

Analysis of Ecological Ethics in Monthly Ordinances of the Book of Rites

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Abstract: The "Book of Rites" is a compilation of Confucian ritual texts from the Pre-Qin to Western Han periods, documenting the institutional and ceremonial systems before the Qin and Han dynasties, primarily centered around the Zhou Dynasty. It is an essential document for studying ancient Chinese ritual culture. The "Monthly Ordinances" follows a fixed format, structured around the four seasons and months. Under each month, it first describes the celestial phenomena and seasonal changes, then records the political orders that the Son of Heaven should issue under these conditions, and points out that failing to comply with the "time" will inevitably lead to disaster. The "Monthly Ordinances" is a scientific summary and philosophical generalization of various natural sciences, agricultural, forestry, animal husbandry, and fishing practices since the Shang and Zhou dynasties, as well as state management experiences. It contains rich ecological ethical ideas, allowing us to explore early Chinese norms on environmental protection and trace their practical significance.

Keywords: Monthly Order; Ecological Ethics; Environmental Protection

1. The Context of the Formation of Ecological Thought in Monthly Ordinances: Agricultural Civilization and Institutional Change in the Zhou Dynasty

Hunting was an important means of production for our ancestors from ancient times to the Xia and Shang dynasties. However, during the Zhou Dynasty, in an agrarian society, hunting's status rapidly declined. Under the constraints of Zhou Dynasty's ritual and music culture, hunting had lost its original wildness, strength, and the aesthetic pleasure derived from bloody slaughter. The rites of field hunting embodied the spirit of agrarian culture, reflecting the natural philosophy and ecological wisdom of agrarian

peoples. Compared to earlier periods, some changes occurred in the Zhou Dynasty:

1.1 The Zhou People Began to Establish Their Country on Agriculture

The Zhou people were skilled in agriculture, and the Zhou Dynasty was established on this foundation. The Records of the Grand Historian: The Basic Annals of Zhou states: "Although Gong Liu was among the Rong and Di tribes, he revived the legacy of Hou Ji, focusing on farming and adapting to local conditions. He crossed the Wei River from Qi and Ju, collecting resources for practical needs. Those who traveled had resources, and those who stayed had livestock. The people relied on his blessings, and many migrated to follow and support him." Hou Ji is the founding hero of Zhou's agricultural civilization. He improved farming techniques and was beloved by the people, revered as the god of agriculture. In the 16th century BC, Gong Liu led his people from Tai to Bin, following Hou Ji's agricultural methods, "the rise of the Zhou path began here."

1.2 The Zhou Dynasty Took the "Feudal System" As the Basis of Its Political System

The "Rites of Zhou: Wang Zhi" records: "The king's system for granting ranks and fiefs is divided into five grades: Duke, Marquis, Earl, Viscount, and Baron. The feudal lords' officials are further divided into five grades: Senior Minister, Junior Minister, Senior Scholar, Middle Scholar, and Junior Scholar. The Son of Heaven's territory spans a thousand square li, while the territories of dukes and marquises cover one hundred li, earls seventy li, and viscounts and barons fifty li. Those who cannot reach fifty li do not qualify as the Son of Heaven but are considered inferior to the feudal lords, known as 'Earl Yu.' The fields of the Three Dukes are similar to those of dukes and marquises, those of the Grand Ministers to those of earls, those of the Senior Ministers to those of viscounts and barons, and those of the Junior

Scholars to those of subordinate states." The Son of Heaven enfeoffed the feudal lords, granting them lands that corresponded to their ranks; the higher the rank, the more land they received. The enfeoffment system was the foundation of the dynasty's institutions, upon which all other systems were built.

1.3 Agricultural Income Has Become the Basis of National Budget

The "Rites of Zhou: Wang Zhi" records: "The Grand Steward shall prepare the state budget at the end of each year, after all the grain has been stored in the granaries. The size of the land is determined based on the abundance or scarcity of the year, using a thirty-year average to prepare the state budget, and expenditures are made according to income." When preparing the next year's national fiscal budget, it must be done at the end of the year, as the budget needs to wait until all the grain has been stored in the granaries before it can be compiled. The budget preparation must consider the size of the territory, the abundance or scarcity of the year, and use a thirty-year average income as the basis for preparing the budget. Expenditures are determined based on the amount of income. Agricultural income is the foundation of the budget and also serves as the basis for planning major ritual expenditures.

1.4 Hunting Declined During the Yin and Zhou Dynasties

During the transition from the Shang to the Zhou dynasties, environmental degradation was severe. Although hunting remained important during the Shang period, it no longer enjoyed the superior ecological conditions and abundant wildlife resources of the Yin-Shang era. Animal bones such as those of elephants and rhinoceroses, commonly found in Yin-Shang archaeological sites, became rare in Western Zhou sites. While the Zhou people overthrew the Shang rule, they also brought agricultural civilization to the Central Plains. The hunting that was prevalent during the Yin-Shang period took a secondary role in the Zhou dynasty, which was established on an agrarian foundation.

2. The Core Connotation of Ecological Ethics in Monthly Ordinances

2.1 Harmony Between Man and Nature: A Cosmology of Reverence for Heaven and Law

The "Monthly Ordinances: Early Spring" records: "Do not violate the way of heaven, do not break the principles of earth, and do not disrupt human order." This means that one should not go against the laws of nature, should not abandon the natural order of the land, and should not disrupt the social order. This is the central idea of the "Monthly Ordinances." Only by following this principle can one achieve high yields and abundant harvests. In the "Monthly Ordinances," celestial movements, climate changes, phenological indicators, and agricultural activities are harmonized and unified. Based on the position of the sun in the sky and the constellations visible at dawn and dusk, as well as meteorological and phenological changes, the "Monthly Ordinances" was the first to clearly divide the year into four seasons—spring, summer, autumn, and winter—and each season into three months, namely early, middle, and late. This made the division of time more objective and scientific. The "Monthly Ordinances" also recognized the overall connection between living organisms and their environment, describing the ecological succession of plants, insects, birds, beasts, fish, and turtles as they change with the seasons. Celestial changes are the decisive factors in seasonal changes. By the time the "Monthly Ordinances" was compiled, a unified coordinate system based on the background of celestial stars had already been established. It selected twenty-eight star officials to mark the celestial phenomena observed, dividing them into four groups and aligning them with east, west, south, and north.

The four directions in the north were connected and named with the images of the Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird and Black Tortoise, forming a relatively clear reference system for describing the location of a certain celestial phenomenon, namely the "28 Constellations system"

On this basis, the Monthly Ordinances further incorporated the "natural calendar" (phenology) into the "astronomical calendar"

Among them, seasonal turnover, meteorological change, and phenological [1] were determined according to astronomical changes. "Heaven" refers more to the natural heaven in "the moon", and the respect for "heaven" also runs through the development of ancient Chinese philosophy. The thoughts of later generations, such as Confucius, Mencius, Dong Zhongshu and others,

have continuously expanded the connotation of "heaven" and formed the unique cosmic view of the Chinese people.

2.2 Timely and Orderly: the Practical Norms of Ecological Agronomy

The "Monthly Ordinances" formulated a "Rural Calendar" based on the concept of "time." This "Rural Calendar" integrates the natural system with the agricultural system, aligning farming activities such as plowing, planting, weeding, harvesting, and storing with seasonal changes in the natural world. It also emphasizes that agricultural management is a crucial responsibility of rulers, who must arrange agricultural production according to the ecological rhythms of the seasons. During peak farming seasons, they are required to refrain from unnecessary labor and avoid disrupting agricultural timing. They are also instructed to "use the people according to the times," avoiding the unlimited use of labor. Only when both rulers and farmers follow the ecological rhythms in arranging agricultural production and engaging in agricultural activities can they achieve "not violating the agricultural timing" and "not disrupting the agricultural timing" [2]. Here, the "Monthly Ordinances" institutionalizes the concept of "time," setting different requirements for people of different social classes. The long-standing contradiction between "rule by virtue" and "rule by law" in Chinese history has been well reconciled, as the "Monthly Ordinances" incorporate both into its system: virtue is practiced in spring and summer, while law is enforced in autumn and winter. "Monthly order" also pointed out that if not in accordance with the "time" to engage in agricultural activities, it will bring adverse consequences, such as: "Moon Ling · The Moon of Meng Chun": "Meng Chun line summer, the wind and rain from time to time, vegetation early withered, the country is afraid. In autumn, the people epidemic, the number of heavy rain to, quinoa and rise. In winter, the water is defeated, frost and snow zhi, the first not into." If the summer decree is implemented in Meng Chun, then the wind and rain will not go along the season, the vegetation will dry up very early, and the people will feel panic. If the autumn decree was implemented in Mengchun, the people would suffer from plague, the wind and rain would attack many times, and all kinds of weeds would flourish. If the winter season is

implemented in Mengchun, there will be biological damage, severe frost and snow to crops, and the wheat planted in the winter will not have a harvest.

2.3 Time Ban and Time Care: Sustainable Management of Natural Resources

The Monthly Ordinances contain detailed and complete "time to nurture time to ban" regulations, which contain rich views on the protection of natural resources.

The "Monthly Ordinances" establish a schedule based on the seasonal succession of tree growth and development, prohibiting logging during spring and summer while allowing it only in autumn and winter. For example, the "Monthly Ordinances: Early Spring Month" states: "Mountains, forests, rivers, and marshes shall be worshipped... logging is forbidden." Spring and summer are the seasons when trees grow, so they cannot be cut down or burned, and there are designated officials to oversee the forests. This way, in autumn and winter, people can harvest trees for daily use. Such measures also aim at ensuring the sustainable utilization of forest resources.

"Monthly order" also requires the protection of animal resources, first of all, is not to kill animal cubs, such as: "Moon Ling · The Moon of Meng Chun": "Do not destroy nests, do not kill larvae, newborn animals, or fledgling birds, and do not hunt fawns or collect eggs." In the Meng spring season is not allowed to overturn the nest, is not allowed to kill young animals and chicks, do not kill deer and tao bird eggs. The second is to prohibit the use of destructive tools, such as: "month · Ji Chun moon": "Tian Li Yi, fufu, feed the animal medicine, not out of the nine doors." In the spring season of hunting, the tools needed to capture the birds and animals, the drugs poisoned to kill the beasts can not be taken out of the gate.

"Moon Ling" also attaches great importance to the protection of land resources, such as: "Moon Ling · Meng Chun Moon": "the land, the land, grain, to teach the people." In the spring season, the officials who managed the farmland observed the hills, mountains and plain depressions in detail, planted grain according to the suitability of the terrain, and taught the people these correct planting methods.

The provisions in the Monthly Orders to protect natural resources ensured sustainable development at that time and to some extent

avoided the "Tragedy of the Commons".

3. The Characteristics of Ecological Ethics in the Monthly Ordinances: the Trinity of Rites, Heaven and Time

As one of the earliest works to guide people's life, the environmental ethics in "Monthly Ordinances" has its uniqueness:

3.1 The Fusion of Religion and Nature Worship

During the Western Zhou period, the early shamanistic culture evolved into a sacrificial culture[3]. Early religious beliefs were more inclined towards nature worship. The "Rites of Zhou: Sacrificial Methods" records: "The gods of mountains and rivers bring disasters such as floods, droughts, epidemics, and plagues. The gods of the sun, moon, and stars bring untimely snow, frost, wind, and rain." The religiosity in the "Monthly Ordinances" has two characteristics:

First of all, the four seasons have the emperor and the god respectively. Spring "its emperor, its god sentence awn", summer "its emperor yan, its god in harmony", autumn, its god collection ", winter" its emperor Zhuanxu, its god "; secondly," month, " has detailed and nature related to god worship activities, for example, in spring, start, start of winter, the day of the three king, nine qing, princes, doctors to eastern suburbs, southern suburbs, western suburbs, northern suburbs to meet the arrival of the four seasons. Among them, the worship of natural gods should also be combined with the ancient Chinese view of the universe.

3.2 The Imitation of Ecological Laws by Rites and Laws

Confucianism holds that the nature represented by heaven is a harmonious and orderly system with "life". Nature provides a wonderful and harmonious living environment for human beings, and shows the highest principle of human governance of society, which is that man must conform to the law of nature."Yue Ling" embodies the idea of imitating nature as the fundamental."Monthly Order" has a fixed writing format, with the four hours and months as the framework of the chapter structure. In each month, first describe the sky and phenology of the month, and then describe the decree of the emperor under the phenology, and pointed out that if you do not conform to the characteristics

of the gas and act, there will be disaster. The ancestors were inspired and inspired by the meticulous observation of nature. Heaven and earth have different advantages and have different natures, and they are different from human grace, so people have different gratitude to heaven and earth when offering sacrifices.[4] It is precisely because of this gratitude that people always carry out the idea of "keeping when forbidden" in agricultural activities, do not kill, do not destroy the environment.

4. Historical Continuity and Contemporary Enlightenment: From Traditional Ecological Wisdom to Modern Reflection

The Book of Rites was listed as one of the "Nine Classics" in the Tang Dynasty, and was listed as one of the "Thirteen Classics" in the Song Dynasty, and became a must-read book by ancient scholars. As one of the representative works of Confucian classics, the Book of Rites is not only a book of historical rules and regulations, but also a textbook about benevolence, righteousness and morality. It is the guidance for the establishment of political system and humanistic order in successive dynasties, and has had a profound influence on Chinese culture since ancient times. As a chapter in the Book of Rites, the ecological thought reflected in it has an important historical position:

4.1 The Origin and Development of Confucian Ecological View and Political Ethics

The "Monthly Ordinances" contain detailed regulations on "timely care and prohibitions," embodying the idea of universal love for all things. The ideas of Mencius's "benevolence towards people and love for all things" and Zhang Zai's "people as fellow beings and all things as companions" and "harmony between heaven and humanity" were both influenced by these principles, shaping the moral character of the Chinese nation. This ecological perspective complements ritual practices; people revere rituals while also respecting nature, without worrying about natural disasters or limitations that might prevent them from performing rituals, thus avoiding punishment from deities. People maintain a constant sense of reverence for nature, reminding themselves not to over-exploit it in the process of taking from nature[5].

4.2 The Ecological Code of Civilization

In the Monthly Orders, the duties of environmental management for the emperor or king were also stipulated, including welcoming rituals, agricultural management, rites and music, criminal justice, religion and other activities. During the Warring States period, Mencius proposed "benevolent government" and raised "timely care and prohibition" to the height of "benevolence".

In fact, the rulers of the Western Zhou Dynasty learned from the fall of the Shang Dynasty and their political views had undergone significant changes compared to before. The rulers of the Western Zhou realized that they could not indulge in luxury and excess, nor could they over-exploit the people; they must protect and care for the people to ensure the continuation of the dynasty. During the Western Zhou period, the concept of popular will was relative to the ruling class and did not provide a legitimate belief or moral force for the people to resist tyranny. However, this theory of popular will invented by the Zhou people gave an unregulated monarchical system, which claimed divine right of kingship during the Shang Dynasty, a clear set of normative principles. Although these norms were legally binding, when they became part of political culture, they could serve as a moral constraint. Indeed, after the Western Zhou, this theory of popular will truly became a tradition in ancient Chinese political culture and was inherited by later Confucian political thought. After the Qin Dynasty, whether it was the reflections of rulers or the resistance of the people, they were all closely linked to this tradition.[3]

4.3 Cultural Continuity

The concept of environmental protection in the "Monthly Ordinances" correctly guided people's agricultural activities, allowing ancient Chinese civilization to continue to this day. Human origins depend on the ecological environment, and changes in the ecological environment also influence the direction of human civilization. The unique natural ecological environment has nurtured the brilliant civilization of humanity, giving rise to ancient civilizations such as Babylon, Egypt, India, and China; however, changes in the environment and the deterioration of the ecological environment due to further development of human civilization also threaten human survival and the continuation of

civilization. For example, the decline of ancient Babylon was not only due to political and war reasons but also inseparable from environmental factors. Every spring, the melting snow on the plateau causes the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to flood in Mesopotamia, especially in the lower reaches where the terrain is low-lying and almost completely submerged. Forests were destroyed, land became barren, and unreasonable irrigation led to soil salinization, turning the once lush fields of ancient Babylon into desolate wastelands. Grand temples and magnificent gardens also collapsed with the re-establishment of the capital by Macedonian invaders and the forced relocation of the people. It is precisely because the Chinese established the ecological concept of "timely cultivation and timely prohibition" early on that they protected their living environment and preserved Chinese civilization.

5. Conclusion: The Philosophical Reconstruction of Benevolence and Ecological Civilization

The "Monthly Ordinances" can have such rich ecological protection laws, partly due to the reverence for nature and humanity, and partly as a result of bestowing benevolence upon nature. "Benevolence" is an affectionate love for all things that emanates from deep within one's heart. These policies for protecting the environment reflect the ancestors' pursuit of harmony between humans and nature, encompassing their respect for life and the value of loving all living beings. These ideas remain relevant in today's society.

As human civilization advances, environmental degradation has become increasingly severe. Unreasonable exploitation and utilization of natural resources, along with construction projects, have led to the deterioration of ecosystems and various environmental effects that adversely impact human living conditions, such as soil erosion, land desertification, and soil salinization. The consequences of environmental destruction often require a long time to recover, and some are even irreversible. Especially after the Industrial Revolution, in an effort to accelerate development, people intensified their exploitation of nature, ultimately leading to ecological issues that have backfired on humanity.

Fortunately, ecological issues have prompted human reflection and the adoption of various

measures. Human survival and development cannot be separated from nature. The idea of benevolence towards all things embodied in the "Monthly Ordinances" is worth learning from. Only by doing well in "nurturing" can we better achieve "taking," such as implementing fishing moratoriums to protect marine life, ensuring sustainable development.

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