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The Contemporary Value of "DongtianFudi": A Perspective on Civilizational Exchanges and Mutual Learning

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Abstract: The rapid advancement of industrialization and urbanization has given rise to the dilemma of spatial disorder in modern civilization: natural space degradation, sharp decline in biodiversity, and intensifying climate crises have pushed the relationship between humanity and nature toward confrontation; community alienation and indifferent interpersonal bonds have fractured human-to-human relations; information overload, the prevalence of consumerism, and the deconstruction of traditional values have created tensions within the human self. Faced with disorderly modern civilization, "DongtianFudi," through the elaborate construction of a microcosm, provides Eastern wisdom for the connotative development of spatial civilization in the new era with infinite order within limited space. From the perspective of civilizational exchanges and mutual learning, this paper interprets the contemporary values of DongtianFudi as "a refuge for health and peace," "a beacon for shared prosperity," and "ordered interconnectivity." It proposes building an equal, inclusive, open, and sustainable "Peace-Development Belt" rooted in the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind and taking the Belt and Road Initiative as a vital platform. This practice emphasizes respecting diversity and reshaping value systems, galvanizing internal driving forces for sustainable development, pursuing ordered interconnectivity through extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits, and fostering high-quality implementation teams, ultimately pointing toward a "World Pot" where all things coexist, and civilizations flourish together.

Keywords: DongtianFudi; Peace-Development Belt; A community with a shared future for mankind; Civilizational exchanges and mutual learning

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1. Introduction

At present, profound changes unseen in a century are accelerating across the world. Geopolitical conflicts and unilateralism keep emerging, and the global governance system faces severe challenges. As the great

rejuvenation of the Chinese nation enters a critical period, how China participates in and guides the world order through its own development has become an important contemporary issue. Building the "Peace-Development Belt" represents China's response to this proposition.

Far more than a simple geographical planning project, the "Peace-Development Belt" is a regional spatial practice that puts into effect the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind. Through open-minded and inclusive civilizational exchanges and mutual learning, as well as mutually beneficial political, economic, and cultural practices, it fosters a new ecosystem of international relations. Spatially, it takes the Belt and Road Initiative as its core platform, expanding outward from nearby regions. While respecting the diversity of countries and their development paths, it jointly charts a common course toward peace and sustainable development. Distinct from the "sphere-of-influence" thinking in traditional Western geopolitics, it is not an exclusive bloc. Instead, it advocates a new type of international order featuring equality, inclusiveness, openness, and sustainability based on extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits, pointing out directions for exploring a new form of human civilization.

As sacred Taoist spaces, "DongtianFudi" construct elaborate microcosms endowed with infinite order within limited boundaries. Their spatial logic of "refuge-self-sufficiency-transcendence-limited openness" offers critical inspiration for constructing an orderly and sustainable "Peace-Development Belt," and helps bring forth a "World Pot" characterized by the co-existence of all beings and the common prosperity of civilizations.

2. A refuge for health and peace: Civilization's ark

DongtianFudi is a sacred geographical space that the ancient Chinese explored regarding the relationship between gods and humans. It originated from the imagination of people during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods about the overseas abodes of immortals such as Kunlun and Penglai. Through the continuous construction by successive Taoist masters and regimes, it was established in the Tang Dynasty by Sima Chengzhen and Du Guangting. DongtianFudi represents the beautiful imagination of the Chinese people for the "Peach Blossom Spring" in the afterlife. The superior natural conditions and the rare accessibility of the place have prompted both emperors and common people to have a sense of awe and care for DongtianFudi and its resources. Therefore, DongtianFudi is a living model for protecting the ecology, reflecting the attitude of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature that has persisted since ancient times.

Early Taoist texts record two major narrative patterns concerning access to DongtianFudi. One type is represented by the story of Baoshanyinju searching for celestial scriptures in Taishang DongxuanLingbaoWufuXu, a theme of adventurous quest later widely adapted in literary sketches, describing temporary stays or visits to sacred grotto-heavens.

The other type depicts people dwelling long-term in DongtianFudi to flee wars, plagues, and other natural or man-made disasters, analogous to the narrative of "Peach Blossom Spring." For instance, in 302 CE, Zheng Yin "packed his books and alchemical herbs, took his disciples and traveled east to Mount Huo, never to be heard of again" [1].

Benefiting from rich biodiversity inside DongtianFudi, humans and nature live in harmonious coexistence. Inhabitants made use of local fauna and flora for subsistence, reclaimed farmland on fertile soil with abundant water supplies, and established a typical self-sufficient small-scale agricultural economy.

Taoist scriptures preserve many accounts of the favorable natural conditions of such sites:

"(Mount Wudang) has sweet springs and fertile soil, beautiful scenery, and is the abode of immortals" [2].

"Local elders relate that northwest of Great Mao Mountain lies the former residence of Lord Siming. The land there is highly arable; tiles and bricks are often unearthed, proving human habitation, yet it remains sacrosanct against desecration" [3].

In DongtianFudiyuedumingshanji, DuGuangting ranks Mount Wudang as an auxiliary sacred mountain under Central Holy Mount Song, praising its fertile land as a sacred abode shared by immortals and mortals. The former residence of Lord Siming on Great Mao Mountain also bears witness to arable farmland and traces of human settlement.

Given the function of DongtianFudi as places of seclusion and refuge, the Shangqing School envisioned them as dwelling places for "seed-people" (zhongmin) after eschatological catastrophes. The eschatology of the Shangqing School foresees a great cataclysm that will destroy the mortal world; "wicked folk" will perish, while virtuous "seed-people" will survive. Followers aspired to become such seed-people, believing that Huayang Dongtian on Mount Mao would shelter them from catastrophe and await the arrival of a new age of great peace.

Derived from early Taoist texts, the concept of "seed-people" refers to virtuous, cultivated individuals who attain longevity, representing an ideal spiritual consummation pursued by Taoists. Classic works including Taiping Jing, Laozi XiangEr Zhu, and DaDaoJiaLingJie all mention seed-people:

"When the great Jia-Shen calamity arrives, the wicked shall be eliminated and the virtuous saved; the virtuous become seed-people, the wicked turn to dust" [4].

Besides accumulating moral merit, seed-people must also engage in Taoist practice and scripture recitation. DengZhenYinJue holds that cultivating longevity enables one to become a seed-person and endure alongside heaven and earth. The Southern-Song commentary DongXuanLingBaoZiRanJiuTianShenZhangJingJieYi states that those who receive divine teachings and pursue the Dao may survive great floods and attain the status of seed-people.

Within the grand redemptive framework of Taoism, DongtianFudi are not merely sites of spiritual cultivation but shelters for chosen seed-people amid eschatological disasters. Integrating Taoist insights into civilizational collapse and apocalyptic catastrophes, the pursuit of ideal social orders, and ultimate concerns for civilizational continuity, they combine geographical locations, sacred spaces, and moral arks of civilization. Beyond providing material survival guarantees, they shoulder the sacred mission of preserving civilizational heritage, realizing moral redemption and pursuing spiritual transcendence. In an era plagued by modern-day crises, the wisdom embedded in DongtianFudi concerning catastrophe, survival, redemption, and renewal provokes reflection on humanity's future: true refuge lies less in securing a physically safe location than in safeguarding and rebuilding inner order and civilizational light capable of resisting value alienation.

3. Shared prosperity: A beacon for a new form of human civilization

As sanctuaries for seed-people in apocalyptic times, DongtianFudi build an ideal model for human survival and civilizational continuity through geographical seclusion, resource self-sufficiency, spiritual transcendence, and conditional openness, resembling an Eastern "Noah's Ark." Within this sacred space, their ultimate value is not to offer individuals a utopian escape from reality and disaster, but to explore a safer, fairer, and more sustainable future for humanity as a whole—namely the construction of the "Peace-

Development Belt." As the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind gains traction in global governance, the "Noah's Ark-like" function of DongtianFudi indicates that a genuine Peace-Development Belt requires not only material foundations and institutional frameworks, but also spiritual shaping, value recognition, and the eternal pursuit of harmonious order.

3.1. Respecting differences and reshaping value systems

As apocalyptic shelters, DongtianFudi establish a survival-and-development paradigm premised on respecting differences and reshaping value systems. While guaranteeing basic subsistence security, they honor individual and collective diversity. Such Eastern wisdom carries far-reaching implications for building a peace-and-development-oriented Peace-Development Belt amid clashing civilizations and conflicting values.

The selection of seed-people: reshaping value metrics. Seed-people are selected primarily according to moral cultivation rather than social status:

"Recite this scripture ten times, and divine officials shall descend to observe mortal conduct, erasing names from the black registers of Luofeng and recording them on green scrolls. Ancestral spirits will ascend, and practitioners shall be refined to become heavenly seed-people" [5].

"On that day, the Northern Deity commands the Three Officers to inspect good and evil across the mortal world. Those who practice Lingbao scriptures, burn incense and observe religious precepts shall have their merits recorded in the celestial registers and become seed-people, their sins expunged" [6].

"When heaven and earth collapse and humanity perishes, only the virtuous shall survive as seed-people … the virtuous become seed-people, the wicked turn to dust" [7].

Moral integrity and sincere devotion to the Dao constitute evaluation criteria for becoming seed-people and gaining access to DongtianFudi. This selection mechanism reshapes secular value systems in an eschatological context, rejecting worldly yardsticks such as lineage, power, and wealth and establishing moral goodness, sincere faith, and dedicated practice as core measures. To become a seed-person means acknowledging and abiding by such values.

Distinct characteristics and divine governors exist across the Ten Great Dongtian, Thirty-Six Lesser Dongtian, Seventy-Two Fudi, and Nineteen Shuifu, which are far from homogeneous. Different sacred sites correspond to diverse cultivation paths and methodologies, offering plural approaches for individual spiritual practice. On the basis of respecting diversity in seed-person selection, spatial orders, and cultivation methods, DongtianFudi unify individuals and collectives through core Taoist values of cherishing life, non-contention, and harmony. This inspires contemporary civilizational development: people must safeguard world civilizational diversity, respect each nation's right to choose its own development path, reject theories of civilizational superiority and civilizational conflict, preserve the gene pool of world civilizations, and foster a global civilizational outlook of "harmony without uniformity."

After eschatological tribulations, seed-people, led by the Divine Sovereign of Golden Tower and Nine Mysterious Heavens, jointly build a new age of great peace:

"Heaven shows no partiality; it rewards only the virtuous. Those who practice virtue bring about small peace, and unite with the Great-Peace Sovereign to realize universal peace" [8].

China's cultural gene of peacefulness is deeply rooted in millennium-old pursuits of a peaceful world. Drawing on moral inspiration, cultural inclusiveness and institutional restraints, the Chinese peaceful

tradition strives to build a coexistence system of "each in its proper place, each obtaining what it needs," contributing Eastern wisdom to global governance.

In 2013, the President of the CPC first put forward the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind at the Moscow Institute of International Relations. In this challenging yet promising era, China commits itself to advancing this vision for world peace, development and civilizational exchanges and mutual learning:

"A community with a shared future for mankind is the future of all peoples around the world. All things grow together without harming one another; ways run parallel without interfering with one another. Only when countries pursue the great way of the world, live in amity and cooperate for win-win results, can prosperity endure and security be guaranteed. China has put forward the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative and stands ready to work with all countries to implement them" [9].

3.2. Galvanizing internal driving forces and pursuing sustainable development

The internal-circulation systems of DongtianFudi embody a classic Taoist micro-cosmos model of "self-sufficiency driven by inner forces." Their production mode of "ecological circulation and perpetual resource renewal" offers a Chinese paradigm for sustainable development amid setbacks in globalization and widening development disparities.

"Within DongtianFudi, there are the Root of Lunar Radiance and the Root of Solar Essence, shining equally with the sun and moon. Lunar Radiance rules the night, and Solar Essence governs the day, orbiting within the grotto. Though differing in minor details across grotto-heavens, they are emanations of the great-world sun and moon, rising and setting with corresponding brightness and obscurity" [10].

Tao Hongjing distinguishes the objective physical world as the "Great Heaven" and the sacred space inside Huayang Dongtian as the "Lesser Heaven." The cosmic circulation mode of Huayang Dongtian exemplifies the operational logic of sacred DongtianFudi spaces.

First, energy self-sufficiency. Lunar Radiance and Solar Essence inside the grotto serve as substitutes for the worldly sun and moon, achieving self-sufficient light-heat circulation independent of external inputs.

Second, system finiteness. Lunar Radiance and Solar Essence inside the Lesser Heaven are emanations of the Great Heaven sun and moon; their waxing and waning follow celestial rhythms. The tangible boundaries of the Lesser Heaven cosmos indicate that resources and energy within DongtianFudi are limited, and consumption must follow the principle of "using resources with restraint."

The operational logic of the Lesser Heaven—galvanizing internal driving forces and pursuing sustainable development—provides critical insights for the Peace-Development Belt to break old-style development paths and realize independent, orderly, and inclusive prosperity.

First, foster independent industrial systems to consolidate the foundations of sustainable development. People should boost domestic technological independence, build complete industrial chains, deepen capacity-building cooperation among Belt-and-Road partner countries, and enhance local capabilities. Unlike older modernization models that transfer backward production capacities, people should jointly develop complete, distinctive national industrial systems suited to local resource endowments and development stages. For example, the Addis-Djibouti Railway, completed in 2018 as the first overseas full-industrial-chain railway adopting "Chinese standards," resolved transportation bottlenecks and drove the layout of national-level industrial parks along the route. It is hailed as "Ethiopia's transportation lifeline" and "the new-era Tan-Zan

Railway" [11].

Second, develop green industries and build ecological communities. People shall vigorously advance new-energy, energy-saving, environmental-protection and waste-recycling industries, construct low-carbon circular industrial ecosystems and locally adapted livelihood-oriented green industrial parks, reduce reliance on fossil fuels, enhance energy independence and strengthen long-term development resilience. For instance, ship-power enterprises in Qingdao are collectively building low-carbon marine-power equipment systems, supplying Chinese solutions for global green shipping [12]. People should also promote green standards, encourage innovation in eco-friendly materials and energy-saving technologies, and set high-quality environmental requirements for ecology, energy conservation, and biodiversity protection. Plastic pollution threatens environmental safety and human health, and more than 140 countries have implemented plastic-restriction policies. "Bamboo-for-Plastic" has emerged as an eco-friendly concept. China actively advocates and practices this initiative: it has hosted international seminars, jointly released the Global Action Plan for Bamboo-for-Plastic (2023–2030) with the International Bamboo and Rattan Organization, and issued the Three-Year Action Plan for Accelerating the Development of Bamboo-for-Plastic through national-level authorities [13]. These efforts demonstrate China's resolve to promote green-industry development.

As self-sufficient sacred sanctuaries for seed-people, DongtianFudi inspire the construction of a "sustainable-development community": shifting from external-input dependence to nurturing local innovation and productive capacity; moving from one-sided economic growth toward green prosperity featuring harmony between humanity and nature; and replacing short-term profit-chasing with long-term institutional mechanisms. Respecting partner countries and regions along the Peace-Development Belt, people shall draw wisdom from traditional Chinese self-sufficiency and forge a path of peaceful and sustainable development.

3.3. Ordered interconnectivity: Extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits

DongtianFudi are by no means completely closed utopias. They maintain inner order while conditionally connecting with the outer world through defined boundaries and entry prerequisites. Acting as transitional spaces between the mortal realm and celestial spheres, they preserve mystical access and transformation mechanisms for both sides, embodying Taoist dialectics of "being and non-being," "concealment and manifestation."

"Famous mountains contain grotto-chambers ranging from ten to thirty li across; sacred peaks may enclose hundred-li-wide cave-realms … Lord Mao transmitted essential teachings, granting access to the grotto-gate" [14].

"Immortals of mountain grotto-palaces command 120 jade maidens and jade youths. Deep within the earth lie the Ten Great Grotto-Heavens and Thirty-Six Lesser Grotto-Heavens within famous mountains, each containing emanated sun-moon light, golden towers and jade halls inhabited by divine officials" [15].

"Thirty-Six Grotto-Heavens underground correspond to the upper celestial realm. Emanated sunlight and moonlight shine within them; celestial mechanics, yin-yang transformations are all brought forth and transformed through the subtle operations of Lord Laozi" [16].

"During the Jian-an reign period, Zuo Yuanfang heard tales of this sacred mountain and crossed the Yangtze in search of it. After three months of fasting, he found the grotto-gate and entered the hidden palace. The Three Lords bestowed three divine spiritual mushrooms upon him. He dwelt inside the grotto palace for years, marveling at its well-ordered palatial architecture. Divine spirits assemble there to judge life-and-death

matters, much like mortal official administrations" [17].

Access to DongtianFudi carries specific prerequisites: defined boundaries, concealed entrances, and moral-religious requirements for visitors. Zuo Ci's three-month fasting and the transmission of essential Daoist teachings as conditions for entry illustrate conditional openness. Divine-official arrangements and the "emanated sun-moon essence" cosmic mechanism offer Eastern wisdom paradigms for international cooperation and governance under the Peace-Development-Belt framework.

First, shape a new international value system featuring security, development, and inclusiveness. The cornerstone of the Peace-Development Belt lies in consensus-based norms and value systems. Rooted in the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind that highlights the intertwined destinies of all nations and peoples, international affairs should be handled according to the principles of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits. Using the Belt and Road Initiative as a platform, people shall promote the formulation and reform of new norms for international production and cooperation, and foster a new international value system prioritizing security, development, and civilizational mutual learning. Reflecting on the two World Wars and the Cold War, Deng Xiaoping identified peace and development as the themes of the times in 1985 [18]. It was recognized that old security concepts built on military alliances and arms buildups could not deliver lasting world peace [19]. China began exploring a Chinese-style security outlook corresponding to the times. In the new era, from advocating the common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable Asian security concept to proposing the common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable global security concept, China has promoted inclusive international-security dialogue mechanisms, mediated conflicts and participated in peace-keeping operations to safeguard world peace [20–21]. Confronting global development imbalances, China supports independent national development, commits to "leaving no country behind" for partners endorsing the Peace-Development-Belt vision, and increases technical and financial assistance. The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, jointly built by China and Indonesia, delivers efficient transportation and stimulates tourism, catering, and related industrial belts. The Thrace Wind Power Project, invested in by China, has operated since 2019, supplying clean electricity for thirty thousand Greek households, easing local energy pressure and supporting Greece's energy transition [22]. Building the Peace-Development Belt requires respect for civilizational diversity, advocacy for inter-civilizational dialogue, support for cultural heritage protection via UNESCO and other platforms, encouragement of Chinese culture global outreach, respect for distinctive national-cultural contexts, and support for independent development paths for all countries.

Second, build high-quality implementation teams supporting peaceful development. Talent constitutes the primary resource for national development, and constructing the Peace-Development-Belt likewise demands high-quality, specialized teams. People shall integrate universities, research institutes, and social forces to build think tanks and expert teams supplying top-level design intellectual support. People shall cultivate compound diplomatic and international-affairs talent, strengthen practical training, expand internship channels within international organizations, overseas-embassy institutions and multinational corporations, and train Peace-Development-Belt-oriented professionals proficient in local languages and customs. Chinese enterprises shall be encouraged to participate in Peace-Development-Belt construction and give full play to initiative in global outreach. The Luban Workshop, a landmark vocational-education-going-global brand originating in Tianjin, was first launched in Thailand in 2016 and has since established branches in Kazakhstan, Russia, Egypt and other countries. Adhering to the philosophy of "small-scale projects delivering tangible livelihood benefits," it shares Chinese vocational education models, standards, equipment,

and teaching resources, offering over 70 majors including industrial robotics, additive manufacturing, new-energy technologies, cloud computing, Internet of Things, EMU maintenance, automotive repair, logistics management, Chinese-cuisine cooking, traditional Chinese medicine, cross-border e-commerce, and smart agriculture. It cultivates large numbers of high-skilled professionals urgently needed by partner countries, becoming a shining calling card and technical hub under Belt-and-Road cooperation [23]. The technical and theoretical transformation capacity of professional teams underpins the foundations and sustainability of Peace-Development-Belt construction and constitutes a powerful guarantee for common global development and prosperity.

4. Conclusion: From DongtianFudi to a community with a shared future for mankind

A genuine Peace-Development-Belt requires not only material prosperity and sound institutional frameworks, but also spiritual transcendence and shared value recognition. It represents the practical unfolding and objective of the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind in geopolitical practice. Its construction is China's exploration for world development and new-world-order-building amid the intertwined contexts of the two major global strategies, and constitutes a call from Eastern philosophy for the times. Only by reshaping a value system of "harmony without uniformity, security as priority" can people realize global security and civilizational co-prosperity; only by deepening national internal driving forces can countries achieve sustained positive development; only by advancing ordered interconnectivity can people foster a safer and more inclusive new-type international order and ultimately establish a global-governance system based on extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits.

As Taoist sacred "micro-cosmos" spaces, DongtianFudi embody ancient wisdom of refuge, self-sufficiency, transcendence and conditional openness. They offer vital inspiration for contemporary challenges including civilizational disorder, geopolitical conflicts, development imbalances and insufficient civilizational mutual trust. The construction of the Peace-Development-Belt does not pursue sphere-of-influence expansion in the sense of traditional Western geopolitics. Instead, it represents a new-type international relations practice rooted in the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind and supported by the Belt and Road Initiative. It requires respecting diversity and reshaping value systems, galvanizing internal driving forces for sustainable development, pursuing ordered interconnectivity through extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits, and fostering high-quality implementation teams. Only in this way can people draw on China's age-old "great-peace wisdom" to advance the co-existence of all things and common prosperity of civilizations, illuminating pathways for exploring a new form of human civilization.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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