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The impact research of value orientation and pattern evolution of consumption on environmental issues

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Abstract

As the indispensable consumptive activity for human survival and development, consumption is not only the process of single material consumption but the reflection of social relations and the relationship between human and nature. From primitive society of hunting stage to contemporary post-industrial stage, the impact of consumptive activity on the environment (nature) has never been interrupted and goes further instead due to consumption's feature of negative externality and duality. From the development history of human society, the pattern of human consumption has undergone three significant evolutions: living the life of a savage, self-contained and self-sufficient, and alienation consumption. Likewise, the environment issues have experienced three corresponding stages of development: initial stage of environmental damage, regional stage and unprecedented challenge stage mankind has never faced before at which environmental issues become global, aggregative and complex. Thus, consumption is the core of the environmental issues, which should be never ignored.

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1. Main text

Changes in the Earth's environment are formed by the long-term effect and impact of many factors. By far, most environmental issues are secondary environmental issues (also called second environmental issues or named pollution) mainly caused by human activities except that the original environmental issues (also called the first environmental issues) caused by natural evolution (mainly refers to the Earth movement) lead to irresistible catastrophic damages (such as earthquake, tsunami, volcanic eruptions,

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collapse, landslide, debris and so on). From primitive society to contemporary post-industrial period, the impact of consumptive activity on the environment has never been interrupted and goes further instead. Although environmental issues has a long history, the large-scale, high-speed trend of ecological environment deterioration is just a recent phenomenon that emerged within the latest century or a few years more, especially after world war II, instead of the normal state of history. From the development history of society, the pattern of consumption will change obviously everytime the process of human society takes an apparent revolution. And environment issues will enter a new stage correspondingly. While whether the value orientation of people's consumption is reasonable or not also has a profound influence on environmental issues. Thus, not only is consumption closely related to social development, but also it is firmly linked with natural judgement.

2. Consumption ideas reflect human values

As the consumptive activity for human survival and development, consumption is the way of human existence and is a kind of living habits. Under no circumstances need we doubt its validity. But when it goes further, consumption is a reflection of life values. It is not the process of pure substance consumption from the perspective of economics whether it is individual living consumption or enterprises' productive consumption. Instead, it is a way of behavior and a kind of lifestyle which contains moral philosophy, ethical relationship and spiritual realm and it is the reflection of social relations. In other words, consumption is a complex and comprehensive economic, social, political, psychological and cultural phenomenon instead of just an economic one. ^[1]While it digests object in physical sense, consumption also shapes subject in social and cultural sense.

2.1. Consumption demonstrates the balance between human reason and desire

From the aspect of living consumption in reality, human consumption can be classified into three different levels. That is, purely survival demand, material and spiritual enjoyment demand. In fact, consumers' choice for demand is a selection of a special kind of lifestyle, and also a selection of a special kind of social class. Generally speaking, the satisfaction of material enjoyment demand varies according to human values. The consumption induced by human desire and demand demonstrates the balance between human reason and desire in a certain sense, especially in the era of globalization with value diversification. The temptation and stimulation for people to enjoy desire from rich goods and diversified life values highlight the treasure and necessity of reason's control over desire to a larger extent.

2.2. The result of consumption alienation means draining the pond to get all the fish

In a consumptive society, if one's demand stay at the level of material comforts for a long time, the consumption then just cares about the symbolic value of commodity symbols instead of its value in use.^[2] It is the shift in consumption value that makes the consumption in the society present a state of alienation. Namely, waste, emotional consumption and conspicuous consumption. In particular, the conspicuous consumers in the wealthy class more often treat the process of consumption as a symbolic expressing process of a certain sense or information. They show off and display their own economic strength through waste, luxury and extravagant consumption on goods. And thus they think it brings them honor, prestige, reputation and status, rights, that is, the self-identify of noble status or even the feeling of manage to do whatever they want on all the creatures so as to fill their empty souls. The display on visible matter shows that some people's rights and ability to control the steady flow of physical products from the environment without any constraints. ^[3] Thus, their desire for consumption is more often expressed as a kind of

psychological demand instead of physiological or daily objective needs and this kind of desire is unlimited. Desire does not desire satisfaction. On the contrary, desire desires desires. ^[4] As long as life continues and pursuit does not stop, they will consume as much as they want and squander as they like. This malignant consumption inevitably promotes malignant exploiting and therefore draining the pond to get all the fish is unavoidable. Some people say that the global financial crisis broke out in 2008 is the crisis of Neoliberalism Economics while others say that it is the crisis of capitalism. Actually, it is the crisis of the lifestyle of American-style consumerism, that is, the bankrupt of the consumption pattern of spending all tomorrow's money today in short. ^[5] These unreasonable or ethics ignored consumption can be sorted into such kinds as excessive consumption, status consumption, luxury consumption and high carbon consumption and so on. Mr. Tang Shuangning considers that the relationship between material and spirit is just like a person's flesh and soul. One cannot live without flesh and soul and he cannot be a vegetative patient or a walking corpse in the absence of soul. ^[6] *Unless mankind controls consumption, the environmental crisis it faces currently cannot be solved by other factors.*

3. Consumption patterns reflect the relationship between human and nature

3.1. Consumption targets natural consumption and has the feature of negative externality

Professor Zeng Shiqiang from National Taiwan Normal University pointed out that nature is the criteria for everything in the world on the program of Lecture room held by CCTV on October 12, 2009. From the aspect of the relationship between human and nature, any consumption targets natural consumption. The ultimate meaning of any human consumption points to nature. On the one hand, all human consumption, whether it is natural product or artificial product, originates from nature; on the other hand, human consumption ends in nature, that is, the waste consumed will come back to the nature eventually. Once the waste accumulates to the extent that natural decomposition, self-purification and absorption are not accessible, environmental pollution and ecology destroying are unavoidable then. The feature of negative externality of human consumption just gives births to environmental crisis and resource depletion fast from these two everlasting aspects.

3.2. Consumption contains both positive and negative effects and has the feature of duality

Consumption has the feature of duality. No human survival and production exist without consumption. And it is the motivation for production in this sense. But consumption alienation is bound to lead to a mass production and consumption of products. While it brings economic prosperity and social progress, it also brings a large number of resource consumption and waste emissions inevitably, causing severe resource and environmental crisis. ^[7] Bias on the positive and negative effects of consumption duality depends on the *preference* of people's consumption patterns. In the past, the reasons that the influence of consumption on the environment has been ignored generally are as follows. One reason is that people believe that the selection of consumption patterns is only related to their attitudes towards life; The other one is that consumption can advance both economic and social development and benefit mankind. ^[8] In the 1980s, the issues on the downstream effect and rebound effect of consumption have drawn attention gradually and the international community tried to introspect the limitation in emphasizing production and technology and underestimate consumption. ^[9] In fact, consumption is firmly connected with environmental issues, and its effect on the environment is not less compared with population and technology.

3.3. Consumption carries the form of civilization and reflects the relationship among human, society and nature

Consumptive activity contains the interests between human and nature, that among people and that between one and oneself while consumption patterns reflect the way of human own existing style, the overall condition of the society, and the relationship between human and nature. In natural dimension, consumption and civilization are combined. That is, civilization is bound to be reflected on certain consumption pattern while a consumption pattern carries certain form of civilization necessarily.^[10] For example, resource-saving, environment-friendly types or high carbon, wanton ones. Our country is constructing ecological civilization now. *Ecological civilization is a form of civilization which contains new consumption patterns, and its basic direction is to promote the ecologicalization of consumption patterns.* Besides, it advocates the precondition of maintaining the balance of ecological environment and is a kind of sustainable consumption idea based on the fact that basic demand for human survival and development is met.^[11] The fundamental essence of it is as follows. To promote moderation and avoid excess when it comes to the amount of consumption, to pursue green and *guard against the imbalance of environment* when it comes to the content of consumption, and *to advocate harmony and prevent the conflict between human and land when it comes to the ideas of consumption.* To realize the ecologicalization of consumption patterns is a significant reflection of ecological civilization. And it aims at forming a kind of living system with moderate and green consumption that is good for human survival and development in the nature and promoting the sustainable development of a harmonious society with living quality.

3.4. Consumption points to nature and it is the core of environmental issues

From the perspective of sustainable development, consumption and regeneration form a pair of basic contradiction apparently. If the speed of human consumption exceeds that of the regeneration of energy and ecology, resources will be exhausted step by step, the natural ecosystem will lose its function and no human survival will exist. Therefore, how to control consumptive activity within natural load (ecological bearing capacity) is an urgent issue that people pay most attention to at present. It is also the reason why we emphasize the importance and necessity of the harmony between human and nature again and again. Actually, consumption and environment cannot be separated from each other always. The impact of consumption patterns and consumption ideas on the environment is a combination of direct and indirect influence, recessive and dominant influence. People's life is closely related to the environment. In this sense, consumption is the core of the environmental issues and the impact of human on biosphere is putting pressure on the environment and threatening the earth's ability to support lives.^[12]

4. Three significant evolutions of consumption patterns result in environment issues at there different stages

In different periods and historical stages of the development of human society, people have different consumption patterns and the influence of the environment has experienced different stages accordingly, resulting in environmental issues of different natures. Since the scope and extent of the impact of environment issues on human society varies in different times, people have a gradual process of understanding and realization of environmental issues and their solutions. From the development history of human society, the pattern of consumption has undergone three significant evolutions. Likewise, the environment issues have experienced three significant stages of development:

4.1. The consumption pattern of living the life of a savage

The first stage is primitive society of hunting stage—the consumption pattern of living the life of a savage. The initial stage of environmental disruption appeared, but the ecosystem got strong ability to recover. And reverence for nature was the basic feature of the relationship between human and nature at this stage.

At the stage of primitive society, hunting and gathering were the basic activities to survive. Mankind almost had no material production and consumption all came from natural supply. Living the life of a savage was the typical pattern of consumption at this stage. In this period, humans were just gatherers and predators of natural food. They conducted material exchange and energy flow with the nature through simple activities and physiological metabolism process and were seldom aware of transforming the environment. Reverence for nature is the feature of the relationship between human and nature at this stage.

The environment issues were mainly caused by the natural growth of population, the improvement of human ability to adapt to the nature with the use of fire and the transformation of tools. Thus, their impact and destruction on the environment appeared. People gathered and hunted overly because of ignorance or they destroyed a large area of lawn and forest due to careless use of fire, which damaged biological resources, led to local famine and caused the successive disappearance of many large mammals and thus presented the initial condition of environmental disruption. Though, the ecosystem of the earth had enough power to come back to balance automatically at this time.

4.2. The consumption pattern of self-contained and self-sufficient

The second stage is the long agricultural stage—the consumption pattern of self-contained and self-sufficient. Environmental disruption was local, regional, of which the impact was limited and natural functions were not damaged basically. Obeying and conforming to nature was the feature of the relationship between human and nature at this stage.

With the emergence and development of agriculture and animal husbandry, human ability to use and transform nature improved and they undertook productive activities targeting the nature. People got certain degree of satisfaction about material interests in their activities of changing the nature and created the culture of humanities which had pastoral charm and gave enlightenment to personality and art through nature. And historic changes of consumption patterns took place accordingly. Self-contained and self-sufficient is the most typical and longest consumption pattern at this period.

At this stage, people began to take advantage of the nature with awareness at a low level, but humanism became dominant and it was common and unique for people to worship, obey and rely on nature. They believed that air is the power for survival, that water is the source of all, that the earth is the mother of all creatures, and that day and night is the wet nurse who is caressing all the newborn babies of the creator in the arms.^[13] Obeying and conforming to nature was the feature of the relationship between human and nature at this stage.

The environment issues happened during this period were mainly as follows. One was soil erosion and land desertification and salinization caused by deforestation and the destruction of grasslands. Another was soil in swamp, the prevalence of schistosomiasis and frequent floods and droughts and so on induced by improper construction of water conservancy. But generally speaking, environmental disruption was local, regional and its impact was limited at this stage. The natural functions of the whole atmosphere, biosphere, lithosphere and pedosphere were not damaged basically.

4.3. Alienation consumption

The third stage is modern industrial stage--the consumption pattern that is different from human and nature. The environmental issues become global, aggregative and complex and mankind faces challenges. The state of disharmony formed by the conquest of nature and its retaliatory punishment is the feature of the relationship between human and nature at this stage.

Science and technology has sprung up and mankind has got liberation from the nature since The Industrial Revolution took place. Besides, historic revolution of the mode of production has occurred and productivity has got unprecedented improvement. The material wealth that was created in three centuries during The Industrial Revolution is almost equal to all of what was created in the past. Based on the fact that survival demand was met basically, human then enters the stage when desire and development is needed and he treats the satisfaction of material desires as an important criteria for the recognition of self-value. Just as the economist Voblem puts it, if one wants to leave an impression on the indifferent observers whom he meets in daily life about his power of money, the only way is to show his ability to pay continuously. We can see that some people are just to show their existence and the so called value through consumption instead of meeting their own needs of survival and development to a large extent. Thus, they are not hesitate to consume excessively. This pattern of consumption leads to human and natural alienation with speed—human becomes addicted to material desire and nature becomes poor. They are self-centered, rule everything in the nature with power and manipulate it arbitrarily according to their own scale and will. This includes the growth of population and over release of consumption desire and leads to more and more consumption. The surge of consumption is bound to take in more natural resources. Malignant consumption and development swallow natural resources like waves, destroy the natural environment, and lead to the degradation and destruction of the nature eventually. In turn, such ecological crisis as resource shortage, energy depletion, environmental pollution, ecological imbalance and so forth are caused due to human destruction of nature. Human beings, including those excessive consumers, step out on a road with no return. Just like what Hemingway wrote in his book of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.^[14]

It goes without saying that people shall take responsibility for their consumption when they exercise consumption rights. The satisfaction for consumption should produce proper result and ecological scale in certain consumer culture and consumption environment. That is, the civilized consumption which doesn't aim at destroying the interests of human community should not only follow the laws of nature but also show the ethical standards for rational consumption. However, the pattern of consumption that is different from human and nature is a quite outstanding and deformity pattern in modern industrial society. It restricts production directly, which affects the development of the nature directly. No wonder some people say that while The Industrial Revolution creates unprecedented material wealth, it consumes natural reserve of hundreds of millions of years, bringing global ecological crisis that is difficult to overcome^[15].

The limitation of natural resources and the vulnerability of biosphere confront the infinity of consumption demand and economic development. Human attempts to control and dominate the nature and tries to change and conquer it while the nature often gives us retaliatory punishment. This disharmony situation is the feature of the relationship between human and nature at this stage.

The environmental issues become global, aggregative and complex during this period. The events of global pollution and the imbalance of ecological environment occur continuously. And human has to face unprecedented challenges on modern environmental issues.

The environmental issues of three different stages mentioned above, which are formed during the development history of human society, are formed gradually instead of mutating at a certain minute. If we say that the impact of human consumptive activity on social development is potential and far-reaching, then the influence of consumption on environmental issues is dominant and significant and under no circumstances can we underestimate it.

5. Summary

Modern society is a system under the control of consumptive activity in a sense. In this system, people's construction of daily self-needs for survival, practice patterns and cultural values is reflected on consumptive activity in one way or another. Under the impact of contemporary culture of consumerism, especially in the era with abundant substances and diverse social values, how to prevent humanity from lesions under material desire is one of the targets of building contemporary humanistic spirit and it is also an important way and practical step to build a resource-saving and environment-friendly society. Just based on this purpose, many people choose to consume rationally and moderately and they show altruistic behavior and social responsibility relying on the moral consciousness (considering about others) of the limitation and sharing of resources. This kind of consumptive activity based on environmental protection and the treasure and sharing of resources rather than personal gain or loss has already surpassed the category of dividing between rich and poor according to their economic strength. It makes everyday life in ecological civilization beyond utilitarian pursuit in reality and thus one can feel the conception of life and the beauty of life. This is the outstanding presentation of citizens' social morality and is bound to result in continuous moral impact.^[16] It will make ecological consumption a common practice in modern society, for example, saving for longevity, advocating thrift and suppressing luxury so as to search for a poetic habitat for our soul, reaching the relationship mode with harmony among people, between human and nature.

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