

# Exploring the Contemporary Value and Innovative Development of Chinese Dai Ecological Culture and Civilisation from the Perspective of “Marxist View of Nature”

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## Abstract

With the continuous development of human society, the ecological environment has been seriously damaged. It is therefore of vital significance to examine the ecological environmental protection and ecological culture, especially in some indigenous and border regions with rich natural resources. This paper analyses the problems faced by the development of ecological culture in Xishuangbanna Dai region of Yunnan from the perspective of the “Marxist view of nature” and explores its innovative and sustainable development paths. The article begins with an overview of the “Marxist view of nature”, followed by an explanation of the necessity of ecological culture construction in Xishuangbanna Dai region. It then provides an in-depth analysis of the ecological problems and concludes with responding suggestions and solutions. This study not only helps to understand the ecological culture and civilisation of ethnic minority groups and their ecological environment status quo, but also provides implications and theoretical value to the construction of global ecological culture and ecological civilisation.

**Keywords:** Marxist view of nature, ecological culture and civilisation, Chinese Dai ethnic groups, innovative and sustainable development, Yunnan

## 1. Introduction

The question of the relationship between man and nature has arisen since the emergence of human being. This question has been explored throughout history and new debates have emerged. In terms of today’s environmental issues, the focus is on sustainable development for building an ecological civilisation. As early as the 1870s, Engels warned us “not to revel in the victory over nature”, pointing out that the key of environmental protection should not be on a one-sided effort in nature, but emphasising the necessity to understand and correctly apply the laws of nature (Löwy, 2017). In 1866, Ernst Haeckel first used the term “ecology” (Rizhinashvili, 2019), which is the comprehensive science of living organisms and their relationship to the external environment. Specifically, it refers to the interconnected, interdependent, mutually limiting and interacting unity of air, soil, water, plants, animals and other objects, all of which affect not only each other but also the environment on which they depend. A growing number of research has examined the environmental problems and ecological protection in many indigenous and ethnic minority-centered areas (Fan, 2014; Liévanos, 2019; Scholtz, 2010). It is true that indigenous wisdom and culture play essential role in environmental protection. For example, the Dai people in Yunnan, the Southwest part of China, have developed many plain ideas and concepts about environmental protection in the process of generalising the laws of ecology during their long-term production and living practices. This plain idea of ecology and environment has been integrated into the reality of production and life. Topics of previous studies related to ecological civilisation in Yunnan mainly include the construction of agricultural ecological civilisation (Zhang & Lei, 2018) and the ecological civilisation in tourism (Chen, 2019; Zheng et al., 2016). However, there is a paucity of research examining the ecological civilisation of ethnic minority culture from the perspective of the Marxist view of nature. Few studies center on the indigenous and ethnic people’s wisdom in the construction of ecological civilisation in border areas. To address this gap, therefore, this paper attempts to explore Dai ecological culture and civilisation, as well as its ecological status quo in Yunnan, aiming to analysing its challenges and innovative and sustainable development strategies in order

to maintain the local ecological culture from the perspective of Marxist view of nature.

## 2. Marxist View of Nature

The “Marxist view of nature” is a scientific concept of nature, which not only clearly points out the dialectical unity between man and nature, but also illustrates the correct solution, and its philosophical ideas have laid a solid theoretical foundation for us to deal with the construction of ecological civilisation in the border ethnic areas. The Marxist view of nature is an important part of Marxism. Broadly speaking, the concept of “nature” refers to all matter in the universe, from the giant planets to the microscopic particles that we cannot see with eyes. The Marxist view of nature that we adopt in this paper is in the narrower sense. Based on a critique of Hegel’s objective idealist view of nature (Wandschneider, 1992) and a revision of Feuerbach’s mechanical materialist view of nature (Foster, 2000), the Marxist view of nature emphasises a dialectical view of nature, for example, a “practical humanistic view of nature”. Marxist view of nature in a narrow sense refers to the integration of human behaviour into the natural environment and emphasises the important role of people. In other words, people’s involvement in practical activities is based on nature, and they relate to nature through a range of practical activities. Without human society, the relationship between human and nature would not exist. Similarly, ecological conservation and sustainable development must be geared towards restoring the ecological environment that has been destroyed by humans.

According to Marx, nature can be divided into “real nature”, “sensual nature”, “human nature” and “historical nature” (Boston, 2007; Kachooyan, 2001). As pointed out by Marx, the natural environment refers to the external environment necessary for people to live. Marx emphasised the essential role of human’s “self-consciousness” and elevated the interrelationship between man and nature to the level of natural philosophy. In *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx & Engels, 2019), Marx addressed the unique significance of capitalism for the development of human society and nature, as well as the specific ecological dilemmas of capitalism and socialism, outlining the ideal state of the relationship between man and nature for the achievement of communism. The Marxist view of nature is a dialectical view of nature that is primarily pragmatic and presupposes materiality. The characteristics of the Marxist view of nature are therefore summarised as pragmatic, material and dialectical. With regard to its pragmatic feature, human activity cannot be separated from a certain sphere, which is the natural world. It is in the context of nature that man transforms the world by understanding it. It is a process of practice, which facilitates the interaction between man and nature. Regarding its material feature, we can understand, from the Marxist view of nature, that humans are part of nature, a material being, and that there are many material molecules in nature that together form a whole nature. Human beings, like other animals and plants, as an objective object of nature, constraint and limited by nature. In terms of its dialectical feature, Marx first proposed a dialectical approach to understand and solve problems. It is a rejection of the modern mechanical materialist view of nature, which is a one-sided view of nature, emphasising only a single static pattern in the development of nature, while ignoring the dynamic connection and development of things. Besides, Marx also criticised the Hegelian idealist view of nature, which contradicts the essence of materialism by taking absolute spirit as the origin of the world. More importantly, the greatest breakthrough of the Marxist view of nature is that it emphasises both the objective properties of the world and the clear subjective consciousness of human beings, a dialectical unity of materiality and practicality, a dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity, a dialectical unity of materiality and praxis.

## 3. The Development of the “Marxist View of Nature” in China

First of all, the Marxist view of nature provides guidance for the development of the concept of ecological civilisation in China. To put it in another way, Marx provided a new theoretical foundation for ecological civilisation. Ecological civilisation was born after human industrial civilisation. It is a new stage in the development of human society following the traditional industrial stage. Marx emphasised the natural qualities that humans themselves possess and stated that humans are an important part of nature. Human beings are rooted in nature, originate from nature and develop together with their natural environment harmoniously. Marx saw nature, man and society as a unified whole and studied this whole in terms of the fundamental contradictions of society, overcoming the old materialist argument that separated the three.

In addition, the concept of ecological civilisation is an inheritance and development of the Marxist view of nature. In China, the development of the concept of ecological civilisation has gone through a process from its initial formulation to its realisation and then to its development. The Chinese Communist Party’s continuous analysis and interpretation of the Marxist view of nature, as well as its integration with the actual situation as it evolves with the times, has resulted in a series of concepts related to ecological civilisation in China. China’s concept of ecological civilisation originates from the Marxist view of nature and is conducive to guiding China’s

socialist construction of ecological civilisation by incorporating the lessons learned from China's ecological practices. Mao Zedong was the pioneer of the construction of ecological civilisation in China. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong has led the Chinese people to actively open up land and vigorously plant trees and forests. Since the 18th Party Congress, the Party Central Committee, with General Secretary Xi Jinping at its core, has put forward new requirements for the construction of ecological civilisation. From then on, ecological civilisation was first introduced as a chapter and elevated to the level of overall planning, and the concept of "Beautiful China" was creatively introduced as a realistic goal for China to move towards a new era of ecological civilisation. Later, the report of the 19th Party Congress stated, "man and nature are a community of life, and mankind must respect nature, conform to nature and protect nature." These are the theoretical achievements of the socialist with Chinese features, and these policies reflect the Party's central leadership responsibility to the Chinese nation and the international community. In the meanwhile, during his visit to Yunnan, the General Secretary Xi Jinping put forward "three major strategies", one of which was to consider Yunnan province as the "leader in the construction of ecological civilisation" in border regions. Overall, both the Marxist view of nature and the concept of ecological civilisation have important theoretical implications for the innovative and sustainable development of ecological culture and civilisation in China.

#### **4. The Need for Innovative Construction of Dai Ecological Culture**

The construction of ecological civilisation in indigenous and border areas has vital significance and should follow a sustainable and green development path in line with their own cultural and geographical features. Firstly, the basic idea for building a socialist ecological civilisation with Chinese characteristics is to respect and protect the nature. Respect for nature mainly includes respect for ecological culture, ecological consciousness, ecological ethics and ecological policies. China's socialist ecological civilisation is based on the common good, with a focus on protecting the ecological environment, strengthening ecological construction, promoting healthy ecological development. The core of the theory of building an ecological civilisation is to respect and protect nature and to adapt the economic pace of development to the capacity of the environment. Specifically, the Dai people of Xishuangbanna are ecologically conscious, grateful to nature and believe that man is the offspring of nature and should coexist with nature. The Dai people have a deep understanding of ecological culture and believe that human life depends on nature. Thus, they adhere to the requirements and principles of observing nature and not destroying or wasting natural resources. For example, the Dai people do not pick unripe fruit, do not catch unripe fish, they believe that natural flora and fauna are gifts from nature. This shows that Dai people have conservation awareness of nature.

Second, the concept of sustainable development is embedded in the environmental concepts of the Dai people in Xishuangbanna. The Dai people believe that the destruction of natural resources is irreversible and that people cannot live without nature in their daily activities. They adhere to the principle of combining environmental, economic and social interests in their development. Xishuangbanna is one of the most biodiverse regions with a variety of forests, grasslands and wetland cultures throughout its history in China. In light of the use of natural resources, the Dai people have collected many ancient fables and poems about the protection of nature and put forward restrictive conditions to regulate local people's behaviour, which have played a positive role in promoting the appropriate use of resources and the sustainable development of man and nature. The principle of the socialist theory of ecological civilisation in China is innovative and sustainable development. Facing the problems of resource depletion, pollution of water resources, destruction of forest resources, and worsening environmental pollution, we must adhere to the principle of ecological civilisation, raise the innovative and sustainable ecological development, respect nature, and reserve more ecological assets for mankind (Yao, 2020).

Third, the Dai people attach great importance to the relationship between the ecological environment and man in the process of development, which has important implications for the correct understanding of the relationship between man and nature. The theory of building a socialist ecological civilisation with Chinese characteristics adheres to the Marxist view of nature and believes that capitalist private ownership is the fundamental cause of the contradiction between man and nature, and that human being should strive to achieve the harmony between man and nature. From the perspective of Marx's socialist society, human production should move away from profit-seeking production, produce products with maximum use value with minimal resources and minimal pollution of the environment, and implement an innovative strategy of protecting the environment. The construction of ecological civilisation in China should apply the Marxist view to analyse the current ecological problems and seek solutions to the ecological crisis for achieving the harmonious development between man and nature. Dai people's view of ecological nature profoundly embodies the essence of ecological civilisation, which promotes harmonious development between nature and man, and economic development on the basis of respect and care for nature.

## 5. Problems of the Ecological Development in the Dai Region in New Era

There are three problems of the ecological development in the Dai region in new era, including the lack of effective safeguards for the ecological culture building process, contradiction between economic development and environmental protection as well as a single subject of ecological construction. The goal of the ecological civilisation reform system is to create a systematic management by establishing an integrated decision-making mechanism, participation mechanism, monitoring mechanism, evaluation mechanism and innovation mechanism for the environment and development. In this regard, the economic development and ecological civilisation construction can form a virtuous cycle and interaction, thus moving towards a truly sustainable development path.

Since ancient times, the Dai people of Xishuangbanna have had the punishment treaties for ecological violations. Nowadays, some village rules and regulations have become less binding in Dai areas, and their behaviour is more influenced by government policies. With the economic development and the advent of the industrial age, some of the policies did not take into account the actual situation of the minority regions, forcibly exploiting and heavily tapping local natural resources, focusing only on immediate economic development and plundering natural resources, resulting in the continuous deterioration of the ecological environment. Since the 1950s, there has been a decline of people's environmental awareness. For instance, the scale of people's logging became larger and the forest cover rapidly declined to 29.7% in 1980 when it was counted again. As the ecological crisis deepened throughout society, the state recognised the importance of ecological conservation and decided to ban deforestation and return farmland to forests in order to increase the forest area (Xu, 2015). Furthermore, because there is no balanced consideration of the benefits between forest area and farmers' land, and no solid compensation mechanism has been established for local people, farmers have failed to be motivated to plant trees, resulting in a decrease in the area of cultivated land and a decline in farmers' income. As a consequence, public enthusiasm for returning farmland to forest has declined significantly and the ecological and environmental crisis remains. Until the mid-20th century, the natural ecology of the Dai people was well protected by traditional ecological and cultural concepts due to the strict adherence to religious ecological ethics. Statistics showed that the forest cover in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province, was maintained at over 55% before, which was once known as the "Kingdom of Plants" (Qu et al., 2015).

There is also contradiction between economic development and environmental culture. Although Yunnan Province is rich in natural resources, the utilisation rate of resources is extremely low, the development method is rudimentary, and the industrial structure is very unreasonable. This has led to problems such as unbalanced development between regions and excessive economic disparities between different industries. To be more precise, primary industry of agriculture still continues the traditional means of farming, relying on human and material resources and self-sufficiency. The secondary industry, which is mainly driven by industrial development, can hardly solve the essentially sloppy way of growth, and it is difficult to solve the problem of transformation into high input, high consumption, high pollution and low productivity in the short term. The economy of the Dai region in Xishuangbanna is mainly associated with tourism, which has both advantages and disadvantages for a border region. On the one hand, the development of cultural tourism can stimulate the economic development of the Dai region, increasing income and providing important financial support for the legitimate conservation of Dai ecological culture. On the other hand, having discovered the economic benefits brought by tourism in one development after another, developers have recklessly continued to develop a unilateral economy, emphasising development at the expense of conservation and pursuing only immediate and short-term benefits, resulting in successive acts of ecological destruction.

Furthermore, surveys show that 10% of the population in Dai villages have received primary education, only 5% have received secondary education, and even fewer have received higher education, with some villages having no education at all. In this cultural environment, it is difficult for the Dai people in Xishuangbanna to be fully aware of environmental protection and to keep up with national laws and policies. Firstly, public awareness of ecological civilisation is very low. The public has general understanding of some basic norms of behaviour in daily life, such as domestic waste, urban sewage and industrial emissions. However, these are based on individual awareness of the ecological environment and are far from adequate for the development of ecological civilisation as a whole. The concepts, such as green production, circular economy and clean energy, are not sufficiently popular in ethnic minority areas. In addition, the public is not familiar enough with the laws and regulations of environmental protection. Most citizens are unaware of the rights and obligations they face in the natural environment and have little understanding of the environmental legal system, leading to a lack of awareness of environmental public morality (Liu, 2016). Although in recent years, the government, schools and communities have organised some activities on ecological culture subjects, their impact is still insufficient

because it is a long-term issue that requires people's efforts from different aspects, while the depth and breadth of the activities are not enough. Additionally, the government is the political, economic and cultural guide of a region. Therefore, the public generally believes that the big issue of ecological civilisation construction should be solved by the government, and individuals only need to follow the government's command; they ignore their role in the whole group and community (Shi et al., 2018).

## 6. Innovative Ecological Development Paths in Dai Region

In response to the problems of ecological development in Dai region, this study proposes several suggestions and solutions. First, it is advisable to strengthen the harmonisation of national law with Dai folk law. In dealing with environmental protection issues, it is important for the government to have a comprehensive understanding of the interaction between Dai folk law and national law. National law can strengthen Dai environmental protection by ensuring harmonious interaction and coordination among local government regulations, individual regulations and Dai folk law. Local people can adopt the ecological concepts into the transformation of economic development. Because Dai people have made tourism known as "green tourism", and ecotourism has been developed to promote environmental awareness of protecting natural resources. Environmental protection is a prerequisite for the tourism development plan in Dai region. The ecotourism plan of the Dai people is based on maintaining the ecological environment and combining the limited tourism space to create tourism resources with the characteristics of Dai people. The tropical rainforest has protected the Dai people for generations like an umbrella. Taking advantage of this, the Dai people have explored models suitable for the development of tropical rainforest tourism, established associations for the protection of the ethnic cultural heritage of the rainforest, developed diversified tourism and cultural products, and adhered to a circular economy, thus effectively protecting the ethnic cultural heritage of the rainforest (Zheng et al., 2016). Besides, monitoring systems at all levels in Xishuangbanna not only promote the development of sustainable ecotourism, but also stimulates environmental benefits. Apart from monitoring systems, there are also multiple layers of supervision, clear individual responsibility, the use of a detection system and so forth. It is worth noting that tourism can bring economic benefits, but at the same time, the human resources associated with the tourism industry can easily be led by profit, causing damage to the environment and affecting the sustainable development of tourism resources. Therefore, the government should formulate relevant rules and regulations to maintain the development of the Dai tourism industry while protecting its natural resources. Last but not least, we should raise people's awareness of building an ecological culture. To be more specific, efforts should be made to improve the ecological civilisation education system in schools. For example, textbooks and teaching materials associated with ecological civilisation education should be standardised, and different education and curricula should be developed for different age groups such as pre-schools, primary schools, secondary schools and universities. In addition to educational institutions like schools, organisations, enterprises, social groups and even communities should also establish independent education systems for environmental civilisation, with the aim of developing environmental awareness and environmental ethics.

## 7. Conclusion

The rich and diverse material and immaterial culture of Yunnan and many ethnic minority groups has brought the people numerous ecological wisdom, which is the spiritual ties for the harmonious coexistence of all ethnic groups. The ethnic minorities in border areas have established diverse ethnic ecological cultures in the interconnections between people and people, people and nature, working together to promote the construction of ecological civilisation in new era. Moreover, ethnic regions should fully utilise various media and materials to excavate, inherit, promote and protect the excellent traditional ecological cultures of all ethnic groups. Environmental issues become increasingly significant with the development of the society. Confronting the environmental problems, it is of great importance of using ethnic environmental culture, together with national laws and regulations, all levels of education as well as social media.

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