Respect for nature
--About the Core Concept of the Grassland Culture  I

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Abstract: Showing respect for nature is one of the core concepts of the grassland culture. As prairie people’s nomadic means of production is highly dependent on the natural environment, shamanism is marked by strict restrictions on human acts that might damage nature. It tries to account for various natural phenomena and tribal or ethnic origins with the help of totems and myths, which catalyzed and reinforced the prairie people’s worship of nature. The doctrine of “Nature worship” consists of such values as revering nature and loving all forms of life; being friendly to and in harmonious co-existence with nature; doing something in return for nature’s favors and refraining from overuse of natural resources; and the self-disciplinary rules of protecting nature and taking responsibilities. The core concept of nature worship, life valuing, and man-nature symbiotic co-existence is the soul of prairie people’s ecological awareness, and an important feature that distinguishes the grassland culture from other cultures. It is also a major source of moral values underlying the eco-system construction of modern times. As an objective of the grassland culture, it has found its way into all levels of material culture, institutional culture and spiritual culture. Thus it manifests itself not only in nomadic peoples’ life, production, moral code, law, religion, literature and arts, but also in the development of philosophical theories.

It is the foremost question for human being to live and develop in the relationships between men and nature. How to solve the problem, for the
most part, it will all depend on different tribal cultural characters, historical process and the trend if its future development. We follow this logic and historical point to make the research and define the essential grassland culture.

Marx once pointed out: “... The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. ..... In fact, every object that exists is constrained by limits imposed by its own nature. ... their physical organization”. In essence, it is the relationship of the unity of opposites of human and nature, which remains harmony as well as contradiction. Nature always shows human with its double functions: it provides grand offerings and numerous calamities. So the attitude of human being to nature is full of contradictions. In ancient time, people were grateful for the offering from nature, meanwhile, they respected and scared of its mysterious power by worshipping the nature as well as thinking of changing and conquering the nature. Hence, “it led to the blurry concept of worshipping nature and humanizing God or the great master”. As a result, it created different attitudes to nature from different tribes and even various cultures. Western culture emphasizes the opposition between man and nature. They regard nature as something that man can draw knowledge from, explore and conquer and utilize. All led to the flourishing of natural science; The Eastern Culture, meanwhile, paid attention to harmony between human being and nature. However, the
exact harmony differs according to different nationalities, and regions. Central Chinese culture stressed harmony between man and nature, proposing the “combination of heaven and man”. The fundamental indication is the unity of nature and spirit, the rational of ethics and nature. So the object of nature was socialized and moralized too, which demonstrated the precocious development of political ethical thinking. But the grassland culture considered the core between nature and life, regarding mankind as part of the nature, primarily, the son of nature and a member of the society secondarily. The grassland culture asserted that only when human and nature lived side by side harmoniously, could one make sure he or she would live and develop. This demonstrated the development of ecological intelligence and natural practice. This reciprocal causation of cultural philosophy and cultural type resulted in the scientific culture from the west; the ethical culture from Central China plains; and the ecological culture worshipping nature as its core from the Chinese Northern grassland.

Fragile environment, hunting and animal husbandry are the basic concepts for grassland culture that worships nature, cherishes life, pursuit of harmonious coexistence between man and the nature. Grassland nationalities live and multiply on the broad Mongolian Plateau, desert, and grassland characterized with a extremely short sultry summer, and a lengthy harsh winter accompanied by snow and sand storms due to
perennial draught. Because of this kind of fragile ecological environment and vegetation, the land is not arable besides hunting which was more dependent on nature than that of farming. As result, the northern nationalities learned to respect and protect nature early.

In order to make full use of what is available, the northern grassland nationalities chose hunting and animal husbandry for living due to the brutal plateau weather and fragile vegetation. In the early stage, hunting was the main living style. As time went, animal husbandry developed and hunting became sidelines business and militia training supplementary to animal husbandry and the Nomadic life style. The labor of hunting was to kill wildlife. It was a contradictory between the hunters and wildlife. In order to survive, hunters need to kill. The only way to guarantee the sustainability, hunters must control random animal killing, and protect food chain. <Bei Lu Customs – Farming and Hunting> recorded: “hunters should cherish life, even though hunting is your profession. In spring, we should not encircle animals, in summer, we should not mass hunt. Hunting should be in small scale and is intended for food”. Grassland hunters never killed or caught wild animals at random; instead, they did it in the designated time and areas. Even though, they had to kill or catch wild animals, they often performed compensatory praying rituals to show their sadness and merciful feelings. This shows the deep understanding and realization of the harmonious relationship between
hunters and wild life in the grassland nationalities. What they did indicated the pursuit of respecting the nature and sustainable development. This would enable the nature to preserve and survive which would lead to harmony and coexistence between men and nature.

Animal husbandry consists three parts: nature (grassland), animals (domesticated ones) and people (herdsmen). The balance and coordination between grassland and animals were essential for animal husbandry and the reproduction. Grassland and animals were in constant conflicts such as the limited capacity of the grassland and the desire for more herds; the rapid forage grass consumption and slow growth of forage grass which were very hard to reconcile. As result, nomadic and itinerant herdsmen seeking water and grass appeared. Initially, herdsmen followed the animals who acted like wildlife wandered the world. “Animals liked to eat the freshest grass, then the mediocre ones. If not enough, animals would move to a new location. Then the herdsmen naturally and inevitably would follow the animals to a new location.”

“Such nomadic life following the animals was very frequent. Once the grassland was gone, herdsmen would dismantle the yurts, take their belongings and their children and put everything on the backs of their animals and look for new grassland.” This early migration, herdsmen followed passively like wildlife followed the seasonal migration. It was known as “settled down along the water and grass”. But from the
practical point of view, this kind of nomadic life style functioned as ecological environmental protection, a best way to alleviate the problems between grassland and animals as well as people and nature. As they got to know the grassland better and the cycles of seasons, the herdsmen, especially the Mongolians, from passively to actively “drove” the animals to new locations instead of “following” the animals. Moreover, they used relatively permanent grassland for rotation twice or four times a year, not like wildlife roamed around in order to find better grassland such as following the water and grass in faraway places. Based on the knowledge of natural environment, soil, vegetation, water sources and animals’ preference, the nomadic herdsmen divided grassland into according to four seasons or two seasons (winter and spring and summer and autumn) for rotation. This enabled grassland fallow. In rotation grazing and grassland rotation, the herdsmen created a strict system that managed cluster grazing and controlled grazing. The actual results showed that migrant herding, rotation grazing, or cluster grazing and controlled grazing all led to protecting the environment, sustaining the grassland and enhancing animal husbandry production. Furthermore, it is the best way to solve the contradictions between grassland and animals as well as human being and the nature.

Believing soul in everything and worshiping the nature formed the foundation for the Shaman religion among the northern nationalities.
Before learning the science, the northern nationalities, out of their ignorance, created the Shamanism which worshipped nature. The Shamanism asserted: “everything in the grassland such as grass, wood, birds and beasts, river and lakes all have souls. They are not easily disturbed, killed and damaged. Otherwise, the offenders will be punished by God. All things were born by their heavenly father and mother. All things are not only equal, but also intimate. Born by the heavenly father and mother, human being should worship the sky, protect the land, and well treat the nature as they should honor their own parents”. So, the from Khan kings to ordinary civilians all regarded the sky and land as their own parents, and believe the sun, the moon, stars, mountains, lakes, rivers, fire, water and woods had living souls. These beliefs of the Shamanism guided and disciplined the nomadic herdsmen to respect the nature and daily behaviors. Strong dependence on nature and belief in the Shamanism, plus the nomadic life style and migration constrained the people’s thought, explanation of the nature and the legend and totem of their tribes and the nationalities. All of these urged and strengthened the worshipping of nature, treasuring life and the pursuit of passionate attitude and cultural concept of harmony between human being and the nature. Of course, there were other nationalities who worshipped the nature, had totem and legends before, but they never formed the cultural concept of worshipping and rules and regulations of their cultural
activities throughout the history. This was because their life style was not like those herdsmen’s closely intertwined with nature.

Grassland nationalities, out of their own simple life experience, drew their scientific ecological philosophy and used religion and ethics to package this philosophy and made it sacred which in turn guided and disciplined the behaviors. No matter it was from subjective motives or objective effect, it was nothing more than to regulate and improve the relationship, reach the harmony between man and nature and to meet the demand and guarantee the environment where human being needed for survival.

The grassland culture of worshipping nature, treasuring life and pursuit of the harmony and coexistence between human being and nature included: the ecological consciousness to fear and respect nature, cherish life; the peaceful coexistence and harmony with nature; and limited asking from nature and the appreciation; protection, responsibility and personal discipline. This is the soul of the grassland culture, one of the major features different from other cultures, the valuable sources for the development of the modern civilizations. This philosophy, approved through an extensive history, has long been accepted as the grassland common social value. The orientation of this cultural value permeated all aspects of material, system, and spiritual cultures, leaving its clear prints in all key cultural elements. As a common will in the whole society, it
seeped through the systems in state’s regulations, laws, ethics, production, and daily lives. So the social values demonstrated the philosophy of green, environmental protection, and the nature worshipping no matter it was in daily lives, ethics, religion, laws and regulations, philosophical ideas, literatures, habits and customs.

Mongolian gowns can be used for clothes and bed sheets or blankets in case it is cold and freezing. The original taste of meat and dairy products is regarded the best, and they are naturally processed. Good wine and delicious food is offered to the sky and the earth first in appreciation of the nature; Mongolian yurts are not only similar to the concept that the sky is round and the earth is square, but also the structures that are most environmental and natural friendly; transportation such as horses, camels and ler ler wagons are all well connected with nature or came from nature, and environmental friendly. The headsmen would always cleaned their garbage and buried their waste before departure no matter where they went and how large their teams or animal herds were. The herdsmen liked to name their children as the sun, moon, stars, river, lakes, animals and organic plants and flowers. When they died, no matter it was burial, cremation or wind funeral, herdsmen would not even hurt the earth and wanted to leave the environment clean.

The grassland nationalities viewed that the natural phenomenon such as the sun, moon, stars, mountains, river, lakes, wind, thunder, rain and
lightening had life and feeling and emotions. Needless to say that animals and plants had life cycles. Such accumulated concept of “pan life” formed the cultural mentality that characterized the grassland nationalities that cherished life. Herdsmen sometimes got hurt when they trained, fed, drove the animals, but they would not abuse or punish animals. That “The real herdsman’s whip is used as deterrent, not a real whip” approved such a concept. The Oroqen ethic minority and Mongolians used language instead of whips to give orders when they trained the dears and horse respectively. The herdsmen thought that they and animals were dependent each other. Without either side, the others side would not live well or survive. The herdsmen would have to pray to show their sorrows and sadness that they had to do this after they slaughtered the animals.

The herdsmen often solved the problems by communicating with their animals in their daily life. When sheep, cows or camels abandoned their new-born afternoon birth, the herdsmen tried to either sing or play the pathetic songs or tunes until the mothers were moved to nurse their babies. Pallas, German world traveler in 18th contrary, was startled to see this and elaborated in his travelogue. This humanitarian management between men and animals through music showed such a concept that animal and man had emotions and both sides were able to communicate and live side by side harmoniously. People from the northern grassland honestly feared and respected the nature, treasured and protected, created and
developed the survival and productive technical and knowledgeable systems in the hunting and nomadic life styles.

The grassland culture of advocacy of nature, cherish of life, pursuit of the harmony between nature and mankind was deep rooted in its cultural system. It is depicted clearly and vividly in the areas of ethics, ecology, and laws.

In the Mongolian habitual law, it prohibits clean-sweep-killing such as no encircling hunting in spring, no group searching in summer, protecting mating seasons, no hunting prior snow season before winter and after the spring melting season, no killing pregnant animals or females. Young cubs were freed. The rulers of the northern nationalities, especially, Mongolian Khans paid a special attention to the protection of wild life and ecological chain. When a decrease of wild life or the ecological and food chain were out of proportion, the authority would take a certain measures to interfere. In \{the Collections of Laws of the Yuan Dynasty\} and \{the collections of Laws of of Khalkha\} and other series of laws, they all explained the hunting seasons, hunting ban seasons and hunting ban rules for certain animals. For example, \{the Collections of Laws of the Yuan Dynasty • Encircling Hunting\} stated: hunting wild boars, dears and roes were prohibited; while swans, ducks, falcons, storks, eagles, vultures and other birds were protected.

In 1251, Mongke Khan said in his throne edict: “Let those who have
feathers and four legs and who swim and live on grassland free of the threat from the hunters’ arrows and traps. Let them fly and wander freely and let our land free of pounding from the hoofs of horses and posts and let water free of being stained from trash.” This shows the unlimited love and the tolerance of heart to nature and animals and plants from Mongolians in the Middle Ages. Some regarded this in history as the first “the Declarations of Environmental Protection” and “the Charter of Life Ethics. It was not unreasonable.

Grassland nationalities could not tolerate the shameful and illegal acts of damaging, polluting grassland and water sources and deforestation. They condemned these bad acts and punished the violators. The Habitual Laws asserted: laundry (leather products mainly), bath, urinating and defecating were forbidden in rivers. They thought these acts would upset the heaven who would send thunders, lightening and punishment. Peng Da Ya recorded in [ Hei Da Shi Lue: “Punish the whole family for those who damage grassland, or burn the grass.” In item 58 in the [the Sixth Banner Law] of (the collections of Laws of of Khalkha), it said:” The punishment for whose sparked the prairie fire is the combination of a cattle, a sheep, a pig a chicken and a dog plus a horse; for those who sparked the fire by accident and were willing to pay instead, ---------- If the fire caused life, it is a death sentence.” In item 134 of (the Third Banner Law), it said: “Live Trees twice the distance from your ranch
where you can tell the animal colors are not allowed to be cut. All illegal lumbers will be confiscated.” (The History of the World Conquers) records: “Someone planted some almond trees and willow trees, ever before, no one see any greens in this region. These trees grow well. Okodei Qhan asked to give the tree planter one balishi (money) for a tree he has planted”. For the past thousand years, the grassland nationalities as always received the benefits from nature, animals and plants, in return, they feared and respected the nature, cherished life; at their own will, they used ethics and punishment to protect wildlife, food chain, domestic animals, grassland, water sources, trees, natural environment. They left the blue sky and green grassland with multiple lives to their later generation. This shows that these are the nationalities who took it as their highest principles to really cherish the nature and life and seek the harmony between the human and nature.

The Shaman popular among the grassland nationalities is the ancient religion that worshiped nature, and strove for the harmony between nature and human being. The attitude of this religion of nature worshipping, cherishing life and the harmony between nature and human being is the foundation for the people’s mentality. In the theory of “All things have souls”, people always believed that their spirits and consciousness would never die. Later, this belief led to the connections
between natural force and oneself. As result, “The sky is father, and land is mother” came. So people worshipped the sun, the moon, stars, mountains, rivers, trees and grass who all had souls. The sky and the earth had breeding capabilities, while father and mother can give birth to their children. This ancient mutual infiltration formed the world view that “the spacious earth was “mother for everything”; while the respected heaven was our “father for everything”. In this world view, the natural sky and earth combined with the mother and father on earth, perfect harmony between nature and the humans.

In many regions on the grassland, the totem worship was popular. Besides its religious features, its environmental ethics was strong. It indicated that nature was feared, life was cherished. According to research, the grassland ancestors labeled wolfs, dears, bears, mangnius, haiqings, eagles, magpies, birch trees and willows as their now ancestors and were worshipped and offered with sacrifice. Moreover, the killings and damage of the animal and plant totems were prohibited. The totem made people believe that the common nature of between man and animals and plants. It not only showed the consanguinity between human being and natural animals and plants, but also human being is the decedents from these animals and plants. So, human being has no reasons not to respect nature, nor does it damage nature at its own will. The Mongolian Buddhism emphasized that people should pay attention to what their
behaviors, follow the rules and have compassion and seek high ethics. These beliefs strengthened the tradition of nature worship, life cherishment and harmony between human being and nature of the grassland nationalities.

Art and literature shows the concept even more of nature worshiping, life cherishment and the harmony between nature and human being. Such advocacy for nature, life and environmental protection appeared everywhere in the grassland literatures. People could feel the miracle of the creator and sense the natural and colorful universe and experience the equality and harmony between man and nature. For example, the lyrics in (Chi Le Ge) depicted the natural beauty of the integration among the sky, earth and man. The Mongolian folk lore (thirteen Steeds), the Uighurs folk lore (In Such a Place) all showed the noble praise and deep love from people to the nature. The Mongolian proverb saying: “the Heaven is the living Buddha in the herdsmen’s eyes, the grassland is the mother in the herdsmen’s hearts” indicated the unlimited love and respect to nature. The Mongolian Heroic Lyric (Jiang Geer) promoted the paradise of the northern grassland, the Bagomal’s ideal society between man and nature. The soul-stirring of Long Tune made the singers intoxicated in the blue sky, the white cloud, the vast grassland. The popular literature of “animal personification” (use fierce animals for heroes) all showed the respect of the nature, cherishment of life and pursuit of the harmony between man
and nature.

The popular epics in the Mongolian art forms also illustrated the understanding of the relationship between nature and man, such as the ideal nature of the harmony between man and nature, the personification nature of human relations of hatred and love, and the fantasy nature of super power which cannot be offended. People could not appreciate the world from his or her own center; instead, he or she should regard him or her as part of the nature. In other words, people could receive benefits from nature, and they need to constrain themselves as well. They need to take responsibilities and obligations to take care of the nature, never separated from the nature. Between nature and human being, nature provided people with power and wisdom; while people gave spirits and feelings to nature. It is no doubt that the perfection and unity between nature and man is the highest aesthetic state for the grassland literature. The relationship between nature and man in grassland literature did not only emphasize people’s appreciation and admiration but also uplifted their respect and attachment to nature that gave them life and happiness, even more love and protection and noble obligation. The lyrics in the Mongolian folk lore (Thirteen Steeds) illustrated: “the headsmen love the universe, the universe gave us happiness; the herdsmen protect the universe, the heaven gave us the task.”

The philosophy of respecting nature, cherishing life and pursuing
harmony between nature and human being was enhanced in theory. Genghis Khan’s “Yikeyi” (great harmony) meant complete harmony between nature and man, and people between people and society and people. The Yikeyi thought opposed the conflicts between man and nature, and plundering nature and advocated respect and protection of the nature, and harmony between nature and man. In personal relations, it emphasized the regime needed self discipline while the authorities should have “democracy” within its system. Between the authority and his subjects, cooperation and peace were observed. Genghis Khan repeatedly asserted: “The heaven protects the authority”. “Heaven bestows us” The mutual force between man and nature guaranteed the success in everything. Any success was the results of harmonious existence between man and nature. So “Yikeyi” thought emphasized the philosophy of the harmony between man and nature, happy families, and one mind between the monarch and his subjects. This will lead to peace under heaven. The harmony between animals and grassland, and human being and nature was the deep source of Yikeyi’ thought as well as its contents. This thought was also the internal extension of the harmony of the people and the society. Husihui, Mongolian nutritionist in the Yuan Dynasty, in his (The Essentials of Diet) said that the relationship between man and nature is in fact an overall system. He asserted; “the sky gives people’s life, the earth nurtures people’s life, people rely on the sky and
the earth. That is the three elements so they are the sky, the earth and people”. Husihui pointed out that people relied on the sky and the earth to live. The sky, the earth and the people formed a common integration. In the headsmen’ eyes, this integration is a life cycle. Everything in this cycle had its own characteristics and patterns which were mutual dependent and mutual accelerating. The herdsmen put themselves in this life cycle, the cycle of cherishing life, loving animals. They even put the ethics and moral into this life cycle and sought the coexistence between people and nature.

All in all, the mentality of cherishing life, worshiping nature and harmony between man and nature became a belief, religion and a potential national consciousness for the grassland people. The mentality came from generations of generations who accumulated experiences, and feelings from interactive relations between man and nature. It is natural gift from dealing with nature. Worshiping nature and cherishing life is like eating and drinking for the grassland nationalities. It is deep rooted in people’s hearts.

We are all aware that people are not slaves of the nature, nor are they the masters of the nature. They are friends of the nature. So people cannot succumb to nature, nor can they conquer it either. People should conform to nature and change it; they should even more participate in cultivating and nurturing nature. If men seek conflicts with nature in the name of
conquering it and utilizing it in an extremely way, the nature will lose its balance in the system of universe and severe punishment from nature will follow.

If people follow the nature blindly, they will lose their dominant position in consequence of losing the opportunity and right of their own lives and development. Mr. Zhang Dai said: “That so called harmony between sky and people means to respect objective laws on one hand, and to take the initiatives on the other. This is a comprehensive view between sky and people. We believe this comprehensive view between heaven and people is the philosophical grassland culture that worship nature, cherish life and pursue the harmony between mankind and nature. This philosophy emphasized not only the ecological balance, but also the dominant position of mankind; not only the harmony between human being and nature, but also live and development; not only oppose use blindly and damaging nature, but also follow objective laws to protect nature and sustainably use the nature.

In summary, the environment and life styles where northern grassland natives lived and worked forged molded the unique grassland philosophy – that is worship nature, cherish life and pursue the harmony between mankind and nature. This is the spiritual wealth that mostly characterized the grassland culture. This is the spiritual strength that multiplied endless generations, and offered a far-reaching impact on the development of
grassland culture. Grassland natives lived as masters in nature without dominating the nature and killed fish with draining the pond. They feared nature, and protect nature. For the past thousand years, they lived, worked and developed in hush conditions and fragile grassland, but they could passed on blue sky and green grassland to their younger generations because they respect nature and care for life. This philosophy of worshipping nature, cherishing life and in pursuit of harmony of nature and mankind demonstrated not only the national value and regional value but also the universal value. Without a doubt, it is an historical importance for us to promote the grassland culture of worshiping nature, cherishing life and in pursuit of harmony between nature and human being in our region and to build a harmonious society and the world, Furthermore, it is an important theory to enhance the soft culture that will up lifts our socialist value in our country, and to prepare us face the global ecological crisis. (Author: Jinhai)
Note:


7. Thirteen horses, Mongolian Folk Literature Collection, Aoqierbatu, Inner Mongolia Education Press, 1998, P3

8. Genghis Khan and Mongolian culture, Narenaoqier Daiyindeligen Wienqi Translation, Inner Mongolia Culture Press, P148-149