

The symbol of Yin/Yang and sustainable tourism in China

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Adopting Chinese cultural perspectives, especially the symbol of Yin/Yang, we study the issue of environmental protection in a developing country such as China. First, we compare the implications of this symbol with those of a more well-known Chinese perspective, i.e., Confucianism, both of which should be very relevant to the issue of environmental protection. After that, we conclude this study with a discussion of the implications of the findings for both managerial researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: Ecotourism; Chinese Philosophy; Yin/Yang Balance.

1. Introduction

This study deals with the issue of ecotourism in a developing country, namely, the People's Republic of China. Although China's tourist industry has been growing rapidly, the country still faces growing challenges with respect to implementing sound strategies of ecotourism and environmental protection. To develop a theoretical perspective on ecotourism in the Chinese cultural context, we compare

two major Chinese philosophical perspectives, specifically the major principles of Confucianism and Taoism as they relate to ecotourism and environmental protection. While Confucianism and Taoism present some important differences on these two issues, they can also be complementary in helping an East Asian country such as China to develop ecotourism.

We believe this study will be of significance for both academic researchers and managerial practitioners. Academically, the study should help in developing a new theory of ecotourism. Today, theories of ecotourism have been developed mainly in the West based on Western cultural or philosophical values (Spiteri & Nepal, 2006), but it remains unclear whether they would apply to East Asian or other non-Western cultures. In this sense, our study helps to bridge a research gap by documenting Eastern perspectives on these issues. In addition, this study should also enrich the literature on ecotourism and environmental protection. Applying Chinese perspectives may assist the development of new theoretical perspectives because of their differences from the West. In particular, a study based on the Asian perspectives could improve our understanding of many interesting issues relevant to ecotourism and environmental protection, such as the relationship between the development of tourism and the protection of local eco-systems.

Practically, this study could also provide government leaders and organization managers' greater knowledge on the issue of ecotourism and environmental ethics; this in turn could help with the management of ecotourism in developing countries, where the business environment differs from that of developed countries. In fact, some of our research findings may also prove useful for practitioners in developed countries. In other words, although the Chinese approach to ecotourism may be more consistent with Chinese cultural and philosophical values, it may also be applicable to ecotourism in other countries. Accordingly, our results should be helpful to both business leaders as well as government officials interested in the strategies of environmental protection and ecotourism. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: We first review the perspectives of Confucianism and Taoism, focusing on their differences relevant to the issues of ecotourism and environmental ethics. Finally, we conclude the study with a discussion of the implications of our model for academic researchers and for managerial practitioners.

2. The Perspective of Confucianism

Confucianism is a Chinese ethical and philosophical system developed from the teachings of the Chinese philosopher *Confucius* (*K'ung Fu-tzu*, 551- 479 BC). It is a complex system of moral, social, political, philosophical, and quasi-religious thought that has tremendous influence on the culture and history of East Asia.

According to *Fung Yu-Lan* (1952), one of the major researchers on Chinese

ancient philosophies, Confucianism has been dominant in Chinese cultural or philosophical literature since the Han Dynasty (220 BC - 263 CE), during which Confucianism was for the first time promoted as the state ideology, or the only government-sponsored set of values. This explains in part why Confucianism has been the most dominant philosophy in China since the Han Dynasty. In fact, Confucianism could be considered as state value in ancient China because of the promotion of the governments (Poortinga, Steg, & Vlek, 2004). Because of the influence of Confucianism, people in East Asian collectivist culture may show environmental behaviors different from those shown by people under individualistic cultures (Sarigöllü, 2009).

3. The Perspective of Taoism

Taoism has influenced China for over two millennia since Chou Dynasty (480 - 221 BC). Taoist propriety and ethics emphasize the perspectives of human-nature harmony, *wuwei* (“non-intrusive action” or “non-interfering action”) & *ziran* (spontaneity), as well as *yin/yang*.

Unlike the Western perspective, the *yin/yang* perspective pays more attention to patterns of change; under some conditions, *yin/yang* factors can transform into their opposite. According to the literature of Taoism, “the extreme of *Yin* is *Yang*, and the extreme of *Yang* is *Yin*,” and “when *Yin* and *Yang* are united in their characters, the weak and the strong attain their substance” (tr., Chan, 1963).

4. Differences between Confucianism and Taoism on Environmental Protection

On issues related to ecotourism, Confucianism and Taoism have some important differences (e.g., Moeller). In this section, we discuss two of the main differences relevant to the issues studied in this thesis.

4.1. Cultivation versus *yin/yang* balance

The core of Confucian philosophy is self-cultivation (Wang & Juslin, 2009) or self-regulation (Woods & Lamond, 2011); accordingly, Confucianism stresses educating people with an ethical standard by which they show respect for the natural environment. Hence, people participating in environmental protection are able to undertake self-cultivation or self-regulation.

The Taoist perspective, on the other hand, considers Confucian ethical standards, including those of self-cultivation and self-regulation, to be a symptom of poor insight or lack of understanding. In other words, the need for certain moral behaviors or guidelines, such as those in Confucianism, normally arises when it is already too late; that is to say, “when one has already allowed circumstances to

deteriorate to such an extent that artificial goodness is called for” (Moeller, 2001, p. 116), a crisis in the eco-system might have already taken place.

Different from Confucianism, Taoism develops harmonious dynamic balance with relational opposites (i.e., *yin* and *yang*) which are mutually interdependent and hence not in antagonistic conflict. This *yin/yang* perspective has two important implications for the development of ecotourism in modern societies. First, self-regulation alone may not be sufficiently effective in ensuring the healthy growth of ecotourism. By the time a set of environmental ethics of ecotourism is needed, the problem may have already grown serious. And second, it is a good idea to control potential problems earlier and in a timelier manner before either the *yin* or the *yang* becomes too strong or a great *yin/yang* imbalance has already taken place. Once this imbalance has occurred, managerial intervention to increase *yin* or *yang* will be difficult or ineffective; this is because efforts to reduce *yin* may simultaneously reduce *yang*, and vice versa. Accordingly, the *yin/yang* imbalance should be controlled at its earliest stage when it has just appeared.

Following on this *yin/yang* perspective, we can assume that ecotourism has the potential to be influenced by a *yin/yang* imbalance, namely the development of the local economy (*yin*), and the protection of the local natural environment (*yang*). With a growing human population in developing countries, this set of *yin/yang* elements must maintain a balance; otherwise, it could have a negative effect on ecosystem or the environment. Specifically, without development of the local economy, local people may have to cut down trees and hunt animals in response to the needs of their increasing population. At the same time, without protection of the natural environment, the local people may lose their most important valuable resources such that their local economy will never be able to develop in the long run. This is especially true for many underdeveloped regions in developing countries that have no other resources to compete against more advanced regions in their countries. In these regions, if ecotourism could trigger positive economic development, it would also improve conservation of the natural environment (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008; Gurunga & Seelanda, 2008). Accordingly, there needs to be a balance between development of the local economy and protection of the natural environment, which we are examining as a set of the main *yin/yang* factors in this thesis.

4.2. Anthropocentrism versus non-anthropocentrism

Another important difference between Confucianism and Taoism is about whether ecotourism should seek to be anthropocentric or non-anthropocentric (Lai, 2003). Specifically, Confucianism asserts anthropocentric attitudes based on the view that humans are separate and independent of other species and the environment (e.g., Fan, 2005). Such anthropocentric perspective is, in turn, often

linked to a dualistic framework set up between humans and nature, subject and object, master and slave, or dominant and dominated. For example, although Confucians classic *Mencius* (named after the author) mentioned “caring for animals”, it just expressed the extension of human compassion (Pfister, 2007), since Confucianism views only human have high intrinsic values, such that they occupy a superior position in the cosmos (Fan, 2005). In other words, Confucianism promotes human garden and transform nature guided by cosmic principle, but they should not deplete the environment for human flourishing (Fan, 2010).

However, Taoist criticize Confucian project of creating a human cultural identity, distinct and separate from all other species and the natural environment, addresses this concern of radical exclusion (Lai, 2003, p. 259). In contrast, Taoism expresses a non-anthropocentric environmental ethics (e.g., Lai, 2003; Pfister, 2007; Wawrytko, 2005). It believes individuals, species, or entities are situated in, and connected to others within the natural environment. Also, human institutions, ranks and hierarchies should remove continuously like natural environment. For example, Taoist non-anthropocentrism has greatly influence on the landscape painting art in Song Dynasty. In that period, landscape paintings deliberately contrasts mountains (*yang* symbols) and water courses or lakes (*yin* symbols), with small human figures on upward paths symbolizing the difficult ascent of human consciousness (c.f., Shaw, 1988). On the one hand, it reflects Taoism’s submissiveness to natural forces. On the other hand, Taoism inhibits chaotic and disharmonious human adjustment to foundational environmental disruption, as *Tao Te Ching* questions the mastery, domination and exploitation of the natural environment by human beings.

5. Discussion, Implication, and Future Studies

Comparing two major Chinese philosophical perspectives, we have shown that Confucianism and Taoism can complement one another in developing an Eastern approach to ecotourism and environmental protection.

On the one hand, the results from this study support educating local people on the issue of environmental protection. This education can be made more effectively by arranging the participation of local people in ecotourism and environmental protection. All these support the perspective of Confucianism such that in developing ecotourism, it is necessary to educate people with environmental ethics so they can be environmentally friendly through achieving ethical self-regulation in activities related to tourism (Woods & Lamond, 2011; Pooley & O’Connor, 2000). In other words, the educational activities should lead to more respect for nature and better harmony in the symbiosis between human beings and their natural environment.

At the same time, the study's results provide evidence supporting a timely and early approach to maintaining balance in the natural environment, or the *yin/yang* balance. Specifically, by making timely and early small adjustments before a serious *yin/yang* imbalance takes place, people can more effectively protect the natural environment or develop ecotourism.

The results from our study have implications for both academic researchers and managerial practitioners. For the former, they suggest some new perspectives that have the potential to develop a new theory of ecotourism and environmental protection. As some authors have pointed out, because of cultural differences, Western theories on ecotourism may not be easily adaptable to Chinese society (Wang & Juslin, 2009). It would therefore be helpful to develop a relevant theory taking into account Chinese cultural or philosophical traditions. This effort of theory development could assist the healthy growth of ecotourism, in Asian countries as influenced by Confucian cultural values.

For managerial practitioners, the results generally suggest a need to deal with the issues of crisis control and management using a more dynamic and timely approach. According to the *yin/yang* perspective, these issues should be addressed from a more dynamic perspective that supports more frequent examination of the growing potential of a *yin/yang* imbalance, thus leading to a more effective approach in dealing with them.

In addition, firm managers and government officials may also need a more timely approach to crisis control and management, since today a firm's internal and external environments can change very rapidly. In this sense, formulating new standards or regulations, both ethical and otherwise, may not be very effective or efficient for crisis control and management since they may come too late. The same is true for developing new agencies, organizations, or systems. According to the *yin/yang* perspective, by the time a society or organization needs to develop these systems, a crisis in the eco-system may already be underway. Moreover, developing such new systems or standards could create a new *yin/yang* imbalance, such as growing bureaucracy and increasing transaction costs. Accordingly, early and timely adjustments and small reforms before a new *yin/yang* imbalance can grow out of hand may be a better approach.

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