist in the future, in both developed and developing countries. It is imperative to change our perspective, eliminate ambiguity, and confront the issues that require resolution.

3.2. Application of Meaningful Theory in Daoist Eco-Philosophy

So far, we have established that Daoism embodies nature-friendly beliefs and practices. Nonetheless, the harmful emission of pollutants and the destruction of the natural environment within the sphere of Daoist culture have been persistently highlighted. Efforts at the level of Daoist sects have not been particularly outstanding compared to other religions. However, identifying and addressing the root cause of these issues could lead to significant advancements in ecological matters within the Daoist culture, which is centered around Daoism. This is largely due to the considerable influence of Daoist beliefs on the daily lives of ordinary people, particularly in China.

As a religion that originated and expanded in China, Daoism primarily exists within the sphere of Sinic civilization. Consequently, this paper also pertains to the realm of Daoist culture, with China—Daoist’s birthplace and central development hub—being at its core. Over 600 Daoist temples exist in China, housing more than 5000 active male and female Daoists under the supervision of the Chinese Daoist Association, established in 1957. It is estimated that 458 million people adhere to the Chinese folk religion. Although it is challenging to determine the exact number due to the lack of a specific membership procedure in Daoism, it is well known that these followers significantly influence everyday culture.

Given this context, we should now turn our attention to proactive responses to these paradoxical situations. We can do this by applying a few significant theories to the practice of Daoist ecological views through connection and the restoration of ecosystems within the sphere of Daoist culture. These meaningful theories have emerged predominantly in advanced Western countries, proposed by Western scholars to solve their societal problems rather than those within the Daoist cultural sphere. This paper intends to extend and apply these theories. It is anticipated that the application of these theories, with consideration for not just advanced Western societies but also the global community, will be effective in implementing Daoist eco-philosophy.

Firstly, it is necessary to reflect on the prevailing ideologies of meritocracy. Meritocracy is widespread, regardless of whether the context is Eastern or Western, and it has faced significant criticism. Within the Daoist cultural sphere, the myth of meritocracy intensifies when it intersects with the principles of capitalism. The pursuit of maximizing capital and profit through meritocracy, in line with the spirit of neoliberalism, has led individuals to prioritize self-interest over the connections between humans and nature. Naturally, this undermines virtues that value community within connections, which are emphasized in Daoist culture.

Meritocracy is also strikingly evident in the relationship between the West and the East, where the Daoist cultural sphere resides. We can consider it as follows: The affluence currently enjoyed by the West is often attributed to their abilities; however, upon reviewing its historical process, we find a series of events marked by imperial invasions and colonial plundering. Of course, this does not represent the entire picture.
So, what about the present? Is it not true that they are reaping excessive benefits within an unjust trade system or an unequal industrial structure? It is problematic to shift the ecological responsibility solely onto developing countries, especially without acknowledging the imbalanced profit structures and poor factory conditions in the production areas. This becomes particularly troublesome when substantial profits are being made in regions where the headquarters of multinational corporations are located. Building on these facts, one might further speculate: Could the developed Western countries harbor the following thoughts towards the Daoist cultural sphere of the East?

Meritocracy encourages winners to believe that their victories are solely the result of their own efforts, attributing their success entirely to their own merits. It also cultivates a tendency to look down on those who are less fortunate... A perfect meritocracy eliminates gratitude and reduces the capacity to recognize our shared destiny... Meritocracy can also promote tyranny of the majority or an unjust rule (Sandel 2020, pp. 52–53).

This can be expanded and applied between nations and races, leading to another tragedy reminiscent of historical repetitions. Within our tightly interconnected global community today, the ecological crisis we face does not only affect the losers. Eventually, even the winners are bound to be affected. Therefore, instead of relying on self-justifications like ‘Manifest Destiny’ that Europeans once used against Native Americans, we need to find ways to coexist. This is because we exist deeply connected within the limited space called Earth; we exist in a structure where I cannot exist without you.

Secondly, by comparing environmental problems arising from the Daoist cultural sphere with the ‘social model of disability,’ we can seek more practical and realistic solutions. In this model, the ‘cause’ of disadvantages related to disability is believed to lie not in individuals but in society and its organization. Mike Oliver was one of the first theorists who distinguished between personal and social models of disability. The social model separates impairment from disability; impairment is seen as a personal issue while disability refers to societal barriers preventing those with impairments from fully participating in society. Thus, it criticizes disability as a denial of full citizenship rights and as a form of discrimination (Giddens and Sutton 2022, pp. 383–84).

Applying this perspective, the causes of environmental pollution on Earth can be seen not solely within the Daoist cultural sphere, but expanded to include structures of capital and production. Just as the ‘individual model of disability’ has until recently been dominant in disability issues, environmental problems have been reduced to issues inherent to the regions causing them. However, within the intricately intertwined links of connection, the ‘cause’ lies elsewhere. In environmental issues too, a ‘global or human model’ applying the ‘social model of disability’ is called for.

In summary, when applying these meaningful theories comprehensively, we need to view Earth and humanity as interconnected communities. We should confront ecological pollution not through a localized model focusing on ‘emission of pollutants’ or reducing it to a regional disability issue, but rather from a macroscopic perspective that directly addresses structural and profit distribution problems in reality.

3.3. Fundamental Suggestions

Environmental issues are widespread within the Daoist cultural sphere, and solutions should be sought within the concept of “connections” emphasized in Daoism. The idea of “connections,” when viewed on a small scale, directly links ecological crises to individual health and, on a larger scale, to the survival of humanity. Each individual exists independently but is simultaneously connected to the universe. From the perspective of human–nature and human–human connections in Daoist eco-philosophy, everyone is currently at risk. In response to this situation, I propose two fundamental suggestions based on Daoist principles.

Firstly, it is necessary to approach ecological issues from a Daoist perspective. Daoism emphasizes the connection between humans and nature. Based on this idea, if we
“restrain development in advanced areas and improve conditions in disadvantaged areas,” the relationship between humans and nature will improve. From this aspect, there is a need to discuss ecological problems from a Daoist perspective rather than a Western one, such as neo-liberalism. Nature is an entity that coexists with humanity. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the conditions of relatively disadvantaged regions in human society, and this responsibility lies with everyone.

Secondly, an approach based on ‘climate justice,’ founded on human-to-human connections, should be considered. According to environmental reports, more environmental destruction occurs in impoverished regions where Daoism is practiced. The pollution caused by these communities is typically an act of survival. The surplus profits generated from these actions disproportionately return to the West and capitalists, who then emphasize environmental protection as part of their public relations efforts or even as a form of virtue signaling. Alternatively, developed countries advocate for positions beneficial to themselves without considering structural factors. For instance, consider the event in June 2017 when the Trump administration announced its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. This kind of structural issue becomes even more significant when we examine data such as the ‘Sector and Country-specific Overseas Input Scale of Chinese Intermediate Goods’. According to this metric, the United States is the largest importer of intermediate goods produced in China. Please refer to Table 2 for details (Kim 2021, pp. 60–61).


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Import Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metals</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>8273 (16.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>5404 (10.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>3646 (7.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>3210 (6.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>India</td>
<td>2342 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation Equipments</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2709 (23.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>733 (6.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>662 (5.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>372 (3.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>327 (2.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrical Machinery</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>30,714 (19.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>12,469 (8.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>11,643 (7.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>10,758 (6.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>10,152 (6.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petrochemicals, Non-metallic Minerals</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>8156 (12.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>5920 (9.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>4116 (6.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>3789 (6.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>India</td>
<td>3658 (5.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As suggested by the table above, developed countries, including the United States, tend to reduce industries that generate significant pollutants while reaping substantial profits. These profits often incorporate gains obtained at the expense of impoverished industrial zones and damaged ecosystems. The ecological crisis humanity faces, is challenging to overcome within this structure—a crisis no one can evade. Recognizing the ‘interconnection’ between the West and East, there’s a call for reconsideration of the myth of ‘meritocracy’, along with a rational application of the significant theory mentioned earlier: the ‘social model of disability’.

Such arguments and practices are encouraging and are making slow but steady progress in various aspects. For instance, advocates for “climate justice” argue that developing countries within the Daoist cultural sphere should not have their right to economic development suppressed due to responsibilities towards neglected ecological environments previously disregarded by developed nations. They also advocate for a principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR),’ citing that developed countries consume more resources and emit significantly more carbon dioxide per capita than countries within the Daoist cul-
ultural sphere. Western developed nations have significantly contributed to cumulative carbon dioxide emissions.

For instance, China’s per capita carbon emissions increased from approximately 3 tons in 2000 to 8 tons in 2014, while those of the United States decreased from around 20 tons in 2000 to 16 tons in 2014. However, there remains a stark difference between China’s per capita emissions and those of America. Moreover, when comparing resource consumption and carbon dioxide emissions contextually, we must confront reality: while resource consumption by developed countries is often for “luxury”, it is for “survival” in developing countries. Structural issues fundamental to resolving ecological problems cannot be overlooked.

To effectively acknowledge and actualize human–nature interdependence on an international scale, it is necessary to establish transnational bodies tasked with implementing common environmental conservation policies. Of course, steps are already being taken toward this goal. In this context, although modest, the following changes can be observed.

Firstly, changes within Daoism and the Daoist cultural sphere are noted. Recently, organizations such as the China Daoist Association and the International Daoist Association have been prioritizing ecological issues. Particularly, ecological discussions held in 2017 and 2023 have garnered attention. Concurrently, China, the center of the Daoist cultural sphere, has been focusing on ecological issues. President Xi Jinping emphasized the concept of ecological civilization when announcing the next five-year plan in 2017. There are also activities by the dedicated ecological environment department, which was established in 2008 and renamed as the Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People’s Republic of China in 2018. Moreover, in 2012, the Communist Party of China incorporated the achievement of an ecological civilization into the constitution and explicitly stated this goal in the five-year plan.

Secondly, nations are moving towards cooperation based on these connections. For instance, entities like The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), led by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), have been established along with International Environmental Agreements (IEAs) previously mentioned.

Additionally, principles included in December 2015’s Paris Agreement—equity “in light of different national circumstances,” as well as “common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities”—set up consultation systems involving both developed and developing countries through funding support; technology provision; capacity building assistance from developed nations; greenhouse gas reduction projects like Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), jointly pursued by both groups.

Thirdly, as mentioned in the main text, Western scholars are critiquing these issues, and a societal consensus is being formed around them. However, considering the severity of humanity’s ecological problems, there is a clear need for more active and comprehensive implementation of these initiatives. This is particularly true when considering the poor conditions faced by developing nations, including those within the Daoist cultural sphere. Furthermore, the lukewarm attitudes exhibited by most developed nations towards these issues only amplify this need. To address these challenges, we should utilize institutional cooperation and support among civil society consultative bodies at both the domestic and global levels. This includes related international organizations, NGOs, legal and policy-making national and societal institutions, and religious groups.

Now, in terms of the cultural barrier that hinders the formation of a societal consensus on supporting eco-equality between developed and developing countries, let us revisit the problem of meritocracy as discussed by Michael Sandel:

Meritocratic selection has instilled in us the belief that our success is solely the result of our achievements, thereby causing us to lose the sense that we owe something to each other. We now find ourselves in a whirlwind of anger born from this loss of connectedness. By restoring the dignity of work, we must reestab-
lish the social solidarity that the age of meritocracy has unraveled (Sandel 2020, p. 343).

If the problem of meritocracy applies to individuals within a society, the same fundamental framework and harm can also be applied to issues between nations on a global scale. A society, indeed the world itself, can only develop healthily when communal consciousness is heightened within a community. Just as Sandel emphasizes ‘connection’ with the elite and advocates for coexistence through ‘sharing’, there exists a need to redistribute the concentrated profits of corporations and improve conditions in impoverished, pollution-emitting factory areas (Sandel 2020, p. 343).

In the production process of a product, more profit is often reaped from selling and investing capital than from processing raw materials into products. Unfair trade practices are still being implemented in some sectors. The structure that prevents substantial profits from distribution and sales from reaching workers at production sites is unjust. Profits obtained through product sales should ensure a minimum level of humane investment in environmental conditions at production sites. Failure to do this, compromises both the sanctity of labor and expands disregard for raw materials obtained from nature. Consequently, not only are human–nature relationships distorted, but also relationships between those with capital and those without, in an ecological context.

In relation to ecological issues, a crucial fact is that we must act more proactively and comprehensively than we are currently doing. The severity of the ecological problems that humanity is facing is escalating, and the conditions in developing countries, including those within the Daoist cultural sphere, are challenging. Within our interconnected ecosystem known as Earth, a call for harmonious development through proper allocation and investment of profits is being made. To achieve this balance, we must first expand fair trade practices to address unequal profit distribution. Secondly, we must improve the poor environmental conditions at production sites to reduce pollution and enable communities to uphold their tradition of living in harmony with nature. As the focus shifts from generating excessive surplus profits to expanding fair trade, an approach that allocates benefits towards improving both the capital structure and environmental conditions at production sites becomes increasingly necessary.

To achieve this, more meticulous policy deliberation processes are necessary, involving consultation bodies within respective governments, administrative agencies, civil and religious groups, and transnational consultative bodies on an equal and reciprocal basis. By implementing such measures, we could foster the improvement of environments within the Daoist cultural sphere. This would enable these communities to address environmental issues from a Daoist perspective, enhancing natural resource preservation and improving conditions in poorer areas. Additionally, applying an eco-justice strategy based on human interconnectedness could address social disparities while manifesting their philosophy of ‘unity of heaven and man’.

Furthermore, policymakers must rigorously examine whether fair trade practices and balanced responsibilities are upheld, not just during production, but also throughout the stages of distribution, consumption, and value-added acquisition. This strategy, rooted in the Daoist eco-philosophy of ‘connection’, can be referred to as ‘green readjustment’.

4. Conclusions

As previously discussed, Daoism presents an ecological perspective that diverges from modern ecological views. The issue lies not in their ecological beliefs, but in the circumstances in which they find themselves. Without improving these conditions, any rhetoric on environmental conservation becomes mere empty words, and efforts risk being futile.

This paper takes a different approach than previous studies. Prior research has primarily focused on the assertion and comprehensive exploration that Daoist philosophy harbors nature-friendly principles, and that these principles were adhered to within the Daoist cultural sphere. We align with this viewpoint. However, it raises a question: Why
is not this the case today? Why has it now become one of the regions contributing most significantly to global environmental pollution? Previous research has fallen short in providing answers to these questions or proposing tangible solutions to these pressing issues.

There is criticism that the Daoist cultural sphere is contributing significantly to environmental pollution, and that such actions should be ceased. However, when viewed not in isolation but within a holistic and contextual framework of interconnectedness, the situation appears somewhat different. To draw an analogy, it is akin to suggesting that one should remove their own kitchen or gas range to prevent pollution caused by cooking. Yet, no one advocates for the complete elimination of kitchens or gas ranges from homes while still permitting the act of preparing food. This is because within the space defined as a home, there must exist places for both creation and consumption.

Should there be an issue, we can rely on natural circulation for ventilation, or lean on technological advancements to replace current tools with other cooking appliances that emit fewer pollutants. Auxiliary items such as air purifiers or masks can also be utilized. We consider the problem of inevitable pollutant emissions in kitchens within the context of ‘connection’, improving the environment using alternative mechanisms to remove pollutants.

The same principle applies to our planet. For something to be utilized, it must first be produced; many goods consumed in developed countries originate from less affluent nations, including those within the Daoist cultural sphere, resulting in environmental pollution. In the era of globalization, which has markedly increased the interconnectedness of spaces akin to homes and kitchens, we understand that entities do not exist in isolation, but rather in a state of interconnection.

Therefore, before focusing primarily on improving the environmental conditions at production sites, a fair distribution of benefits should be established. This is not an issue that can be resolved solely through religious ideologies or faiths. It requires an approach from a fundamental perspective that considers humanity and the Earth’s environment beyond religion. Particularly from the standpoint of trans-regional cooperation, a multidisciplinary approach is necessary. This approach should be based on an interactive relationship between governmental and non-governmental institutions—one that aims for the mutual recognition of individual and societal identities, as well as civic solidarity in relation to a shared value horizon. The problems we have encountered so far have not been confined to any specific group; they are collective issues for which everyone must assume responsibility.

However, this paper has conducted discussions from a standpoint that advocates for the Daoist cultural sphere while acknowledging criticisms stemming from a perspective of an unbalanced playing field. China, at the heart of the Daoist cultural sphere, declared in its 19th report that it would “swiftly reform the ecological civilization system to build a beautiful China”. Whether this public commitment will be realized is yet to be seen. The same holds true for other countries within the Daoist cultural sphere, such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Vietnam. Nevertheless, what is clear is that there should be an initial leveling of the playing field, followed by proactive and dynamic actions within the Daoist cultural sphere based on this foundation.

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Notes

1 There even exists a best-selling book that discusses these connections in a scientific context. Refer to The Self Delusion: The Surprising Science of How We Are Connected and Why That Matters by Tom Oliver (Oliver [2021] 2022, pp. 1–32).

2 The term “Daoist cultural sphere” refers to regions significantly influenced by Daoist culture, primarily located in East Asia. These include China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, Korea, Singapore, Mongolia, and Vietnam. Although Daoism has a substantial presence in the Chinese mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and Singapore, it does not constitute a major religion in most of these areas. Instead, it is part of a wider Chinese cultural context that also encompasses other major religions such as Confucianism and Buddhism. In this article, the term “Daoist cultural sphere” may, in some contexts, be used interchangeably with the “Chinese cultural sphere”, the “Sinic civilization sphere”, or simply “China”. However, given potential disagreements over the latter term among constituents outside of China, and considering Daoism’s substantial cultural influence in the substrate of the regions mentioned above, this paper opts to use the “Daoist cultural sphere”. That is, although the ruling class in the Chinese cultural sphere may have embraced Confucianism or Buddhism as its ideology, Daoist culture has formed a foundation among the grassroots populace through its fusion with folk beliefs and other forces. Accordingly, this choice of term is made despite the fact that most of the prior references focus on China and the Chinese cultural sphere.

3 Before delving into the main discussion, it is necessary to mention the difference between Daojia (道教, Daoist philosophy) and Daojiao (道教, Daoist religion). Various discussions on this subject can be found in works such as Ren, Jiyu’s “Daojia and Daojiao” (Ren 2005, pp. 3–8), and Li, Shen’s “Basic Theory of Daoism” (Li 2001, pp. 1–311). The clearest summary of the issue between Daojia and Daojiao is found in the writings of Mou Zhongjian (Mou 1996, pp. 4–14). There is a difference between Daojia as a philosophy and Daojiao as a religion. However, since Daojiao absorbs the philosophy of Daojiao as its theoretical basis and places the scriptures and figures in an important position, the influence of Daojia’s philosophy in Daojiao is significant. In this paper, the focus will be on the philosophy of Daojia, which plays a significant role in Daojiao, and the intersection of the two.

4 Notably though, since 2021, China has been operating a national carbon emission trading market since 2021. Through this system, it is estimated that China’s carbon dioxide emissions in 2021 were reduced by approximately 3.8% compared to the previous year. Korea Environmental Industry & Technology Institute (KEITI) (https://m.blog.naver.com/lovekeiti/223168445062) (accessed on 13 October 2023).

5 The term “Daoist cultural sphere” refers to regions significantly influenced by Daoist culture, primarily located in East Asia. These include China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, Korea, Singapore, Mongolia, and Vietnam. Although Daoism has a substantial presence in the Chinese mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and Singapore, it does not constitute a major religion in most of these areas. Instead, it is part of a wider Chinese cultural context that also encompasses other major religions such as Confucianism and Buddhism. In this article, the term “Daoist cultural sphere” may, in some contexts, be used interchangeably with the “Chinese cultural sphere”, the “Sinic civilization sphere”, or simply “China”. However, given potential disagreements over the latter term among constituents outside of China, and considering Daoism’s substantial cultural influence in the substrate of the regions mentioned above, this paper opts to use the “Daoist cultural sphere”. That is, although the ruling class in the Chinese cultural sphere may have embraced Confucianism or Buddhism as its ideology, Daoist culture has formed a foundation among the grassroots populace through its fusion with folk beliefs and other forces. Accordingly, this choice of term is made despite the fact that most of the prior references focus on China and the Chinese cultural sphere.

6 For instance, studies such as “Laozi and Natural Farming” or “Laozi’s Philosophical Thought and Environmental Consciousness” (Ge [1991] 1996, pp. 1–426) explore theoretical value and potential within Daoism regarding early environmental issues but fail to provide practical solutions. Natural farming may counteract scientific agriculture but can it realistically provide a solution? While Laozi’s philosophy mentions environmental consciousness, did he envision contemporary environmental problems when advocating for environmental protection? A more realistic discussion is needed.

7 “五行謂水, 火, 金, 木, 土. 相推者, 水生木, 木生火, 火生土, 土生金, 金生水, 水又生木, 周而復始; 又相剋法; 水剋火, 火剋金, 金剋木, 木剋土, 土剋水, 水剋火, 周而復始; 相推之道也. 反歸一者, 水數也. 五行之道, 乃物之宗” (Liang 1988a, p. 533).

8 The author organized the information according to the data arranged by Junghan Kim (2021) using Eora MRIO [KIF (Korea Institute of Finance) Financial Analysis Report 2021-07].


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